

Seven Days

by septentrion

Seven days can change a life. Ask Hermione and Severus.

Part One, Day One

Chapter 1 of 14

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Thanks to Dacian Goddess and her beta skills. She went over this piece written for shivverus twice, making good use of her scientific knowledge and characterisation abilities. Hugs to you much.

"Hmmm..."

Slowly, Hermione emerged from sleep, roused out of unconsciousness by rays of pale sunlight. She moved and stretched, but was forcefully reminded of the previous day's events by the friction of cloth against her bruises and scratches. She had fainted. After Harry, Ron and she had left the headmaster's office to talk to Dumbledore's portrait, they had headed to Gryffindor Tower, but she had never made it. She had fainted on the way, too weak to carry on, her stock of adrenaline completely exhausted.

She took a look around her and noted she was in the Hospital Wing. So, Harry and Ron had not taken her back to the Tower. Other beds were occupied by unmoving forms, but she could not make out exactly who they were, except for the bed next to hers. Had Hermione been older, her heart might have done what Bellatrix Lestrange did not manage to and kill her: Severus Snape was lying on said bed. What's more, his chest was moving without assistance, proof that he was breathing and therefore living. How could that be? Nothing, absolutely nothing could bring a dead man back to life. Hermione's mind went in overdrive faster than a Firebolt reached top speed. Snape could not have had a Horcrux. His body had been killed. If Snape had made a Horcrux, his body would not be here, breathing, sleeping serenely, with a huge bandage on his neck, with his soul still in place. No, this was the body he had had when he was struck by Nagini, so a Horcrux was out of the question.

Hermione contemplated her former teacher for a while, taking in his white, rather deathly complexion; his hands, loosely clenched around the sheet's hem; and his black hair, slightly fanning out on his pillow, when his jaw drew open brutally, as if a string had snapped and let it go. That seemed to alert Madam Pomfrey, who came near Snape's bed with a vial of vividly green, thick potion.

"Dear, dear, now that's the temporalis muscle. It will be a feat to make him swallow the potion," she muttered. With great precaution and efficiency, she grabbed Snape's chin and poured the vile-looking liquid down his throat. Soon after, his jaw snapped back in place. Only then did Madam Pomfrey note that Hermione was watching her.

"Ah, Miss Granger, you're awake. I'll be with you in a minute, just the time to renew the monitoring spells on the Headmaster."

She waved her wand above Snape and accompanied her movement with two or three incantations...it was difficult to tell...and turned to Hermione.

"I think you were too exhausted, and your body brought you to your senses, so to speak. Just a moment." She waved her wand above Hermione. "You can go, but don't overexert yourself, or it's back to the Hospital Wing for you," she said sternly, but with a touch of kindness.

Hermione climbed out of the bed. "Madam Pomfrey, can I ask you a question before I go?"

The nurse, who was already heading for another bed, stopped in her tracks. She went back to Hermione, a frown born of tiredness on her face.

"Yes?"

Embarrassed but too curious to let it go, Hermione asked, looking at Snape and going near his bed, "What happened to him?"

"He was bitten by You-Know-Who's snake, but he'll recover. Now, off you go. I have other patients to attend to."

"But, I saw him die!" Hermione protested, even though she could see she was wrong.

Madam Pomfrey seemed stunned by that statement, but not for long. "This mustn't be your concern, Miss Granger. My patients trust my discretion, as you very well know. It isn't my story to tell. Goodbye."

The nurse turned on her heels and stalked determinedly to the next patient.

"Feeling remorseful, Miss Granger?" a voice rasped beside her.

At once, Madam Pomfrey turned and rushed to Snape. "Headmaster! You're awake!" She already had her wand pointed at him. Yet, Snape had his eyes on Hermione, who was staring at the scene with the fascination a deer could find in a car's lights. A sense of dread was taking hold of her.

"Madam Pomfrey, you can tell this young lady what happened to me." Even in his weakened state, his voice carried out some sort of... well, venom might be out of place, but it was the right term nonetheless, as if Nagini's poison had found a translation into words. Hermione dreaded what she was going to hear.

The feeling of a thick liquid running down his throat choked him awake, but before it led to his second death (how many times could a man die?), the potion reached his stomach. He was vaguely conscious of a woman waving a wand above him. Little by little, his awareness of his environment grew. He felt heavy but his brains, though a bit fuzzy, seemed intact.

He heard voices nearby: Madam Pomfrey and Miss Granger. They were discussing his condition. Ah! His condition! He had been prepared for such an occurrence...a snake attack...but not for being impeded in his movements by a magical cage until he did not have the strength to reach for his antivenin anymore. But he had not died. It had been a near miss, though. He had felt life slip away from his being; he had felt his soul embrace the darkness of death; he had come across nothingness, but not before realising that the trio would not seize the opportunity to search his pockets, find the phial of antivenin and pour its content down his throat. No, those stupid Gryffindors had just left him for dead, not even checking his pulse. And now, the girl had the audacity to pry into his being alive! A white-hot rage spread through Severus, scalding his mind and jerking him out of his semi-unconscious state. He completely forgot that the girl had probably lost her friend Potter recently and that he should wonder why she was concerned about his fate instead of mourning Lily's son.

He opened his eyes and looked at Madam Pomfrey and Granger bickering over him. An idea occurred to him. Granger sounded guilty, as if she was blaming herself for his condition. What if he made sure she had reasons to feel guilty? He knew enough of her psychology to be sure that self-reproach would gnaw at her for years, if not for life, if there was but a hint that she could have been the one to save him. He forced his eyes to open fully and tried his voice, pouring his resentment into the words.

"Feeling remorseful, Miss Granger?" he managed to rasp. It was as he had feared: his voice had changed due to the damage to his vocal cords.

The nurse did not waste time and fussed over him at once. He, however, kept his resentful eyes on Miss Granger.

"Madam Pomfrey, you can tell this young lady what happened to me."

She stared at him, astonished by his request, but complied with it. She looked at Hermione and started, "The Headmaster had cast a spell on my wand... If he were in mortal danger, my wand would vibrate. He had prepared some kind of antivenin in advance, even taken some to prepare his body to fight the venom should he ever be bitten. I was to take the antivenin with me if I were called, along with other Healing Potions."

Hermione blanched, but the nurse went on telling the story.

"When I arrived at the Shrieking Shack, I immediately made him swallow some antivenin potion. What I don't understand," she said, interrupting her narration and addressing Snape, "is why you didn't take the antivenin before. You had some in your pocket. It had even rolled onto the floor."

If it were not for the fact that he himself was feeling weary and lying in a bed in the Hospital Wing, Severus would have exulted at the sight of Miss Granger's deathly complexion. Now, she looked the part of the dead as well as he did. As it was, he settled for deep satisfaction.

"By the time the Dark Lord released me, I was too weak to reach for the phial by myself," Severus answered.

Before she could even process what she had just heard, Madam Pomfrey blurted, "But Miss Granger told me she saw you die. If she was there, why didn't she give you the antivenin?" A crease between her eyes was emphasising her incredulity.

"That is a question only Miss Granger can answer."

During all that time, his black eyes never left Hermione's brown ones. He let his emotions show: resentment, questioning, reproach and something akin to hatred.

Hermione's eyes watered. Tears swelled and formed at the corners, blurring the brown colour into a muddier shade. Madam Pomfrey, who had at last noticed the staring match between the headmaster and the Gryffindor, looked expectantly at them. Severus remained silent, deciding not to make it easy for Hermione, for he was sure she had seen the phial with the antivenin.

"I'm..." she sobbed, "I'm sorry. I... We... all thought yo-you... were dead!"

"You did not even check my pulse," he accused her.

"I'm sorry," she wailed, burying her shame in her hands.

Now, let's see if she can live with herself. Severus thought.

Hermione spread her hands on each side of her head and asked, still sobbing but hopeful, "You're going to mend, though, aren't you?"

"I hope so; that is, if my treatment didn't come too late."

Madam Pomfrey took that sentence as her cue to reintegrate the conversation. "Actually, Headmaster, there's something I need to tell you about." She cast a significant glance at Hermione.

Severus dismissed her. "You may go, Miss Granger."

Hermione left without a word, her head down, her unruly hair hanging on either side of her blotchy face. The last thing she heard before leaving the Hospital Wing was Madam Pomfrey's, "I will levitate you into my office, Headmaster."

Hermione felt bad. Hermione felt very, very bad. She had been so persuaded that Snape was the first person she had seen die. And Harry had seen dead people before. He had asserted that Snape was really dead and she had not sought to ascertain that for herself: she'd trusted Harry's judgment.

Hermione wandered about the castle, lost in thoughts of guilt. Her eyes saw nothing; it was as if her body recognised the obstacles and pulled her out of their way, but her mind was away: with Snape, who was perhaps suffering from lasting injuries because she had not thought, no, not dared to touch what was supposed to have been his corpse. The first of too many she had seen the day before...

It was still early, and Hogwarts' corridors were empty of any being, be it dead or alive. She was nevertheless too lost in her misery, too busy rehashing what had happened in the Shrieking Shack, to take notice of any other presence, or absence for that matter. She had seen the black glitter of the antivenin potion on the Shack's floor, not recognising it for what it was; she could have picked up the phial and healed him. For heaven's sake, they had not verified if he was really dead. How much time would that have taken them? Five seconds? Ten seconds? That would not have really put them behind schedule. And the fact that they had still thought Snape one of Voldemort's faithful servants at the time did not matter. He had been lying on the floor, unable to harm anybody or to defend himself. The way they had behaved, Ron, Harry and she, had hardly been better than Voldemort.

As she was busy stirring up gloomy ideas, Hermione did not notice where she was going. She was ascending some stairs, probably heading unconsciously to Gryffindor Tower. Mindlessly, she uttered one of last year's passwords to the Fat Lady, who swung aside and opened the portrait hole even though that password had not been in use for a year. Hermione Granger was Harry Potter's friend, one of those who had rid the castle's inhabitants of those abominations the Carrows were; therefore, she deserved a pass. Hermione took a seat in front of the fireplace in the common room, looking as if she was waiting for the others to come down from the dormitories, while she was actually wallowing in Snape-inflicted guilt. She sat in the same spot, unmoving, for two more hours, until Ron, Harry and Neville appeared at the bottom of the staircase leading to their dormitory.

"Hermione," they exclaimed in unison.

They were beside her in a flash, bumping into each other in their eagerness to greet her. It warmed her, and she hugged them back fervently, though Ron had clearly expected more. Well, she was not in the mood for kisses and groping: she needed friendship; just friendship.

"You don't look that well, Hermione," Ron inquired after they had all settled in the comfortable armchairs of the Gryffindor common room. Truthfully, he did not look that well himself. Hermione guessed his brother's death weighed on his mind. She shoved the thought away, or else she might cry, and concentrated on what she had to do.

How would she announce them the news? By telling them outright: "Snape is alive," she said hollowly, still under the strain of her self-condemnation.

That shut the boys up immediately... for three seconds; she counted.

"What?" they roared.

She held up a hand to forestall any more roaring. "He was in the bed next to mine in the Hospital Wing. He spoke to Madam Pomfrey and me." She hung down her head and tried to stifle a sob. "He told me he had some antivenin potion in his pocket and that we could have given it to him and saved him in the Shrieking Shack."

"Impossible," Harry stated firmly. "He was dead. We were there, and we saw him die."

"I agree," Ron added.

"But it was him, I swear. His voice was different, hoarser, but the words were his without a doubt," Hermione insisted.

The boys did not look entirely convinced, but a deep doubt had been planted into their minds.

"How so, his voice was different?" Neville asked. "Snape's voice is rather unique."

"He was bitten in the neck by Voldemort's snake," Harry explained. "If it was really Snape, perhaps his voice will be permanently damaged." None of the Gryffindors seemed happy at the idea. Now that they knew the truth, they were of the opinion that the man did not deserve that.

"Would it have made a difference if we had given him the antivenin at that time?" Ron wondered aloud.

"Perhaps not for his voice. The vocal cords are really close to the place Snape was bitten. But Madam Pomfrey implied there would be some lasting effects. I was dismissed before she said more about it, though."

Uneasiness settled upon the group.

"It's my fault," Hermione whispered after a while. "I saw the phial of potion roll out of his pocket. If only I had picked it up... I'd probably have guessed what it was. I'd probably have been able to save him..."

"Hermione, stop!" Ron interrupted her. "It's not your fault. Harry and me didn't do anything either. And if we'd known, I'm sure we'd have done something to try and save him."

But it was as if Hermione had not heard him: she carried on her monologue. "I know! I'm going to make it up to him!"

Three pairs of eyes widened in horror; three mouths gaped; three heads shook in denial; three boys shouted, "No!"

Startled, Hermione asked, "Why not?"

"The man might be brave and a hero, but I wouldn't be surprised if his disposition was as agreeable as always," Harry said sarcastically.

"True, but I don't care." Hermione was definitely digging in her heels. "I need to do it, or I won't be able to live with myself otherwise."

"And how do you plan to do it?" Neville asked pragmatically.

"I'm not sure. I think I'm going to go and visit him later and see what I can do for him. If he's too weak to leave the Hospital Wing, he might need some help with everyday tasks. It'll give Madam Pomfrey more time to rest and to take care of the other casualties, too."

Ron spluttered. "You're going to help Snape to go to the loo?"

It was apparent that Hermione had not thought of that, but she pulled herself together and stated, "Yes, I will do it if necessary, though I doubt I'll have to. But I thought I could bring him tea or coffee, reading material, give him his Potions, that kind of thing. Perhaps even brew Medicinal Potions for him... It's not much, but it's something I can do to help him get his life back," she finished softly. She was so solemn, so pensive, that neither Harry nor Ron nor Neville thought to contradict her anymore. If war had taught them anything, it was to follow through the requirements of one's conscience to do the right thing...whatever the cost.

"If you need help, just ask," Harry said simply. Ron and Neville nodded their agreement, and Hermione hugged the three of them in thanks.

Madam Pomfrey Levitated Headmaster Snape onto a stretcher and guided him to her office around the beds of the Hospital Wing. It seemed to Severus that there were

more beds than usual. *Well, the Dark Lord attacked the school yesterday, so of course there would be casualties.*

Once in her office, the school nurse used another spell to maintain the stretcher in a state of levitation and started to explain to Severus what had happened the previous day and what his injuries were. He was astonished to hear that Potter was alive. Somehow, Dumbledore must have suspected that the boy would not die. *Of course, I would be the last to know*, Severus reflected bitterly.

But what struck Severus most in Madam Pomfrey's narration was the idea that he was free now: Potter has met his destiny and did not need to be protected anymore, and so he could let go of Lily's memory; the last tormentor of his youth, Remus Lupin, was dead; Dumbledore rested in peace; the Dark Lord was finished. All were ties to a painful past, and all had now been severed. Lucius was alive, but he was his friend, so Severus did not mind that much that the blond man had survived.

"As for your injuries, Headmaster, I'm afraid I couldn't reach you soon enough to save you from some everlasting effects of the venom. You'll need to have Muscle-Controlling Potion," she pointed at the green, thick potion she had given him earlier, "with you at all times. The venom seems to have acted as a permanent inhibitor to the cholinesterase in your body, and that will make you lose control of your muscles from time to time. The only thing is, it's impossible to predict which muscle will let go. Earlier, it was your temporalis muscle—one of the muscles controlling your jaw. During the night, though, your urethral sphincter was the one to switch off, but I was able to *Scourgify* you immediately. The potion will help in regaining control of the muscle, but you might suffer from incidents before you can swallow some of it," she finished matter-of-factly.

Severus went pale, or rather paler, at her explanation. He could see his dignity fly out of the window. Any muscle...his urethral, or any other, sphincter!...could fail him at any moment!

"Shouldn't I take some Muscle-Controlling potion regularly as a preventative measure?" he croaked with his still-damaged voice, though he had recognised a Voice-Soothing Potion among the numerous vials at his bedside. At least, he would soon recover his silky tones.

The nurse shook her head. "Alas, no. In such a case as yours, it will only be effective as a curative draught." She noticed the disgruntled look on Severus's face and made an attempt at consoling him. "It could have been worse. You could have been partially or totally paralysed, or..." her voice became a whisper, "dead."

Nothing could have been more irritating than the truth at that moment for Severus. He had to acknowledge that he had had a very narrow escape with death, but it would have been broader if only those three dunderheads had not rushed away from his not so dead body. He could literally count his blessings: one, he was alive; two, he could have sustained more damage; three, his enemies were dead; and that was all.

As Madam Pomfrey took him back to his bed, Severus thought it was nonetheless enough to come back to, but a bit more would do no harm. No harm indeed. The question was what could "a bit more" be?

Late in the morning, Professor McGonagall came to the Hospital Wing to assess the situation and see how Severus was doing. In her wake were the other Heads of House: Pomona Sprout, Horace Slughorn and Filius Flitwick. Slughorn zeroed in on Severus at once when he noticed the headmaster was awake.

"Severus! How are you? So you never were a true supporter of You-Know-Who?"

Trust Slughorn to pinpoint the heart of things...especially the embarrassing ones... without any sense of diplomacy.

"Horace, give the man his rest!" McGonagall interjected. She looked embarrassed, never making eye contact with Severus. Her boldness did not desert her, though, for she addressed him nonetheless. "Headmaster, we wanted to let you know that we were sorry not to have respected you as we should have this past year. Of course, we didn't know where your loyalties truly lay, and you did nothing to let us know. Nevertheless, we owe you our excuses." Her eyes finally met his when she finished.

Severus considered them a moment. He took in their fatigued state and crumpled clothes, but also their relief at the war being over and their fidgeting under his scrutiny. Keeping his face impassive, he answered his colleague.

"You are forgiven," he stated simply. There was no need to be stuck in the past through a useless grudge. Not that he intended to forget, but they had indeed been in the dark about his loyalties, and he really wanted to start as anew as possible.

"Thank you," McGonagall answered for herself and the other teachers. "We'll take our leave now. You probably need your rest." She glanced at the five vials of Blood-Replenishing Potion on his bedside, turned on her heel and strode out of the Hospital Wing. The others nodded at him...Slughorn even beamed...and followed her silently, probably to take care of more urgent and important matters than standing awkwardly at his bedside.

After a while, Severus started to feel bored to tears. After months of plotting, acting and being on his guard constantly, lying in a bed did not agree with his state of mind, even though he felt he should be exhausted after having lost so much blood. Madam Pomfrey had drawn a curtain around his bed to ensure his privacy, and only the risk of another sphincter incident kept him from asking her to remove it. He would at least have been able to observe the proceedings in the Hospital Wing.

He should be thinking of his future. He had previously planned to go on teaching after the end of the war, but he was not sure of his welcome by the other faculty members, though he really would not mind to remain the headmaster: no brats to teach and authority above all the others. He had entertained the idea of creating his own business, whether in Potions or security he did not know, or getting a paid job in the laboratory at St Mungo's... But right now, when he had the time to go over the options life could afford him, he found he could not concentrate on them. All he could feel was boredom; until Hermione Granger drew back the curtain around his bed with one hand as she balanced a tray laden with food on her other one. She stepped into his partition, drew the curtain back, and tried to set the tray down on his lap.

"What do you think you're doing?" Severus hissed.

She blinked.

"Bringing you your lunch." She stood uncertainly, the heavy-looking tray putting a strain on her arms. "Madam Pomfrey told me you would be here for three days, that you would need bed rest. I thought I could help her and you, and bring you your meals, books, or something..." She bit her lower lip nervously. She too looked fatigued, older, somewhat wiser, though her current actions belied the impression. Her hair was as uncontrolled as ever. She wore a robe over her Muggle clothing...a Gryffindor robe. She seemed earnest in her desire to be helping him. He narrowed his eyes.

"Don't you have anything else to do, Miss Granger?"

Her cheeks turned a delicate shade of pink and she cast her eyes down, as if the tray she was carrying had caught her interest all of a sudden, hiding her face behind her bushy hair...not unlike Severus, the difference being his hair was straight. "I will go to Australia to bring my parents back as soon as things are quieter. In the meanwhile, I'd like to do something useful."

"Very well." He opened his arms and indicated for her to put the tray down on his lap, which she did gingerly, trying not to touch him in the process.

"Now, Miss Granger, I'd like to hear your version of these last months' events while I'm eating."

Hermione sat down in a nearby chair and set to telling him everything that had happened since Dumbledore's death, carefully avoiding even a hint at that 'incident'. She had reached the point when Harry, Ron and she had fled the Ministry of Magic when Severus dropped his glass of water. His hand convulsed a little and fell upon his tray, right in the middle of his mashed potatoes, while dampness spread across the sheet, reaching his nightshirt through the material.

"Fuck!" he exclaimed. He had forgotten about his predicament.

Hermione was frozen in the chair she had been sitting on, shocked by both the expletive and Snape's hand lying in his plate.

"Give me the green potion!" he barked at Hermione. She did as bidden and handed him one of the vials she had taken on the bedside table. He took it and tried to uncork it with his teeth, unsuccessfully.

"Open it. I currently have the use of one hand only."

Shaking slightly, Hermione unstopped the phial and brought it to the headmaster's lips.

"No! I can still drink it on my own!"

Hermione withdrew her hand as if burned. "Sorry. I..."

"Give it to me, stupid girl," he snarled.

"Yes, yes, of course, but you don't have to call me that!" she snapped back.

As quickly as she had withdrawn her hand, she gave him the vial with the Muscle-Controlling Potion. Severus drank it at once, all in one gulp, but coughed a little: the liquid was too thick to be swallowed that fast. Immediately after, he seemed to have retrieved the use of his right arm, for he lifted his hand and wiped it with his napkin. He grabbed his wand, which she had not noticed on the bedside table until then...there had been so many potion phials scattered around it...and dried the sheet with a short wave and a non-verbal incantation. Hermione was still staring at him.

"Do you know what has just happened, Miss Granger? Was it in any book you came across?"

She shook her head.

"No? Let me enlighten you then. As I was not given the antivenin right after being bitten, a critical neurotransmitter in my body was inhibited to a certain point. Said inhibition appears to be of a rather permanent nature, and it interferes with the transmission of impulses from nerves to muscles and causes me to lose control of my muscles from time to time. These losses of control thankfully concern only a small number of muscles at a time, but they are completely unpredictable and cannot be prevented. So I am bound...from time to time...to face... *delicate*... situations. I don't even know if I will be able to find a job due to this handicap." Severus was tempted to add that this could have been prevented had the three Gryffindors thought a bit more in the Shrieking Shack, but Hermione's complexion changed colour so quickly...from red to white and from white to red...that it was rendered unnecessary.

"A job? But you have job!" she squawked. "You're the headmaster!"

Severus frowned. "I don't think I will retain that position for a long time."

"Why not?"

"Where is your brain? Has it been driven out of your cranium by your invading hair?"

Hermione looked offended. "Of course not. But you're the headmaster as long as the school governors don't vote you out, and I'm sure that..."

Severus raised a hand to interrupt her. "That will be enough on the subject. You were narrating how you escaped the Ministry of Magic that day. I'd like you to resume your story."

Hermione looked at him intensely, with determination. Severus had the feeling he had just become a cause for the girl, whether to assuage her guilty conscience or because of her soft spot for the underdogs he could not say.

At last, she spoke. "All right. I will 'resume my story' as you put it, after I've put the tray on your bedside table. It wouldn't do for your roast pork and mashed potatoes to end up on your sheet." Her curt tone was a testament to how annoyed she was with him...especially given the clipped manner in which she pronounced her 'sheet'...but she acceded to his request nonetheless.

While a part of Severus was listening and cataloguing the information Hermione was giving him, another part was plotting how he could use the girl's need to have a cause for which to fight. Not that he wanted others to fight his battles, but having an ally such as this girl, the hero of the day's best friend, who had never wavered in her loyalties even under torture, was an asset he would not deny himself. He would not have survived this long without such instincts. He asked the girl a few questions about her adventures with Potter to show interest in her tale, and he felt her warm up to him.

"Well, that's it, sir. You know everything I know now. Can I do anything else for you? Bring you books or something?"

Severus made a show of thinking about it. Actually, he did care for some books and he told her so.

"I'll bring them to you with your evening meal. You look tired. You should rest a bit."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Since when are you the nurse, Miss Granger?"

"I'm not," she answered defensively, "but you really look tired."

"Far be it from me the idea to cause you distress, Miss Granger," Severus said mockingly, "though I'll admit that I indeed feel tired. I'll see you later then?"

"Yes, sir. And if you ever need anything, you only have to ask."

"Goodbye, Miss Granger."

Severus waited until she had left before he ensconced himself into the sheets and let sleep overtake him for a mid-afternoon nap. He had not had an afternoon nap since he had been a child. Another side-effect of that wretched poison.

"Hermione, there you are!" Ginny, who had been the first to spot her in the corridor, cried. Ron and Harry turned and waited for her to join them so they could enter the Common Room together.

"How did it go?" Harry asked without preamble.

"Not that bad," Hermione answered while they scrambled through the portrait hole. "He was civil enough. He even told me about his injuries and asked me to tell him everything that had happened to us this last year," she finished as they sat down in armchairs. "By the way, where are the others?"

"They went outside," said Ron, who had taken a seat next to Hermione. "They wanted to laze around a bit."

Hermione nodded her understanding before she spoke again, "Harry, can I ask you something?"

"Of course," came the immediate reply.

"I've thought of something. Snape will be tried, won't he? He must answer for his actions since last year. There's no doubt that he'll be cleared, but he might be unemployed before that. That would be unfair, especially since you told us he tried to protect the students. Could you vouch for him to the school governors?"

"Sure," Harry said slowly. "But what makes you say he might be fired?"

"He killed Dumbledore, for one," Ginny answered. "I know Dumbledore asked him to," she quickly added when she saw Harry's frown, "but he did it nonetheless. He'll have to answer for that. He was headmaster during Voldemort's reign too. The governors might want to choose someone else with a 'cleaner' past."

"That would be unfair," Harry conceded. "What do I need to do?"

"A press conference would go a long way, I think. And perhaps a personal letter to each of the governors," Hermione proposed.

"When do you plan on organising the press conference?" Harry asked.

"The sooner, the better," Hermione answered assertively. "I thought tomorrow would be good. That way, the public would know the truth right away. If we wait, people will be fed lies and fiddled truths. We owe it to the dead," she finished in a whisper, a lump having formed in her throat at the thought of those who had fallen and whose funerals would be held two days later on the Hogwarts grounds, near Dumbledore's tomb. A notice about it had already been pinned to every notice board of the castle.

Remembering how efficient his interview for *The Quibbler* had been two years ago, Harry agreed, "But on one condition: I don't want Rita Skeeter there. She'll try to make it sound dirty."

"It's settled, then," Hermione said, relieved.

"You're brilliant, Hermione," Ron said in the hopes of earning himself another mind-blowing kiss like the one she had given him after they had returned from the Chamber of Secrets. It would help him not to think of Fred too much either, but he was to be disappointed: Hermione was already heading to the portrait hole, eager to plan Snape's rehabilitation in the public's eye with McGonagall, who was acting as headmistress while her colleague was incapacitated.

When Hermione arrived in the Hospital Wing later in the afternoon, she found Harry seated in one of the Hospital Wing hard-backed chairs and conversing with Snape. She had with her the books about snake venom she had checked out from the library at Snape's request. She had perused them herself but had not found much hope in them to improve her former teacher's condition.

"I understand," Harry was saying.

"Only time will prove it," Snape answered in a tone indicating that he did not quite believe it.

"Good evening, then."

Harry briefly smiled at Hermione and gently squeezed her arm on his way out...his way of letting her know that his conversation with the headmaster would stay between the headmaster and himself. She put the books on the bedside table and sat down in the chair Harry had just vacated.

"Good evening, sir," she said brightly, curiosity about his conversation with Potter plainly etched onto her face. "Here are the books about the snake venom you've requested. I've added a few references I found in the library."

"Good. You may go and have dinner now."

"And what about your dinner?" she inquired. "I..."

"Madam Pomfrey will ensure it is brought to me," he said dismissively, already reaching for the book on top of the pile.

"Actually..."

He jerked his hand back and looked at her. "Tell me you didn't take upon yourself to look after me?"

She bristled at that. "Actually," she resumed, "I've ordered a tray for you from the kitchens. You need to eat after your blood loss."

Severus pinched his nose in annoyance. "Miss Granger, there's already a nurse in this castle, and she certainly isn't you."

"But she's accepted my help!" Hermione protested. "She's given me precise instructions about what to give you and what to do with you this morning!"

If he did not need her support, he would have dismissed her in a rather rude manner. As it was, he decided to quell his urge to do so and engaged her in a discussion about the different snake venoms and their effects while he nibbled at his evening meal. It appeared that she had ordered her own meal along with his, for a second tray had appeared and was now precariously settled in her lap. Eating did not prevent her from eyeing him attentively in case another "muscle incident" occurred, but nothing happened while she was with him. In fact, Severus did not find her as bothersome as he had feared: a year far from Hogwarts and the library had done her a world of good. He recalled her telling how she had fooled Travers while impersonating Bellatrix Lestrange and nearly laughed aloud. She yawned.

"Are you still a little girl who can't stay awake past sunset?" he teased her, but with a bit of malice for good measure.

Hermione checked her watch. "Merlin's robes! It's already eleven p.m.!"

Oh. That was why darkness had already fallen around them and the Art Nouveau lamp on his bedside table had lit, Severus noted.

"We're organising a press conference tomorrow morning. I need to go back to Gryffindor Tower and catch some sleep. I want to look fresh."

"A what?" Severus had heard her perfectly. However, having the fact confirmed did not hurt.

"A press conference. I've convinced Professor McGonagall to organise a press conference to explain everything that has happened and to clear your name. And Harry will vouch for you before the school governors so that you won't lose your job."

Severus was dumbstruck. He had expected to have to do a bit of coaxing, and here she had taken the initiative, and the right one at that. He would have to show gratefulness, but not too much. His situation would have been better if she had shown such degrees of initiative the day before, when she had left him lying in his blood in the Shrieking Shack.

"Potter already told me of his plans regarding that matter," he informed her. "I... thank you."

"You're welcome, sir."

As Hermione rose from her chair, Severus felt the muscles in his ankle give way. Thankfully he was lying on his bed. Had he been standing, he would have fallen down. He grabbed one of the phials of the vividly green Muscle-Controlling Potion and downed it. Hermione stood there, unmoving, staring at him with large eyes, as if she had forgotten about the venom's lasting effects.

"Good night," Severus snarled at her, effectively prompting her to leave him quickly, but not before a flash of guilt and pity crossed her face.

Severus tossed and turned all night in his small bed. Sleep would not come to him. He could hear the other patients' snores very acutely, as if they were breathing directly

into his ear. *I shouldn't have napped this afternoon.*

When the first ray of daylight came through the windows, Severus had not been able to sleep at all. His sheets were in disarray and his temper awful. *Perhaps I should have accepted that Sleeping Draught Madam Pomfrey proposed me..* And to crown it all, he had had another urethral sphincter incident around two a.m. He had cleaned his bed with a swish of his wand, but the school nurse had got up nonetheless and fussed over him so noisily that it was a wonder the other patients had not heard her. Severus sighed. He was going to be a disabled person. He had the proof of that when Miss Granger drew back the curtain hiding his bed from view, a breakfast tray in her hands. Severus had never had breakfast in bed before.

Part One, Day Two

Chapter 2 of 14

Severus's second day of recovery. The conference press is held and a trip is decided.

Part One, Day Two

Disclaimer: I make no money with this story.

Many, many thanks to my beta, Dacian Goddess.

The food was good, but Severus had little appetite. He forced himself to eat a piece of toast and to take a couple of swallows of tea; he did not want Granger to start nagging him about his welfare, however right she might be.

"The press conference will start in two hours in the Great Hall. So far, all the wizarding Media outlets have answered our invitation favourably." Like the previous day, Hermione had brought her own meal with his, but did not show more appetite than him. She was a bit nervous about the conference. She was not accustomed to speaking in public, but she had prepared all her arguments carefully, even though she had not had much time in which to do so.

Severus found her uncharacteristically silent. Her face bore the "I'm-revising-for-exams" look he had observed on her in the past. "Miss Granger, are you unwell?"

She started a little. "Sorry, sir. I'm reviewing what I'm going to say for the press conference."

He snorted. "This isn't an exam. You won't be marked on your performance." His gently mocking tone was the only indication that he was teasing her. His face and his black eyes remained impassive as ever...apart perhaps from that slight twitching at the corner of his thin lips.

"I know. In fact, it's more important than an exam. You do realise that what we're going to say to the press will influence the way the wizard in the street will remember this past year? You do realise that the way you're perceived in wizarding society will be influenced by what we're going to say? You do, don't you?"

Would the girl be as impassioned as that in front of the press? That did not bode well, in Severus's opinion. "Miss Granger, please refrain from such emotional behaviour. It will do more harm than good. You'll be more believable if you are logical and matter-of-fact. People will question your motives otherwise. You have no real reason to show that much heat in my defence."

Hermione considered his argument. "I can see why you'd think that. I'll try not to show too much enthusiasm. You're not a house-elf after all," she answered with a hint of mischief.

"Indeed, I am not," Severus said through gritted teeth. *I need her, I need her.* "And I do not appreciate your cheek."

"I didn't want to offend you, sir. I'm sorry," Hermione conceded. "I need to go now. I want to arrive in the Great Hall in advance." She stood up, piled up the two trays of food and put them on the bedside table to be retrieved by the house-elves later. Only then, as she was into the sunny light pouring through the windowpanes, did he notice her more womanly figure. Camping had not been good for her intellect only, it seemed. Her voice brought him out of his brief reverie. "Don't forget to take your Blood-Replenishing Potion. I'll see you at lunchtime." She left his curtained partition swiftly, and he was left to ponder how mature she had become.

Near to two hundred journalists were waiting when Hermione came into the Great Hall. She heard a babble of different languages and was dazzled by the various attires and colours worn by the reporters from all over the world. Harry and Ron, among other Hogwarts students, were already on the dais where the staff table usually stood. The plates and glasses usually in place on the massive table had now been replaced with microphones. Professor McGonagall was conversing with a dignified Kingsley Shacklebolt, who had been newly appointed as Minister of Magic. Professor Slughorn waved and smiled broadly at several journalists, showing off the breadth of his connections in the wizarding world for everyone to know. "Oh, look who's there?" he exclaimed in Professor Sprout's ear. "That's Mamadou N'Diaye. Do you know that he owns eighty percent of the wizarding press in Western Africa? He studied in Beauxbâtons, but I met him for an interview years ago. We've kept in touch since then."

Hermione joined her friends. Harry looked resolved. Ron sidled up to her and tried to hold her hand publicly, but she took no notice and he withdrew his hand, a bit miffed. Neville smiled nervously, but there was an underlying confidence in his demeanour. Luna was as dreamy as ever. Ginny was trying to get as close as possible to Harry without seeming to invade his personal space. There were other students on the dais and at the foot of it, and Hermione was glad of it: they were all heroes, after all. Her gaze swept over the crowd in the Hall. The journalists all had badges pinned on their clothes. She recognised the logo of the *Daily Prophet*, Xenophilius Lovegood from *The Quibbler* and... George Weasley, along with Lee Jordan. They both were proudly wearing badges with Fred's photo and the word "Fredwatch". Their faces were grave and solemn, and their eyes looked red and somewhat puffy. Actually, the whole Weasley clan, minus Ron and Ginny, stood in the Great Hall near a platform erected along the outside wall of the Hall. There lay the bodies of the fallen of the battle at Hogwarts. Looking at the ashen yet peaceful faces of Tonks, Lupin and Fred, Hermione could not help the tears that ran down her cheeks. She would miss them dearly. Ron snaked an arm around her shoulders and dragged her to him, burying his nose in her untameable hair in the process, and Hermione heard him sniff. She returned his embrace, not knowing that the picture would make the front page of most of the wizarding newspapers in the world.

The press conference lasted two hours and could have gone on if Kingsley had not decided it was time to stop. Besides, it was lunchtime.

Deeply relieved, Hermione stopped to talk a bit with the Weasleys before she joined Snape in the Hospital Wing.

Severus tackled her head-on. "How was the press conference? I hope your head has kept its usual size after all that attention paid to you." A sneer graced his face and bared his yellowish teeth.

"Do you regret that you couldn't attend it?" Hermione answered testily, putting down on his lap his lunch tray a bit harshly.

He waved his hand dismissively. "I don't care for fame...."

"Whether you care or not, Harry made quite the impression when he declared that you were 'one of the bravest men he'd ever met'."

Severus sighed dramatically. "Potter sang my praise in public? His father must have been turning in his grave!"

Hermione was tempted to ask about Harry's mother, but she chose to refrain. It would not be right to use his love for Lily Evans against him while he was incapacitated, especially since it was said love that had turned him away from Voldemort.

"You should be glad. You're going to be swarmed by women who will think you to be the last romantic man on earth."

It seems the girl knew her sarcasm well, which was for the better. Not only had she switched from "Textbook" to English but, what was more, her conversation was not dull.

"You don't look rested," she said abruptly.

"It must be because I'm not," he snapped.

"I'm sure your health would improve if you ate," she said, pointing at the untouched tray.

"I'm not that hungry."

"Perhaps you don't want to quit Madam Pomfrey's good care?"

He grabbed his fork and started to eat, though without enthusiasm. As had become her habit, she ate with him.

After their meal, Hermione stayed with him to discuss snake venoms. There was a "muscle incident", as they were beginning to think of them, when Severus's head fell forward suddenly and without prior warning. He could not raise his head, and so he had to lie down to swallow the Muscle-Controlling Potion. He resumed his sitting position as soon as he regained control of the muscles in his neck again. He batted Hermione's hands away when she tried to slide an army of pillows behind his back.

"Is there really no cure for your illness, sir?"

"As far as I know," Severus replied warily, "no, there isn't. The Dark Lord's snake was unique, modified with potions to suit his ~~seeds~~ *needs*. And as you should know, venom is not just a poison you can deconstruct and brew an antidote against. You need the original toxic substance to make antivenin. I managed to approach Nagini some months ago and steal her venom, but not enough to make more than one-batch of antivenin potion; not enough to inject some into me and have my body make its own antibodies. I wasn't treated fast enough after I was bitten," ...he glared at her... "and the venom had time to do some damage in my body. To find a cure means to have a sample of that snake's venom at hand," he finished bitterly.

Hermione's guilt rushed to the fore once more. "Does this mean you won't be able to remain as Hogwarts' headmaster, no matter what?"

His glare intensified. "Of course I can remain the headmaster! It's just..." *I'm diminished*, was his unfinished thought, but Hermione seemed to catch on. She was saved from finding something to say when Professor McGonagall entered the Hospital Wing and headed for Severus's bed.

"Severus! It's good to see you're better!" she exclaimed with measured joy, as if she felt awkward being warm to him after having scorned him for a year. "Miss Granger, I've heard from Poppy that you've been taking good care of our headmaster?"

Hermione blushed. "Yes, Professor. I'm doing my best to help him recover."

"Good. The press conference this morning was quite a success. I must commend you for the idea." She smiled at the younger woman, whose blush deepened.

Severus snorted. "I highly doubt, Minerva, that you made the trek until here only to praise your favourite student."

Back on track, the acting headmistress retorted, "Of course not. I wanted to know what your plans were after you're released from the Hospital Wing." She was quick to add, when he opened his mouth to speak, "No, Miss Granger can stay. She might be concerned by the conversation."

Both Severus and Hermione looked bewildered at the older teacher's statement and, for lack of a witty repartee, let her utter her idea. "Miss Granger told me that she envisaged going to Australia to give her parents their memories back and bring them back to England. The governors have decided that they wanted Mimar Sinan, the famous architect, for the castle's reconstruction. The man built the wizarding opera in Sydney, and it's said it surpasses even Hogwarts' magnificence. He hardly leaves Australia because You-Kn... Voldemort wanted him dead for his refusal to become a Death Eater twenty years ago. Sinan probably never believed that Voldemort," she said the name nearly smoothly, "was dead for good either when Harry defeated him all those years ago. The governors are convinced that nothing short of the school's headmaster could convince Sinan to leave Australia."

"And they thought the man would follow me on my good name?" Severus said sarcastically while baring his left forearm, on which the faint line of the Dark Mark stood out.

"Severus," McGonagall answered as if explaining some complex Transfiguration Spell to Neville Longbottom, "that's why having Miss Granger at your side would be an asset. She's Harry Potter's best friend."

"Minerva, he would simply think that I've put her under the Imperius Curse."

"Nonsense, Severus. By tomorrow, everyone all over the world will know of your true loyalties. Miss Granger's presence will only reinforce the idea of your innocence."

Said Miss Granger was witnessing the conversation mutely; she was very curious to know where it would lead.

"The Ministry will never let me leave Britain before I've been tried."

"Just say you don't want to go," McGonagall snapped, "but stop trying to find excuses. Kingsley is the new Minister. He's agreed to give you a pass to Australia. He'll give it to you tomorrow after the funerals."

"Funerals?"

"Yes. The funerals of those who fell here. They'll be held near Dumbledore's tomb."

Severus closed his eyes as if in pain. "I bet Madam Pomfrey won't let me attend it."

"But you have a splendid view of the grounds from the Hospital Wing windows. Your bed could be moved up to there." She pointed at an empty place right under a large windowpane.

Severus was too tired to fight her for long. "All right. You win. I'll attend the funerals from the window, and I will accompany Miss Granger to Australia."

"Thank you, sir," the young woman answered brightly, startling the two others, who had forgotten about her being there.

The five Gryffindors were sprawled in the armchairs of their common room, which was blissfully empty of any other student.

"Dirk Sinan? The governors want Mimar Sinan?" Neville asked incredulously.

"What's with that Mimar Sinan?" Harry inquired.

"He's famous for fleeing England twenty years ago or so. He refused to be a Death Eater like his father."

"He's also the best wizarding architect alive," Hermione added. "I've checked in the library. What he did with Sydney wizarding opera is awesome."

"I don't care about Sinan," Ron interjected. "It's only right that you go and fetch your parents, but I don't like you going with Snape. Maybe I could go with you?"

Hermione frowned. "I don't think so. Professor McGonagall would have mentioned it otherwise. She seemed to think that my presence could bend Sinan's will into coming back. I wonder if it has anything to do with the fact that Voldemort killed his daughter and mistress in front of him. I went to the library before I came back here, and I saw his mistress's photo in an old issue of the *Daily Prophet*. She had hair like mine, though her eyes were blue."

"A reformed Death Eater travelling with a Muggle-born, who is also a friend of mine, and who looks like his past mistress... That makes sense," Harry mused aloud. "It's very much like Dumbledore taking me to convince Slughorn to come back to Hogwarts."

"Said like that, yes, I suppose it makes sense," Ginny agreed. "Can you spend a bit more time with us today, please?" Ginny asked to Hermione, turning to her. "We're leaving tomorrow, and we've hardly seen you lately."

"Of course." She smiled. "But I'll go back to the Hospital Wing tonight to make sure Headmaster Snape eats his dinner." Being with her friends was good, but she would not shirk her duties, however self-appointed they might be.

Ron was not happy with her answer, but for once he kept his tongue in check. "I'll go with you tonight, then, if the only way to be with you is to see him as well."

"Oh, Ron, that's so sweet!" Hermione exclaimed, and she kissed him soundly on the mouth until three light coughs convinced them to part from each other.

What? She had not dared! What was that redheaded prat doing there? Obviously, he was escorting Miss Granger, for he was carrying her tray while she had his in her hands.

"Ron came with me. I hope you don't mind?" Hermione looked at Severus uncertainly.

"Will he stay?" Severus glanced at the phials of green potions on his bedside table.

"No, sir," Ron answered. "I only intended to help Hermione with the trays." He could feel the hostility coming off the headmaster in waves, and the man did not sound like an invalid. He feared that if he did not leave, Snape would take it out on his girlfriend. He pecked Hermione briefly on the lips and slipped out of the curtain-closed partition.

"Did you need to bring that oaf? I count myself lucky that he left; that boy eats like a pig!"

"That's not true! Ron has very good manners!" she exclaimed indignantly.

Severus snorted. "If you say so." He looked down at his plate. "Let's tuck in."

They ate in silence. Severus observed the girl stealthily. She had improved greatly during that last year when she had been away. Her shape and her mind had both benefited from hands-on experience. This consideration had him pondering one of the great mysteries of life: what did women see in men who were not him? The general question slid to: what did Granger see in the Weasley boy? He was brave? Severus too. He was intelligent (when he deemed it fit to actually use his intelligence)? Severus too. He was... handsome? Severus was not sure if he was competent enough to judge how handsome other men were, but he had to admit Weasley had something that he, Severus Snape, did not have: good looks. But Severus had something Weasley did not have: cunning, an uncanny ability at plotting, and experience at life. What could win a woman's heart...and body? Good looks, or craftiness? If he had done things differently with Lily, would he have won her heart? He now had an unexpected opportunity to test these theories out and to seek answers to his questions in the form of an Authority-sanctioned travel alone with a Muggle-born who was not so different from Lily. If it brought him the "more" his life was craving, it would be all the better.

Part One, Day Three

Chapter 3 of 14

The dead are buried, Hermione's friends leave Hogwarts, and she has a date of sorts with Severus.

Thanks to my wonderful beta, Dacian Goddess.

The *Daily Prophet* was delivered early the next day. As expected, the press conference of the day before had made the front page, including Ron and Hermione's embrace, but Ron was the sole recipient of all the teasing because Hermione escaped to the Hospital Wing as soon as possible. It was not as if Ron was really bothered, after all. He liked to have his share of fame, and Hermione was his girlfriend; there was no harm in letting people know.

Severus was reading the *Daily Prophet* when Hermione arrived with the trays. He had had a horrible night. Sleep had eluded him once more, and his cardiac sphincter had loosened in the middle of the night. Being choked by his stomach contents was a sensation he did not care to feel again. And this utter tripe had landed on his lap this morning! People were bound to feel joy, relief, hope after the Dark Lord's fall, but was that a reason to go sentimental? "Young love", "purity of heart", "wondrous bravery" and such inanities were but a sample of the rubbish printed in this morning edition. He himself was depicted as the Dark Hero, whose love was undying, faithful to the end, not fearing to sully his hands for the love of a Gryffindor, Muggle-born woman. He hoped he would not be stalked by women in need of a hero to save. Well, seducing Granger was a necessity; it would have the double advantage of making him appear as the Dark Hero who fell once again for the Gryffindor, Muggle-born woman who could save him, and of putting a damper on silly women's attempts to rescue his soul.

"Good morning, sir," Hermione greeted him as she entered his partition with two trays in her hands and thankfully no Weasley in tow.

"Good morning, Miss Granger." Time to be civil; no flies were caught with vinegar.

They started on their meal without waiting, as had become their custom after a couple of days. After a while, Hermione could not help but ask, "Did you sleep well, sir? You look... pale."

"I always look pale."

"Well, paler than usual, if I may say so." She bit her lower lip.

"And what would you know about my complexion?"

"Er... I don't remember you being that pale yesterday."

I will not snap at her. He sighed. "If you must know, difficulty to sleep is another side-effect to some snake venoms. I believe the not-regretted Nagini was gifted with that kind of venom." He smirked at her apparent discomfiture. "Do not worry too much about it, though. This side-effect is easily remedied with potions taken daily until my death. I ought to start my treatment today."

"Why not before?" Hermione asked before she could stop herself.

I will be patient, though patience clashes with tiredness. "Because it would have interfered with the antivenin possibly to the point of cancelling its effects. Now, this conversation is over. I believe it is time to move my bed to the windows."

Hermione checked her watch and saw it was only half an hour before the funerals started.

"If you can stand for a few seconds, Professor, I will Levitate your bed to the window," she offered.

Severus nodded and got out of the bed; he knew from her exploits that she was more than up to par for the task. He was only in his grey nightshirt, and Hermione got a glimpse of white calves and sparse tufts of black hair on his insteps below his grey nightshirt's hem.

"Here, sir. Your bed is ready."

She waited for him to climb back into his bed. Severus wondered for a moment if she was going to tuck him in. Of course not.

"Thank you, Miss Granger. You can go now."

"Yes, sir. But I will be back for lunch."

He watched her walk around the beds and cubicles of the Hospital Wing. Her gait was easy on the eye, made even more pleasant by the undulation of her untameable hair hanging loose down her back and highlighted by the sunrays bathing the room in their warm, golden light.

Then Severus looked out of the window and concentrated his mind on the funerals to come. He wanted to pay tribute to the fallen properly.

He saw countless rows of chairs waiting for families, friends and officials. White tables stood in front of the chairs, aligned with Dumbledore's tomb. He could not discern their number, but there were too many. A lump formed in his throat; too many dead; too many lives taken too soon; he had nearly been one of them.

"Headmaster." He started when Madam Pomfrey addressed him. "I trust you'll be all right if I leave the Hospital Wing to attend the funerals?" He could only nod. "If need be," she added, "my wand will vibrate. I haven't lifted the enchantment you put on it." Not trusting his voice, he nodded again to thank her; she seemed to catch his meaning.

He refocused his attention back to the school grounds. Several chairs were occupied now, and people were scattered all over the place. Most of them were wizards, but the Muggles were easy to spot: they wore different clothing, and above all, they were the only ones in black from head to toe. The students who had fought against the Death Eaters or who had lost family members in the battle were given...provided said family members were not supporters of Voldemort...chairs in the front rows; they were mostly Gryffindors, and none of them was a Slytherin. He could not believe the students of his own House had been such a bunch of cowards. Not only had they all fled the castle at the first hint of an attack...with the notable exception of Draco and his two goons, but they had had no noble goal in doing so...but not even one of them had joined the Death Eaters to take part in the fight afterwards. He noticed Granger and Weasley holding hands...*They should make the best of it, for it will not last*...trailing behind Potter and the Weasley girl. The rest of the Weasley family was already taking seats in front of one of the white tables. Severus could glimpse the white corners of starched handkerchiefs protruding from their clenched fists.

The school staff arrived in one block. Officials of the Ministry could be seen Apparating beyond the gates. Under the trees of the Forbidden Forest, the centaurs' silhouettes stood out, the shade darker than that of their surrounding environment. He guessed the ghosts' presence from their moving shimmers, like Disillusioned living persons. A window was opened at the far end of the room to let in a bit of a breeze into the Hospital Wing. It also let in the heavy silence that permeated the assembly below.

He heard the castle's doors creak open. All attendants stood up as one and watched in direction of the noise. Soon, Aurors carrying coffins made in light wood appeared in his field of vision. Each white table received a coffin, and the Aurors drew back to their assigned place in the crowd. Kingsley Shacklebolt got to his feet to stand in front of the soon-to-be tombs. Severus could not hear his speech well, but the emotion in the black Minister's voice was unmistakable. This was not a half-hearted homage; this came from the depth of his being, and Severus felt moved. Words were pointless when faced with such grief.

Of course, that was the moment all the muscles of his left leg chose to twitch and loosen. He was thankful he had not been standing, but it was disturbing nonetheless. Mindlessly, he reached for his bedside table while keeping his eyes on the scene unfolding on the grounds, only to find that his bedside table had not been moved with his bed. He swore. Loudly. Twice, or maybe more. Gingerly, he put down his right foot on the floor and hopped to the table, plucked the last phial of Muscle-Controlling Potion with one hand...the other one was busy steadying him...managed to uncork it without spilling all of the potion on the floor and swallowed its contents. After a minute, he tested his left leg: it was firm. He walked normally back to his bed and found that the coffins and the white tables had disappeared. They were replaced by tombs in white marble, like clones of Dumbledore's. Drat! He had missed the part he had been expecting most, when the dead were truly put at peace. He would have liked to see the shape of the smoke above Lupin's tomb, to see of what the man's soul was really made. He would have to ask later.

The throng was already scattering. He heard noise in the corridor outside the Hospital Wing door and climbed back into bed quickly.

Madam Pomfrey burst into the room and made a beeline for his bed.

"How do you feel, Headmaster?" There was concern in her voice.

"Not bad, though I still had an incident during the funerals," he grumbled.

"It was to be expected." She sighed. "Can you stand?"

He nodded.

"Good. I need to put your bed back in its place."

When that was done, she resumed. "I see you've run out of Muscle-Controlling Potion. I've ordered a double batch. It should arrive at any minute now. I've prepared the potions you'll have to take daily for your appetite and sleep. The one for your appetite is to be taken a quarter of an hour before each meal, and the one for sleep when you

go to bed."

Hermione joined them at that moment with her customary two trays.

"Thank you, Miss Granger. I appreciate very much the help you've given me." With that, Madam Pomfrey left them.

"I will leave you early today, sir. Harry, Ginny and Ron will be leaving this afternoon, and I want to say goodbye to them. But don't worry. I'll be here with your evening meal."

He inclined his head. "Very well." *I will soon have her to myself.*

This time, they ate in silence, both lost in their own memory lane inspired by the funerals.

Hermione found her friends packing their belongings in their trunks with more or less method, if piling things up haphazardly could be called a method where Ron and Harry were concerned.

"Let me," Hermione ordered more than suggested. *'Pack!'* she cried and waved her wand in long, sweeping movements over the beds and wardrobes, and even under the beds.

"I tried that spell," Harry said sheepishly. "Seems I'm not the only one with no hang of housework spells."

"Who else?" Ron asked.

"Tonks," Harry answered with a sad touch in his voice. The others did not ask for clarification.

The three of them got down into Gryffindor common room, where Ginny was already waiting for them. Her eyes were puffy, as if she had been crying not long before. Dean, Neville and Seamus, who had been sitting in another corner of the common room, joined them. Lavender and Parvati had left right after the funerals, and the rest of the students were leaving that afternoon, all except for Hermione. They chatted quietly there, reminiscing over their dead friends, discreetly sweeping their eyes, and discussing their future. Harry was to join the Aurors the next day. Ron was moving in with George with the intent to work with his devastated brother in the joke shop, having decided that he had had his share of Dark wizards for life. Neville intended to travel, to see for himself all the treasures of flora he had only read about. Dean, Seamus and, strangely, Hermione had no precise idea.

"And to say that I have to come back to Hogwarts in September!" Ginny moaned.

"Oh, you poor girl," Harry teased her. "Perhaps you should go camping. It earned us our NEWTs."

"Hrmp. It's unfair. You didn't even have to take the exams."

"Believe me, sis, if I had the choice, well, I never thought I'd say that, but I'd rather have double NEWTs than living another year like that," Ron interjected.

"I can't believe you've just said that either," Hermione said. "As for me, I think I miss the exams."

"Hermione!" the others exclaimed in unison.

"What?" she said defensively. "It's a rite of passage."

"Killing Voldemort was enough of a rite of passage for me," Harry asserted while pulling out of his pocket the watch he had received from the Weasleys for his seventeenth birthday. "Look! It's already that late!"

Armchairs were pushed back hastily, trunks were Levitated, and a procession of luggage and students proceeded to the school gates. Hermione hugged each of them and gave Ron a lingering kiss until the Knight Bus appeared in front of them in a bang. She watched them embark on the double-deck purple vehicle. Then, it disappeared in a bang, leaving her alone behind. She strolled back to the castle at a leisurely pace, thinking of the people who had been buried in the morning. She let her tears run freely while she contemplated the aligned tombs near the lake; it was such a nice day. Little did she know that she was being watched.

Severus was doing up the last buttons on his robes and gazing at the grounds through the windows of the Hospital Wing. Madam Pomfrey had declared that there was nothing more that she could do and discharged him from her care. He would have dinner in his rooms tonight. His eyes caught sight of Miss Granger looking like she was meditating in the sunlight of this late afternoon. *I could invite her to share my meal as usual, except that this time, we would be in my rooms above the headmaster's office. The stunning view I have of the grounds and the Forbidden Forest from there would certainly help with my plan.*

His decision made, Severus left the Hospital Wing and waited in the staircase leading to the Entrance Hall. As soon as Hermione got into the castle, he pretended that he was just climbing down the stairs.

"Professor! Did Madam Pomfrey let you go?"

"As you can see. She told me there wasn't anything else that she could do."

"Good." Hermione felt awkward. "Will you... will you need help with something?"

"I don't think so. But I'd like you to share my evening meal with me."

Severus smirked. "I wasn't clear enough. I meant I'd like to share my meal with you in my own rooms." Hermione's eyes widened. "You're the only person apart from Madam Pomfrey who knows the extent of my injuries, and I don't want to advertise them."

"Oh... Of course. I accept your invitation, Professor."

What did you think I invited you for, Miss Granger? Did you have the right idea? Come to my office at seven. The password is 'daisy roots'."

He nodded at her and went outside to pay his own homage to the fallen.

When seven came, Hermione reached Severus's office. He opened the door even before she could knock.

"Miss Granger. Punctual, as always."

She blushed a little, for his remark sounded like a compliment, something she was not accustomed to coming from this man.

"Follow me."

The past headmasters' portraits followed her with their painted eyes. There was a lot of whispering going on from one portrait to the other; gossip was not a privilege for the living only. Hermione hardly had time to glance at Dumbledore's portrait, whose blue eyes watched her and Severus intently as they crossed the study.

Severus tapped his wand five times on a bare part of the wall between two bookshelves, and the right one pivoted. It hid a stony, spiral staircase. They both climbed it steadily and emerged in a vast but simply furnished living room. A table for two was laid on one side, while the other side was occupied by two armchairs and a sofa in front of a fireplace. Bookshelves and cupboards covered the ancient walls. Opposite to the fireplace and near the table were two large windowpanes overlooking the Forbidden Forest.

"How magnificent!" Hermione exclaimed. Forgetting herself, she strode to the windows and watched the scenery. The sun was low on the horizon above the forest. The tops of the trees were rippling with a lazy wind, which freshened Severus's living room thanks to an open window. She noticed Hagrid heading for the castle to have dinner with the other professors.

"Won't the other teachers say something about us missing dinner?" The question had been plaguing Hermione for the last two hours.

"I've informed Professor McGonagall about our whereabouts and the reasons why we wouldn't attend dinner with them. I think it'd be easier too to plan our trip to Australia far from prying ears."

"I understand, sir."

"I suggest we start eating. I have taken my 'appetite potion'," Severus put a slight, derogatory emphasis on the word, "a quarter of an hour ago."

He helped her into her seat and sat down in front of her. It was not a fancy dinner, just mixed salad and bread, and crème brûlée for dessert, but Hogwarts' house-elves knew how to make even a modest dish taste like a feast. They chatted quietly throughout the meal.

"So, we'll meet at seven tomorrow morning in your office and have breakfast together before we Floo to the Ministry. We take the ten o'clock Portkey to Sydney and arrive there at eight p.m. We head to our hostel, have a light dinner and take a Sleeping Draught to help us adjust to the time difference," Hermione summarised.

"Quite right, Miss Granger. Tomorrow, we take care of your parents and organise their return to England. The day after tomorrow, we make contact with Mimar Sinan. After that, we can only guess how long we'll have to stay in Australia." *If I have my say, it will not be a short stay.*

"Then, we agree. Er, would it be presumptuous to borrow one, or two, or more of your books for our trip? You'll be there to check on them, after all," Hermione asked him nervously, though her daring to ask was a testament to her feeling more at ease with him.

Why did I not think of it myself? Severus admonished himself. He could score so many points in his favour with his lending books to Hermione. "Of course, Miss Granger. I know you would never mistreat a book."

Hermione smiled warmly at him. Receiving compliments from a man so hard to please was a bit heady.

Severus led her to a bookshelf. "You might find those of interest." He chose three heavy-looking books *Ancient Runes and Their Secret Meaning*, *An Anthology of Wizarding Fiction Literature* and *The Real History of the Dark Arts*.

"Thank you, sir. I think I'll enjoy these immensely."

"I don't doubt it. I wish I could carry on our conversation, but it is getting late, and we have a long day tomorrow. You should go to bed."

"Yes. I'll see you tomorrow, then." She nearly told him that he had not had a "muscle incident" tonight, but it would probably not have been a smart move.

"Good evening, Miss Granger." And Severus, ever the gentleman, walked her back to the gargoyle guarding his office entrance.

Part One, Day Four

Chapter 4 of 14

The journey to Sydney.

Many thanks to my beta, Dacian Goddess, for her help with this story.

And if you wonder, I don't make any money with this.

Hermione thought that having breakfast in the headmaster's private rooms nearly beat taking one's meal under the enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall; sipping one's pumpkin juice while gazing at the beautiful grounds of Hogwarts was a marvellous experience. Severus observed her silently, enjoying her expression of delight. Her revelling in life was the most befitting homage to the dead he had seen. He was loath to break the quiet.

"Miss Granger, it's time we go."

She turned her eyes to him. "All right, sir."

She picked up her rucksack from the floor and readied herself.

"I trust you've taken warmer clothes?" Severus inquired. "It's currently autumn in Australia."

"And winter in Sydney is more like spring in Scotland," she retorted to show him that she had prepared for her trip seriously.

"Let's go, then." Severus was tempted to offer her his arm, but decided not to *It's too early. She's never seen me offering my arm to anyone. She would know that I am up to something.* However, he managed to brush his fingertips against the small of her back in a seemingly unconscious movement of his arm when he closed the door to his rooms.

They crossed the grounds without exchanging a word, for the presence of the tombs was overwhelming them. They Apparated to the Ministry's Atrium and headed for the Portkey terminal, where a clerk thoroughly checked and rechecked their papers, Severus's pass, their reservations and their luggage before he let them go to the waiting room, where Severus had to deal with curious wizards and fawning witches. One unfriendly reply and one very dark look put everything and everyone back in place, and

Hermione and he were left in peace afterward.

At ten to ten, they were invited to gather around a long plank and to grab it firmly, along with ten other wizards and witches. "I hate Portkeying to Australia. The travel lasts longer, and I'm sick almost every time when I arrive," a man with short legs and a protruding belly commented. At that moment, the sensation of being hooked by their navels seized the passengers, and they were swept away in a howl of wind and swirling colours for several long seconds. Severus managed to make some physical contact with Hermione under the pretext of being pushed against her without him meaning to. It nearly sent his blood boiling, and that was certainly the explanation for the most humiliating "muscle incident" so far.

When the whole group landed in Sydney, Severus's anal sphincter let go. He felt his intestinal contents escape into his underpants. He paled and backed away from the others quickly. The odour was already expanding its foul-smelling tendrils. Severus's eyes darted from one person to another, wondering when one of them would notice his humiliation. Sweat formed on his forehead. He was on the verge of panic.

Hermione was very worried when she saw her ex-teacher looking like he might faint. She followed him and guessed what was wrong when the smell hit her nostrils. She casually unsheathed her wand and waved it at Severus, who found himself dressed in warmer clothes and devoid of excrement in his underpants.

"Here, sir. You're still recovering from your injuries," Hermione stated aloud for their audience. "Madam Pomfrey insisted on you not catching a cold."

Her countenance expressed understanding and she smiled at him. He nodded his thanks. He had to admit that he was impressed. The girl had non-verbally performed a Cleaning Charm and a Clothing Charm in one wand-movement, leaving the witnesses of the scene in the dark about the real reason for her bout of magic. Filius would be proud of her, and Severus would be proud to have her on his arm one day. Then, Hermione dressed herself in warmer clothes too with the same wand movement. They were ready to face Australia.

They Flooded directly from Sydney Portkey terminal to their inn in Warrane Lane, the *Muggle Cook*. They came out of the fireplace in the corner of the room where lay the reception area. The establishment as a whole was modest and seemed to be built mostly in brick.

"Severus Snape and Hermione Granger," Severus indicated to the receptionist, a witch apparently in her late twenties.

"Two rooms with a common bathroom," she announced. She gave them their keys and indicated how to find their rooms. "First and second doors on the left, on the first floor."

Severus grabbed his leather bag and Hermione her rucksack. They retired, each to their own room, to put away their things and to get ready for dinner. When Hermione opened the bathroom door, she found herself face to face with Severus, who smirked at her while folding his dark blue and very plush-looking towel on the towel-rail. She blushed deeply.

"It seems we'll have to work out a schedule for the use of the bathroom," he remarked idly without pausing in putting away his soap, shampoo and shaving set.

Hermione shrugged and tried to act casual. "There's no need, really. All we have to do is double-lock the door when we use the bathroom."

"Very well. I'll meet you in the lobby in ten minutes."

Severus turned on his heel and returned to his room, ostentatiously closing the door behind him. Still blushing, Hermione hastened to tidy up her things and to freshen up a little. When she met up with Severus, she was wearing her coat above her jeans and sweater, whereas he was only in his custom black robes, sans cloak.

"We're having dinner in the hotel restaurant," he informed her. "Your coat is not needed."

"Oh." Hermione felt a bit stupid. She had assumed they were going out, if only to familiarise themselves with Warrane Lane's layout a little.

"Take it back to your room, Miss Granger." He was mildly annoyed with her, but he reasoned that it had not been that obvious that they were going to eat on site.

Later, when they were settled into their chairs, Severus asked her where her parents lived.

"I found them a flat in Regent Street, not far from here. I thought it'd be easier if I didn't have to roam all of Australia when the time would come to bring them back."

"Good thinking," Severus acknowledged, and Hermione's cheeks took on a slight shade of pink under the compliment.

"Thank you, sir."

They discussed the particularities of the Australian culture while eating their roast meat and vegetables. Hermione had studied the subject extensively before she had sent her parents here and she was only too happy to share her findings. Unexpectedly, Severus was keen on listening to her, and not only because of his plan to seduce her; he did not know much about Australia, never having had the time to read about it, and his curiosity was aroused. She still sounded like a travel guide, a very animated travel guide, but she did not bore him at all. After having a slice of Pavlova for dessert—a meringue decorated with whipped cream and strawberries—they retired to their rooms and, with a simultaneity that would have scared them had they been able to witness it, they swallowed their doses of Sleeping Draught and slept without interruption until six in the morning.

Part One, Day Five

Chapter 5 of 14

Severus and Hermione meet Hermione's parents, and Severus baits Hermione.

I make no money with this story. Thanks to my dear beta, Dacian Goddess, for preventing me from embarrassing myself.

At seven a.m., they met as agreed in the restaurant to have breakfast together. Severus had had another muscle incident just before going down to join Hermione. His wrist had been the victim this time, leaving him, if not limp and incapacitated, at least feeling the weakness in his limb. He wasn't sure he would have been able to grasp anything securely and hold it without dropping it. He was glad that he had been able to take care of it himself. These unannounced incidents were starting to be really bothersome. He wondered if he should not hire a personal aide for disabled persons, with Miss Granger filling the position. She would be with him all the time, and he would be able to influence her in choosing him over Weasley. All he needed to do now was to convince Miss Granger, and he had no doubts that he could do it.

"Good morning, sir," she greeted him. Her eyes scanned his Muggle attire approvingly. It was black, of course, but completely appropriate for moving about in the Muggle world.

"Good morning, Miss Granger."

They ate their breakfast rather quickly in order to catch Hermione's parents before they left for their dental practice.

"I only changed their surnames from Granger to Mansfield," she explained while they were checking the names at the door of her parents' building. "Ah, here they are." She pushed the button labelled "Mansfield, William & Josephine."

"Who's there?" a feminine voice not unlike Hermione's asked over the intercom.

"This is Hermione Granger, your landlady." Severus raised an eyebrow at that "revelation". "I came to see if everything was in order and to inform you about the new renting conditions."

"Oh." Mrs Granger sounded surprised. "Well, in that case.... It won't take long, I hope? My husband and I need to go to work." *Merlin!* Severus thought. *Now, I know whence Miss Granger's insatiable need to speak comes from. The woman can't wait for us to climb up to her flat to start the conversation.*

"No, I promise you it will be a short visit," Hermione answered in a reassuring tone.

At last, Josephine Granger opened the door and let Hermione and, unwittingly, Severus in. The flat was on the third floor, and the door was already open when they arrived. Hermione knocked firmly.

"Come in," answered the same voice they had heard on the intercom, though it was much more agreeable without the cracking of the device. They entered a straight corridor, which split the flat into two parts. A woman about Hermione's height with brown hair...obviously dyed since greying roots were showing...was standing near the door leading to a living room on their left. Though she looked surprised to see Severus, she invited the both of them to take a seat in the living room.

"Let me introduce you to Severus Snape, my partner," Hermione said.

"Nice to meet you, Mister Snape."

"Likewise, Mrs Mansfield."

They shook hands.

"William will be ready shortly," she informed them.

"I'm here," said person announced from the doorway. He was a tall man, with a crown of salt-and-pepper hair covering his head, and it was obvious Hermione had inherited her brown eyes from him. He came to stand near his wife.

Hermione drew her wand out, pointed it at the startled couple, and intoned, *'Delere Obliviatum!'*

The Grangers remained unmoving for a second then looked around, clearly trying to regain their bearings, until their eyes settled upon the young woman in front of them.

"Hermione!" they exclaimed. They rushed and embraced her tightly. Mrs Granger was sobbing overtly, mumbling words like "my dear girl!", while Mr Granger was unsuccessfully trying to keep his tears in check. Severus opted to wait patiently for the family embrace to stop on its own. A few minutes later, William Granger collected his wits and looked around him.

"Where are we?" he asked.

Hermione disentangled herself from her mother's arms and set to explain the situation to her parents. "You're in your flat in Sydney, Australia."

"What?" the Grangers exclaimed in unison. "What are we doing here?" her father boomed. He narrowed his eyes. "Does it have something to do with the events relayed by the *Daily Prophet* last week?"

Josephine Granger remembered Severus's presence and, squinting at him, took a step back. "You! You were in the newspaper! You..."

"Mum! He's with me!" Hermione interjected. "Things are not what they seem. Let me explain them to you. You've been here for nearly a year."

"What?" For the second time, the Grangers had spoken their astonishment in unison.

William Granger did not know whom to glare at, his daughter or the... man accompanying her. What was she doing with a known murderer? His thoughts were echoed on his wife's face.

Severus sighed. "Perhaps we should all sit and discuss what happened this last year?"

"I think we should, indeed," Mr Granger acquiesced. "You," he abruptly turned to Hermione and jabbed his index finger into her sternum, "have a lot to explain."

"Yes, Dad," Hermione answered meekly. Her father still had the power to intimidate her.

Mr Granger took the time to call his and his wife's practice to inform their secretary that today's appointments were to be cancelled, and they all sat on the sofa and in the armchairs in the living room. It took the whole morning to update them about the past year's events, from the moment Hermione had modified their memories up to Voldemort's defeat a few days ago. The Grangers, especially Josephine, interrupted her every two minutes to ask questions, which seemed to irritate Hermione. She even snapped at her mother once. Severus contented himself with observing the scene, but in the end, he was invited to share his own version of things. He noticed with satisfaction that Hermione was enraptured by his account of what had happened at Hogwarts during his tenure. He also managed to show himself in a good light, insisting on how he did everything in his power to keep the students safe without provoking the Dark Lord's or the Carrows' curiosity...and he did so with perfect subtlety, of course.

"That's such an incredible story!" Mrs Granger exclaimed when Severus finished his tale. But she was looking at him with awe, her husband with admiration. Good. One of the safest ways to a girl's bed was through her mother. And father. The moment was spoiled when William Granger's belly growled. It was already past noon.

"There's a nice Chinese restaurant further down Regent Street," Mr Granger proposed. "Let's celebrate our *reunion* there." Hermione had the feeling that she would hear about her using magic on her parents without their consent for a long time.

During lunchtime, Severus experienced another one of those blasted muscle incidents. He was headed for the lavatory at the end of the meal when some of the muscles in his right foot slackened. He would have merely stumbled had the incident not occurred at the precise moment that a waiter was hurrying along the aisle with three glasses in his hands. As it was, the two men bumped into each other, and Severus fell flat on his face in the middle of the aisle. Some patrons laughed. They were not even impressed by Severus's withering glare, while Hermione rushed at his side to give him some Muscle-Controlling Potion. Her parents followed her and tried to help him stand, but Severus could only spare one hand in his position, as he was using the other to lift himself up from the floor, and he elected to grasp Hermione's. When he could stand on his two feet, he went to the lavatory as he had intended with his head high, as if nothing had happened, but his pride had been bruised nonetheless. He could not even cross a Muggle restaurant without being ridiculed. Meanwhile, the Granger family members resumed their seat.

"What's that?" Josephine asked her daughter, glancing significantly at the now empty bottle of potion.

"It's a potion," Hermione answered, not keen on giving too much information to her mother.

"That much I guessed, Hermione. What is it for was what I meant."

"Well," she spoke slowly, carefully choosing her words, "Professor Snape suffers from lingering effects from his injuries. He needs to take some of that potion when he has a... an incident."

"Is it serious?" her father asked.

"Not really. In fact, I'm not sure. But I know it complicates his everyday life." She really did not want to elaborate. As it was, she already felt like a nurse betraying professional confidentiality. She was saved from more questions by Severus's return at their table.

When their stomachs were satisfied, Hermione implemented her plan for her parents' return to England. Essentially, she erased every trace of their presence in Australia, including casting a charm on their practice and flat so that anyone who would try to reach them for an appointment or something would be Confounded and forget about their very existence. Thanks to magic, it only took them an afternoon to put their affairs in order, and at eight that evening, the Grangers were on a plane to their home in London, after having extorted from their daughter the promise to go and visit them as soon as she would be back.

"That could have been worse," Hermione commented as soon as her parents had gone to the international area of the airport.

"Considering that you used magic on them to alter their life so radically without prior warning...an act that, I must insist, could lead you to Azkaban for several years...it could have been worse indeed."

"I know, but Azkaban was the least of my worries last year. And I couldn't really advertise what my plans were."

Severus smirked. "No, you couldn't."

They went back to the centre of the city and decided to eat Indian.

"Would you mind walking a bit before returning to the hotel?" Severus suggested at the end of dinner, which had been livened up by a discussion about the theory behind Memory Charms. "We might never come back here. It'd be a pity not to do a bit of touring while we're here." *And a walk in the romantic setting of a city at night would help her to see me in another light.*

Their walk was perfect: lovely city, lovely company, lovely conversation. Severus was seized by another muscle incident at one point, but it was taken care of swiftly by Hermione as soon as she noticed signs of discomfort on his part. Passers-by had had no chance to notice anything at all unless they had been paying attention to the pair beforehand.

"I'm really indebted to you, Miss Granger," Severus acknowledged. "I don't want people to take notice of my predicament...not yet...and your help has been invaluable in that respect."

"Thank you, sir. I'm sincerely sorry that nothing can be done about it," Hermione said.

"So am I. My only hope is that the incidents will become less frequent with time. At least, Madam Pomfrey thinks so, but it could take years before it becomes tolerable."

Hermione's feeling of guilt, which had been pushed to the back of her mind by the trip and the reunion with her parents, came back full force. "Is there anything I can do, sir?"

"You've already done a lot, Miss Granger." He made a show of pondering what he was going to reveal to her. "Actually, I have been thinking of hiring a personal aide."

Hermione looked stricken. "Like in 'personal aide for disabled persons'? But I've heard that there weren't enough nurses in the wizarding world to fill all the job offers in that profession. Well, that was last year...."

"Actually, a nurse would not do for the job. As you have seen, anyone with a bit of common sense and a modicum of magical skill could help me when I have a muscle incident. A nurse would be bored to tears because she...or he... would not have a thing to do between two incidents. No, I need someone who could help me in my duties at Hogwarts as well."

"But... don't you have a deputy for that?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't be surprised if Professor McGonagall chose to retire soon. Perhaps not this year or the next, but within five years, yes, I think she will. Besides, the Deputy is also a teacher and thus can't be with me all the time." Severus carefully kept his expression neutral and carried on walking as if he had just said something innocuous.

Hermione remembered how tired her Head of House had looked after the battle. She glanced sideways at her companion of travel and thought. Severus could nearly hear the cogs in her mind being put into motion. "What would being your 'personal aide' entail?" she inquired in a falsely casual voice.

"Basically," Severus answered, "being ready to act in case I was struck by a muscle incident, help me with the paperwork, help me handle my schedule, the relations with the Ministry and the school governors, essentially." He made a short pause. "And if I trusted them enough, they might help me with disciplining the students as well."

"That doesn't sound that dreadful."

Severus was giddy. She was taking the bait!

"No, it isn't. That person would get all the fun without the responsibilities that go with being the headmaster."

They were silent after that. Hermione wondered if she could fill the position. In fact, she had the inkling that Snape wanted her to fill the position. After all, she already knew about the lingering effects of the poison and had helped him out of delicate situations without a fuss. She was certain of her own abilities to handle the paperwork and anyone's schedule...after handling Ron and Harry's revision schedules for years, she could deal with three Ministers' timetables. Impersonating Bellatrix Lestrange had given her clues about the way to conduct relations with the Ministry and the school governors successfully. As for disciplining the students, her experience as a prefect proved that she had never shied away from her duties in that matter. She realised then that the job description could have been her description.

"You want me for the job, don't you?" she blurted.

"What if I do?" He was the tiniest bit defensive.

"I will think about it. But you know, you could have asked me directly." She sounded mildly annoyed with his lack of straightforwardness.

"I didn't want you to feel forced to accept it." Which was partly true: a willing aide would do a better job.

"I'll think about it."

They both knew that, in essence, she had just agreed to take the job.

Part One, Day Six

Chapter 6 of 14

Severus and Hermione meet Minar Sinan, share an evening of sightseeing in Sydney and arrive in time in England to share a dinner with the Grangers. During that eventful day, Severus comes to an important conclusion about Hermione.

I don't own the characters, only the storyline and I make no money with it.

Thanks to Dacian Goddess for her beta skills.

Severus's jaw went lax in the middle of the night, and he woke up with drool gliding along his chin and pooling on his pillow near his cheek. He could not even sleep without being bothered by his undisciplined body! He took care of his offending temporalis muscle with a sip or two of the Muscle-Controlling Potion, *Scourgified* his bedding, and joined Hermione at seven a.m. on the dot.

She looked a bit tired this morning, but greeted him with a broad smile nonetheless.

"Good morning, sir. I've already ordered your breakfast. The same thing as yesterday."

He raised an eyebrow and sat down in front of her. "What if I had wanted something else?"

"I've had breakfast with you for several days now, and you always eat the same."

He was pleased with her answer.

When they finished, he suggested that they have a look at Warrane Lane before heading to Minar Sinan's. "Eight o'clock might be a bit early to arrive at a stranger's door."

They traipsed along the biggest wizarding quarter in Australia for the better part of two hours. It was quiet when they arrived, with only a bakery open. Little by little, the shopkeepers opened their shop for the customers. Hermione and Severus compared the wands in the Ollivander's Heritage window with the ones the British Ollivander made and could not really see a difference. They bought a couple of books about Aboriginal magic and treatments for snake bites, and barely spared a look at the broom maker, though Hermione would not have minded a stop at the flying carpet shop (those items were obviously not prohibited in Australia). Before they knew it, it was ten o'clock.

Here goes nothing, Severus reflected. I'm just going to meet with a man whose life was destroyed by Death Eaters, and I am... was one.

Minar Sinan's address led them to the Victoria Barracks. Severus swore under his breath when he saw those were buildings still used by the Australian Army *A Muggle military setting? What was the man thinking?*

Severus looked around them and cast an Anti-Detection and a Muggle-Repellent Charm. Then, he waved his wand and traces of magic gleamed in the air. "This way, Miss Granger," Severus said, indicating the gleaming traces of magic with his hand. Dumbstruck by what she had just witnessed, Hermione followed him wordlessly. She made a mental note to investigate this charm later. They reached a building that had hosted officers in the past, but which was concealed with magic. Hermione could feel wards around it.

Severus took one more step and was suddenly suspended spread-eagled in the air, not like with a *Levicorpus* Spell, but more like an insect taken in a spider web. Hermione tried all sorts of spells in rapid succession, but Severus would not budge. Whatever the enchantment was, it was very well crafted.

The door of the building burst open, and a tall, broad man in his forties came out. "You filthy Death Eater!" he barked. "I'll skin you alive..." He stopped abruptly at the sight of Hermione looking desperate, standing at Severus's side, her wand raised and ready to fight. He was literally frozen, as if he had seen a ghost.

"You will take him down," she hissed. "He's done nothing wrong. We've just come to talk to you."

"I don't speak with his kind!" Sinan replied, but his eyes did not leave Hermione's face. "A bunch of cowards! Look! He's even pissing on himself! Coward!" he shouted, pointing at the stream of yellowish liquid running along Severus's shoes from under his trousers.

Severus, who had been trying to hide his misfortune, chose to look at Sinan defiantly. He would not take humiliation with his head down.

"Oh, no, sir!" Hermione exclaimed. She made to wave her wand in Severus's direction, but Sinan grabbed her arm. "Don't! No magic can interfere with my wards without serious repercussions!" he warned her.

"But I want to clean him, nothing more!"

"No magic, I said." Then, he proceeded to watch Hermione attentively, and she saw the moment he recognised her. "You're Hermione Granger, one of Harry Potter's friends," he stated.

"Yes, I am. Please, take him down. He's with me."

Sinan raised an eyebrow. Hermione blushed when she realised the way her sentence could be construed. "I mean, I'm travelling with him. Hogwarts governors have mandated the both of us to come and speak with you." This was not exactly the truth...only Severus had been mandated...but she was not above a little distortion of the truth, after all.

"Let me check you for jinxes first." Sinan waved his wand in front of her. "You're not under the Imperius Spell, nor can I detect Dark magic upon you. Very well. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt, but you'll have to explain why a Death Eater...and I don't care if he's been labelled a war hero or not...was mandated to speak with me, when my opinions about *him* and his followers are well known." Another wave of his wand had Severus falling down ungracefully. Hermione was immediately at his side. She *Scourgified* him and gave him his potion.

"What's this?" Sinan asked, jerking his chin to indicate the potion.

"A Muscle-Controlling Potion," Hermione answered curtly while Severus stood up. He was in a very, very foul mood; his hands were shaking but, by his attitude, he dared Sinan to ask for more clarifications or, heaven forbid, to make fun of the incident. The architect would not live to tell the tale.

Seeing that his two visitors were unwilling to elaborate on the matter and that one of them was on the verge of exploding, Sinan invited them to follow him into his home. One day, his curiosity would kill him.

"So, what were you mandated for?" Sinan asked without preamble once they were all seated in comfortable armchairs, each with a cup of tea in their hands.

"I suppose you have learnt of the events in Great Britain?" Severus asked diplomatically.

Sinan nodded.

"Hogwarts had suffered great damage from the Dark Lord's attack," Sinan's jaw twitched at the mention of his enemy's title, "and mere repairs will be insufficient. To celebrate the Dark Lord's final downfall in the walls of the castle, the governors have decided that the school ought to be more than repaired, but to be given an unprecedented magnificence as well. Your work with the Sydney wizarding opera has not gone unnoticed, and they're of the opinion that only you could give Hogwarts the splendour it deserves. As the Headmaster of the school, I've been mandated to make you an offer."

"It doesn't explain why you're travelling with one of Harry Potter's best friends, if only to put pressure on me." Sinan's expression was puzzled, but his expression visibly softened when he looked at Hermione, the way one's expression softened when one watched pictures of one's lost loved ones.

"Not at all," Severus lied smoothly. "She had sent her parents to Australia last year. Now that the war has ended, she needed to come and fetch them. We merely killed two birds with one stone by travelling together: I helped with the formalities, and I benefited from her knowledge of the city." He would not say that she had been more useful to him than that given his handicap, but Sinan seemed to catch on, for his eyes darted to the pocket in which Hermione had slipped the empty phial of potion.

Sinan was afraid he found Severus very persuasive. "I don't want to go back to England," he said abruptly. "There's nothing more for me there."

"If I may, sir," Hermione intervened, "I think there's something in England for you...at least at Hogwarts. The castle had been badly damaged, especially by the giants. The school can't reopen before the renovation work has been done, and some parts even need to be rebuilt. You know how important Hogwarts is in the wizarding world, and not only in England. You know it's one of the greatest schools of witchcraft and wizardry. Can't you see the good you could bring about if you directed the repairs? Hogwarts would be an example of reconciliation."

Sinan persisted in his refusal, while Severus watched the proceedings with interest. He admired Hermione's demeanour, pleading but without humiliating herself.

"I won't go. I have enemies there."

"Do you think I would have sent my parents back if I thought there were any dangers?" Hermione retorted hotly, her eyes alight, her cheeks reddened, her air indignant.

How could I not want her? Severus averted his eyes from her so as not to advertise his intentions for her.

Sinan sank back in his armchair at her words. Clearly, they had struck home. He sulked in the heavy silence that permeated the atmosphere for a few minutes, then uttered slowly, his eyes cast on his cold cup of tea, "Since you've taken the trouble to travel all the way to Sydney to meet me, I will return the courtesy and travel with you to Hogwarts. I want to sleep at the castle. I will look over the damage, and I alone will decide what will be done in term of refurbishment and repairs. I will not lower my price, there will be no bargaining." He looked Severus in the eyes. "Those are my conditions."

Severus nodded. "Agreed, but I will need a couple of days to prepare decent accommodations for you at the castle."

"Fair enough," Sinan acknowledged. "Expect me the day after tomorrow at the gates. I'll be there in the morning."

"Will you accept my invitation to eat with us to seal our arrangement?"

"No. I'll see you at Hogwarts."

"Very well. Goodbye, Mr Sinan."

Hermione and Severus took their leave. As soon as they had crossed his doorstep, Minar Sinan retrieved a photo album from his bookcase and passed his afternoon watching pictures of the woman he had loved and their baby daughter. The woman had incredibly bushy brown hair and blue eyes.

Severus and Hermione ate in a nondescript restaurant before they went to the Portkey terminal to book their return ticket to England. The employee told them that the evening Portkeys could not take more travellers..."You know the rule," he had said. "One traveller every seventy centimetres, and the plank is only three meters and seventy-five centimetres long. We really need a bigger terminal."...and they had to book centimetres on the five a.m. Portkey on the next day. They had a very nice afternoon after that: they went touring and had a nap at their hotel. Each time he could, Severus touched Hermione: putting his hand on the small of her back to guide her through the crowd, brushing her fingers with his while giving her a drink or an ice-cream, and offering her his arm to go to dinner. She did not seem to mind his discreet familiarity. They decided against sleeping that night. The five o'clock Portkey would bring them back at seven p.m. the previous day in London. They would rest then.

"Would you like to go to the opera?" Severus asked Hermione. "It would be the occasion to see Sinan's work with our own eyes."

They had seen the exterior of course, but to see the inside as well?

"That's a great idea!" Hermione answered.

Sydney wizarding opera was really amazing. As an architect, Sinan was a real concurrent to the Hogwarts founders, though his creation was nothing like a medieval castle. Severus felt smug at Hermione's awe. "Professor, it's wonderful! I can't wait to see what Sinan will do with Hogwarts!" *If I were a Hogwarts House, I would award points to myself.*

They shared a drink afterwards. Their conversation, which had started to drift to more personal subjects...Severus even alluded to Lily Evans...was barely interrupted by Severus's right arm muscles, which had begun twitching in the middle of Hermione talking about her holiday in France between her second and third years. Hermione caught his glass before it could fall and spill all over their table, and Severus took one swallow of Muscle-Controlling Potion; the whole incident did not even last thirty seconds. They were already so well-coordinated together.

After a while, they resumed their nightly sightseeing in Sydney. Their silences were longer, but comfortable. Hermione felt as if she were with a friend. Professor Snape listened to her, asked intelligent questions about what she said, challenged her, opened her mind to other, new perspectives. All the things she could learn if she worked with him! No, when she would work for him.

As for Severus, he thought things were going in the right direction. He had realised that he would not seduce her in a couple of days; it did not matter. She would become a great woman; she had the potential for it. She had the potential for being the "more" he craved to have in his life. He would seduce her for keeps. He would steal her from Weasley.

They retrieved their luggage from their hotel, and at half past four a.m., they were in the waiting-room of the Portkey terminal. At five, they departed for London with a group of weary-looking, yawning travellers and arrived in London at seven p.m. the previous day as expected.

"Er, sir?"

"Yes?"

They were in the Atrium at the Ministry, which looked deserted but for a guard.

"Would you mind going with me to my parents'? I'm sure they'd be delighted to see you again, given that you were very helpful in Australia."

I can't exactly refuse an occasion to ingratiate myself with people who might be my parents-in-law one day! Very well. As it is, I feel a bit drained myself, and I don't fancy a stroll across the Hogwarts grounds right now. Are you able to Apparate the both of us to your parents'?" There was no scorn in his question, only concern.

"Yes, sir." She seized his arm...the first time she had taken the initiative to touch him...and Apparated them both into her parents' garden.

William and Josephine Granger ushered them inside and offered them a light dinner consisting of soup and fruit. Hermione and Severus were completely exhausted after their sleepless night in Sydney, so much so that Hermione's parents took note and did not pester them with questions. Severus used the Grangers' owl, which had managed to survive during their absence and had reappeared the day after they were back, to inform Minerva of their return to the motherland and turned in for the night in the guest room, while Hermione went to sleep in her childhood bedroom. Neither of them took the time to freshen up or even clean their teeth. Both fell asleep as soon as their head touched their pillows. But both dreamt of the other.

Part One, Day Seven

Chapter 7 of 14

Hermione and Severus reach an agreement pertaining to her new position. Then Severus goes back to Hogwarts and Hermione joins her friends at the Burrow.

Many thanks to my beta, Dacian Goddess.

Need I to remind you that I don't make any money out of this?

A breakfast for four was waiting for the occupants of the Granger household on the kitchen table on this Sunday morning.

"Mum, this is perfect," Hermione exclaimed at the sight of toast, tea, marmalade, bacon, etc.

"Mrs and Mr Granger, I don't know how to thank you for your hospitality," Severus began as soon as he was installed at the table.

"No, no, it's quite natural," Josephine protested. "In fact, after everything you've told us, we're honoured to have you under our roof." She was very sincere, and Severus felt warmed by her kind words, which were reflected in her husband's eyes. *They wouldn't be that bad as in-laws, indeed; and, being Muggles, they wouldn't be able to intrude in our life too much.* Yes, the more he knew about Hermione, the more he found her desirable. He might never love her as he had loved Lily, but he could grow feelings for her nonetheless.

When breakfast was finished, Hermione and Severus exchanged a significant glance, which the Grangers did not miss. Josephine cleared the table, and William decided the lawn needed to be mowed. Hermione led Severus into the lounge.

"Sir?"

"Yes?"

"Do you still want a personal aide?"

He looked at her intently. "Absolutely."

"I'm willing to take the job, but I have some questions before."

"Of course." He settled comfortably into a deep-brown armchair, his posture an invitation for discussion.

"First, what would my duties be, exactly?"

"Essentially, to be with me all day and available on short notice at night. You would have to help me take care of any muscle incidents with discretion and efficiency, especially if I'm in public. The rest of the time, you could help me with the school paperwork, take notes during meetings, advise me on how to handle certain situations with the Ministry, the governors, the teachers, etc. You would be a confidante of sort."

Wow. Hermione's eyes widened at his last words. *He really trusts me. Maybe we're friends after all.* She smiled at the idea. "I'd like to have my Sundays off to see my family and friends."

"Naturally. Sundays are quieter days as it is. I can avoid interactions with others more easily that day." There was no way he would face a muscle incident, especially one of the humiliating species, alone; he would not be able to act quickly enough to avoid it being noticed. "You will have your Sundays from six a.m. to eight p.m. free."

"No Saturday night?"

"If necessary, and on condition that I have an early notice. You will have Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, New Year's Eve and New Year's Day off as well." He did not want to alienate her by preventing her from having time with her loved ones on such important holidays.

She looked at him both slyly and shyly. How did she manage it? "Actually, I'd like to ask a favour of you."

A bargain? How interesting. "Do tell."

"Would you accept to teach me more on Potions, Defence, Charms... Anything you know."

Knowledge. She wanted knowledge. *That, I have in spades, so much more than Weasley. I am confident now that she will be mine. I only need to bide my time and suffer to see her with that not-as-bright-as-he seems boy.*

"I accept." He gifted her with a genuine smile. It was not much, just a slight opening of his mouth and a small curling of his lips, but she saw it, and her beam nearly blinded him. *Yes, I am sure that I will care for her a great deal with time.*

"Where will I have my quarters?"

"I'll arrange something for you as soon as I'll get back to Hogwarts. You won't sleep in Gryffindor Tower. It'd be too far from my own quarters." 'Too far from me' was implied. "Do you have other questions about your position?"

"No, I don't think so, sir."

"Very well. I think it's time I go back to Hogwarts. Today is Sunday, so your day is free." He was teasing her. "I'd like you to start your job tomorrow morning. We could have breakfast in my quarters, since you like the view so much. Then you'll help me to finish the preparations for Sinan's arrival a little before noon."

She was radiant. "I'll be there at eight a.m., if it isn't too late."

"Perfect."

They both felt relieved after that conversation. Hermione's acceptance of Severus's personal aide position helped her to assuage her guilt at abandoning Severus in the Shrieking Shack and gave her a job with the possibility to expand her knowledge and the time to think of a future career. Severus would keep his pride intact and be unburdened of some of the most tedious tasks that fell to a Hogwarts headmaster while giving him a twenty-four hour opportunity to woo a potential bride. Both knew that he could have done without a personal aide in reality, but if they were questioned about it, they would deny it fiercely.

They parted soon after. They were very much looking forward to the next day.

Severus proceeded to the Hospital Wing straight after his arrival at Hogwarts, where he found the nurse cleaning the now empty beds. All the casualties had either been transferred to St Mungo's or had received clearance to leave.

"Madam Pomfrey, I have a favour to ask of you," he told her without preamble.

"What would it be, Headmaster?"

He looked around him and cast a silent *Muffliato*. "As you know exactly what the after effects of the presence of the venom in my body are, I would like you to stay by my side all day to help me face certain *situations* that I can't deal with alone."

"But, Headmaster," the nurse objected, "your condition isn't so dire as to..."

"Most of the time, you're right, Madam Pomfrey." Severus was affronted by her disputing his request. "But I have yet to learn to live with my predicament and to adapt how to react accordingly without it being a fuss. As the Headmaster of this school, I have an image to maintain."

She conceded at last. "All right. But I won't be able to be with you at all times every day. Surely you can see that."

"Don't worry about later. I've hired a personal aide. I'll only need you on Sundays, and only if I need to be in public those days."

Madam Pomfrey waited for Severus to elaborate, but he did not. He would tell her in time who that aide was. "There will be a staff meeting in half an hour. Be there," he ordered her. As he was leaving the Hospital Wing, his left arm went slack. He reached into his left pocket with his right hand to take a phial of Muscle-Controlling Potion out and drank it under the nurse's attentive eyes. She then understood why he had insisted on being accompanied by a competent aide: he had checked if nobody was in sight before taking the potion. He did not want people to know precisely what his handicap was. She had an inkling of what kind of situations he had alluded to by "*need help*" and a suspicion about the identity of the "aide". She would bet her Gringotts vault that Miss Granger would be back soon.

The teachers filed into the staff room, a bit puzzled at being dragged away from their occupations on such short notice. Severus was already seated with Madam Pomfrey on his left and McGonagall on his right. They all expressed, with more or less sincerity, their best wishes for his recovery.

"My dear colleagues," Severus said once they were all installed around the table, "thank you for answering promptly to this summons, but I could not wait till tomorrow to inform you of certain developments about the school."

Anxious wrinkles and frowns appeared on the teachers' faces.

"First of all, Minar Sinan has agreed to supervise the restoration and reconstruction of the castle." Joyful exclamations punctuated this announcement. "I have personally visited his main realisation in Sydney, and I must say that it bodes well for the school. He will be here tomorrow a little before noon. Minerva," he turned to his Deputy, "can you arrange some quarters to be ready for him?"

"Certainly, Severus," she answered, smiling.

"Another person will join the staff tomorrow morning." Now, curiosity etched itself on the staff's visages. Had Severus already found a Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, or a Muggle Studies teacher? "I am suffering from certain lasting effects from my injuries and have decided to hire a personal aide." He surveyed his colleagues' expressions, daring them to comment on the disclosure of him being an invalid. "Miss Granger has accepted to fill in the position. She is no nurse, but she knows what I am suffering from. I must say that she has been of great assistance to me while I was in Australia, and she wishes to grasp the opportunity to further her education while helping me." Well, that was news: Severus Snape publicly praising a Gryffindor, even hiring her to work closely with him? Any reticence that might have lingered among the staff about his person evaporated...mainly. Other decisions were made, like advertising in the *Prophet* for the positions of Defence and Muggle Studies teachers, and arranging with Minerva for Hermione's quarters to be near the headmaster's.

Severus spent the rest of his day writing to the governors and the Ministry, reading, chasing away Slughorn, who had insisted on sharing a glass of Ogden with him, and personally supervising the arrangements for Hermione's quarters. He could not wait to see her reactions when she would set foot into them, so much so that he dreamt of it that night. When at last she would be there the next morning, he would start his seduction of Hermione Granger.

After Severus departed for Hogwarts, Hermione spent some time with her parents, trying to catch up a little more on all the time she had not spent with them in the past. She told them about her new job. They were not thrilled about it, thinking that she should have earned a better profession, but kept their counsel about it; their only daughter was an adult, and they did not relish the prospect of being on bad terms with her. However, they were somewhat reassured when they learnt that she intended to carry on her education while working at Hogwarts.

The three of them ate a late lunch at home, but around four, Hermione left them for the Burrow. She needed to tell her friends about her choice.

When she arrived at the Burrow, she found the whole family in the courtyard. She discerned Harry, Ginny, Ron and George playing two-a-side Quidditch in the orchard while the older Weasleys, Bill and Fleur included, were sipping tea under a sun umbrella. Mrs Weasley was the first to spot her and rushed to her. "Hermione! You're back!" Her loud exclamation drew the attention of the others, and she was soon surrounded by well-meaning Weasleys. She hugged them tightly, pouring her affection for them

into the tightness of her embraces. From afar, the Quidditch players noticed the animation in the courtyard and the bushy brown hair amidst the red, Fleur and her silvery hair watching the scene from aside. They dismounted their brooms rapidly and sprinted to the courtyard to greet their friend. They hugged her in turn, Ron being the last and keeping his arm around her shoulders under the approving eyes of his parents.

"A cup of tea, dear?" Mrs Weasley proposed.

"Sure," Hermione answered. Her tea was served with a slice of cake, and they all settled around the table.

"So, how was Australia?" Mr Weasley asked.

"We went to Sydney only, but I liked it very much. That city is full of history, but so modern at the same time. And I got to meet Minar Sinan," Hermione began excitedly. The Weasleys were all ears and listened to the account of her trip with pleasure. She remained circumspect about her interactions with Severus so as to not raise too many questions she could not answer, and the others did not seem to care much about that part of her sojourn.

"I'd be delighted to reacquaint myself with your parents, Hermione," Mr Weasley said. "Are you staying with them?"

"No, I won't be." She was going to tell them about the job she had accepted, and she was a bit apprehensive of their reaction. She did not want them to think ill of her because her professional choice would appear beneath her. She bit her lower lip with anxiety. "Actually, I will be at Hogwarts."

"Great," Ginny cried. "I will have a friend in my dormitory." Ron did not look that enthusiastic.

"I won't go back as a student. I will be Headmaster Snape's personal aide."

Of course, several exclamations at different noise levels followed her announcement. She patiently waited for them to die down before explaining what the job entailed. Mostly, the Weasleys and Harry expressed disbelief, confusion, and a conviction that it was far beneath her abilities and that she was squandering her future. Once more, she had to justify her choice. If it was normal for an Auror or a Healer to have several years of training before being fully qualified, she did not see why she could not seize the chance she was offered to expand her knowledge while being paid, and thus increase the probability of having very good job offers a couple of years later.

"You realise you'll be at his beck and call," Harry insisted. "Are you sure?" He was worried for her.

"Yes, I'm sure. And I have all my Sundays free. It's not as if I'll be a recluse, you know. I can speak to the other teachers, too."

Hermione could see that the others were not completely convinced, but she was determined not to let anyone dictate her career's choices. Ever.

Later that evening, she and Ron managed to steal some alone time behind the cover of a thicket of trees. They snogged a lot and spoke a little.

"I'm not sure I like you working so close with Snape," Ron said to her. "I hope he won't be too hard on you, but if he is, you know where to find me...." He smiled and kissed with so much tenderness... Hermione could not get enough of it. "We can't here," he whispered regretfully. "Too much risk that Mum will find us."

When they got back to the house, Hermione went to sleep with Ginny, whereas Harry returned to Grimmauld Place, which was improving day by day thanks to Kreacher's care, and Ron left with George for the flat they shared above the joke shop.

At eight o'clock the next morning, Hermione started her new life at Hogwarts under the very close watch of Severus Snape.

Part Two, Day One

Chapter 8 of 14

One year later, Hermione has an enlightening conversation with her mother, while Severus thinks of Hermione with more than his brain *wink*. At the end of the day, both acknowledge there's something between them.

Add usual disclaimer here.

Thanks to my beta Dacian Goddess for her invaluable help.

"Mum, can I speak with you?" Hermione asked warily after lunch. Her father got the unspoken message and made himself scarce into the garage where he always had some on-going do-it-yourself project.

"What is it, Hermione?" Josephine Granger asked once her husband had left them alone in the kitchen. She had noticed her daughter had been distracted this morning; she had had to repeat nearly everything she had said to her, and Hermione had even dressed the carrots with washing-up liquid instead of oil when they'd been making lunch. Surely not even the upcoming first year anniversary of What-Was-His-Name-Already's defeat...what could you expect from someone who chose a French name?...could put her in such a state?

Hermione, seated across the table from her mother, bit her lower lip and wrung her hands above the smooth chipboard surface. "I told you I've broken up with Ron because he was too jealous and pestered me to give up my position as Severus's personal aide?" She had been on a first name basis with her boss since last year, at his insistence. He wanted her to feel at ease, to feel like a part of the staff, and everyone was used to it by now.

"Yes..." Apparently, there was more to that breaking-off than Hermione had said.

"Well, there was that... among other things." A short silence followed, then Hermione bravely resumed. "I did not feel my place was at Ron's side anymore. I mean, he's intelligent and clever and thoughtful...most of the time...but he's interested in being intelligent and clever only when it can be described as 'fun'. When I try to tell him about things I've read and that interest me, he doesn't really listen, or he picks the bit that could be used to create something saleable for the shop." Hermione threw her hands up in frustration. "I couldn't seriously discuss anything academic with him!"

Josephine's attentive and non-judgemental face encouraged Hermione to go on.

"He has yet to learn any manners. Why couldn't he understand that I'm not in the mood for sex every damn Sunday?" She omitted that her growing attraction to Severus did not help at all to put her in the mood for a romp with Ron.

"But he's still very young," Josephine observed. "He'll improve with time. Your father wasn't very far from that description when he was that age."

Hermione cast her eyes down. "What if I don't want to wait for him to be a man?"

Ah, that was the matter. There was another man in the wings. An older man.

"Who is he?"

Hermione started at her mother's blunt question. "Who?"

"The Prime Minister. No, the other man, the one who occupies your thoughts."

"Severus." Hermione's voice was but a whisper. She looked out of the window at the neatly arranged garden. "Severus Snape occupies my thoughts, and I think the feeling is mutual."

"How so?"

"He... he watches me all the time, and his expression is one I've seen on Ron's face when we were about to make love. He touches me... brushes my arms... removes hair from my face... things like that. He always listens to me, and I always want to listen to him."

Oh, dear. "It sounds pretty serious."

"It is! Even the teachers have started to notice. The other day, Minerva caught him staring at me. He told me she waited until I retired for the night before she came to see him and lecture him like a naughty child, reproaching him for being the reason why Ron and I broke off. As if I would have let anyone interfere in our relationship! She got on her high horse and couldn't climb down! She even prevented him from taking his potion when the muscles at the back of his neck started to spasm."

"How do you know all of this if you had retired?" Josephine inquired.

Hermione blushed and averted her eyes. "I heard her coming to his rooms and I eavesdropped."

"Hermione! I didn't raise you like that!"

"No, but Ron and Harry did. He refused to answer her, you know. He didn't deny what she was saying, and that got me thinking. Would it be so bad to take the next step?"

"You mean, as in starting a relationship?"

"Yes. Why wouldn't we? We're both of age and unattached; we quarrel from time to time, but no more than I did with Ron and Harry; he knows so many things... He told me he has hardly taught me half of his knowledge," she finished dreamily.

"Why did you seek my advice, since it's obvious you've made your decision already?"

"I... I think I needed to say it all aloud. You aren't upset with me, are you?" Hermione asked with worry.

"Why would I?"

"Because I broke off with a charming young man and am envisaging pursuing a relationship with a man barely younger than you?"

Josephine smiled. "Hermione, you're of age, and everything you've been through has added years to you, psychologically speaking. You're older than your official nineteen years old. And he seemed like a nice enough man, though you should invite him to come visit with you soon."

Hermione was so relieved! She stood up and walked around the table to embrace her mother. "Thank you, Mum. You don't know how much it means to me."

"I have an idea. And, Hermione, don't forget about contraception."

While Hermione was putting any lingering doubts to rest, Severus was actively avoiding human contact. Admittedly, the muscle incidents had become infrequent, now happening only two to three times a week...which, he had been told, would be the state of things until his death...but he was not going to tempt fate by leaving his quarters alone. He tried to read, but only managed to distract himself for one hour or two. He hated Sundays. He hated them because Hermione was not with him on those days. He sighed and resumed his pacing, glancing through his windows every three seconds to watch for her return. It was only three p.m.

He had to admit it: he wanted her, body, soul and mind. And heart. And everything. What was more, she showed no sign of being averse to the idea. Her cheeks reddened at the drop of a hat each time she noticed him staring at her. Her breathing shortened whenever he touched her. Her eyes darkened and her pupils widened when he pronounced her name in a certain way: the way he would say her name in the bedroom while making love. The imagery his thoughts conjured was too much for Severus. His cock swelled rapidly while he imagined one thousand and one ways to take Hermione. He strode to his bedroom and shed his clothes hastily. Having nothing better to do, he decided to take pleasure in thinking of Hermione and to make it last as long as he could prolong it.

He trod on the plush carpet slowly, enjoying the feeling of the hand-woven wool on the soles of his feet, while the still fresh May air slid along his skin. When he reached his bed, he lay down slowly and stretched upon the satin bedspread, letting the material caress his body. He moaned loudly. He imagined Hermione riding him on his bed, taking her pleasure with his sex while his back would savour the softness of the satin. He nearly lost it here and there. "Careful. We wouldn't want this to be over before it has begun."

Severus reined in his imagination and started to touch his face with his fingertips: the arch of his eyebrow, his eyelids, his nose, his cheeks, his lips. His tongue came out and teased his middle finger, which was soon sucked greedily by lips and teeth. In the meantime, his other hand was heading south, slowly, in the same manner he had touched his face. He skimmed over his neck, his chest and his nipples. There, a little pinch. "Fuck!"

However, another part of his anatomy was claiming his attention. He anticipated the pleasure of touching the smooth and firm skin of his cock. His eyes closed, he pictured Hermione's hands on his belly, on his rod, on his balls. He arched his back with bliss. "Hermione!" The cry had escaped his mouth. It was incredible, the way he wanted her. He fantasised about her mouth leaving a wet trail on his neck, about her tongue battling with his, about her sex open for his greedy eyes. He imagined himself touching her breasts, shaping them with his hands like tailor-made underwear, plunging his fingers in her most secret places, penetrating her slowly and making her cry out with pleasure until her voice was gone. Paradise could not be better than being sheathed into Hermione up to the hilt, to move inside of her, to explore every inch of her cunt. He wanted to learn her body and be able to sculpt it blindly...the inside as well as the outside.

His left fist, which was stroking his erection, sped up its movements, while his right hand crushed his testicles. He moaned very loudly. "Yes... shit... Hermione..." His back left the mattress; only his head and feet were still in contact with the bedspread. His sperm gushed out onto his belly.

It took him time to recover from his powerful climax. He was still panting when he cleaned his sex with a handkerchief. "The best orgasm of my life and Hermione is not even here! This will not do. She will be mine before the First Anniversary of Potter's victory."

Later in the evening, Hermione entered Severus's quarters without knocking, as had become her habit, but the familiarity was very understandable; her own quarters were more like a hostel room where she only went to sleep, while her awake time was spent in the Headmaster's office or in his quarters.

"Severus, I'm back!" she called to him brightly.

He was sitting in an armchair pulled near the windows and reading, of all books *Hogwarts, a History*. He raised his eyes and gave her a small smile. "Good evening, Hermione. How was your day?"

She dragged another armchair near his and plopped down into it. "Great. I... spoke with my mother." Her brown eyes were upon him, very intense, full of a meaning he could not decipher, and yet he felt he ought to understand. "She was very helpful." She leaned forward and, briefly, squeezed his hand. Then, she resumed her position against the back of the armchair and asked, "So, you like to read *Hogwarts, a History*?"

Severus put the book down on his thighs. "I've always found this book enlightening, though I wish there were more on the end of Gryffindor and Slytherin's friendship. The official version has always seemed fishy to me. The wizards' persecution by Muggles only began centuries after their time. I don't see why Slytherin should have been wary of Muggle-borns back then. It's not that he did not want them because he considered them a threat, but because he did not consider them nobility. It was more a form of elitism, and it was turned into racism later." It was his turn to give her an intense, meaningful look. "It's not like that anymore."

Hermione was sure he was not speaking of Salazar Slytherin anymore, and her breath caught in her throat. "No, it's not like that anymore."

Severus swore he would have conjured the courage to kiss her at that moment if his jaw had not gone slack. Hermione, who had seen this happen countless times, reacted instinctively and helped him take the Muscle-Controlling Potion. Severus was soon put to rights, but the moment was gone. They both went to bed frustrated that night, wondering if they would be given another opportunity to at least express their feelings to each other without feeling awkward about it.

Part Two, Day Two

Chapter 9 of 14

A very busy day, but not the way Severus and Hermione would have preferred.

Disclaimer: I make no money with this story.

Many, many thanks to my beta, Dacian Goddess.

The next day proved to be too busy to implement any plan of seducing Hermione properly. Breakfast was not even finished when Filch informed Severus that the caterer chosen for providing petit fours for the upcoming celebrations was at the school gates to discuss final details about prices and quantities. Severus would have gladly left that chore to his deputy, but Minerva had classes all morning. With an undisguised, disgusted sigh, he rose up from his place at the staff table in the Great Hall and, followed by Hermione, he headed to his office. Once there, he told Hermione that he trusted her to negotiate with the caterer while he went over some of his paperwork. "I'll validate your choices when you're finished with him."

Hermione beamed at him, grateful for his faith in her abilities; but before she could thank him, Mr Greedings was introduced into the office by an eternally grumpy-looking Filch.

"Miss Granger has delegation from me to choose that which she will deem acceptable for Hogwarts' guests," Severus told him. He led the caterer to the table where Hermione was already seated and went back to his own desk. For two hours, he heard murmurs of "elf-made Champagne", "warlock caviar", "sweet or savoury food", but he did not pay attention to the conversation per se.

"Severus?" Hermione called to him. "I've got three estimates to submit to you."

Without moving from his armchair, not even raising his head from his work, he waved his hand in the air. "Choose whatever you deem best. You know what the budget is."

"Well, Mr Greedings, I think we'll settle for this one." She pointed out the two hundred and seventy-one Galleon and one Knut estimate, opting for savoury food and elf-made Champagne, with Butterbeer, gillywater and pumpkin juice for those who could not stand Champagne. "All of this must be delivered on Monday next week by eight in the morning, and your waiters must be there before ten."

Mr Greedings had a very satisfied smile. He was still young in his job, and this contract would be good advertisement for his business. "Very well, Miss. All will be as you want."

Hermione presented the contract to Severus, who skimmed through it before signing it, and then the caterer left.

Severus looked at Hermione, who was standing in front of his desk, with approbation. "You have done well, Hermione."

She smiled at him, very pleased by his praise. "Thank you, Severus. I want to be worthy of your trust."

"You are. Believe me, you are," he whispered. He stood up and joined her in the middle of his office. All his being expressed a rarely seen intensity of feeling. His attention was focused on Hermione in a way the young woman had never seen before. The portraits all held their breaths, in a manner of speaking. Hermione watched him come to her, she herself bearing an intense expression of longing on her face. He was so close to her! He was leaning his head toward hers, and her lips parted in anticipation, when a hard knock rattled the door on its hinges. Stunned, Hermione and Severus turned their heads to the door and saw it open before a very excited Hagrid.

"Headmaster Snape, I wanted you to know Jenna started to foal! She's in the secon' cave after the sprin'," he boomed as soon as he was inside the study.

It took several seconds for a nonplussed Severus to remember he had asked to be told at once when the female Thestral would give birth. He regained his senses and answered the gamekeeper. "Thank you, Hagrid. I'll go and cast the protective charms in a few minutes." Thestrals were very rare, and each foal had to be protected against thievery. Hagrid seemed to realise then that Severus and Hermione were standing quite close to each other. He narrowed his eyes; would the rumours be true? Was Snape trying to seduce Hermione? Was he the reason she had broken off with Ron, putting Harry in the difficult situation of having his two best friends on non-speaking terms? The truth was that she did not appear to be bothered at all by the headmaster's proximity. Hagrid decided to shrug it off. Hermione had gone in hiding with Harry, staying with him even when Ron had defected. She had faced the Death Eaters, You-Kn... Voldemort's snake in Godric's Hollow, resisted Bellatrix Lestranger's torture... There was no way Snape could have influenced her if she had not wanted to be.

"See you later then, Headmaster, Hermione. I have a class in ten minutes."

Severus inclined his head in acknowledgement, and Hermione waved at him. "See you later, Hagrid."

When the half-giant was gone, Severus exhaled deeply. "Duty calls," he said in a blank tone.

"So it seems," Hermione answered in kind.

They made their way to the Forbidden Forest. At this hour, there was not a student in the corridors, and only the droning noise of voices lecturing could be heard behind the closed classrooms doors. Outside, the sun was playing hide and seek with the clouds, and the temperature on the ground varied depending on whether the sun's rays were within reach or not. It did not take long to them to find the mare. Thestral herds were very organised when it came to their offspring. Weeks before the birth of a foal, the animals collected grass and let it dry in caves until it was hay, which they used to build nests for their newborn foals and their mothers.

Jenna's foal was already feeding when they arrived. Severus circled mare and foal and wordlessly cast the customary protective spells.

"Can you explain me what you've just done, or is this supposed to be a headmaster's secret?" Hermione inquired on their way back to the castle. They did not walk very quickly; they were savouring their outdoors time together.

"It's not a secret, though only the headmaster can perform the spell. Until the spell-protected foals reach their adult size, only the headmaster and those he designates can touch them." Severus explained to her the functioning of the spell extensively. When they reached the castle, it was lunchtime. In the Great Hall, Hagrid stopped his conversation with McGonagall abruptly when they came in and looked away guiltily. The Transfiguration teacher tried to act as if nothing was amiss, but she was not that good an actress. The meal was awkward. It was obvious that gossip ran among the staff as wildly as a herd of hippogriffs. Severus and Hermione could not get away quickly enough.

Hermione stormed into the headmaster's office. "I wish they would stop doing that," she seethed.

"Doing what?"

"Gossip! Did you notice that all the teachers were glancing at us curiously while whispering? As if we wouldn't notice!"

Severus settled calmly into his armchair. He was actually rather amused. "And what would they gossip about that would involve us?"

Hermione blushed deeply, but glared at him. "You very well know. They gossip about *us*."

Hands steepled and elbows propped onto his desk, he asked her, "Elaborate what you mean by *us*, please."

Now redder than a beetroot, Hermione stammered, "Well, *us*. I... I think they... they suppose we're having an affair."

"Are we?"

"No..." But Severus heard the *not yet* as clearly as if she had uttered it. He finally took pity on her and elected to distract his aide's upset mind. As it was, they still had a lot of work to cover today. "Hermione, I suggest we go over the arrangements for next week's celebration one more time and that we then prepare the agenda for tonight's staff meeting."

Their afternoon was spent in quiet companionship above clutters of parchment.

As the teachers filed into the staff room for the weekly meeting, Hermione's discomfort returned with a vengeance. She felt as if each of them had spotted something that needed to be deciphered on her, and they all ogled her the way people usually ogled Harry. It was disconcerting to say the least. She glimpsed Flitwick and Truthful, the new Defence teacher, leaning towards each other and whispering furiously while casting her what were supposed to be surreptitious glances. McGonagall's expression was etched with disapproval and curiosity. She was probably torn between morals and gossip. Hagrid was rather pensive and cast them a very appraising look. Madam Pomfrey was in fact the only one neutral, which was a good thing because she was usually the most informed person in the school. Hermione shuddered at the idea of Madam Pomfrey being Hogwarts' columnist.

"Good evening," Severus greeted his colleagues. "Tonight will be dedicated to the final preparation of next week's celebration of the Dark Lord's downfall. Hermione and I have reviewed everything this afternoon. I'm going to present you with what we have prepared for our guests and make sure the event is worthy of our school. Tell me what you think, and if you have last minute suggestions, now would be the time to make them. Each one of you shall be assigned a role as well."

The meeting was wrapped up in one hour.

"I must say, this sounds extremely well organised," Firenze admitted.

"O' course! Hermione's involved, after all," Hagrid said. He winked at Hermione.

After that, the teachers lingered for a little while to socialise, but soon the staff room was empty but for Severus, Hermione and McGonagall.

The Deputy Headmistress told them, "Congratulations for the way you've planned all of this. I'm sure it'll be a success."

"Most of the merit falls to Hermione, Minerva. She's an incredible planner."

McGonagall had a small smile. "I know. However, I wasn't aware you were that good," she said, addressing Hermione and giving her a speculative look. "You're even better than me."

That last statement puzzled Hermione, but Severus was stunned. Minerva had previously hinted at her fatigue and want for retirement. Had she just given her blessing for Hermione to take over her job?

"Thank you, Minerva," Hermione answered simply.

"You're welcome." And the older witch left them alone.

Severus yawned widely. "I think we should call it a night. What say you, Hermione?"

She yawned in turn. "I think you're quite right, Severus."

He offered her his arm and walked her to her quarters. At her door, he lifted her hand to his lips and gave it a kiss. "Good night, Hermione."

The fire in his eyes captivated her. She could not look away.

"Good night, Severus." And, standing on her tiptoes, she kissed his mouth. A long time later, they went to bed, separately.

Part Two, Day Three

Chapter 10 of 14

Between work, time with friends and flower delivery, there's no time for Hermione and Severus's budding romance.

Still no money made out of this.

Thanks to my beta, Dacian Goddess.

Neither Severus nor Hermione had slept well in spite of their tiredness. Any doubt they might have still had about their mutual attraction had been swept away by their heated kisses in front of Hermione's door. They had both tossed and turned in their beds, wondering not if but when they would sleep, in every meaning of the word, together.

A bleary-eyed headmaster, accompanied by an equally bleary-eyed personal aide, made his entrance in the Great Hall for breakfast in the morning. Most of the teachers were already there. They observed Hermione and Severus for proofs of sexual activities, but apart from looking very tired, they could draw no positive conclusion on the matter.

"Hello, Hermione."

Severus did a double-take. He had not noticed there was a guest at the staff table. Neville Longbottom was sitting near Pomona Sprout and inviting his erstwhile classmate to sit down near him.

"Hermione is my personal aide, Longbottom," Severus said rather harshly. The boy had matured in a not bad-looking young man. "Her usual place is near me." He noticed then that Hermione was casting him pleading looks. She obviously wanted to catch up with her friend. If he wanted her in his bed before the end of the week, it might not do to antagonise her with such a trivial issue. "But it would probably do no harm for her to be seated near you for once." Hermione smiled at him warmly in thanks, and Severus's insides did some belly dancing; he had just assured himself another kissing session.

"So, Neville, tell me how you've been. What've you been doing?" Hermione asked.

Proudly, Neville answered, "I've travelled through Europe: to France, Spain and Russia. Professor Sprout had signed letters of recommendation to the greatest Herbologists for me so that they would accept to teach me the stuff not taught at Hogwarts."

"Great! How much did you learn?" Hermione was sincerely happy for Neville. Gone was the terrified first-year who had lost his toad. In his place was a self-confident man whose passion for Herbology had driven him to travel to expand his knowledge in the field.

"Each place had its own treasures. In Spain, I learnt about the herbs the Arabs once used in Andalusia. In France, I learnt about the Mediterranean magical seaweed, especially how to cultivate Gillyweed. I've interrupted my stay in Russia to attend the anniversary of Voldemort's defeat, but it's very promising there." His eyes were alight with fervour. "I've been staying in the Ural Mountains, and after the ceremony, I'll go to the Caspian Sea."

"That's fantastic," Hermione exclaimed, squeezing Neville's forearm to show him her support.

Neville blushed, his eyes glued to the place Hermione had touched him. "Thank you, Hermione. I've brought some plants with me. Would you like to come and see them? They're in one of the greenhouses."

"Er... that is to say..." Hermione glanced at Severus, only to see him glower at Neville. Hmmm... now was not the time to antagonise the man she wanted more than one snogging session with. "I'd be delighted, but as the Headmaster's personal aide, I must be with him at all times. I'm sorry, I can't go with you now."

Neville was a bit disappointed, but valiantly tried to hide it. "I understand. I'll just have to wait for Professor Sprout to finish her classes so that I'll be able to share my interest with someone."

"You know, I think Luna has a free period in the morning. I'm sure she wouldn't mind seeing your findings."

Neville brightened at that. "Great! I'm going to tell her. Goodbye." In a rush, he left the table and caught Luna before she was out of the Great Hall.

Hermione finished her breakfast quickly after that. Then she and Severus went to his office to tackle the day's amount of paperwork and for her weekly Potions lesson. They were interrupted by no less than three Floo calls from Ministry employees anxious to check if their Head of Department would get a seat at the front for the celebration, or if they had rented a platform for the speeches which would be made that day.

"I need the aconite," she said, stirring her potion clockwise.

"Take it yourself," he answered from his armchair, bent over scrolls of parchment waiting for his signature.

"I can't stop stirring," she replied.

"Why did you not prepare the aconite next to your cauldron?"

"I was distracted." He had combed her hair with his hands under the pretext of helping her tie it, and she had completely forgotten that ingredient.

Smug to know he could distract such a dedicated worker as Hermione, Severus stood up and handed her the plant; he caressed her hand in the process. But he would not kiss her in his office: it would not be professional...and he would not be able to work in here anymore after that. Besides, he had no desire to fuel the portrait grapevine with first-hand gossip. However, this did not prevent him from initiating as many acts of physical contact as he could with Hermione. To his utter glee, she did not hesitate to reciprocate. Trouble was, they were both aroused when the time came to go to lunch, and they could do nothing about it.

"Severus makes Hermione work too hard," Filius whispered in Pomona's ear. "Look how flushed she is!"

"Well, he doesn't look that healthy either," she whispered back. "Even his cheeks are pink. Perhaps he's just had an attack or something, and she had to help him. You never know what can happen with an invalid."

Deliberately oblivious to the whispering, Hermione and Severus took their meal, wondering how to get some alone time discreetly. Hermione groaned and covered her face with her hands. "I promised Harry I would write his speech for the celebration. I must do it this afternoon so that Ginny will send it to him by return post tomorrow morning."

He wants to 'practice' his speaker skills."

Severus sighed. "And I promised Pomona last week that I...I mean we...would help her oversee the arrival of the flower shipment for the celebration."

Hermione peeked through an opening between her fingers. "The afternoon is doomed. Flower shipment equals a lot of handling. We'll be exhausted this evening, and Madam Pomfrey has insisted on you resting enough."

"Indeed," Severus answered gloomily. Hermione would never let him get more "physical" activities tonight; she would be too worried for his health.

"Don't worry," she soothed him. "We'll have time for it."

"For what?" interjected McGonagall, who had just ended her conversation with Professor Sinistra.

"Nothing important, Minerva," Severus answered curtly. He turned to Hermione, ignoring his Deputy. "Let's go. You have an hour to write that ~~the~~ *speech* before Pomona expects us in Greenhouse Five."

"Couldn't you have lost the habit of doing Potter's homework when you ceased to be a student?" Severus grumbled one hour and a half later while they were hurrying along the castle's corridors to the greenhouses.

"You shouldn't think like that. You wouldn't want a poor speech to reflect poorly on the school. And you wanted to be sure that you'd be praised properly," she teased him. "If I'd let Harry do it by himself, it would've been maudlin."

"Touché."

"Ah, Severus, Hermione! Here you are," Pomona Sprout greeted them. "Argus has just told me the delivery men were at the gates. With three wands on the job, the flowers will be in the greenhouse in no time."

In no time turned out to last more than two hours. A lot of flowers were needed to decorate the platform, the grounds, the Great Hall, etc. Most of them were fragile and had to be handled so carefully that it was impossible to Levitate too many at a time. When all the flowers were set down near Greenhouse Five, Severus and Hermione remained to help Pomona to put them into vases or pots inside the greenhouse.

"Blimey! I never thought that bunch would be so much trouble!" Pomona whined. "I hope we haven't missed dinner!"

"There are always the kitchens," Hermione suggested. She looked drained.

"That's a very sensible idea, actually," Severus agreed. "Right now, I don't feel like facing the hubbub of the Great Hall. Let's take something in the kitchens and eat in my quarters." He did not seem to be faring better than Hermione, and he feared that his tiredness would provoke a muscle incident. Pomona Sprout observed the exchange with curiosity; those two would soon be out of the closet.

Half an hour and several trays later, Hermione and Severus entered the latter's rooms at last. They had barely put their piled trays down onto the table that the muscles in Severus's right leg went slack. He grabbed hold of a nearby chair and let himself fall on it gracelessly. With an efficiency that bespoke of a long-time habit, Hermione handed him a phial of Muscle-Controlling Potion.

"Thank you," Severus said while re-corking the phial of the vividly green, thick potion. "We've only just avoided a disaster."

Hermione plopped herself down into a chair in front of him. "I hope it hasn't cut your appetite off?"

"Not at all." He helped himself to a healthy plate of pork, potatoes and carrots and started to eat with gusto.

Hermione chuckled. "The exercise made you hungry. Well, me too." And she imitated him.

When their meal was finished, they listened to music through the Wizard Wireless Network side by side on the sofa while drinking a cup of herbal tea. They felt so at ease with each other. Hermione leaned her head against Severus's shoulder, and he snaked an arm around her shoulders. They stayed like that, unmoving, for a while before Severus started to fall asleep.

"I think I'll call it a night," Hermione said, standing up. "I'm knackered."

Severus stood up too and offered her his arm. "I'll walk you to your quarters."

In the dimly lit corridor which led to both their rooms, they exchanged a good night kiss. Tiredness prevented it from being as physically heated as the one they had shared the day before, but the warmth in their hearts made up for it tenfold.

Part Two, Day Four

Chapter 11 of 14

Hermione has a bit of girl talk with her friends while Severus faces Minerva's concern for the school. And at last, they consummate their relationship.

Thanks to my dear beta, Dacian Goddess.

I make no profit from this.

"Good morning, Severus!" Hermione exclaimed loudly when she came into Severus's living room.

He was already sitting near the windows, an old-looking book in his hands. "Good morning, Hermione."

Hermione joined him, but before she sat down in her own armchair, she took Severus by surprise by leaning over to him and frankly planting her lips on his. "I think we can call ourselves a couple now, and couples share good morning kisses."

He smirked. "I don't know what research you did to reach that conclusion, but this idea has merit. Could you explain it to me again?"

"Don't act dumb. It doesn't become you." But she kissed him again all the same.

Severus cast a regretful glance at the wooden clock that adorned one of the walls; it was a gift from Hermione. "I suggest we get down to the Great Hall, lest we miss breakfast altogether."

"Right. Hmm, Severus? I'm going to give Ginny the speech I wrote for Harry yesterday. After that, if she has time, I'd like to spend some time with her during her free period this morning. Is that all right with you?"

"How long?"

"An hour, an hour and a half at most."

"I think I can manage that long without you. I will only make sure that I don't leave my office."

He would have done it just for her smile, but the kiss she gave him, albeit brief, was a very nice icing on the cake.

They separated as they came into the Great Hall: Hermione headed for the Gryffindor table, and Severus for his seat at the staff table.

"I had been starting to wonder if you two would make it to breakfast," McGonagall pointed out coldly.

Severus took his time to pull his chair and to sit down. "Why wouldn't we?"

She huffed. "You both missed dinner yesterday, and you're late for breakfast."

Severus, who had been reaching for a bit of toast, stopped moving and slowly turned to his Deputy. "Minerva, we missed dinner because putting away the flowers for the celebration took more time than expected." From her seat, Pomona nodded vigorously. "And I don't see what concern it was of yours. I did not leave the castle. I was there if you needed me, which obviously you didn't. As for this morning, we are not late, since breakfast isn't finished."

The other teachers noticed the tension between their bosses, but it is a truth universally acknowledged, that one never gains anything by meddling into one's superiors' disagreements, and so they made as if nothing was amiss...though they looked on and listened in as much as they could.

"You know what I mean!"

"Minerva, if you have any concerns, I must ask you to come to my office to share them with me. Right now, I need sustenance."

Hermione taking her seat on the other side of Severus put an end to the argument.

"Did you give Potter's speech to Miss Weasley?"

"Yes. Harry should get it some time this morning. I'm starving! I must still be famished from all that flower handling we did yesterday."

Severus chuckled softly, but it was enough to draw attention. Filius and Pomona exchanged a knowing look; Madam Hooch had her head bent down over her porridge, her shoulders shaking with mirth; Hagrid still had his contemplative look; Madam Pomfrey, well, it was as if she had not noticed anything. It seemed Minerva's only ally was the Muggle Studies teacher, John Milestone, but the man had never gained any points for Hufflepuff when Severus was his teacher.

Later in the morning, Hermione headed for the Room of Requirement to meet Ginny and Luna. The weather was not very inviting today, so an outdoor meeting was out of question, and there were few places in the castle for inter-Houses meetings.

"Hermione!" Ginny greeted her. "I feel like it's been months since we've spoken together."

Hermione smiled. "It's actually been months. Two months."

"That long?" Luna asked. "You're right. It was during the Easter holidays."

The Room had conjured a cosy lounge in different shades of green for the girls, complete with a coffee table, tea and biscuits.

Ginny sprawled herself on a sofa and grabbed a biscuit. "So, how's your life, Hermione?"

"Always the same, you know. I help Severus in his Headmaster's duties, and he teaches me his knowledge," Hermione answered while taking a seat in a very plush armchair. But she could not prevent a slight blush from taking residence on her cheeks, which of course did not go unnoticed by Ginny.

"I suppose you get on with him rather well. You looked very comfortable together this morning," Luna said. She was sitting cross-legged on another sofa.

"Well, you know," Hermione tried to sound casual, "we practically live together, so it's really better if we get along well." She did not fool her friends one bit.

"How well along do you get?" Ginny queried, her eyes alert, watching out for her friend's body language.

Luna's silvery grey eyes were upon her as well, though not as intimidating as Ginny's.

"I think we're friends," Hermione replied airily.

Ginny raised an eyebrow in an eerie imitation of Severus. "Friends, really?"

Annoyed, Hermione retorted tartly, "Yes. Why not? He's human, you know. He has a heart."

"Did you dump Ron for him?" Ginny asked seriously.

"What? Er, no. Ron and I weren't working anymore. In our last days together, we spent nearly all our time quarrelling."

"I know," Ginny sighed. "I would have liked it if you'd been my sister-in-law one day."

"We're still friends. That must count for something."

Ginny nodded.

The three girls switched the conversation to other topics after that, but Ginny promised herself to keep an eye on her friend and the Headmaster. There was something going on between those two, and she did not want to be the last to know. Besides, Hermione might need help in diffusing the situation if her suspicions were true and if Severus Snape and she ever went public.

While Hermione was trying to divert her friends' attention from her burgeoning relationship with Severus...she did not want any interference at this stage, nor at any other stage for that matter...the latter was facing a very irritated Minerva McGonagall. Sitting stiffly in an armchair in front of Severus's desk, she attacked him without preamble. "What is going on between you and Hermione?"

Severus looked equally irritated. "Minerva, why are you asking?"

"Because I wouldn't think it appropriate if there was something beyond friendship between the two of you. I'm not prying into your private lives, but you must be an example for this school." She breathed deeply and looked at him over the rim of her glasses. "I must admit that I would have preferred for her to be with someone her age, but my personal preferences are not important. You know that I've thought of retiring at the end of this school year. Since I've known Hermione as a colleague, the qualities I'd discerned in her as a student were confirmed in the young woman she's become. I had hoped for her to be my replacement, since the other teachers either aren't willing to take the job or simply don't have the abilities required. What do you think would happen if she were appointed as your Deputy while being known as your... *dear friend*? The school's reputation, your and Hermione's reputations are at stake."

Severus digested his colleague's words, then spoke, "I must admit to not having thought that far. In fact, I had not thought of you retiring until recently."

"So," Minerva resumed without letting him finish, "what are you going to do?"

"I thank you for your concern," Severus answered her curtly. "I can assure you that neither the school's reputation nor mine or Hermione's will be questionable. Now, I have some paperwork to take care of, if you don't mind." He looked at her square in the eyes while dismissing her, letting her know that she ought to obey him. It was plain that she had irritated him with her meddling. What he hid well was the fact her words had hit the mark and he needed to think things through.

"Very well. I hope you'll keep your word." As stiffly as she was sitting, she stood up and left Severus's office.

I really don't need this kind of complication, Severus complained inwardly. *Well, better strike while the iron is hot. I'll talk to Hermione about it today.*

That's how, after an uneventful day, Severus and Hermione found themselves in their armchairs...transfigured into a single sofa...in Severus's living room, discussing Hermione's future.

"Hermione? I suppose you aren't planning on being my personal aide forever?"

"Not really," she mumbled, looking out of the window.

"Don't be embarrassed to tell me the truth. If we are to be a couple for more than a couple of days, we must be sincere with each other. I won't hold it against you if you want to have a career that doesn't involve me." He squeezed her hand to reassure her.

"In fact, I've been thinking of joining the Ministry, the Magical Law Enforcement Department to be precise. I want to make certain things, like discrimination or enslavement, change in the Wizarding world."

Severus felt smug. *Here go your plans, Minerva.* "Hermione," he grabbed her chin to ensure she would look at him, "I'm glad to hear your plans don't involve Hogwarts. Minerva was in my office this morning and already planning your future, or your professional doom would be a better way to put it."

"How so?"

"She's making plans for retiring next year, and she envisioned you as her replacement. She was worried that our relationship would tarnish your appointment or the school's reputation."

Hermione frowned and crossed her arms. "She should have discussed this with me in the first place. She can't know better than me what I want to do. I wanted to speak with you about it first. I'll need to train you to deal alone and discreetly with your muscle incidents, especially the most embarrassing ones, before I can take any other position. And we need to organise how we're going to meet if I'm not your personal aide anymore. For starters, I'll probably have to leave the castle."

"You've given this a lot of thought, it seems." He admired her foresight and was annoyed by it at the same time, since it implied she imagined living without him.

"I didn't always know if you reciprocated my feelings," she admitted weakly.

"Now that you know, what is your mind coming up with to deal with our situation?"

"I will hire a flat connected to the Floo network in London so that you'll be able to come and see me as often as you can," Hermione stated confidently.

"Or the other way around: you come to see me as often as you can," Severus replied.

"I agree. It sounds like a good plan, doesn't it?"

"Indeed." He bent his head forwards and kissed her, softly at first, caressing her lips with his. Soon enough, they both parted their lips, and before they realised it, they were kissing passionately with their tongues as entangled as their limbs as they reclined on the sofa. Without knowing how it happened, Severus found himself cradled between Hermione's clothed legs and grinding his erection against the much too covered juncture of her legs. He propped himself up on his arms. His breath came in heavy pants, and his skin has taken an unusual pink tinge. Hermione reflected idly that it was the first time she had seen a black fire burning, and that fire was Severus's eyes as they took in her flushed face and wanton expression.

"We stop now or we don't stop at all," he said.

"I don't want to stop." She stroked his face with tenderness. "We've been practically living together for a year now. We know our own minds. It's more than time than we give in."

Severus did not know what swelled more at her words, his penis or his heart. "I want nothing more than to take you to bed right now," he croaked, his voice hoarse with desire. "But I don't want our... interlude... to have repercussions in nine months time."

"Don't worry, Severus. I never stopped taking my contraceptives after I broke up with Ron."

He stood up and helped Hermione on her feet, more to keep a physical contact with her than because she really needed it, but then...

When they reached Severus's four-poster, which was draped with dark green and grey curtains, their mouths found each other once more. "I... have... thought... of you... on this bed," Severus managed to say between kisses.

Hermione had a naughty smile. "How did you think of me?" she asked against his mouth.

"You will find out very soon." He grabbed her hand and put it on his erection.

"Did you touch yourself?" she queried daringly, blushing, as she fondled him through his robe.

"Yesssss," he moaned. And, trapping her hand between their bodies, he recaptured her lips with his and literally shoved his tongue into her mouth.

After a while, they separated from each other. Wordlessly, for their eyes said it all, they undressed under each other's appreciative eyes. Severus was very pale and not too hairy, though more so than Ron, but Ron had freckles. He was not built like an athlete, but his metabolism was very kind with him and absorbed greedily anything that Severus ate. Hermione wondered if he had scars, but in the dim light of the bedroom she could not say.

For his part, Severus admired Hermione's womanly body. She was not fat, but she had the right curves in the right places. Her rather sedentary work at Hogwarts had not distorted her frame, though Severus reflected he might encourage her to practice some exercise in the future to keep in shape. He did not fancy her looking like a Molly Weasley alter ego in twenty years. Yes, he reflected, he pictured himself still with Hermione in twenty years. Then, he ceased to think when Hermione stretched onto his satin bedspread, the very one on which he had masturbated to thoughts of her. She gazed at him expectantly. "Come here, Severus," she whispered.

He joined her on the bed, lying down next to her so that his eyes had an unimpeded access to her feminine form. She returned the scrutiny. Tentatively, she reached out one hand to his chest and started to explore his body. He knew she had slept with Ron Weasley and hoped she would not find his older body lacking in comparison. He let her caress his torso and watched carefully her expression.

"Touch me." He complied. His hand wandered to her breasts, pinching and taunting her nipples. She arched against him.

"More." He moved down her body to put his mouth on her breasts, and her hands flew to his head, treading thin fingers through his lank, black hair and holding him against her. Instinctively, she threw a leg over his hip, and his thigh slid between hers, higher and higher until she could feed the tension in her clitoris by rubbing it against his limb. She made soft noises of pleasure, and she could not keep her eyes open. She could not wait anymore. She would explode if she did not have him inside of her soon.

"Now."

"Yesssss."

Pushing her onto her back, Severus took *his* place between her naked thighs and teased his erection a bit against her moist entrance.

"Now!"

He slid into her and kissed her with even more passion than previously. She wrapped her legs snugly around him. Neither was prepared when they were assaulted by their unleashed emotions and sensations. They started to move frantically, not knowing how else they could release the tension that threatened to make their hearts and bodies explode with unprecedented physical pleasure and unbearable heat. Their orgasms washed over them violently and nearly simultaneously. They screamed without restraint, startling the dozing portraits in the Headmaster's office two doors away.

"I win," Phineas Nigellus conceitedly announced to a miffed Dilys Derwent.

It took Severus and Hermione several minutes to come down from the highs their first coupling had brought them.

"Will it be like that every time?" Hermione asked in a whisper tinged with awe.

Severus, who was lying above her, answered into her neck, where he had buried his face, "I don't think so, but it bodes very well for the future." After a while, "Please, stay with me." He felt her nod her agreement.

With great effort, they moved from their intimate position and slid under the soft cotton sheets. They felt asleep cuddled together, still not feeling the need to speak.

Part Two, Day Five

Chapter 12 of 14

The morning after, a meeting with Ministry officials, a realisation on Hermione's part and MInerva's musings.

Another round of thanks to my beta, Dacian Goddess.

I make no profit with this story.

Very reluctantly, Severus and Hermione left *their* bed on Thursday morning. They had awakened each on their side of the bed, no longer entwined like they had been when they had gone to sleep; but still, to awake near each other for the first time was a very precious moment to store in their memories, the kind which could produce a very powerful Patronus. They smiled at each other, still comfortably ensconced under the sheets, and Severus reached out to caress Hermione's cheek. They were brought back to reality brutally when that hand went slack.

Annoyed, he grumbled, "Fate conspires against me. Why wouldn't I have an incident when in bed with you?"

"Don't move," Hermione said soothingly. "I'm going to fetch the potion."

His hand might have been useless, but his eyes were not, and he admired her form from the back from head to toe, and particularly in-between those two extremities, while she sashayed naked across his bedroom. He sighed inwardly. Their responsibilities would not leave them enough time to take care of his morning erection the pleasant way. He got an eyeful of her front when she came back with the phial of potion. She was not hiding from him, and it pleased him to contemplate the owl nest she called her hair, which was sticking out in all directions, the way his own repletion mirrored on her features, her slightly swaying breasts, the triangle of brown hair of her pubis... He quickly drained the phial and dragged her down on to him for a kiss, very heated in spite of the thin layer of the sheet between them. When he let her go, she told him forlornly, "It's nearly breakfast time. We should go, or else the gossip will be flying higher than ever."

He sighed with regret and tugged a stray lock of hair from her face. "I hate it that you're right."

She moved away from the bed, gathered her clothes and headed for her rooms. "All my personal things are in my room," she said ruefully. "I'll have a shower there and come back right after."

"I'll be counting on it. How long before you're back?"

"Half an hour should be enough."

He nodded, she left, and he felt bereft.

Hermione and Severus went to breakfast together, as always, but McGonagall gave them a sharp glance, which made Hermione self-conscious. She was sure she sported no love bites, but she had the impression that the older witch could guess what had happened just by looking at them. However, the Deputy did not make a fuss and acted as if she did not suspect anything.

At nine o'clock, after breakfast was long finished and Severus and Hermione had gone to work in the Headmaster's office, Filch announced that Percy and Arthur Weasley were there to see the Headmaster on behalf of the Minister of Magic.

"All right, Argus. Let them enter."

He pushed away the scrolls of parchment he and Hermione had been perusing and welcomed the two visitors.

"Good morning, gentlemen," Severus greeted them.

"Hello, Mr Weasley, Percy," Hermione said. There was awkwardness in her greeting, due to the fact that everyone had expected her to become a Weasley one day, but she had pushed that fate away.

"Hermione, Severus," Arthur answered for his son and himself.

Once everyone was settled, Arthur explained why they had come. "The Minister, well, Kingsley...it's a bit difficult to call him Minister after everything that happened...wanted to know in detail what your plans were for Monday's celebration. He'd like to know where people are going to be seated, where the... things you're going to use, the ornaments, etc. will be, what they will be... With the number of people who will be there, he wants the security to be perfect, absolute. We can't risk an attack by the Death Eaters still on the loose."

"I see," Severus answered. He was looking Arthur in the eyes and did not say more for a few minutes. Arthur simply held his gaze. "Since the Ministry isn't trying to control the school, I'm willing to cooperate." Percy squirmed on his chair. Obviously, he thought Severus's attitude to be supercilious. "Hermione," Severus continued, "since you organised most of the event, please explain to the Ministry's representatives what will await them on Monday."

Hermione gave them a small smile, which did nothing to hide the tension in her at being in the same room as members of the Weasley family. Arthur seemed as embarrassed as she was. Surprisingly, or not, the one to act naturally was Percy. From that moment on, he took the lead and, very much without embarrassment, grilled Hermione about the organisation of the anniversary of Voldemort's defeat. Severus added his opinion as a Dark Arts expert here and there. The rest of the morning passed in a blur of negotiations on how many Aurors would be on site and on other details pertaining to the security of the ceremony. Arthur and Percy declined the invitation to eat at Hogwarts. They did not even have time to see Ginny, for they had to report to the Minister himself without delay.

Lunch was uneventful overall, in spite of Minerva still watching them closely. Severus's acting abilities made him hard to read, but Hermione could not hide that she was glowing. Oh, she acted naturally enough. She had not changed the way she addressed Severus publicly, nor did she act as a girlfriend...Minerva snorted at the idea. The girl had not even acted as a girlfriend with Ron Weasley...but there was no other word for it, she was glowing. Did the other teachers notice? No, they were all concentrating on their plates or on small talk with their neighbours. Except Hagrid. His warm black eyes were set upon the Headmaster and his aide, but his pensive expression of the last few days was gone. It was replaced by a knowing, understanding, almost resigned one. He was not condemning!

After lunch, Minerva caught up with Severus and Hermione before they climbed the spiral staircase leading to Severus's office.

"Severus! Wait!" Severus and Hermione turned their back to the gargoyles that guarded the entrance of the staircase to transfer their attention to the Deputy Headmistress, who was out of breath. "I'd like to discuss something with you." She cast a look loaded with meaning at Hermione.

Severus shook his head. "Minerva, now is not the time. I have to write a detailed report about the organisation and details of Monday's ceremony for the school governors. They want me to present it to them during their meeting tomorrow. However, Hermione and I will have time on Saturday, morning or afternoon, at your convenience."

Minerva pursed her lips in a very unbecoming fashion. Her stern, wrinkled face was forbidding. "Well, I hope it won't be too late. I'll be in your office after breakfast." She turned on her heel and walked away without another word.

Hermione sighed. "Doesn't she trust us to behave appropriately?"

"Let's not discuss this in the corridor."

Back in Severus's office, he explained to her, "Minerva is very preoccupied with the school's fate. She probably feels that its reputation must be irreproachable after one year under the Death Eaters' command, and she fears that an *affair* between us would stain its record. She doesn't know you don't plan to succeed her as Deputy."

"You're probably right, but I wonder if she isn't disappointed that I didn't carry on a relationship with Ron too."

"Well, I am not."

Hermione smiled at him slyly. "Tell me, Severus, for how long have you been wanting me?"

The question took Severus off guard, but he managed to hide his surprise quickly. Not quickly enough, though. "For a while," he answered shortly. He was not comfortable with this line of questioning at all. "I suggest we start on the report for the governors."

"No, no, no, Severus. Remember: we ought to be frank with each other. And I won't let you distract me with your diversionary tactics. You know as well as I do that that report won't take us more than, well, two hours if we dawdle."

Severus considered his lover carefully. How should he go about telling things he had never told anyone in his life? Such words were usually stuck in his throat and refused to come out, however much he might try. He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. He knew she would not budge until she had pressed it out of him, like a winegrower pressed the juice out of grapes. "There's no easy way to tell it, Hermione." He was grateful for her silence. "When I... woke up in the Hospital Wing last year, I thought about my life and realised that nothing tied me to my past anymore. What I mean, Hermione, and you're probably not going to like it, is that everyone who had been a link to my past was dead. No more Potter and his gang, no more Lily Evans," he choked slightly on her name, "no more Voldemort, no more Dumbledore. All of them were related to periods of my life I'd rather forget about altogether. I found myself with the opportunity to build my own future. You were at my side during that time. I noticed you had changed, that you had matured. It was there, in the Hospital Wing, that I decided I wanted you. The feelings I had then grew while we were in Australia. It was there that I decided that I wanted you not only for a night, but for more, possibly for life."

"But," she interjected, "you didn't say anything about it. You didn't even give a hint of how you felt." Yet she was very pleased by what he had said and showed him by kissing his cheek.

"Would it have helped you to develop feelings to me faster, if I had?"

"I don't think so. I would have tried harder to make it work between Ron and me, only to prove to myself that I had an independent mind."

He smirked. Understanding dawned on her face.

"Oh, you, you... cunning, sly... You made sure I'd spend nearly all my time with you so that you could seduce me imperceptibly!"

It was pointless to deny it. It would be better if she saw him as he was now and accept his nature while their relationship was still young. "Admit you did not need a lot of convincing."

"Of course," she retorted a bit hotly. "You played on my feeling of guilt!"

He leaned over to her and, nose to nose, asked her, "What do you think of the result of my little scheme?"

"It was very underhanded, but I like the result... very much," she whispered. "Don't be surprised, though, if I feel authorised to use similar methods with you in the future."

"As long as there is a future," he whispered back and captured her lips with his and to hell with professionalism and decorum in the Headmaster's office. The portraits ceased to snore abruptly, but it went unnoticed by the couple at first, until a discreet cough from Phineas Nigellus reminded them they really ought to tackle the report for the governors. They even managed to keep a professional demeanour for the rest of the afternoon.

Dinner was as uneventful as lunch had been, though the most observant people, that is to say Hagrid, McGonagall and Ginny, noticed that the Headmaster and his aide touched each other quite a lot...a hand on the forearm to catch the other's attention, a brush of fingers when passing the salt, etc....and that they seemed drawn to each other like magnets.... powerful magnets. The question was no longer if there was an attraction between the two, but when would it become public knowledge that they were an item.

In the evening, Severus briefed Minerva about the report and its contents. She wanted to warn him again about a liaison with his aide, even if it were probably too late, but his cold attitude toward her dissuaded her. It was with a heavy heart that she left his office. What would happen to the school if the future Deputy was also known as the Headmaster's mistress? She slept poorly that night, unlike Hermione and Severus, who made love and shared a bed for a second time. Hopefully, it would be like that for many, many years. Both had marriage on their minds when they fell asleep, though they would not approach each other with the matter for quite some time.

Part Two, Day Six

Chapter 13 of 14

Today is delivery day, and the Ministry shows its bad taste in matter of celebration.

Thanks to my very wonderful and very patient beta, Dacian Goddess.

As always, I make no money with this story.

"You realise we do have to get up," Severus whispered in Hermione's ear, keeping her unruly hair out of the way with his hand.

Hermione opened her eyes with difficulty. "Don't I know it?"

Severus chuckled.

"Chuckling in my ear isn't an incentive to get up, you know," she chided him, snuggling closer against him.

"Sunday morning, we'll be able to lie in as much as we like, my dear. Today is delivery day."

Hermione shuddered at the reminder. The Ministry had imposed on the governors and Severus...how Kingsley could have condoned it was beyond her comprehension...four sets of wizarding automatons replaying the key moments of the Battle of Hogwarts. They were to be installed on mezzanines in the Great Hall until the celebration so that the students would still be able to have their meals there. The elected scenes were: Harry being "killed" by Voldemort in the Forbidden Forest; Nagini attacking Severus in the Shrieking Shack (this one Severus did not know how he would react to); Neville beheading Nagini; the final duel between Voldemort and Harry. Some fake giants and Death Eaters, all wizarding automatons, would be roaming the grounds on Monday to entertain the guests as well. Wizarding paintings of other scenes would be displayed on the walls in both the Great Hall and the Entrance Hall as well: the Room of Requirement on fire; the secret passage to the Hog's Head; Molly Weasley killing Bellatrix Lestrange, etc.

"I know," he said, rolling over and getting up, "but the school wards would not let strangers tamper with them, and the charms that put those monstrosities, as you put it, into motion will have to be combined with the school wards."

"I've never liked to play Meccano, even a magical one," Hermione said disdainfully, getting up too.

"No, indeed. You'd rather play the nurse to her Headmaster," he teased, his eyes roving her body, his sex clearly erect. They had slept naked, and the sexual tension in the room was nearly palpable.

Sighing, Hermione picked up her robe on a chair and donned it. "Have a shower! I'll come back for breakfast in half an hour."

Severus did not like one bit the moment when Hermione had to leave his rooms for hers. He looked down at his dwindling erection. How long would it be before she lived with him full time? *I give her two years at most. Less if I have my way.*

Breakfast was barely finished that the delivery men were at the gates with enormous cardboard boxes behind them. It was more impressive than the flower delivery. Filius and Pomona, who had a free hour, helped bring the boxes into the Great Hall while Hagrid and Filch cleared out the Great Hall and started to build the mezzanines, which would be lowered at ground level for the ceremony on Monday. All Care of Magical Creatures classes had been cancelled that morning to this effect.

"The content of the boxes is written on each of them. Please, place them near their designated mezzanine," Severus instructed.

When the boxes were sorted out, it was time for Pomona and Filius to head for their classes. Aurora Sinistra and Septima Vector, who had less classes than the others, had agreed to help until noon. The Muggle Studies teacher, John Milestone, had pleaded a backache and was not there. It was all the better, for Hermione did not like the man much.

When Hagrid and Filch were finished with the mezzanines, the caretaker rummaged through the boxes for the paintings.

"Headmaster Snape!" he called. "This one is damaged." He was holding a rather big painting in front of him. Coming closer, Severus distinguished Ron Weasley and

Hermione Granger coming out of the Chamber of Secrets with basilisk fangs in their hands and then, in a very dramatic shortcut, dropping their newly acquired weapons to share a passionate kiss. The canvass had been ripped at one corner, and there were indentations in the frame Severus was sure were not intended to be there.

"Send it back to the manufacturer," he ordered scornfully. "I won't have a damaged painting in this castle."*Especially not this one.*

They worked hard all morning. It soon appeared that Hermione was best at deciphering the assembly plans and directing the others on how to assemble the automatons before putting them into place. When lunchtime came, the second set was almost complete. Severus Levitated the mezzanines and boxes and, with a swish of his wand Hermione was jealous of, restored the Great Hall to its original state.

Sybill Trelawney always had her Friday afternoons free, but nobody thought to ask for her help, and Slughorn was genuinely ill and lying in the Hospital Wing, so it was only Professor Truthful with Severus and Hermione for the afternoon. The scene in the Forbidden Forest turned out to be more complex than the others to assemble. The trees and the number of scattered Death Eaters made it difficult to get it right. Besides, there was a mistake in the assembly plan, and because it took Hermione nearly an hour to spot it, they were put behind schedule. When Truthful announced that she had to go because she had promised to attend her sister's birthday...with the Headmaster's permission...Severus resorted to pulling the Head Boy and Girl from their classes. Ginny Weasley and John Bentley scurried into the Great Hall and stopped dead in their tracks when they saw the automatons.

"That was what was Levitated above our heads!" Ginny exclaimed. Clearly, she did not find the automatons tasteful. "We could only see the platform from our table."

"Not a word, Ginny," Hermione admonished her. "It was chosen by the Ministry. We need your help to finish assembling them before dinner time." Ginny did not answer, but did not bother to keep her own dislike from her face either.

Without a word, the two students set about arranging the automatons on their respective sets. In an unspoken agreement, they took care of the Shrieking Shack scene without supervision, for Severus did not want to see it too closely, though the garish set-up would probably take away part of the trauma attached to the memory of that particular moment of the war. They were so absorbed in their task that John did not notice when Severus nearly fell when the muscles of his left foot and ankle became lax, and Ginny, who had yet kept glancing at her friend all along, nearly missed it. She observed Hermione's interactions with Severus. They looked very comfortable together, indeed. If Ginny could read Hermione's body language correctly, she was sure they had slept together. The mere idea was enough to make her queasy, so she redirected her mind by going back to work.

The little group only had half an hour to spare before dinner when they finished. Without consulting, they each elected to have a shower. The weather had been warm, and sunrays had been generously pouring through the windows of the Great Hall all afternoon.

"They're really hideous," Hermione commented on the automatons while regaining her quarters.

"I agree with you wholeheartedly, Hermione, but there is nothing either of us can do about it," Severus replied.

Hermione yawned widely and loudly just before she reached her rooms. "I wish we could have an early night tonight."

"Agreed," came the immediate reply from Severus. "But we still have to meet the school governors after dinner."

"It's a good thing none of them is like Lucius Malfoy," she said ironically.

"Lucius is not a completely bad man, you know."

She groaned. "How can you have been friends with him?"

Severus's face darkened. "We will not have that argument again, Hermione. I'll probably have to tell you more about my relationship with Lucius, since ~~we~~ *we are a couple*, but for now, I want to keep my strength for the meeting."

She looked sheepish. "I'm sorry. I find it hard to get over what he did to Ginny with Voldemort's diary and how he insisted we be brought before Voldemort when we were captured last year."

"And *that* is the reason why I haven't renewed with him since I survived. But I can't just forget everything he and I shared."

"All right," Hermione admitted. "I ought to understand, after all. I'd break off all contacts with Ron if he tried to hurt you, but I couldn't forget everything we've shared either."

"Coming to that understanding has deprived us of five minutes of precious time. Meet me in my office in twenty minutes."

Severus turned on his heel and strode to his own rooms, leaving behind him a somewhat embarrassed Hermione.

The sky was still clear when the governors filed in Severus's office. His desk had been replaced with a big oval table and chairs.

"Welcome, gentlemen."

When they finished exchanging pleasantries, they settled around the table, and the meeting itself began. It was a short affair; the governors found nothing to criticise about the plans made.

"I don't remember this school to have ever been so well run," a portly man with grey hair congratulated Severus while taking his leave. Needless to say, Severus's earlier bad mood evaporated like a puddle of water in the Sahara. He could not help but be sensible to praise, and to deserved praise especially.

"Come, Hermione. Let's go to bed," was all he said, but with tenderness, when the governors had departed. He offered her his arm.

"Young love," Dilys Derwent's portrait said with longing in her voice while Albus Dumbledore's portrait stroke his beard pensively.

Part Two, Day Seven

Chapter 14 of 14

The air is cleared with Minerva and romance is now in full bloom between Severus and Hermione.

I can't thank my beta enough for her thorough work on this story. Dacian Goddess, you're the best.

I make no profit with this humble contribution to the Potterverse.

Special thanks to Lulabelle72 for pimping this story on her deviantart page.

Hermione and Severus got up on Saturday in what was already starting to look like a routine. Severus made note to have another shower and another sink installed in his bathroom in a not too distant future so that Hermione could go through her morning ritual in his...their...rooms.

The gossip about the state of their relationship at the staff table had dwindled, eclipsed by the automatons hovering over the students. The teachers could see them better than the students thanks to the position of their table; all except for one scene, which was surrounded by a fog.

"Was it necessary to hide one of the scenes?" Milestone asked.

"I think Severus doesn't relish the idea of witnessing his 'death' while eating," McGonagall answered him tartly. She probably did not like the man either. Her outburst at least had an interesting result: a silence that could have rivalled a monks' refectory fell over the staff table.

For the second time that week, Minerva found herself sitting stiffly in the Headmaster's office. However, having been reminded of what Severus had gone through earlier had mellowed her a little regarding his liaison with his aide.

"Hermione and I are all ears, Minerva, and we have all the time to address your concern."

Minerva glanced at the couple in front of her and could almost physically feel the solidarity between them. She knew then that her cause was lost in advance, but opted to fight all the same. She crossed her fingers on her lap and started. "I worry about the school. You know it's been difficult to convince a not negligible part of the parents to let their children attend Hogwarts this year. They know that you're not a Death Eater, not anymore, but they were afraid that the school wasn't safe enough, that Death Eaters might be able to enter the school and harm their children to get at you, who had betrayed your *master*. After all, the Lestranger brothers are still at large."

Severus nodded to indicate he was listening to her. Hermione was utterly immobile; she was giving her previous Head of House her full attention.

Minerva continued, "However, I intend to retire next year. I'm not young anymore...don't try to protest, Hermione, you know it's true. My replacement will need to be a person with authority but fairness." She gave Severus a pointed look over her glasses. "Someone who can organise the functioning of the school with efficiency and be a teacher at the same time, and you're both aware that none of the other teachers has the inclination or abilities to be a Deputy Headmaster."

Hermione had an idea of where Minerva was going.

"I had hoped that you, Hermione," she looked the young woman into the eyes, "would be my replacement. You certainly have the abilities for the position in spite of your young age. But then, there are witches my age who haven't done in their entire life half of what you've done."

Hermione...and Severus...felt the warmth of pride at those words.

"What I want to say is... you're certainly very close, the both of you. What would happen if you became the Deputy while being the Headmaster's dear friend, Hermione?" She paused a second to let her words sink. "People would get the wrong idea of how this school is run. Worse, they would imagine that good grades could be obtained by..." Minerva turned a bit pink at the suggestion, "doing favours for the teachers. Most parents would be very tempted to home school their children. It'd be a blow to wizarding education!"

Hermione smiled at her old teacher to reassure her. "You worry too much, Minerva. Who said I was striving to be the next Deputy?"

Minerva's jaw dropped. She started so violently that Severus believed for a moment that her bun would come undone. "What? You wouldn't accept to..."

Hermione shook her head. "No, Minerva. I have every intention of taking a job at the Ministry. So, you see, your concern was unfounded."

"Ah, er, well... I'm glad the school's reputation won't be tarnished. But what about your handi...health trouble?" she asked Severus.

"Your interest in the school's reputation has been noted, Minerva, and I thank you for it," Severus answered smoothly. "As for my 'health', you needn't worry about it. The symptoms are not as dire as they were at first. And be assured you will be consulted about the choice of your replacement. Actually, if you have people you'd like to recommend, next week, after the celebration, would be the right time to contact them."

"Yes, I'll think about it. Now, I'll leave you to your work. I have essays to mark." She fled out of the office.

"Have a good day, Minerva," Severus and Hermione said in unison to her retreating back. That brought a silly smile on Hermione's face.

"I don't know why you're smiling, but I like it."

"I just feel happy, very happy."

"I'm glad to hear it. You make me happy too, Hermione." He grabbed her hand and brought it to his lips to give it a light kiss. "Since there isn't much to do until Monday except for a bit of paperwork, I suggest we get over it now, and we'll have our afternoon and Sunday free. How about a stroll into Hogsmeade?"

"That'd be great!" She withdrew her hand and started to sort out the scrolls on the desk in two piles. "You take care of this," she pushed a stack of parchments towards him, "and I take care of this," she finished in an authoritarian way.

"Who is in control here?" he asked, but it was a rhetorical question for he bent over the parchments, quill in hand, without another word. Hermione did not even respond.

When Severus announced at lunch that he would be absent that afternoon and that any problem should be taken to his Deputy, the teachers cast him funny looks. They obviously wondered what emergency could urge the Headmaster to leave the castle not two days before an important event. It never crossed their minds that romance might be an emergency.

The sight of Hogwarts' Headmaster walking arm in arm with his personal aide around Hogsmeade on a sunny day barely raised an eyebrow among the village's inhabitants. It was not the first time they had been seen together, after all, and people here did not know them enough to recognise the change in their relationship...or maybe they were simply too busy with their lives to notice the happenings in others'. Hermione and Severus visited several shops at a leisurely pace. They bought chocolate at Honeydukes, and Hermione bought a new dress at Gladrags Wizardwear. The shopkeeper was very professional, but she noticed with curiosity that Severus Snape, who had never graced her shop with his presence until then, seemed very involved in his aide's choice of a dress. She thought they were lucky she was not a gossip.

"Professor Snape! Hermione!" Rosmerta greeted them enthusiastically.

"Hello, Rosmerta. Could you bring us two Butterbeers?" Hermione told her.

Severus chose a remote table at the far end of the inn. The couple spent a full hour conversing about Hermione's projects. She was full of ideas on how to go and change

some of the laws of the wizarding world. Then, they reluctantly made their way back to the castle for dinner. Their bright eyes and cheerful expressions...Severus could not help it; he looked cheerful, in a Severus Snape way...did not lend any doubts to the nature of their relationship. From her seat, Ginny caught the enamoured look Hermione gave Severus when he held her chair out. The elbowing and whispering going on at the Slytherin table indicated that the look had not gone unnoticed there either. As for the teachers, they did not disapprove of the relationship per se, though they were a bit disconcerted about the age difference, but they wondered if they should acknowledge it. Hagrid unwittingly put them out of their misery. "Headmaster! Hermione! How was Hogsmeade?"

"It was lovely," Hermione answered, while Severus gave himself something to do by sipping a bit of pumpkin juice.

"Got to Madam Puddifoot's?" He accompanied his question with a wink.

Severus looked horrified at the suggestion.

"No," Hermione said. "We went to the Three Broomsticks."

"Ah, nothin' like Rosmerta's Butterbeer!"

The food appearing on the table put a stop to a conversation that could have become awkward. The cat was out of the bag now, and there was no way Severus or Hermione would be able to put it back in it, not that they wanted to. To go public, even in small doses, meant serious, long-term commitment, and they were very much aware of it.

Hermione and Severus slipped out of the Great Hall as soon as they could. Once they were sitting on Severus's sofa with their arms around each other, Hermione murmured, "By Monday evening, everyone that counts will know about us." She withdrew from his embrace a little to watch him in the face. "I don't care one bit. Actually, it'll be a relief to have that part when people get indignant, or sympathetic, behind us as soon as possible."

Severus had a small smile. "I've never been one to broadcast my feelings, as you very well know, but in this case, I'm very willing to make an exception. You're important to me."

Hermione looked at him tenderly. "You mean you've never been one to broadcast your *positive* feelings. And how important am I to you?"

Oh, tricky question. Would he give her the full answer? "Very important. Important enough for me to be glad that I'm an invalid. If not for that, you wouldn't be in my life now."

This coming out of Severus's mouth was tantamount to a declaration of love in due form. It prompted Hermione to give him a deep, heated kiss, with battling of tongues and scalp scratching included. "The same for me," she finally said. "I mean," she added hastily, "I'm not glad about your handicap, but I share your feelings."

"Oh, Hermione," he moaned and hugged her tightly.

It would be a while before they would be able to utter the very words their hearts were singing, but those words were present in the very core of their being and would be there for a long time. Hopefully.