

A Spider Book

by duniazade

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Professor Slughorn's Christmas party was still in full swing when Hermione left.

From the far side of the room, where she had hidden behind a magnificent "pièce montée," Hermione had seen Harry leave hurriedly after Snape and Malfoy and, knowing him, had a fair idea of what he was up to. She certainly couldn't follow, so she slipped quietly out of Professor Slughorn's office through the small pantry the elves had installed for the evening. She was pretty sure Cormac hadn't seen her, but she listened for a moment to make sure he wasn't on her trail before heading towards Gryffindor Tower.

The corridors were deserted, but she stopped and listened warily when she heard voices coming through the door of the third classroom from the Fat Lady's portrait.

"Won-won, I'll miss you so!"

She scowled and didn't wait to hear the reply, if any, nor did she heed the grumbings of the Fat Lady, but hurried through the portrait hole. She really did want a word with Harry before he left for the holidays. She couldn't, however, linger in the Common Room, for fear that McLaggen would turn up; so, she took the chance to look for Harry in his dormitory.

The dormitory was empty, which proved that Ron was not the only one to deport himself after curfew. She sighed and sat down on Harry's bed, hoping he'd be the first to appear. Too many things were going amiss this year; something really didn't add up. A clutter of boyish mess littered the floor between Harry's and Ron's beds a jumble of discarded garments, old parchment, broom servicing kit, Keepers' gloves. She prodded it absent-mindedly with her foot and stiffened as she saw something strange peeking from under a maroon, hand-knitted jumper.

Professor Snape was even more ill-tempered than he ordinarily was.

And not only because of his recent conversation with Draco, which was only the last in a string of unsettling incidents. Things definitely hadn't gone his way this year. Something, something he didn't quite grasp, something indefinable, was amiss.

He wished there had been some out of bounds students to catch and punish, to vent his fury on, but even this was amiss. He had already silently patrolled the second and first floors, with even more stealth than usual, his wand extinguished, without catching anyone.

He was almost resigned to return to his dungeons empty-handed when he entered the corridor on the ground floor. He had passed the painting which masked the entrance to the kitchens when he thought he had heard something. He turned right, tiptoeing along the wall in the shadows, when a clatter came from the niche at the dead end of the corridor, and the bewildered face of a girl, trying to hide behind the suit of armour, shone palely in a moon ray. He was upon her in a leap, and, with a cry of "Lumos!," shoved his lit wand in her face.

"Miss Granger!"

She blinked, half blinded by the light thrust in her face and shuffled, trying awkwardly to avoid it, but only succeeding in losing balance. Something she had been trying to hide hastily beneath her robes slid from her grasp and landed on the floor. She held herself still and seemed petrified. Snape addressed her with a stony gaze and then bent leisurely to retrieve the object.

It was a book a large, but strangely flat, book. On the rigid and glazed cover, gaudy drawings flashed in violent colours.

"Comics, Miss Granger?"

"Graphic novel, sir."

The cover depicted a young athlete on a broomstick, defending the goalposts of his team. His flaming hair seemed almost as garish as the orange Chudley Cannons robes that swirled around his muscular body.

Professor Snape smirked and was about to make a cutting comment when something caught his eye. He looked again, and his lips tightened.

"Follow me, Miss Granger."

She followed in silence. Snape removed the wards from the door to his office and entered first. He seated himself at his desk without a word and opened the book. She waited patiently, standing before the desk, and, at last, he shut again the book, raised his head and said wearily, "Come here, Miss Granger."

She went round the desk and stood by his chair. They both stared in silence.

He was the first to speak.

"Something must be done about this, Miss Granger."

"Yes, sir."

"You intended to do it by yourself, this night?"

"I only hoped to hide it, Professor, until I could find a better solution. I confess I thought of throwing it in the garbage chute in the kitchen I know it leads directly into the Hogwarts magical incinerator but I thought better of it."

"It's tempting, but I don't think it's prudent. After all, we are in this thing. Do you think he'll miss it?"

"Not for the fortnight, sir. He leaves tomorrow morning for the Burrow with Harry. He'll think he's just misplaced it, and then he won't think about anything but food and Quidditch until the end of the holidays."

Silence fell again. They contemplated the book.

The figures on the cover moved, which was quite normal; it was a wizarding book, after all. But, an unusual whirlwind seemed to form in the left lower corner.

At once, the cover clouded; a dense fog was invading the image, and what seemed to be a powerful storm blurred the contours of the Quidditch pitch and scattered away the players. The Keeper himself was swept away through the loop of the tallest goalpost, but his leg caught in it, and he dangled upside down in the fierce wind while the fog grew thicker and darker, swirling around his body until he seemed to shrink to an unsubstantial black speck, holding by an invisible thread. At last, he was blown away in the billowing clouds.

Hermione knew full well what followed inside.

The first panel depicted a quite different scene: a quiet and sunny room, with chintz curtains swirling lazily in the soft breeze coming through the open window. A young woman sat at a large desk, cluttered with a jumble of papers, pencils, gum wrappers, and erasers. She was writing in a notebook, but had clearly reached a difficult point because she had stopped and was biting absent-mindedly on her pen, her eyes on a butterfly that had fluttered in. She didn't see the small black spider that hurriedly crossed the page on her left and dropped to the floor, nor did she seem aware when it grew and changed shape. A young man was now reading over her shoulder, and, if his body was somewhat translucent, his hair was as flaming as ever.

The next panels sported captions. The young man had bent to murmur something in the young woman's ear.

"Sweetie, no way. Hermione gets her Prefect badge, all right. That's expected. But the second one must go to me."

"Why you? Harry's the obvious choice."

"I never get anything new. And that know-it-all Hermione that will surprise her!"

"No."

"Yes."

"No."

The young man discreetly slid the tip of a wand from his sleeve, murmured "Imperio," and ghosted a light kiss on her ear.

The young woman immediately began to write in earnest. The young man sighed contentedly, went to the couch at the far end of the study and arranged himself for a nap.

Snape spoke again.

"So, that's how it happens."

"Yes."

"Any idea how he does that?"

"Not exactly. His brothers sold daydreams this summer. If he tried to fuse a daydream with a Chudley Cannon comic and it backfired..."

"Daydreams are downstream from our reality. Going upstream is supposed to be much more difficult forbidden, in fact. Of course, you know that you mustn't mention this to anyone. Very few suspect we are, in fact, written by someone residing in another layer of reality, and it must stay that way or our world would fray and dissolve. Sybill and the Centaurs will ramble about stars and omens, which is their way of expressing a vague uneasiness. The others are perfectly unaware of the situation. The Headmaster knows, of course, but he won't discuss it, only twinkling at me when I mention it. Merlin knows how Weasley..."

"I don't think he's really aware of what he's done, Professor. Ron is so solid that he may have caused the magical equivalent of a gravitational warp... but wait! The Prefect incident that was last year!"

"Of course, Miss Granger. Being on a different reality plane, he can move at leisure through time."

While they were speaking, the young man had woken from his nap and seemed quite refreshed. He went to look over the writer's shoulder again and tutted.

"Hermione will marry me."

"You have nothing in common!"

"That'll show her. Besides, it's no problem. Dad is almost never at home."

"I worked hard to put in the subtle clues to who her true soulmate is. The age difference will only make it more romantic."

"No way! You aren't giving her to the greasy git."

Hermione blushed. Snape scowled.

Meanwhile, the author's eyes were brimming with tears.

"Let her have Krum at least. He's young; he loves her passionately; he has a hooked nose..."

"Nope."

A large tear fell on the page and blurred Krum's name.

"Note, Miss Granger, that he only seems interested in minor matters."

"Minor matters, Professor? I won't marry Ron under any conditions. Can you imagine a lifetime with a Weasley? I prefer to risk my own destruction by flinging that thing in the incinerator."

"I'm afraid the matter is out of your hands, Miss Granger, as the book is in my possession. Besides, you must think of the greater good."

"Did you read it till the end, Professor?"

"Of course I did. Potter killed the Dark Lord, my name was cleared and I got an Order of Merlin First Class."

"You might want to look again. It keeps changing."

"Hmm... Yes, these pages seem to have shifted... What!"

"I told you so."

"Don't be impertinent, Miss Granger. Nonetheless, we must take immediate action."

When Ron came back from the holidays, he was greeted in front of the Fat Lady's portrait by a rosy-cheeked Hermione, glowing with cheerfulness. She took him by the arm and whispered in his ear, "I want to show you something."

Ron was taken a little aback, but it was a pleasant change, which proved that his tactics had begun to work at last. He had a smug grin on his face when Hermione, still holding his arm, stopped on the seventh floor and began pacing in front of Barnabas the Barmy, murmuring, "I need a paradise for Ron. I need a paradise for Ron."

His grin widened to the ears when he stumbled in the room, dazed by the orange flames that seemed to leap out of the walls. The enormous bedroom was tapestried with posters of the Chudley Cannons. The resemblance to his own room at the Burrow stopped there, for in the centre of the hall, big enough to host a Quidditch pitch, stood a majestic and vast bed, encumbered with young and pretty creatures who welcomed him enthusiastically. He didn't note that Hermione had discreetly left the room. When he grew tired, the charming creatures fed him mashed potatoes, roast beef and chocolate pudding, laughing when he spluttered because he tried to eat and speak simultaneously. After a refreshing nap, they all mounted broomsticks and played against the Chudley Cannons who came out of the walls. Ron's team won. And so the pleasures went endlessly under the everlasting glory of the golden sky.

Meanwhile, in the dungeons, Professor Snape murmured dark spells while turning the book in the vat of acromantula venom. Hermione looked worried. She had helped him put preserving spells on the parts they wanted to keep unchanged. There had been rather tense negotiations on what had to be kept or not, but, at last, they had reached some form of consensus.

The parts covered by the spells were protected against contact with the acromantula venom, a little like the pattern on decorated Eastern eggs is protected by wax. The venom was to selectively wipe Ron's interventions from the strips, which were, subsequently, to be patched with the finest spider silk, allowing the new additions to flow and meld flawlessly with the preserved parts. This was Hermione's task.

It was a delicate job, and they did it at night, while the author slept, so as to avoid any trauma. They had put out all lights and fires except the thin bluebell flame under the cauldron in which Hermione stirred the melted silk.

They also hoped not to be interrupted. That hope proved vain when the meagre fire under Hermione's cauldron sputtered, hissed, and disgorged a spinning blur of magenta. A single lemon drop arched from the still revolving figure of Albus Dumbledore as he stumbled out of the flame and fell hissing in the vat of acromantula venom. Dumbledore steadied himself, brushing his clothes and smiling while Snape and Hermione, transfixed, tried to assess the damage.

"Well, Severus," said the older wizard, "I'd rather you kept your fireplace open."

Two heads slowly lifted to stare at him. On Hermione's face, pity fought awe. On Snape's, pure rage melted in a cold smile.

When at last Dumbledore left, Hermione coughed.

"That panel is ruined, isn't it?"

"Yes. The lemon drop fixed forever what the feverish brain of Weasley had imagined."

"So, you'll have to do it."

"After this, I think I might enjoy it."

"That's not a nice thing to say."

"I am not a nice man."

"That's why I prefer you."

"We agreed you'll go to Krum."

"You might need my evidence."

"Well, at least you can't cook and don't like children."

A few years later, the spider book, as it came to be named because of the delicate and complicated webs the acromantula venom had etched in its cover, sat on the black marble mantelpiece of the Minister for Magic's living room.

Hermione stretched and yawned. She put aside the latest issue of the Annals of Modern Arithmancy.

Lucius had left three hours ago, and Severus was late, as he always was when he received a delegation of the Wizards for the Light, who tended to squabble interminably about the rights of flobberworms and the need to re-educate Thestrals to eat yeast-produced proteins.

She wandered to the mantelpiece and leafed idly to the end of the book.

The author smiled and waved happily at her. Thanks to Hermione and Severus, she had achieved her aim with fresh inspiration.

The seventh tome had been an enormous success. The Slytherins were vindicated; Hogwarts' stairs were mended; the splendid marriage of Miss Hermione Granger and new Minister for Magic Severus Snape (Snape had grumbled about the splendour, but Hermione insisted that it was necessary for the public image) had been impressive; everyone saw the exemplary happiness of Harry Potter who, being rid of his scar and his magic, became the first squib Headmaster and proved that love conquers all by marrying Marietta Edgecombe. The surprise of the readers only equalled their pleasure.

The Room of Requirement was sealed. The faint outline of its door, seeping with an orange fire, figured on the inner side of the back cover. Hermione's eyes lingered on it, and she murmured, "Paradise is paved with evil intentions."

"Evil is a strong word," sneered a dark voice from the velvety depths of the night-blooming garden beyond the French windows. Minister Snape didn't use the Floo anymore.

"Live is a much wiser one, I agree," she answered, turning to offer him a fragrant tumbler of Armagnac before she took in the scowling face, the thin lips, the smouldering black eyes.

"I take it they were irritating?"

"The most preposterous bunch of dunderheads," hissed Snape.

Hermione smiled. The night promised to be interesting.

Author's Notes: Written for Elfarren, in the 2007 summer round of the SS/HG Exchange, a few weeks before the publication of *Deathly Hallows*.

The prompt was: "Severus and Hermione have a run-in after hours in Hogwarts and he finds her with a book she shouldn't be reading - it doesn't necessarily have to be a magical text. Taunting would be great but somehow Hermione has to pull herself out of getting in trouble. No NC-17 or otherwise very graphic/sexually explicit stories, if you take my meaning."