

Across the Anvil

by *Subversa*

They shared a secret past and meet again in Gretna Green for a wedding.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 7

They shared a secret past and meet again in Gretna Green for a wedding.



Chapter One: In Which Our Story Opens, in Gretna Green ...

The Outlander Inn was a hostel of no little popularity in wizarding Britain, especially for its location in Gretna Green, just over the border from England into Scotland. The village itself had been infamous in olden times as the location to which one would flee to achieve a runaway marriage. In modern times, the Muggles in the United Kingdom had made Gretna Green one of the most popular wedding destinations in the country, and weddings and all their attendant gaiety was the main industry of the town.

Wizards loved the old traditions as well, and the Outlander Inn was the only wizarding establishment in Gretna Green to accommodate the brides and grooms desirous of being married 'over the anvil'.

On this crisp September morning, the fireplaces of the lobby of the inn were busy with the arrivals of the guests for the Granger wedding. The entire second floor had been reserved to lodge the wedding party and guests, and a full week of festivities awaited those who chose to attend. Not all invited guests could be there for the full week, but invitations had declared all were welcome to arrive at the time of their convenience, up to Sunday, 19th September, 2004, the actual wedding day.

In a lull in the afternoon, the receptionist, Joe Macgregor, was summoned from his tea and cake to assist a new arrival. The newcomer stood in the middle of the lobby, surveying his surroundings like a royal duke at Balmoral, standing as if he wore a cape blowing behind him in the wind.

Minus the flights of fancy, the man stood over six feet tall; he was slender of build and long of leg, wearing a finely tailored set of black robes over an austere black suit and an impeccable white shirt. Hair the colour of India ink was held at his nape in a tie, and arresting black eyes glared out of a supercilious face graced with a ridiculously large hooked nose and a thin, sneering mouth.

'May I help you, sir?' Joe inquired deferentially.

'I am here for the Granger wedding,' the man replied.

'Of course, sir,' Joe said, slightly nervous of the silky, threatening voice. 'Do you have a reservation?'

The sneering stranger stared into Joe's eyes for a long moment, and then replied in a voice of ice, 'I am the groom. Where are the wedding party now?'

Joe blanched. It was his job to be particularly helpful to the bride and groom! 'Most of them are in their rooms, sir, dressing for high tea in the Grand Salon at four o'clock,' he said.

'Excellent,' the self-proclaimed groom responded smoothly, placing a sack of Galleons on the polished oak counter. 'May I have the key to the bride's room, please?'

Joe forced himself to keep his eyes away from the sack of gold coins—a cool hundred, he reckoned—a week's pay!

The groom's icy expression melted into that of a sheepish man; he leant forward and added in a conspiratorial tone, 'I was out too late last night, and she's ... not happy with me.'

Joe, a married man of many years standing, nodded sympathetically—his missus was not best pleased if he stayed down the pub with the lads for too long, either!

The dark man produced a piece of parchment from his inner pocket—no, it was a black velvet jeweller's box. Joe blinked. How could he have mistaken white parchment for a black box?

A slender white finger popped the box open, displaying the red satin lining, embossed with 'Grundell and Ridges Jewellers', and the dazzling emerald pendant nestled within. 'I've brought a small gift for her,' the stranger said.

Joe grinned conspiratorially. 'Ach, sir, she'll like that!' he said, slipping the requested room key to the wizard in black, scruples eased by the predicament of a fellow sufferer of the unreasonable wrath of women.

The stranger's mouth quirked up on one side, and he slid the largesse to Joe's side of the counter. 'Good man,' he said. His eye fell upon the pieces of pink parchment artfully fanned out on the far edge of the wooden surface. 'Is this the ... schedule of events?'

Joe swiftly palmed the sack of Galleons and nodded amiably. 'Aye, it is, sir—you've certainly provided for the entertainment of your guests, if I may say so.'

One of the pieces of pink parchment disappeared into the stranger's coat pocket. 'Indeed,' he said, a bit of his hail-fellow-well-met manner sliding from him like ink from the feathers of an Augurey. 'Of course,' he added with a sardonic lift of one black brow, 'I'm more interested in properly entertaining the bride, eh?'

Joe grinned outright. 'As you say, sir!'

The dark wizard nodded once and turned to stride through the double doors of the lobby into the marble-tiled hall, where his steps were heard upon the grand staircase. Joe put his hand in his pocket, fondling the bag of gold and thinking of ways in which he could surprise the wife with a special night on the town ... or ways he could hide the windfall from her and use it as he wished.

Lost in these happy thoughts, it was not until he heard the shouting that he was brought back to a sense of time and place. Rousing, he darted his eyes about the lobby to see if he had been observed wool-gathering. Relieved to see that he was still alone, he tidied the area, putting away a stray quill, straightening the Guest Register until it aligned perfectly with the edge of the desk, and neatening the fan of schedules for the Granger wedding. He paused for a moment to admire the neatly arranged document, complete with photographs of the venues for the various parties and outings for the week—and, of course, a large photograph of the bride and groom at the top of the page. The happy couple stood arm-in-arm, alternately smiling soppyly into each other's eyes and waving out of the frame.

The bride was a bushy-haired, no-nonsense sort of young woman, undoubtedly the type to rule her man with a will of iron. The groom, on the other hand, was a happy-looking young man with a round, friendly face.

Oh, no—what had he *done*?

A/N: More to come very soon!

This story was written as a birthday gift for sshg316 - happy birthday, Shug!

Beta reading and Brit picking were done by DeeMichelle and LettyBird, respectively.

Gretna Green was forever immortalised in the novels of Georgette Heyer, as well as other Regency Romance authors, as the place where elopers were married.

From the HP Lexicon:

Augurey (Irish Phoenix) - Thin and mournful-looking bird somewhat resembling a vulture, greenish-black in color, native to Britain and Ireland. Normally remaining hidden in its nest in brambles and thorns, flying only in heavy rain, *the feathers of the Augurey repel ink*. Its distinctive cry was once thought to be a death omen, but it is now known that the Augurey's cry foretells rain. The Augurey eats insects and fairies.

Chapter Two: In Which Hermione Learns of an Unexpected Guest

Chapter 2 of 7

The Bridal Suite is invaded.



Chapter Two: In Which Hermione Learns of an Unexpected Guest

Severus paused on the first landing to peruse the schedule he had lifted from the front desk. Curling his lip in distaste at the sickly pink of the parchment...did Longbottom have *no* control over the girl?...he was appalled to see the number of events arranged for this charade of a wedding. Who in thunder was paying for this farce?

On the agenda for the week were a bridesmaid luncheon, a bridal brunch, a lingerie party...that might be only worthwhile pastime listed...a hen party, and a stag party. Interspersed were cocktail parties, shopping expeditions, trips to the nearest wizarding spa...and what the *devil* was karaoke?

Stuffing the parchment into his pocket, he consulted the number on the key the pathetic, Confused desk clerk had given him...Room 222. Taking a moment to Disillusion himself, he climbed the stairs to the second floor and paused in the doorway to peek up and down the corridor. Thank Merlin, the silly sods were still in their rooms dressing for the formal tea. He moved silently down the carpeted hallway and stood outside the door for an instant. He closed his eyes, seeing in his mind's eye her face the day he had sent her away, then he slipped the key into the lock and entered Hermione Granger's Bridal Suite.

Hermione stood before the mirror in the dressing room, admiring the long, loose corkscrew curls the hairdresser had wrought in her brown hair. Idly, she touched her soft, shiny hair...it was staggeringly expensive to pay to have it done, but it wasn't every day that a girl got married, so for just this once, it was all right to spend gold like a Malfoy.

Grinning at the comparison of her Muggle-born self to the pure-blood prat, she stepped into her new crimson knickers, appreciating the sheen of the satin-like fabric. Ginny Potter had steadfastly refused to allow Hermione to leave the shop where she had bought her nightdresses without also buying several sets of fancy knicker-and-bra sets. Slipping into the matching bra, she thought she really had to give Ginny credit; wearing pretty underwear really did give a girl a lift!

She seated herself at the marble-topped dressing table and looked through her newly acquired make-up from the smartest wizarding shop in Diagon Alley. Did she want a demure pink lipstick, or a cheeky red to match her knickers? She giggled at the thought; it wasn't as if Neville...or anyone else, for that matter!...would see her in her knickers today.

She popped the top off the colour called Scarlet Siren, and she heard the door to her room open. Had she left it unlocked?

'Neville? Is that you?' She stood and reached for her dressing gown, which hung on a hook beside the bathroom door. 'Just a minute...let me get decent.'

'But I prefer you *indecent*,' a silky voice responded.

Hermione froze. No! That voice had no place in her bedroom...no place in her memory...no place in her *life*. In fact, as far as she was concerned, *that* voice had ceased to exist!

'I see that Longbottom rates saucy knickers...why was it that I never got anything but Muggle discount shop white cotton, six-to-the-pack pants?'

Hermione shoved her arms into her Gryffindor gold dressing gown and whirled on the spot as she belted it tightly about her waist. 'When one never, *ever* leaves home, it's hardly worth the bother of putting on saucy knickers!' she spat at the apparition leaning insolently against the door. *Nimue, Circe, and all the Graces!* she thought, feeling her mouth go dry at the sight of him. *When the hell had he got so fit?*

When Hermione had seen him on a daily basis, Snape had been fairly unsavoury-looking, most of the time. He had showered every other day, whether he needed it or not, washed his hair once a week, shaved about as often, seldom thought to launder his robes, and often reeked of drink.

Now, his black eyes flicked down her body once before settling on her face.

The Snape of her memory bore almost no relation to the one at whom she now stared. He was pristine in his cleanliness, hair shining, face smooth, clothes immaculate, and all she could smell on him was bergamot and sage, with a touch of lemon. Without thinking, she inhaled deeply, trying to catch his scent again.

'That's all I need to know,' he said, and he pushed off the door and crossed the floor to her in three long strides.

Hermione watched his approach as if it were in slow motion, like in a movie. His jaw was set, his shoulders were tense, and his eyes were smouldering with all-too-recognisable passion. Too late, she tried to jump back from him, her hands raised defensively, but he grasped her by her upper arms and jerked her against his hard body with a violence which overbore her feeble attempts to ward him off.

Insanely, she felt her muscles relax in response to his actions; it was certainly not the first time Severus Snape had embraced her as if she were the enemy *.and the results were always well worth it*, she thought as the austere, thin-lipped mouth descended to capture hers in an overpowering kiss.

He held her to him in an iron grip, one large hand pressed to the small of her back whilst the other was firmly planted betwixt her shoulder blades. The cologne which she had so longed to smell again now overwhelmed her, seeming to caress all of her senses in the same way his clever tongue was now overtaking her mouth and claiming it for his own.

Interrupted in the act of pushing him away from her, her hands fisted in the front of his robes, neither pulling him closer nor pushing him away, simply enabling her to keep her feet under the assault of his mouth on her own. She was all but unaware of responding to his kiss, her tongue stroking languidly against his, until his grip on her loosened and the hand at her waist stroked down to her bum. She might have stood for that...particularly when he pressed himself more firmly against her, revealing his obvious interest in continuing with their activities...until the other hand began travelling up to find its favourite place, nestled in the hair at her nape. She sighed into his mouth, recalling how he would use that bit of leverage to control her head, allowing him to deepen his kisses even further...until she remembered the expensive hair-do ... for the week of parties ... oh, bugger, she was engaged to Neville!

With a mighty wrench, she broke from him and backed up to the dressing table in the alcove to retrieve her wand, which she turned on him. He stood as she had left him, his eyes smouldering with unfulfilled passion, his lips reddened by her lipstick and slightly swollen from the desperation of their kissing, his trousers front unabashedly tented with the evidence of his desire for her. He started towards her, clearly intent upon finishing what they had begun, but she raised the wand in a threatening gesture.

'I don't know how you got in here, but if you're not out in five seconds, I'm calling for help!'

He paused, eyeing her wand speculatively. 'You weren't calling for help when you were sucking my tongue halfway down your throat,' he pointed out. He caught sight of himself in the mirror, then, and ignoring her, he removed a snowy white handkerchief from his pocket and began fastidiously wiping the traces of Scarlet Siren from his

face. 'I got in with this,' he added, shoving the handkerchief back into his pocket with one hand and tossing the key with the other.

She caught the key and promptly regretted taking her eyes from him, for he held her wand arm down and looped his free arm about her waist. 'What's this nonsense I hear about your wedding?' he murmured, leaning in to feather kisses along her temple.

She twisted out of his grasp. 'How dare you show up in my bedroom after five *years* of silence and paw me?'

A sneer touched his mouth as his erection began to visibly diminish. 'I thought it was *six* years...unless you're not counting the year when you sent owls, and I ignored them?'

Insensibly enraged, she struck him with a Stinging Hex, watching with perverse satisfaction as he swore and rubbed at his wand hand. 'Get out now, Snape, or my next target is your bollocks,' she promised.

Unperturbed, he advanced on her again, and she backed away from him until the edge of the dressing table pressed into her bum. 'You used to be quite fond of my bollocks,' he murmured, placing the flats of his hands on the dressing table top and bending down to kiss the corner of her mouth. 'I've missed you, Parker.'

Hermione closed her eyes as he breathed his name for her against her lips and then lightly touched the tip of his tongue to the opposite corner of her mouth until her lips parted, and he was kissing her again. She twined her free arm about his neck, and he effortlessly lifted her onto the table, surely parting the dressing gown over her bare legs and insinuating himself between her thighs, never breaking their kiss.

Seven years before, when they had both lived at Grimmauld Place, following the end of the war, he had angrily called her a 'Nosy Parker' for expressing interest in his daily life. Over the year of their uneasy non-relationship, 'Parker' had become his private name for her, seldom uttered if he did not have his hands upon her body. In the presence of other people, she had been 'Granger'. No one had ever known that she spent most of her nights rutting with him in his bed, and as they had never gone out on a date, their affair had never become common knowledge.

She chose to view his tenderness to her in the throes of passion and his sarcastic version of pillow talk as representative of his deepest feelings for her, and in spite of his many faults and detracting traits, she had allowed herself to care for him much more than she ought to have done. He had finally got a job...in Ireland, and when she had tentatively broached the subject of weekend visits with him, he had laughed in her face.

'Why would I want to see you on weekends, Granger?' he had drawled, throwing the last of his sad, dingy pants into his trunk and slamming the lid closed. 'I'll have gold...I can pay for a *proper* shag.'

Remembering his cruelty now, she slapped the hand inching up her thigh and propelled herself forward, pushing him away and gaining her feet again. Turning away from him, she marched to the wardrobe and removed the dress she was wearing to tea.

'I don't know what you're doing here, Snape,' she said, stepping into her little black dress and magicking the zip up the back. 'After all, you look like you're making good money...why don't you go buy a proper shag?'

She bent to slip on her black sling-backs, and Snape chuckled, the warm intimacy of the sound rousing memories she did not wish to deal with now.

'Does that still sting?' he said.

Hermione walked past him to the door, steeling herself not to look at him. 'Don't forget to lock up when you go,' she said over her shoulder.

'I'll come with you now,' he said as he approached her. 'You'll want an escort to this function, won't you?'

Hermione turned a cold glare on him. 'I have no need of your services, Snape...my fiancé will be there.'

Snape reached past her and opened the door. 'I wouldn't count on that, Parker,' he said, amusement evident in his tone.

Hermione whirled, and catching him unaware, she stomped down on his instep with the heel of her shoe and pressed the tip of her wand into his throat. 'What have you done with Neville?' she demanded furiously.

A/N: DeeMichelle betaed and LettyBird Brit-picked this chapter.

This story was written as a birthday gift for Sshg316.

More to come soon!

Chapter Three: In Which a Declaration is Made

Chapter 3 of 7

The pre-wedding festivities commence, and Hermione fumes as Snape mingles.



Chapter Three: In Which a Declaration is Made

'I haven't done anything with *Neville*,' Severus responded, managing to utter the name in a tone dripping with disdain.

Hermione increased the pressure of the wand tip, sinking it further into his throat. 'Then why did you say for me not to count on him showing up?' she demanded suspiciously.

'Because he might be a bit hung over.'

Hermione lowered her wand and Severus rubbed his throat. He gave her a wolfish smile. 'If it bruises, I'll say *you* did it,' he promised.

Refusing to be distracted, Hermione persisted. 'How would you know whether or not he was hung over?'

He quirked an eyebrow at her. 'Isn't it customary to buy the lucky groom a pint to wish him well?'

Hermione gave a snort of disgust. 'You didn't go to Long Leighton.'

'If you say so,' he responded amiably.

She spun away from him again. 'You're wasting my time! I'm going to be late for my own party.'

'I only stayed with him long enough to hear about how he's only marrying you to get to his inheritance,' he said, his tone goading. 'It's not as if he *loves* you,' he added.

When she swung at him, her fist made glancing contact with his jaw, and he staggered back under the blow.

'You loathsome bastard!' she cried.

Severus was so surprised that he had to laugh. He hadn't been with her fifteen minutes, and she had already marked him twice. He rubbed at his jaw and watched her standing with clenched fists; he felt as if he was watching her with brand new eyes. He wanted nothing so much as to kiss her again, but he suspected that now might not be the best time.

'I may be loathsome,' he agreed sardonically, 'but I must object to the "bastard" bit...my parents were, regretfully, married.' He eased toward her again, for she drew him, like a bee to an exotic blossom. 'Longbottom told me about his Uncle Kelp's will...about the clause that states he will only inherit on his twenty-fifth birthday if he's married by then...but I never took you for a gold digger, Parker.'

'Algie!' she screeched, correcting him, almost as if she couldn't help herself. 'Uncle *Algie*!'

He shrugged, moving another step closer. 'Kelp, algae...what's the difference?' He inhaled deeply of her scent, marvelling that she had changed so little in the years since he had last smelled her. Her face had lost the last touches of girlish roundness, and she was more slender than he remembered her, but the alterations simply made her more alluring than before.

She took a shuddering breath, as if to calm herself, and said, 'You expect me to believe that you went all the way to Long Leighton to have *pint* with someone you despise?'

'I believe it was more along the lines of four or five pints...but I wasn't really counting...*just buying*.' He smirked and dared to raise his hand to stroke her unbelievably soft cheek. 'I had to find out what was happening, Parker...your engagement came out of nowhere, you know.'

She batted his hand away and backed away from him. 'You're such a liar ...'

With the speed of a striking serpent, he whipped a phial from his pocket and held it before her eyes. 'Veritaserum,' he said. One side of his mouth quirked up slightly. 'I thought the issue might come up, and I like to be prepared.'

She reached for it, a speculative light in her eyes, but he closed his fingers into a fist. 'I'll keep it,' he said firmly. 'You may use it once, and you may ask anything you want...but make sure you know *all* the questions you want to ask, because we will *not* repeat the exercise.'

Shaking her head, as if to clear it, she turned away again. 'I have no interest in anything you have to say to me.'

'I'm not going away, Parker,' he said. 'And you're going to hear everything I have to say, if I have to kidnap you to make you listen.'

She seemed to hesitate a moment in the doorway as he made his rash threat, but she did not stop or turn, and then he was alone in the Bridal Suite.

Longbottom did show up for the tea, looking none the worse for wear for having been inebriated the night before. Severus sat in the corner of the Grand Salon and drank his tea whilst he watched the groom interact with his guests. The boy didn't know it, but he was also suffering a bit of a Veritaserum hangover, as well.

Severus hadn't had time to pussyfoot about. Four years of quarterly reports on the life and doings of one Hermione Granger, provided by the discreet...and expensive...services of the wizarding division of Blue Moon Investigations, Dover Street, Mayfair, London, had not prepared him for the stunning blow of picking up the Sunday edition of the *Daily Prophet* and finding Granger's radiant face smiling from the front page of the society section. The engagement and the wedding had been announced at the same time, almost as if the girl was in an indecent hurry to be married...yet Severus knew that Longbottom had never slept with her. Perhaps she was carrying about someone else's bastard and she was making haste to legitimise it? He shook his head. Why would Longbottom agree to this rush-job of a wedding when his twenty-fifth birthday wasn't for 10 more months?

One bit of information Severus had gleaned from a quick look inside the mess of Longbottom's mind had been that the boy was in love ... with a different female. Severus recognised the girl's face...she had been his student...but for the life of him, he could not recall her name. And according to Longbottom's sickly sentimental memories, she was called "Abby." Severus had no memory of ever meeting someone called that, much less teaching someone with such an unfortunate name.

He surveyed the group of witches and wizards included in Hermione's wedding party; there was a disproportionate number of Gryffindors present, with a smattering of Ravenclaws, but there were no Hufflepuffs...and he was the only Slytherin. He placed his empty cup on the table and stood. He was ready to *mingle*.

Hermione watched Snape first hovering on the fringes of the men's groups, then slowly insinuating himself into the conversations, until she wanted to slap him. Who was this debonair, socially adept man? The Snape she remembered couldn't be arsed to leave the house...she had assumed he was an antisocial git. *This* git was moving about as if he had years of *savoir faire* under his belt.

'Is that *Snape*?' Ginny Potter gasped, coming up to stand beside her.

'Yes,' Hermione snarled.

'What's he *doing* here? Did you *invite* him?' Ginny turned amazed eyes onto Hermione. 'I didn't even think you liked him!'

'I don't know what he's doing here,' Hermione snapped. 'I didn't invite him, and I don't like him...in fact, I *hate* him!'

With that proclamation, she thrust her cup and saucer into Ginny's empty hands and stalked across to interrupt the men's impassioned discussion of Quidditch. She tucked her arm possessively through Neville's, and he looked down at her with a bemused but fond smile. Ignoring him, she turned her attention to the interloper, whose dark head was bent to listen to something Remus Lupin was saying.

'So, Snape, what are you doing here?' she asked abruptly.

Neville was horrified. 'Hermione!' he whispered. 'Don't!'

Snape met the challenge in her eyes with a gleam of amusement. 'I wouldn't miss this for the world,' he assured her.

'Don't you know it's rude to gatecrash a wedding?' she countered, infuriated at his attitude.

'Oh, but I'm not gatecrashing,' he responded smoothly.

'Oh course he's not!' Neville said rather too loudly. 'I invited him...he's my guest.'

Neville stared down at Hermione then, looking surprisingly stern. She was torn...she wasn't nearly finished ripping up at Snape, but she couldn't make Neville look the fool in front of all his friends, either.

'How good of you to say so, Longbottom...but as I was going to say, I popped in at Grimmauld Place over the weekend.'

Hermione froze. Snape continued to speak...something about how he had seen the wedding invitation on the bulletin board in the Order office, and he was still a member in good standing of the Order, was he not?...but she was stuck on the fact that he had been at Grimmauld Place. She had been living there...all of her belongings were still there...what if Snape had been in her room? Seen her ... things?

Dragging her attention back to the situation at hand, she directed a dazzling smile up into her fiancé's face. 'That's that, then,' she said, giving Neville's arm a squeeze. She reached up and kissed his cheek, for good measure. Neville smiled back at her, seeming a bit nonplussed by all the affectionate attention, and Hermione turned a challenging look across to Snape...but his lips *twitched!* And then he turned back to the Quidditch talk, his black head floating like a shark fin in the sea of Weasley ginger provided by Ron, Bill, Fred, and George. He did not look at her again for the rest of the tea.

She didn't know whether to be pleased or miffed. Or ... alarmed. Why was he here? Why now? Damn the man!

That night, the wedding party went to a local nightclub for a night of drinking and dancing. Hermione, who had planned to wear her nicest jeans, arbitrarily changed her mind, and wore instead a short black skirt and her highest heels. She pinned the loose curls up on her head and applied her new make-up with a generous hand. She felt in a dangerous mood, as if Snape's presence was eroding at her peace, raising a tide of uncertainty in her placid plans. How dared he to show up after all this time and try to ruin things for her?

She would show him.

Severus stood another round of drinks for his ever more jolly companions and kept a weather eye on Hermione. When she had walked into the club, his mouth had gone dry. Her legs ... dear Merlin, how was he supposed to keep his eyes to himself when she exposed that much leg? What the devil was she trying to do, anyway...start a riot? He was torn between kneeling at her feet and pressing his lips to one slender ankle...or grabbing the nearest tablecloth and wrapping her in it from the waist down.

Was she still wearing the saucy red knickers?

Just now, she undulated on the dance floor in company with her female friends. On one side, Ginevra Potter threw her copper hair about with complete abandon. On the other side, the former Patil sisters, now Mrs Ronald and Mrs George Weasley, moved as if they were one being, a synchronised dance made all the more tantalising by their traditional Indian dress. In a space all to herself, Luna Lovegood danced as if no one else were present, seeming to move to her own internal composition.

They were lovely, the young witches watched over by the wizards who sat around Severus, drinking lager and doing as little dancing as possible. But Hermione stood out for him, in her too-short skirt and her tiny top which lifted to show provocative bits of midriff. She glowed as if she had swallowed a golden light which now limned her every movement with gill. He knew with a certainty deep in his gut that she had dressed for him...that she danced for him...that she was defying him, defying his presence here...and she was magnificent.

He would have a dance with her before the end of the night. The slow dances were few and far between, but he was patient. He would bide his time. And he would prepare the way.

'Drink up, Longbottom!' he urged, pushing a new pint to the already rosy cheeked groom.

His chance came rather more than an hour later, when the number beginning was slow and sweet, a near-the-end-of-the-night song, for the drunks to pair up and clear out. Deftly manoeuvring between Harry Potter, who appeared to dance with his wife, and Fred Weasley, who asked Miss Lovegood to dance, he materialised before the slightly dishevelled Hermione Granger and took her into his arms.

'My dance, I believe,' he said.

Her right hand, clasped in his left, fluttered. 'I should dance with Neville ...' she said, her too-wide eyes darting away from his face.

'Longbottom asked me to make his apologies...Lupin escorted him back to the hotel.'

He gathered her slightly closer, resisting valiantly the urge to crush her to him, wanting nothing so much as to feel her softness against the length of his body. Holding her, yet not holding her, his memories stirred...memories which had sustained him and given him hope on many a long night...and the bittersweetness of having her so close and yet so far tore at him.

Amazingly, she relaxed...relented...and tilted her face up to look into his eyes. 'Why, Severus?' she said, her voice showing her fatigue. 'Why are you here? Why now?'

He pulled her closer still, until her cheek rested upon his shoulder, and he bent to rest his cheek upon her temple. 'I'm here to fight for you, Parker...and I mean to win.'

She did not answer him, but he could have sworn she trembled in his arms.

A/N: There is a real private detective agency in London by that name at that address. I picked it because I liked the name and the idea of it being in Mayfair (where so many of my Georgette Heyer heroes and heroines lived). No resemblance to real people or actual situations is intended.

This chapter was beta read by DeeMichelle and Brit-picked by LettyBird.

Chapter Four: In Which 'Trouble' Descends Upon Our Friends and Wreaks Havoc

Chapter 4 of 7

Snape makes trouble, and Hermione finds trouble.

Across the Anvil

Chapter Four: In Which 'Trouble' Descends Upon Our Friends and Wreaks Havoc

The festivities planned for the week continued apace, and Hermione was frustrated to find Snape present at each and every one of them. In contrast to the fashion-challenged professor he had been at Hogwarts, he dressed appropriately for each occasion. If his colour palette still tended toward the more sombre hues of the spectrum, his ability to dress like and blend in with the Muggles into whose territory the wedding party often strayed rivalled that of his former students.

On Thursday, Hermione attended her bridesmaids' luncheon, which also included her other girlfriends who had come to lend their support at this special time in her life. She was able to relax and enjoy the occasion because *Snape* could not properly attend an all-witch function.

Had she been privileged to see what trouble *Snape* was *up* to, she might not have experienced such *sang froid*.

Ensnared in a pub with the other men of the party, Severus continued to focus his attention on Longbottom. Laying down an obscene number of pounds and obtaining an unopened bottle of Muggle Single Malt, he lured the young man to a darkened corner, and engaged him in quiet conversation, hoping the others would respect their privacy.

Thus insulated from the interfering assistance of Potter, Lupin, and the motley assortment of Weasleys, Severus set about to further his own plans. Pouring a third finger of whisky for Longbottom, he mimed drinking from his glass, then leant confidentially toward his companion and said, 'Tell me about "Abby".'

Longbottom startled so badly that whisky splashed over his fingers. 'I ... I ...' he stuttered, flushing badly and looking wildly about, as if searching for an avenue of escape.

'You can trust me, Neville,' Severus added, trustworthiness rolling off him in calming waves. Not for nothing had he been counted amongst the Dark Lord's most essential followers; if he could hoodwink the greatest Legilimens the world had ever known, he could make Neville-Bloody-Longbottom believe he was his newest and best friend.

The expression of inebriated gratefulness on Longbottom's face would have been amusing if Severus were less desperate. In response, he managed a thin smile.

'I know I can, sir,' the boy slurred.

'Severus, Neville...you must call me Severus now.'

Longbottom nodded earnestly. 'Right, Severus.' He looked down at the scratched tabletop. 'But how did you know about Abby?' he asked his glass.

'*You* told me about her,' Severus responded with something akin to honesty, 'Sunday night, when we had a pint in Long Leighton.' In absolute truth, Severus had got that titbit of information by Legilimency, but why mince matters?

Neville looked up again. 'I did?' he said, surprised. 'I haven't told *anyone* about her ... I wouldn't want to hurt Hermione's feelings, or to make her look bad to everybody.'

Severus nodded judiciously. 'I think that's appropriate,' he said, matching his tone to Longbottom's. 'A bloke ought to always look after his lady's feelings.'

Longbottom took a long pull at his glass, and Severus immediately refilled it. Longbottom sighed. 'Abby is brilliant,' he said forlornly. 'Not in school, I mean...she did well enough...but she's smart and pretty and she thinks I'm *heroic*.'

A missing piece clicked into place in Severus' mind; so, the girl in question flattered Longbottom's ego, unlike Hermione, who had always bested Longbottom at everything they did, save for Herbology. 'Well, she's right about that,' Severus said. 'Look at all you did in the war,' he added for good measure.

Longbottom flushed at this faint praise. 'That's what *she* said,' he admitted, and then he seemed to lapse into melancholy reminiscences, his attention far away.

'They why are you marrying Hermione and not Abby?' Severus asked in a reasonable tone.

Longbottom looked back to Severus' face with bleary eyes. 'Abby said we hadn't been going out long enough to talk about marriage,' he said sadly. 'And then she took that training position in that hotel in Lausanne.' He looked sadder by the moment.

'Did you ever tell her how you feel?' Severus asked, finding himself no longer impersonating an interested friend, but suddenly quite involved in the conversation.

Longbottom seemed to notice the difference, as well. 'No,' he admitted. 'I hinted at it...I tried to *show* her...but she didn't seem to *get* it.'

'Perhaps if you told her outright that you love her, it would make a difference to her,' Severus suggested, hearing the hope in his words and feeling rather pathetic for it.

'I couldn't do that,' Longbottom objected. 'She's in Switzerland, and I'm here...and I'm marrying Hermione, anyway. That would be just *wrong*.' He stubbornly shook his head, ending by making himself dizzy. He lowered his head to the table.

'Any more wrong than marrying Hermione when you love Abby?' Severus asked, his tone quiet but his question pointed. 'If it were the other way around...if Hermione loved someone else...would you want her to marry you out of a sense of obligation?'

Longbottom raised his head from the table, his brow furrowed in laborious thought.

Severus moved in for the kill. 'What would it be like, married for the rest of your life to a witch who loves someone else?' he said, as if he were simply musing aloud. 'And how would it be for her, to be married for the rest of life to you, when you love someone else?'

Still frowning, Longbottom said, 'But my gran said that people who don't love each other get married all the time...and that respect and friendship are more important than

love, because they last longer...and that real love grows from *those* things.'

Severus picked up his glass and drained it. 'When your grandmother was your age, pure-bloods often made arranged marriages...but times have changed, and people want different things from life, now.' He shook his head. 'It's tough to know any more what's the proper thing to do, Neville, but I'll tell you this: You ought to go for what you want. Making other people happy is no way to live your life.'

Longbottom nodded companionably, murmuring agreement, and Severus didn't even notice when the boy refilled his glass with Scotch.

Between the two of them, they drank the entire bottle.

'What do you mean, he's a bit *under the weather*?' Hermione demanded angrily, standing before the door to Neville's room, glaring at Harry and Ron, who barred her entrance.

'He had a bit too much to drink at lunch,' Harry said.

Hermione glared at him. 'You were supposed to keep an eye on him,' Hermione reminded. 'You know he can't hold his drink!'

'Snape was watching him!' Ron objected hotly.

Neither of the young wizards understood why Hermione turned on her heel and marched away from them, re-entering her own room and slamming her door resoundingly.

The wedding party continued on schedule, in spite of the groom being indisposed. Tickets had been purchased for them all to attend a Scottish reel at a local Muggle hotel that night, and Hermione was determined that her guests be entertained. She was also angry with Neville for drinking until he was ill; she had left him in the care of a house-elf.

For some reason, *all* of the men were subdued that evening, almost as if they had a mass headache. Well, if they had been drinking with Neville in the middle of the day, then they bloody well deserved to have terrible headaches! Hermione's main concern was that she would be holding Snape off all night long, but to her surprise...and perhaps to her indignation...he busied himself with speaking with each of the other women in their party between dances, without one glance at her.

Returning to their table from dancing the Gay Gordons, Ginny Potter took a healthy drink of champagne and smiled at Hermione's raised eyebrows. 'Snape dances a treat,' Ginny informed her frankly.

Hermione, whose first experience of dancing with Snape had occurred at the club on Monday night, shrugged indifferently, and Ginny leant in and added, 'Have you noticed how *fit* the man is? He's like a different person, these days...I'm trying to think of witches I know who could use a good middle-aged wizard ...'

Snape left the dance floor with Luna Lovegood, who danced surprisingly well for someone who seemed always to have her head in the clouds. The dark, hawkish head was bent close as he spoke to her, his most charming smile on his lips. The answering smile from Luna drove Hermione straight to her feet; she was damn well *not* going to sit about watching that bastard flirting with every witch in their party!

'It's stuffy in here,' she said abruptly to Ginny. 'I'm going out on the terrace.'

The September air was crisp, and Hermione was sorry she had left her wrap at the table...she would have been able to remain outside longer if she were wearing it. The gibbous moon flirted amongst slowly moving clouds, through which stars peeked and twinkled as well. Hermione wrapped her arms about her torso and asked herself why she cared with whom the git laughed or flirted. He was nothing but trouble on legs.

'Trying to avoid the obligatory chat with your ex?' trouble inquired from directly behind her.

Hermione whirled about, only to find herself standing much too close to him, but a step back only brought her up against the low wall. 'Stop creeping up on me!' she said querulously.

'You know, if any of our party could hear you, they would think you're daft. I haven't approached you all day long.'

Hermione raised her hands defensively, as if to ward him off. 'Good! Don't break your perfect record now!'

He took a step toward her, his glittering black eyes fastened on her face. 'Be reasonable, Parker...I told you I have some things to say to you. Now is a perfect time for you to hear them.'

With him standing over her, he seemed to block the moon from her eyes, but his silhouette glowed about the edges, providing all she needed of lunar light. He looked superb, but the most disturbing thing for her was the intoxicating scent of bergamot and sage, with a hint of lemon; his body heat warmed the cologne and increased its potency a thousand fold, making it difficult for her to concentrate. Why did the sound of his voice make her think of nothing save the things he had said to her when they lay together in his bed, moving as one being? Why couldn't she forget the way he had made her *feel*?

Muzzy-headed from his dangerous proximity, she was caught off-guard when he wrapped her up in his arms. 'Hold on tightly, Parker...I won't let you go, but I would hate for you to Splinch.'

'No, Snape...don't!' she cried, but she was being squeezed through a too-tight tube and came to rest upon a hill brilliantly illuminated by the unobstructed moon.

She pushed away from him. 'What have you done?' she demanded angrily. 'What will the others think? You won't get away with kidnap!'

How she wished she had not left her wand secreted within her wrap! He bloody well deserved every hex she knew for his high-handed treatment of her.

As if reading her mind, Snape pulled a tiny swatch of fabric from his pocket, and with a flick of his wrist, caused her evening wrap to materialise. 'I picked up your things when I stopped at the table and told Mrs Potter that you had the headache, and that I would take you for a walk before escorting you back to our hotel.'

'Give me that!' she said imperiously, holding out her hand to receive the deceptively light stole from him.

Snape flicked his wrist again and returned her shrunken garment to his pocket. 'Not just yet,' he said. 'After you've listened to me.'

Although she was far too angry to feel the cool air, Hermione faked a shiver. 'But I'm cold! Give it to me!'

He stepped up and turned her, pulling her back against him, his arms enfolding her from behind. Deftly, he captured both of her hands in his and crossed them over her tummy. Hermione struggled against him, but he just chuckled.

'Stop fighting me and look down the hill,' he said, inhaling deeply.

'Stop *sniffing* me and let me go!' she responded.

'But you smell so edible, Parker ... I have very much missed the scent of you upon my pillows.'

That totally unfair pronouncement, uttered as it was in his silkiest, deepest voice, was followed by the touch of his lips upon her temple. For an insane moment, Hermione considered turning in his arms and giving in to her base desire to feel his hands upon her again. Her body hummed with the memory of the magic they had made when they touched, and it had been so very long since anyone had made love to her ...

'Do you see it?' he asked, his lips now ghosting over the shell of her ear.

Shaking her head to dislodge his mouth from her skin, she stared down the hill into a hollow. 'There's a cottage down there,' she answered.

'My cottage,' he corrected her.

She threw his arms away from her and moved away from him. 'Are we in *Ireland*?'

'Yes, Parker, my cottage is in Ireland,' he agreed. 'Come with me...let me show it to you.'

Hermione balked.

'I'll light the fire,' he promised, 'and brew tea. And I will behave.'

She snorted her disbelief at his last statement, but the lure of the fire and the hot tea was irresistible, and she could not Disapparate back to Gretna Green without her wand.

'Take me back to the hotel,' she countered. She didn't think he would take her back...after all, a man unscrupulous enough to kidnap a bride from a pre-wedding party would have no qualms about denying such a request...but she felt there was no harm in asking.

'After you hear me out, Parker...not before.' He stepped up to her and gestured to the cottage. 'Keep to the path and you'll be fine.'

As they descended the path, Hermione noted the odd shape of the cottage. There was a central portion with two odd-looking wings on either end. Closer, she could see that the central part of the house was quite old, while the two wings were modern. Snape directed her to the modern portion on the right and took down the wards, opening the door and allowing her to enter.

Snape switched on electric lights as Hermione stepped directly into a modern kitchen, complete with Muggle amenities. A stark table occupied the far end of the room; two matching chairs were pushed up to the table, and two more chairs ranged along the wall. The counters and sink were spotlessly clean and the open shelving ruthlessly organised, reminding Hermione strongly of Snape's Potions storeroom at Hogwarts. The dresser to her left was cluttered with books and newspapers. She saw a stack of *Daily Prophets* next to a stack of Irish Muggle newspapers, with the detritus from a man's pockets littered amongst the rest of them; receipts jumbled with chewing gum wrappers and stray coins, both Muggle and wizarding.

'Do you need the loo?' Snape inquired, lifting a copper kettle from the top of the Aga and filling it at the sink.

'No,' Hermione answered, riveted now by the copy of the *Daily Prophet* on the top of the stack. It was folded open to the society section, and her smiling face looked out at her. She lifted it, a singing sensation beginning in her blood.

Wielding his wand, Snape brought the kettle to an instant boil and poured the water into an old-fashioned brown teapot. Turning, he opened the refrigerator and frowned. 'I'm afraid there's no milk,' he apologised. 'I went away unexpectedly.'

Hermione replaced the newspaper on the dresser and turned to him combatively. 'Do you mean to tell me you opened the paper on Sunday morning, found my wedding announcement, and promptly decided to spend the week in Scotland?'

Snape turned away from her, reaching to the open cupboard and taking down teacups and saucers, which he arranged on a plain wooden tray. 'I didn't see the announcement until after lunch on Sunday, and I spent Sunday night in Grimmauld Place...but essentially, yes, you are correct.'

Taking a packet of biscuits from another cupboard, full of such homey items as tins of baked beans and green peas, he levitated the tray and directed it to the table. 'Sit, Parker,' he said with gentle exasperation. 'A cup of tea will do you good.'

Hermione sat at the table, watching with fascination as his long-fingered hands efficiently prepared their tea, no movement wasted. How many times had she watched him do it at Grimmauld Place? But the Snape she had known then had possessed no soft edges; he had been a mass of prickly sensibilities, jagged nerves, and rapier tongue ... which had occasionally been put to other uses. She gave her head a shake, dislodging that traitorous notion.

'Still two sugars?' he asked her, disrupting her train of thought.

She nodded, surprised that he would remember such a small detail. He placed her cup and saucer before her, nudging the matching plate of biscuits toward her, as well. Automatically, she took one and took a bite, meditatively stirring the tea Snape had already stirred.

'Sorry about the milk,' he murmured, and she looked up to see him smirking at her.

Hermione made a face at him. 'All right, Snape, you have me captive in your Irish cottage. Now, say your piece so I can leave here and never see you again.' She saw with a vicious stab of satisfaction the shadow which crossed his face at her nasty words; if she could get just a portion of her own back for the innumerable times he had wounded her with his cruel words, she would be a very happy woman.

He drank his tea, eyeing her speculatively over the rim of his cup. 'I don't recall you having such a petty streak in you, Parker,' he murmured.

She flinched. 'Oh, it's all right for *you* to spend years of your life terrorising everyone who crossed your path, but *if* show any backbone, I'm *petty*.'

He did not respond to that, but finished drinking his cup of tea. 'More?' he asked politely, lifting the teapot.

'No,' she responded shortly. 'Just get on with it.'

Snape removed a phial from his coat pocket and passed it to her. 'I would like for you to ascertain to your satisfaction that this is Veritaserum.'

With a sigh of disgust, Hermione accepted the phial, but her expression quickly changed. 'This is commercially brewed,' she said. 'The seal is unbroken. But this is a Class A Restricted Substance...did you steal it?'

He waited for her to look up from the Veritaserum before responding. 'I thought there might be some question in your mind as to its efficacy if I brewed it,' he said evenly. 'Let us say that I have connexions from whom I was able to obtain it.'

She frowned and pushed it across the table to him. 'Why all this drama?' she demanded peevishly. 'I don't care if you swallow it. It's nothing to me if you tell the truth or tell lies; nothing you say is going to change anything.'

He held the phial between them, in the palm of his hand. 'I know you're very angry with me, Parker,' he said, his voice calm and disturbingly warm. 'I know I mucked up things between us so badly that you may never forgive me. But I've been working for four years to get to a place where I felt I had the right to ask you to listen to me...and that's why we're here now.'

Hermione laughed unkindly. 'Don't make me laugh, Snape. You just saw that article in the paper, and you came to see how much havoc you could wreak.'

He pulled the stopper from the phial and upended it over his mouth; Hermione watched as three measured drops fell onto his tongue. He then passed a pocket watch to her, settling back in his seat and pouring another cup of tea for himself. He lifted the pot, offering some to her, but she mutely shook her head. He smiled mirthlessly and said, 'Now, we wait.'

A/N: A Scottish reel is a ball where the participants dance traditional dances in groups. The Gay Gordons is one of those traditional dances.

This story was betaed by DeeMichelle and Brit-picked by LettyBird, and it is Sshg316's birthday present. Love you, Shug!

Chapter Five: In Which Truth is Told

Chapter 5 of 7

Hermione questions Severus under Veritaserum.



Chapter Five

Severus sat across from Hermione in the kitchen of his cottage, his heart racing much faster than his outward calm would denote. So much rested on what was now to come; he had told himself, over and again, that he deserved whatever she chose to mete out to him, but he desperately hoped that he knew her as well he thought he did. Who had ever been more just or more merciful than Hermione Granger?

She sat there in her evening frock, the colour of cranberries, with her crazy hair charmed into long, loose ringlets, and frowned down at his pocket watch. 'How long do we have to wait?' she asked impatiently.

'Five to ten minutes,' he replied. He picked up his cup of swiftly cooling tea and drank automatically to occupy himself, to prevent the grovelling protestations currently longing to issue from his mouth. No doubt he would be humiliating himself enough, presently, without voluntarily getting an early start.

The seconds ticked past, and he passed the time by looking at her, making up for the years when he had only had the photographs from the newspapers, or the ones provided by Blue Moon Investigations. There was a vitality to her that never showed in the photographs, in which she often appeared either annoyed, in the case of newspaper ones, or harried, in the case of those snapped by the private investigators.

Gazing at her in his kitchen, it was so easy to imagine her in the other rooms of his cottage, and the notion touched him on the raw with his want of it. His mouth opened to tell her so, and he realised the potion was doing its job. 'I'm ready when you are,' he said quietly.

She pushed the pocket watch back to him, and he read in her face her desire to evince disinterest...but Hermione Granger's curiosity had ever been her besetting sin.

'Why did you leave Grimmauld Place six years ago?' she began.

'I obtained a job in Ireland,' he responded.

'For whom do you work?'

'Astride the Fence, Ltd.'

She frowned. 'What type of business is it?'

'It's a Muggle/wizard hybrid, seeking ways to combine knowledge from each culture to the betterment of each society.' He glanced at her from beneath his lashes. 'Just so you know, I am forbidden to reveal their existence or their mission statement to outsiders. I would appreciate it if you kept the information to yourself.'

She nodded absently, as if in agreement. 'Give me an example of the work you do there.'

He felt his lips twitching and quickly directed his eyes to his hands. How curious that she would take her opportunity to question him to her heart's content and use it to ask about his work rather than his intentions...or his emotions.

'I work with a chemist, a physicist, a biologist, and an Arithmancer, to devise experimental protocols combining our respective fields of study.'

She gestured somewhat impatiently, urging him to elaborate.

'For instance, our first project together was a work-around to attempt to carry the wizarding cure for juvenile diabetes into the Muggle world without violating the Statute of Secrecy.'

Hermione became very still, her luminous eyes riveted upon his face, the original reason for her interrogation of him gone by the wayside.

'What happened?' she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

'The company had been trying to accomplish this for years, without success. There was no way to introduce the proper ingredients without invoking the magical brewing process.' He sat forward a bit, becoming lost in his explanation. 'I suggested seeking out a natural process which would achieve the same results. You're familiar with the chemical reaction produced in fish when marinated with citrus?'

Hermione nodded, her eyes becoming ever brighter. 'It's brilliant,' she breathed.

Severus smiled at her, a full, joyful smile, and he knew he had to look like an idiot, but he couldn't bring himself to care. 'Thank you,' he said, sliding into his more natural smirk. 'We were able to produce enough of a chemical reaction in the mixture to "brew" without using magic.'

'And?' she prompted him. 'Why haven't I heard anything about this? If the Muggles found a cure for Type I Diabetes, there would be rejoicing in the streets! It would be on the front page of every newspaper and magazine ...'

'Yes,' he agreed, 'which would draw a terrific amount of scrutiny in the medical research field...something my employers seek to avoid. We have been forced to go about it in stages, setting up clinical trials, jumping through all the Muggles' hoops so establish a trail for the research.'

'But what about the patients?' Hermione asked indignantly. 'What about the ones who are really sick...dying, even!'

Severus stood impetuously. 'Come with me...let me show you something about that.'

Without hesitation, she took the hand he offered, and he led her out of the kitchen and into the room directly across the hall. His home office was very tidily arranged, a curious mixture of his Hogwarts sanctum and a modern business office. He turned her to face the wall directly to the left of his desk and switched on an electric light hanging there. The breath she released, as if she had been holding it in anxiety, was like music to his ears. Unable to resist the temptation, he encircled her torso from behind, and in her absorption, she did not think to object or fight him.

On the wall was a cork bulletin board, covered with the photographs of dozens of children, all of whom were smiling hugely.

'Who are they?' she asked, reaching with one finger to trace the edge of a snapshot of a small, thin, grinning Asian boy who was missing two front teeth.

'Our first clinical trial group,' he said with quiet pride. 'Oddly enough, there was a one hundred percent success rate with the new, experimental drug.'

She pulled away and turned to face him. 'But you don't even *like* children,' she said.

'Says who?' he demanded.

'But you always behaved ...'

'Like any secondary school teacher with a classroom combination of dunderheads and combustible ingredients,' he snapped.

'You were particularly nasty to Neville and Harry and me,' she snapped back.

'I had my reasons!'

She crossed her arms over her chest. 'What?' she inquired acidly. 'What were your reasons for behaving like an unmitigated arse to me and my friends for six years?'

'I disliked Potter on sight,' he answered, 'and Longbottom never gave me a moment's peace when he was in my classroom, because he was a disaster waiting to happen. If you hadn't done his thinking for him, he never would have scraped even an Acceptable O.W.L. in Potions!'

Her lips drew tighter with each syllable he uttered, until her mouth looked as pinched as Minerva McGonagall's in mid-snit. He waited for her to say something else, but she just glared at him. At last he was compelled to answer the rest of her question. 'You were so desperately pitiable, waving your hand about, wanting everyone to notice you, to commend you for memorizing your textbooks word-for-word ...'

He looked into her face again, and his resolve broke. 'Parker, you sounded and acted so much like I had done at your age ... it was painful to watch you trying so hard to fit in and yet so plainly *not* fitting.' A stern look passed over his face. 'By the time you were in your third year, you no longer cared about fitting in...all you cared about was finding more rules to break. Watching Potter lead you from one idiotic, capricious adventure to the next was enough to drive the sanest wizard mad! It was impossible to anticipate you or to protect you!'

He scowled at the unpleasant memories and turned away from her, moving to sit in the chair behind his desk.

'Please, sit down,' he said, indicating the other chair in the room. She looked mutinous, but finally, she sat, her pinched expression looking fair to become permanent. 'What's your next question?' he demanded irritably.

'When did you decide to seduce me?' she said, her voice carrying a dangerous edge of unidentifiable emotion.

The ridiculous notion catapulted him immediately from irritation to amusement. 'I never decided to seduce you,' he answered. 'The shoe was on the other foot, I thought.'

She squirmed for a moment, and he put a mark in his own tally column...he had scored a hit.

'All right,' she said. 'When did you decide to let me seduce you?'

'Ah, Parker,' he said, one side of his mouth curving up as he remembered. 'After you walked into the bathroom in the middle of my shower wearing nothing but that ridiculous handkerchief-sized thing you called a dressing gown.' He felt his gaze heat up, and he indulged himself in a good look at how nicely her shape filled out her dress. 'The dressing gown was moulded to your body by the steamy air in about fifteen seconds...and then you turned away and bent over to clean your teeth without a stitch on your bottom...sweet Nimūe, girl, did you think I was made of steel?'

Wisely, she chose not to answer that. 'How did you feel about me then?'

He frowned a bit. 'I wanted you. I needed you. I couldn't bear for you to leave the house with your friends, because I thought every time you left you would come back with a younger, fitter bloke on your arm.'

She shook her head a bit. 'I would have been very happy if you had gone out with me,' she said. 'I thought you wouldn't come because you were ashamed to be seen with me.'

He heard the memory of hurt in her voice, and he was on his feet, rounding the desk to kneel at her side. 'No!' he said earnestly. 'Parker...no! How could you think such a thing?' He reached to cup her cheek, and she met his eyes steadily. 'I was ashamed,' he admitted, 'but of myself...never of you.'

She batted his hand away. 'Then what was that when you left?' she cried. 'You wouldn't even let me come to see you...you said you could afford to buy a proper shag! That's the foulest thing you *ever* said to me! And then you left without saying good-bye!'

He reached for her again, blinded by her anguish, wanting only to comfort, but she stood and began to pace. Well remembering her tendency to do so when distressed, he rested a hip against the edge of his desk and answered her.

'It was some mixture of fear, pride, shame, and sheer bloody-mindedness.' Her snort prodded him to elaborate. 'I was a miserable sod the whole time you knew me, Parker. After the war was the worst...I'd made no plans, saved no gold, dreamed no dreams...I was supposed to be fucking *dead*. I was not supposed to be skulking about, living on Potter's charity, scorned by every decent-living witch and wizard in England...and taking advantage of the best person I knew.'

She paused in her progress to cast him a look of disbelief. 'If you're referring to *me*, I believe the shoe was on the other foot...I was taking advantage of you, not the other way around.'

'I was the adult...technically speaking,' he added before she could, quite rightly, refute his claim. 'You were half my age, Parker...I had no business encouraging you.'

She managed a wry half-smile. 'I would scarcely call your behaviour toward me *encouraging*, you know. You scarcely spoke to me unless we were alone, and even then, you barely opened your mouth unless we were in bed.' She flushed a bit at that, and he strenuously fought the urge to cross the floor and kiss that spot on her throat where the delicious colour touched her collar bone.

'My bitter disappointment in myself and my life spilled over into everything I touched,' he said. 'For the most part, I was unfit for human companionship...but not so large-minded that I would decline the willing presence of a desirable female in my bed, Parker.' He scowled. 'I'm not proud of how I behaved with you; it was inexcusable.'

He stood and walked up to her, stopping a foot away. She looked at him expectantly, and he forced himself to swallow. *In for a Knut, in for a Galleon*, he thought.

'I'm sorry, Hermione,' he said.

Her startled expression was not reassuring. 'What is it that you're apologising for, Severus?' she asked pointedly.

'I am apologising for treating you like a dirty little secret instead of acknowledging your presence in my life...and mine in yours. I am apologising for taking out my own misery and self-loathing on you, an innocent bystander.' He raked a hand restlessly through his hair, jerking strands free from their orderly queue, then yanking the tie from his hair and letting it fall free. 'I am saying sorry for allowing you to believe that you had wasted your care and affection on someone who was indifferent to the comfort and ease you brought...sorry for pretending to be indifferent to *you*.'

Now he was pacing, talking out loud to her as he had practiced so many times in this very room, and she stood like a statue, watching and listening to him.

'I took the job because it was the first one offered to me in nearly a year of searching...by the time I got it, I had almost given up hope. I felt lower than the worms crawling through the dirt under your feet, but as long as I was near you, I could no more give you up than I could stop breathing. The only decent thing I could do was to exit your life as convincingly as possible and to free you of the taint of being associated with me.'

He stopped moving and looked to her face, gauging her reaction to his words. She did not leave him to guess.

'Oh, I see,' she said, her words dripping with sarcasm. 'It was all about *you*. Your wants, your needs, your shame, your pride, your job, your life...you selfish bloody *tosser!*'

He stood straight and held her gaze. 'I am a selfish, self-centred, arrogant, self-loathing bastard, Parker...but make no mistake: I know you cared for me once, and if you give me another chance, I will spend the rest of my life making it up to you for being a selfish tosser.'

If he had been a bit less desperately involved, he would have given her full marks for the sneer she directed at him then. 'Words, Snape...words are easy. You've been away for six years, living in your charming Irish country cottage, without a *thought* for me, until you saw my wedding announcement.'

'You're wrong, Parker...and I'll prove it to you,' he said.

He took her wrist and tugged her again into the hallway; turning away from the main part of the cottage, he led her to a room and pulled her in behind him, lighting the oil lamps overhead with the wave of a wand. This was a sitting room, furnished with comfortable, well-worn overstuffed chairs, a sofa, and walls lined with bookshelves. The middle shelf of the centre bookcase directly across from the sofa was covered with framed photographs...and they were all of Hermione.

She went to stand before this altar-like shrine, staring at herself. Three of the pictures were official portraits; one from the first anniversary of the fall of Voldemort, one from the fifth anniversary, and the one taken when she first took up her Ministry job. The others were candid shots, taken of her out and about in public.

What in the name of Merlin did this collection mean?

'That's not what I want to show you,' he said, interrupting her browsing.

She shrugged, turning to face him. 'A shelf of pictures doesn't prove anything, Snape. You could have put this together in an hour if you wanted to.'

He held a stack of narrow folders, which he extended to her without speaking. Taking them with a long-suffering grimace, Hermione flipped open the top file and began to read through the parchment within...and then she strode to the nearest armchair and sat down, going through each of the folders. This was a day-by-day, cursory log of her existence for the last several years. Deviations from her regular schedule, such as when she went on holiday or went out on a date, were marked in red. A very few of those red-flagged date entries were highlighted in yellow, showing nights when she had not returned home. At the end of each file was a summary report of her activities for that time period. She quickly counted through the files...there were sixteen of them.

Hermione tossed the folders onto a low table. 'So,' she said, crossing her arms over her chest and musing aloud, 'you crossed the line from first-rate git to second-rate stalker. Is that supposed to impress me?'

He sat down in the armchair across from her with an exhalation of vexation. 'Not impress you, Parker...just prove to you that you have been very much on my mind for a very long time.'

She curled her lip at him. 'Are you implying that you've gone all this time without female companionship?' *Smooth move, Granger*, she thought. Did she really want to hear the answer to this?

'I saw other women for the first few years,' he said quietly. 'But what I found, Parker, is that you are not replaceable.'

Hermione physically turned her face from him before she could cry, *Neither are you!* Damn him!

Mistaking her averted face for a further sign of disbelief, he continued to speak. 'Four years ago, I began to see someone ...' He stopped for a moment, as if the words were difficult to speak. 'I began to see a counsellor.'

Hermione slowly turned her face back to him and found his attention focussed on her. He had been to a therapist? After all the times she had urged him to go when they were together, he waited until he had destroyed her and moved on before he could be *arsed* to see one?

'I know,' he said in answer to her unspoken words. 'You suggested it many times...but Parker, you can lead a Thestral to water, but you can't make him drink.' He shrugged. 'It wasn't until I saw myself living a life of which I had never dreamed, with a rewarding job, appreciative colleagues, sufficient gold for my needs and enough to put away for the future...and still being a miserable bastard, that I understood the problem was within myself, rather than in my circumstances.'

As hurt as she had been, and as angry as she was with him for waiting until it was too late to show up again, she was not proof against the weight of his contrition. He was

under the influence of Veritaserum...these words were the truth. This sentiment was sincere. The self-knowledge she had longed for him to seek was shining in him like a flame, and in spite of her best intentions, she was drawn to it like the proverbial moth. Yet still, she struggled against the treacherous maelstrom which pulled her relentlessly back into his life.

'Her name is Dr Shalvah Shadaim,' he said softly. 'I want very much for you to meet her, one day. She wants to meet you.'

Hermione shifted uncomfortably in her seat, trying to decide how she felt about a strange Irish witch having given that much thought to her.

'I decided to see her when I realised that I wanted to make changes in my life, but I had no idea what those changes needed to be.' He moved from his chair and knelt again beside her, as if he could not bear being so far away. 'I bought the cottage at the first of this year, and that was the first time I let myself hope that I might manage to get myself together before you found someone else.'

Hermione closed her eyes so she wouldn't see him right in front of her, there for the taking. Nothing he had told her about his feelings about himself surprised her; even at nineteen, she had recognised his anger and hopelessness as depression. No, the tragedy of this was that he had waited too long

'Parker,' he said, and she opened her eyes again, his nearness like a plague of breathlessness upon her.

The years had crinkled the corners of his eyes with small crow's feet, yet the severe creases scoring his forehead and the path from his nose to the corners of his lips were all but gone, eased by the reduction of the stress under which he had lived for so long. He would never be a handsome man, with his harshly jutting nose and the austere planes of his face, but she had always found him to be attractive...dangerously so. The scent of his cologne wafted to her...bergamot and sage, with a touch of lemon...and she vividly remembered the feel of the muscles of his thighs as he moved between hers, the scent memory tumbling her inexplicably into a state of acute want.

As if he could read her mind, he leant in and kissed her mouth. With a moan, she wrapped her fingers in the ultra-fine strands of ravens-wing hair and kissed him back, introducing urgency to the proceedings. Rather than jerking her out of the chair onto the floor, as he might have done when she had known him before, he cradled the back of her head in one large hand, angling her just so, and deepened his kiss accordingly. At the same moment, his spare hand passed soothingly between her shoulder blades, managing at once to inflame and comfort her...a devastating combination.

Hermione abandoned his hair, scrabbling against his muscled back, seeking to pull him closer; her reason told her to acquire this necessity else existence might cease, and she obeyed the imperative, biting at his lips and sliding one questing hand around to his abdomen, heading for his beltline. To her utter frustration, he broke the kiss, capturing her hand and drawing it to his lips.

'Do you have a bedroom in this place?' she asked huskily.

His eyes seemed to consume her. 'Yes, and I want to show it to you...I want you to see all of the cottage.'

She swayed toward him. 'The bedroom first.'

He stood and drew her to her feet, pulling her into his arms and kissing her again, taking his time over it, with such intensity that Hermione soon found herself whimpering into the warmth of his mouth. He released her then and stepped back, taking a steadying breath.

'Severus?' she said, stepping toward him, her formerly slumbering libido pounding a tattoo in her ears, with a matching rhythm betwixt her legs. She reached to trace a finger along his jaw.

'Not like this, Parker,' he said gruffly, closing his eyes and leaning into her touch. 'Not while you wear Longbottom's ring.'

Hermione did not spare a glance for the modest ring in question; she was far too intent upon her purpose. 'You don't want me,' she pouted, averting her face and simultaneously darting a glance up from beneath her lashes.

He growled and took possession of her chin. 'Don't play the coquette with me, woman...I want you more now than I want my next breath.' He kissed her again to prove his point, his tongue stroking firmly and aggressively into her mouth, giving what he wanted to give and not a whit more. When he put her from him again, he did so with finality.

'Come...I want you to see the rest of the rooms.'

Hermione wanted to scream with vexation; she didn't want a house tour, she wanted a shag! She didn't want to think about the next moment, much less the approaching dawn of the day before her wedding. She wanted to lose herself in the passion this man evoked...and he was determined not to give her what *he* made her want!

She turned from him, pressing her palms to her flushed cheeks, feeling the warmth there, struggling to reclaim her reason from the swamp of what had once been her brains and now seemed to be a viscous mess saturating her knickers.

'Give me my wand,' she managed, wondering if she could get back to her room and close the door before mortification set in.

His hands closed over her shoulders and did not yield when she attempted to twist away from him. 'I know what you want, Parker,' he murmured, his lips beside her ear. 'I want it, too...I want to take you to my bed and ravish you within an inch of your life...but I cannot bear to do it, knowing that you might climb out and trot off to marry another man.' The palms of his hands slid down her bare arms as he pressed a kiss beneath her ear. 'I'll take you to my bed when I can keep you, Parker...not before.'

She managed to wrench away from him, the desire he had roused roiling swiftly into anger. 'You're raving,' she said, hearing and hating the tremor in her voice. 'What makes you think I want to be kept by you?'

He stared across the distance between them, his face suddenly pale and his expression forbidding. He slipped his hand into an inner pocket and removed a newspaper clipping, which he held before her face between his thumb and index finger. Hermione buried her flaming face in her hands, wishing the floor would open up and swallow her whole.

'*This* made me hope you want to be kept by me,' he replied steadily. 'You didn't exactly leave it nailed to the wall in your room at Grimmauld Place, but it was on top of the mess in the drawer of your bedside table.'

Hermione resisted putting her fingers in her ears and singing, 'La la la la la!' to drown out the silky, inexorable voice.

'I knew this photograph ran in the Irish wizarding paper, Parker, so either you have been keeping up with the *Shamrock*, or the *Daily Prophet* has acquired an unnatural interest in Irish gossip.' Reaching out, Severus peeled the fingers of one hand from her face. 'Did you think I was seeing this witch?'

Hermione nodded feebly, her only wish now to end this humiliation as quickly as possible.

A vein of humour opened in his stern tone. 'This, Parker, is Dr Shadaim...my therapist. I was her last appointment of the day and we walked out of the building together...and thus a rumour was born.' He shrugged. 'There is a rather nice restaurant on the ground floor where we might have been dining together, I suppose.'

Hermione reached for the clipping, but Severus tucked it away again. 'Oh, no; I'll be keeping this...you see, it's evidence of your jealousy, which delights me.'

'You're a loathsome toad!' she cried. 'At least I didn't have you followed for four years, like some sort of a pathetic stalker!'

The corner of his lip twitched. 'Couldn't afford it, could you?' he commiserated.

'Oh, go to hell, Snape,' she said, and turning on her heel, she flounced to the door.

He was upon her before she passed through the doorway; he spun her around and held her at arm's length. 'I don't know when anything in my life ever made me happier than finding that clipping, Parker,' he said, his eyes like fathomless black pools as he looked at her. 'It's the reason why you entered into this ridiculous engagement with Longbottom, isn't it?'

She nodded helplessly, feeling like a complete fool, and he said, 'Tell me you still care for me.'

Hermione turned her face away from him, tears starting to her eyes. She felt as if she had run an emotional marathon in the last two hours...for the last four days, really...and her endurance for the exertion was about at an end. She could no more hold out against his unrelenting assault on her defences than she could engage to run another marathon.

He pulled her surely into his arms and held her against his heart, burying his nose in her hair. 'That will do to be getting on with,' he murmured, rocking her gently to and fro. 'And thank God, Parker...because I love you so.'

She toured the rest of his cottage, finally seeing his bedroom, decorated in gender-neutral mahogany with earth tone accents, as well as the two spare bedrooms, each of which bore a bed and a wardrobe, but no further items.

'Why do you need three bedrooms?' Hermione asked, and Severus smiled enigmatically, tightening the arm which held her to his side. He was glad the Veritaserum had finally worn off.

They stood together in the unfinished central portion of the cottage, the original structure over one hundred years old.

'How will you finish it?' she asked.

'I don't know...I thought you might like to decide,' he answered.

She buried her face against his chest. 'I can't decide how to decorate your house,' she said. 'I'm going to marry Neville.'

He stroked her hair. 'No,' he said calmly. 'Your heart is mine...and I shall spend the rest of my life endeavouring to deserve your hand, as well.'

And all through the remainder of the too short September night, they talked of many things, but ever circled back to the question of whether or not Hermione would marry Neville on Sunday. Severus steadfastly averred that she would not, whilst she remained adamant that her promise had been given and that she would follow through.

When the sun rose over the misty Dublin Mountains, Hermione and Severus were outdoors to witness it, seated upon a handy bench, so placed for just such a reason, and wrapped together in a warm rug.

'It's so beautiful here,' she sighed. 'I don't know how anyone could bear to leave it.'

'You'll be back soon,' he assured her, believing it was true. 'I made this place for us, Parker...you'll be back.'

And when the sunlight peeked over the nearest ridge, they Disappeared to Gretna Green, where he saw her safely to her hotel room before returning to his own.

A/N: This chapter was beta read by DeeMichelle and Brit-picked by LettyBird. It is Shug's birthday present, and we will finish up this bit of fluffy pinkness with one more chapter.

The name of Severus' therapist was playfully provided for me by the adorable Machshefa.

Here are the cottage and the misty mountains:



Chapter Six: In Which the Irresistible Force Meets the Immovable Object

Chapter 6 of 7

The wedding festivities continue, up to the night of the stag and hen parties.



Across the Anvil

Chapter Six: In Which the Irresistible Force Meets the Immovable Object

Sitting in the chair next to the window with the morning light streaming in, Severus Snape stared out at the busy street on which the Outlander Inn was situated, his thoughts far away from the Scottish wizarding hostelry. He had not slept, having spent the night with Hermione. A mocking sneer touched his lips. That sounded far more exciting than it had been...talking the night away with a few impassioned kisses was not what one might consider 'spending the night' with a lady. Nevertheless, the time had been precious to him. She soothed and aroused him simultaneously, and he knew now that she always had done...he had simply been too blind to see it. He wanted to enthrall her delectable body, but he wanted to do the same for her mind. She lured his intellect with her own as surely as the memory of her impassioned response to his love-making drew his desire.

Why could he not move her stubborn stance by the force of his desire for her?

He rested his head against the back of the chair. He was more tired than he could recall having been in a long time. Last night, he had set in motion his hastily-made plan to get Hermione alone and make her listen to him. He had ingested Veritaserum and permitted her to question him, opening himself to anything she cared to ask. He had done everything in his power to convince her to give him a chance. Now, all he could do was bide his time and wait.

Hermione sat before the mirror in the dressing area of her hotel room and stared at her reflection. Her eyes were shadowed, relic of her sleepless night. Her hair was windblown from sitting outdoors to watch the sunrise. The dark red evening frock looked wrong by the light of day, as if she were a girl who had spent an impassioned night with her lover, only to return home the next morning, indecently attired in her party clothes. Bleakly, she began to clean last night's make-up from her face.

Why, knowing all she did about him, did she find it so hard to resist the allure of Severus Snape?

The girl in the mirror smiled sadly. It was precisely because of all she knew about him that her resolve felt like dust in the maelstrom of his determination.

Her wedding day had best come quickly, whilst she possessed the will to withstand him.

The entire wedding party gathered in the dining room for a cheerful breakfast on Saturday morning; the only quiet people present were the bride, the groom, and Severus Snape.

Severus ate little but drank coffee steadily, his attention focussed on Hermione. He wished he had had more time to plan this whole operation. Even more, he wished he had not been so determined to have everything perfect before he tried his luck with her again. She called him a 'second-rate stalker' for watching her from afar for so long, and he knew it had been a coward's way out of actually *seeing* her, but he had been torn between knowing she was better off without him and desperation to know how she was faring and what she was doing. Years passed, and his life had begun to change for the better, but *she* did not seem to change. There had been other men; there had even been times when she had stayed away from her flat for several nights in a row. But there had been no engagement, no indication of a lasting relationship...and Merlin help him, he had begun to believe that he could accomplish all he wished to do before approaching her, and that she would be free of any emotional encumbrance...free to come to him, if she so chose.

So close and yet so far.

She looked tired and distracted; Longbottom looked like a man who had endured an unpleasant encounter with too much single-malt whisky. The two exchanged little conversation, spending their time responding to the sallies of their friends, instead. Tonight, the stag and hen parties were scheduled to take place; Severus could only continue to show up to the group activities, maintaining the fiction of wishing the bridal couple well, when what he most wanted was to rip them asunder and steal the bride away.

Hermione picked at her breakfast and drank too much coffee, stringing herself out on caffeine as a replacement for sorely needed sleep. She knew Severus was watching her, and she had to exert a great deal of self-restraint to keep from looking at him. She could feel his black eyes moving over her like the rasp of his slightly calloused fingertips over her bare skin; just thinking about it sent a thrill to her jangled nerve endings, crinkling her skin from the tips of her toes to the tips of her breasts. She ought to be attending to her guests, making sure everyone had all they needed, but instead, her mind kept replaying over and again the words Severus had spoken to her, saying things she had dreamt of hearing him say...admitting he had been wrong, saying sorry, saying he *loved* her...and reliving again and again the desperate, tender kisses they had shared in the secret dark of the misty Irish night.

She looked over at Neville, his brow furrowed in thought, his round, open face wan. Was he regretting their agreement? The night she had found the picture of Severus and that Irish tart...*Doctor my arse!* she thought sourly...in the *Shamrock*, Ireland's wizarding paper, she had gone out drinking. Serendipity had provided Neville as her drinking partner. She had found him in the Leaky Cauldron, sitting glumly over a pint of lager, and he had been all too willing to tell her his troubles. His gran was driving him mad, he had said, and just that day she had taunted him that he would be dependent upon her as long as she lived, because his Uncle Algie's money would only come to him if he was married by his twenty-fifth birthday. Immersing herself in Neville's woes had taken Hermione's mind from her own ... such as, what Severus was doing with that utter *cow* in the photograph. Married by twenty-five? What an excellent notion. It was better to marry a good friend than a lover, anyway...all the Victorians had thought so! Friendship matures into love, but passion fades...how many times had she read that very sentiment?

'Are you all right, Neville?' she asked, her conscience pricked. He was such a dear! How could she be sitting beside him, wearing his ring, and thinking of another man?

He turned a quick, shy smile to her. 'Yeah,' he said. 'Thanks, Hermione. Are you all right?'

Hermione smiled back, impulsively reaching a hand to him. They had shared only a few kisses, nervously agreeing the rest could wait until they were married...there was no spark between them, in Hermione's opinion...but Neville was sweet and brave, and he had trusted her since they were eleven years old. How could she be so untrue?

Neville gave her a crooked smile as he took her hand, and he raised it to his lips, just as his Uncle Algie had taught him to do. An exclamation of annoyance echoed from across the room, and they looked up to see Severus Snape standing, spilling split coffee from his trousers whilst Bill Weasley Vanished some from the formerly white expanse of tablecloth between himself and the erstwhile Potions master.

Hermione's lips thinned in displeasure as Neville excused himself and rushed over to make sure Severus had not burnt himself. She did not know if Severus had accidentally or deliberately doused himself and the tablecloth with hot liquid, but she was positive he had done it out of jealousy. With a huff of annoyance, she threw her napkin on the table and headed for her room to prepare for the day.

Severus trailed the group through the thronging crowd, glowering, feeling in a foul mood. The wedding party were in attendance at the Glasgow Highland Games, a simple Floo trip through to a wizarding pub on the premises. His companions, the *dunderheads*, were excited to be rubbing elbows with the Muggles and preparing to watch the preposterous Muggle games.

Severus, on the other hand, dearly wanted to hex something...or *someone*...into ashes. Seeing Longbottom kissing Hermione's hand had got right up his nose. He was sorely tempted to give up and go back to Ireland. He had given it his best shot...shown her the cottage, apologized, answered questions under Veritaserum, professed his love...and through it all, she had steadfastly insisted that she would honour her promise to Longbottom. Oh, she was hot for a quick shag...when he had been unable to resist kissing her, she had asked him repeatedly...but she obviously didn't want *him* the way he wanted *her*. He was just rubbing salt in the wound by hanging about here, waiting for her to complete the job of ripping his heart out.

Serves you right, his inner Hermione remarked. *You ripped her heart out, didn't you?* His shoulders sagged. He had, indeed, hurt her terribly. Every owl she had sent when he had left without saying good-bye had proclaimed her injury...not in words, for she was not one to whinge, his Parker...no, it was only in tone, and in the things not said that she revealed her devastation. *I don't deserve her, and I never shall*, he thought. *Best to clear out now, and leave her to enjoy her wedding.*

Ambling along, unmindful of his surroundings, he stumbled into someone stopped in his path. Reaching out blindly to prevent his victim from falling, his hands closed about the shoulders of the subject of his cogitations.

'Severus!' she scolded softly. 'Let me go!'

He released her and glared down his nose at her. 'Gladly,' he snapped. 'If you don't wish to be man-handled, don't pose as a road block in the middle of a garden path!'

Her hands went immediately to her hips, in a heartrendingly familiar gesture. 'If you were watching where you were going ...'

He closed his eyes against the sight of her and cut across her complaint. 'Leave it, Parker,' he ground out. Her huff of annoyance brought his gaze back to her indignant face. 'Never fear,' he added icily. 'I shall soon relieve you of my unwelcome presence.'

The large numbers of spectators flowed past them, parting like water about obstacles when they reached Severus and Hermione, only to rejoin on the other side of them, continuing with their happy chatter. The Irresistible Force and the Immovable Object stood with gazes locked, unaware of the presence of others in their universe.

'What do you mean?' she said in a tiny voice, looking and sounding stricken.

'I mean that I will leave here and let you get on with your *wedding*,' he sneered, speaking the last bit as if it were a filthy swearword.

'But Neville is counting on you for the stag party,' she objected in a tone he might have interpreted as pleading if he had not been very well aware that she wanted nothing more than to see the back of him.

'I am aware,' he replied. 'I shall leave tomorrow.' His eyes bore into hers. 'That is what you wish, is it not?'

'I ...' she began, but faltered, averting her eyes from his. She wore the arms of a lightweight jacket tied about her waist for later use in case of cool weather, and now she fidgeted with the dangling fabric.

'Well?' he demanded aggressively. Dear God, was he wrong? Did she want him to stay? Why could she not just say what she wished for him to do? How was he supposed to *know*?

She dragged unhappy eyes back to his face, where she focussed on his nose, avoiding his eyes. 'Of course,' she said, her voice thready.

He moderated his tone a bit, speaking more calmly. "'Of course" what, Parker?' he said, infusing a bit of amusement into his words.

She took a step back from him. 'Of course you must go,' she said mechanically, assuming the mantle of hostess as she turned away from him, speaking her last words over her shoulder. 'We have kept you too long...we mustn't be so selfish.'

She hurried away into the crowd to look for their party, leaving him standing alone in the rush of people, wishing to be the Force, but feeling like the Object.

Hermione spent the afternoon amongst her friends, forcing herself to behave normally, remembering every lesson her mother had ever taught her about how to be a good hostess, smiling, laughing, returning remarks. But all the while, she watched for Severus and felt ill. He was going! In spite of his protestations...that he would be unmoved by her disinterest; that he would fight for her and win!...in direct contradiction of his own fierce avowals, he was going to *quit*! He was going to chuck her and go back to Ireland! He was going to take her at her word and withdraw, as a gentleman would do.

How *could* he?

Couldn't he see how conflicted she was? Didn't he understand her dilemma? How in the name of *Nimue* was she supposed to think coherently when she was assaulted from every side by insanity? Marrying Neville when she loved Severus...oh, yes, she did love him, and had done pathetically and unceasingly since she was nineteen years old...well, marrying poor Neville when she wanted Severus with every fibre of her being was surely the wrong thing to do. It was unfair to Neville, for how could she ever come to allow friendship to grow into love when she would be forever comparing him to Severus Snape? And no matter how good and kind and brave and loyal Neville was, he would never be the equal of Severus Snape in Hermione's eyes.

She was a horrible person.

But, on the other hand, how could she run away with Severus, leaving Neville in the lurch with a hotel full of guests and a wedding planned in two days' time? She couldn't expose Neville to the pity...or the ridicule...of their friends that way! And what would he do about inheriting Uncle Algie's fortune if she didn't marry him? He would be left at his grandmother's mercy!

He could get a job, couldn't he? her inner Snape demanded.

Well, no, he couldn't. He was diligently working on his greenhouse, trying to get things up to speed to open his own business. If he had to stop that to get a paying job, he would likely never get his own business off the ground...or so he had told Hermione.

And besides...she had *promised*. It had been as much for her own rescue as for Neville's, truth to tell. She had been unable to face the notion of continuing on as she had done if Severus was going to take up with some buxom Irish witch...and just how was Shalvah Shadaim supposed to be an Irish name? ...no, if Severus was going to take away her last hope that she might one day be reconciled to him, then she might as well marry Neville. At least Neville would be kind and gentle with her, and they could work together to build a life and a home together. Only Severus had come waltzing into her hotel room...catching her in her saucy red knickers!...and dismantled her entire world. How many times had she dreamt of him walking back into her life? But not when it was too late! Not when she was about to be married to a nice, decent man! Damn his Slytherin hide!

'Knut for your thoughts,' a silky voice murmured into her ear, and Hermione started violently, feeling every nerve ending prickle and her heart begin to pound at the sound of his dangerous baritone. She looked about desperately, but half her party had wandered off to watch the caber toss, and the others had gone for a drink.

'Are you still here?' she said, striving for a light, dismissive tone, turning to face him. He loomed over her, dark and predatory, smelling of bergamot and sage...with a touch of lemon. Damn him to hell! Nervously, she wiped her palms upon her jeans and tried to force her eyes away from the buttons of the broadcloth shirt he wore, beneath which his lightly toned chest begged for her fingertips and lips to trace the contours of his pectoral muscle, down across his ribs, hearing the hitch in his breathing as she paused to nuzzle his navel ...

'Don't let your husband-to-be catch you eyeing my belt, Parker,' he murmured outrageously. 'He might get the idea ...'

She forced herself to swallow and took a precautionary step back. 'Get what idea?' she said, stupidly echoing him, opening the door for whatever he might say next.

'The right idea,' he replied, advancing upon her and wrapping a hand about her wrist. 'Don't be a fool, Parker. Come away with me now, to the cottage. Give me a chance to make it up to you. Longbottom will get over it.'

'I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that,' a sharp, disapproving voice interrupted. Severus released Hermione and looked around, obviously annoyed, but Hermione inwardly hailed the arrival of Ginny Potter as her saviour. 'Come on, Hermione,' Ginny continued. 'The caber toss is about to begin, and Ron says you *have* to see it.' Ginny took Hermione's hand and began to pull her along. 'See you later, Severus,' she added civilly.

Hermione dared a look up into his face, the intensity of his glittering black eyes moving her to mouth, 'I'm sorry!' as Ginny dragged her inexorably away.

Try as he might, Severus had been unable to get close to her again for the rest of their afternoon at the Highland Games.

That evening, he packed his things away, leaving out only what he would need the next morning. He was going to go back to the cottage. She knew where to find him, if she wanted him.

Eschewing the more elaborate goings-on offered at some stag and hen parties, the Granger/Longbottom group parted company in the entrance hall, with the men going to the right and the women to the left. They would remain in the hotel with relatively quiet activities; drunkenness seemed to be the most desirable objective.

Neville was an avid card player, if not a very good one, and the men's party room boasted a huge round table stocked with card-playing paraphernalia, in addition to a lavishly stocked bar tended by a house-elf, and a box of very expensive cigars.

Hermione had toyed with the idea of providing the materials for pottery painting, but in the end, she had decided what she most wanted was a girls' night out of drinking and talking and laughing. The room was equipped with party foods, party drinks, and party music, all to Hermione's taste.

It was a shame that she had no desire to be here, or to drink, or to share her thoughts and feelings with her friends. She sat with an untouched glass of icy cold champagne and watched the girls downing the sparkling wine and telling funny stories from their own weddings and wedding nights. During the year she and Severus had been lovers, only Ginny had been a frequent visitor in Grimmauld Place. But the heady recklessness which had filled them all in the immediate aftermath of the downfall of Voldemort had served to centre all of Ginny's attention on Harry. Ginny had remained oblivious to any clues there may have been of a relationship between Hermione and their former Potions teacher, and Hermione had never felt any urge to confide in Ginny or anyone else about it. In truth, she had not been willing to invite the opinions of her friends into her choice of sexual partner...and she still felt that way. Not about Neville, whose relationship with her the girls were welcome to discuss and speculate about...but about Severus. If she were aberrant enough to run away from her own wedding to be with Severus Snape, she would confide in no one...invite no one's assessment of her decision or acknowledgment of her choice. The magic of her interactions with him sufficed her completely; she did not need the validation of other people to know her love for him was momentous and life-changing.

Dear God...how could she possibly carry on with this charade?

She sat forward and carefully placed the goblet of wine on the table before her, taking care not to draw the eyes of her friends. She had to put a stop to this. It would be embarrassing for Neville and inconvenient for all their guests, but what were embarrassment and inconvenience in comparison to marrying one man when you loved another? How could she have imagined for an instant that keeping her promise was more important than the whole rest of her life?

Her heart was now racing irregularly in her chest, making her feel elated and giddy. Her hands trembled with excitement, and she clasped them together to still them. She would not do anything now, with the eyes of the others upon her, but she would wait until after the party, when she was alone, to find Severus and let him know of her change of heart.

She just had to reach him before he left Gretna Green.

Severus accepted the tumbler of Firewhisky offered by the house-elf and stared moodily at his cards. Longbottom's inane responses as the brothers Weasley, Potter, and Lupin wound him up about becoming an 'old married man' irritated Severus almost beyond bearing. If it were his wedding, he would not tolerate this type of vulgar speculation about his relationship with Hermione; he could not stomach listening to the conjectures of the ever more intoxicated wizards on either side of him regarding the number of children Longbottom and Hermione would have. Good God! Children? He had never got that far in his imaginings. He knew the goading was good-natured as well as traditional, but it scraped him on the raw. This was *his* witch of whom they spoke. If she were going to be a mother, should it not be to *his* children?

Ah, Merlin...this was more difficult than he had thought it would be. It was harder than keeping his countenance whilst sitting amongst Death Eaters gleefully planning the downfall of wizarding Britain. And why was he still in Gretna Green? She had turned him down, and the owl he had sent off to the continent earlier in the week had borne no fruit...and it had been his last hope.

'Severus?'

He looked up into the disquietingly kind eyes of Remus Lupin.

'I raised you two Galleons,' Lupin advised, nodding toward the pile of coins in the centre of the table.

Severus tossed his cards face-down onto the baize table-covering. 'I'm out,' he informed them, then stood and gathered up his pile of gold.

Longbottom looked up, his idiotically friendly face clouded by disappointment. 'You're not going?' he said, sounding only a touch intoxicated.

Severus flicked his eyes over wizards at the table before he said to the groom, 'You have to know when to fold them, Neville.' He turned and walked to the door, thinking, *It's past time, for me.*

He closed the door to the party room behind him and crossed the entrance hall to the stairway. He had only to fetch his things from his room, and then he could Apparate home.

A/N: This chapter was beta read by Keladry Lupin and Brit-picked by LettyBird.

The caber toss is a traditional event at the Highland Games, wherein a burly, kilted fellow hurls a tree trunk as far as he can. I thought Ron, in particular, would find that infinitely amusing.

Thanks again to the darling machshefa for the loan of Dr. Shadaim, Severus' therapist, whom Hermione rather unjustly maligns!

Chapter Seven: In Which We Quit Gretna Green

Chapter 7 of 7

Now Complete! Our story comes to a conclusion.



Across the Anvil

Chapter Seven: In Which We Quit Gretna Green

It was growing late on Friday night, and Joe Macgregor, the receptionist of the Outlander Inn, would be happy when the two parties broke up and the guests went to bed...but he realised that it would likely be the wee hours before that happened.

He was quite surprised when the front door of the Inn was flung open, and a young woman rushed in. She was greatly dishevelled, her chin-length blond hair in disarray, and her face unnaturally pink from the wind and chill of the September night. In one hand she held a small case, which she dropped with a loud clatter as the door slammed behind her.

Joe hurried out from behind the desk, scurrying across the lobby and into the entrance hall, where he stopped at the foot of the staircase. 'I'm sorry, miss,' he said, 'but we're fit to bursting tonight.'

The young woman turned her eyes on him, obviously agitated. 'I'm not here for a room!' she cried. 'I'm here to see Neville Longbottom. Where is he?'

'You're here for the wedding?' Joe inquired, racking his brain regarding the propriety of conducting a young lady into the midst of a stag party.

The girl's agitation increased. 'I'm not here for *the wedding!*' she screeched at the top of her lungs. She gestured to the stairway. 'Tell me what room he's in or I'll knock on every single door in the inn...I swear I will!'

Joe wrung his hands as he stared at the girl, watching as the pupils of her blue eyes seemed to dilate. He couldn't have her disturbing every guest in the hotel! But he couldn't turn her loose in the middle of a guest's stag party, either. How could he salvage this situation?

From each end of the hotel, down the corridors branching out from the entrance hall, doors opened, and guests of the stag and hen parties crowded the doorways, obviously drawn by the ruckus created by the wild-eyed blond girl. Oh, dear Merlin, what was he supposed to do? It was his job to keep peace in the hotel, and this was bidding fair to become a disaster. How was he to best serve the interests of the hotel if a young woman who was not the bride burst in demanding the groom?

With her attention focussed entirely on Joe, the girl was unaware of the witches and wizards approaching the entrance hall from either direction. 'Well?' she demanded of him shrilly. 'What's it going to be, you great oaf?'

One of the ginger-haired wizards was the first to reach the hallway, and he spoke hesitantly to the young woman. 'Hannah?' he said. 'Hannah Abbott, isn't it?'

Joe breathed a deep sigh of relief as the girl turned to the ginger-haired man. 'Ron!' she cried, rushing to him and grabbing the front of his shirt in her fists. 'Where is he? Please, tell me!'

The group of witches had now entered the entrance hall, whilst further ginger-haired wizards clustered behind the man now peeling Miss Abbott's fingers from his clothes. A kind-eyed older wizard could be seen peering over the heads of the two identical twins, and the unhappy girl applied next to him.

'Please, Professor Lupin! Where is Neville?'

Before the professor could answer, the odd girl, Miss Lovegood, placed a hand on Miss Abbott's shoulder. 'What's wrong, Hannah?' she asked gently.

As Miss Abbott turned to answer Miss Lovegood's question, Joe was aware of movement from the corner of his eye. He turned his head and saw Snape, the Dark wizard who had tricked him into giving up the bride's key. Joe bristled; he heartily disliked the ugly fellow, and he was a bit afraid of him, as well...but the greasy git *was* a paying

guest.

Snape stayed where he was above the bend of the stairs, out of sight of the group in the entrance hall, and shook his head once, indicating to Joe that he was not to reveal Snape's hiding place. So, the so-called war hero was an eavesdropper as well as a conniver? Joe turned his face disdainfully away, but did not give away the presence of the man on the stairs. There was no reason to antagonise a dangerous wizard, was there?

Hannah Abbott clutched at Luna Lovegood. 'Luna!' she gasped. 'Is it true? Is Neville marrying Hermione?'

The witches scattered as the bride pushed her way to the front, and Joe was aware of the increased tension in the bearing of the man hovering on the stairs half-way down from the first floor. The bride opened her mouth to speak, but another voice spoke first.

'Abby?'

The groom pushed his way through all the other wizards, his speech slurred just a bit. He stood staring at Miss Abbott, rubbing his eyes for a moment with the heels of his hands.

'I'm dreaming, aren't I?' the groom said, sounding rather sad.

'Neville!' Miss Abbott screeched, and she flung herself at him, now clutching his shirt front. That girl was hell on freshly ironed clothes, Joe reckoned.

The groom's arms closed about the intruder and the two of them hugged and clutched at one another. Snape began to move again, stealthily gliding down the stairs to the landing, where he paused again, watching the young people. Joe kept a suspicious eye on Snape, not trusting him any farther than he could see him.

'What are you doing here?' the groom asked the pink-cheeked girl in his arms.

'I came as soon as I could,' she answered, talking and crying at the same time. 'I only just found out you were getting married.' She pulled back and looked up at his face. 'You *can't!*' she cried.

'I didn't think you were interested,' the groom said miserably. 'You said you were going away to be trained in hotel management and told me all about your career plans ...'

Miss Abbott pushed the groom's shoulder. 'You were supposed to ask me anyway!' she cried, looking miserable as well. 'You weren't supposed to marry the next girl you saw!'

The groom hugged her to him again at this pronouncement, murmuring into the windblown blond hair words that were indistinct, but obvious in their import.

'Neville?'

Putting Miss Abbott from him firmly, the groom turned to the bride, inebriation seeming to fall away from him. Joe had to admire the boy; he stood up straight and faced the bride with Miss Abbott's hand grasped in his.

'I'm sorry, Hermione,' he said, and it appeared to Joe that the groom grew a set of iron bollocks as he stood up to his bossy bride. 'I ought never to have asked you to marry me...I love Abby, you see.'

Miss Abbott emitted a watery laugh, and the groom kissed her hand.

A black-haired wizard pushed his way through the ginger-haired contingent, and Joe stood straighter. There wasn't a man, woman, or child in all of Scotland who wouldn't know Harry Potter when they saw him.

'Look, Neville,' the messy-haired wizard began, but the bride cut across him.

'I wish you had mentioned it before, Neville,' she said.

Joe watched for the hysterics; he had seen many rows between brides and grooms before their weddings; he had even seen weddings called off at the last minute. But never had he seen this...some other girl showing up and making off with the groom right under the bride's nose! Surely there would be trouble from the bride; she was a managing female, if Joe had ever seen one.

But something odd was happening with the bride; she seemed, somehow, to be lightening and brightening before their very eyes. Why wasn't she flying into a rage? Didn't she care that her groom was throwing her over for a rather podgy blond?

'Hannah,' she said, and the tension in the room increased.

One of the identical wizards whispered to his twin, 'A Galleon says Hermione hexes "Cheat" across their faces,' and the other accepted the bet; Joe noticed, but all other eyes were on the bridal couple and the interloper.

'Yes?' Miss Abbott answered, and Joe was not surprised to hear fear in the blond girl's voice.

The groom moved as if to interpose himself between the two witches, but his bride stayed him with a calming gesture. 'How did you find out Neville and I were getting married?' the bride asked her rival.

The girl called Hannah...and Abby...swallowed audibly and said, 'Professor Snape owed me.'

As one, all eyes in the entrance hall moved to the tall, still figure on the first landing. Snape was attired all in black, a travelling cloak on over his clothes and a black travelling bag slung over his shoulder. He responded to the attention by lifting one insolent brow and strolling down the remaining stairs. He seemed to be looking over the heads of all assembled...until the bride spoke again, and then his eyes were riveted on her face.

'Oh he did?' the bride murmured, sounding as if she had received the answer she expected. She then looked over to meet the unsettling eyes of the Dark wizard, and it seemed to Joe that something powerful but unspoken occurred, for the air before his face was disturbed by the force of the energy crackling in the air betwixt them.

Abruptly, the bride turned to the groom and removed the ring upon her finger, offering it to him with a rueful smile. 'I'm not upset,' she said, and she was so sincere that Joe believed her. 'I was trying to think of a way to do the same thing, only Hannah did it for me.' She included both her former fiancé and his Abby in her smile, then stood on tiptoes to press a kiss to Mr Longbottom's cheek. 'I'll go ahead and wish you happy now,' she said, and he grinned at her.

'Thank you, Hermione,' he said.

Miss Granger then took Miss Abbott's hand and shook it. 'I'm in the bridal suite on the first floor,' she said, 'but I'm going to get my things and go. Then you can stay in my room...Joe can show you up when I leave, can't you, Joe?'

Joe jumped, surprised to have been addressed, but he nodded, trying to look helpful.

Miss Abbott was distressed. 'I don't want you to leave, Hermione,' she said. 'You're welcome to stay.'

But Miss Granger had already walked away, and although her words seemed to be for Miss Abbott, she spoke them to Snape.

'Thank you, Hannah, but I actually have someplace I'd rather be.'

Snape inclined his head solemnly, his face expressionless, but it seemed to Joe that a manic light burned in his eyes. 'May I be of assistance?'

Miss Granger nodded and Snape took her hand; the two began to climb the stairs.

Harry Potter started forward, a frown on his face. 'Hermione!' he said, sounding annoyed. When Miss Granger neither turned nor answered, he added, 'See here, Snape!'

Then a pretty witch with dark red hair crossed the hall; Joe recognized Mrs Potter. She placed a hand on her husband's arm and he turned his gaze to her face. 'Let them go,' Mrs Potter said firmly. Then she said more softly, 'I'll tell you later,' but only her husband and Joe heard that. Joe hoped she would tell within his hearing, because he was curious to know what the devil was happening!

The ginger bloke called Ron spoke aloud to his companions, and it was obvious that his mind had stalled out several minutes before. 'If her name's Hannah, why is the great prat calling her "Abby"?''

Miss Abbott emitted a tearful giggle and linked her arm with Mr Longbottom's. 'It's his nickname for me,' she said, smiling up at her love.

Then the older fellow rubbed his hands together. 'Well, it looks as if we still have plenty to celebrate! What do you say we combine these two parties and get on with the celebrating?'

And the entire group of them moved into the ladies' party room, with much chattering and laughing and pelting of the new couple with questions about their romance. Joe saw them safely disposed, then he went to supervise the cleaning of the men's party room; he was still involved there when two quiet figures slipped out of the hotel and into the chill September night.

Hermione clutched Severus' arm, laughter bubbling up to her lips in such a giddy burst that she thought she might crow for joy. He glanced down at her, the ghost of an answering smile upon his lips. The street was dark, save for the lights in the Outlander Inn, which they were leaving behind them.

They turned onto the next street, and Hermione released his arm and danced forward a few steps, then turned to look at him, her face solemn. 'You were leaving!' she accused.

He smirked. 'I was,' he agreed. 'The lady said "no",' he explained. 'What else could I do but withdraw?'

'I made up my mind to go with you just a few minutes before Hannah came bursting in the door, screaming for Neville,' she confided.

His brows drew together and he directed a keen look to her face. 'You decided *before* Miss Abbott arrived?'

'Yes,' she answered. 'I decided that marrying Neville when I love you was a stupid thing to do.'

Abruptly, he pulled her against him, lowering his face to kiss her. Hermione accepted his kiss eagerly, relaxing into it, giving herself over to him and to the emotions he stirred in her. He tasted of whisky and smelt of cigar smoke, evidence of his presence at the stag party, but she didn't care. She wanted him, wanted to be with him, and that was the only thing that mattered.

He lifted his lips from hers, looking down into her face, the tenderness in his expression making her feel weak in the knees. He caressed her cheek and pressed a kiss to her forehead. 'You're the first person to ever speak those words to me,' he said.

Overcome, Hermione leaned back until their eyes met. 'I love you,' she said clearly, and then she kissed him in the middle of the street in Gretna Green, pouring all of herself into the expression of her love. He opened his mouth to her, and she kissed him fiercely, her tongue caressing his, her fingers twining his hair, pulling it free of the confining band.

A noise behind her startled her, and she released him, turning. A cheerfully lit building met her eyes, a fairy-lit sign proclaiming, 'Across the Anvil,' twinkling there.

'That wasn't there before,' she said, unnerved. 'Where did that come from?'

Severus chuckled and took her hand. 'Let's investigate,' he said, pulling her along with him. 'I think I would like a souvenir of my stay in Gretna Green.'

'Souvenir shops aren't open at this time of night!' she protested, but he opened the door and pushed her through first, following closely behind her.

A burly man in purple wizard's robes came forward, a smile on his face. His head was completely bald, and he was massively built.

'Welcome to Across the Anvil,' he said with a strong Scottish burr. 'I am Hephaestus. How can we help you?'

Hermione smiled and returned the greeting, but her eyes were focussed on the two enormous anvils before the immense forge and its roaring fires.

Severus touched her shoulder. 'Look around a bit,' he encouraged her. 'I'm going to see about a souvenir.'

She moved away, and Severus turned to the smithy. 'I take it we triggered the revelation enchantment?'

The robed wizard nodded. 'We have to cloak the shop from the Muggles, so we keep it from some others, as well...those who are underage, those who are coerced ...'

Severus nodded his understanding. 'Then you can accommodate us?'

Hephaestus smiled his agreement. 'It would be my prodigious pleasure,' the smithy said.

'Give me a moment,' Severus said, and he walked over to Hermione, who was looking at the handcrafted swords displayed on one wall.

She turned as he approached. 'You could have a sword souvenir,' she said playfully. 'That one with the rubies in the hilt reminds me of Gryffindor's.'

He rolled his eyes at her, then asked, 'Do you know what this place is?'

She shook her head in the negative, and when he cupped her cheek, her eyes closed in pleasure, like a cat being stroked.

'I guess they've yet to write *Gretna Green: A History*,' he teased.

Her gurgle of laughter brought forth the smile which only she could wring from him. 'Do you know about the wizarding smithy at Gretna Green?' he asked her, finding his voice suddenly thick with emotion.

'It's a myth,' she answered promptly. 'The legends say the smithy only appears to those truly prepared to make a commitment to one another. It cannot be seen by underage wizards or by people who are trying to force someone into marriage.'

'Almost full marks,' Severus said, stepping closer to her, 'except for one small error.' He took her hand and raised it to his lips. 'I believe you can work it out, if you think

about it.'

Her brown eyes softened when he kissed her, then narrowed when he challenged her. He watched her with pleasure, his hope and his desire rising within him, twining and parting, then twining again. When her eyes widened and her jaw dropped, he chuckled. 'Got there, did you?'

'But why?' she whispered. 'We're not getting married ...'

'You stood in the street and professed your love for me, Parker,' he told her, trying to ignore the thundering of his heart in his chest. 'You proclaimed your love and sealed it with a kiss...I believe the smithy took that for some sort of promise.'

'But you...you didn't do or say anything!'

'It would appear that the magic disagrees,' he said. With an inclination of his head, he indicated the patiently waiting Hephaestus. 'The blacksmith awaits our pleasure, Parker...shall we take our wedding rings back to Ireland as souvenirs of our trip to Gretna Green?'

Hermione stepped away from him. 'That's crazy talk, Severus,' she said quietly. 'I'm only just beginning to trust you again. You can't ask me to commit myself to you like this after six years of silence.'

Severus felt the hope within him plummet, but the desire kept him centred. *She's here with you, old man*, he reminded himself. *Steady on*. 'I understand your hesitation, Parker, but please hear me out.' He took her hand and led her over to a glass case, wherein resided a number of different handmade rings. There were three different boxes, each bearing a label. The labels read: 'A Year and a Day,' 'As Long As We Both Shall Love,' and 'Forever and a Day.'

'There are three wizarding ceremonies,' he began, and she nodded.

'I know about those,' she said. 'Most modern-day wizards are married under "As Long As We Both Shall Love". That's what Neville and I chose.'

Hope began to stir again; she was willing to discuss it, which was half the battle. 'You're coming home with me, aren't you?' he asked.

'Yes,' she answered.

'You want to see if we can make a successful relationship together, don't you?' he continued.

'Yes,' she answered, 'but...'

He cut across her, gently but insistently. 'Marry me, Parker. Marry me, for a year and a day. Something between us triggered the magic of this place, where wizards and witches marry one another across the anvil...take a chance on me.'

He could read the warring emotions in her eyes, and he lowered himself to one knee, uncaring that Hephaestus could see him. 'I love you,' he said. 'I vow to you that I will do everything in my power to make you happy. I'll be an arse and act like a fool sometimes, but I will make it my life's endeavour to deserve you, Parker.' He took her hand and turned it, pressing a kiss into her palm. 'Marry me, my love...try me out, for a year and a day, and if you don't wish to stay after that, I'll let you go.'

She looked down into his face. 'And if I want to stay?'

His hand tightened on hers. 'Then I'll bring you back here, and you can marry me again for a year and a day...or any other way you wish.'

She studied him then, her eyes boring into his until he began to wonder if she had become a closet Legilimens. He felt the sweat which broke out upon his brow, and he had a fleeting wish that he had thought to pray. When he thought she would surely turn away, she spoke.

'All right,' she said. 'I'll marry you for a year and a day.'

Ferocious joy burned through him at her words, and he bowed his head over her hand, closing his eyes and pressing his lips to her wrist. She startled him when she knelt as well, taking his face in her hands.

'I like hand-kissing as much as the next girl,' she said, her voice husky, tears shining in her eyes, 'but you can do better than that.'

When they broke apart, Hephaestus approached them, and they stood, their fingers twined, to meet him.

'You can choose rings from amongst the collection there,' he said, indicating the glass case, 'but I always recommend that you fashion your wedding ring from a piece of metal you already own.'

Severus promptly bent his arm and removed the silver cuff-link at his wrist. He placed the cuff-link on the counter and charmed the shirt cuff closed. He watched Hermione, who chewed a lip for a moment, then reached into her hair and pulled out a silver hair pin. The smooth ringlets on that side of her head began to frizz, and she gave him an apologetic smile. 'Sorry for the horrible hair,' she said.

With his fingertips he felt for and found the hairpin on the other side. 'May I?' he asked. She nodded and he pulled it free, allowing all of her hair to return to its natural state. 'I like it this way,' he said, his voice low and intimate, as if they were alone. 'It's the way your hair is.'

She melted into his kiss, and they were only brought back to themselves when Hephaestus cleared his throat.

'If you could choose a style for your ring, miss, I can craft it for you,' he said indulgently.

Hermione looked through the patterns available and chose a simple silver band. 'I'm not a fussy sort of girl,' she explained.

Severus chuckled, expressing his thankfulness for that fact, and Hephaestus nodded. 'An excellent choice, my dear,' the blacksmith said. 'We are crafting the ring for the "Year and a Day" contract, are we not?'

Hermione nodded, and Hephaestus crossed to the anvils and the forge. When the blacksmith shrugged out of his purple robes, it was to reveal a leather jerkin, from which his massive shoulders and arms bulged. His golden skin, soon sweat-slick from the heat of the forge, glistened by the light of the flames as he melted the hair pins, then refashioned them.

'How can someone so large do work so delicate?' Hermione whispered, and Severus shook his head wordlessly. He was too moved to make small talk. He looked down into her face, absorbing every detail, idly playing with a lock of her progressively more bushy hair. She returned his regard, studying him in turn, lost in him as he was in her.

Hephaestus returned to them again, placing the miraculously cool ring in the palm of Hermione's hand. 'Make sure it fits,' he advised, and she slipped it on, demonstrating the perfect fit.

Severus looked at her wearing his wedding ring and wondered briefly if it were possible to expire from too much happiness. 'Make mine to match hers,' he said.

The blacksmith took up Severus' cuff-link. 'We are crafting the ring for the "Year and a Day" contract, are we not?'

Severus replied without looking away from Hermione. 'No, craft my ring for the "Forever and a Day" contract, if you please.'

Abruptly, Hermione pushed away from him. 'No! Severus, you can't do that! You can't bind yourself to me forever when I'm only promising a year and a day!'

One corner of his mouth quirked, and he took hold of her wrist, pulling her back to him again. 'Of course I can,' he responded lazily.

'Sir,' Hephaestus said diffidently, 'it is most irregular.'

Severus began again to finger her hair. 'It is not, however, impossible, is it?'

He remained deaf to her objections, and when the blacksmith began to labour at the forge to make Severus' ring, Severus wrapped his arms around his prize and murmured into her hair. 'I have been bound to you for longer than you know, Parker...the ring will only make it official.'

She clung to him but still argued. 'I didn't know you were going to do something so foolish,' she pointed out. 'I can stop this now; it's wrong for us to be so unequally committed, Severus.'

He took her face between his palms and looked into her eyes. 'You spent a year with me before, Parker, with that inequality on the other side. This is payback.'

She shook her head, his hands moving with her. 'I don't need to be paid back...I'm not like that, Severus...don't you see?'

He kissed her lips and touched his nose to hers. 'I'm not doing it for you, love...I'm doing it for me.'

Hephaestus returned to them with Severus' ring, indeed a perfect match to Hermione's in appearance, and Severus pushed the ring onto his finger, where it fit perfectly. He experienced a moment of light-headedness. Whose life was this? He wasn't supposed to get everything he wanted...he was Severus Snape!

Hermione reached to touch the silver band on his finger, then looked at him, suddenly incandescent.

'Can we be married now, please?' he said to her.

She took his hand in hers. 'Where's this anvil I've been hearing about?' she said.

They stood on opposite sides of the golden ceremonial anvil, their joined hands resting upon its surface, and made their pledges to one another. When the vows were complete, Severus paid Hephaestus for the rings and the ceremony, agreeing somewhat tartly that Hermione could repay him her portion upon her next payday, and they signed the register, before leaving Across the Anvil.

'Will we be able to find you again?' Hermione asked uncertainly before following Severus out the door.

'Never fear, missus,' Hephaestus told her with an understanding smile. 'If you're in need of Across the Anvil, we'll find you.'

Severus and Hermione stood upon the dark street and watched as Across the Anvil blinked out of sight. Severus took her hand and began to lead her again along the street. 'Would you like to announce our marriage to your friends before we go home?' he asked carefully. Merlin knew he had no wish to see anyone but his bride, but he would do anything to please her...even share her with the dunderheaded duo.

'No, thank you,' she responded tranquilly. 'I don't want to see anyone but you.'

He pulled her close, his arms wrapped tightly about her, and bent to whisper in her ear. 'Then shall we begin this honeymoon, Mrs Snape?'

They Apparated to the hill, and he stood behind her, his arms enfolding her.

'Do you see it?' he asked, echoing the question he had asked when first he had brought her to this place.

'Our cottage,' she said, her voice full of satisfaction.

Sweeping her up into his arms, he carried his wife down the hill and across the threshold of their home, feeling as he imagined the first man must have done at the dawn of the world.

A/N: This story was written as a birthday present for Sshg316. Her prompt was, 'Write a story where Severus and Hermione had a relationship in the past which ended badly, and how they came back together.' That, alone, might have been a simple enough task had I not enjoyed a telephone conversation with my twenty-two year old daughter, who was telling me about the wedding her college roommate was planning...I had never heard anything so silly! Mix in the movie *Elizabethtown*, in which an obnoxiously self-absorbed couple take over an entire floor of a hotel for their pre-wedding festivities ... and you have the genesis of a Subversa story. As usual, the plot got away from me, a bit.

This chapter was beta read by Keladry Lupin and Brit-picked by LettyBird. The theme song for this story is *Memory of You* by Course of Nature. Thanks for reading along, y'all.