

White Satin, Black Silk

by junimel

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Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 13

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A/T/N:

This story was written in Spanish by JuneCooper, and translated into English by Hechicera. You can read the original--Raso Blanco, Seda Negra--here:

http://www.fanfiction.net/s/5476764/1/Raso_Blanco_Seda_Negra

Special thanks to exartemarte for the occasional Britpick.

Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. We just take her toys out of the box and make them do naughty things.

The sun blazed fiercely through the window, directly into his eyes. He blinked a few times, trying to dispel the glare, but it refused to dissipate. His first thought was that there must be an afterlife after all, and he was filled with surprise and an uncharacteristic hope; but a second later, when he tried to move, every cell in his body exploded with pain.

Oh, no, this wasn't heaven; it was just the sun through the window. How anticlimactic. All he had wanted was to die and rest in peace...he hadn't even considered an afterlife. He had just wanted to disappear, be nothing, feel nothing . . . but instead what he found awaiting him was a life even more miserable than the one he had left, filled with the most excruciating pain imaginable. And now the very sun was mocking him to his face!

He heard familiar voices, talking about him with a mixture of repulsion and pity. He was used to the repulsion, but the pity was something new. He only managed to hear a little.

"In the end they were able to repair the vertebrae, but I don't know if he'll be able to walk . . . poor man, sometimes I wonder if it wouldn't have been better if . . ."

"Close the curtains, Poppy, he's waking up!"

At least Minerva had realized that the sun was painful to his eyes; soon the room was dark enough for him to open them. The two women appeared in his range of vision, their brows furrowed with concern.

"Severus? Can you hear us?"

"Don't move, Professor...it would not be advisable."

Move? With this horrific pain gripping his neck? He tried to make an appropriately sarcastic comment, but when he opened his mouth and tried to speak, he managed to produce only a pathetic groan and a burning sensation in his throat. Merlin, this damned thirst, and he couldn't even ask for a glass of water!

"Oh, I'm sorry, Professor, but we haven't yet been able to completely heal your wound. The phoenix tears accomplished a great deal, but the wound was . . . at one point we thought the even with the phoenix tears we wouldn't be able . . . so we're grateful that they've worked even partially," explained Madam Pomfrey, patting the back of his hand gently. "But we're doing everything we can."

"I suppose you're wondering what you're doing here at Hogwarts instead of St Mungo's," added Minerva. "We thought about transferring you, but your condition didn't permit moving you from where you were, so the Healers from St Mungo's come here every day to see you."

Every day? thought Severus. *Well, bugger me, I've suddenly turned into someone important.*

"You'll be wondering about the outcome of the battle. We won, Severus."

He rolled his eyes. Wasn't it obvious they'd won? Were it not so, he would hardly have been in the Hogwarts hospital wing talking with Minerva McGonagall.

She took his hand, her eyes filling, and went on. "So many died: Lupin, Tonks, Fred Weasley. But Harry and his two friends survived. Those three came through pretty well unscathed. We're all trying to rebuild what we've lost."

And I didn't have the good grace to die, right? No matter; I'm sure the Wizengamot will take it upon themselves to make what life I have left a nightmare. Imbeciles.

"Kingsley, Harry, Ron, and Hermione are preparing your defense, aided by your memories and the evidence that Albus prepared for you in the event you survived the war. In any event the Wizengamot won't require you to appear until you've recuperated sufficiently; we think that by then we'll have proved your innocence. You've nothing to worry about...we're taking care of everything."

"The Healers from St Mungo's will be here later to transport you..."

"NO!" He tried to shout, but all that came out of his throat was a hoarse grunt. No way would he let them take him to St Mungo's, where anybody might lay hands on him. Most people still believed him to be a Death Eater, and it was not outside the realm of possibility that someone might try to settle accounts with him . . . because despite being ultimately on the side of the angels, he had been forced to do quite a few nasty things in order to maintain his cover. No, St Mungo's was most definitely not an option.

Minerva and Madam Pomfrey looked at him. Voice or no voice, he was making it quite clear that he did not want to go to St Mungo's.

"Well," Poppy conceded, "now that the worst is over, I don't really see why we couldn't take over his care."

Severus closed his eyes in relief, and moved his hand towards his neck. He felt so weak...as if his bones were made of cotton...and his muscles screamed with pain at the effort. Even so, his hand reached his throat, where he found a bandage big enough for Hagrid.

"Don't touch the wound!" snapped Poppy. "We haven't got it to close completely, and you'll start it bleeding again."

She lifted a vial to his lips and poured a potion into his mouth, and the world turned black once again. Blessed oblivion, blessed nothingness.

When he awoke much later the sun had disappeared, but the relief this brought him was short-lived. He realized that there were now three people surrounding his bed...the three people he least wanted to see. Like a hammer-blow to his head, the memory of his last conscious moment after Nagini's bite assaulted him. Thinking that his hour was upon him, he had given Potter his memories. The love he had felt for Lily; his promise; his sacrifice. And now Potter stood before him, and Severus thought he might die of humiliation. But on seeing those green eyes, he thought: "I did it, Lily; I protected your son."

When they saw that his eyes were open, the three approached his bed.

"Professor," said Harry tentatively, "we heard that you had recovered, and we came to . . . to say hello."

He snorted. Potter, always so eloquent. Now that he knew the truth, he'd probably be hanging about all the time, trying to prove his "gratitude," when all Severus really wanted was to be left in peace. But he couldn't speak; how frustrating.

The Granger girl spoke. She was holding a bouquet of red roses.

"We came back to finish our studies. There's a special program for us seventh-years, so we can take our N.E.W.T.s without having to repeat the whole year. So we'll be around for a while. We brought you these."

Drawing closer to the bedside table she picked up a glass, transformed it into a vase. Casting a quick *Aguamenti* charm to fill it, she set the flowers in it.

Ron tried to say something so as not to stand there mute. "We wanted to bring some sweets as well, but..." He would have done better to keep his mouth shut, but didn't realize it until he saw three pairs of eyes looking ceilingward.

"Professor." Potter turned away from his friends and leaned over to whisper in Severus's ear. "I know you don't want to hear this, but I need to say it anyway. Don't worry, I won't speak of it again. I thank you with all my heart for what you did for me, for my mother's memory. I know she's grateful as well, wherever she is. I owe you so much that I doubt I'll ever be able to repay you, but I'll do whatever I can, for the rest of my life. I know you don't like me or want me around, and I'm not going to annoy you with my presence any more than necessary. But I'll be around. For whatever you need me for."

Severus was momentarily nonplussed. His emotions were still raw from the aftermath of the war and his brush with death, and he was wholly unprepared for accolades. Fearing that his eyes would fill with tears, he closed them, hoping that the students would think he was tired and wanted to sleep.

"All right, you lot, let the professor rest. Come on, outside with you." He heard Poppy's voice and opened his eyes. She had a bowl of broth in her hands, and the aroma flooded over him: he'd had no idea how hungry he was until he smelled food.

The students left, and Poppy raised the head of the bed with one pass of her wand so that he was in a position more suited to eating. Severus realized that she meant to feed him as if he were a baby; humiliating, but he was so hungry and weak that he let it pass.

The first spoonful of broth was like manna from heaven in his mouth. He had never tasted anything so delicious in his life, even if it was only warm chicken broth. Poppy saw his expression and smiled.

"Good, isn't it? The healthier patients don't share your opinion. Ingrates."

"Erm...Madam Pomfrey?" Hermione stuck her head in through the doorway. "Could you come here, please? It's an emergency. There's been an accident in Potions class . . ."

"Oh, dear! I'll be right there," she said, crumpling the linen napkin in her hand. "I'm sorry, Severus, I'll be back later to give you your soup."

Severus couldn't repress an anguished groan. Just his luck...he was doomed to wait for everything, even a bowl of lukewarm soup when he was on the brink of starvation. And of course it was down to the stupidity of some imbecile student!

Poppy departed, leaving Hermione standing in the doorway. Seeing the way the professor's eyes were fixed on the bowl of soup, she tentatively approached the bed. Taking a deep, fortifying breath, she walked resolutely to the bowl and picked it up.

"I won't tell a soul," she said, and sat down facing him on the edge of the bed. She held the spoon to his lips, and to her surprise, the professor opened his mouth.

Too right you won't, thought Severus.

Spoonful by spoonful, Severus obediently opened his mouth and ate his soup. His raw throat was grateful for the warm liquid, and his stomach sang with happiness, his hunger and thirst both satisfied at once. Hermione was amazed that he was allowing her to feed him. *He must really be starving*, she thought. When the last spoonful was finished, Hermione looked for the napkin, but remembered that Madam Pomfrey had been holding it in her hand when she left; instead she lifted the sleeve of her robe to the professor's lips and blotted them delicately.

He closed his eyes. "Thank you," he said, his voice rough with disuse. The warm broth had relaxed his vocal cords enough for him to speak those few words.

"It was nothing," she said, lowering her eyes in embarrassment. After all he'd done for them, for everyone, helping him to eat seemed a small thing indeed.

Madam Pomfrey appeared at the door.

"Oh, I see you've been assisting the professor! Thank you so much, Hermione. There's so much to do here that sometimes I just run out of time!"

"It was nothing," she said again.

"Actually... I wonder if you'd like to lend me a hand with him it could be very useful experience for you."

For a second, Hermione was at a loss for words. She assumed that Professor Snape would no more desire her company than that of Harry or Ron, but on the other hand she didn't want to insult him by refusing. And then there was the matter of her proposed study of magical medicine: if she could tolerate Snape as a patient, she could put up with anyone.

She turned around to look at her professor and gauge his reaction. She saw his horrified expression and could practically read his thoughts: *you wouldn't dare*.

Wouldn't I? Well, watch this, she thought.

"I'll have to check my schedule, but I'd be delighted," she answered with a smile.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 13

Severus meets his new nurse.

Severus breathed a sigh of relief when, despite Hermione's parting remark, the nurse who came to attend him turned out to be someone else. Now that he had recovered his voice, but was still too weak to get out of bed, he reverted to his normal charismatic self; within a matter of hours the beleaguered Mediwitch from St Mungo's had flung her apron at Poppy's feet, her bun in disarray, her eyes red and filled with tears of rage.

"I'm off! I didn't spend all those years studying just to take care of an ill-tempered git!"

"But, my dear, Professor Snape is a war hero..."

"I don't give a monkey's! All the wonderful people who died in the war, and he had to survive? I hope he chokes on his tongue in his sleep."

And that was the end of nurse number one. She hadn't been easy to get, either: most of the younger Mediwitches had been Snape's students at one time or another, and remembered him only too well. The mere mention of his name was enough to make them quake in their boots, lips trembling. Soon only a handful of student nurses...Hufflepuffs, every one...remained who were willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the "war hero."

Severus himself, lost in a dark miasma of pessimism, depression, and self-pity, had nothing better to occupy him than the terrorization of his healers. It was a talent he had elevated to a veritable art form. He studied them, ferreted out their weak spots and insecurities and, swiftly and without warning, would deliver the *coup de grâce*.

"Daddy's little girl, hmm? Always wanted you to be a nurse, didn't he? I wonder what he'd say if he knew you hadn't the slightest aptitude for magical medicine, try as you will . . ."

"Miss Coleman, these delicate hands were made for other things, certainly not for magical medicine," he would say with a malevolent smile, pressing the hand of a confused young woman between his own. "Things like . . . like . . . tell me, Miss Coleman, how might a waste of space like you occupy herself?"

"Tsk, tsk, tsk, Miss Belcher. Did you really think this was the way to outshine your brother? He's years ahead of you. Years. At least that's the impression I get reading this edition of *Magical Healing*. His article regarding the alternative uses of dittany is quite interesting. But don't despair; if you really exert yourself he might let you become his . . . errand girl."

"Severus Snape!" Poppy scolded after yet another weeping student nurse had left her office. "No one's going to want to take care of you! Those poor girls!"

"If they had a lick of sense they would realize that everything I say is completely baseless," he said with a look of studied innocence. "But they're such little fools! And if they're credulous enough to believe everything I say, then they deserve every bit of it."

Had Severus believed in karma, he might have behaved differently, for in short order he was to realize that he had more cause for despair than he had at first supposed.

He made this discovery one night when he was finally feeling strong enough to stand up, and found that his legs refused to leave the bed.

Alarmed, he flung back the covers and used his hands to lift one of his legs, and then to let it fall. Nothing. He tried the other, with the same dismal result. Simply put, they were dead.

The impact of this revelation was devastating. He was unable to process a single coherent thought: ideas flared and dispersed in his brain, like bolts of lightning colliding and counteracting one another.

He sat through the night, oblivious to the passing of time and the arrival of the dawn, and when Poppy came in with the breakfast tray she found him motionless, sitting bare-legged on the bed, a look of pathetic bewilderment on his face.

"For Circe's sake, Severus!" she exclaimed, dropping the tray. She knew at once what had happened, and that it would not be easy to make him understand.

Severus raised his head and looked at her with dark, empty eyes.

"I can't walk," was all he said, in a small voice she had never heard him use before.

"Severus, don't be upset, it's still too soon..."

"I can't walk." He interrupted her, his voice a bit louder than before.

"The vertebrae...the snake crushed your vertebrae..." She stammered a little, desperate to make him understand.

"I can't walk!" he shouted. Alarmed, Poppy approached the bed, hoping to pacify him. She laid a hand on his shoulder and began again, trying for a calming tone and the right words.

"Severus. It's early days yet."

"I CAN'T WALK!" he roared, grabbing her by the shoulders. Apparently Professor Snape had returned from his post-traumatic leave. "Why the fuck did no one tell me I couldn't walk?!"

Hearing the shouts, two of the St Mungo's Medi wizards (who happened to be nearby dispensing some potions) and Professor Sprout (who had come for an antidote to a venomous plant) came at a run. Seeing Severus shaking Poppy by the shoulders, they immediately drew their wands and pointed them at him.

"Severus, let go of Poppy this instant," said Pomona, in a cool, calm voice which carried an undertone of icy menace.

Threatened by three wands at once, he let her go, and in that same moment felt two tranquilizing spells hit him directly in the chest. He managed to contain his reflexive rage, but immediately felt blessed nothingness take over him, and by the time his head hit the pillow he was actually grateful.

He woke at four in the afternoon, still thick-headed from the sedative spells, and with some effort shook off the residual wooziness. He blinked twice before being sure his eyes weren't deceiving him. She was in a corner of the room, wearing the garnet-colored robe and white apron that all the nursing students wore, her finger marking a place in the book resting in her lap.

"Miss Granger! What the devil are you doing here?"

"Good afternoon, Professor," she said, polite as always. "Isn't it obvious? I'm the new nurse-student-assistant-whatever."

Severus pushed himself to a sitting position and pressed his fingers to his temples, trying to make the room stop spinning. He looked at her through the strings of black hair falling across his face. Fuck, it must be true. Otherwise she wouldn't be wearing the uniform.

"What happened to Poppy? And those useless girls from St Mungo's?"

"Well, Madam Pomfrey is still a little shell-shocked. She's not used to being physically attacked by her patients. And the St Mungo's students won't come back...there's not a single one that could be persuaded. So it's just you and me, Professor," she said with a air of courage that was far from what she was actually feeling. But her instinct, informed by six years with "Professor Personality," warned her that it would be a mistake to show the slightest weakness if she didn't want to end up like the other nurses.

Severus laughed through clenched teeth.

"Poppy's afraid to come herself, so she sends you, a *child*, to do her job?"

"I'm not a child," she said in an offended tone. "If it hadn't been for the war I would have left Hogwarts already. And anyway, no one else wants this job."

"And why would *you* want it?" His left eyebrow rose a fraction.

That was a good question. Ron had asked if she was crazy, accepting a job like this one...there wasn't any professional experience valuable enough to be worth the torture of spending extra time in the presence of Severus Snape. For his part, Harry felt differently. He didn't exactly ask her not to take the job, but he made it clear that if it weren't for the fact that Snape would loathe the very sight of him, he himself would have done it.

It wasn't a matter of pity, or really of the experience either. It was a matter of honor now. The greasy git had saved their lives countless times. If she hadn't volunteered, her conscience would never have let her rest. The problem was that Snape mustn't suss that out, because even from a distance you could tell that he was allergic to pity and wouldn't be able to tell the difference between that and a debt of honor.

"I've been thinking of going into magical medicine. Even though I haven't taken my NEWTs yet, Professor McGonagall wrote me a letter of recommendation to St Mungo's, and they're confident that my marks will be high enough to get me into their program. They'll count the time I spend here as part of my medical work placement."

"How very like you, Granger, to find a way to get a head start on your classmates, but there's a part of this that doesn't add up."

Hermione felt the blood drain from her face. If he thought she was motivated by compassion he would make her regret her decision to accept the position so quickly that by nightfall she'd be returning the uniform to St Mungo's. So she struggled to maintain a poker face.

"Someone in possession of a superior mind like your own," he continued, in that sinuous tone that he used when he wished to make the strongest impact on his audience, "not to mention an absolute know-it-all like you . . . wouldn't you be better off dedicating yourself to a field reserved for the most brilliant intellect...arithmetic, for example?"

Hermione smiled in relief, first of all because it was the first time he'd ever acknowledged that she was an intelligent person...which was unusual enough in and of itself. And second, because she had the perfect answer ready.

"Oh, I don't plan to devote myself exclusively to the care of the sick. I'm planning to go into research. I want to develop new potions, new spells, find solutions for problems that don't exist today." Her eyes shone with emotion. She had a promising future, and she couldn't wait to get started.

"I wonder how long it will take you to open your eyes to reality, Granger. Everyone dreams of making their mark in their chosen field. They all want to change the world . . . when they're young. But sooner or later they realize that the world goes on as before, and will remain the same with or without them. Eventually they lose hope, after a year or two behind a desk shuffling papers . . . or in your case, treating sniffles."

But Hermione paid him no attention, shaking her head with a little half-smile. She'd been pretty sure, even before she came in the room, that something like this was going to happen when she confronted her Potions professor. If he was bent on making her cry like the other student nurses, he was going to have to try harder...much harder.

She laid her book on the side table and crossed over to the bed. "I need to change your bandage, Professor."

So, this was no joke, and Poppy wasn't going to jump out from behind a curtain shouting, "Surprise, Severus!" With a snarl he lay back on the bed and offered her his bandaged neck. His neck, in the hands of a student he'd brought to tears on more than one occasion. This was a real demonstration of faith.

She removed the bandage carefully but was unable to suppress a horrified gasp.

"That bad, is it?"

"It's pretty bad."

"Have you got a mirror? I'd like to have a look."

"Trust me, Professor, you'd rather not."

Her touch on his neck was gentle. Gentler, in fact, than Poppy's or the student nurses'. Perhaps she did have a talent for medical magic after all.

"Does it hurt very much?"

"Only when I breathe."

Hermione was momentarily taken aback, and then burst out laughing. Had Severus Snape just made a joke? His face was as grim as ever. Perhaps . . . perhaps at some point they'd come to understand each other. There was plenty of time.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 13

Things are not going entirely well.

It was midsummer, but a light drizzle was falling, cleaning the air and the vegetation that surrounded the castle, as well as the stones of the castle itself. Severus watched the rain fall outside his window, watched the grey clouds and thought that he too felt that way: grey and weak.

He had begun to miss his nurse. Not that he had any affection for her, but . . . now no one at all came to visit him. Even Minerva had stopped coming, but he didn't blame her: he knew exactly how much work was involved in being headmaster of Hogwarts, from his own experience, and besides . . . well it wasn't as if anyone were eager to see a person like him. So he resigned himself to wait for his nurse.

"Hello, Professor. How are you feeling today?"

Severus heard Hermione's voice and was glad she was back. Of course he would never let her see it, but that didn't mean he wasn't sincerely glad.

"Late today, Miss Granger?"

"No, not late. I had classes. Most of the professors just assign readings and exercises to make up for the classes we missed, but there are two classes I have to actually attend: Defense Against the Dark Arts and Potions."

"And who's teaching Potions?" asked Severus with a twitch of irritation. Even though he hadn't taught Potions for two years now, he couldn't help feeling that someone was trespassing on his turf.

"Professor Slughorn."

Severus's eyes widened in surprise and she went on. "No one else would take it. Professor McGonagall admitted to me that she didn't especially want to hire him, after the way he'd acted during the battle, but it turns out there's an asinine rumor circulating that the position is cursed, just the way DADA used to be."

"And who do they imagine cursed it?" he demanded, a bit confused. "Voldemort's dead, the Death Eaters are in hiding . . . who's left?"

Hermione moved away from the bed under the pretext of needing something from the table. In these situations, location was paramount.

"You, Professor, who else?"

Severus regarded her incredulously, then gave a bitter laugh. Would they never . . . well, not forgive him, but . . . leave him in peace?

Hermione for her part would have liked to say something supportive, tell him that she was sorry, or that it shouldn't matter to him, but she knew it was better to keep such sentiments to herself. To fill the awkward moment, she began to chatter about her studies.

"I need the DADA classes because it's so practical. Of course I learned a lot with Harry and during the war, but..." she took a breath "...and then there's Potions. For some reason I still have some problems with that subject."

She opened a cabinet and began to take out vials of potions and unguents for his wound. "Today, for example, I couldn't get my antihemorrhagic potion to thicken properly."

"Did you grind the elderberries?"

"No, I chopped them, like the book says."

The professor raised an eyebrow, and picked up his wand from the bedside table.

"There are things in that book that could do with improvement. *Accio Moste Potente Potions!*"

He raised his hand and waited for the book, which Hermione had laid on the table, to respond. But it did not move.

"Accio Moste Potente Potions!"

Nothing.

He fell back against the pillows and closed his eyes.

"Did you know about that, too?"

"No. I don't think anyone did. If Madam Pomfrey had known, she would have told me."

"Not a word to anyone, do you understand?"

Hermione set the vials down and sat down on the edge of the bed. If it had been any other patient, she would have taken his hand to comfort him, but not Severus.

"I'm sure this is all temporary, Professor. The inability to walk, the lack of . . ."

The words died in her mouth. After a pause, she started again. "I've read of cases like this...a life-threatening illness, a profound depression, any situation that imposes an abnormally high degree of stress. Wizards can lose their magic. But once the underlying problem is cured, the magic returns." She was whispering. "We just have to be patient. The magic will return."

Sunk deep into the pillows, his eyes squeezed shut, Severus spoke from between clenched teeth.

"And if it's connected with the spinal injury? I'll stay like this forever, unable to walk, unable to do magic?"

Hermione smiled. There was something she knew that he did not.

"Professor, you're totally capable of walking."

His eyes flew open and he struggled to sit up and speak, but she stopped him with a hand against his chest. "The Medi wizards treated the injury. There was a certain amount of inflammation of the spinal cord, but that's completely corrected. Your body will regain its ability to walk as soon as you command it to. But in order for that to happen, you've got to be aware that you can do it...and not only that, you've got to want to do it."

He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. He sat, opening and closing his mouth like a fish out of water, and Hermione had to smile. Snape at a loss for words was not something she'd ever had the pleasure of seeing before. If she could borrow a pensieve from somewhere, it would be an amusing sight to show Harry and Ron.

"I know, Professor. It's not something that happens much to wizards. Muggles suffer this type of thing more often. They can get psychological help, but there's no real wizarding equivalent. So you're sort of on your own to deal with this." Hermione rose to leave, but felt a steely grip close over her wrist, holding her back.

"Swear to me, Miss Granger, that you will tell no one anything of this. No one. Not even your . . . little friends."

His dark eyes were fixed on hers: two deep, hypnotic pools. Suddenly the penny dropped: he was trusting her, incredible as that might seem. He was in her hands now.

"I promise, Professor," she replied, meeting his gaze, and added, "and I promise I'll help you get through this."

Severus breathed a sigh of relief. He had confidence in the little swot; she always managed to work out a solution to even the most difficult problems.

He sank back into the cushions, closed his eyes, and waited for her to do her job.

The days passed without much variation. A Thursday was much the same as a Saturday; she was always close by. And when she wasn't there, he missed her. He had grown accustomed to the sound of her voice, to her quiet presence as she studied silently in the corner. She brought him books and chocolate biscuits, his two weaknesses. And though he himself said little, he let her chatter on about whatever took her fancy once she had finished studying. It wasn't vapid chatter about meaningless things; she wasn't like her little girlfriends, who would have been talking about boys, or clothes. She was more likely to talk about books, spells, potions, or her anticipated future as a Mediwitch. Thanks to her he was introduced to some Muggle authors he might otherwise have scorned to read; he was particularly moved by Oscar Wilde's *Ballad of Reading Gaol*.

And one morning, when she approached to dress his wound...which was much improved, but not completely healed...his attention was captured by a glint of red on the ring finger of her left hand.

"Miss Granger!" he said, feigning admiration while firmly refusing to release her hand. "Is that something new on your hand? A ruby? How Gryffindor. Potter?"

"Ron," she corrected him, gently withdrawing her hand, her gaze lowered. Modesty? thought Severus *No*, he amended. *Not modesty . . . shame!*

"You didn't tell me you had a serious suitor."

"It didn't seem appropriate."

"When is the happy event?"

"After the NEWTs."

He quirked his left eyebrow. "Quite soon, then. Any reason in particular for the haste?"

The implication irritated Hermione.

"I'm not pregnant!" she snapped.

"What's your hurry, then? You're both still young, and for some reason you don't seem to me to fit the profile of those empty-headed girls who are in such a rush to get married right out of school."

"Ron . . . the Chudley Cannons have offered him a position, and he's anxious to start a family. He's always dreamt of having lots of children."

"And your training at St Mungo's? And *your* dreams, of becoming a researcher?"

She took a great gulp of air before responding.

"I can do all of that. Although the children may mean I'll have to wait a bit."

"And of course that's fine with him."

Hermione said nothing. Snape gave a low laugh.

"I expected a little more of you before you tied yourself down."

"You...who are you to be handing out that sort of advice?" She was shaking with rage. "I'd say you've waited overlong, by the looks of it. I've never met a Mrs. Snape, and I don't imagine I ever will."

The sarcastic smile died on Severus's lips and he fixed her with a malevolent look.

"You have no idea of my motives for deciding not to form a family, Miss Granger," he said in a low, menacing voice. Its timbre alone should have frozen her blood, but she refused to be intimidated. Looking him defiantly in the eye, she did her best to match his tone of voice.

"I saw your memories, sir. Harry showed them to me."

This girl...this *child*...had caught him in his own trap. And she was not intimidated, even by his best threatening tone.

"I'll thank you not to speak to me of that matter ever again," he said, without breaking eye contact. At least in this he would not be defeated.

"I might ask the same, sir," she said with a tight smile.

And they spoke no more of it.

But Severus was convinced that Hermione was about to commit the worst mistake of her life in marrying Ron Weasley. For one thing, the boy was hardly her intellectual equal. Of course, he did have a formidable analytic mind, but Hermione's thirst for knowledge was of a different calibre altogether. A Ravenclaw might have suited her, perhaps...but the Ravenclaws lacked the spirit and valor that she exuded from every pore.

And to think that in no time she'd be burdened by a pack of redheaded brats, occupied with nothing more challenging than cooking and changing nappies . . . Merlin, what a waste! Any idiot could spit out a dozen children and feed them, but . . . what a waste. Severus gave a mental shrug each time the thought accosted him, telling himself that if that's what she wanted out of life, then that was fine. But he knew that wasn't what she really wanted . . . and it bothered him, like a pebble in his shoe. If he had been wearing shoes.

Hermione for her part was concerned with other things. The professor was making no progress at all, and if he continued at this rate, he would spend the rest of his life lying in that bed, unable to walk or perform magic.

I've got to get him out of there, she thought, desperate. Keeping him cooped up in this bedroom was tantamount to condemning him to unremitting depression. Perhaps if she could take him to his old potions laboratory he would recover his desire to move about, do something on his own . . . but how to move him? She wasn't about to cast a Mobilicorpus and carry him floating about Hogwarts, at least not if she wanted to see her next birthday. She knew that the professor would die before he would tolerate such a humiliation, too similar to his experience with the Marauders, even if he weren't floating upside-down. She'd have to talk with Professor Flitwick.

And so it was that Hermione turned up one morning at Snape's door pushing . . .

"What the devil is that, Miss Granger?"

Hermione clucked her tongue.

"Professor, a fine analytical mind like yours . . . one would think you could figure it out for yourself."

"A *wheelchair*!?"

But it was no ordinary Muggle wheelchair. In the first place, it was a marvelous bit of woodcraft, made of ebony, beautifully carved and exquisitely upholstered in a dark red chintz with deep golden whorls. It was enchanted to ascend and descend staircases and overcome any obstacle in its path. It was also enchanted to obey the magical will of whomever used it, but . . . that particular feature would have to wait.

"What is wrong with you, Granger, did you fall off your broom and hit your head? There is no way on earth I'm going to use such an article. Get it out of here, I don't want to look at it."

"Fine, then, what were you planning to do, Professor? Spend the rest of your days flat on your back in that bed?" she exclaimed, exasperated, hands on her hips, doing her best to loom menacingly above him.

Severus was momentarily nonplussed. No student had ever dared to take such a tone with him. But he was not about to be scolded by some apprentice . . . or by anyone else, for that matter. He sat up abruptly, putting on his best bitter vampire face and his most intimidating voice.

"I have no intention of rolling about out there so that students can make fun of me!"

"News flash, Professor! The students have always made fun of you, and they're not about to stop now. And you know that perfectly well." Hermione leaned over and looked straight into his eyes, a few inches away from his face. "Oily bat of the dungeons, greasy git, Batman!"

"THAT'S ENOUGH, GRANGER!" he snapped. Desperate to shut her up, he put a hand over her mouth. She didn't even pause to think; just grabbed the hand and removed it.

"It's not as if you didn't already know!" she spat angrily. "And nobody gives a toss whether you walk, drag yourself, fly, or sleep hanging from the clothes rail."

"Why do *you* give a toss, then?"

"That's an excellent question, Professor; I have no idea why I should care, if you yourself don't!" she hissed, then took a deep breath to try and calm herself. "I shouldn't care. But I do," she concluded sadly.

Silence fell like a stone between them; there was nothing else to say. Severus was stupefied to think that at least to one person it mattered whether he lived or rotted in a hole somewhere.

But Hermione was feeling defeated and impotent. She headed towards the door with a weary step and picked up her rucksack from the floor.

Gathering his courage, Severus asked, with studied casualness, "Tomorrow, then, Miss Granger?"

Hermione paused for a moment and thought about it, but had no idea what she was going to do.

Without turning around or saying good-bye, she left the room.

A/N: *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was the most poignant work of Oscar Wilde, who wrote it while serving a sentence of two years at hard labor for the crime of sodomy. After writing it he was never able to write another word (of literature, of course) and he died soon after.

He did not wear his scarlet coat,

For blood and wine are red,

And blood and wine were on his hands

When they found him with the dead,

The poor dead woman whom he loved,

And murdered in her bed.

It's not difficult to imagine why Snape would have been moved by this poem.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 13

A wheelchair with no designated driver--what could possibly go wrong?

T/N: Special thanks to exartemarte for helping me to navigate the treacherous waters of British fermented beverages.

The evening after the argument with Snape was a nightmare for Hermione. She went straight to bed without eating dinner...as if she could have taken a single bite that didn't taste like sawdust...and, pleading extreme fatigue, closed the curtains of her bed canopy, then cast an Imperturbable and a Muffliato.

It occurred to her that she had better test to see if anyone could hear her.

"Parvati?"

No response.

"PARVATI!!!" she shouted as loud as she could. There was no answer. Brilliant, no one could hear her; now she could give herself over to her rage without anyone deciding she'd lost her mind.

"Fucking . . . bastard . . . greasy . . . ungrateful . . . GIT!" she shouted, punching her pillow savagely with every word. "After all I've done for him! No one else will even go near him . . . and to think that I actually gave up classes to be with him!"

She continued this tirade until it dawned on her that her pillow was soaked with tears. She had been weeping with rage and impotence. *Calm down, Hermione*, she thought. *He's not worth your grief.*

The next morning was no better. After a restless night filled with incoherent dreams about her professor, she woke up to a splitting headache and swollen eyes.

"Mione?" asked Ron, after she appeared in this state at the breakfast table. He came closer and took her hand, pressing it lovingly against his chest. "Are you feeling all right? You look a bit ill."

Hermione snatched her hand away, a bit embarrassed. She still hadn't got used to Ron's demonstrations of affection . . . they made her feel odd.

"I just had a bit of a bad night, don't worry."

"Really, Hermione, you do look ill," insisted Harry with a worried look, laying a hand on her forehead. "Well, at least you don't seem to have any fever."

"It's nothing, really, I just had a few nightmares last night. All I need is a bit of rest," she said, taking two slices of toast and getting up from the table.

"Get some rest, Mione," said Ron sagely, and she simply nodded and went back to her bedroom.

Harry stared incredulously at Ron.

"What?" he said, his mouth full.

"You've got no idea, have you? Hermione's always been a terrible liar. Seriously, Ron, you're planning to marry her and you still can't read her?"

"She's just tired, that's all. Must have been spending too much time with Snape...that's got to be exhausting."

"Think what you want, I know something's the matter with her. She's not herself, she didn't even try to visit Snape or go to the library."

"You know what, Harry?" Ron said impatiently, "I think that all that mystery-solving to defeat Voldemort has fried your brain. Come on, it's Saturday morning and it's a glorious day. We can't let it pass without at least playing a game of Quidditch."

Harry acquiesced...it was Quidditch, after all...but he made a mental note to keep an eye on his friend. He didn't like the way she was looking at all.

She looked no better at lunchtime, and busied herself pushing her food from one side of the plate to the other, drinking glass after glass of pumpkin juice as if she were dehydrated. Ron, for his part, seemed completely oblivious to his fiancée's condition, talking excitedly about his promising future as Keeper for the Chudley Cannons, and including Hermione by saying things like, " . . . and then I'll acknowledge the crowd, and you'll be sitting in the part reserved for players' wives, and I'll blow you a kiss," to which she responded with a slight nod and a forced smile.

"Are you coming to Hogsmeade with us tonight?" asked Neville. As they were all of age and enrolled in a special program outside the normal course of study, they enjoyed complete liberty to come and go as they pleased, provided they didn't make waves or draw undue attention to themselves, and they were taking advantage of this opportunity to go out and enjoy themselves as often as they could.

"Thanks, but I think I'm going to stay here and study . . . I still haven't got that antihemorrhagic potion to thicken properly."

It was that comment which made up Harry's mind to go to the Hospital Wing and investigate. They'd all had problems with the antihemorrhagic potion, but Hermione's was by far the best of the group. Something else was going on . . . of course it was typical of Hermione to insist on perfection, but she was lying...he could always tell when she was lying.

He slipped away after lunch and went to the Hospital Wing. Madam Pomfrey seemed very worried about Hermione.

"I know that girl has had much more patience than the other nurses, and I've no right to ask even more of her, but . . . she's been the only one who's been able to manage Professor Snape. And whatever it is that's happened between them, he seems to be very sorry. Well, after his fashion. He's asked after her several times today . . . and you know how he is."

After an awkward conversation with Snape, Harry decided to talk to Hermione. He found her curled up in an armchair in the common room, which was vacant at this hour, as everyone was out on the grounds or in Hogsmeade enjoying the beautiful summer day. She was holding an open book in her hands, but was not reading it. He went over and knelt down beside her.

"I've just come from the Hospital Wing." He began slowly, trying to find a way to broach the subject without raising her hackles. "You've had a fight with him, haven't you?"

"Harry . . . " She laid a hand over his. "I'm just all in. It seems I haven't got anywhere with him. I haven't even been able to heal that damned wound . . . "

"Mione . . . "

"I know, I know, Harry, it's not my fault. But I feel useless there, and unnecessary. There's just no point to my going there any more."

"You're wrong about that. Snape's been asking after you."

Hermione raised her left eyebrow, a gesture she had apparently acquired from hanging about in bad company.

"Go and give him a chance. You know, something I learned in the war is that do what you will, you can't save everyone. It doesn't matter how hard you try, there will always be things beyond your reach. We may be witches and wizards, Mione, but at the end of the day . . . we're still just human beings. Keep that in mind and go and give Snape a second chance. From what I've heard, you're the only one who's been able to manage him."

She spent the rest of the afternoon sitting in the chair in the common room, Harry's words circling round and round in her head like goldfish in a bowl. Should she go to the Hospital Wing? Would it even be worth the effort?

The clock in the Gryffindor common room struck four, then five, then six. She skipped dinner, knowing that she would be unable to swallow a single bite. At half past seven she could no longer fight the miserable feeling that she was not where she ought to be. She went to her room and changed clothes so that she wouldn't look so depressing, and headed for the Hospital Wing.

Poppy received her with an enormous smile; she'd become very fond of the girl.

"Hermione! I was sure you'd come back ! Although I confess I was beginning to have my doubts . . . but we'll talk later. There's someone who's been waiting for you."

Hermione went to her patient's room and got the surprise of her life: Snape, fully dressed in his classic black suit, seated in the wheelchair reading the *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*.

When he heard her come in, Severus looked up and set the book to one side. For a moment they both hesitated, regarding each other in uncomfortable silence.

"I thought..."

"Not another word on the matter, Miss Granger," he interrupted.

Hermione could only smile and nod. She hadn't expected the professor to want to discuss his defeat in their battle of wills. She was contented to know that she had won...there was no need to blazon victory all over her face.

"Would you like to go for a stroll around the castle grounds?"

"After twenty years of walking them, I'm frankly sick to death of the castle grounds. No, I think I'd rather go to Hogsmeade."

"But . . . it's Saturday . . . most of the students are there . . . "

"Best to get it over with, don't you agree? Sooner or later they're going to find out about my . . . condition. Assuming that you haven't already discussed it with your little friends."

"Not a word, Professor, just like I promised you," she replied, with a show of offense.

"Let's go, then, Miss Granger. I have an urgent need for a glass of Firewhisky, and something tells me that once we leave here I'm going to need more than one."

So they donned their capes and left the Hospital Wing, Hermione wearing a huge smile and Severus an expression that threatened to pulverize the first student who made the slightest comment about his condition. Magic or no magic, he was still Severus fucking Snape.

They crossed the school grounds and went down into the village, drawing up in front of the Three Broomsticks. The pub was packed and rowdy...par for the course on a Saturday night...but as soon as the wheelchair came gliding across the floor, a funereal hush fell. For a few moments there was only the sound of glasses being set down on the wooden tables, a nervous cough, a quickly silenced murmur. Madam Rosmerta stopped what she was doing and turned to see what had cast such a pall.

"Professor Snape!" Her jovial tone had a forced quality. "How wonderful to see you doing better at last. It's an honor to have *aeal war hero* in my establishment," she added, in a tone that brooked no argument: he was welcome in her pub, and no one had better cross her about it. "Over here, please."

Rosmerta seated them at a table in a quiet corner, and the volume of conversation gradually returned to normal. Evidently his reappearance in public wasn't going to be such an ordeal after all.

"What can I bring you?"

"I'd like a glass of Firewhisky; make it a double. And the lady?" He looked a question at Hermione.

"A butterbeer," she replied without thinking.

"Butterbeer? I thought you told me you had put childhood behind you. What are you now, eleven?"

Hermione did not customarily drink alcohol. It hadn't ever appealed to her, really, and on the few occasions when she had tried it, the taste hadn't really been to her liking. But if he was going to needle her about being an adult . . . she cast about wildly in her mind for something she had heard Ron and Harry order.

"A pint of bitter, then," she said, her pride getting the better of her common sense. At least that didn't have so much alcohol in it; that's what she'd read, anyway. Not like whisky.

Severus smiled...at least that was his intention; he'd had had very little practice smiling...and almost laughed out loud when Rosmerta placed a pint glass of amber liquid in front of Hermione.

"This whole thing is for me?" she asked in a whisper.

"Cheers, Miss Granger." Severus lifted his glass happily, but seemed almost immediately to remember something, for his face hardened and his tone darkened. "To the end of the war, and the beginning of our lives."

At first they talked little, but as the level in her glass dropped, her tongue loosened considerably. She didn't have to drink much to achieve this effect, since she had hardly eaten all day except for the pumpkin juice, and this, combined with her lack of experience drinking, made the alcohol go straight to her head.

"They're watching us, Professor. I wonder what they're saying," she said between giggles.

For his part, Severus was enjoying seeing her like this. Of course, had any other person in her condition shared his table, he would have found it revolting, but this was different in some way he couldn't put his finger on. She had always been serious and reserved in his presence, but now she couldn't seem to stop talking except to take another pull at her glass, and she looked enchanting, with her generous smile and rosy cheeks. *Enchanting? Where did that come from? Okay . . . it's the Firewhisky talking*, he thought, unable to take his eyes off her or to do anything that might chase the smile from her face.

" . . . and all the time we were thinking it was you who was hexing Harry so he'd fall off his broom, and . . . I *set you on fire!*" she confessed giddily, covering her face with her hands and peeking through her fingers to see her professor's reaction. Snape wanted to get angry with her, he really did, but try as he might to muster up some indignation, none would manifest itself, and he lifted the glass of whisky to his lips to hide his smile.

"Ooh, Professor . . . I've got to go to the loo, but I don't know if I can stand up . . . my legs are so . . . heavy!"

Seeing the way she reeled, Severus realized that the drink had affected her more than he had at first thought. They should go back to Hogwarts immediately . . . and pray that Minerva would never find out that he was guilty of getting her favorite student pissed, or she would Transfigure him into a rat and keep him in a cage in her office.

When Hermione returned, she sat down heavily in her chair and rested her chin on her hands, looking at the table. She seemed to have fallen asleep.

"Granger . . . Granger! Are you feeling all right?"

"No . . . um . . . not really . . ."

"Can you walk?"

"I think so . . ."

"Let's go, Granger, head up, we'll leave with the same dignity as we came in with, let's not give any more cause for gossip than we already have." Leaving some coins on the table, he helped her to her feet.

They left the Three Broomsticks, with Hermione more leaning on the wheelchair than pushing it. No sooner had they emerged into the quiet street than Severus began to chide her...although not too severely, since this was partly his fault, and he knew it.

"For God's sake, Granger, don't you know your limit?"

"I've never drunk alcohol before . . . and I haven't had much to eat today," she confessed, not without embarrassment.

"You should have told me that earlier. We could have asked Rosmerta for something to eat. But it's water under the bridge now. We'll have to walk back to Hogwarts. Apparition's out of the question; if you can't even stand up, you'd be certain to Splinch yourself."

"I'm so sorry, Professor . . ."

The night air appeared to have an adverse effect on her, for shortly after they headed out towards the castle she had to stop and duck behind a tree to empty the meager contents of her stomach.

Brilliant, thought Severus. *Minerva's going to have my guts for garters.*

Bacchus must have been watching over them, because they managed to reach the castle under their own steam, and then make their way to the Hospital Wing without anyone's noticing them. Hermione cast a few spells to help the professor get his pyjamas on and lie down in the bed. And that was the last thing she was able to do, because with an enormous yawn she sat down on the bed beside Severus, blinked a few times in a vain effort to keep her eyes open, and finally gave up. With a "Merlin, I'm exhausted," she rested her head on the pillow . . . and fell asleep.

"Granger? *Granger!*" Severus's voice rose in alarm. "Hermione!" he exclaimed finally, shaking her, panic washing over him. "You *cannot* fall asleep here!"

But Hermione only groaned and settled in at his side. Giving up, Severus covered her with the blankets.

"A rat," he murmured. "A black, skinny rat."

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 13

The morning after.

T/N: Many thanks to exartemarte, Britpicker extraordinaire.

The first bright rays of morning had begun to threaten an end to the night, and Hermione and Severus were fast asleep in the same bed.

Warm.

Comfortable.

She moved away a bit, but he pressed her against his body, her back against his chest, his hands at her waist.

From the blissful oblivion of sleep, Severus pondered what a fine thing it was to have a woman asleep in his arms. He had never experienced it before, first of all because it was too risky for a spy to do, and second...but no less important...because he'd never met anyone who would really have wanted to sleep with him. Sex, maybe, but to stay there asleep in his arms was a different matter entirely. It implied a certain intimacy...more, ironically, than he was willing to offer the women with whom he'd had sex, and more than they were willing to offer him. But now he was asleep, and while his mind was idle, his body sought her out, his nose buried itself against her nape to smell her, his hands searched out the softness of the skin at her waist underneath the blouse . . . and that was all, because the rest of his body refused to cooperate, except for one *not-so-small detail* which had been dormant since his encounter with Nagini and had apparently chosen this particular moment to come back to life. Ah, everything was so warm. So soft. So . . . perfect.

Hermione, also lost in the depths of sleep, pressed against the lean, warm body that wrapped around and caressed her. In her dream it was Ron, but it felt nothing like Ron. When she was with him, things didn't feel half this good . . . but this was a dream, and dreams are not like real life. The few times that she and Ron had spent the night together they had been uncomfortable, unable to find a way for their bodies to fit together and let them fall asleep. There were too many elbows and knees, when he put his arm around her it pulled her hair . . . and in the end they had rolled apart and slept on opposite sides of the bed. Although she would have loved it if he had held her like this, large hands holding her firmly by the waist, pressing her possessively against his body and against, ah! the physical evidence of his desire.

Hermione didn't consider herself ugly, but she didn't think she was particularly desirable either, so she was secretly proud of her ability to evoke this reaction in a man. Delighting in the sensations of her dream, she pressed back against the swelling, eliciting a groan from the lips of her dream-husband.

Perfect.

Neither wanted to wake from this exquisite dream. They held close to the warmth, unwilling to let it go.

Hermione turned to embrace him, entangling her legs with his. Circe! They seemed made to measure for each other, so well did their bodies fit together. She rested her head on his shoulder and let her hands wander over his torso, slowly, with a delicious languor.

When the sun broke through the window, a songbird perched on the sill and began to sing. Loudly. They both heard it and groaned in unison as they realized they were waking up.

"No . . . " protested Severus, and Hermione, recognizing the voice, and that her dream-lover had not vanished when she awakened, opened her startled eyes to find herself face to face with her Potions professor.

"AAAAHHHHH!!!!" she shrieked, leaping from the bed.

"Sshhh! Miss Granger! Calm down!" implored Severus, terrified that someone would hear.

But Hermione remembered only that she had got drunk the night before and . . .

"Merlin, Merlin, Merlin, what have we done?"

"Nothing outrageous . . . " he began, but she mistook his meaning.

"What the hell do you mean, nothing outrageous?"

"Shhh, be quiet, I'm telling you that you fell asleep and that was it. Look at yourself...you're wearing those Muggle trousers that are the closest thing I know to a suit of armor," he said, gesturing toward the jeans she wore beneath her robe. "And furthermore, in case you were forgetting, I'm completely useless from the waist down." This last was a lie, of course: he was perfectly aware that he'd had an erection, the first since his injury, but this was hardly the time to mention it.

This detail had not passed unnoticed by Hermione either; she remember having pressed herself back against that bulge . . . oh, but in order for anything of a sexual nature to have happened, she would have had to climb on top . . . *don't go there, Hermione*, she warned herself, blushing furiously at the direction her thoughts had traveled.

And suddenly, once the initial blast of adrenalin had passed, the hangover blossomed in her head as if someone had hit her with an axe.

"Oohhh . . . " she said, holding her head in both hands. "I swear I will never drink alcohol again . . . "

"Yes, yes, a hangover potion will disabuse you of that notion in short order, but for the love of God, Miss Granger *get out of here.*"

She stared at him, her eyes like saucers. *Ron*. Everyone had seen her in the Three Broomsticks with Snape. And she'd never made it back to Gryffindor Tower to sleep. Oh, no, she was going to have a lot of explaining to do . . . and she left at a run, hoping against hope that she could get back to the dormitory before the other girls woke.

Snape watched her disappear through the doorway and rolled over into the middle of the bed, seeking out the warmth of her body, which had already begun to dissipate, and the aroma of her hair which clung to the pillowcase.

Lily, he thought, trying to summon up the memory of the love of his life. He wanted to put her in Hermione's place, to imagine that it had been she who shared the bed with him, whom he had clasped to his chest.

But he knew perfectly well that it had not been Lily. The two women were too different. And somehow he felt that his debt to her had been paid when he protected her son with his own life. He understood that finally, after so many years and so much pain, he was letting her slip away . . . but he didn't want it to be so. He wanted to cling to her memory, he wanted to love her until the day he died, he wanted to be faithful to her even though she was dead, he wanted . . .

But what one wants and what one is able to do are different things.

Lily, what is happening to me? He buried his head in the pillow, breathing deeply of the faint smell of jasmine that remained on the fabric, and fell back asleep.

Thank all the gods, thought Hermione as she entered the dormitory full of sleeping girls. But before she could get her bearings, her feet were entangled in a furry orange mass. There was a loud yowl of protest from her cat, who had leapt out happily to greet her, only to have one of his paws squashed beneath her trainer. She held her breath, hoping that the noise hadn't wakened anyone.

"Hermione, is that you?" Lavender peered at her out of one eye. "Where have you been? We were worried. Everyone was talking about you and Snape drinking together at the Three Broomsticks, and that he was in a wheelchair . . ."

Fucking Crookshanks! she thought. Her best stealthy entrance, foiled by a cat.

"Erm, well, I had to take care of him, and . . ." She tried desperately to think of a plausible excuse, but then breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that Lavender had fallen back asleep. That would give her time to invent an alibi. Although really, when you thought about it, who would believe she had spent the night with Snape? She put her pyjamas on, and crawled into bed. She'd think of something, but for now all she wanted was to sleep just a little longer.

But as soon as she closed her eyes in search of sleep, the memory of a pair of arms wrapped firmly about her waist invaded her mind. She tried to shake it *off for God's sake, Hermione, it's SNAPE!* but in the end she told herself that no one was ever going to find out, and she permitted herself to relax a little and savor the memory. Everyone was allowed at least one guilty pleasure, weren't they?

When she awoke again the rest of the girls had risen and gone, so she had a bit of time to put herself to rights and go out to the common room. She'd missed breakfast, but she didn't care; all she needed was a hangover potion and she'd be as good as new.

"Hi, Hermione, your eyes look like two burn holes in a blanket. Something you'd like to tell me?"

She felt her stomach lurch. Harry had been waiting for her, and where Harry was . . .

"Hi, Harry. Where's Ron?"

"He went to Hogsmeade to do some last-minute shopping. He wanted to give you some chocolates, but we forgot to go by the shop. Don't tell him I told you, it's supposed to be a surprise. But, hey, that's not why I wanted to talk to you. Everyone saw you at the Three Broomsticks, drinking with Snape..." here he lowered his voice, "...and you didn't get back here until this morning."

Hermione cast about desperately for an excuse, but she looked in Harry's eyes and knew immediately that she wouldn't be able to lie...not to him. And anyway, what was she feeling so guilty about? It had just been an accident, after all. An unfortunate accident.

They sat down together on a sofa in the empty room, and in whispered tones she told him everything.

Everything except for the fact that she and Snape had slept in each other's arms and she had liked it.

"Ron's going to kill me. And he's going to kill Professor Snape for getting me drunk. Or more likely, he'll try to kill him, and end up dead himself."

"Calm down, Ron has no idea. Nobody's had the bottle to tell him. But you ought to, you know. He's your fiancé, after all; you're getting married in what, a few months?"

Hermione knew he was right. A relationship had to be based on trust and sincerity. Where was her confidence in her fiancé? It must be hiding under a bed somewhere, because just at the moment she couldn't locate it. She would just have to summon up the courage to tell him what had happened. The censored version, anyway.

"Mione!" exclaimed Ron, bursting into the room. "I missed you! How much longer are you going to have to take care of His Greasiness?" He gave her a large, smacking kiss and handed her a box of chocolates. "Not today, at least. Mum's waiting for us at home, Luna and the others are on their way. And I want you to myself for a bit."

"Thanks, Ron, you shouldn't have," she said, looking down at the box of chocolates.

"No, I like indulging my girlfriend. And maybe we can run by Grimmauld Place and . . . you know."

Hermione looked around and saw that Harry had quietly disappeared to give the lovers their space. Taking a deep breath, she realized that this was the moment to come clean with Ron about the night before.

Choosing her words carefully, she began recounting the events, unable to look at his face while she did so. When she was done she looked up and their eyes met, and he burst out laughing.

"I can't believe it! You had to spend the night with the bat! You poor thing, you'll have nightmares for a month!"

She felt as though a great weight, the weight of her secret, had been lifted from her chest. How could she have been afraid to tell Ron? Really, he was such a love. Such a friend. Relieved, she opened the box of chocolates and offered him one.

"I think the margins have contracted a bit more," commented Hermione, as she cleaned the wound and changed the bandage. "Pretty soon you're not going to need my care at all."

Severus smiled grimly.

"If only that were the case. I don't know how I'm going to manage stuck in this chair."

"Professor, the NEWTs are coming up soon, and then I'll be leaving school for good. I expect someone else will have to take care of you. I've already spent far more hours here than St Mungo's requires of its student nurses." She didn't like to remind him of it, but she knew she needed to make it clear that she couldn't stay at his side forever.

"I'm well aware of that, Miss Granger. And I do hate to be in anyone's debt."

He rolled the chair over to one of the bookshelves. Since they had made the excursion to Hogsmeade, Poppy had judged him fit enough to return to his rooms, which is where they found themselves at the moment. He took a battered old notebook down and held it out to her.

"What's this? Oh!" she exclaimed upon opening it and realizing what it was...his personal notes for the elaboration of advanced potions. "Professor, I can't accept this . . . it's your work, your studies, it wouldn't be right for me to use this . . ."

"Take it, foolish girl. You wouldn't have such scruples if it were printed, would you? What's the difference between this and a book? This is just a more ~~exclusive~~ edition."

She felt an impulse to go over and kiss him on the cheek, but contented herself with pressing the book to her chest.

"Thank you, Professor."

She was thrilled with the gift, and although she felt she hardly deserved it, did not hesitate to make the most of it. When she showed it to the others, their jaws dropped in disbelief.

"*Snape* gave you his notes? That snake venom must have pickled his brain . . ."

The truth was that after the nasty argument they'd had, he had gradually begun to treat her a little better. Not excessively, but enough to make it clear that he didn't actually hate her. Of course, Harry and Ron would never believe he was really trying to be *friendly* with her. But she knew that he was, and that was enough for her; she smiled

every time she looked at the tattered notebook.

A few days later, after she had harried Snape into taking a turn about the lake to get some fresh air, they were sitting in the shade of a large tree. Hermione took out the notebook and opened it to a page with a description of an obscure fortifying potion.

"I'm going to leave a little early today, Professor; I want to have another go at brewing this potion."

"Is it giving you trouble?" he asked, quirking his left eyebrow. "Perhaps you haven't followed the instructions to the letter."

"I have done!" she cried, her pride wounded, and then continued in a dejected tone of voice, "but it doesn't turn out right, no matter what I do."

"Let's go in. Any more fresh air and my lungs will collapse."

"Where to?"

"To my laboratory, Miss Granger, where else?" he replied acerbically.

"Are you going to help me brew the Augeo potion? Why?"

"Because if you keep on experimenting, you're going to blow your head off, and I'll lose my nurse."

"But . . ."

"Be quiet and start pushing, before I change my mind."

Hermione was genuinely surprised. Snape had not returned to his laboratory since his encounter with Nagini. And she knew he'd had no intention of returning unless he could walk and do magic again; otherwise there'd be no point to it, since he'd be unable to brew potions. Nevertheless, that appeared to be where they were going.

Once inside, Severus made a sweeping gesture with one hand, giving her permission to begin.

"Have at it, Granger; show me your version of Augeo."

She began immediately to work, confident in her abilities, but soon she had to stop, knife in hand.

"No, no, you're holding the knife wrong."

"That's always how I've held my knife; it's the correct way to do it, just like the book shows."

"I would have thought you'd have realized by now that you've reached the limit of what books can show you, Granger. " Severus rolled closer to the table, but from a sitting position he was unable to reach high enough to show her the correct way to hold the knife.

"What are you waiting for, Granger? Shorten the table legs!"

Hermione hurried to comply, but then the table was too low for her. With a noisy sigh, Snape rolled his chair up behind her, striking the backs of her knees with his own and making her fall seated into his lap. She gave a little shriek of surprise but he silenced her with a gesture.

"Here, hold it like this." He placed the knife in her hand and guided it with his own, and rhythmically, methodically, they began to slice the silkworms. Hermione couldn't suppress a laugh of delight...she had never been able to cut up those slippery creatures this easily!

Severus heard her laugh and something clicked inside of him. The memory of the night in the Three Broomsticks hit him like a Bludger; he remembered how marvelous it was to hear and see her laughter. And soon he was all too aware that she was seated across his legs, that he was securing her with an arm around her waist, and that his right hand was laid over the top of hers. His face was only an inch or two from hers; he could smell perfectly the jasmine fragrance of her shampoo. And as if it belonged to someone else, his left arm tightened against her of its own accord, and his right hand squeezed hers, lingering there for a moment.

Hermione felt him pressing her closer, and a little involuntary groan escaped her lips. An unfamiliar sensation flooded over her from head to toe, like an electric shock, but not disagreeable. She could feel her professor's face by her ear, she could hear him breathing . . . and she wished she were brave enough to lean her head back for a moment and rest it on his shoulder . . . offer him her neck . . . *Get a grip, Hermione*, she thought, and released the breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

Snape, when he heard her groan, almost lost his head completely. He had never in his life felt anything like this for a student. He wished he were twenty years younger and had the courage to turn her head towards him and kiss her senseless. Caress her, possess her . . . *Control yourself, Severus*, he thought. *You're not a hormonal adolescent. And she's your student. And she would never, ever fancy you.*

She's not your student any more, said the other voice in his head. *She's just your assistant. And you'll never know whether she fancies you if you don't give it a try.*

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 13

Good news and bad.

The moment passed.

Two people as sensible as they were would never allow themselves be swept away on a tide of dangerous feelings.

Hermione sat motionless, eyes closed, lips parted, not daring to move a muscle. Long seconds passed before both suddenly realized that they needed to move in order to avoid an awkward situation. Well, even more awkward than the one they were in.

He was the first to recover. "You can carry on on your own now."

She inhaled deeply to clear her head, and continued working.

Of course, she achieved a perfect Augeo Vitalis.

But her mind was not on the potion. For the remainder of the day, she worked at a frenetic pace, trying to keep her thoughts at bay. She stayed up well past her customary bedtime in the belief that fatigue would make her fall asleep right away, but she was mistaken.

She lay awake in her bed, enveloped in the darkness, with the curtains closed and her gaze fixed on the canopy above her. Remembering every second. Every movement. Every sensation.

Her left hand crept across her waist, echoing the way he had embraced her. She wanted to feel again that electrical current running all over her, that sensation of abandon, of complete surrender.

She could deny it all she wanted, but that would make it no less true: she felt powerfully attracted to a man who not only was more than twice her age, had been her professor and was now her patient, but was also an ex-Death Eater and one of the most despised people in the magical world.

And yet . . . knowing all of this . . . she still felt like a moth sucked inexorably toward a burning candle: at once conscious of mortal danger and helpless to resist. Thank God she'd be married soon, and safely out of the way of temptation. Although . . . Ron was wonderful, really he was, but he didn't excite these visceral reactions when he held her or made love to her. He was always so earnest...a little anxious, even...and although he tried his best to please her, he had never succeeded in making the earth move for her, nor drawn from her throat a single cry of ecstasy.

But he would be a good husband, she told herself, trying to convince herself she was making the right decision. You couldn't base a relationship...much less a marriage...on sex alone. There were more important things, like friendship...and they had been friends since childhood. They knew each other like an old pair of shoes, and that would guarantee a contented life together.

The sex would probably improve with time.

Severus wasn't faring much better. After he had been helped to bed by a house elf, he lay under the covers with his eyes closed, but instead of sleep he was visited by images from that afternoon. It had been a long time since he had been with a woman...perhaps this was just his body, urging him to get back in the game. Yes, he told himself, that must be it: he was simply experiencing his body's natural response to the nearness of a young woman.

But self-delusion was not one of his failings, and he knew that there was something more going on. Why did it please him so much to see her laugh? Why was he so eager to make her happy? The look on her face when she received his gift had been more than ample compensation for the "loss" of his valuable personal notes. Why? Why did he suddenly adore the smell of jasmine? Why had the thought *she would never fancy me* popped unbidden into his brain?

He berated himself for his stupidity. He was no longer a boy, and yet here he was, repeating the errors of his youth. The last time he had yearned after a Gryffindor who belonged to someone else, he had fucked things up royally and had spent the next twenty years with a broken heart, trying desperately to atone for his actions. There was no way he was going to make the same mistake again.

And this time was even worse than the last, because now he was nineteen years older than she was, stuck in this wheelchair, reduced to a squib, and . . . well, if he had been less than comely in his youth, the years had done nothing to improve his appearance. He refused to become a pathetic old man chasing after a young girl; her rejection would cost him what little dignity he had left. It was a good thing he had observed this weakness in himself early enough to control it with a bit of willpower.

Yes, that was what was called for: the not inconsiderable force of his will. And it was time for him to stop being a pathetic invalid and get back to being Severus Snape, the terror of the dungeons.

So they both made up their minds, she to become Mrs Weasley and he to return to being Severus Snape. The next day they met again as usual, and neither admitted that something extraordinary had happened the day before.

The students in the Hogwarts special summer program had become accustomed to the sight of Hermione Granger pushing Severus Snape about the castle and grounds in his wheelchair, and heads no longer turned when they passed. Only a week remained before the NEWTs, and everyone was studying frantically...except for Hermione, who was completely unruffled and confident of obtaining a good result, a calm due not just to her years of assiduous study, but also to a newly acquired maturity. Looking into the face of death...her own and that of the people she loved most...had given her a new perspective on things.

Severus had tried to continue helping her, but there wasn't much he could help her with any more; hers was a truly exceptional intellect. It was a shame, he thought, that there were no House points to be earned in this program, because she would certainly have earned more than her share.

One quiet Thursday afternoon, they were seated alone by the lake in the shade of the big tree that had become their favorite spot, both immersed in reading their respective books and enjoying a companionable silence, when an owl flew down and dropped a letter in Severus's lap. When it realized they had nothing with which to reward it, it flew quickly away.

Startled to receive a letter, since no one really wrote to him anymore, Severus opened it immediately. As Hermione watched, the tranquility left his face, and his eyes took on a strange brilliance.

"Bad news, Professor?"

"I've just learned that my maternal grandmother has died," he said evenly.

"I'm sorry, sir," she replied, genuinely saddened for him. Poor man. There had already been so much pain and sadness in his life . . . and now this.

"Don't be, Miss Granger. I certainly am not. If I'm sorry for anything, it's that this letter didn't arrive years ago."

Hermione stared at him, shocked and confused. His grandmother had died, and he was *glad*? He saw her expression and laughed harshly, folding the letter. Had she been anyone else, he would not have bothered to explain, but, much as it pained him to admit it, her opinion mattered a great deal to him.

"My mother was a pureblood of good family, Miss Granger. Eileen Prince was raised like a princess, pampered and protected by the wealth of her family. Right up until the day she fell in love with, and got pregnant by, a Muggle, Tobias Snape. In spite of her parents' opposition, she eloped with him. And they disowned her, condemning her...and me...to the miserable life my father provided. If they had had any heart, my mother and I would have had somewhere to go to escape from that monster. But however she begged and pleaded, they never gave in. If only they had died sooner, we would have been able . . . my mother . . ."

The professor faltered in mid-sentence, lacking the words to finish his thought. He felt the hand of his ex-student on his arm, and saw a look of sympathy in her eyes.

"We were hungry, cold, afraid. Tobias Snape abused us verbally and physically. I at least was able to escape here to Hogwarts, but she remained a prisoner in that house. And my grandparents knew it, and they didn't give a damn. If only they had died sooner, we would have had a place to live in peace, and some means of sustenance."

His eyes glittered darkly, filled with a fury she'd never seen before.

"My mother died in short order. My father killed her...not with blows, not with a weapon. But she died of grief, so it comes to the same thing. She guttered and went out, little by little, like a candle, until she finally lost the will to go on . . . and her parents did nothing to help her, and they *knew*. They knew everything, the whole time, and they

let her die."

His features twisted, and then hardened. Hermione pressed her hand on his arm, and he placed his own hand over it.

"Professor . . ."

"And now . . . now . . . it's all mine: the house, the fortune. Now, when I don't need it any more, when my mother is gone. But I know the last thing my grandparents would have wanted is for the son of Tobias Snape to stroll through those rooms as lord and owner. So that's exactly what I plan to do."

"I'll go with you," she said, in a voice almost as fierce as his own, but then she remembered whom she was talking to and added, in a softer voice, "that's if you want me to."

Severus raised his glistening eyes to hers, taken aback by the offer.

"After the NEWTs, Professor, we'll go and walk around the Princes' house."

The NEWTs arrived at long last. They threw themselves into the exams wholeheartedly, determined to get the best results possible. Hermione was accustomed to being the last to leave the classroom after the written exams, since her answers were always extensive and detailed. She had no problem with either the written or the practical exams, and when she was done she felt very strange, as if it were not reality that she had finally taken her very last exam, and her education at Hogwarts was finally at an end.

They had spent the evening before the last day of exams together in the common room, celebrating and sharing what would be one of their last moments together as classmates, recounting the funniest incidents...and some of the terrible ones, like when the twins left Hogwarts for good, or the horrific fight with the mountain troll that they had early in their first year.

The day after the exams were over, the boys went out in the afternoon to play Quidditch, conscious of how little time was left to them to fly over the Hogwarts pitch, and Hermione went to the library to bid farewell to the thousands of books that had been her constant companions all these years.

She took down a fat volume of *Hogwarts, A History* and sat at a table by a window. After a few minutes she laid her head on the smooth pages to rest for a moment, and before she realized what was happening, she had fallen asleep.

She woke when Madam Pince shook her by the shoulder, her voice urgent.

"Wake up, Miss Granger. The headmistress wants to see you immediately in her office."

"Wha--?" she asked, confused, waking disoriented from her dream and wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "Professor McGonagall?"

"Yes, she's asking for you and insists on seeing you immediately."

Hermione ran her hands over her face and hair, trying to put herself to rights, and yanked at her robes to straighten them. Wondering what on earth could be awful enough to make the headmistress issue such a peremptory summons, she ransacked her memory, looking for any misdemeanor she might have committed. But no, her conscience was clear; she could think of nothing they could reproach her for.

The gargoyle admitted her without requiring a password when she arrived, and then the headmistress's office door opened just as she raised her hand to knock. Inside, Professor McGonagall was waiting for her, along with a formally dressed man.

"Good afternoon, Miss Granger. Allow me to introduce Mr O'Riordan," said Minerva in a formal manner, gesturing toward the man standing next to her, who nodded politely to Hermione. "Mr O'Riordan has come from the Ministry for the express purpose of giving you the results of your NEWTs."

"But . . . the results aren't supposed to arrive until tomorrow," she said, confused.

"That is correct," broke in the Ministry envoy. "Your official results will arrive tomorrow, and I'm told nobody here"...he glanced at Professor McGonagall..."will be surprised that you got 'Outstanding' in every subject. But given the circumstances, we felt it appropriate to give you more detailed results privately, along with our sincere congratulations. Your percentage scores in the examinations were extraordinarily high, breaking a number of historical records. Here..." he handed her a rolled parchment tied with a red ribbon "...are your examination scores. Again, congratulations, Miss Granger."

Hermione could barely take in what she was hearing. A number of historical records? She unrolled the parchment with shaking hands, and her eyes flew across the columns bearing the numbers of her results, along with another set of columns showing the previous high scores. She raised her eyes, still in a state of shock, and opened and closed her mouth several times, trying to say something, but her mind was a complete blank. Suddenly she broke from her reverie and said, "Thank you so much, but I have to . . ." and left the office at a run.

She practically flew through the castle corridors, leaping up the staircases, grabbing onto pillars as she rounded the corners, running as fast as her legs would carry her.

She burst into the bedroom, but stopped abruptly in the doorway.

Because he was standing up, looking out the window at the sunset.

Hearing someone enter, he turned slowly, bracing himself against the windowsill.

"Professor!" she cried, on the verge of tears, and she ran and threw her arms around him.

He could barely withstand the impact of her body against his chest; his knees buckled under him, and he leaned on her to keep himself from falling.

"I knew it was just a matter of time," she said, her breathless voice choked with emotion, "but I didn't think you'd be able to manage it so soon."

Smiling, Severus pushed a stray lock of hair back from her face.

"No more did I, Miss Granger. No more did I."

They regarded each other for a moment in silence, the slanting rays of the setting sun warming their faces. Suddenly she drew in a sharp breath, startled by the weight of a revelation.

"Professor, your eyes! They're not black, they're *brown*!"

Severus chuckled softly.

"Of course they're brown, foolish girl. If they were black..."

"...you'd have aniridia. And aniridia is associated with diseases of the eye and cognitive deficiencies. And you clearly suffer from neither of those."

"Always the insufferable know-it-all. I assume, from the unusual way in which you entered, that you have something important to tell me."

Hermione's face split in a tremendous smile, and she showed him the roll of parchment.

"My NEWT results. A Ministry clerk came expressly to bring them to me. I've broken various records...in fact, I've got the highest scores of the last twenty years."

"And in Potions? You beat my old score as well?" There was just a hint of trepidation in his voice.

"No, Professor. I didn't beat it. *Matched it.*"

T/N: Exartemarte really earned his exorbitant salary this chapter, helping two American Muggles find their way through the British educational system. We doff our collective hat to you, sir.

A/N:

From Wikipedia: "Aniridia is the absence of the iris. This usually occurs in both eyes. It can be congenital or caused by a penetrant injury. Congenital aniridia is not just an isolated defect in iris development but is a panocular disorder with macular and optic nerve hypoplasia, cataract, and corneal changes. Vision is severely compromised with the aniridia and the disorder is frequently associated with a number of complications with the eye: nystagmus, amblyopia, buphthalmos, and cataract."

Obviously Hermione, insufferable know-it-all that she is, was already aware of this.

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 13

Out of my way, Weasley.

It was the night of the Hogwarts Leaving Dance, and Hermione was descending the Common Room staircase with great care in order not to twist an ankle in her outrageously high heels. Wrapped in yards of gauzy pale-apricot fabric, her hair swept deftly into an elegant twist and her face expertly made up by Lavender, she felt beautiful and sexy...something she never felt when she was wearing her school robes or her jeans. Or her student nurse's uniform.

Harry and Ginny waited below, arm in arm, along with Ron. *My fiancé*, she thought, as he turned to look her up and down with those startlingly blue eyes.

"You look as beautiful as . . . as . . ." he said, and took her hand to help her down the last step. Clearly, he was trying to pay her a compliment, but the words were escaping him.

Hermione rolled her eyes at this demonstration of eloquence, but smiled when Harry said, "You're dazzling, Hermione. If it weren't for Ginny, I'd be fighting Ron for the privilege of escorting you."

"Watch it, Potter," said Ginny, tugging him by the necktie, and the two of them left, laughing, in the direction of the party.

It was a smaller party than in previous years, since not all of the seventh-years had come back to finish their studies. Some because they didn't want to, others because they had moved on . . . or because they were dead.

But so many were there...almost everyone from the Order of the Phoenix, students' parents, others who had fought alongside them in the in the Battle of Hogwarts...that it seemed like just another of the celebrations occasioned by the fall of the Dark Lord.

The music played, and the students danced. Harry and Ron were no longer the children they had been at their first dance, during the Triwizard Tournament; they had a man's appreciation now of the pleasures of holding a woman and moving to the rhythm of the music. Not that either of them was possessed of exceptional grace, but at least they were genuinely enjoying it now.

They were well into their third dance when Hermione noticed, among the little knot of professors, the arrival of a wheelchair pushed by a frightened house-elf who disappeared as soon as his task was completed.

Severus Snape, who had sworn he would never deign to attend a dance held for the spotty little scrotes, was here...dressed in his best robes, of a silk so black they seemed to suck in all the light around them.

Hermione kept dancing, but awareness of him pricked at the edge of her consciousness. She saw him turn down a glass of punch, shaking his head politely. And then to everyone's astonishment, he picked up a cane from beside the chair and rose ceremoniously to his feet.

They all held their breath as he took his first shaky steps, wondering if his legs would support him. The music continued to play and the couples to dance, but no one's mind was on the dancing: there was a much more interesting spectacle unfolding at the moment.

Step by slow step, with a look of focused determination on his face, and the dignity of which only he was capable, Severus arrived at the place where Ron was dancing across from his fiancée, who had stopped in anticipation.

He shot Ron a fierce look, and thrust the cane roughly toward his chest.

"Out of my way, Weasley. I'm here to dance with my nurse."

And to Hermione's...to everyone's...amazement, he took her by the waist and began to move gently in time to the music.

To say that they danced would be an exaggeration. Snape was barely able to move, and he leaned on Hermione much of the time, but they managed to move gently back and forth on the dance floor.

"Professor . . . what do you suppose we're " she began, once she had overcome her initial shock and recovered the use of her voice, but he interrupted her.

"Shhh, Granger . . . I know that I said I'd rather be dead than come to this party, but I was forced to reconsider. It's the Leaving Dance for my best student and my nurse. I

had to come and dance with you at least once."

He berated himself mentally for having said something so infantile, made such a cheap excuse. He had come because he wanted to see her in her finery, because he had wanted to hold her as he was doing at this moment . . . and by Merlin, because he would have regretted it bitterly if he hadn't had the guts to do it. It might well be the only opportunity he'd have to hold her in his arms . . . although, if he were being honest, she was the one holding him.

He was drunk on the music, the lights, the sweet smile on her face and the fragrant aroma of jasmine that surrounded her, and before he could stop his tongue, he had blurted out, "God, you're beautiful tonight. How do you do that?"

Surprised, her brown eyes met the dark depths of his own. His gaze and his words were so intense that she had to look away, blushing furiously. She felt as though her feelings for him were written all over her for him to read.

Severus Snape could have kicked himself. He felt as though speaking those words had bared his soul to her and given her access to his thoughts. To their mutual relief, the song ended just at that moment, and Ron came up to them, holding the cane in his hand. Severus took it, leaned on it, and turned to go. Both Ron and Hermione tried to help him walk, but he batted Ron's hand away brusquely and shot Hermione a warning look. He walked back to his chair and sat down, and the elf that had brought him returned to take him back to his rooms.

Minerva and Poppy looked at each other, confused.

"What's going on here, Poppy?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. I sent those two on their way from the Hospital Wing some time ago," murmured the Mediwitch, bemused.

When he arrived outside his rooms, Severus stood up immediately and walked the few steps to the door. And first laying his forehead carefully against the wood, he drew back and struck his head against it three times. *Brute. Beast. Animal*, he thought, in time with the blows. He sighed deeply, resigning himself to the idea that what was done, was done, and he sat down to drink Firewhisky until he passed out. At least that way he'd be able to sleep.

And while Severus was hitting his head against his door, Ron took his fiancée to the Room of Requirement to have their last romantic night in the castle, before some other couple had the same idea and beat them to it.

The following morning found Hermione sleeping on the edge of the bed, while her fiancé occupied almost the entire rest of it, sleeping with outflung arms and legs. She stretched painfully, her muscles protesting the uncomfortable night, but relieved that the torture had ended.

Getting up, she looked at the man who would be her husband in a few short weeks. He looked so peaceful when he slept. He wasn't handsome, really, but neither was he ugly. His hair blazed like a bonfire in the morning light, and the freckles across his nose gave him the look of a mischievous child.

She buried one hand in his hair and was overcome by a feeling of affection. She loved Ron. Of course she did. She loved him with an infinite tenderness. He might not be the perfect lover, he was hardly romantic, but . . . they cared for each other deeply. That was more than you could say for most married couples.

She concentrated, and the Room responded rapidly to her request, supplying her with quill and parchment. She wrote Ron a note, telling him that she had to follow through on the promise to Professor Snape that they'd discussed the night before, and that she'd see him next weekend. She dressed quickly and headed straight for Gryffindor Tower to shower and change.

She felt contented. She had finished her studies with the highest qualifications a person could get; there was a post waiting for her at St Mungo's and a brilliant future to look forward to. For a second she remembered that in two weeks she'd be married as well, and would need to talk to Ron about her career . . . and she also remembered the intense look her professor had given her the night before . . . but she buried those thoughts deep in her mind. She didn't want to mar her moment of happiness.

When she arrived at Severus's rooms, the doors recognized her and opened to let her pass. He was seated in an ordinary chair, the cane resting between his knees, his hands fiddling with his now-useless wand. On seeing her, he slid the wand into his sleeve and stood up. Just the sight of him here, waiting patiently, filled her with intense joy, and she smiled in spite of herself.

"Good morning, Miss Granger. If appearances are anything to go by, you had a good night." He felt a twinge of jealousy but was unwilling to admit it even to himself.

"Good morning, Professor. Erm, I guess that depends on your point of view . . . but most of all I'm happy to be getting out of here once and for all. Are you ready?"

"I've sent a quantity of luggage, and the wheelchair, ahead with house-elves. Minerva was kind enough to connect the fireplace of this room to my new abode. All that remains is to ask whether you've had breakfast."

"No, actually...I didn't have time."

"Perfect. We'll have breakfast in my new house." He gestured ahead of him to the fireplace.

"Who should go first, sir? I don't want to arrive before you; I'd feel odd if there were someone waiting there . . . and you'll need help getting out of the fireplace . . ."

Severus stepped into the fireplace and stood there with his hand outstretched.

"Quiet, then, Granger, and put your arms around me. We'll arrive together."

Hermione stepped forward and took the proffered hand, and he pulled her against his chest and encircled her with his arms. Instinctively, she placed her hands against his chest and felt her head begin to spin even though they hadn't yet begun to travel. The fragrance of his aftershave invaded her senses, her heart began to beat uncontrollably fast, and she lost her breath for a few seconds. Her eyes closed involuntarily and she gave herself over to the feeling of being embraced by her Potions professor.

This reaction did not go unnoticed by Snape. His entire mind and body shouted at him to incline his head until his lips found hers and kiss her until she yielded to him. Those soft lips, moist and pink, that had just now parted . . . for him. *I'm hallucinating*, he thought, and settled for clasping her a little closer to his chest.

"Granger . . . are you all right?" *She's probably just dizzy. Low blood sugar from missing breakfast.*

She opened her eyes, looking a little startled.

"Yes, Professor, I'm fine."

"Hold on, then."

She clasped her arms firmly about his waist, and he released a handful of Floo powder.

"Prince residence!"

T/N: I have coined a new Spanish noun, *britpicolaje*, in honor of exartemarte.

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 13

Hermione's housecleaning takes an unexpected turn.

Many thanks to exartemarte for the beta and Britpick.

When the world stopped spinning, Hermione opened her eyes and found herself standing in the center of a huge fireplace, arms about her professor. He looked at her for a moment to see if she was all right and she nodded. Hand in hand they stepped out of the fireplace into a spacious, elegant hall. She tried to remain unimpressed, or at least to act as if she were, but it was hard. If the rest of the house was like this hall . . . then the Princes had indeed been filthy rich. And from the look of it, Snape was having the same thought, because she heard him hiss under his breath, "Fucking arseholes."

A man in formal robes cleared his throat and approached them with his hand extended.

"How do you do, Mr Snape. Castor Robinson; I'm the Prince family solicitor. And I assume the young lady is your daughter?"

Severus and Hermione looked at each other, startled. His *daughter*? Did the man not have eyes in his head? They were about as alike as night and day. . . oh, of course. They were still holding hands. Severus released Hermione's hand, only to put an arm about her shoulders.

"Miss Granger is not my daughter," he said gravely, but without further clarification.

"Ah, yes, of course . . ." the man stammered, visibly embarrassed. "Naturally . . . er, shall we have a look at the matters which have brought us together this morning, if you don't mind?"

They sat down at the table and the solicitor began bringing out papers followed by more papers, pouring forth a stream of legal jargon that in short order began to bore Hermione senseless. She soon realized that her attention had wandered to the furnishings of the hall, and that she was itching to get up and explore the house. Really, she had no interest whatsoever in how much money Snape was going to have; she was just here to help him and keep him company.

There were three cracks in rapid succession, and three house-elves appeared before them, breaking her from her reverie.

" . . . and these are Dixy, Mindy, and Daley," the man explained, as each elf responded to its name with a bow. "They are from this moment at your service and will show you around the house. Do you have any questions? No? Well then, Mr Snape, it's been a pleasure," he concluded, holding out his hand to Severus. "And it's been a pleasure meeting you as well, Miss Gregson."

"Granger," they both said in unison, although his was more of a growl.

"Granger," the man said apologetically, and disappeared into the fireplace, leaving them alone in the house in front of three frightened house-elves.

"Sir?" The male elf, Daley, approached, putting on a brave face for all of them. They'd always been told that the Snapes were the worst sort of vulgar trash, and now a Snape was their master.

"Is there anything Daley can do for Sir?"

Severus regarded him seriously and spoke in a low voice, almost to himself.

"Dixy, Mindy, and Daley. Here's a turn-up for the books...I've never had my own house-elves. Do your duty and I'll be fair with you. But a warning: I don't like busybodies of any kind, is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," responded the trembling creatures in chorus.

"And now Miss Granger and I would like to have our breakfast, please."

"And if you could please bring the wheelchair," added Hermione.

After eating their breakfast off the Princes'...now Snape's...fine china, they set out to explore the house, he in the wheelchair and she pushing it. It wasn't quite a mansion, but it was undoubtedly large and quite elegant. Daley volunteered to guide them and show them the bedrooms. Snape looked pleased to see that his things were already arranged in the master bedroom, but it soon became apparent that the elf was extremely nervous. He twisted a corner of the pillowcase in which he was clad, and seemed to be struggling with himself about whether to speak. Hermione could tell that Snape was growing increasingly irritated, and she gave him a pleading look and put a hand over his, silently asking him not to be too harsh. He looked at her and sighed inwardly. Was he incapable of refusing her anything?

"Very well, Daley, what is bothering you?"

"D-d-daley doesn't wish to be a busybody, sir, but, the young Miss...is we to put her things here or in another bedroom?"

Severus turned to look at Hermione, whose face had turned a deep crimson. His natural impulse was to explode in anger, but her hand on his shoulder changed his mind for him. Instead of terrifying the elf with a roar, he burst out laughing.

"Nosy little creature! No, Miss Granger is not my girlfriend, she is . . ." he almost said *my nurse*, but he realized suddenly that for some time she had been more than that to him. "She is . . . my *friend*," he concluded, savoring the feel of the word in his mouth. It wasn't one he used often, particularly with reference to himself, but it sounded good. Very good.

Hermione said nothing. Not even a sigh escaped her lips, but the sudden title left her slightly breathless. *Friend? Who are his friends, then? They've all either died or abandoned him. I'm his only . . . friend.*

"And I want one thing clear: even though she is neither my girlfriend nor my daughter..." here he made a face, remembering the solicitor "...I want you to treat her with the same respect and consideration, do you understand?"

"Yes, Master, Miss Granger is a like a member of the family; Daley will let the other elves know. If Master excuses him, Daley will go to prepare a room for Miss Granger," he said in his squeaky voice, then snapped his fingers and was gone.

Hermione went to the window and looked out at the landscape. The house was built on a precipice, which gave it a splendid view of the Cornish coastline. Feigning interest in the expanse of blue before her, she said:

"So . . . friends, is it?"

Snape passed a hand across his face in a gesture that was half desperation, half weariness.

"Miss Granger, you and I both know perfectly well that this hasn't been a nurse-patient relationship for some time now. I don't need a nurse, and you don't need more work experience hours. Why you remain by my side is beyond my comprehension, yet reason suggests that you must have some motivation. If I haven't forgotten what the word means...and make no mistake, I well could have done...I am forced to conclude that you are my friend."

"Of course I am. I consider it an honor."

Severus' eyelids drooped, and he said in a menacing tone:

"I wouldn't sound so pleased if I were you; I'm a wretched friend. And now that we've cleared this up, might we please forget about it?"

"No! No, I don't want to forget about it. What's more, if we're friends, we might stop being so formal with each other, don't you think? Friends don't call each..."

"Miss Granger, kindly don't make me regret saying what I did," he interrupted, and she realized it was better not to push. If she had to call him 'Professor Snape' until the end of time, well, that didn't matter so much.

The days passed peacefully during their first week in the now-Snape residence. The house-elves adapted readily to their undemanding new master and, surprised to be treated so considerately by a Snape, made an effort to please him, outdoing themselves to produce delicious meals, impeccably clean rooms, and irreproachable service.

Meanwhile, the Potions Master and the apprentice Mediwitch dedicated themselves to redoing the house according to his tastes. They reorganized the library and remodeled a basement room into a potions laboratory, in anticipation of the day when he would regain his magical powers (old habits die hard, and Severus felt more at his ease several meters below ground).

Each day, Severus spent less time in the wheelchair and more walking the halls with the aid of his cane. Sometimes Hermione would enter the library and find him seated in a chair, his gaze distant and lost, twirling his wand sadly between his fingers, as if pining for the days when he was able to do magic. At such times she would leave the room quietly before he noticed her, to save him the embarrassment of being discovered.

During her wanderings of the house on one of those awkward occasions, she came upon a locked room. She tried opening it with an Alohomora, but had no success and called one of the elves.

"Dixy?"

Crack

"Miss called?"

"Dixy, could you tell me what is inside this room and why it is locked?"

"Dixy had almost forgotten it, Miss Hermione. It is Miss Eileen's old bedroom." And then she added in a whisper, "The old Masters ordered that the room stay locked forever, but Dixy can open it for Miss Hermione."

"Yes, thank you, Dixy, I would like for you to open it," she said, mentally rubbing her hands in anticipation. It would appear that she had stumbled upon a treasure. She would clean and air the room and surprise Severus with it...it was certain to be filled with his mother's things. At that moment the door opened, and she saw that she had been correct on both counts: the room looked like a sort of time capsule, but covered in dust and cobwebs.

She rolled her sleeves up and set to work, opening the windows to let in light and air and allow the smell of mildew to dissipate. Drawing forth her wand, she began to cast a series of spells to remove the dust and cobwebs. Dixy offered to do it for her, but Hermione demurred; she wanted to do it with her own hands as a gift for Severus. Besides, she wanted to be alone to poke around to her heart's content, so she thanked the elf and sent her away.

It was without a doubt the room of a cosseted daughter. There were frames with moving pictures, showing a teenaged girl with raven's-wing hair laughing happily with her friends at the seaside, flying on a broom, in the Hogwarts great hall. There was a dresser scattered with beauty products, a Wizard Wireless receiver, posters on the walls . . .

She began going through the drawers and found a diary but did not read it. Remembering the story her professor had told her, she imagined how terrible it must have been for this pampered child to exchange all this for a life of poverty and deprivation. Perhaps it would be painful for Severus to have to see it, but she knew that he had the right to know what his mother had been like when she was young. At least she could spare him the sight of it in its initial condition, decayed by years of neglect.

It was then that she noticed the chest, identical to the one she herself had had at Hogwarts. It would certainly be filled with mementos of Eileen's student years. Smiling, she lifted the lid.

A piercing scream jerked Snape from his wandering thoughts, and without thinking about what he was doing he jumped up from the chair, wand in hand, and ran in the direction of the cries.

He was filled with fear, but not for himself.

When he entered the room, he found Hermione huddled in a corner, weeping with terror, held at wandpoint by Bellatrix Lestrange, who looked more demented than ever.

Severus felt the rage and fear rise from his stomach and spill with a sour taste into his mouth. Ready to die before he let anything happen to Hermione, he thrust himself in between her and the crazed Death-Eater.

Years later, when he remembered that moment, he wondered what god in the heavens had made him realize what was really happening, and at what point the light had come on in his brain. Because Bellatrix was dead, and there was simply no way she could be in his house, threatening Hermione with death . . .

"Avada..." she began, but Snape was quicker, and raising his wand, he cried:

"Riddikulus!"

A bold of light shot from Severus's wand, and in an instant the rabid Death-Eater was transformed into an exact replica of Pippi Longstocking, complete with red pigtailed and mismatched socks. It was a hilarious image, but Severus hardly felt like laughing. With a wave of his wand, he shoved her into the chest and slammed the lid shut, turning immediately to fall to his knees beside the terrified Hermione, who clutched at him as if he were a life preserver.

Snape held her tight, murmuring comforting sounds, saying things like, "It's over, it's over, I'm here, I'll never let anything bad happen to you." She buried her face in his neck, seeking out his smell, his warmth, his aura of protection. At his side, no harm could come to her. In his arms she could find refuge and peace. He tilted her tear-streaked face up, anxious to reassure himself that she was all right. She looked up at him with admiration and gratitude, with trust, with . . . love? Unable to stop himself, he kissed her on the cheek, tasting the salt of her tears.

Something came over them at that moment, because Hermione felt as though she were surrendering to her destiny, helpless in the hands of this dark man, offering him her lips as if it were his right to claim them.

"Hermione..." he groaned, knowing himself incapable of resisting what she was offering.

"Severus," she said, giving in at last to the overwhelming force of her feelings.

His lips touched hers, hesitantly, but after a wary first kiss, he kissed her as if neither past nor future existed, only this sublime moment.

Chapter Nine

Chapter 9 of 13

Ron suspects, and does not go gentle.

Thanks as always to exartemarte for the beta/Britpick.

On rare occasions in this life there are brilliant moments, ones that we would choose to live over and over again if we could, events which remain etched by fire in our memory.

The kiss between Severus and Hermione was one of those memorable events. And yet that impression was to change almost immediately.

When they finally broke apart to allow some air into their starving lungs, they looked into each other's eyes, each searching out the reflection of the other's soul. She lifted her hand to caress his cheek, but at the instant she did it he saw her mouth twist in a grimace, and she lowered her eyes. He followed the direction of her gaze and saw the cause: a gold ring inset with a ruby.

To say that Severus felt as if a bucket of cold water had been dashed over him would be an understatement. He felt his heart give way, as if he had been stabbed. So much self-abnegation, so much suffering and skirmishing with death, so much healing from his broken heart . . . all so that a slip of a girl could wound him again. A girl he had allowed into his thoughts and feelings, thinking that nothing could ever hurt him like that again. For one brief second his face became a mask of pain, but within an instant it had regained its customary cold expression. At the very least he would keep his dignity. And thank god for his years of practice as a spy.

Hermione raised her eyes slowly. She did not see the moment in which she had destroyed Severus's unexpressed aspirations, nor did she see the way he had regarded her with anguish, with pain, and with hopeless yearning. She saw only the mask of cold indifference with which he had succeeded in arming himself.

Ron. She was engaged to Ron, her friend since childhood, the first and only man she had ever been with, the future father of her children, who in one short week would be her husband. Could she dishonor that commitment? Trample the confidence that had been placed in her?

But Severus . . . kissing Severus felt different from anything she had ever felt before. She felt as though she could completely lose herself in his arms, drown in the depths of his dark eyes, while that velvet voice caressed her, saying her name over and over: *Hermione, Hermione* . . .

Never in her life had she felt so confused. She needed time to think, time to sort through her feelings . . . but time was the very thing she didn't have. Severus was there in front of her, waiting, and within seven days Ron would be waiting for her at the altar, with Harry and Ginny as witnesses, and the whole Weasley clan seated around her, and her parents, and all the members of the Order of the Phoenix . . . just thinking about it gave her vertigo.

But Severus was looking at her coldly, indifferently now. Where was the man rapt with passion who had kissed her only seconds before? Had she imagined him? No, not possible. Had it been nothing more than a kind of seizure that had carried him away in the emotion of the moment?

Hermione dried the tears that were filling her eyes on the sleeve of her sweater. Severus held out a white handkerchief, and she thanked him timidly. He stood and helped her up. They looked steadily at each other for another moment, and then he turned and left her alone in the filthy room.

He hadn't even noticed that it was his mother's bedroom.

It was Saturday morning, the day after the incident in Eileen Prince's bedroom. Hermione and Severus were seated at the dining-room table eating breakfast, conversing in a cordial tone but unable to look each other in the eye. Suddenly the fireplace blazed green, and Ron appeared, covered in soot and ash.

"Someone needs to give this chimney a good sweep...look what it's done to me!"

"Ron!" she cried, and jumped up to throw her arms around him and kiss him. It wasn't that she was that eager to do it, but it was what he would be expecting.

"Wait, Mione . . . ugh! I told you! Now look, I've got dirt all over you!" He laughed merrily and gave her a playful kiss. "I've missed you."

Ron touched the tip of her nose, leaving a smudge of soot that was at once funny and adorable...but nothing short of torture for Severus, who couldn't help but think that the spectacle was going to make him bring up his breakfast if he didn't get up from the table immediately. Privately he set aside the image of the little scene, recasting himself in Ron's place, imagining himself making her laugh and blackening the tip of her nose before helping himself to more kisses. With a hiss, he threw his napkin down on the table and left the dining room.

It was going to be a long weekend for Severus Snape.

Ron and Hermione spent the rest of the afternoon together, and Snape made certain to stay out of their way. Ron could not get used to the idea that his "Mione" was so chummy with the bat of the dungeons, and he wondered what kept her at his side. His lack of academic prowess didn't mean Ron was a fool. Snape was walking now, and

his wound was still livid, but it was healed shut. Hermione had explained to Ron that even though the wound was closed, any exertion or sudden movement might open it again, and the danger of this happening was still acute.

According to her.

When evening came they gathered again in the dining room for dinner. Snape did not seem particularly inclined to strike up a conversation with Ron, and Hermione understood that he had already put himself out considerably in allowing Ron to come to his house, so she didn't press him. She had known for some time just how far the man could be pushed.

Ron chattered gaily to his fiancée while the house-elves set the dinner on the table. And then something happened that made his mouth go dry and the words to stick in his throat. Hermione raised a bite of beef to her mouth, and before she could make the slightest gesture of pleasure or displeasure, Severus picked up the salt-cellar and placed it in her hand. Without even looking at it, she salted her meat and continued to eat. Ron looked at Severus's plate and realized that he had not yet touched his food. *How the devil could the greasy git have known that she wanted to salt her meat?*

"Is something the matter, Ron?" she said, realizing that he had suddenly fallen silent.

She doesn't even realize what just happened.

"Nothing, Mione. I was just looking at how beautiful you are." *I still can't believe you're mine, and that we're getting married this weekend.* He cast a sidelong glance at Severus, who seemed to be taking an unusual interest in his dinner. "To our future marriage," he said, raising his wineglass and waiting for Severus and Hermione to join him.

Severus left off examining his plate and raised his glass. He looked for a second at Hermione, also with her glass in hand, and took a slow sip while looking steadily at Ron, then set the glass back down on the table. Ron's look was freighted with a very clear warning: *stay away from her.*

But Snape was not a person who was easily intimidated, least of all by a little snot-nose like Ronald Weasley. Before Severus could get his feelings under control, Ron's wineglass shattered into a thousand pieces, drawing forth a shriek of alarm from Hermione. Instinctively, she moved towards her former professor for protection, and he stopped himself halfway to shielding her with his arm.

"What was that?" she cried, returning to her seat perhaps a fraction too late to escape Ron's notice.

"The change in temperature, perhaps . . . poorly tempered glass," said Severus, with a face of innocence.

Ron got up from his chair and went over to her, squatting down until his face was on a level with hers.

"Are you all right, Mione?" he asked in the sweetest tone he could muster, drawing a hand down her cheek.

Hermione could only nod shakily. She felt guilty, as if she had been caught in the act of betraying him.

Ron would not be cowed, and as soon as Mindy had cleared away the debris, he sat back down and applied himself to his dessert. And as Hermione had completely lost what appetite she'd had, he ate hers as well.

When the meal was finally over they left the dining room together, Severus with the intention of sitting for a while in the library with a glass of whisky until it was time for bed. He had a lot to think about. But Ron had very different plans. Taking his fiancée by the hand, he drew her to him and kissed her fiercely, pulling her along with him upstairs toward her bedroom. They went up amid kisses and laughter (his), and when they were at the top, Ron stopped and looked back down. As he had suspected, Severus had paused, and was watching them from the foot of the stairs.

This time there was no well-practiced mask of espionage that could have deceived Hermione. His face betrayed nothing, but his eyes met hers, and she knew. Knew that it was he she should be with at this moment, he who should be taking her to his room, he who should be covering her with kisses.

But real life was different.

"Good night, Professor," said Ron, with a self-satisfied smile.

"Good night, Severus," she said, her eyes pleading with him to forgive her.

He did not reply, but turned to go instead, his robes billowing about him, and walked determinedly in the direction of the library. Really, he could use a glass of Firewhisky.

From a distance he heard:

"Since when do you call him Severus?"

Chapter Ten

Chapter 10 of 13

At long last lemons.

T/N: Thanks as always to exartemarte for beta and Britpickage.

The alarm clock on her bedside table read three a.m., and Hermione gave a hiss of irritation. There was simply no way she was going to get any sleep. She was dead tired after a frantic day of dress fittings, hair consultations, and any number of other last-minute decisions to be made before the weekend. Running back and forth between her parents' house and the Burrow; Ginny babbling every few seconds that she couldn't believe they were going to be sisters at long last, and that when she and Harry got married they'd all be one big family; Molly looking over the invitation list for the umpteenth time and saying, "I know that I've left someone off, but I can't think who;" Arthur playing with the Muggle appliances that had arrived as wedding presents from her side of the family. And the constant clamor of the house, full of people coming and going, conversing, laughing and making merry.

She would have liked to put her elegantly gloved hands over her ears and shut it all out.

So when she finally arrived at the Prince residence that night, at well past midnight, she blessed the absolute silence that greeted her, and thanked the gods that Ron was training for his team and couldn't come to sleep with her that night. She wanted to be alone in the bed, able to lie down in the middle with her arms and legs outstretched, finding the coolest part of the sheets . . . and to sleep. Sleep deeply, because in her dreams she could put it all out of her mind, could forget who she was and what was expected of her. Rest.

But after three hours of tossing and turning between the sheets she began to believe that even that simple pleasure would be denied her. She could always get up and go to ask Severus for a sleeping draught. Hermione couldn't help but smile ruefully into the darkness; she had spent three hours trying not to think about him and had failed miserably, and getting up at three in the morning to knock on his bedroom door in her nightgown was not exactly the best way of putting him out of her mind.

Was it really so bad to think about him? She told herself that a little fantasy never hurt anyone, and hugging her pillow close, she let her thoughts wander freely. And of course, as soon as it had slipped the leash, her mind flew back to the memory of her Potions professor. With her eyes closed, she watched the parade of images: the memory of the morning they had woken up together, or the moment when she had first realized that her relationship with him was something special. She imagined herself lying by his side in his bed while he pulled her close against his body, hearing his breathing in her ear, feeling his hands traversing her skin. And just think, now he was in complete control of his body . . . she couldn't stop her mind from going there, and she buried her face in the pillow to stifle the hysterical laughter that threatened to overtake her. But just as she got the laughter under control, another memory assaulted her: the memory of being held against his body, weeping, while he gazed at her as if nothing else existed in the universe except the brilliance in her eyes; the way he had held her, and dried her tears, the comforting sound of his soft, gentle voice. And that amazing kiss that had made her question everything she had been taking for granted before.

Did he have feelings for her? She refused to believe that the kiss had meant nothing. It had been so intense, so fraught with emotion, it had come directly from that corner of her heart where she kept her most profound, secret feelings. It was a kiss that should never have been allowed to happen, but nevertheless had.

When they kissed she had been certain that he felt the same for her, that his kiss had also come from that hidden place; that he had struggled to resist it, and finally given in. She would still be sure of it, were it not for the recollection of his expressionless face when she had looked into his eyes.

Fucking enigmatic bat.

But what would she do if he really was in love with her? Would that change anything?

Damn it, this is not healthy, she thought, throwing off the sheet abruptly and getting up to go to the kitchen for a glass of milk. She was not about to wake up the elves at three in the morning.

Severus had not been able to sleep either until he heard her arrive alone at her bedroom door. At that moment he felt himself heave a sigh of relief. Home: safe, sound . . . and by herself. He couldn't bear the idea that she would have to share her life with that idiot Weasley. He knew there was nothing he could do to change her fate, but at least for tonight she wouldn't have to share her bed with him.

The following morning they both were showing the effects of too little sleep, but Hermione looked really dreadful.

"Pre-wedding jitters getting the best of you, Miss Granger?" he asked, pouring himself a cup of coffee.

"I think so. I could barely sleep last night. I think I finally dropped off about half five," she said with a yawn. "I had no idea a night could be so long."

"Why didn't you ask me for a sleeping draught? All modesty aside, I do know a thing or two about them."

"Really, sir, I didn't want to disturb you. I would have been interrupting your sleep, I didn't..." She had been on the verge of saying, "I didn't want to risk it," but her voice trailed off in mid-sentence and her eyes lost focus, gazing off into nothingness.

"Miss Granger? Hermione?" He waved a hand in front of her eyes. "Perhaps you should go back to bed."

"No, I've got a million things to do. Although to tell the truth, I don't have the slightest interest in any of them, and it does seem like everyone is managing just fine without me."

"Go and lie down. I'll have Trixy bring you a potion."

Severus left the dining room to get the potion, but when he returned he found her asleep, her head pillowed on one arm. The sight of her warmed what was left of his heart, and he was flooded with a feeling of tenderness. He ached to take her in his arms and just watch her sleep . . . memorize every feature of her face, count her eyelashes, stroke her hair and be there, the first thing she would see when she woke.

Bugger it, he thought, and made up his mind. He slipped one arm under her knees and another behind her back and lifted her almost effortlessly. Feeling the movement, Hermione startled awake and found herself looking into the face of her professor. She furrowed her brow and started to ask him something, but he silenced her.

"Shhh, Granger . . . go back to sleep," and he pulled her head down against his chest. She murmured something unintelligible, nestled her head against her professor's jacket, and closed her eyes, completely secure in his arms. When he laid her on her bed she didn't wake up. He covered her with a blanket to keep off the chill, and looked at her for a long moment. Fighting back the urge to kiss her on the mouth, he left her to sleep in her bedroom, and went to curse his luck somewhere else, where he wouldn't be tempted to do something stupid that he would later regret.

The remainder of Hermione's week was no better. By day she had no interest in doing anything, and by night she was unable to sleep. She had decided that it was probably typical bride's nerves, but Severus saw things with more clarity...he had never heard of a bride so indifferent to the preparations for her own wedding.

He cast about desperately for some way to intervene. It wouldn't matter if she didn't choose him...he could hardly ask that she leave Weasley for him...but . . . at least, let her not marry that boy. Weasley would never make her happy, he could never be what she needed. And the worst of it all was that she would change to accommodate him, and that would end up killing the girl Severus had fallen in love with.

Yes, there was no point denying it now: he had fallen in love with her.

He had fallen in love with the headlong passion of an adolescent.

It was already Friday, and tomorrow at midday she would be married. He had to do something. He had to move, to come up with some kind of plan to prevent that wedding . . . take her away somewhere . . . but then she would hate him. Well, at least she would be safe from Weasley.

For the fourth time he paused with his hand on the doorknob, ready to go and knock on her bedroom door. What would he say? Merlin, the anguish was eating him alive.

Hermione had succeeded in falling asleep for a moment, but she had a horrible nightmare which she couldn't remember. She awoke sobbing and fighting for air. She sat up in the bed and looked at the clock on her bedside table: it was scarcely half past midnight. Another of those interminable nights evidently awaited her, but surely this would be the last. Tomorrow night she'd be Hermione Weasley and would sleep in her husband's bed.

But something was wrong, horribly wrong, and she knew it. That's why the closer she came to her wedding day, the more desperate she felt.

Severus . . . her whole being cried out for the presence of Severus. She couldn't be mistaken, he must love her . . . despite his coldness, despite acting like she didn't matter to him, he must love her . . . she needed to know. It wouldn't change anything, she knew she had to get married tomorrow, but she needed to know if he loved her the way she loved him. Just once, before she got married, before her loyalty was completely pledged to her husband.

It would be wrong, of course . . . but not as serious as doing it once she was married.

She got out of bed without realizing what she was doing or how she came to be knocking on the door of his bedroom. How could she tell him what she wanted to say? She hoped he knew already, and that he would not ask her for explanations. Might he love her back? Would he take what she was offering, or would he send her back to her rooms humiliated?

Trembling in fear she stood before his door, barefoot and dressed only in her short nightgown. Defenseless. She raised her hand to knock, but at that moment the door opened and he appeared, looking surprised to see her there.

"Trouble sleeping?"

She only nodded, and he stood aside to let her enter.

Now was the time. He could implore her not to marry Weasley. Ah, no, he couldn't. *Coward*, he said to himself as he poured a dose of sleeping draught into a glass and handed it to her.

She held out her hand to take it, and her fingers brushed his hand; she was trembling. The glass slipped between her fingers and fell to the carpet. Severus's gaze followed the trajectory of the glass, and when he raised his eyes again he saw her looking at him intensely. The next thing he knew she had thrown her arms around his neck and his lips were on hers.

Severus had thought that he had no decency left, but apparently a tiny bit remained. So he struggled with himself to return from the magical place where Hermione's kiss had dragged him; he opened his eyes and broke free of her.

No, she didn't deserve to be with someone like Weasley, but neither did she deserve to be with someone like him. What could he offer her? Money? That didn't matter to her. Making a supreme effort, he grabbed her by the wrists and pushed her against the wall, immobilizing her.

"What do you suppose you're doing, Miss Granger?" he said, with deliberate coldness.

Hermione wanted to scream in frustration: she had been so close, so close . . . but ~~he~~*must* love her, she knew it, she felt it . . .

She was incapable of responding, stunned by the magnitude of her own actions, by the nearness of his body and by the position in which he held her. If he had wanted to frighten her, he was not succeeding...in fact, she was feeling an overwhelming desire to surrender to him . . .

"Do you think you can come here and kiss me as if I were one of your adolescent boyfriends? Make no mistake, Miss Granger, I'm not a boy, and I won't settle for kisses, do you understand?"

Severus thought that this would be enough to frighten her, to evoke the image of the evil despoiler of maidens. A Death-Eater who, if provoked, would not hesitate to take her by force. But instead of shrinking away, she closed her eyes and uttered the most erotic moan his ears had ever heard.

In disbelief, he struggled against the urge to kiss her, and pressed her harder against the wall with his body. He wanted her so much that he felt he would explode. *Better still; that way she'll know I'm not joking.*

"This is what you want, then, right?" he said menacingly, rubbing his body against hers so that she could feel his erection. "Are you sure? Do you want me ~~to~~*use* you, so that tomorrow you can feel cheap and filthy?"

Hermione smiled. Who was he trying to fool?

"No. I don't care what you say. I know you feel something for me, Severus."

"Lack of sleep has made you delirious, Miss Granger."

"Then tell me why my Boggart didn't change form when you stepped between it and me! Are you perhaps afraid of Bellatrix? You weren't afraid of her when she was alive; why would you fear her now that she's dead? Answer me!"

Severus did not answer, because there was no possible response to that question that would not reveal what he felt for her. So instead of speaking, he silenced her in the only way those perfect lips deserved: he kissed her.

It was a sweet kiss, with eyes closed and lips barely touching, and bore no relation to the obscene posture in which he was holding her. He stepped back to look at her, and she opened her eyes slowly.

"Please, Severus, let me know what it is to be with you before I marry Ron," she whispered.

Severus swallowed.

Oh.

So it wouldn't matter what he did, wouldn't matter if he declared his undying love for her, if he made love to or her gave her the moon, she would still marry her Ron.

"Ron! Ron!" he growled, not shouting but with a blood-chilling rage. "Does Ron by chance kiss you like this?"

And he kissed her furiously, holding her with force, lifting her up in his arms and carrying her to the bed. "Does Ron make you feel like this?" he hissed, his lips against her neck, making her shudder violently. "Answer me!"

He grabbed the collar of her nightgown and ripped it from her, tearing it almost in two. Hermione was in a state beyond words. She knew what she had exposed herself to when she offered herself to him, but she didn't have it in her to be sorry. She simply accepted her fate at his hands, at his lips, wanted him to sink his teeth into her flesh, run his fingers across her skin, mark her with his mouth, for his desire to consume her. She was scarcely conscious that his kisses and caresses were drawing groans from her throat, and she heard his voice as from a distance, asking her if Ron was able to produce these sensations in her, if he had ever made love to her like this. *Ridiculous, no one else could make love to me like this.*

"Tell me, Hermione, has he ever touched you like this?" he asked, lowering his voice, stroking her with his words while he drew her knickers off, then returning to run his hand up the inside of her leg. Completely surrendered to his will, she parted her legs gently to permit him access, and his fingers touched her just where she needed to be touched. He was not surprised by her wetness, but feeling it between his fingers, the evidence of her desire for him, made him lose control completely. He wanted to frighten her, to make her run away from him, but he realized that he couldn't, that he would not be able to let her go now, even if she asked him to.

"Tell me, Hermione, if he's ever made you feel this," he said, at the instant that he pulled his own pajama bottoms down and penetrated her mercilessly.

She arched up to receive him and gasped, stunned by the force with which he possessed her. From somewhere deep within her she found the strength to articulate the words that escaped her lips, and she cried,

"No! It could never be like this with him!"

Severus caught his breath, shocked by the intensity in her voice, and had to hold himself back to contain the orgasm that threatened to release itself too soon. He had dreamed for so long of having her like this, and it had been so long, so long since he had been with a woman . . .

He kissed her again, and made love to her as he had always imagined he would.

Chapter Eleven

Chapter 11 of 13

Pigheadedness, thy name is Hermione.

T/N: Many thanks to exartemarte for the beta and Britpick.

Severus was in a state of profound peace. He lay naked in the bed, his arms around Hermione...equally naked, and asleep. She had finally succumbed to longstanding exhaustion and satisfied desire.

But Severus himself resisted sleep. It seemed like a dream to have her here, so trusting and confident, sleeping in his arms. Her young skin, firm and soft, felt wonderful under his fingers when he caressed her, and the jasmine aroma of her hair penetrated his nostrils, a feast of Hermione for his senses. Plus she was snoring softly...a sound more like purring than anything else. His little kitten, soft and smelling of jasmine.

Despite the savagery with which they had begun, they had ended by making love tenderly, kissing and stroking as if neither could believe that the other was there, and this constant touching was necessary to believe that this was real, that this was really happening. When it was over they murmured each other's names. He would never forget Hermione, flushed and breathless, squeezing her eyes shut and throwing her head back to cry, "Severus!" her voice strangled with passion.

And now he didn't want to fall asleep, because he had the irrational fear of waking to find that it had all been a dream; as well as the much more valid one that morning would arrive and snatch away from him the prize now lying asleep at his side. He wanted to take advantage of every last minute with her. Engrave her forever in his memory.

She had never seemed more beautiful to him than at this moment, naked and deeply asleep in his arms. His rational mind told him that she was no beauty, and nevertheless he could not remember any woman more beautiful. Leaning down, he softly kissed the parted lips that seemed to him to be always begging to be kissed.

This is what it felt like to kiss the lips of the woman he loved.

And she, like a fairytale princess, woke when she felt his lips on hers, and smiled sweetly as she raised a hand to stroke his face and tuck a stray lock of his hair behind his ear.

"So it wasn't a dream, after all," she said. "You're still here."

"Like your worst nightmare." And he kissed her again.

For a moment they remained lost in ecstatic contemplation of each other, until she spoke.

"Thank you. Thank you for giving me this, Severus. I'll keep it in my heart always."

"You're going ahead with this ridiculous marriage? I can't believe it."

"I have to," she said gently, as if explaining a lesson to a child. "My place is at Ron's side. There's no going back now, I have to do what's expected of me."

"Hermione, no...you don't have to do that . . . you don't have to marry Weasley to be someone, you . . . you're doing this to belong to that family?"

"What choice do I have? They'll hate me if I don't, and they're all I have in the magical world."

Severus wanted to offer himself as an alternative, but within himself he knew that was not the solution. He had to make her open her eyes, make her see her own worth.

"Why do you need to be Hermione Weasley? Don't you realize that Hermione Granger is much more valuable and worthy of admiration? It was Hermione Granger who made the Polyjuice Potion in second year; it was Hermione Granger who broke all the NEWT qualification records; it was Hermione Granger who rode the back of a dragon; it was Hermione Granger who fought in the Battle of Hogwarts . . . and it is Hermione Granger who has a brilliant future in magical diseases research. You can do that by yourself, and you're valuable for who you are. Do you think he'll be happy to have you as a wife, that he'll know how to appreciate your achievements in research? How much time do you think will pass before he starts pressuring you to have seven children, just like his parents? To abandon your career to take care of them? No, Hermione. You don't need to be Hermione Weasley . . . or Hermione Snape. You should be Hermione Granger. That's the only way you'll be happy...being yourself first."

When he finished this speech, Severus realized she was looking raptly at him with eyes glittering with tears, and he was afraid he had hurt her. The last thing he needed now was for her to run out of the room weeping. But it had to be said. He had been swallowing those words for too long now, and was incapable of holding them back any longer. She ought to hear the truth from someone.

"Is that how you see me?" she asked in a shaky voice, and then gave him no time to answer, but kissed him bruisingly on the mouth.

He returned the kiss with desperation, knowing that despite his words she would escape like water through his fingers, wanting this kiss to be strong enough to change her mind, but at the same time knowing...

"You're going to marry him anyway, aren't you? Aren't you?"

She didn't answer, and he knew that was as good as a yes, but at least he would have the memory of holding her in his arms and making her his.

His desperate certainty that this would be the last time made him make love to her with all his senses, with all his soul, to give her the greatest pleasure possible and tell her with his actions how much he loved her, because words were not enough to express what she meant to him. Saying "I love you" would have sounded ridiculously poor in comparison with what he was feeling, so he let his hands, his mouth, and his body tell her what she meant to him. So that in the years to come she would always remember, so that no man would ever be able to erase the memory of him, so that she would bear him like a tattoo on her skin until the day she died.

Hermione lay across his chest and sighed one last "Severus" and fell asleep once more. But Severus could not sleep. He looked at the clock and cursed under his breath, as if the apparatus were at fault for there being only a few hours until dawn. He had never wished so fiercely for a Time-turner with which to steal hours, days, years . . . a lifetime with Hermione.

A few hours from now she would get up, get dressed as she did every other day, as if nothing had happened, and leave early for the Burrow to prepare for the wedding.

And he would have to let her go.

But before she left, he would give her something to remember him by. What did he have that was worthy of her? He looked at her, asleep in his arms, and smiled. He had just the right gift for her. Something of his own, something very personal. Trying not to wake her, he slipped silently out of the bed, picked up his robe, and headed for his potions lab in the dungeons.

Hermione felt the morning light on her face and began to wake, but when she opened her eyes she saw Severus's face so close to hers, studying it attentively, that she was unable to suppress a yelp of surprise.

"Severus, you nearly scared me to death!" she said, laying a hand over her heart to calm its frantic beating.

He merely looked at her, smiling inwardly, and, lifting his hand, suspended before her eyes a gold chain with a pendant hanging from it. He laid what appeared to be a jewel on her naked breast, and let the chain puddle around it.

"It's my wedding gift," he explained.

Surprised, Hermione picked up what appeared to be a topaz, and examined it. It was not, she discovered, a precious stone, but rather a tiny vial of faceted crystal, filled with a golden potion.

"Felix Felicis," she cried, recognizing it.

"Ten points to Gryffindor, Miss Granger."

She looked quizzically at him and he decided to be serious.

"Since you've decided to go through with this asinine marriage to Weasley, I reckoned you would need a deal of luck."

Hermione undid the clasp of the chain and put it on, letting the little flask fall between her breasts. She was touched by this gesture; she would never have thought him capable of giving her any gift under these circumstances, much less something so precious. Even though it pained him, he respected her decision, and she knew it. And loved him even more for it.

But there was no looking back. Their night together was over, and it must never happen again. She looked for her nightgown, but remembered that he had ripped it to shreds the night before. She gathered up the pieces...they would be her talisman that this night had really happened, that it was not a figment of her imagination. Severus came up behind her and gently laid one of his shirts over her shoulders. She gave herself over to the sensation, shivering lightly with her eyes closed, her heart thick with love. She turned around to say goodbye.

"I'm sorry, Severus. At least I'll always have this night to remember." She rose on tiptoe to plant a brief kiss on his lips, but he took her by the waist and kissed her deeply, pressing her hard against him as if he wished to meld their bodies together. She gave a groan of anguish and he let her go immediately.

They looked at each other in silence for a few seconds, and then she left the bedroom.

He stood rooted to the spot, staring fixedly at the closed door, wishing desperately that he had bled to death on the floor of the Shrieking Shack.

He went downstairs to the dining room to take his breakfast and discovered that Hermione was already finishing hers. She sat in her usual place as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, but avoided his gaze. There was a flash of green in the fireplace, and Ginny Weasley's head appeared, a worried look on her face.

"Hermione, it's after nine! Mum's getting frantic because you're not over here yet!" And then, seeing that Severus was there as well, "Good morning, Professor!"

Severus muttered a grumpy response, and Hermione threw her napkin down on the table.

"I'm sorry, Ginny, I was too nervous to sleep well last night, so I slept in a bit. But I'm ready now."

"Well, hurry up then, let's go, I think Mum's going to freak out any minute now. Are you coming to the wedding, sir?"

"As fond as I am of Miss Granger, I truly loathe weddings. I'm sure you'll excuse me."

"If you change your mind for any reason, you're welcome to come, sir," said Hermione, looking into his eyes. She felt obliged to leave open the possibility of his attending, as awkward as it would be.

"Don't worry. I don't think I'll turn up, but I'll bear your invitation in mind." He rose from the table to make his farewells.

"Right then, see you later, Professor," said Ginny, and then added, before disappearing into the flames, "Get a move on, Hermione, or face Mum's wrath!"

Hermione walked over to him and embraced him, kissing him gently on the cheek. He remained still as a statue, and she stepped sadly into the fireplace.

"Goodbye, Severus. The Burrow!"

Severus watched the green flames die down and knew that his last hope had died with them. He suddenly felt very weak, as if his legs would no longer support the weight of his body. He fell to his knees on the floor, his throat choked as by an iron grip, struggling not to weep. And all he could think was, *Again, again, this is happening to me again.*

Chapter Twelve

Chapter 12 of 13

Romeo, what's here? Poison? Drunk all, and left no friendly drop to help me after?

T/N: Thanks as always to exartemarte for the excellent Britpick.

Hermione looked at herself in the mirror, dressed in her beautiful wedding dress. She hadn't wanted to buy one of those elaborate monstrosities that would have transformed her into a cabbage or a meringue, and had settled on an unadorned strapless sheath of white satin, with a skirt that flared gently down to a hem embroidered with flowers and leaves. The dress was complemented by long white gloves, and jasmine flowers enchanted to stay fresh scattered through her subjugated curls. And the fine gold chain from which depended the tiny vial of golden potion.

It was still early, but both Molly and Ginny had insisted on having ample time to get her ready. They had pounced on her the instant she emerged from the fireplace, amid a clamor of cries that Ron mustn't see her before the wedding, and had imprisoned her in Ginny's room. There she remained at the mercy of the womenfolk, who stripped her bare, plunged her into a hot bath with aromatic salts and oils, dressed her, perfumed her, and even plucked her eyebrows.

And she had let them, insisting on only one thing: she wanted to wear the gift her professor had given her. The women, who didn't realize what exactly it was, saw only that it was a lovely ornament that didn't clash with her bridal regalia, and allowed it. Ginny even commented that she hadn't believed Professor Snape capable of making such a lovely gesture to a student.

At last they left her alone, and went to tend to the other last-minute preparations. Alone, where her thoughts and memories conspired to subvert her resolve.

She looked beautiful. She had never before seen herself as so beautiful. But the absence of any smile made her look as cold as marble. She tried to put on a dazzling smile, the kind a woman should wear on the happiest day of her life, but she was able to achieve only a grotesque rictus. She could draw back the muscles of her face and show her teeth, but her eyes remained expressionless.

Giving up, she sighed and threw herself down on the bed, grateful for the anti-wrinkling charms that kept her dress in perfect order. She closed her eyes, and immediately the memories of the night before flooded her mind. Only then did her lips curve in the warm smile she had been striving for.

There he was, looking at her from his fathomless dark eyes, watching her as if nothing else existed for him in the universe, with an expression of absolute adoration. His dark hair framing his gaunt face, his pallid skin covered with scars that she would have wanted to kiss again and again until she blotted out the memory of whatever pain he had once felt on receiving them. To stay by his side forever, taking away his pain, making him happy and provoking that marvelous, elusive smile over and over again.

She could still feel him touching her. Despite the bath and the perfumes, it seemed to her that even his scent still pervaded her skin. Or perhaps it was only the memory of his scent.

It had been wonderful, but it had been a dream. Maybe if she hadn't already been engaged things might have been different, but here she was, veiled in white, and there was no time for regrets.

She tried to imagine her life as Hermione Weasley. They would have a small flat in London; she would study Medimagi at St Mungo's and he would play for the Cannons. Weekends they would go to visit the family; perhaps on Saturdays they would go to her parents' house, and on Sundays to the Burrow. They would share the domestic chores, although she suspected that Ron would try to slack off, but she would keep him in line.

And they would have children. Once married, she would make him see the sense in waiting until she had finished her studies before getting pregnant... and they would definitely have no more than two. Not if she meant to go into research. Maybe Molly could lend her a hand with the babies...

The babies. What would they be like? She hoped they would have Ron's blue eyes. She imagined herself cradling a baby of indeterminate gender in her arms, a baby with big blue eyes and auburn hair, that looked up at her and reached out its tiny hands to touch her face. And then the features of her imaginary baby unaccountably changed, until it had dark brown eyes and jet-black hair, and someone came up behind her and enfolded both of them in an embrace, whispering into her ear in a velvety voice: "Do you suppose he'll be a Gryffindor or a Slytherin?"

Hermione groaned and squeezed her eyes shut. She had never wanted children, had even come to believe that she had no maternal instinct, but now she realized that what she had not wanted was to have children with Ron. Because as soon as the image of Severus Snape's child had coalesced in her mind, she realized that she did want it, with a desire so intense it was like a pain in her breast. She would have his children, she would love them, she would have as many as he wanted! If only they were Severus Snape's children she would have them!

OK, Hermione, she said to herself, blotting the tears that had not quite spilled over. Calm down. You can't change any of this now. This is your destiny; you chose it yourself. Accept it.

She looked in the mirror.

"You're a Gryffindor. Show your courage," she said to her reflection, lifting her chin defiantly.

"Calm down, dear," said the mirror. "It's normal to have jitters before the wedding, but that doesn't mean you have to act as though you're preparing for battle. It's just a wedding."

Severus finally dragged himself to his feet. He had no idea how long he had been kneeling on the floor...it could as easily have been a few hours as a few minutes. But he had not wept. From somewhere inside himself he had gathered the force of will necessary to keep from shedding tears. He had given the best of himself, and he had lost again... but he was used to it by now. If there was one thing he knew how to do after all these years as the fool of the gods, it was to endure punishment with grace and dignity. His life had been one long round of struggles and failures... but he was tired now, and didn't know if he could take another one without breaking.

He knew what he had to do.

Struggling to produce a sound from his aching throat, he called his house-elf in a broken voice.

"Trixy."

Crack

"Master Severus, you are bleeding!"

Severus raised a hand to his neck and swore. He had been so overwhelmed by the pain of his loss that he had not even realized that his wretched wound had reopened and the warm blood was oozing out, staining his robe.

Trixy quickly conjured a bandage and tended to his wound.

"Trixy, I need you to place an urgent summons to Castor Robinson, the family solicitor. I don't care if he says he's busy, I don't care if he's with the Queen herself, drag him here against his will if you have to. I need to see him right away. I'll be waiting in the library. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir, Trixy will bring him to you right away." And snapping her fingers, she disappeared from the bedroom.

Hermione was toying with the little vial of potion, waiting patiently for her destined hour to arrive, when Ginny arrived, dressed all in lavender and terribly excited.

"It's time, can you believe it? You're going to be my sister-in-law!" she cried, taking Hermione by the hands and bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet. Hermione tried to appear equally excited, but bouncing was beyond her.

At that moment her father entered the bedroom, dressed formally and prepared for the ceremony. It seemed to Hermione that her heart stopped for a few seconds, and she understood that the moment of truth had irrevocably arrived.

Visibly moved, he drew closer to her and kissed her on the forehead.

"You're beautiful, Princess," he said, sounding near tears. "My little girl's a grown woman now."

He took her by the arm and they went out to the garden, where the guests awaited her, along with the Ministry official... and her future husband.

Walking down the aisle on her father's arm, she managed to produce a nervous smile to greet all the familiar faces that surrounded her. Hagrid was seated at the back; there was Luna in one of her outlandish getups (although without it she wouldn't be Luna, thought Hermione); Neville; Kingsley; farther forward Professor McGonagall, her maternal grandmother, her godmother... everyone. They were all smiling at her, doubtless thinking of the blissful life she would have as Ron's wife. That this was the happiest moment of her life. But the closer she drew to the altar, the more frantically her heart pounded, and the more she felt as if she couldn't get her breath, the more her hands sweated profusely inside their immaculate white gloves.

Her mother had told her that all brides experienced doubts and anxiety just before the wedding, that this was completely natural, but that after the ceremony the nerves would pass and she would be perfectly happy, like every other bride.

But she knew that this was not the normal, healthy jitters of the typical bride. It was a full-blown panic attack.

Ron was waiting for her at the end of the aisle, with Harry just behind him. He looked so handsome in his formal robes, his blue eyes brilliant with anticipation. Her father passed her hand to Ron, who took it firmly and without hesitation. They turned to face the Ministry official, who began to speak.

Hermione closed her eyes and prayed fervently that she might faint, but to no avail, and the ceremony proceeded on course.

Severus sat before the small desk in his bedroom to review calmly the parchment that contained his will. The solicitor had not been best pleased to be taken by force to Severus's house, but he put on a willing face, anxious to secure this client for the future. The petition had seemed strange to him, but in the end he shrugged his shoulders and revised Mr Snape's last will and testament, naming Hermione Weasley as his only heir, with the sole proviso that her husband not be able to touch a single Knut of her inheritance.

The professor smiled to himself, satisfied with the result. It would ensure her economic well-being forever. Even if her husband turned out to be a bastard like Tobias, she would be protected, along with any children she might have, and she could spend all the money she liked on whatever education she fancied, and buy a gold-and-diamond-encrusted edition of Hogwarts, a History if the notion took her, without having to take any shite from her git of a husband.

Sighing, he looked at the clock on his bedside table. It was already one o'clock; the hour was approaching. He stood, and opening his wardrobe, took out his best robe, the black silk one. He passed a comb through his greasy hair and put himself to rights as best he could.

He had decided to leave this world in style.

Sitting back down before the little desk, he looked around the bedroom. Yes, it was the perfect place, the place where for a few minutes he had known happiness, the place where she had given herself to him and where she had slept in his arms. At least he could carry that memory with him until the end.

It wasn't cowardice. It was weariness. He had tired of being the plaything of the gods. He had tired of a world that considered him unworthy of it, of the rejection of his peers. He had fought in two wars, risking his life more than anyone else; he had won, and survived, only to discover that he had nothing in life...not family, nor friends, nor love...fuck, he didn't even have a dog! He had loved deeply, twice, only to be faced with rejection. The cursed wound on his neck had appeared to heal, only to reopen when he least expected it, and he realized that he would probably never be rid of it altogether.

He looked bleakly before him at his future: day after day in this house, accompanied by three house-elves, old, sick, and alone.

What a lovely prospect.

Considering that no one would mourn for him, that he was tired and could do more good dead than alive... it was not such a difficult decision. If only she could have stayed...

Severus Snape was not a romantic man. He was not a person given to fantasies, and he did not waste time in conjuring idyllic fantasies. But at some point he had dared to imagine what his life would have been with her at his side. Even while remaining his acerbic self, he would have managed to cherish her, to gratify her every whim. He would have let her run his house and his life however she wanted. He even (yes, his stupid fantasies had even gone this far) would have married her if that's what she had wanted. He would have loved her, adored her, worshiped her. Anything at all to wake up every morning and see her asleep at his side.

How had he dared to dream such foolishness? It didn't matter any more. He looked again at his clock and knew that at that very moment she must be standing before the Ministry official, on the verge of saying, "I do." How quickly time flew when the dreaded, irrevocable moment was drawing near! She, Hermione Granger, would be changing into Hermione Weasley, dressed all in white and surrounded by her loved ones.

He touched the three small bottles that stood in a row before him. Three insignificant-looking bottles that contained the promise of liberation. Being the Potions Master had its advantages.

He had not yet decided which of the three to use. Hemlock, despite its Muggle origins, had the cachet of its association with no less august a personage than Socrates. It

would send him into a gentle sleep from which he would never wake...the sweet death that everyone hoped to meet some day.

Acromantula venom would not be so benevolent...oh, no. But he was accustomed to pain. It was the venom of a magical creature, and beyond that would have the advantage of preserving his body indefinitely. The idea that his remains would be impervious to natural corruption was attractive, but... did it really matter so much? It was not as if there would be anyone to appreciate it.

And finally there was cyanide. Another Muggle toxin...how obsessed Muggles were with this poison! It was so effective that one barely had time to realize what was happening. In less than a minute it would be all over... for him, at least. Because afterwards the air would be fragrant with hydrogen cyanide, a lovely surprise for whoever found him.

Each of the three promised an elegant death. Well, the acromantula venom might twist his features into a ghoulish rictus. Not that he was that fair of face to begin with, but he didn't relish the thought of spending eternity with a ghastly grimace on his face.

Muggle or not, cyanide was unrivalled. He reached out a hand and caressed the little vial, thinking how ironic it was that something so small could put an end to him in seconds...something the Dark Lord himself had not succeeded in doing.

As he raised the vial he saw that his hand was trembling. Was Severus Snape's courage failing him? Of course it was...there was no use deluding himself, he was clammy with fear. But he would do it nonetheless. This was the difficult bit, to summon up the courage to open the vial and raise it to his lips. But once he had done that, only seconds would separate him from eternal rest...

His hands were trembling and clumsy as he fumbled to get the stopper from the vial. And just as he sensed it coming loose, he felt a cold breeze on his face that sent a chill through him. Invisible, glacial fingers laid themselves over his, and a familiar, beloved voice whispered in his ear.

Stop, Severus. Wait just a moment...

"Lily?"

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter 13 of 13

What's black and white and almost over?

Hermione struggled to breathe. Panic squeezed her chest, and the Ministry official's words reached her ears as though she were under water. Her hands were sweating so much that the only thing she wanted was to rip off those damnable gloves once and for all.

"I do," said Ron firmly, and looked at her, smiling.

"Hermione Jean Granger," began the official, and she could not stop her mouth from dropping open in dread.

Hermione Jean Granger, she repeated to herself. Her. No one else but her.

Her hand went to her chest and clasped the little vial of Felix Felicis. Seeing her distress, the official paused and said, "Are you all right, Miss?"

"Mione?" She heard Ron's worried voice.

She looked at him as if surprised to see him there, and took a step back. The guests, sensing that something was amiss, fell absolutely quiet. Hermione stepped back and turned abruptly to face them; the silence was so complete that she could hear the rustling of the lace in her train.

Eyes wide, she was finally able to take in a great gulp of air, as if she had been too long underwater and had finally fought her way to the surface. Whipping off the gloves, she flung them to the ground, and heard a scattering of startled gasps, but it no longer mattered to her at all.

"I'm sorry. I can't do this. I'm sorry."

And pulling the stopper from the tiny vial of potion hanging about her neck, she drank its contents down and vanished.

"Lily?" persisted Severus, on the verge of concluding that it must be his imagination and the fear of death playing tricks on him.

At that very moment he heard a *pop* and decided he was definitely hallucinating, because across the room there appeared a vision of what, to him, was the most marvellous woman in the world, enveloped in white satin and adorned with jasmine flowers.

The bottle slipped from his fingers and struck the floor, rolling and spilling its contents. One moment the two were looking into each other's eyes across the room, and in the next they were running toward each other, groaning as their bodies came together and she crashed against his chest like a wave against the shore.

Hermione wept, but with relief. Finally she could breathe again. Severus's arms were neither cage nor prison, but the loving protection of a home, warm and welcoming.

Severus felt choked with emotion, unable to form a coherent thought. Nevertheless, there was something he had to know. He lifted her face gently to his, and looking into her eyes, he asked:

"You didn't go through with it, did you? Tell me you didn't."

"I'm still Hermione Granger."

He kissed her on the lips, thinking that never before would he have imagined that he would feel so absolutely happy to hear that name. They clung in the embrace, unable to release each other for even a second, and as he felt her sob and shudder against his chest, Severus realized that the tears he had so struggled to contain were now falling freely down his cheeks.

He didn't care. He buried his face in her jasmine-bedecked curls and let the emotion overwhelm and free him. All that he needed was to be here, in her arms.

Don't let them take her away from you, Severus, Lily's voice whispered in his ear. Suddenly there was a series of *pops*, and the room filled with people: Ron, Harry, Ginny, Arthur and Molly, all with wands drawn...even Hermione's parents, who seemed to have Side-Alonged with them, were there.

Without releasing his hold on Hermione or moving from where they were standing, Severus reached for his wand.

"They followed me," murmured Hermione, and turned slowly in his arms to face the new arrivals.

"You fucking pervert!" shouted Ron. "I knew it was you!"

"Please, Ron, calm down," Hermione begged, desperate to control the damage. "I'm so sorry, Ron, I never meant to hurt you... "

"Come home with me, Hermione. Let's go home and forget about all this...the ceremony, the reception, the guests... just come with me and we'll start again." He drew closer to her, reaching for her hand, but she shrank away and Severus stepped between them.

"No, Ron." Her voice was trembling, but loud enough for everyone to hear. "I'm sorry, but I can't leave. She corrected herself immediately: "I don't *want* to leave."

Ron stood there, mouth open in stunned incredulity. Harry and Ron's father edged quietly towards him, ready to restrain him should some foolish impulse overtake him.

"Ron, my boy, it's better if we leave now. Perhaps tomorrow... "

Arthur placed his hand gently on Ron's shoulder, but Ron shrugged him off, saying, "Hermione, are you mad? You're swapping me for this... this... *thing*?"

"I believe Miss Granger has made her preference clear enou..."

"You! What did you give her? You've slipped her some love potion, haven't you?" Ron interrupted him, so angry he might have been spitting fire. And then he remembered something and gave a bitter laugh. "Of course. That's what she drank right before she Disapparated. What was it? Amortentia? You're nothing but a filthy old man who can't get a woman of his own, so you have to use magic to steal another man's girl!"

"No, Ron, you're wrong," Hermione broke in, desperate. She knew Severus must be exerting tremendous self-control in order not to hurt anyone, but his limit was fast approaching. "What Severus gave me was a dose of..."

But before she could finish, Ron felt his blood boil over at her defense of the loathsome bat, and he lost the last bit of self-control he had left. Raising his wand, he let fly the most horrible curse that popped into his head.

"Sectumsempra!"

"NO!" There was a collective shout, and Harry and Arthur threw themselves upon him, unbalancing him and skewing his aim so that the curse missed. Or almost missed, because it succeeded in grazing Severus's neck, knocking him to the floor, tearing his bandage and making the old wound bleed profusely.

"Severus!" cried Hermione, her voice rough with pain and fear. She dropped to her knees beside him, fearing the worst. "Severus, please, no!"

Ron looked on in stunned amazement as she tried to stanch the blood with her hands, murmuring a spell to slow the hemorrhage. Desperate, she used her wand to rip apart her petticoat into bandages.

Severus blinked twice and sat up, murmuring to her in a calming voice, "I'm fine, Hermione, it's just the old wound... I think."

Once she had helped him to his feet and assured herself that at least for now he was out of mortal danger, she wiped her bloodied hands on her dress and raised her wand with the fury of an avenging angel.

"GET OUT!" she shrieked, hurling a curse that sent him flying across the room. He slammed into the wall and fell heavily to the floor, gasping for air. "Get out, get out, get OUT! How dare you do such a thing, Ronald Weasley? You might have killed him! I don't ever want to see you again in my life, do you hear me? Not ever!"

Ginny and her mother stared at Hermione in disbelief. They had never seen her out of control like this.

"How could *you*, Hermione? It's *Ron*!" cried Ginny. "Snape has to be controlling you with a potion. It's the truth...we all saw you drink it!"

"For god's sake, Ginny! Didn't you see it? Didn't you recognize it? You've taken it yourself: Felix Felicis!"

There was a collective gasp from the witches and wizards in the room. If this was true, then the situation was quite different from what they had been imagining.

Hermione took advantage of the silence to continue her explanation.

"Yes, it was Felix Felicis. I didn't know what to do or where to go. When I took it I was too upset to make a decision, so I closed my eyes and thought about disappearing... and the potion brought me here. Because this is where I should be. Because I really belong here, at Severus's side."

Severus came up behind her and rested his hands protectively on her bare shoulders.

"Again, I think *Hermione's* wishes are quite clear." He pronounced her name slowly, looking a challenge at Ron. "I'll thank all of you to cease this invasion of my property and assault on my person. If it's not too much to ask."

"Let's go, Ron. We've no business here any more," Arthur said to his son, taking him by the arm. But Ron shook him off and turned to face her once again, tears of rage glittering in his eyes.

"Why, Mione?" Why did you have to wait till the last minute to run out on me? Didn't I love you enough?"

Hermione didn't answer...just lowered her eyes in shame, and he saw that there would be no answer for him.

"Goodbye, Hermione," he said, and Disapparated.

She heaved a great sigh, closing her eyes and leaning against Severus's chest, thinking that at least the worst was over.

But then her father, who had remained silent through the whole ordeal, spoke up.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Hermione. Because you've turned what should have been the proudest day of a father's life into an episode of *EastEnders*."

"Dad!" she cried, but his mouth was set in a grim line, and he refused to look at her.

"We've stood by you, your Mum and I, through this whole witch-and-magic business...even though we didn't understand it...because it was your life and it was what you wanted. But magic's one thing, and good manners another."

She opened her mouth to speak, but he went on in a dreadful, flat voice. "We didn't bring you up to do something this unkind...lead a decent young man on and then shame him before his friends and family just so you can have your bit of high drama. I don't know who you've embarrassed more...your fiancé or your mother and me."

She ran to her mother...just as she had always done as a child when her father scolded her...and put her arms round her, seeing the glitter of tears in her mother's eyes before burying her face in her shoulder.

"Mother? Mum? Please, tell me you understand!"

Her mother laid a gentle hand on the nape of her neck, and leaned forward to murmur in her ear.

"Give him time, dear; I'm sure he'll come around. He's just...we're both in a bit of shock at the moment."

She drew back slightly and looked into Hermione's eyes. "It's not exactly been your finest hour."

Undone by her parents' disappointment, she fell to her knees, racked with sobs that would have moved a heart of stone. Severus knelt beside her and took her in his arms, then raised his eyes to impale her parents with a glare.

For a second, the four of them remained thus in a frozen tableau, and then Hermione's mother turned to Mr Weasley and said, in a quiet voice, "Arthur, would you take us back, please?"

"Of course." He took them by the hand and the three of them Disapparated together.

Molly was terribly conflicted. Her heart was breaking for Hermione; she longed to run to her and console her, but the girl had hurt her son horribly, and she did not know what to do. So she put her arm around Ginny and the two Disapparated together, each with her heart riven by divided loyalty.

"Well, it looks to me like you've well and truly fucked it up this time."

Severus and Hermione both looked up in surprise. They had forgotten about Harry, who had been observing matters quietly from a corner of the room.

"You, too, Potter? Don't you think Hermione's been through enough already today, without you tormenting her any further?"

"I'm not likely to cheer her on, am I? Ron's my best mate, after all. I mean, I don't have to be Professor Trelawney to know that wasn't a match destined for happiness, but there are ways of doing things decently, and that was hardly the best way to go about it, was it?"

He smiled sadly, not moving from his corner. "But I won't stand in your way. I owe you a debt, Professor, if you recall, and I'll speak for the two of you. It won't be easy straightening out this mess, and it'll take some time, but I'll do what I can. It's just that everyone's so hurt right now...including me...and no one's thinking clearly. I'll try to help them see sense."

"No, Harry," she broke in, drying her tears, her voice still shuddering with sobs. "If you d-d-do that, they'll just think you're taking sides, and you'll end up fighting with them too."

"I'll be fine, don't worry."

For the first time in his life, Severus looked at Harry with respect. His efforts might prove futile, but there was no doubt he would be true to his word. And he'd have to be brave indeed to confront all his friends for their sake.

"Thank you, Harry," he said, with a brief nod. Harry nodded back, and then Disapparated with a *sofpop*.

At last they were alone in the room, completely exhausted. Severus carried Hermione to the bed and they lay down in each other's arms.

"What am I going to do, Severus? I've lost everything, everything..."

"Not everything. It may not be much, but you have me... that's if you want me. This is all my fault."

"No! It's not your fault! I was the one who..."

"I was certainly the underlying cause. You risked everything, choosing me, but I'll do everything in my power to make it up to you, Hermione, even if right now I've no idea how I'll manage it."

Their faces on the shared pillow were inches apart, and he looked directly into her eyes as he spoke.

"You risked everything for me, and I haven't even had the guts to tell you that I love you. I love you, Hermione Granger, are you listening? I love you with my life. And I'll do anything to make you happy."

"Just stay with me, Severus...stay with me forever, and you'll make me happy." She smiled weakly. "I love you, too, Severus Snape."

They lay there in each other's arms, exhausted, until sleep overtook them: each wrapped in the other, the white satin dress mingling with the black silk robes, one single being to face whatever was to come.

Fin

A/N There's an epilogue coming. Did you think I could leave it like this?

T/N: This chapter has been a real collaborative effort. I'm so grateful to June for her patience, and to Exartemarte for his tireless help.