

From Dire Circumstances

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Hermione willingly goes along with the only man that can protect her from the Dark
Lord for this break... Set in Hermione's 7th year at Hogwarts and during the fall of
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Take Her Home...

Chapter 1 of 21

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Chapter 1 - Take Her Home...

Albus Dumbledore peered over his half-moon spectacles, blue eyes sparkling in that most familiar way as he examined the scowling face of the younger man in the comfy chair across from him. The man was frowning deeply, his obsidian eyes as black as ever, the sneer he wore in his dungeon classroom still firmly set.

'Severus, I am afraid that I must impose another on you for this coming break,' Albus said slowly, knowing full well that the man was no fan of the Christmas season and was surly around students in general.

Severus Snape knew that it was coming. The war was already beginning to encroach on the Wizarding world, and it appeared that this Christmas break, he would be a host to one of the few students that were involved. Though Albus knows full well that they should not be! he thought angrily. It was putting so many more lives at risk than needed to be, and Snape certainly would not be taking any blame for the death of a student.

'So, Albus. Which of the infamous "Gryffindor Three" will I be playing host to this Christmas season? Who of them will be forced to endure an entire break with one as petulant as me?' Snape drawled with all of his usual sarcasm.

'Ah! Perceptive as ever I see, Severus. Yes, you will be hosting one of them. And as for the other two, they will be going with separate professors,' Albus said with a twinkle.

'As interesting as this conversation is, Albus, you have not yet informed me whom I will be hosting, exactly.'

Albus chuckled. He had decided to purposely leave out that minor detail until it was time for the two to depart the next morning. Severus wanted to know and, on finding out, would, without question, object completely to hosting a certain, attractive head girl, who was possibly the smartest to go through Hogwarts since Severus himself. However, it would be the safest place for a Muggle-born witch who was wanted dead by the Dark Lord and his followers.

'I will let everything unfold on its own accord, my boy. It should not make too much of a difference who, as I have heard that your dislike for each of them is equal.' The

older wizard sighed. Although he did hope that all that would begin to change soon.

Severus simply nodded his consent curtly, although thinking that to host any of them would wear at his patience. 'If there is nothing more, Albus...' he trailed off.

'By all means, my boy. I will have the student report to your office at promptly 8 o'clock tomorrow morning for the Christmas break,' Albus quipped, waving him off in a dismissive manner.

Snape bowed out and left the office through the great mahogany doors he had entered. Albus couldn't help but laugh to himself as his godson strode out of the room with a foul disposition. 'Oh, Severus, how much you have yet to learn...' he mused to himself softly.

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Hermione Granger, head girl of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, left the Headmaster's office with a pounding head, unable to understand Dumbledore's reasoning for separating her from Harry and Ron for the Christmas break.

And of all people that she would be staying with, it just had to be Snape! What on earth was Dumbledore thinking? And why in the world would Snape agree to have her in his home, on the holidays no less, with the sacrifice of practically all his privacy? Hermione would have thought that he would put up at least some argument, but from what Dumbledore had said, Snape had been "most amiable".

Hermione passed around the corner, lost in her thoughts, running straight into another fast-moving form that was going in the opposite direction. Her bag fell to the floor, sending quills, parchment, ink, and textbooks almost everywhere.

'I am so sorry!' Hermione exclaimed as she dropped to her knees, without looking at the person she had run into, and scrambled to gather her things together. She was frantically trying to gain control of the situation, clutching at what were usually the contents of her bag, pointing her wand at the stone and whispering spells.

She looked out of the corner of her eye as the person bent down next to her and gathered together the things on her other side, pushing them into her bag. She deposited the rest into her bag and lifted it onto her shoulder before standing and turning to thank the victim of her inattentiveness. She took in a sharp breath.

'I should think that the head girl of all people would be paying more attention to where she is walking,' he drawled barely, raising a dark eyebrow.

Hermione swallowed the lump that was threatening to form in her throat before she spoke. 'Thank you for your help, Professor,' she mumbled into the stone of the hall, choosing to ignore his initial scathing comment.

'Must you really be so clumsy?' he asked in amusement. She didn't take his bait.

'I am dreadfully sorry, sir. I wasn't looking where I was going. I will be more careful next time,' she squeaked apprehensively, staring at her slightly scuffed black school shoes.

Snape decided to change tack and see if he could find out just who he would be hosting, and if Dumbledore wouldn't tell him... 'I assume you just met with the Headmaster about your arrangements for this Christmas break?' he inquired silkily; not politely, but not as gruffly as usual. She looked up in surprise.

'Yes, I just left his office.'

'Then you have been told who your guardian will be?' he asked, totally focused on finding out just which of the "Gryffindor Three" would be imposing upon his hospitality.

'Kind of,' she mumbled, then added, 'sir.'

'Well...?' he trailed off, indicating for her to continue.

Hermione looked straight into his inky black eyes. He didn't know, and she could tell. That was why the Headmaster had said that Snape had been "most amiable", and why he had not argued. She had ten seconds to decide whether or not she would tell her professor or just leave him to be surprised.

'Well, I don't know exactly who. Professor Dumbledore only told me where I should go. I was merely making an educated guess...' she lied, deciding on the latter. He would just have to kick up a fuss the next day. Hermione had no wish to increase the throbbing pain in her head.

'Assumptions can be a dangerous thing, Miss Granger,' he drawled coldly, turning on his heel and disappearing around the corner in a swirl of black robes.

Hermione stood, back hunched a little from the weight of her bag, alone in the dark corridor, feeling a little guilty. But she was absolutely sure that Snape would be able to exact some form of revenge in the three weeks she was being forced to spend with him. She felt her feet start to move on their own accord and decided to direct them towards the infirmary to get a cure for her migraine before retiring to bed.

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Snape strode away from the head girl and down the corridor, so that he could retreat to the comfort of his chambers. Miss Granger had not been specific on who she would be staying with but did not seem too disturbed, so it would therefore have been someone agreeable with her, which meant that it was not him.

This also unfortunately meant that he would be left with either Ronald-Bloody-Weasley or the Boy-Who-Just-Kept-On-Living. He would have preferred the Know-it-All to the other two dunderheads.

He grumbled something unintelligibly, flicking the wards off of his chambers with his wand and striding straight to the decanter of firewhiskey, pouring himself a large tumbler full. He tipped it straight down his throat and swallowed, feeling it burn his throat in a delightfully familiar way.

'FUCK!' he roared, kicking the nearest stable object over and listening to the disgusting crunch it made as it broke and splintered across the room. He slumped into the nearest chair by the fire, pouring himself another drink, hoping desperately that this had all just been a terrible nightmare of sorts.

Spinner's End

Chapter 2 of 21

Severus finally finds out just who he will be hosting. Needless to say, he is none too pleased.

Hermione left the head girl's room with her shrunken belongings all in her shouldered school bag, heading straight to Professor Snape's dungeon office. That was, after all, the place she had been told to go to begin her "holiday", as Dumbledore had put it.

She decided earlier that morning that it would be unwise for her arrive late for their departure, so she walked quite briskly, reaching the office in record timing. Her hand raised immediately to knock on the door, and she paused to hear the low 'enter' Snape would utter before she opened the door.

His back, thankfully for her as she needed a moment to compose herself from the walk, was turned on the door as he faced the fire. 'Good morning, Professor Snape!' she intoned dutifully, resting her bag near the doorjamb.

He spun around sharply to face her, robes whipping in the cold, stale air, the noise hanging damply. He glared down as he spoke. 'Miss Granger, what a delightful surprise. Come to say goodbye before you leave for the holiday? How quaint,' he hissed with just a hint of annoyance.

'Actually, it appears as though I will be your guest for the holiday,' Hermione replied, getting a kick out of the way his face drained of what little colour it had.

'As funny as that jest may seem to you, Miss Granger, I have no time for banter,' he said dismissively and added almost to himself, 'and someone is very late...'

'But, Professor, I am not jesting you. The Headmaster was explicit on the details of my timing and especially insistent that I would be leaving from the fire in your office,' she said firmly, picking her bag up from near the door.

Snape faced her. 'You are being serious, are you not, Miss Granger?' He sighed, folding his arms across his chest before bringing one long-fingered hand to pinch the bridge of his nose with eyes squinted closed. A migraine perhaps? But not possible. Dumbledore had misused Snape's trust that he would make wise decisions. Again.

'Yes, Harry is with Remus, and Ron went home with Charlie,' Hermione replied immediately, shifting her position uncomfortably.

Remus Lupin had been reinstated to the position of DADA instructor, and Charlie Weasley had been called in as a replacement for Hagrid, who was currently on leave for his honeymoon with Madame Maxime-Hagrid. Snape's sigh of resignation broke Hermione's chain of thought, however, as he moved to stand closer to the fire.

'Very well, Miss Granger. Come with me,' he said, grabbing a handful of Floo powder.

Hermione obeyed without question this time, and in moments they were standing in a fully furnished study. All of the walls were lined with ceiling-high bookshelves, filled with books. A claw-footed desk was on one side of the room, and comfortable armchairs surrounded the fireplace itself.

'I will show you to your room,' Snape drawled sullenly, moving towards a door.

Hermione followed wordlessly, still awed by the magnitude of the large study, walking through a spacious and lavishly decorated hallway on what she assumed was the second floor landing. They were soon on the third floor and at the end of that hall; Hermione made sure she memorised the exact way she had come.

The bedroom that they entered was furnished with a large, four-poster bed, a dresser, long mirror, as well as various drawers and cupboards. There was a small study desk and chair to one side, with an open door that led to a bathroom on the opposite side of the room. All in all it was quite nice and welcoming, smelling of irises.

'I do believe, Miss Granger, that you have never, in the small expanse of time that I have known you, been rendered speechless in such a way,' Snape said silkily, unable to help the little jibe. 'However, that door--' he pointed to the bathroom. '--leads to the bathroom as you can see. The curtains are charmed to close on whim, and any of the clothes you brought with you were automatically transferred to the wardrobe when you entered, for convenience,' he rambled methodically. 'You are most welcome to any of the books on the shelves in the study.'

Hermione nodded, completely unaware of the personal attack, absorbing all that she could lest she do something wrong and become victim to his wrath.

'If you should encounter any difficulties, do not hesitate to inform me of them, and I shall do what I deem reasonable in the circumstance. I will leave now to let you better acquaint yourself with your surroundings,' he said gruffly.

Hermione found her voice finally. 'Thank you, Professor. I appreciate your hospitality and hope that I do not further impose on you during my time here. It was unfair of Dumbledore to make you bring me here,' she said softly.

Snape turned to leave, but paused without turning back. 'Lunch is served at noon, if you are hungry.' And with that, he left.

Hermione, therefore, decided to get a head start on her essays, set by nearly all of her professors for the break, with a particularly nasty one from Snape himself. By noon, her stomach began its protest, and she reluctantly stood up, leaving behind a stack of completed essays higher than the stack of those yet to be completed.

She left her room and followed the trek backwards that she had made and took a further flight of stairs down, guessing and finding the dinning room directly to the left of the staircase. She was glad to see that Snape had graced the table with his presence, and that lunch was there too.

She sat in what appeared to be her seat, lowering herself into it gracefully. She then waited for him to tell her exactly what to do, even against the protesting of her stomach that thankfully had growled silently that day.

'Well, what are you waiting for? An invitation? Despite what you believe about magic, Miss Granger, I hardly think that the food will feed itself to you,' he said sarcastically. Hermione bit her lip to quell the sudden wave of frustration and fury at the mild-mannered man across from her.

Hermione remained silent and ate quickly, watching the plate disappear. Snape had remained blissfully ignorant of her presence and the whole time had read a book while nibbling thoughtfully at a sandwich. He had finished and stood without a word, moving to the door. 'Dinner will be at promptly 7 o'clock. If you are in need of any assistance, call a house-elf,' he said, walking away.

Hermione sniffed at his curt dismissal and left the dinning room then in a dreadful mood, wishing that Harry or Ron were with her, or better, that she was away from this house, with them...

Acceptance

Despite the annoyance of being stuck with Hermione, Severus finds himself accepting her presence in his home more easily than he thought he would have.

Chapter 3 - Acceptance...

Hermione had returned to her room not long after the moment in the dining room, collecting a few quills and scrolls of parchment, along with her school texts, depositing them in her bag. Shouldering the bag, she went to the study in hopes to be further inspired for the more difficult essays, namely the potions one.

She walked in to find the professor sitting at his desk; all that could be heard was a scratching quill and a soft afternoon breeze rustling the curtains. 'Oh, sorry, Professor. I didn't realise... I'll just be leaving...' she started as he looked up at her from his work.

'Nonsense, you may stay. As long as you intend to keep that trap shut,' he offered courteously enough, despite the scathing remark. He gestured to the chairs by the fireplace turning back to his work and not looking up again.

'Thank you,' Hermione said softly, ignoring the insult.

She sat and pulled out her work, and for three hours neither said a word. The only sound remained as it had been before, the simple but beautiful scratching of quill on parchment. So concentrated on her work was she that the house-elves that appeared shortly after nearly frightened her out of the chair placing a tea and biscuit tray in front of her. She turned and saw Snape receiving the same treatment.

'Thank you,' she managed as the house-elf bowed low and Apparated with a pop.

She picked up a biscuit and nibbled at it thoughtfully, looking up from her essay to find that Snape was now occupying the seat adjacent to hers, teacup in one long-fingered hand and a book in the other.

'Professor, I hope you do not think it rude me asking, but, what is this place?' she asked, curiosity getting the better of her analytical mind. She had been meaning to ask at their arrival, but had been at a loss for words and decided that it was now or never.

'Not at all, Miss Granger. This is one of my homes, formally known as the Manor on Spinner's End. I have inherited various other estates, but this is the smallest and by the far the most comfortable as well as being the one I frequent most often,' he replied, without taking his eyes off the book.

'Oh,' she said quietly. 'Why this one?'

'Although the house can room up to 20 adults, I find it is the least intimidating of the others,' he said flatly.

Hermione decided to leave it there, not wanting to press her luck with this surprisingly amiable side of Snape, with the lingering chance that he would convert back to the evil Potions master she knew so well. After an hour, her essays were complete, and she cleared the small coffee table of her belongings, returning them to her bag neatly. She moved to the nearest bookshelf to be delightfully surprised by some of the selection.

Amongst the expected books, authored by witches and wizards alike, there was a vast array of what looked like Muggle books. 'Professor? Are these Muggle authors?' she exclaimed, utterly bewildered.

'Contrary to popular belief, Miss Granger, I am not an uncultured, anti-Muggle freak. I do find Muggle literature quite fascinating,' he said, sipping his tea and sparing her a brief thoughtful glance.

Hermione blushed several attractive shades of pink and pulled a book from the shelf with infinite tenderness, returning to her seat before glancing it over. *Pride and the Prejudice*, by Jane Austen? She gasped. Surely he didn't have that book? She opened to find it in mint condition.

Snape certainly knew how to take care of his books. Careful not to ruin the practically perfect state that it was in, Hermione began to read with enthusiasm and soon found that she had become quite consumed by the reading.

'Miss Granger?' Snape prompted an hour later.

Hermione's head snapped up immediately. 'Yes, Professor?' she asked innocently, afraid that she had already done something wrong.

'There is only one hour until dinner. Perhaps you would care to bathe and dress appropriately for the occasion?' he suggested dryly.

'What do you mean by "appropriate" dress?' she asked, wondering if her robes were now insufficient.

'Dinner has always been a formal occasion in my home. I suggest simple dress robes for dinner every evening and normal robes through the day.'

Hermione nodded, returned her book to the shelf, and grabbed her bag, fleeing the study at a fast pace. Snape watched the retreating form with mild interest. She had certainly gotten taller and seemed quite comfortable for her first day.

He pondered this for a moment, wondering why that headmaster had insisted upon him bringing her, even after they had arrived and he had Flooed straight to Dumbledore's office. He had argued for the man to exercise reason. But on his return, he saw Hermione as completely relaxed, luckily for them both.

Perhaps--just maybe, this would be a good Christmas after all? He set his book on the coffee table and went through the secret door to his room on the third floor to prepare for dinner in 30 minutes.

He pulled out some simple, black dress robes, leaving them on the bed for his own scrutiny, before going for a hot shower.

Of Riddled Wanderings

Chapter 4 of 21

Voldemort just has the worst timing, right?

Chapter 4 - Of Riddled Wanderings

Snape paced his study. It had only been three days since he had been holed up with Hermione; in his own manor, no less. He had come to think of her as 'Hermione' lately, much to his dismay, but would never admit that to anyone. She was, after all, his student, and it would be inappropriate in any case.

Christmas was a whole gut-wrenching three days away. The snow had been falling in thick blankets throughout the whole countryside for two days up to that point, and after a first night of snowfall, the occupants of the manor on Spinner's End were snowed in. Snape turned away from the window when he heard the door open and saw Hermione slip inside.

'Sorry, Professor. I haven't interrupted anything, have I?' she asked softly, standing by the door in case he sent her from the room.

'No, of course not. Come in,' he replied dryly before continuing to pace as he had been doing only a moment ago. His mother had told him when he was a child that he would pace so much that he would walk a hole through the floor, figuratively speaking. Hermione noticed that as soon as her professor had again begun his silent tirade, he adopted the same passive look on his face that he had bore the whole morning.

'Is something bothering you?' she asked with genuine interest.

Snape opened his mouth to say something when his left forearm began to tingle in a most familiar way. The tingling sensation soon became a hot burning, and he doubled over slightly, gripping his arm. He had been wondering when this would happen. Hermione gasped and went to him as he groaned a little in pain.

'I am being summoned!' he ground out painfully.

'Must you go?' she asked idly, eyes growing frantically wide. He turned to look her in the eye and nodded sharply, then began to make his way to the study.

He strode out, ignoring now the pain in his arm as it stung all the way to his shoulder. Hermione accompanied him to his room and waited in his sitting area, practically livid and chewing her bottom lip nervously.

He came back out in his full Death Eater's attire, silver mask grasped in one hand. 'Miss Granger, I will need you to let Professor Dumbledore know the situation in whatever way you think would be fastest,' he said darkly, looking at the mask with disgust.

Hermione nodded. 'Do be careful, Professor,' she murmured quietly as he raised his wand to his forearm and disappeared.

Hermione rushed to the fireplace and muttered an *Incedio*, grabbing a handful of Floo powder and throwing it at the new flames to turn it to the desired shade of green. She stepped into the flames and took a deep calming breath.

'Albus Dumbledore's office, Hogwarts,' she said in a clear voice.

A moment later she was standing in the headmasters' lavish, circular office, filled with the portraits of other former headmasters and headmistresses. Behind his desk, the old wizard sat with astonished, sparkling blue eyes fixed on the spot where she had appeared, apparently lost for words.

'Miss Granger, to what do I owe this... surprise?' he managed after a good five minutes.

Hermione moved forwards, resting her shaking hands on a chair to hold herself up, as her legs suddenly became very unsupportive. 'Professor Snape was summoned by Voldemort,' she said unsteadily.

'Oh dear,' the headmaster said softly.

Hermione waited patiently for him to say more, which he did after several minutes of careful thought. 'Please, Miss Granger, inform Professor Snape on his return that I shall be paying a visit tomorrow to discuss the situation,' the old man said, choosing his words purposefully.

'I will do that,' Hermione stammered. 'Good evening, Professor Dumbledore.'

Hermione Flooed back and sat in a seat. It wasn't long, though, until she was out of her seat once more. Snape Apparated back with a pop and slumped against the wall, holding himself a little awkwardly.

'Merlin!' Hermione gasped, rushing immediately to his side and letting him lean on her for support as she walked him to his bed in the other room.

His body was shaking violently, and his eyes were watering slightly from the pain. Hermione knowingly uncorked a vial of muscle relaxant, pouring it down his throat and dabbing at his forehead with a damp cloth that she had transfigured. After 10 minutes the pain died down and his pulse returned mostly to normal.

'Thank you, Miss Granger,' he managed to croak out, a bead of sweat sliding down from his temple.

'I'm glad you're okay,' she replied with a relieved smile. 'What happened? Is Riddle unhappy about something?'

Snape shook his head and was rewarded with a throbbing pain for attempting to move so soon. He pinched the bridge of his nose, squinting his eyes shut.

'On the contrary, Miss Granger, I would say he was exceptionally happy. Lucius Malfoy, however, is not the Dark Lord.' He spat Malfoy with venom and a sneer of dislike. Apparently he wasn't too fond of the Malfoys, despite common belief.

'Oh,' was all Hermione could manage as she brushed a lock of silky--wait. His hair was silky? In any case, she brushed it out of his eyes tenderly.

She was oblivious to what this gentle touch did to Snape. He relished her soft, nimble fingertips gently moving his hair about. He didn't respond to the gesture but he did, however, allow it.

'It is late, Miss Granger. Perhaps you should retire to your rooms,' he suggested, not really wanting her to leave but figuring that it was the right thing to do.

As if she had sensed his reluctance to let her leave, she remained on the bed next to him, folding her arms across her chest. 'Nonsense. Someone has to ensure that you recover properly. Who better than me?' she challenged in her no-nonsense tone.

'A certified mediwitch perhaps?' he teased in a slightly croaky voice.

Hermione snorted indignantly and chose to ignore the comment and stay exactly where she was. 'Professor Dumbledore said that he shall be coming here tomorrow,' Hermione said, remembering what the old wizard had said earlier. 'It's not something important, I hope.'

Snape shook his head slightly and ground out a 'No. It can wait until the morning, I am sure,' he said in a long sigh.

'That's a relief,' Hermione said, letting out a sigh of her own.

'Miss Granger?' he asked, causing Hermione to jump.

'Yes.'

'Why are you helping a Death Eater?' he asked with mild interest.

'Because I believe that you have never been shown the gratitude you deserve for everything you have done for the Order, and for me,' she replied softly.

'You place a great deal of faith in my mistake,' he replied gruffly, his voice becoming hoarser with every word.

Hermione chanced a wistful smile. 'You are incorrect, Professor. I place a great deal of faith in you.' Her words spoke volumes and touched even his cold heart. Whatever he had felt for her when they had first arrived, it had multiplied tenfold.

Hermione was also sure at that moment that she had become attracted to her professor. And then he laughed. It was not a loud, jolly one, more of a light chuckle really, but a laugh nonetheless. 'You are a strange girl indeed, Miss Granger,' he muttered sleepily.

'I know,' she quipped as he yawned. 'But I am sure that I admire very much that same strange quality in you.' Hermione knew she would never have been able to say that if he had been more than half-awake, but it felt good to get it off her chest and out in the open air.

'Goodnight, Miss Granger,' he mumbled, drifting into a light sleep.

'Goodnight, Professor Snape.'

And with that, she left his rooms and went to her own, positive that she would not be getting a very good sleep at all that night.

Delivering Bad Tidings

Chapter 5 of 21

An Order meeting is called, and Severus has some news to deliver... and Hermione slams a door.

Chapter 5 Delivering Bad Tidings

Snape sat under the weary scrutiny of the older wizard in the armchair directly across from him. He was absolutely sure that the twinkling blue eyes were not over concern for the news he had to bear, but more over the progress of a certain know-it-all head girl and his so-called growing attachment to her.

An attachment that he denied to himself and Dumbledore. He looked straight into the blue eyes with his hard ones and opened his mouth to speak.

'Albus, you do want to know what the summoning was for, do you not?' he questioned through clenched teeth.

Dumbledore chuckled a little at the strain in Snape's tone and gave the younger man a quelling look. 'Severus, I am all ears,' he replied with an insincere smile.

Snape raised a dark eyebrow and shook his head. 'The Dark Lord seems to be happy at this time. There are very few plans of "celebration" for this Christmas. Just the usual--plunder, rape, torture. His main target is a wealthy Muggle family on the border, near the Scottish Highlands,' he listed on his long fingers, trying not to seem appalled at the discussion, but not being able to help himself.

'I see. And what is your proposed plan of action?' asked the older man, serious now.

'I do not know the exact location, so it might be productive to secure the location before the event takes place on Christmas day,' he suggested with a brow furrowed in thought. 'Although, I am sure that the Order will be able to come up with a subtle and appropriate course of action after that?'

Dumbledore nodded his consent. 'Fair point. I will call a meeting tonight,' he said thoughtfully. 'Although I suggest you do attend.'

'I am sure that it will not be a problem for me to attend. Miss Granger will simply have to attend also, and I am sure that you will have some way of ensuring that Potter and Weasley will be there to keep her company?' Snape said dryly.

'Of course, that can certainly be arranged, and it is a commendable thought,' Dumbledore praised. Although it was unwanted and not responded to in kind.

'I am sure Miss Granger will want to see her... friends, no doubt,' he replied as evenly as he could.

'Then I will see you at the meeting this evening at 9 o' clock,' Dumbledore said, getting up from his seat and moving towards the fire.

Severus stood up also and saw the headmaster to the fireplace, watching as the man disappeared into the green flames. Once he had the room to himself once more, he slumped over, grateful for the silence, into a chair again. He closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose with one hand and massaging his temples with the other.

'Professor?' Hermione's sweet voice floated to his ears from the door. There was no sound more comforting at that moment.

'Yes, Miss Granger?' he found himself asking.

'Professor Dumbledore is gone then?' she murmured quietly.

'Yes, he is. And there is an Order meeting that must be attended this evening. You will be coming with me, and Potter and Weasley will also be attending in order to keep you in familiar company,' he repeated to her as he had suggested it to the unknowing headmaster.

'Harry and Ron, you mean?' she asked, moving closer towards him.

'That is what I said, was it not?' he drawled uncaringly, hurting inside at having to treat her this way.

'Yes, I suppose you did,' she said with a smile.

The room went silent, and Snape finally opened his eyes and looked around to see that Hermione had not moved. She seemed almost lost in thought or something of a like description. 'Miss Granger, have you become a statue?' he teased lightly.

Hermione came to her senses and looked at him. 'No, I don't think I'm quite as bad as Ronald yet,' she replied.

Snape barked a laugh out quietly, smiling a little in spite of himself and what his spy self tried to say. Hermione smirked at having gotten her professor to laugh at something she had said. She walked straight over to him while he was distracted momentarily and lowered her head to peck him on the cheek.

'Thank you for your thoughtfulness, Professor,' she said to a very startled Snape.

He hadn't even mentioned to her that it was his suggestion, and yet she knew. And what's more is that the girl had the nerve to actually kiss him. Why did she do such an absurd thing to him? 'I don't think I mentioned telling you that I had requested the two dunderheads to be at the Order meeting,' he said when he managed to find his voice.

'You didn't have to,' Hermione replied with a genuine smile before walking out of the room, leaving a very shocked Snape behind with a look of mild outrage on his face.

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Snape watched as Hermione seated herself between her two idiot best friends, hugging each of them in turn, smiling. The treacherous part of him wished that he was Potter, and pointedly Potter because it was better than being a Weasley any day. But the sensible spy and professor in him protested to those thoughts loudly.

Apparently, though, the thought of being Potter in those few moments was winning out against all odds. 'Dammit, Snape! Keep focused on the situation at hand!' his internal voice this yelled.

He forced his eyes away from Hermione and concentrated on the door through which many of the Order member's were entering.

'Ah, Severus. As prompt as ever!' the headmaster intoned. And not a moment too soon, for his eyes had started to stray towards the curly-haired beauty on their own accord once more.

'Albus,' Snape drawled, nodding at the old man.

'We shall begin in ten minutes as soon as everyone is settled,' Dumbledore said in a tone that seemed a lot more serious than that of earlier in the day.

Snape nodded and waited, keeping his eyes trained on the floor for the next ten minutes that would pass.

Hermione, however, was on the opposite side of the room, talking quite happily with her friends that she had not seen in almost a week. 'Oh, Harry. Ron. I have missed you both so much!' she exclaimed just as enthusiastically as they expected of her.

'Yeah, we missed you too, 'Mione,' Harry replied, hugging her tightly. 'Ron and I have been able to see each other every other day. You must feel like rubbish, holed-up with Snape day in and day out.'

Hermione wanted to tell them that it was actually quite pleasant but decided on the neutral path. 'It is a little lonely, but you get used to it. Better than spending my entire time around Professor Snape, though,' she said thoughtfully.

Ron agreed to the second part while Harry eyed her curiously for a moment before forgetting about it and moving on. 'So what have you been up to?' Hermione asked, changing the subject.

'Well, me and Ron practice Quidditch with Ginny and the twins during the day, and I go back home with Remus in London at night, and we just hang about, really,' Harry said.

Ron pretty much had the same answer. 'What do you do, Hermione?' Ron asked without bothering to listen for an answer.

Harry, however, did listen, and that made her feel a little better. 'Well, I study and read, and sometimes I talk to Professor Snape, but other than that there is really not much else to do. Although I did play a couple of games of wizard chess with him,' she said nonchalantly.

Harry opened his mouth to ask another question when Dumbledore called the meeting to order and began discussing the most recent issue. He did a very detailed analysis of what Snape had said to him earlier, spoke of how they had searched and discovered the whereabouts of the family and had received numerous suggestions on a course of action since.

Hermione listened carefully, drinking everything slowly, and, with each word that Dumbledore said, became more angry with Snape for not telling her this the night before. In the end, it was decided that a few skilled Aurors would go to this place, take the family away, and replace them with fake beings.

Hermione returned to Spinner's End with Snape in a bad mood and went off to her room without saying a word to him, slamming the door as she went.

Snape knew why she was upset and let it go this time. Next time, however, when she chose to slam one of his doors and ignore him, she would get what was coming to her...

Confronting Christmas Eve

Chapter 6 of 21

Hermione remains displeased... Severus, however, has other ideas about what mood she should be in.

Chapter 6 - Confronting Christmas Eve

Hermione sulked around the Snape manor for most of the morning, reading, scowling at the various portraits and landscapes hanging on the walls, and completely ignoring Snape. She knew that it was an entirely immature gesture, but he deserved it. Why hadn't he trusted her enough to tell her about the Muggle family the night he had returned from the Dark Revels?

She sniffed haughtily and continued her reading in the first floor parlor, only because she knew that Snape would be in the study and had never ventured as far as the parlor during their time there.

'Miss Granger, I would hate to disillusion you, but I do know exactly where you are,' Snape's voice said close to her ear, sending warm breath down her neck.

She turned sharply, and her nose met Snape's with a muffled crack. 'Bugger!' she swore, hand flying up to her now sore nose.

Snape was a little less guarded with his words and began swearing loudly in both English and a number of other languages, one of which was French, which Hermione conveniently spoke fluently. He finished his rant with a snapped out 'Putaine de merde!' before dropping into the seat opposite Hermione and pulling out his wand.

He muttered a charm, and the bleeding stopped as well as his nose returning to the most normal form it could. Hermione opened her mouth to ask what had happened, but he cut her off with a wave of his hand. 'You broke my nose, Miss Granger.'

Hermione blushed, still pinching the bridge of her nose, which apparently had been bleeding and was paining her quite a bit. Snape noticed then and moved lightning fast to her side and moved her hand away from her face gently. He pointed his wand at her face and looked at her, asking permission to proceed, and after receiving a nod, muttered a charm that stopped the bleeding and immediately took away the pain.

'Miss Granger, it seems that I have given you your first broken bone,' Snape said with amusement dancing in his eyes.

Hermione sniffed and continued reading her book, ignoring the stubborn, insufferable, uncouth, petulant man next to her now. 'Thank you for healing my nose,' came her muted response.

Snape sat and looked at her for a moment. She was still mad at him. He had been hoping that she would get over the whole bloody incident, but apparently she was as headstrong and relentless as himself. 'Miss Granger, you seem to have something bothering you. What, pray tell, is it?' he asked, pretending to be blissfully ignorant, meanwhile bracing himself on the inside.

He had seen her many a time at Hogwarts, yelling and fighting with one of her best friends, Ronald Weasley, and by the gods, she was a vicious little spitfire when it came down to it.

Hermione looked up at him with a mad glare, flames dancing in her honey eyes. If steam could come out of a human head without the assistance of wizard's candy, he was sure that she would be steaming like an engine.

'How dare you ask me that? You know very well what is wrong with me. Don't play coy, Professor!' she snapped angrily.

Snape schooled his face as best as he could to a tight-lipped glare.

'If I knew, Miss Granger, why would I have asked you? I do not usually ask inane questions that I already know the answers to,' he retorted skillfully.

'Ha! You say that, but I can see in blackness of your eyes that you know very well that I am mad at you for not confiding in me when you returned from the Dark Revels!' she said, voice rising in pitch and volume. 'I asked you, and you lied to me!'

'I was sparing you the gory details of something that you do not have a right to become involved in! The headmaster was wrong to allow children to become involved in an adult's war!' he said, volume also rising.

'Child! You think that I am a child?' she asked shrilly.

'You give me no reason to believe otherwise! Moping around the house. My house. Ignoring everything and scowling at portraits, for Merlin's sake!' he roared.

Hermione shut her mouth. He was right. She had been acting as a child that whole day, even then, when she had been arguing with him. 'I apologise, Professor. I was wrong to question your decision,' she murmured, bowing her head.

'There is nothing to forgive, however. I suppose it would only be proper of me to give you an explanation as to why I withheld those details from you,' he said, voice returning to the normal, silky tone.

Hermione nodded and wisely kept her mouth closed. 'Miss Granger, I am aware of your stance on issues concerning Muggles. And although your intentions are good, the Order will not allow you to place your life and those of people close to you at risk just so that you can traipse around the countryside trying to save unknown Muggles that can be taken care of more efficiently by a senior Order member,' he ground out evenly, pushing on no matter how many times Hermione opened her mouth to protest angrily.

'Now how do you know that I would have immediately rushed off like that?' she demanded angrily, her apparent distaste at his choice of words becoming more pronounced.

'Because you are honorable and courageous, and you believe in mercy and sparing the lives of the weak and vulnerable. You would selflessly give your life for another, because that is the person that you are,' he said seriously. 'But your brash decision would have been in vain. I will not allow such potential pass away without so much as living what one might call a fulfilling life.'

Although he would waste no time denying it if she mentioned it later, Hermione heard the compliment and careful consideration in his words. He seemed truly concerned for her life, despite the fact that she was Muggle-born and a Gryffindor.

'Thank you for caring, Professor,' she said softly, finally finding the courage to look up into his inky black eyes.

'It is of no matter. Just do not question the decisions that I make on your behalf as often as you do, Miss Granger. I would not make them if I did not see the need to,' he replied in a low voice.

'I understand, Professor, and I thank you again for your thought,' Hermione said, standing from her seat.

'Dinner will be as per usual,' he added as she walked towards the door to leave.

'I will not be late.'

Snape watched as Hermione pushed the plate forward slightly after finishing her meal, sliding the knife between the prongs of her fork as was proper and neatly folding the napkin that was on her lap into a square back on the table.

'Dinner was lovely,' she commented when she saw that he had finished eating too.

'I'll be sure to pass on your compliments to the elves,' he replied, noting her expression change when he had mentioned actually talking to his elves. 'Miss Granger?'

'Oh, sorry, Professor. I just didn't think that it was customary for masters to speak to their elves,' she said blushing an attractive shade of pink.

'Despite what most people think, I actually treat my employees properly, as an employer should and do compliment them and treat them as humans. And I even continue to do so with the elves in the kitchens at Hogwarts,' he said understandingly. 'Have you ever wondered where exactly it is I go when I am not present at the staff table for meals?'

Hermione nodded and smiled. 'I don't suppose many others do, so I have never had a chance to discuss with anyone else and speculate about it.'

Snape chuckled at her admission a little and knew she was right. Hardly anyone except Dumbledore ever wondered where he was whenever he was missing from a meal, or anything else for that matter.

'I suppose you are right,' he replied, looking over to the antique clock on the wall. 'And it is getting late. I must excuse myself and take my leave from the table. Goodnight, Miss Granger. I have no doubt that I will be seeing you in the morning.'

'Goodnight, Professor.'

On The First Day of Christmas...

Chapter 7 of 21

Christmas in the Snape household... Severus and Hermione share a tender moment.

Chapter 7 - On the First Day of Christmas...

Hermione woke early and went to the bathroom, taking a long, invigorating bath before dressing for the day ahead. She decided on a nicer pair of casual copper robes for the more special occasion that she was faced with. After dressing, she went to the dining room that had been decorated with holly and leaves, with mistletoe hanging at the entry and breakfast set out on the table.

'Happy Christmas, Professor!' she exclaimed cheerfully, sitting in her now usual seat with a breathtaking smile gracing her elegant features.

Snape nodded in her general direction indifferently, continuing his daily perusal of the Daily Prophet without so much as a "hello" or even a "don't interrupt me." She sighed sadly, but spooned her porridge and honey into her mouth neatly, consuming her breakfast quickly.

After twelve minutes of comfortable silence, he finally spoke as if he had not realized that she had even entered the room earlier. 'Ah, yes, Happy Christmas, Miss Granger,' he said boredly. 'I believe your gifts are beneath the tree in the study.'

Hermione beamed in delight, getting up from the table as the plates and trays cleared from view as she excused herself. Snape followed her, assuming that she would go directly to the study. He entered and found it void of all Hermione's presence and was most surprised when she appeared at his side, clasping something behind her back.

She handed it to him and settled in a comfortable armchair, drawing her wand and summoning the presents to rest at her feet in a neat little pile.

Each of them then spent a good portion of the morning opening the gifts they had received from their friends until they both only had one last gift, coincidentally the ones from each other.

Hermione looked up at him and he nodded at her, letting her know it was okay to open it then and there, before she began to peel back the wrapping paper, making sure not to rip it. She held a black box with silver patterns on it and lifted the top of it to reveal four books, hard-cover and neatly lined in something of a colour order.

The Literary Works of Jane Austen... she mused silently, eyes wide and gleaming, jaw slack and feeling utterly and totally bewildered. 'I... ummm... Professor, are these -' she began, stammering.

'Yes Miss Granger, it is exactly what it looks like,' he said, cutting her off with a smirk. 'I thought you might enjoy them. Have you read any of them?'

Hermione shook her head, closing her gaping mouth. 'No, Professor. And thank you, very much,' she replied with a dazzling smile. 'You should open your gift now,' she egged, reminding him that he had still not opened it.

Snape meticulously went through the same torturously slow process of preserving the wrapping paper, and carefully opened the box to reveal a beautiful pocket watch. It was silver, carved with runic expressions and the customary Slytherin serpents, suitable for the head of that house.

He opened the watch, and on the inside, on the watch face, it was just as exquisite as the outside, with old runic numbers and serpentine hands. 'Miss Granger, this is... well to say the very least, exquisite.'

Hermione stood up from her seat, beaming, and made her way over to him, plucking the watch out of his open palm, raising an eyebrow. 'May I?' she asked softly. He nodded, and she clasped the serpent pin and chain to the top of his pocket, slipping the watch piece inside of it.

'There,' she pronounced, almost to herself, patting the pocket gently and moving to withdraw her hand before, she was sure, he would swat it away. Instead, his hand came up and covered hers over his black clothed chest. 'Thank you, Miss Granger.'

Hermione felt the slight pressure his hand made on hers as it held her small hand to his chest. It was the first time she had realized that there was a lot of sexual tension buzzing in the air around them, sharp, like a strong and intoxicating spice. She quickly regained her senses and, pulling her hand away, fumbled her way back to her belongings, remembering that she should be miserable that she could not be with Harry and Ron.

Gathering everything into her arms, she turned back to Snape. 'Thank you again, Professor, but I should go to my room. I am sure that you have better things to be doing other than entertaining teenage girls on Christmas Day,' she mumbled.

She rushed from the room before Snape could reply. He stayed in his chair, wondering for a while exactly what it was that he had been feeling, and thinking, for that matter, that he had held her hand over the spot where his heart was supposed to be. When she had left, he felt just as he had every other year for the past twenty years for Christmas. Alone. And he remained like that for the remainder of the day.

Hermione, as he had freely taken to thinking of her recently, did not make a peep for the rest of the day. He finally decided that, after much careful deliberation, he would seek her out in order to find out exactly what the source of the tension was. Leaving his study he ventured up to her room and opened the door on a crying Hermione.

'Miss Granger, are you quite alright?' he asked in whispered tones.

She looked up with puffy eyes, a tear-stained face, flushed cheeks, and lips parted in a gaping expression. She then set to brushing the tears away with her palms and tried to quell more of them threatening to spill down her cheeks in a fresh wave of grief.

He walked forward and pressed a handkerchief into her hand and indicated that she should use it. She obeyed, sniffing. 'I'm so sorry, Professor. I must be making your Christmas terrible,' she cried hysterically.

Snape waved her off with a dismissive hand gesture and crouched on the ground next to her, facing her chair. 'I have had far worse and far lonelier Christmases. As far as

they go, this may be the best I've had in a long time.'

It was true. As much as he had become used to his life of solitude, he had never really taken the time to realize just how lonely a life it was. Hermione had very much become a part of his life, or what miserable shreds of it that was left. He realized in that moment that it was not tension rooted in anger, but really, sexual tension.

'Thank you... for everything,' Hermione managed to sob out.

He took her shaking hands into his own steady ones. It surprised them both, especially when he gave them a brief squeeze of reassurance. 'Feel obliged to tell me anything that is on your mind while you are in this house,' he said softly, with no trace of his customary sarcasm.

'Thank you,' she repeated.

'You are most welcome, Hermione,' There, he had finally said it. Her given name slipped so naturally from his lips, so perfectly. It made him shudder momentarily.

As soon as he had said this, something in Hermione snapped, and she launched herself out of her seat at him, throwing her arms around his sturdy shoulders and hugging him fiercely, crying into his shoulder.

He stood to receive her better and held her around the waist, stroking up and down her back involuntarily with one hand. She didn't reject his touch and continued to sob like that for a solid hour. He started to feel her tears seep through his robes after a few minutes and began to wonder just how much pent-up emotion she had inside of her.

'Shhh....,' he found himself soothing.

'I'm s-sorry,' she murmured. 'I'm s-so sorry.'

Snape stopped her mumbling as he lifted her face to look him straight in the eye. 'Do not apologise, Hermione,' he whispered softly and paused, calculating his next move. 'Tell me what is wrong?'

Hermione shook her head. 'It's silly, really,' she said, looking down and blushing even redder than she was already.

'I won't laugh,' he reassured her.

'I miss Harry and Ron, and it's been so long since we've even been away from each other, and I just get so worried about them...'

He chuckled then and tipped her face back to look him in the eye. 'It's not silly to care about one's friends, no matter how undeserving of your care they are,' he said gently.

Hermione ignored the part about Harry and Ron being "undeserving" and smiled a little before burying her head in his robes again, murmuring a 'thank you.'

They stood like this for a while longer, both enjoying it so much more than they should.

Back to Formalities

Chapter 8 of 21

All too soon the break is over, and Hermione and Severus must return to Hogwarts... and go back to formalities.

Chapter 8 - Back To Formalities...

Albus Dumbledore sat in his office and waited. For what? Well, he was not sure what exactly, but had high hopes for a reformed Severus Snape. But this hope was proved to have been in vain, as Snape himself banged loudly through the office door in his usual manner.

'It's good to see you too, Severus,' Dumbledore said with what he had hoped was a mood-lightening smile.

Snape raised an inquisitive eyebrow and sat in a seat across from the headmaster. 'I would say the same thing to you, Headmaster, but I'm afraid that would be a lie,' he sneered back ruefully.

Albus chuckled. Still the same old Severus. 'How was your holiday, my boy?'

'Christmas is Christmas no matter what year it is, Albus. I don't see how this year would have been any different from last year and every other year before that,' Snape replied with all of his usual sarcasm.

'And Miss Granger?' he prompted.

Ah! There it was! Snape was wondering when he was going to jump that question on him. Miss Granger... Hermione... Well, she was still the same as ever; an insufferable Gryffindor know-it-all.

'Miss Granger is the same as ever,' he replied effortlessly.

'Severus, forgive me if I am bothering you with my questions, but I am not quite sure as to what you mean by "same as ever"?' Dumbledore replied with a little urgency.

'She is the very same, equally annoying Gryffindor and resident know-it-all that she was before she left the castle, and has been returned in exact condition,' he snapped. 'Just to Minerva's predilection.'

Albus looked the younger man over, scrutinizing his tone and unkempt appearance with his twinkling blue eyes. Outwardly, there appeared to be no change. The same unrelieved black, raven's wing hair, sour expression, even the same stiff posture. He was every bit the Severus Snape that had left a few weeks earlier, much to Dumbledore's dismay.

'Thank you, Severus. You may go now,' Albus said, waving him off dismissively.

Snape stood and left the headmaster's office, absolutely thrilled that the old man was every bit as clueless as Snape had hoped. Did he not notice the bead of sweat running from his temple, or the slightly exaggerated explanation of Hermione's know-it-all nature? He admitted that he had actually been trying extremely hard to hide any

abnormal feelings for the girl, especially now that he had come to think of her as a friend.

She had quite easily slipped beneath his defenses and infiltrated the rock-solid barrier that he had built around himself. But now that they were back at Hogwarts, he had no time for silly holiday "friendships", and all of the walls would be going back up. Especially when it came to Herm--Miss Granger and her dunderheaded friends.

He walked with startling composure back to his dungeon office to find a girl with familiar brown curls tamed back into a braid perched attentively on the stool near the fire.

'Miss Granger, pray tell me why you would be in my office when you should be reuniting with your so-called friends?' he asked sardonically.

'Sorry to impose on you again, Professor, but I just assumed--' Hermione started numbly.

'You assumed wrong,' Snape spat. 'Now kindly remove yourself from my sight.'

Hermione stood from the seat with a hurt look on her face that was killing Snape to have to see, but he had already schooled his expression to a dangerous one. She went to the door and opened it, stepping outside and moving to close it softly behind her.

'The headmaster wishes to see you now,' Snape ground out painfully just before she could close the door fully.

'Thank you again, Professor,' she whispered with a trembling voice, closing the door and disappearing from sight.

Hermione continued to walk as quickly as she could away from the office in question of the dour man inside. She had just gone back momentarily to thank him once more before going to her meeting with Dumbledore, and had been received most unwelcomely by a now uncaring Snape. It had not taken him very long to morph back into the greasy-git Professor that she was so used to, and now his hatred of her had intensified ten-fold--or so it seemed.

She finally reached the headmaster's office, making sure that she did not look at all distressed before knocking and walking in when she heard a warm 'come in!' She settled into the seat across from the old wizard, looked up, and smiled sweetly. 'Hello, Professor!' she exclaimed with false cheeriness.

'Miss Granger, I am delighted to see you looking so well,' he replied with a twinkle.

Hermione's mood was improved almost immediately when the headmaster had spoken. At least someone was happy to see her. 'I had a wonderful holiday. I assume that yours was equally as good?' she replied brightly.

'Yes, it was quite enjoyable,' he said with a chuckle.

'Is there any particular reason that you wanted to see me?' she asked, curious to know why she was now sitting in this lavish office.

'I was just making sure that our head girl was rested and well for the coming term,' he replied, trying to keep a straight face.

'Well, I am just fine. Thank you for asking though,' Hermione said, seeing straight through Dumbledore's guise. 'Now if you don't need me for anything else, I have to catch up with some friends. I'm sorry if that might seem a little rude...' she added hastily.

Dumbledore held up a hand to silence her. 'That is quite enough. It is understandable that you would wish to see your friends. Thank you for your time, Miss Granger,' the old man said knowingly.

'Goodnight, Professor,' Hermione said, standing from her seat and moving to the door.

'Sleep well, Miss Granger.'

His voice floated out the door, and the words hung in the air, following her as she made her way to the Gryffindor Tower to see Harry, Ron, and Ginny. She reached the portrait, muttered a quick 'Wronsky Feint' (typical that Ron would make the password something to do with Quidditch), entering through the portrait hole.

She was immediately greeted by loud male voices and was pulled into a huge hug by three people at the same time. 'Hermione!'

She smiled in spite of herself. 'Harry! Ronald! Ginny! If you don't let go of me, I will not be able to breathe!' she said over their repeated use of her name.

Harry was the first to let go, however, and tried to pry Ron and Ginny off, having more success with Ginny and pulling her into a comfortable hold. Ron clung to her for a little longer, but looked at her with something that she assumed was longing.

Oh dear!

'I missed you, 'Mione,' Ron said, hugging her around the shoulders.

'Yeah, I missed you too, Ron,' she replied, trying to shrug his hands off of her. She peered at Harry and Ginny, who had not said a word since they had detached themselves from her.

She wished that she had not looked over. Apparently they had come to a compromise over the holidays and were now involved in a wild snog that looked a lot like they were trying to wrestle each other for control over the situation. Hermione turned back around to Ron, who had moved onto the sofa and was patting the seat beside him.

'Ron, I'm sorry, but I can't stay. I am tired and we have to start classes tomorrow,' she said regretfully.

'Oh,' he said sadly.

She smiled and left the common room, heading straight for her own dormitory two floors down, dropping straight onto her bed. That had been a close call. She was not interested in another attempted relationship with Ron anytime soon, or preferably not anytime, ever.

They were friends, and it ended there. He was just too interested in Quidditch, and just too uninterested in any other thing for her personal liking. She would be perfectly happy with any other male in seventh year, as long as they were intelligent and could carry a decent conversation.

'Yes...' she thought. 'This is going to be an interesting term...'

Closed Doors

It's the first day back to classes, and it seems that Hermione just might have made a new friend -- not to mention a new admirer...

Chapter 9 - Closed Doors...

Hermione walked into the Great Hall for her first breakfast since the break, and it seemed strange now to be back at Hogwarts, eating with her friends, instead of a quiet, secluded one in Snape Manor. She secretly wished that she could go back there and just spend the rest of her days resting and relaxing in the study or parlor, reading a good book and getting intelligent conversation.

But now she would be eating breakfast with Ron, who spoke with food in his mouth, Harry, who was too busy talking to Ginny, and... Well, Neville wasn't very good with conversation, as he seemed to always trip over himself when he spoke. She sighed and took a bite out of her toast. She looked up at the staff table and the first thing she noticed was that Snape's place was vacant.

'Hermione, what are you looking for?' Ron asked from beside her.

She spun around and looked at him with surprise. 'Nothing really. I wonder where Professor Snape is,' she mused out loud.

'Why? He's probably off in the dungeons with his Death Eater mates,' Ron commented stupidly.

Hermione flashed him a dangerous look. 'Firstly, Ronald, Professor Snape would never do something like that, and secondly, Dumbledore would never allow it,' she snapped angrily, insulted by Ron's implications.

'Whatever you reckon, Hermione,' he mumbled, not seeming to care that he had hurt her, and continuing to shovel forkfuls of egg and sausage into his mouth.

She sniffed indignantly and finished her food in silence. By the time she had finished, her anger with Ron had as much as dissipated like fog in the sun, and she left the hall without feeling so much as a trace of anger.

She actually wondered why she still even felt the slightest bit of protectiveness over a man who had as good as spat in her face the previous evening. Shrugging inwardly, she made her way to her first class of the day and waited patiently at the door for Professor Vector.

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Snape watched as his seventh years filed into the dungeon, all sitting in their regular seats, Blaise Zabini with Harry Potter, as the two, although in rival houses, had formed a tolerance and friendship with each other, and Draco Malfoy. Daphne Greengrass sat with Draco now, he being her more recent beau. Neville was sitting by himself this lesson, however.

He paused. Herm-Miss Granger would never be late for class, which meant that she was sitting with the only other student in this class... Anthony Goldstein, Head Boy of Hogwarts, was sitting silently next to Hermione, smiling at her, but both seemed to be waiting for Snape to begin class.

Snape didn't like that smile. He sneered and stood abruptly from his seat, walking and pointing his wand at the board, giving it a decisive flick. He flicked it so hard that dust flew off the board and his wand made a whipping noise as it cut through the air.

'The potion you are making today is on the board. Take down all of the notes listed beneath before you begin,' he commanded in a no-nonsense tone.

Hermione looked up from her seat next to the most charming Anthony Goldstein. Being a Ravenclaw, he was intelligent, good for conversation and a very good listener. He had been standing next to her as she had waited to get into the Arithmancy classroom earlier that day and had asked her how her holiday had been.

She didn't give him too many details, like the fact that she had been staying with Snape, but he had coaxed an 'it was lovely' out of her. He had, in kind, given her a quick overview of his Christmas in Ireland with his family, and she found that he was quite entertaining and witty.

She understood now, as she was starting to get to know him better, the reason he had been chosen as Head Boy.

After quickly writing all of her notes up in her tidy print, she pulled out her Potions text and summoned her cauldron and ingredients from the student stores. Anthony was still finishing his notes off, and by the time she had put a fire beneath a cauldron filled with liquid, he was at her side, chopping the ingredients efficiently.

They had, by unspoken agreement, decided that it was best to talk outside of class only and finish all of their work without running the risk of losing House points and setting a standard for the other students. He was, to say the very least, far more receptive and considerate than Ron.

'May I put the shriveled fig in now?' he asked quietly, rousing her from her thoughts.

She nodded, noticing that Snape had begun his customary walk around the classroom to examine the work and dish out punishment and insults wherever he could.

Snape, from the other side of the classroom, watched Hermione covertly out of the corner of his eye as he scrutinized Harry and Blaise's potion thus far. 'It's not the right colour that it should be by now. You are far too slow, and the heat of the flame should be at least twenty degrees higher than that,' he said in a low, silky voice.

Hermione was sure that Snape did it on purpose this time. She had once argued that he only did it to keep up appearances, but he seemed sincerely delighted now to be picking apart Harry's class work. She forced herself to concentrate on her own potion that was simmering slowly, the exact shade it should be at the stage she was on.

At the end of class, Snape stood at the front of the room and looked down his hooked nose at them all.

'Put a stasis on your cauldrons and clean your workbenches,' he started in a low voice, close to that of a whisper so that the students would not move until he had absolutely finished speaking to stand, just so they could hear him. 'I want a six foot essay on the properties and uses of the root of asphodel and wormwood in the Draught of Living Death by the beginning of next lesson.'

Everyone immediately began to pack away their belongings in a race to leave the dank room, leaving Hermione and Anthony as the last to leave, smiling and chatting with each other as if Snape was not still standing in the room.

Not that he cared. They were just students, after all. Except one of them he had more recently been friends with and had taunted back into hating him, and the other was a male, not unlike himself, who appeared to have an interest in the first. Snape scowled at Goldstein's back as he left the classroom.

Just one more student to put on his 'kill when no longer a student' list.

He went to his desk and flicked his wand, sending all of his notes for that day into the filing system in his office and everything to return to a relatively tidy position. He did not have any feelings for Hermione Granger. He had done terrifically at rejecting her personally in every way up until the Christmas break.

It should be easy for him just to block her out again. Shouldn't it? She was just a silly teenage girl with the maturity and body of a woman. That shouldn't concern him though, should it?

He groaned and ran a hand through his hair in thought. She was insufferable, yet he could not get her out of his mind. She was untouchable, yet she was the only thing that he wanted so badly to touch. She was a torment to him, yet he felt willing to subject himself to it -- any torment she had to dish out, he would bear, just as long as she was there.

But he couldn't. It was wrong, and it was probably terribly perverted of him to think those things of her. But she was nineteen soon, and a good two years older than the rest of her year level, due to her extensive use of a Time-Turner in her third year. She was not a child.

'Dammit, Severus! Stop trying to make excuses for it to seem in the least bit acceptable!' he shouted loudly to himself, slamming the door closed and oh-so thankful for the silencing charms he had put up around the room.

One thing was for certain. Hermione Jane Granger was off limits.

Kindly Take Your Leave...

Chapter 10 of 21

Preperation begins for the Valentine's Day ball, while Severus' dark mood becomes darker -- meanwhile, Hermione gets asked on a date!

Chapter 10 -- Kindly Take Your Leave...

Hermione walked as briskly as she could down the halls, clutching a note in her hand tightly and hoping desperately that nobody would notice that she was late. She had been sent a last minute note by McGonagall to a meeting with the head boy and heads of house. She wasn't quite sure what it was about, but it seemed important nonetheless.

She uttered a quick 'acid pop' to the gargoyle guarding the headmaster's office and bolted up the staircase. She took a moment to compose herself and opened the door calmly, watching as everyone present turned to look at her with the exception of Snape. 'Sorry I'm a little late,' she mumbled, taking her seat.

'Well, now that everyone is present, we may begin our meeting,' Albus said cheerily, instantly quelling Hermione's first fear that it was something horrific.

Anthony Goldstein flashed a quick smile and a wink before looking at Dumbledore to listen to what the old man had to say. Hermione simply smiled nervously and did the same, listening to all of the castle updates before Dumbledore announced the main topic and reason for this meeting.

'Now, I am sure that you are all aware that Valentine's Day is fast approaching, and that is merely a week away?' he asked to all present.

There was a murmur of assent and a few nods, and the headmaster continued. 'This year, I have decided that instead of just the regular feast we shall transform it into a fully-fledged ball,' he said softly.

He saw two heads turn at him sharply and their mouths open to argue. He held up a hand to halt Hermione and Severus as they were about to start their tirades. 'And it is mostly due to the Yule ball that was promised but had to be cancelled. Students are expecting a ball, and I am merely delivering,' he finished with a smile.

Hermione huffed softly and sat further back in her chair, folding her arms across her chest and staring at the carpet. Snape, who was standing now by the fireplace, had settled for simply glaring at the headmaster down his hooked nose.

Albus took a deep breath to continue. 'I called you all here to help in the preparation for the ball, namely Mr. Goldstein and Miss Granger, and to remind you that you will all be expected to attend and partake in the evening.'

Fabulous! Hermione looked up then. 'Does that mean, Professor, that you expect Anthony and me to organize this in one week?'

Albus nodded. 'I am confident in your ability and think that the task should not be too hard for the two of you.'

Hermione ignored the compliment in that and pressed on. 'Headmaster, not to be rude or anything, but why do we have to have a ball? I think that a feast would be sufficient,' she stated firmly.

'I think it's a wonderful idea, Miss Granger, and it's about time this school had a ball,' Minerva McGonagall intoned, with professors Sprout and Flitwick nodding in agreement. 'Don't you, Severus?' she teased.

Snape sneered and growled a low response. 'Only a brainless twit would be so interested in such a pointless event,' he snapped before grabbing Floo powder and swirling into the Floo network and out of sight.

'Mr. Goldstein? You haven't said a word this whole meeting. What is your opinion?' Dumbledore asked kindly.

Anthony took a deep breath and looked at Hermione apologetically. 'I don't mind the idea, and it would certainly get all of the girls off my back who is asking when a ball will be held.'

'So the issue is resolved. We shall have the ball in one week. You are all dismissed and I shall announce it at dinner.'

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Severus spent the rest of the week snapping at students, forcing his dark nature onto them, and dishing out detentions with Filch left, right, and centre for the most mediocre things like coughing in class or raising their hands, to walking a little too fast in the school corridors.

Hermione had noticed Snape's worsening mood throughout the week and couldn't blame him either. She was being made to organize the event as well as attend it and had been spending the better part of her spare time planning during the time which she would normally be doing productive study.

Finally, the day of the ball came, and she was required to take her afternoon classes off to decorate and set up the Great Hall with the head boy at her side.

Anthony had been surprisingly good company over the past few days and was continually helpful and easy to get along with. He had been a good remedy for her ill-feelings towards the headmaster and the event, always smiling and encouraging her. She was surprised that he had a familiar cheeky smile that she could not quite place until she

thought back to her Christmas.

It had been that long since she had seen Snape smile. Even almost two months after the break, she was still finding that her feelings for him had not changed at all and had just intensified at the fact that she could not have him.

Anthony and Hermione set the Great Hall up pretty quickly and sealed it off, leaving three hours until the feast and ball would begin. She was about to leave when he stopped her, taking her hand in his lightly and smiling.

'Hermione, I was wondering, if you didn't have a date for the ball, maybe you'd like to go with me?' he asked nervously.

Hermione looked surprised. 'Of course I'll go with you,' she said with her first genuine smile that week. She felt happier now that she would not be going alone. 'I had better go get ready though.'

'There's another three hours yet,' he replied with a laugh.

'I know, but I have to go see a friend first,' she explained, not mentioning that Snape was the particular person this time.

He nodded and waved as she left and headed towards the dungeons. She stopped outside of Snape's office, unsure why she felt the sudden urge to see him that afternoon, but going ahead nonetheless. She knocked softly on the door and heard a sharp 'enter'. She opened the door and stepped through.

'Miss Granger. To what do I owe this... visit?' he snarled cantankerously.

Hermione merely smiled back. 'Professor, is something bothering you?'

'Yes, you stupid girl!' he thought angrily. 'The one woman I want, I can not have!' He looked up from the essays he was grading on his desk and frowned at her. 'I don't see how that is any of your business,' he said in a low voice.

'Well, I am just a little concerned. You have been... moody of late...' she started saying, comparing him now to the Snape she had spent Christmas with.

'I do not see how that should concern the head girl, who should have other, far more important matters on her mind. However, your concern is touching,' he drawled somewhat sarcastically. 'Now if that is all, kindly take your leave...'

Hermione left without another word, leaving Snape alone to ponder what she had just said to him. She couldn't possibly mean what he thought she meant? That she actually cared about him? It was improper, to say the very least, but some traitorous part of him liked the fact that Hermione might have feelings for him.

She had been sad the day he had told her to leave his sight when they had first returned from Spinner's End. She was sad then, when he had curtly told her to leave the room, but she did seem to be taking his snappy defense rather well.

He finished off marking the essays pretty smartly and left his office for his private quarters. He had to attend the stupid ball. He had to dance with the other insufferable female professors. And the worst part was that he had to spend the entire evening watching Hermione dance in the arms of other males.

He pulled out some crisp black dress robes and left for his bathroom to take a long, hot, and soothing shower. His muscles ached and head throbbed from the day's classes.

It was going to be a very long night...

A.N. Sorry I had to leave it off there... I will be writing the Valentine's Ball in the next chapter. Please! R&R!

Shall We Dance?

Chapter 11 of 21

Severus and Hermione dance, although the Valentine Ball brings a certain Gryffindor Witch and a Ravenclaw Wizard a lot closer than he would like to see...

Chapter 11 -- Shall We Dance?

Hermione used all of the spare time she had to get ready for the ball in her rooms. She had chosen out her finest dress robes a lovely cream and gold number, with the inner dress cut snugly around her curves, thin spaghetti strapped, and cut low down her back: lovely and simple. The outer robe was the same delightful shade, sleeves reaching to her elbows and trimmed with gold lace, trailing a little longer with an intricate pattern woven in gold thread all over the outside, lined with gold silk on the inside and fastening at the front with long strands of gold silk weaving and crossing over.

Once she was satisfied with her dress, she muttered a quick charm that piled her hair on top of her head, sending a few loose ringlets to cascade down her shoulders and back. She left her room not long after and took a couple of shortcuts to the Great Hall, met by a charming Anthony in black dress robes with a cream coloured waistcoat beneath, as she had instructed he wear in a note.

'Hermione, you look absolutely beautiful!' he exclaimed, eyes wide, drinking in her appearance.

'Thank you. You look quite dashing yourself,' she replied, blushing an attractive shade of red and clasping her hands together nervously.

'There's no need to be nervous, Hermione. You look great. Everyone will be really impressed and the ball will be fine. You organized most of it, remember?' he reassured her kindly.

She replied with a soft thanks and a brilliant smile and walked with Anthony, who had offered his arm to her, to the doors to open them and announced for the ball to begin. They each threw a door open, and a sea of grandly-dressed students went inside to the lavishly decorated hall.

Hermione had decided that pink and red were certainly too overrated and instead decorated the hall in lovely shades of white, gold, and silver. Apparently, it had impressed everyone, and the celebrations began well.

She danced around the hall gracefully with Anthony a few times before Ron and Harry both took her for a turn around the hall each before returning to their dates and leaving Hermione alone for a moment. She went to the refreshment table and watched as Dumbledore waltzed with McGonagall around the hall energetically. She was surprised at the amount of energy the old man had sometimes.

'Shall we dance, Miss Granger?' a familiarly silky voice asked from beside her ear.

Hermione felt a shiver run down her spine when the warm breath washed over her neck. She turned and saw that Snape was standing there with a hand extended to her and an indifferent expression on his face. But his eyes... they were glittering in... mischief? Triumph?

'I suppose,' she said with a shrug, taking his hand as he led her onto the dance floor. Outwardly, she appeared not to care too much, but inside she was a mess. Her stomach was doing flips, and her heart was aching painfully.

He gracefully led them into a slow salsa, and Hermione was delightfully surprised at how well he danced. She had not even been aware that he could. There were only two other couples on the dance floor apart from them, Dumbledore and McGonagall, and Remus Lupin with Professor Sinistra. Apparently not many people knew the dance.

'Miss Granger, I was not aware that you could salsa,' Snape commented silkily.

'Yes, I did dancing lessons when I was younger,' she replied meekly, blushing a little and trying to calm her breathing.

'You dance well,' he complimented smoothly.

'Thank you, so do you,' she said a little breathlessly as the dance sped up a little and he spun her out to arm's length before snapping her back to his body and bearing down on her as the dance required to be successful.

'Thank you,' he replied, moving them perfectly in time with the orchestra.

The dance came to a close, and Hermione had a lump in her throat when Snape bent her backwards and handed her a rose as he pulled her back up smoothly, ending the dance. 'Thank you for the dance, Miss Granger.'

And with that, he left. Hermione stood there breathing heavily and trying to regain her senses. He was a wonderful dancer, and he had practically flirted with her the entire time she was in his arms, bodies pressed together perfectly, breath mingling wonderfully and blood pumping at an unbelievable rate.

She collected herself quickly, holding the black rose he had given her lightly and turning to face Anthony, who had returned to her side and tapped her on the shoulder to gain her attention.

'That was quite a show,' he commented offhandedly. 'You are a brilliant dancer, Hermione. I just had no idea that Snape was capable of that...' he mused afterwards.

'Neither did I,' Hermione replied, almost slipping back into her thoughts of him. She shook her head and pushed the insufferable man out of her thoughts, smiling at Anthony.

'Are you recovered enough for another dance?' he asked, gesturing to the dance floor with one hand and holding the other out to her.

She nodded and didn't give Snape a second thought for the rest of the night. She had a wonderful time dancing with Anthony, who was rather good himself, before Dumbledore approached and asked if he could cut in, which Anthony kindly let him do, leaving to dance with Professor McGonagall.

'How has your evening been, Miss Granger?' he asked, blue eyes twinkling in their regular fashion.

'It has been wonderful, Headmaster, thank you,' she replied.

'Mr. Goldstein is a nice young lad,' he commented. 'A good dancer, and speaking of good dancing, you dance wonderfully yourself.'

'Thank you, Professor. You were quite something with Professor McGonagall earlier,' she said with a blush.

'Yes. I must say, you and Severus were quite the couple. I would have to say that it was the best dance I have seen this evening,' the Headmaster replied with a mischievous grin, one that the likes of even Salazar Slytherin would be proud of.

Hermione raised her eyebrows and remained silent for the remainder of the dance before being returned to her date, who started another dance with her. 'This has been a wonderful evening, Hermione. Thank you for coming as my date,' Anthony said with a smile.

'Thank you. I have enjoyed myself greatly,' she replied with a soft, squinty smile.

Anthony held her a little closer and leaned forward slightly, allowing his lips to brush hers innocently. Hermione gasped softly, but something in her squirmed and stopped her from pulling away. Instead, she clung to him lightly and let the kiss deepen, pressing back on his lips a little more insistently. He traced her lips lightly with his tongue and she allowed him entrance. They kissed for a little while longer until Hermione pulled back and led them off the dance floor.

'I'm sorry, Hermione,' he said, cheeks flushing a little.

She held up a hand to stop him and kissed his cheek. 'I didn't mind it, but I have to ask you, what did you mean by it?' she asked softly.

'Well, I think it means that I like you, Hermione,' he replied now with his normal measure of confidence.

'You're not just doing this on impulse are you?' she pressed, raising an eyebrow.

'Of course not. I've been trying to get your attention for months now. I've just never had the chance, really,' he replied honestly.

Hermione nodded. 'So what does this mean?'

'I think it means that I want us to be together,' he replied with the same amount of straightforward talk as Hermione was famous for.

'I think the only answer I can give you is a yes,' Hermione replied with a smile, leaning forwards and giving him a chaste kiss on the lips. He smiled and pulled her into a hug, which she reciprocated, all thoughts of Snape gone from her mind.

Meanwhile, from the staff table, a furious Snape sat watching as Hermione danced around the hall with the Head Boy. He noticed when they stopped dancing and saw Hermione involved in a passionate kiss with said Head Boy.

His temper became like an active volcano, and he stormed out of the room, unable to watch another torturous moment of the only woman he had ever loved being kissed by another male, a tear desperately trying to escape his eyes.

A.N. Sorry about this chapter. I know, it kills me to have to do this to my Severus, but it is important to have a few ups and downs in relationships. I promise that it gets better along the way, and that this little schoolgirl romance will not last long and Hermione and Severus will be happy in the end [cliché I know] ;p

Hogsmeade

Chapter 12 of 21

It's a Hogsmeade weekend, and Hermione goes with Anthony as was to be expected... what she had not counted on, however, was running into Professor Snape in the Bookshop.

Chapter 12 -- Hogsmeade

Snape walked along the path to the small wizarding community not so far away from Hogwarts, trailing behind a mass of students that were eagerly making their way to Hogsmeade, no doubt to buy sweets and other rubbish from the shops there. Dumbledore had graciously given him the task of chaperoning the little brats and the older dunderheads as they merrily went about their business.

He carefully trained his jealous eye on the school's newest gossip item, Hermione and Anthony Goldstein, with rumours sweeping about that they had been a couple long before the ball, even going as far as speculating their sexual relationship. Snape wished he hadn't heard those.

He was inwardly seething that the head boy had managed to coerce Hermione into anything with him and dreadfully jealous. Dumbledore had called him into his office two days ago to discuss the matter, in fact, and had been most keen to hear Severus' view. He had kept silent and sneered when Dumbledore had suggested that he was jealous.

'Silly little girl,' he muttered to himself as he walked.

Just ahead on the pathway, Hermione was talking and smiling with her beau, hands intertwined and practically as close to each other as they could get. The two had been inseparable since the ball a mere two weeks earlier and were practically joined at the hip. The end of February was nearing, however, and the two would soon be spending far less time together to prepare for their N.E.W.T exams at the end of March.

Snape wished that Hermione would talk to him, or argue with him, or smile one of her brilliant smiles at him, but she had not said so much as a 'hello' or 'goodbye' to him since their dance at the ball.

Hermione herself wasn't too keen on the subject and avoided it at all costs when other students brought it up. Even though she was with Anthony now, she still felt a familiar twist whenever Snape was mentioned in her presence. She had hoped that Anthony would be a good distraction for her and that she would soon be over her little schoolgirl crush, but apparently the attraction had gone further than that.

She therefore concluded that if she avoided all contact with him it would eventually end and she'd be able to move on and be more comfortable with her future companions.

They reached Hogsmeade not long after and Hermione parted ways with Anthony, going to the bookshop and apothecary to restock her school supplies and treat herself to a new book, promising to meet up with him at the Three Broomsticks later.

She dodged a few gossiping students and ducked straight into the bookshop, taking an hour to find the perfect book, and bought a new supply of quills and parchment, as she had almost exhausted her current supply, paid the shopkeeper, and headed to the apothecary to get potions supplies for herself.

She walked into the shop and to the last aisle of ingredients, running straight into Snape's black clad form. Stumbling, she was caught around the elbow by his strong hand and hauled into a normal standing position.

'I'm sorry, Professor,' she murmured, keeping her eyes trained on the ground.

'Next time be a little more aware of what you are doing, Miss Granger,' he said softly, in a voice unlike the usual stern one that she was used to.

'Thank you for your help,' she said, avoiding his eyes and feeling a little strange around him, a little breathless at his close proximity.

'Cut the crap, Granger!' she thought furiously. 'He's your professor, and you have a boyfriend--remember him?' She looked up and noticed that he was still standing there, looking at her expectantly.

'What exactly are you looking for, Miss Granger?' he asked curiously.

'Oh, nothing, really,' she replied. 'Just some supplies that I have run out of...'

'Would you like some help?' he offered. Inside he was cursing himself for acting so openly different. 'I hope she doesn't notice...'

Hermione shook her head, wanting him to stay, but willing him to go away at the same time. 'No thank you, but your offer is appreciated. I think I can manage.'

He bowed out, leaving a very puzzled Hermione standing alone in the aisle of the apothecary. Why was he being so... nice? He had been nothing but downright awful to her since the evening she had returned from Spinner's End, a gentleman at the Valentine's Day ball, and generally pleasant ever since.

The only catch was that he was extremely rude to Anthony, always criticizing his mistakes inside and outside of class, and even going the extent of blaming him for her failures.

Shaking Snape from her head, she picked out a few ingredients and paid for them, heading straight to the Three Broomsticks to meet up with Harry, Ginny, Ron, his date Luna, much to everyone's surprise, and finally, Anthony. They waved and beckoned her over as soon as she walked in out of the cold. She smiled and sat down next to Anthony in the little out-of-the-way booth.

He put his arm around her waist and drew her in nearer, pushing a Butterbeer towards her with the other hand. 'Thanks,' she quipped, rubbing her hands together to warm them inside of her gloves.

'No problem,' he replied, giving her a light squeeze. 'You're cold,' he added offhandedly.

'Just a bit,' she muttered, pulling out of his grasp so that she could shrug her damp outer cloak off.

At the bar, on the other side of the room, Snape watched the exchange with interest, noting the little glances, the smiles, the hugs and kisses that punctuated their conversation. Even Weasley and Potter had their little dates hanging off their every word, doing the exact same thing, small exchanges of glances and intimacy.

He felt a pang of jealousy when it was time to leave, and Anthony got up and helped Hermione out of her seat, wrapping her cloak around her shoulders, caressing them in a very Slytherin manner, kissing her neck before wrapping her scarf around it. And Hermione let him do it.

He had often wondered over the past two weeks why he chose to follow them around like a stalker, watching everything that went on between them. When realisation dawned on him: he was the one that had driven Hermione into the arms of the boy. He had ruined his only chance with the girl during the months that had followed their return from Spinner's End. It was all his fault.

'Professor, are you ready to leave?' asked a voice from beside him.

'Yes, Miss Granger,' he started. 'But I do not need you to chaperone me back.'

Hermione snorted a laugh back. 'I would never suggest that you needed a babysitter, Professor Snape.'

Snape stood up from the barstool, towering over all of them, and moved silently out of the pub, sending a jet of green sparks into the air. It was the signal for everyone to return to the meeting spot to leave for the castle. Within ten minutes, Snape had counted all seventy students that had come, and they all headed back to the castle on the path they had come from.

When they reached the castle, Snape walked into the entrance hall and happened to look up at the top of the grand staircase just as Anthony pinned Hermione with a long kiss. He fled from the room, straight to his dungeon and slammed his door shut with fury.

It was the beginning of what promised to be a long night and a very painful hangover when he woke up the very next day.

Dilemma

Chapter 13 of 21

The air is thick with tension -- but that is not the only thing. Hermione pays a visit to Severus to ask about something strange that is going on at Hogwarts.

Chapter 13 -- Dilemma

There was a strange mist hanging around the Hogwarts grounds. Hermione hadn't seen anything quite like it since the third year, when Dementors had been posted around the castle. It was strange because the headmaster had not mentioned anything to her, Anthony, or any of the other staff as far as she knew.

'Hermione?' Harry asked from beside her as she stood at the cold, misted window in the third floor corridor.

'Hmmm?' she mumbled incoherently, staring out.

'Are you alright?' he ventured.

She nodded softly and looked at him. 'This weather is strange, like Dementor fog. It's a little creepy to be honest,' she replied mutely.

'Yeah,' he agreed. 'I think that there might be more to this than just weather though.'

Hermione got an idea. 'Harry, I think I'll just nick off to the library for a bit. There's something I need to take a look at,' she lied.

'Alright,' he said, hoisting his bag more steadily onto his shoulder and turning to leave. 'I'll see you later.'

Hermione watched as he left and did not move until he was completely out of sight. She was going to visit Snape. He of all people had to know something about the unusually dreary weather. Without thinking about it twice, she walked as quickly as she could in the general direction of the downstairs, hoping that she would not run into anyone she knew on the way, as she could not risk getting distracted.

She finally reached her destination and moved to knock urgently on the door, only to have it immediately opened on her as her palm came into contact with Snape's chest. She snatched away her hand quickly as if she were afraid that he would yell at her and muttered a quick apology. 'Sorry.'

'Is there something that you wanted, Miss Granger?' he asked silkily.

'Actually, yes. But I think it might be better if you let me inside to discuss it,' she said daringly. Snape glared at her momentarily, only to have a stony look thrown back at him. He relented, stepping aside to allow her entry.

'You realize, Miss Granger, that gallivanting down to my office and demanding entrance is not the appropriate way to get what one wishes,' he sneered with a trace of his usual sarcasm.

'Oh, I understand, Professor!' she spat acidly. 'I just didn't expect you to be the kind that appreciated good manners! Especially those from a Gryffindor know-it-all!'

Snape winced slightly. He had hit a high note and apparently Hermione was a little more sensitive and hormonal today than she would have normally been. The cause? Well he didn't know, but he intended to find out.

He closed the door and gestured for Hermione to take a seat before sitting down himself behind his desk. 'Now I assume there is a purpose for this little--visit?'

Hermione nodded sharply. 'It's the weather. I don't know what it is, but this just doesn't feel right. It's gloomy and it feels like the castle has had its cheerfulness drained from it. Just like a Dementor.'

Snape's eyes widened and his lips twitched. He wanted to smile, but he could not allow it in front of Hermione. 'Ah, very good, Miss Granger, perceptive as ever,' he purred softly, sending chills up Hermione's spine. 'Yes, everyone else would simply shrug it off and account it as a normal end-of-winter fog, but you, Miss Granger. You question it and apparently you have made a reasonable conclusion.'

'You mean to say, that all of this, the fog, all of everything is the cause of Dementors?' she asked incredulously.

'You are correct,' he said simply.

'Why are there Dementors in these parts? I mean, what do they want here at Hogwarts?' she asked curiously.

'Well I'd have thought it was obvious,' he said with a quirked eyebrow.

Hermione sat still for a moment and pondered the information she had gathered in the last twenty minutes. When it came to her, she gasped and covered her gaping mouth. 'They--the Dementors... have they joined Voldemort?' she mused loudly.

Snape winced slightly at the use of the Dark Lord's name. 'Miss Granger, do I have to remind you about using that name?' he snapped coldly. 'But you are quite correct, nevertheless. They have sided with the darkness and are here for Potter,' he said in a slightly softer tone.

'Oh, Merlin, help us,' Hermione whispered softly.

'Merlin indeed,' Snape muttered under his breath in agreement.

Hermione looked up at him in surprise. 'What are we going to do?' she asked.

'YOU are not going to do anything. Professor Dumbledore and I have arranged a security plan for the protection of the students, especially Mr. Potter, and the arrival of the beasts will be made as soon as the headmaster sees fit,' he said prudently.

Hermione bristled at his tone and set a sneer onto her face before peppering him with another question. 'And what do these security measures entail, Professor?' she snipped angrily.

'There will be no trips to Hogsmeade for the remainder of the school term. Nobody will leave the inside of the castle without a guardian of some sort, and powerful barriers have been erected and strengthened on the perimeters surrounding the castle,' he replied in a dreary tone.

Hermione's eyes widened with each new precaution. No trips to Hogsmeade? No trips to Hagrid's? No sun-baking on the grass while Ron and Harry fly about on their brooms in the fresh air above her? 'Does that also mean that there will be no Quidditch?' she asked urgently, wondering how Harry and Ron would take this news.

'Regrettably, yes it does,' he replied with slight morose.

Hermione couldn't tell whether he was being serious or not, but she was starting to feel the familiar throb between her legs as his silky baritone spoke volumes to her, sounding like liquid dark chocolate surrounding her. She decided then that it was best that she leave, lest she be tempted to do something she would later regret. [a/n As if you would regret anything with Severus...]

She stood and looked her professor hard in the eye. 'Thank you for confirming my suspicions, Professor Snape,' she said curtly, moving to the door to leave.

'My pleasure, Miss Granger,' he replied smoothly, causing her step to falter just a bit as she curled her hand around the door knob, ready to open it.

She left without another word, leaving Snape alone at his desk with a painful throbbing between his legs. The first thing he did before he reached down to try and relieve some of the pain was to flick his wand to lock and ward the office, then letting his hand wander to the bulge in his lower region.

His hand brushed it experimentally, and its reaction was to twitch uncomfortably. He quickly unbuttoned his pants and freed his throbbing erection from its restraints and stroked it a bit before the hunger for more grew and he was soon thrusting uncontrollably before finding his release and coming with a groan.

Panting, he finally calmed and cast a cleansing charm over himself and buttoned his pants up again. Damn, what that girl did to him. Even when she was furious with him, he seemed to be too easily aroused by her. Her scent was intoxicating, her presence demanding, her beautiful eyes were completely and totally innocent and passion-filled. He couldn't imagine a more beautiful and intelligent witch.

She had come to mean so much to him in the past three months. He knew her better now than he ever expected he would. And he wanted to know more. She drove him to the point of insanity and back, sent him on a trip that he never expected he would take and was feeling a new emotion, in a part of him that he had not thought existed.

And she belonged to another.

He pulled his watch out of his pocket and examined its beauty. Peering inside, he viewed the time and saw that it was almost time for dinner. Just enough time for a nice cold bath to get rid of any excess arousal, as a precaution. The Potions master of Hogwarts could not very well be seen walking about the school with a raging erection.

And besides, he really needed to get over this school-boy reaction to her.

Decisions...

Chapter 14 of 21

Perfection was something that Hermione had often strived for -- until it became woefully apparent that perfection was not what she sought this time around.

Chapter 14 -- Decisions...

Hermione was a coward, and she knew it. She had fled Snape's office at the first sign that he was actually reverting back to the Snape she knew at Spinner's End. She liked that Snape, but she didn't want to and couldn't afford to. He had been pleasant for the past few weeks, and it was starting to get a little too weird for her.

Anthony Goldstein was a perfect match for her. He was smart, witty, able to carry a decent conversation without talking about Quidditch, charming, and ever the gentleman. He had a special smile that was just for her, and hugged and held her when the moment called for it, and kissed her in a surprisingly gentlemanly way--not the sloppy, disgusting kisses of a testosterone-driven teenage boy.

For all intents and purposes, he was too perfect.

And although Hermione had once admired the perfection in her life and strived for it, her opinion on the matter was weakening. So much so that Snape had somehow found a way inside of her mind, spinning in and out of the dreams and fantasies that she was supposed to be having about Anthony.

She shook her head and looked up at the staff table. Dumbledore had been standing and announcing the situation concerning the dementors for the last ten minutes, greeted by the protests and groans of the students. It actually wasn't that bad, and they had all been allowed one last trip the week before, one week after her discussion with Snape.

She was surprised at how fast the time had gone and even more so by the fact that she actually felt that strange twinge every time she was in the same room as Snape. Perhaps she was delirious?

Never mind that though. She stood when the Headmaster dismissed them and went straight to her rooms without looking back or waiting to see Anthony, who did not know about the dementors until just moments before and would no doubt want to discuss it. Her only interest was to get back to the safety of her private rooms and hope that she would be able to use the excuse of studying for the N.E.W.T's, which, incidentally, were only a couple of short weeks away.

'Hermione! Wait up!' called a voice from nearby.

She groaned and turned to face an approaching Anthony. 'Hi!' she said with false enthusiasm.

"Mione, what's up?" he asked, using the pet name for her.

'Nothing, I was just going to go up and study for a bit,' she said plainly, as if it was obvious where she was going and what she was going to do.

'Oh? Well in that case, Dumbledore insisted that we attend a meeting right away with the heads of house to discuss this matter more thoroughly,' he said softly.

'Oh great!' Hermione thought to herself. Just another hour or more that she would be closed into a room with Snape, except this time, it was an even smaller room than usual. 'Where do they want to meet us?' she asked with a sigh.

'In the staff room on the second floor,' he replied, holding out his hand to her and twining his fingers with hers when she accepted his touch.

Hermione looked down at their hands and wondered curiously. Why wasn't there any spark? She was supposed to feel something, wasn't she? But she didn't. It felt just like grasping the hand of Ron or Harry as she stood in between the two boys and they made the trek to Hagrid's hut. She felt like she was holding hands with a good friend as opposed to a potential lover.

She was relieved when they finally reached the staff room and he relinquished her hand, opening his mouth to speak the password. Hermione had made up her mind. It had been just over a month, and although it had been fun, she knew this was the right thing to do for both of their sakes.

'Anthony, wait!' she said quickly, pressing a finger over his lips.

'Is there something wrong?' he asked in surprise.

Hermione decided not to run around in circles like most of the rest of their year level did. The direct approach always worked better. 'I don't think that this is going to work, Anthony.'

He looked at her for a moment and then nodded. 'I know. I started to sense it last week some time. You're a great friend and a wonderful person, and I think you're really beautiful, but I think we should just be friends too,' he replied with a small smile.

Hermione threw her arms around him in a friendly hug and sighed with relief. 'Thank you for understanding.'

'It's fine, Hermione. I love you heaps, but only as a friend now,' he said, returning the hug. 'I guess it was just all of the extra time we spent around each other.'

'Hmmm...' Hermione agreed. 'I think we should go in now, though.'

He nodded and gave the password, both of them slipping in to find the four heads of house waiting. They had been walking with their hands held fast for the past couple of weeks but this time they walked in neutrally, not touching, but still seemingly friendly.

Snape was the first to notice the change, but he kept silent and in the background, while gradually the other professors caught on with the recent difference. Snape inwardly smiled at what this meant and felt a twitch in his trousers. Damn! He would have to learn to control that reaction.

McGonagall was the first one to speak however. 'Miss Granger? Mr. Goldstein? Is there something you would like to share?' she asked curiously.

Hermione smiled and sat down in a seat next to Snape. The first step to moving on was embracing and confronting the issue, and she had a feeling that this was just what she needed to do. Anthony smiled too and sat between Flitwick and Sprout.

'Hermione and I have decided that we serve each other better as just friends,' Anthony answered for both of them. 'Now if that's all, what is the reason for this meeting?'

Hermione was impressed at the way that Anthony handled the situation calmly and without lingering on the subject for more than a minute. A very clever move that would not attract attention to them and away from the issue at hand. She knew exactly why he had been sorted into Ravenclaw.

McGonagall addressed a number of minor issues and left the dementors for last. After an hour, the odd group had decided that it was just best to leave security as it was until something serious arose. Hermione was the first to rise and move to the door to leave. She went through the opening and felt a light pressure on her shoulder and turned her head to inspect the hand there.

Snape.

He looked down his nose at her. 'Miss Granger, a moment if you please?' he asked.

She nodded and followed him a little way down the corridor and into a hidden alcove. 'Just a precaution,' he explained and she cottoned on.

Finally, she looked him in the eye and asked, 'You wanted something, Professor?'

'I take it you understand that the school will be closing earlier this year than most?' he asked quietly.

'It will?' she asked in surprise.

'Indeed. The headmaster believes that the school becomes more dangerous every day and has decided that, for the best of the students, he will be closing the school for the year after all of the N.E.W.T. and O.W.L. exams have been taken in exactly one week,' he said silkily.

Hermione blanched. 'When will the exams be starting?' she asked in alarm.

'Two days, Miss Granger.' He sneered with triumph.

Hermione's eyes widened noticeably and she gaped her mouth open unattractively. 'That's not nearly enough time for me to study for the exams!' she exclaimed.

'Oh, pish,' he said, waving her off. 'You will excel.'

Hermione looked up curiously. 'The headmaster will announce this in the morning then?' she asked softly.

'Of course,' he replied, as if the answer was obvious.

Hermione's mind was racing. Her final examinations were so soon! She felt her knees buckle beneath her, and she collapsed onto the ground, eyes wide and fearful. Dementors... the Dark Lord... N.E.W.T.s? Everything was happening so fast.

Snape saw Hermione collapse in a helpless pile on the ground and instinctively bent down next to her, tipping her chin up so that she looked at his face. 'Dear girl, are you alright?' he asked in a worried voice.

'Was that concern?' Hermione thought airily before coming to. Hermione looked into his worried black eyes and knew the answer to that question. Maybe he did care? 'Professor Snape...' she whispered.

'Hermione...' he whispered back softly, caressing her chin lightly with the pad of his thumb. He had gone too far. Snape stood up immediately and held out a hand to help Hermione back up. When she was steadily on her feet he swept away quickly, without looking back at her.

Farewells & Forgiveness

Chapter 15 of 21

The trio has finally graduated from Hogwarts, and Hermione emotionally bids farewell to her friends, before returning to Spinner's end with a certain Potions Professor.

Chapter 15 -- Farewells & Forgiveness

Snape watched as Hermione hugged Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley goodbye on the platform in Hogsmeade. The end of the school year had come so soon, and he found that he liked the idea less and less. He was now going to be stuck with Hermione as his house guest once more while her two best friends travelled with Lupin and Charlie Weasley on the Hogwarts Express to a safer location.

He watched as she ran up to Anthony Goldstein, the now former head boy, and pulled him into a ferocious hug also. He felt a stab of jealousy as she kissed him on the cheek while the tears leaked down her face as she wept. These would be the hardest farewells Hermione would have to make for a while now, and luckily for her she was taking it well.

Ten minutes after her goodbyes to her friends, he found a weeping Hermione walking in his direction. Her face was streaked with tears, eyes puffy and a little red, cheeks flushed. To anyone else, this may have looked like a typical hormonal teenage girl. But to Snape, she was a beautiful, intelligent woman.

'I'm sorry it took so long, Professor,' she murmured softly, sniffing back tears.

'Time is not an issue, Miss Granger. You most likely will not be seeing any of your friends for quite a while now,' he replied evenly, leading her to an Apparation point nearby.

Hermione pulled her bag onto her shoulder properly, allowing Snape to find a proper grip on her to Apparate. They reappeared in a familiar setting to Hermione, the walls of the study still lined with books.

'I've missed this house,' she commented quietly to herself, hoping that Snape did not hear her. But no such luck.

'Surprisingly, Miss Granger, I am afraid that I will have to agree with you on that point. It is good to return to a quiet environment,' he said from beside her and then added, 'I believe you are already familiar with the location of your room?'

Hermione nodded mutely and turned to leave the room when he spoke once more. 'Miss Granger, I hope you will not mind having to put up with living under the same roof as me once more. The headmaster seemed to think that this is a good idea.'

'Merlin only knows why,' Hermione replied softly with a smile.

And Snape chuckled. It was the first time she had heard him laugh in what felt like years, but was only months. Hermione liked this Snape. She remembered everything then, of what their time had been like on the Christmas break.

'Thank you, Professor,' she mumbled quickly before leaving the room.

'No, thank you, Hermione,' he whispered softly to himself when she was out of earshot, allowing some of the adoration he had for her to show on his face.

Snape left the study and sometime later found he was wandering aimlessly around his own home and, besides being completely uncharacteristic of him, left him wondering what Hermione was getting up to.

Meanwhile, in her bedroom on the third floor, Hermione was staring at the ceiling of her bedroom, watching the way the light played off of the antique glass of the chandelier and thinking about Snape. Finally, after three hours of solitude she worked up the courage to venture around the house in search of intelligent conversation.

She needed to find Snape. And fast. She needed to touch him, hold him, inhale his sharp, delicious scent, and feel his skin beneath her fingers. She needed him. She didn't care how long it would take her, but she was going to have him. He was the only thing that had been plaguing her mind, and she had to act on her feelings.

Her feet carried her first to the study, where they had spent so much time poring over books during the Christmas break. He wasn't there. The dining room was empty, save for the remnants of her lunch. The parlor held not a single hint of his prior presence.

Hermione was going insane. Where was Snape?

'Are you looking for something, Miss Granger? Perhaps you've misplaced a book?' Snape whispered into her ear, warm breath washing over the sensitive skin of her neck.

Hermione jumped. She had not even left the parlor, and her bounty had come straight to her. And scared the wits out of her, on top of that. She spun around to face him only to come into contact with his chest, as he was standing so close to her.

She took an involuntary step backwards. 'I-I, ummm... was looking for you, Professor...' she stammered nervously.

'Oh?' he asked, eyebrow rising in question. 'And how can I be of assistance?'

Snape took a menacing step forwards but was surprised when Hermione didn't step back again. She steered her eyes to look directly into his and sighed in resignation. It would have to be today. She had been pining for him for far too long.

She stood up on her toes a little and leaned up to brush her lips softly across his. She saw the shock in his eyes and felt a sudden embarrassment, blushing several shades of red and getting ready for rejection.

It didn't come. Snape's hands immediately flew to her waist and held it tightly as his lips crashed back to hers even more insistently. Her arms, meanwhile, had a mind of their own as they went around his neck and pulled him down harder, urging him onwards.

His tongue darted out and ran along her bottom lip before he withdrew it and gently bit down on the same tender flesh, drawing a sharp gasp from Hermione as he plunged his tongue forward into her now open mouth.

And then she moaned, drawing Snape back to his senses. He pulled away from her, keeping his grasp on her waist. 'Miss Granger, I apologise, it was very presumptuous of me...' he started, but was silenced by a soft kiss from Hermione.

'Don't say sorry. I liked what you did,' Hermione whispered against his lips.

That was all Snape needed before he leaned forwards and stole another long, sensual kiss from her sweet, innocent lips, relishing the feel of her beneath his hands. 'Hermione,' he groaned as her hips began to grind against his own.

Hermione stopped kissing him then. 'Say it again,' she said softly.

Snape looked confused. 'Say what again?'

'My name,' she replied, sliding her hands up to grasp the silky, not-oily, lengths of his raven hair.

Snape smiled. 'Hermione.'

'Very good, Severus,' she replied before pulling his head down for another kiss. She felt like she was in heaven. He kissed better than anyone had a right to and out of all the other boys she had dated.

And then it hit her. Severus Snape was not any mere boy. He was a man, and a talented one at that, because just being in his presence made her ache with desire.

Snape looked down at his lovely prize, which now seemed to be contemplating something, and gave her a squeeze. 'What are you thinking about?'

'How much I love you,' Hermione replied weakly, feeling breathless from their recent activity.

'Never in a million years did I ever believe that you would say that to me,' he whispered, pulling her flush against him and inhaling her glorious scent.

Hermione smiled. She understood that she would not be getting a response at that moment, but things were looking up already...

The Calling

Chapter 16 of 21

Severus is once more called by the Dark Lord to be amongst his ranks - however, things are not going quite so smoothly any more.

Chapter 16 - The Calling

Ordinarily Snape would get a slight tingling sensation in his arm before the Dark Mark began to burn, but this time the pain shot through his entire arm with no pretense, like being burnt with a fire-poker that was fresh off of the fire. He couldn't help but to gasp from the sudden wave of pain.

Hermione's eyes flew to him immediately. 'Severus?' she asked, worries creasing her ordinarily smooth features.

'He's calling me,' he gasped, leaping from his chair, sending his book flying across the floor, and rushing from the room.

Hermione took a deep breath and calmed herself. It wasn't going to help either of them if both were hysterical. And by the looks of things, it was Snape who was a little frantic this time, leaving her to be calm. She picked up the books and spelled them to their shelves. Walking slowly, she went to follow him to his room, still giving him time to get ready alone.

When she reached his bedroom, he was already dressed in his Death Eater robes, holding the silver mask in one hand and looking grim.

Hermione ran to him and flew straight into his arms, resting her cheek against his strong chest and taking another deep breath before she hyperventilated. But as soon as she exhaled, the tears began to well up in her eyes.

'Please be safe,' she whispered emotionally.

'I promise,' he said back quietly.

She looked him in the eyes and let the tears fall down her cheeks, holding on tighter than before. He leaned forward and kissed her softly but pulled away soon after lest it get out of hand.

'Hermione, there is a good chance that I am going to be in a great deal of danger, and I don't want you to be hurt,' he said, holding her shoulders lightly and rubbing circles with his thumbs.

'I know.'

'I want you to go to Albus. Tell him that I will report to him WHEN I get back,' he pleaded.

Hermione looked doubtful and turned away.

'I will come back, Hermione. I promise,' he said, turning her chin up to face him properly. 'Trust me.'

She nodded and kissed him once more, pushing him away and walking to the fireplace. 'Go now.'

Snape pulled up his sleeve and touched his wand to the Dark Mark, disappearing with a loud pop, leaving Hermione alone by the fireplace. She wiped away the stray tears and tried to restore as much normality to her appearance as she could before grabbing a handful of Floo powder and appearing in Dumbledore's office.

She found the headmaster staring out one of his grand windows, looking a little disturbed and dreamy. 'He's been summoned then?' the old man asked without turning to face her.

Hermione would have nodded, but he couldn't see her. 'Yes.'

'He's in a lot of danger, Miss Granger,' Albus started sorrowfully, 'and I'm afraid it is all my fault.'

'What do you mean?' Hermione asked quickly.

'I asked him to make an unbreakable vow with me, in exchange for my protection. It didn't leave him with much other choice, so he accepted, naturally.'

Hermione's eyes widened. 'So you mean to tell me that Severus is out there risking his life for a few miserable people that could not even give a flying broomstick about him, just because of some stupid vow?' she piped a little frantically.

'I would like to say no, but that would be a lie,' Dumbledore said with a sigh. He understood how the girl felt.

'Brilliant!' she said, throwing her hands up dramatically. 'We have no idea whether he is coming back or not!'

'He will come back, Miss Granger. Make no mistake, Severus is strong and he has too much to live for!' Dumbledore said firmly, voice rising a bit.

'What guarantees do we have?' Hermione retorted.

'We do not have any, Hermione,' he admitted. 'All we have is hope. I swear that if I could do one thing, I would take back the vow and chose another fate for him, but for now he must walk his own path.'

'I will not lose him, Professor,' she said quietly, staring at the ground.

'Have a seat, Hermione. We will just have to wait and see what the outcome is.'

Hermione sat herself precariously on a seat, trying to relax her tense muscles and then remembered the potions he had stuffed into her pocket earlier. Pulling out a muscle relaxant, she tipped it down her throat and swallowed. It was disgusting, but it helped.

They waited for about half an hour before the flames in the fireplace glowed green and Severus stumbled out, shaking violently.

'Call the Order, now!' he commanded croakily.

Dumbledore stood and summoned his phoenix Patronus to alert all of the Order members, before walking to help Severus onto the couch that Hermione was on.

'Miss Granger, a Cruciata potion, please,' he said firmly.

Hermione obliged and uncorked a vial, pressing it to Snape's lips and pushing him back onto the couch forcefully against the violent tremors.

'Drink!' she commanded.

He did as he was told and drank every vile drop of the potion and, after a few moments, relaxed back into the seat with Hermione still perched atop his lap.

'Thank you,' he croaked.

Dumbledore watched the somewhat changed dynamics between the two and saw that Hermione was smiling, albeit a little nervously, at him. Severus, in turn, didn't seem to be bothered at all by their close proximity, and welcomed her embrace. It looked, to him, like the beginnings of love.

'Severus, tell me what happened?' he said finally.

'The Dark Lord will attack at dawn. He discovered that I have betrayed him and tortured me, letting me live only to bear this message to you: he says that you will not live to see the end of tomorrow,' he reported, voice husky with emotion.

'How were you discovered?'

'I am afraid that I betrayed myself. There was no informant,' he replied, taking Hermione's hand.

'Very well. Is that all?'

'He will attack the Ministry of Magic first,' Snape said softly.

'I want both of you to remain here while I update the Order. Do not be too worried if I do not return tonight,' he said, stepping up to the fireplace and leaving in a swirl of green flames.

Hermione was left alone in the room with Snape now and slid down to sit on his lap properly, winding her arms around his waist and laying her head on his chest. 'I didn't think you would come back,' she murmured quietly.

'Neither did I. But my one redeeming thought saved me from the Dark Lord,' he replied with a heavy sigh.

'What was it?'

'I thought of you, and that is why I was discovered. But that is also why I am no longer tied to Voldemort,' he said, kissing her on the forehead lightly.

Hermione looked up, eyes shining and kissed him slowly, then more deeply, until she needed to catch her breath. He closed his eyes as she rested her head on his chest again, and they both drifted into a sleep-like state.

'Hermione...' he whispered softly as sleep took a hold of his mind.

The War Within

Chapter 17 of 21

Severus and Hermione return to Spinner's End, offering comfort to each other... And maybe a little more?

Chapter 17 -- The War Within

When Albus did not return to his office after an hour that evening, Snape stood, clutching his sleeping beauty to his chest, and Flooed back to Spinner's End with her in his arms. He was more grateful than ever now that he had made the house unplottable.

Hermione would be safe there.

His only thoughts, for the last hour, had been for her and her safety. He couldn't bear life any longer if he lost her.

He carried her to his bed and lay her down gently before thinking to wake her. He wiped her face with a cool towel and left it on her forehead, leaving the room to take a shower and attempt to wash every last trace of the Dark Revels from his skin.

His lips pinched together tightly as he viciously scrubbed at his skin, all the while wishing he could scrub away memories as well. He was weighed down heavily by everything that had gone on in the last twenty-four hours. Even as he washed, he felt as though the stain wouldn't leave his skin either.

All of it was branded into his head like it had been done so with a flaming hot brand and tattooed onto his arm painfully in the form of the dark mark. He pulled a bathrobe on over his naked chest and pushed his wet hair back from his face and tied the robe shut. When he went back to his bedroom, Hermione was sitting up on his bed.

'You're awake,' he commented. His voice had regained most of its normality since the time he had returned.

She nodded slowly and stood up, holding her arms outstretched to him. He went to her quickly and took her up in his arms, holding her and cradling her against him.

'I love you, Severus,' she murmured, whispering it into his chest.

Snape knew that he should pull away, but instead, just accepted it. He was deeply in love with her. But he wasn't ready to tell her that yet. The only thing he could do was accept her and show her how he felt.

He kissed her lips softly as he did, just before he deepened it, using his tongue to explore her taste and tease her sweet, innocent little mouth, kissing her with every ounce of passion he had in him.

It was not long until they had made it to the bed and were simply lying there, not making any attempt to go further, and enjoying each others' company. Hermione was the first to speak.

'What will happen if we don't make it?' she asked as he held her and stroked her spine through her blouse.

'You will, Hermione. I will not allow you to go to the Ministry tomorrow. You will stay here,' he answered carefully.

Her reaction was only to be expected.

'I am not a child, Severus!' she argued, outraged, and pulled out of his arms. 'I can take care of myself! Harry needs me!'

Snape sighed in resignation. 'I knew you would say that. But it was worth a try,' he said, sighing again deeply.

Hermione rolled over to face him and shifted back into his arms. 'Don't worry about me, Severus,' she whispered softly, stroking a slim finger down his cheek. 'I will be fine and I will live, just to see you once more on the other side.'

Snape smiled and gave in. She was going to fight, whether he liked it or not. He had only one night left with her. Eight hours until the dawn's first light.

At that thought, he was suddenly filled with desire, but restrained himself. Hermione saw it there, and she saw the uncertainty that was with it. She reached out to him and tried to quell his fears.

'Please, Severus. I want this, and you. I'm old enough to decide what I want for myself. And right now, all I want is you,' she pleaded softly, tangling her fingers into his damp hair.

'Hermione,' he warned her, fear still penetrating his mind.

'Please, Severus,' she begged more insistently.

Snape groaned in defeat before pulling Hermione flush against him and claiming her lips in a bruising kiss. Hermione moaned into his mouth, causing him to break away, and instead, kissed a heated line down her neck to the juncture between it and her collarbone. She took a sharp breath and whimpered.

His mouth left her skin and his fingers began to undo the buttons of her blouse at an agonizingly slow pace. 'Severus, please!' she moaned softly.

'Be patient, my sweet,' he murmured, kissing the tip of her nose gently.

'Easy for you to say, Professor!' she retorted huffily, drawing a deep chuckle from the Potions master.

After the blouse came off, they both managed to make short work of removing the rest of their cumbersome clothing and were soon lying, holding each other after their snogging match that had been much like a wrestle for dominance.

Severus pulled her flush against him, lazily tracing a finger over her back and letting one hand cup her bottom and letting the tracing hand move around to her other side and lower.

It danced over her abdomen before it reached its destination and plunged within her. She rode his fingers into her orgasm, muscles clamping around his fingers and driving

him mad with lust. When she regained her breath, he positioned himself and paused, waiting for her permission, and when she gave it, drove into her without restraint...

He pounded into her, unable to control himself, and tried to keep the pace steady. But his own lust coupled with hers was too much, and both found themselves grinding harder, moving faster, screaming and yelling louder, begging for their release.

'Harder, Severus, please!' she groaned, panting and wanting more as he pumped into her slowly.

Severus obliged and went harder and faster until both of their orgasms washed over in an instant and drove them over the edge. Still panting and breathing heavily, they managed to untangle themselves from the bed sheets. Hermione turned to face him, pressing her body against his and snuggling into him.

She closed her eyes and hummed in satisfaction as Snape spelled the sheets from beneath them and covered them. As she began to fall asleep, all he could do was hold her close and hope that this was not just a dream and that she would not slip away from him.

He bent his head close to her ear and whispered to her quietly, 'I love you, Hermione...'

She murmured something in response and curled into his arms a little further. He tightened his arms around her and sighed to himself in contentment.

The morning would come far too soon...

Mayhem at the Ministry: Part 1

Chapter 18 of 21

The final battle has finally arrived...

Thanks go to Drusilla, who beta'd the last few chapters of this story for me after my last beta was unable to.

Chapter 18 - Mayhem at the Ministry: Part 1

The sun began to rise over London, twinkling at the citizens of Muggle London with the greeting of a new day. However, the inhabitants of the Ministry of Magic, that morning, were not so fortunate. The air was stale, and only a tiny peak of what lay beyond the cloud reached through the air of gloom and pending destruction that hung over them.

Snape stood by the nearest window, staring out at the clouded haze on the outskirts of the city. They were coming. Soon. He could feel his Mark burning with their anticipation. His only relief was that having the Mark did not automatically mean that he would perish with the Dark Lord when he was destroyed.

'Severus?'

Snape looked over his shoulder at Remus Lupin and nodded in acknowledgement, folding his arms across his chest forebodingly.

'Getting nervous, old friend?' Remus asked with a reassuring smile.

'Old I can agree with, Lupin. But I can hardly remember a time when we have ever called each other friend,' he replied sarcastically.

Lupin chuckled darkly. 'Well, perhaps now is the time to set aside our differences and make amends? Right, old boy?' he asked kindly.

'Perhaps,' Snape replied, smiling weakly at Hermione as she approached them. He took her hand in his own and brought it up to his lips, brushing them against her knuckles.

Remus was a little surprised by this, but decided not to ask questions. The less he knew, the better, perhaps. 'Hello, Hermione,' he greeted with a warming smile. She smiled back at him, let Snape draw her into a comfortable hug, and in turn, returned his embrace.

'Hello, Remus,' she said softly.

Lupin looked on at the changed dynamics between his old school foe and the younger woman, who had once been his student, and a brilliant one at that. He saw the tender way that Snape tucked a stray curl behind her ear and their reluctance to pull away from each other as they let go.

They all turned sharply when they heard a loud, cracking noise, and then a squeak before something fell to the ground with an almighty crash, shaking the floor beneath them.

Snape's eyes flew to where the large fountain stood in the middle of the Ministry's first floor foyer. What he saw was nothing short of despicable. The head of one of the statues, the one of Merlin in the centre, had been severed and had fallen clean off.

Hermione, who had moved straight back into Snape's arms again, fixed her eyes on his face. Snape pulled his wand from his sleeve while keeping one arm around Hermione, pinning her to his side. 'Draw your wand,' he ordered softly.

She obeyed without question, looking from the firmly set face of the man she loved to Remus, who also had his wand in hand, staring, concentrating on the fountain.

'Remus, where are Harry and Ron?' she whispered urgently.

'They are hidden and safe. And you should be, too,' he said back quietly, looking pointedly at Snape.

Hermione noticed this and pursed her lips together tightly, shooting him a sharp look. 'I chose to be here, Remus. Severus tried to keep me away,' she snapped defensively just as they heard another crash, this time caused by the head of the female witch statue falling.

Snape listened to Hermione defend him and decided to stay out of whatever it was that was supposed to offend him, just as Lupin spoke again.

'I apologise, Severus.'

'As much as I appreciate your apology, Remus, I do not think this is the time nor the place to be worrying about such trivial issues,' he replied as a flash of green light emanated around the fountain, blocking it from sight, and then suddenly, the hall was filled with Death Eaters in their black robes and silver masks.

Snape could sense Hermione's fear as her pulse sped up beneath his fingers and her breaths became ragged. He leant down and gave her a final, chaste kiss before whispering to her as the Death Eaters scattered around the foyer, 'Do not panic, my sweet. I have every confidence in you.'

Hermione was sure that she had never been so scared in her life. She could already see the curses and hexes flying across the room in jets of bright light. 'N-no, I... oh, Merlin!' she uttered in gasps.

Snape gripped her by the shoulders and turned her to look at him. 'Hermione, I am going to ask you... no, implore you once more. Will you please go to Spinner's End? Stay there for me? Please?' he pleaded, keeping his wand aimed to block the oncoming wave of hexes.

Hermione clamped her jaw in place firmly and shook her head. 'No, Severus,' she said, finding her voice again. 'We are wasting time with this discussion. I will be staying.'

She pulled away from him and, getting a firmer grip on her wand, looked at the battle before them. Snape nodded and cast a Shield Charm, giving her one final thought, before using Occlumency to disguise the rest of his thoughts from the Dark side. He was ready for this, and ready to live, if only to see Hermione one last time afterwards.

As Hermione broke away, she had to dart out of the way of some misguided hexes and shot as many curses and charms as she could, with fair accuracy, getting her targets nearly every time.

'Stupefy! Reducto! Furnunculus!' she yelled, pointing at each Death Eater as they approached, slicing her wand through the air violently.

Two were blown backwards, knocked out the instant that they crashed into the walls and pillars. A third was writhing around on the ground in pain, clutching at his face and trying to tear his clothes off, screaming, his flesh breaking out in boils everywhere.

She left him there after magically binding him and dodged another Death Eater who was falling at the hand of "Mad-Eye" Moody. Moody gave her a brief nod before taking off across the foyer to where another Death Eater was trying to engage him into battle.

'Hermione, watch out!' somebody yelled from across the foyer.

She spun around and caught a glimpse of Bellatrix Lestrange before she was caught in the shoulder with the older Death Eater's slicing hex. She swore under her breath as the cow let out a high-pitched laugh.

'Well, if it isn't the Mudblood slut that has Snape wound around her little finger,' she spat cruelly. 'It's been a while, little girl. Care to see if you're any better at duelling than you were last time?'

Hermione saw the blood soak through the sleeve of her robe and threw Lestrange a foul look. It hurt, but it would have to wait. 'Bring it on, Lestrange,' she dared, spitting out her name as if it was fouler than the monster herself.

'She's a feisty one. I can see why Severus likes you. He always did like it... rough,' Bella said with a twisted smile.

Hermione opened her mouth to retort just as she saw someone approach Bellatrix from behind. She was going to warn them, but was too late. Bella whipped around quickly and, without much effort, muttered the worst Unforgivable and, in a flash of green light, Draco Malfoy fell to the floor, dead.

Hermione would have screamed if she could have found her voice, but instead of panicking, her Gryffindor common sense kicked in while the Slytherin in her decided to take advantage of the situation. She drew every ounce of anger in her and concentrated it on one spell. As Bellatrix turned around to face her again, Hermione looked at her and smiled.

'Avada Kedavra!'

Mayhem at the Ministry: Part 2

Chapter 19 of 21

The Battle continues... Severus and Hermione go off to find Harry, and find themselves in a difficult predicament.

Thanks again go to my beta Drusilla. She is the greatest!

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Chapter 19 - Mayhem at the Ministry: Part 2

Snape spun around just in time to avoid the hex aimed at him and to return a Killing Curse at the offending Death Eater. His aim was as precise as ever, striking the man square in the chest.

He had killed so many of them already, and he was wondering where Harry-Bloody-Potter was, hoping that wherever the hell he was, he was preparing to kill off the pain-in-the-arse poor excuse for a Dark Wizard.

The only Death Eaters remaining in view were the younger, less experienced members of the Dark Lord's army; thankfully, all of the senior members were already dead or unconscious. Severus found that it was getting rather monotonous and boring, and he just wished that the War would end. His battles were starting to become like taking candy from a baby.

The only two Death Eaters that he yet to encounter were the ones who were probably directly at Voldemort's side on a higher level of the Ministry building. Grumbling, he stunned another Death Eater from across the over-sized foyer and spotted Hermione as she bound another on the ground. 'That's my girl,' he uttered under his breath, but stopped short.

Bellatrix came out of the shadows and approached Hermione from behind. 'Hermione, watch out!' he bellowed across to her.

He watched as his beloved turned just in time to avoid a slicing across her back, and instead, took the blow to her shoulder. He heard Bellatrix laugh as she stumbled

slightly with the pain, although Severus could see that she did her best to disguise it.

He Stunned and hexed as many of the Death Eaters as he could, intending, when his path was clear, to assist Hermione. He looked up just in time to see Draco Malfoy fall at the wand of Bella. His stomach wrenched at the sight of the innocent young man falling, and he dropped his eyes to the floor for a fraction of a second as a mark of respect.

'Avada Kedavra!'

Severus's head jerked towards the voice, immediately thinking the worst, but instead, it was not Hermione falling to the ground, but her opponent. He watched, stunned, as Bella's body hit the ground with a satisfying thud.

'Sweet Merlin, she did it,' he uttered to himself softly, looking at Hermione as she towered over the fallen body of her opponent, her mouth pressed in a thin, confident line.

After recovering from the initial shock, he went straight to her and soon had an armful of crying Hermione, who muttered inanities into his robes, sobbing. Snape held her and stroked her hair gently, whispering soothing words, and for a moment, it seemed as if it was just them and nobody else. 'It's alright, my brave little lioness. You did the right thing,' he crooned softly.

'I know. I j... just scared myself. I think I actually enjoyed that to some extent. Too much,' she replied honestly, ducking her head in shame.

She finally let go of him and wiped the tears away. 'I'm sorry. We should go. I have to find Harry. I said I would be there with him when it... when he destroys Riddle,' she apologised.

'Fine, we'll go find our saviour,' he teased lightly, pointing his wand over his shoulder, and wordlessly stunning a passing Death Eater.

Hermione managed a weak smile for his efforts and held onto his free hand as he cast a strong shielding spell around them both. As long as he was alive, he would be the one protecting her. They walked in silence to the top floor of the Ministry building together, hexing as many Death Eaters as they could and running into various Order and Ministry members along the way.

They heard a scream and hurried towards it. Voldemort had Harry at his mercy, writhing around on the floor like a maniac, shrieking in pain and calling out his parents' names. Instinctively, Hermione began to rush forward to aid her friend as he screamed in agony, but Snape held out an arm and held her back. 'You're no use to Harry dead, Hermione,' he said rationally.

Hermione stopped struggling in his grip and conceded reluctantly, standing by watching her best friend enduring such torture.

'This is how the Dark Lord works, Hermione,' Severus explained gently. 'He uses the ones you love against you in his own personal vendetta to have revenge on his Muggle father. He doesn't have a heart, so he doesn't feel anything for anyone,' he said hatefully, resting his hands on her shoulders.

He touched his wand to her bleeding shoulder, closing the wound in an instant. 'It is so simple, sickeningly brilliant, and people fall for the same tricks every time,' he added.

Hermione closed her eyes as Harry's cries became louder. She couldn't watch. She curled into Snape's embrace and put her hands over her ears. 'I can't watch this,' she said with an escaped sob.

The cries suddenly subsided, catching them both completely unaware.

'Expelliarmus!'

They didn't have a chance. Snape's wand flew out of his hand in an instant and fell at the feet of the Dark Lord, all in the space of a few seconds. Hermione gasped, and her eyes flew open just in time to step away from Snape and see Harry getting groggily to his feet. Voldemort began to walk towards them.

'Hermione, get behind me,' Snape ordered Hermione in an urgent whisper.

Hermione quickly looked between Voldemort and Snape and could only see violent electricity between her beloved and his former master. However, Snape didn't have a wand. 'I won't. You don't have your wand,' she answered, silently aware of Harry slowly approaching from behind them.

She didn't have any time, however, to spare another thought, because no sooner had she thought about the danger of the situation than Voldemort had yelled *Crucio!* with his wand aimed directly at her. She doubled over with the pain and fell to the ground, writhing in anguish.

Snape held up a hand and bellowed *'Expelliarmus!'* at Voldemort, whose wand then flew straight into his hand. He quickly used it to end the curse on Hermione with a clear *'Cruciata!'*

Harry joined Snape at his side. Snape handed Harry Voldemort's wand, which Harry immediately aimed at his torturer. The Dark Lord still seemed to be in shock that he had been disarmed by a mere Potions master.

'You... you couldn't possibly. How? Wandless Magic, Snape?' he stammered as Snape raised his hand to him once more.

'Pathetic!' Snape spat. 'Without your wand, you're nothing, you miserable excuse for a wizard. You honestly were just wasted potential. You could have been great, and you threw it all away. And for what, exactly? Petty revenge? At least I now have something to live for.'

'And what's that, Severus?' the monster replied.

'Love,' he said simply, turning away from him and looking at Harry. 'Finish him, Potter.'

'With pleasure,' Harry sneered hatefully.

He stepped forward and raised the wand to make the final blow, but was too late. Voldemort had his hands inside his robes fast, withdrawing a knife and throwing it at Hermione. The knife hit her in the side, puncturing her lung, just as she was clambering to her feet after being *Crucio'd*.

'That was for you, and your love, Severus,' he spat.

Hermione stumbled, looking down, her vision spinning in and out of focus as the blood drenched her robes. It coated her fingers as she grasped desperately at the knife. She yanked it out of her side with her last remaining energy and fell, once more, towards the ground. She felt Snape catch her in his arms before she hit the ground. She heard him whisper to her, 'It's alright Hermione. Stay with me, please, love. Just hold on.'

She tried to reach up and touch his face, to reassure him that she was fine. However, all she could see was a blur, and no matter how hard she tried, her fingers would not reach. She felt as if she were falling away from him. 'Severus...' she spluttered.

The last thing she heard, before her world went black, was her name being called out, a high-pitched laugh, and then two male voices boomed in unison, *Avada Kedavra!*

Wishing You Were Here...

Chapter 20 of 21

It has been months and Hermione has yet to awaken from her coma. Severus, meanwhile, has been unable to leave her side.

Thanks to Drusilla for beta-ing this chapter! I don't know what I would do without her!

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Chapter 20 - Wishing You Were Here...

The steady beep and the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed were the only things that Snape had to reassure him that Hermione was, indeed, alive. He had visited her every day since she was admitted to St. Mungo's but, after a while, gave up and simply stayed by her side constantly, leaving only for the occasional meal or shower.

She had been unconscious for over two months, had shown very little improvement, and was still in a coma. Her wounds had completely healed, and the punctured lung had long since been repaired. She was left with a few scars that she would have for the rest of her life, but other than those, all that she needed to do was wake up.

'Good morning, dear heart,' he cooed softly, stroking her curls and smiling weakly at her. 'Ready to come home?'

He had asked the very same question every morning, but no matter what, the answer would never come. He leaned down and brushed a kiss over her forehead.

It was terrible that she had become the victim, and the one in the coma, while all Snape could do was watch her, escaping with just a few bumps and scratches. He wished that Voldemort had attacked him instead, but, as always, the Dark Lord hurt his victims by harming the ones that they loved the most.

For him, it had been Hermione.

A soft knock on the door bumped him out of his thoughts as Albus Dumbledore limped through. 'Good morning, my boy,' he greeted sadly. 'Still not awake, I see.'

'I'm afraid that my Sleeping Beauty continues to sleep on,' he replied with a deep sigh. 'It doesn't come as such a surprise, though, for I am certainly no Prince Charming.'

Dumbledore chuckled. 'Have her parents been to visit?' he asked thoughtfully.

Snape nodded. 'Yes, Mr Potter has brought them here twice, and both Jane and Phillip are quite distressed,' he said, pinching the bridge of his nose and dropping into a seat next to Hermione's bed, taking one of her small hands into one of his.

'So it's Jane and Phillip now, hmmm?' Albus teased with a nudge.

'Surprisingly, neither of them seems to have a problem with my relationship with Hermione. Nor does Potter. But I do not hold the same hopes for everyone else,' he said with a grim look.

'You never cared what people thought of you, Severus. And I don't expect you to begin now,' the Headmaster intoned.

'Have no fears of that, Albus,' he said with a weak smile.

Dumbledore took the silence that followed as a chance to look over the younger man. He was even thinner than he had been while he had been working as a spy. His hair had grown a good inch and was tied back. There was the shadow of stubble on his chin, and his eyes were even darker than usual. However, that way he was looking at Hermione made him appear younger somehow, hopeful, and completely in love.

'You love her, don't you, Severus?' the Headmaster asked quietly.

'Yes, Albus, I do very much,' he replied honestly and unabashedly as he rubbed circles over the back of her hand with a long thumb. 'She is the only thing that I have to live for now.'

Dumbledore nodded understandingly. He loved a woman in the same way, who was just a Floo away, in a castle in the Scottish Highlands. Maybe it was time for him to tell her so, before it was too late, or he lost the ability to do so.

'If you are thinking about Minerva, old man, then I suggest you stop being so cowardly and go to her,' Snape suggested dangerously. 'Trust me when I tell you that it is painful to just sit back and watch as the opportunity passes you by, Gryffindor.'

Albus chuckled at this. 'I'll consider your advice, and put it to good use, Severus.'

'Off with you then,' Snape joked dismissively.

Albus flashed a final twinkling grin at him before turning and walking from the room serenely. Snape could do nothing but sigh as the old man departed. He didn't know how much longer he could wait. How long he could wait to kiss her, and laugh with her, and love her. How long until he could tell her that they had lost their baby.

'My sweet, beautiful, Hermione... please... come back to me, and your parents, and Harry,' he whispered, resting his head on his arms, next to hers.

Closing his eyes, he was soon asleep, only waking an hour later when he felt a twitch. He jerked himself upright and saw Hermione's hand twitch again.

Jumping from his seat, he rushed out into the hall and went immediately to fetch Hermione's Healer. They came back into the room, and the Healer gave her a full examination before declaring that she was fine.

'It seems as though her brain's connection to her nerves has finally re-established itself. She is getting better, Professor,' the Healer said, smiling.

Snape slumped into his seat with a hopeful heart. She was finally getting better. Her senses were slowly returning to her and she was going to wake up one day. She was going to live. Snape held onto her hand and kissed her knuckles. 'Well done, love. You're doing just fine,' he murmured against her skin quietly.

He soon fell asleep beside her once more, holding her hand, and this time, with the nerves functioning again, having his hand gripped back gently. Even though she wouldn't remember or know any of this happened, it was comforting to have his touch responded to.

He really missed just being able to sit down in the same room as her and talk. Over the past months, he had been remembering the many hours they had spent together on that wonderful Christmas, and the time before the battle.

He tried not to remember the time she had spent with Anthony Goldstein, or her closeness to Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley. However, he realised that had they not been a part of her life, she would not be the same Hermione.

When he woke later, he looked at Hermione's face; there was a small smile curving her lips and a faint blush on her cheeks.

He stood up and kissed her smiling lips gently, giving her hand a squeeze. 'I'll be back soon, love. I am just going to get something to eat. I'll bring the *Daily Prophet* back so we can have a good laugh at it,' he suggested thoughtfully.

He saw her lips twitch a little as he left the room with a *pop*, the first genuine smile in ages plastered to his weary features.

Return to Spinner's End

Chapter 21 of 21

An awakening and a return to home...

Many thanks to Drusilla for being such a great beta!

Chapter 21 – Return to Spinner's End

Even though the room was dark, it took a long while for her eyes to adjust to the light flooding into the room. She blinked a few times and her vision cleared, only to show that she was staring at a ceiling.

She had no idea where she was, or why she was there, but her body felt a little bit rigid, and stiff, as if she hadn't been using her limbs in a while. In addition to that, she felt something resting on her hand. She craned her neck around and looked down to see a head of raven hair tied back at the nape of the person's neck with a black leather tie, and a pale hand, glowing in the moonlight, holding onto her own.

It was Severus. His hair had grown a little longer. Actually, quite a bit longer and he looked a lot paler than normal. Relaxing a little, she flexed the fingers of her free hand and reached out to him, tracing her fingers lightly over the ridges of his cheeks and nose, making sure he was actually there.

'Severus...' she croaked.

Hermione's hand flew to her throat. Her voice was so husky and scratchy. She let her eyes wander around the room and deduced that she was in a hospital.

She felt a slight pressure on her hand. She turned her head back to face Snape. He was sitting up, looking at her with glistening eyes. A single tear slid down his cheek and dropped onto the bed sheet, followed closely by another. She weakly lifted a hand to his cheek and brushed the tears away.

Grasping his chin, she drew him towards her as firmly as she could. He stood from his seat and leaned down to rest his brow against hers. She kissed the tears off his cheeks and smiled.

'Don't cry, Severus,' she croaked. He laughed softly and gathered her into his arms as best he could.

'Oh, Hermione!' he exclaimed softly into her hair, holding her as tightly as her frail body would allow. 'Oh, God...'

Hermione smiled and held him to her close, toying with the hair pulled back in the leather tie. 'I like your hair like this,' she commented offhandedly, tangling her fingers in it.

He chuckled and kissed her neck softly, nuzzling it with his nose and sighing in contentment. 'I should cancel my haircut appointment tomorrow, perhaps,' he suggested without moving from their embrace.

'I'm in St. Mungo's, aren't I?' she asked weakly.

'I'm afraid so, love. But you won't have to be here for much longer,' he explained, letting her lay back into the pillows again.

'How... how long have I been here?'

'Five months,' he replied carefully, watching as her eyes grew wide.

'That long? What happened, Severus?' she asked, searching his face for an emotion. She saw him wince when he said how long she had been unconscious. She saw the yearning, pain, worry and loneliness he had endured for the past few months.

'After you were struck with the knife, we killed Voldemort, and all of the remaining Death Eaters were silenced or rounded up for Azkaban. Ronald Weasley silenced Lucius Malfoy,' he recounted softly. 'You have been here ever since.'

'Oh, God, this must have been so hard...' she started.

Severus silenced her with a gentle kiss and looked meaningfully into her eyes. 'That's enough. You're back now, and I am never going to let you go again,' he promised.

Hermione shifted a little and felt a little sore, in particular around her stomach. 'Severus, it hurts. Why does everything down there hurt?' she asked, getting a little worried. Her body was far too thin, she observed; it would take a long time to put all of the weight back on.

Snape looked sad suddenly. 'You were pregnant, love. The child miscarried while you were in the coma. Your body couldn't accommodate the child,' he said quietly.

Hermione's jaw dropped sharply, and she gaped at him unattractively. 'I... I lost my... our child?' she uttered, touching her gaunt, flat stomach over the linen pyjamas.

'I'm so sorry, Hermione. It could not be helped. Don't blame yourself,' he soothed, rubbing her shoulders gently.

She halted his hands on her shoulders and looked up at him sadly. 'Don't say sorry, Severus. It wasn't your fault,' she said reassuringly.

'But it was. If only I hadn't taken the Mark,' he said, furious with himself for putting her in danger. 'I was so dense. I didn't even think about the effect it would have on everyone that I cared about, or the few who cared about me.'

'Don't be ridiculous. Everything is HIS fault. Don't blame yourself. If anything, I am more to blame. You told me to leave, and I didn't. I'm the one to blame,' she said, her voice catching in her throat.

'Don't you blame yourself if you won't allow me to blame myself,' Severus warned.

'Alright,' she agreed reluctantly, stifling a yawn.

'Rest now, love,' he whispered as her eyes began to drift open and closed sleepily, and she yawned again. 'When you fully recover, we'll go home.'

'Home?' she asked sleepily.

'Yes,' he replied, drawing the covers up around her and dropping a feather light kiss to her forehead before letting himself out of the room to alert the Healers.

Severus and Healer Blake returned to her room the next morning to find Hermione still resting. The Healer did a complete check-up of her body and vitals, and then pronounced, to the immense relief of Severus, that she would be able to leave St. Mungo's that morning.

'Thank you,' Snape sighed.

'Not a problem, Professor,' Blake said, exiting the room as Snape took his regular seat.

He simply sat there, looking at Hermione with adoring eyes. He drank in every inch of her, from her frail thinness to her soft smile as she slept. It was so good to be able to talk to his beloved again.

Hermione woke a few hours later to find Snape standing by the window and staring out absently. She pulled herself into a sitting position and wriggled out of the bed, making sure that she was standing steadily before she even attempted to walk. She grimaced when her feet touched the cold floor.

Walking over to him, she wrapped her arms around his slender waist. He looked over his shoulder at her, turned in her arms to face her and wrapped his own arms around her slender frame. Leaning forwards, he kissed her lips softly. 'Ready to go home yet, love?' he asked wistfully.

'I can leave?' she asked, her eyes lighting up.

'Yes, Hermione,' he replied, giving her a gentle squeeze.

'Will we be going back to your home?' she asked, looking up imploringly.

'No, Hermione. We are going to OUR home, Spinner's End,' he answered. 'Collect your things so we can leave.'

Hermione wasted no time in collecting her wand and all of her other possessions, then returned to Severus, and was hauled into his arms tightly. He Apparated with her in tandem to his bedroom but didn't release her.

He leaned down and kissed her with every ounce of passion and love that he had, running his hands through her tangle of glorious curls, while her arms managed to snake their way around his neck, pulling him closer. He delved his tongue into her mouth and felt her desperate intrusion of his own mouth, as they kissed and tasted each other fully for the first time in so long.

An hour later, they both lay dishevelled and sated beneath the black silk bed sheets, holding onto each other tightly. Snape whispered endearments to her and stroked a long finger up her spine as she began to drift to sleep once more.

'Welcome home, Hermione.'

~TERMINUS~

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A/N – Well, folks, that is all for this story! I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. Thank you to all of my dedicated and wonderful readers who took the time to review. You really did provide me with the initiative to finish the story for you all. I hope that this ending was satisfactory for you. The sequel is on the way now!