

# The Crystal Decanter

by Cyprienne

Severus Snape is missing and presumed dead, but recently more and more people are claiming to have seen him throughout Europe. Hermione Granger is firmly convinced that he really is dead, but what if the rumours are true?

## Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 4

Severus Snape is missing and presumed dead, but recently more and more people are claiming to have seen him throughout Europe. Hermione Granger is firmly convinced that he really is dead, but what if the rumours are true?

J.K. Rowling owns the Harry Potter universe and characters, I simply own this story's plotline. Many thanks to my amazing beta, Elizabeth.

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"Look at the bloody *Prophet*, Hermione! Someone's claiming to have seen the git again. At this point I don't see how you don't believe that he's still alive," Ron insisted, all but shoving the newspaper in Hermione's face.

"Stop calling him a git, Ron, that's disrespectful. And I don't believe it simply because it isn't possible. Harry saw him die in the Shrieking Shack, remember?" Her argument was almost automatic now as she filed some papers away into another folder and levitated it into her filing cabinet, closing the drawer with a bang.

"Maybe he didn't, though, just think! Maybe it was all an act and Snape just wanted to get out of fighting in the rest of the war! It'd be just like the greasy prat to do that sort of thing," Ron muttered resentfully.

Although his dislike of the former Potions master had decreased over the five years since the Final Battle, he still considered the man a *bête noir*. Even in supposed death, Ron had never forgiven Snape for the undeserved detentions and snarled insults he had heaped upon the students of Hogwarts for as little as stepping a toe out of line.

"Stop talking about him like that! I don't care how much you dislike him; it's just cruel to desecrate his memory like this." Hermione was not usually one to get upset over Ron's insensitivities, but she was getting fed up with both the claimed sightings and her friends' speculations that there was or could be some truth to them.

The rumours had started about a year ago when the *Daily Prophet* had printed the testimony of some old witch in Suffolk, who resolutely insisted that she had seen the supposedly dead Severus Snape buying a croissant from a pastry shop. But when she further relayed that he had disappeared when she looked away and back again, and because the cashier at the shop had no memory of serving such a man, her claims were chalked up to mere senility.

It was several months until the next sighting. This time it was a teenager in Ireland, claiming that Snape was living in a cottage concealed by strong charms beneath a seaside cliff. The area was searched thoroughly by wizards and witches with training similar to that of Gringotts' own Curse-Breakers, but no such cottage was found.

The vast majority of the wizarding world was sceptical of these allegations. Only two months later, however, the sightings began to pour in. He was seen in London, in Edinburgh, in Munich, in Paris; soon every country in Europe would have a claim to seeing Severus Snape. The escalation of these findings eventually led the vast majority of the wizarding world to believe that he was still alive somewhere in Europe.

What flabbergasted Hermione the most was that Harry, of all people, who had seen Snape die before his eyes, was beginning to believe that he was hiding out somewhere. She was continually astounded that she was the only one who could view the situation logically.

"Fine, fine," Ron conceded. "But Merlin, Hermione, sometimes you act as though you actually liked him or something." He glanced up at the clock on the wall and jumped out of his seat, nearly knocking his chair over in the process. "Bloody hell, I'm late for training! See you later, Hermione, I've got to go." He rushed to the door, barely remembering to shrug on a coat before Disapparating.

Hermione shook her head in annoyance, levitating the last of her files into the cabinet. They contained detailed descriptions of new charms and spells she had been attempting to create, which she planned to compile into a book at some point and market to the wizarding world. *One Hundred and One New Spells and Charms for the Modern Wizard or Witch* seemed appropriate as a title, though quite a mouthful and rather clichéd. She had nowhere near one hundred and one yet, though; rather more like twenty.

She was glad that she had opted not to become an Auror like Harry and Ron; she didn't like the idea of rigorous training every day and loads of theory work on top. While Harry had started his schooling at the Ministry as soon as he graduated from Hogwarts, Ron had only started training a year ago. He often whined at her to help him with the written work.

In fact, Ron was whining a lot these days. He whined at her when he was "too tired" to help with the housework, which was especially tiresome since she refused to hire a house-elf. It annoyed her a great deal, partly because of the extra chores when she already had her own self-imposed work to do and partly because she felt that she was slowly slipping into the role of submissive housewife. They weren't even married! She had no idea if Ron was planning to propose anytime soon. He had shown no signs of it.

He rarely told her he loved her anymore...

That struck her as particularly significant. Shouldn't couples say that they loved each other, if they did? It didn't matter that it had been five years; she still said that she loved him, though it dawned on her that she did so rather automatically. Most of the time he would reply with "Mmhm" or "Me, too". They were never intimate anymore, in any sense of the word. When it came down to it, it seemed she had been sucked into a loveless marriage-that-wasn't-actually-a-marriage.

Hermione stood up, marched to the filing cabinet, and slammed it shut with a clang. Everyone had always said that she and Ron were made for each other; their bickering was apparently proof of that. It reminded her of a sentiment she had often heard in her Muggle preschool. *If he picks on you, he must like you.*

Of course, no one had ever said that *to her*, exactly. None of the boys wanted to play house with a girl with frizzy hair and buck teeth, much less one with brains in her head.

She had always felt somewhat left out that her friends had boyfriends as they progressed through school while she hadn't. Her mother had always advised her that the girls with boyfriends at age eleven would grow up to be fast, but she was envious all the same. Her parents had had her teeth corrected earlier than most, hoping to save her some embarrassment later in life, but she was still the bushy-haired know-it-all.

Ron had been her first boyfriend. As sad as it was, he had been her first everything. She had never expected any better because she simply had never had any better, had never thought that she could do any better.

It occurred to her that, right now, being single seemed infinitely preferable than being in a relationship with Ronald Weasley. If she couldn't find anyone better for the rest of her life, so be it. She would be alone if that meant not settling for less than what she really wanted.

She would end it with Ron.

She left the study and made her way to the foyer. She was going to shop for houses today, look for her own place while Ron was at work. She put on her coat and Apparated to the local magical real estate office.

\* \* \*

Ron held his wand at the ready, traipsing around the battlefield with a clumsiness common to gawky teenagers. He was, for the most part, still a hobbledehoy, often tripping over his own feet and knocking things over. But here he could not afford to make mistakes. Here he had to be alert at all times, ready at all times to fire a spell or create a defence.

Suddenly a bolt of red light flew past his head, narrowly missing his freckled nose. He spun around *Protego* already forming on his lips, but it was too late. A hazy, indistinct black figure raised its wand once more and fired a spell at him silently, the green light filling his vision. He fell to the ground as the scene around him dissolved...

... and Harry Potter's voice filled his ears.

"RON! You botched it again! I keep telling you, you have to cast *Protego* before you turn." He continued to chastise Ron as he opened the door to the simulator, completely breaking the illusion that Ron was in a field. Harry helped him to his feet, looking him up and down and shaking his head. "And you don't have to fall every time you die, it's melodramatic." He sighed. "I suppose there's nothing for it now, we'll try again tomorrow."

Ron groaned. "I'm getting bloody tired of Auror training, you know. Why do we even need Aurors, now You-Know-Who's gone?"

Harry rolled his eyes at his friend's reluctance to say Voldemort's name. "Voldemort wasn't the only Dark wizard, Ron, and there are plenty of Death Eaters probably still out there, waiting for someone new to cling to. But since you think Aurors are so useless, perhaps you shouldn't become one." He knew that would sting, but his friend's complaining was wearying.

Ron kicked the grass angrily on his way out of the room. "You know, I think you're right. I'm not suited to be an Auror. I keep messing up every-bloody-thing I do and I'm not getting any better." He was angry at Harry, angry at himself, angry at the Ministry for making the training so damned hard. But then, Auror training should be hard, shouldn't it? They could only afford to train the best of the best, rather like the Muggle Marines Hermione had sometimes mentioned.

Ron didn't like hard work. He liked asking his friends to help him with his work. He supposed, though, that the end of school marked the end of the time when he could coast by on help from others. He had not even initially intended to become an Auror, but when Harry finished his training, Ron followed suit to be with his friend. Obviously this had been an imprudent decision.

"Good luck to you, mate, but I quit." He grabbed his jacket from a chair and stalked out of the room, telling the secretary in the main hall that he would not be returning.

\* \* \*

Ron Apparated into the house with an especially loud crack, his magic more potent than usual due to the height of his frustration. He stormed to the study with intent to burn all of his studying papers and manuals on stealth and tracking and everything to do with Aurors, but the sight of Hermione standing quite still in the doorway stopped him.

"What is it, Hermione?" he asked, a bit miffed that she was blocking his entrance.

"I'm leaving, Ron." She crossed her arms, ready to take whatever he reaction he offered. She had rehearsed her lines over and over beforehand, and had tried to think of every possible reply.

Ron looked as though he'd been punched in the stomach. "You're *what*?"

She sighed. "I said I'm leaving. I'm ending it. I'm sorry," she repeated, avoiding his eyes. She didn't like having to hurt him, but she had made up her mind hours ago. When Hermione Granger made up her mind about something, no one and nothing could change her decision.

"W-why?" Ron cried, dropping to his knees. "Did I say something? Did I do something? Is there something wrong with me? I'll fix it, Hermione! Just tell me what to do!" he pleaded.

Hermione dropped her hands to her sides, willing herself not to break under pressure. "No, Ron, there's nothing you can do. There's nothing to fix. I feel like you and I have just... I feel like I'm settling. And I don't want to settle. I don't want to hurt you, Ron, really I don't, but," she sucked in a deep breath, "I've fallen out of love with you and I think I'll be happier on my own. I really have fully considered this, and I believe that this is the best thing for us.

"I think that, given a bit of time, you'll realise that you're not as hurt by this as you think you are." She said this gently, unwilling to further injure his feelings by hurling spiteful comments. She didn't look at him as she moved toward the kitchen, where she had left her things packed.

He shook his head and stood up, following her with long strides. "No, no, no, Hermione, you're mad, there's no way...we're perfect for each other, everyone's always said so!" he insisted desperately.

"They're wrong, Ron. I'm sorry." She picked up her bags, all conveniently shrunken to the size of sugar cubes. "Good bye."

A loud crack resounded in the kitchen, followed by the sound of Ron's muffled sobs.

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Hermione's new flat was small, smaller than the house she and Ron had shared. Small but with enough room to hold her books and papers, and room to magically expand if she wished. She preferred a smaller living space; it made her feel as though everything she needed was only a short distance away.

The flat consisted of a bedroom, a washroom, and a small den with a kitchenette. Each room was appropriately small and cosy, and she had even managed to get a charmed fireplace in the deal. The agent had added it on for just a nominal extra fee. The chimney was Disillusioned, so that it was invisible to Muggles. And the flue was spelled to vaporise the smoke before it hit the outside air, as it is not every day that one sees an apartment building emitting smoke.

It was ironic that she had decided to move just then, as she had been about to leave for a stress-relieving trip to Lyon. Now, she felt that she needed a holiday more than ever. Going over the ramifications of her recent broken relationship with Ron and subsequent change of living accommodations was giving her a headache, not to mention a heavy case of the guilts.

She had unpacked everything...minus the essentials for her trip to France...as soon as she arrived, as well as made a few modifications to her already charming abode. All it had needed were some dark curtains and thick carpeting to make her feel at home.

But the headache was still nagging her, so she pulled a vial of the Draught of Peace out of a cupboard to soothe her head. The potion reminded her, dimly, of fifth-year Potions class, when she had first made it. Naturally, she had read up on it a great deal the year before, but she had never put the knowledge into practise due to her lack of ingredients. After all, where could she get moonstone and syrup of hellebore other than the dungeons? Snape would never have allowed a student, especially a Gryffindor, to come within a metre of his stock of ingredients.

Now she was lucky enough to receive an inventory of ingredients every month, which allowed her to practise her brewing as well as make some potions for her own convenience. She was only bringing a small supply with her on her trip, considering she only planned to be gone for a week or two.

She had originally intended to leave in the morning, but she was feeling restless and wanted to be out of Britain. God forbid Ron should find her new flat and try to get in while she was asleep.

*Why wait?* she thought suddenly. *Nothing is stopping me from leaving now.*

With that, she found her miniature bags, now resting on the counter in the kitchenette, deposited them in her pocket, and Disappeared.

## Chapter 2

*Chapter 2 of 4*

Severus Snape is missing and presumed dead, but recently more and more people are claiming to have seen him throughout Europe. Hermione Granger is firmly convinced that he really is dead, but what if the rumours are true?

Credit to JK Rowling for the universe, thanks to my beta Elizabeth for her invaluable help and corrections.

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Arriving at last at the Apparation point inside Lyon, Hermione made her way to the house where she would stay. It was owned by a charming old Muggle couple, Monsieur and Madame Robichaud, who, because they had no children, were renting out their rooms to young tourists. The woman was bent over and seemed quite frail, but she was quick on her feet as she led Hermione upstairs to the bedroom. She explained a few rules of the house and imparted some history of the countryside in rapid French. But, while Hermione appreciated the beauty of the language, almost every word was lost on her. Her only regret in going to Hogwarts instead of continuing her Muggle education was that she had never had time to learn a second language.

She thanked the old woman with an uncertain '*Merci*', gently ushered her out of the bedroom, and locked the door. Though this was to be a relaxing trip, she had still brought some of her work with her. After all, she would have only herself to blame if she fell behind on her research.

Her quarters, however, seemed to have been built purely for the purpose of distracting her from doing anything useful. In one corner there was a bed that looked like it was made of soft, cushiony cotton alone and seemed to beg her to rest in it and read by the light of the bedside lamp.

The walls were cream-coloured, and all the antique furniture was coordinated to match. An ornate Persian rug lay on the floor beside the large and inviting bed. And a look in the smaller room off the bedroom revealed a small study area, complete with a roll-top desk and crushed velvet chair. The rooms whispered of understated opulence.

Hermione mused that evidently her hosts had amassed a small fortune before retiring.

Glancing out the window, Hermione could see why.

The house was positioned on a small hill, at the bottom of which lay a large vineyard stretching back several hundred metres until it met the forest. She imagined they must have at least a hundred workers to tend a field this large, though she had not seen anyone on the premises but the man and his wife. She made a mental note to ask one of them what sort of wine they made.

Hermione's mind shifted subtly, as she realised she would have to have some way of communicating with the locals. Brilliant witch though she might be, she doubted that she could learn to speak French fluently in two weeks' time.

She pulled out her packet of parchment listing every spell and charm she had crafted to date. She was sure that she had developed at least one or two translation spells... Aha!

There they were: Auris Prudens, Oculus Prudens, and Verbum Prudens. The first allowed one to understand a foreign language by ear, the second to read it, and the third to speak it. The idea for these spells had come up one night when she was researching in one of Britain's magical libraries (which was possessed of many more tomes on nearly every subject than Hogwarts') and had come across a section of books entirely in Russian. From what she had been able to decipher, the books were vital to her studies at the time, and she had felt that a simple translating spell might leave some of the original meaning lost.

These three spells were some of her first magical inventions. She had used them infrequently, and she had not tested them on any native speakers yet, but she supposed there was no time like the present.

She pulled her wand out of her sleeve, made sure that the door was securely closed, and murmured, *Auris et Verbum Prudens. Oculus Prudens*," while swishing her wand over each of the senses she wished to sensitise to the new language in turn.

The incantation had been a mouthful, but she had learnt, whilst thoroughly investigating the best method to create charms and spells from scratch, that there was a sort of spell called a compound spell. It was less a spell in its own right and more of a combination of two other related spells. Sometimes it was a simple matter of joining the spells with 'et', and sometimes it required combining the spells into a new word.

The greatest benefit of these translation spells, to her mind, was that they did not translate the foreign language into the caster's native language. Rather, they let the caster understand the language as if it were his or her native language. Hermione felt that this kept the beauty of the language itself intact, rather than possibly mangling the meaning through paraphrasing.

Necessary spells in place, Hermione stood considering her bags for a moment. She had charmed them back to normal size as she neared the house, and luckily there were only two.

*I can unpack later*, she decided.

She was not usually one to procrastinate when there was work to be done, but she thought she deserved a chance to explore the grounds of the winery and enjoy some of the remaining sunlight. She would have time to work tonight.

But her first order of business was to find out what her hostess had tried to convey to her earlier.

\* \* \*

Ron was sulking, and Ginny was tired of it.

An hour ago, he had come to the Burrow with red-rimmed eyes and a great deal to say...none of it good. Hermione had dumped him, had left him alone in their house, with only a limited explanation as to why. He was crushed, he was heartbroken, he was alone in the world with nobody who loved him.

Melodramatic tosser.

He was talking again...*whinging*, *more like*...and she had to force herself to tune back in.

"She has no consideration for my feelings, Gin, none at all! I can't believe she could just leave me like that... like she never cared," he moaned, slamming his head on the table again.

"Ron, she's cared about you forever. It's just that she only cares for you as a friend, and I'm sure she did the best she could." She had repeated this over and over, but it never seemed to sink in. She was on the verge of kicking him out of the house, but then she remembered that it wasn't only her house to kick people out of. Her parents still lived at the Burrow, and Ginny herself was only visiting. It was just her rotten luck that her stopover had coincided with Ron's breakdown.

"How do you know that, Gin? You didn't see the way she looked at me. It was like...like she only pitied me! Am I really that pathetic?" He looked at her with streaming eyes, searching her face for an honest answer.

She was tempted to just have out with it and say Yes, but she didn't have the heart to hurt him any further. "No, Ron, you're just a silly sod who's crying over the wrong girl." She wrapped her arms around him and he clung to her, still weeping softly. "Now, listen to me. I want you to pull yourself together and figure out how to deal with this, because I'm going home and I don't want you bothering Mum and Dad with this."

Ron opened his mouth to wail something else, but Ginny held up her hand. "It isn't because I don't love you; I'm just done mollycoddling you. You're making too much of this. If you really can't stand losing her, then try to win her back," she finished, exasperated. "I'm going to tell Mum and Dad goodbye."

He nodded mutely, rubbing the tears from his eyes.

*Win her back*, he mused. *I hadn't thought of that.*

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Hermione wandered through a row of tall grapevines, marvelling at how beautiful the day was and at how vast the vineyard appeared to be. She had discovered...with the successful use of her new spells...that the owners of the vineyard grew only Syrah grapes, which they used to make Cornas wine. The old woman had explained to her that this particular wine was normally grown a bit farther south, nearer to Valence. But they had chosen to keep their business in Lyon, because they found that a slightly colder climate made the wine sweeter.

Hermione was eager to taste this new treasure, but for the moment all she wanted was to soak up the French sunshine and explore the gorgeous terrain. It was amazing how free she could feel when not using any magic. France alone seemed to imbue the atmosphere with a romantic kind of magic all its own . . . a magic far more powerful than anything she could do with a wand.

Suddenly she found herself running through the field, intent on reaching the other side of the rows of grapevines and to enter and explore the forest. The sun was just beginning to set, bathing everything in a glow of molten crimson. She was out of breath long before she found the end of the long rows of fields, but the adrenaline and excitement of being in a foreign country with no responsibilities pushed her on until she collapsed in the cool grass with a laugh on her lips.

She hadn't felt quite so free since . . . probably since fifth or sixth year at Hogwarts. Before it was a constant fear that Voldemort would rise to power without warning, before they had even known about the Horcruxes. It was not that they hadn't been afraid of his return back then; it just wasn't an immediate threat.

Reminiscing about Hogwarts always gave her an odd feeling inside, especially when she remembered moments with people who had died in the Final Battle. Fred and George racing their brooms out of Hogwarts in fifth year... Professor Lupin teaching them about Boggarts . . . she had known all the answers to his questions even then, of course.

And then, Professor Snape. . .

Beginning in her fifth year, she had slowly grown to understand his bitterness, especially after Harry shared what he had learned from the Pensieve. Thinking of him pained her a great deal, especially with all of the rumours circulating in the newspapers. She wished that the media would let him rest in peace; he had, after all, died under awfully unpleasant circumstances. She didn't like to think about it, but...

She felt the memories leap to her mind unbidden again. Snape had been in the Shrieking Shack; Harry, Ron, and Hermione had been hiding in the tunnel. Harry had seen Snape imploring Voldemort to let him bring *the boy* to his master. Voldemort had explained about the Elder Wand; he was not yet the rightful owner because he had not killed Dumbledore himself. He had explained all of this to Snape, made it quite clear that his faithful servant was about to die, and then...

Nothing. Her mind was blank. The next thing she remembered was walking into the Great Hall and comforting Ginny over the loss of her brother. But that couldn't be right. Surely Harry had told them the whole story as soon as it was safe, as soon as Voldemort had gone?

But, try as she might, she could find nothing in her memories that referred to any point between what she so clearly remembered happening in the Shack and her seemingly sudden entrance into the Great Hall to see Ginny. This frustrated her to no end.

But, after the battle, she, Harry, and Ron had reached an unspoken agreement that they would not talk about the deaths of those close to them (regardless of Ron's detestation of Snape, and subsequent desire to gloat over the dark man's fall).

Hermione was worried now, as she always was when she pondered what she had come to call her 'lost memory'. Why couldn't she remember this little bit of information, which seemed almost insignificant in the larger scope of the battle? It was as though her memories had been *erased*, but how could that be? And why would anyone wish to take those specific memories from her?

She shivered involuntarily, wondering, not for the first time, if she was under some Dark magic. She had not often stopped to remember *his* death. She had focused on her work, so focused on healing from the pain of loss. And she had preferred not to think about the fact that her memories appeared to be missing.

*What's wrong with me?*

\* \* \*

Next day, Hermione was ready to explore the city of Lyon. She bade the old woman good morning and grabbed a croissant on her way out, her wand hidden in her sleeve. She set off down the country road, deciding not to Apparate in favour of seeing the beautiful view.

As she walked, she didn't spot any other wineries, but there was a multitude of farms. Cattle grazed somnolently on a hill, oblivious to anything but the grass beneath them and the sun above. A few tanned men and women waved to her jovially as she passed, and with all of this Hermione felt as though she had found nirvana.

When she reached the city, she was overwhelmed by its size. She had had no idea that it would be so vast. Normally she would have found out more about her chosen vacation spot before coming, but she had forgotten to do so in the excitement and busyness of the last few days.

The buildings were tall and of similar construction, though not enough to make the city a uniform block. The city was alive with excitement; street performers danced, sang, and recited verse every few blocks, asking nothing but a few coins for their effort. Every few minutes or so she would see some distinctive building that caught her attention: a library, a theatre, a statue of Louis XIV. She knew already that, some night, she would find herself creeping out of the house to attend a midnight showing of some French play or to look through the stores of Victor Hugo and Alexandre Dumas at the library.

As she passed the inhabitants of the city, she found herself turning around to catch a second glimpse several times. Ubiquitously odd fashions strutted down the boulevards, as though living in Lyon entitled you to be a supermodel. She felt rather out of place in her oh-so-English tweed jacket and demure skirt; as though the people surrounding her were spectacular, colourful birds and she the homely pigeon.

She did know that the city was a centre of culture in France, which had been a part of her reasoning in making it her destination. She had heard that the Notre Dame basilica was particularly beautiful, and it was there in particular that she planned to go today. She made her way through the streets, asking directions of a few locals and never failing to notice the beauty of the city.

Finally she stood before the grand cathedral. It loomed over the street below, far more imposing than she had imagined. Two towers on either side of the façade stretched to the sky, each topped with a cross. It was a wonder of architecture that left her awestruck.

She hurried inside, eager to see its grand chapel. There was a little foyer, in which a bald priest gave her his blessing and showed her into the narthex. The main room was opulently decorated, with columns running down the aisles, at a space of several yards apart. Detailed stained-glass windows and gold-leaf were omnipresent.

Hermione sat in one of the pews, closed her eyes, and let her mind wander. Though her parents had raised her Christian, she had never been very religious. She could, however, appreciate the beauty and sanctity of this place, the purity that it represented. She basked in the reverent overtones of the chapel, her ears filling with the echoing sound of monks chanting psalms.

Too soon, a gentle hand on her shoulder woke her, and a quiet voice told her that the chapel was being closed to the public. She nodded, thanked the humble monk, and left the basilica. The sun was sinking in the sky, and she could see that she ought to be heading back. She was beginning to grow hungry, so she bought a piece of baguette from a street vendor, a lanky man with thick stubble who merely grunted when she thanked him. As she passed a grimy storefront and an alleyway, she heard a hoarse voice...decidedly male...coughing, and then...

"Mademoiselle, may I have some bread?" he begged, and she felt a gentle tug at the hem of her skirt.

Hermione spun around in surprise. Though he spoke French, his accent was English. She looked down upon an emaciated form covered in rags, with long, stringy black hair covering the face. She crouched down and handed him her entire piece of bread; he needed it far more than she did.

He took it and tore into the bread greedily, devouring the whole thing in seconds. Hermione looked down at him in pity, sad that he had to live this way. He gazed up at her, brushing his hair out of his face to get a better look at his benefactress. What he saw seemed to stagger him, made him shrink back in what seemed like fear. For a moment Hermione wondered why, but then she took a closer look at his face. Beneath the grime and the hard lines was a face she recognised. She covered her mouth to muffle her gasp.

Severus Snape sat before her in destitute state, covered in rags and dirt.

Hermione crouched lower, edging closer to him. "P-professor Snape?" she whispered, hardly believing it. He was ~~dead~~. How could she be seeing him here, in France of all places?

He was silent for a few seconds, just staring at her. Then he shook his head slowly, backing away. "No . . . No . . . NO!" he screamed. He stood up and took off down the

alley, running awkwardly but quickly.

Hermione ran after him, determined to find some answers. As she went, odd images flashed through her head, causing her to almost trip.

*Snape lay on the floor, groaning quietly as his neck bled from where he had been bitten.*

She rounded a corner, following him closely. She hoped the alley ended in a dead end.

*Harry took the glass flask Hermione gave him and collected the silver essence flowing from the Potions master's body.*

He was running out of breath, and so was she. She was not particularly athletic, and he was malnourished; they matched each other well in speed.

*Snape looked into Harry's eyes intensely before his own black ones closed.*

How was it possible? Perhaps she was wrong, perhaps the man only looked like Snape. But then why had he run from her and seemed so afraid, as if he didn't want to remember her?

She rounded another corner to find him lying on the ground at the hoped-for dead end, a fresh cut on his forehead bleeding. He had been running so fast that he hadn't seen the wall and had crashed into it. Hermione rushed to his side, feeling his pulse. He was so thin; he probably hadn't eaten in days. He was cut up and bruised all over, probably from fighting with other homeless people.

Hermione looked at the other end of the alleyway to be sure that no one was watching, and then took his hand and Disapparated.

\* \* \*

They spun to a halt at the Apparation point near her lodgings. Hermione paused a moment, knowing that she couldn't very well walk into the house with a dirty homeless man in her arms. She Disillusioned and levitated him, so that he hung invisible in the air above and in front of her.

Wand hidden in her sleeve, she advanced down the path to the house with Snape in front of her, carefully controlling the Hovering charm holding him up. When she reached the house, she made sure he didn't hit the doorframe as she walked quickly inside. Now she just had to make it up the stairs and into her room and...

"Mademoiselle Granger!" The voice of her hostess stopped her in her tracks, and she swivelled to return the old woman's smile.

"Madame Robichaud, how nice to see you," she said solicitously, dipping her head in respect.

"I have not seen you all day, my child, what have you been up to?" Madame asked as she set the table for supper.

Hermione groaned inwardly. She needed to get Snape upstairs before he came to, or else this would be a very awkward conversation. "I was just wandering around the city, Madame. Lyon is a beautiful place."

Madame nodded enthusiastically. "It is, it is. That is why my husband and I have lived here nearly our entire lives. I married him when I was just eighteen," she said fondly, and Hermione could see a loving gleam in her eye as she spoke.

"That's wonderful, Madame. I think," she said, trying to sound casual, "I'll just go up to my room."

"Oh, dear, wait a moment." Madame paused in her arrangement of the cutlery to gaze back at Hermione thoughtfully. "I was hoping that you would join us for supper in an hour. We've hardly gotten to speak with you yet."

"I would be honoured," Hermione said immediately; she was ready to accept an invitation to come to a rave with them if it got her out of the room. "I'll just go freshen up in my room." At the old woman's nod, she quickly ascended the stairs and entered her bedroom.

"Good God," she muttered as she removed the charm from Snape's body and gently lowered him onto the bed. The bleeding had stopped now, and he was breathing evenly.

Hermione looked around for something that she could use to clean the wound, and found a box of tissues. Brilliant. She pulled out a few and laid them out, end to end, in a line about two feet long. Tapping her wand on each piece, they became one long length of bandage which she wrapped gently around his head.

She decided, after a cursory examination of his body, that she didn't have time to clean or dress him before supper, so she chose instead to sit beside the bed and read in case he woke up. Her novel of choice: *Les Misérables*.

As Bishop Myriel saved Valjean from being taken back to jail, a low groan made her look up from the pages. Snape rolled his head from side to side, trying to discern where he was. His eyes lighted on her, and he let out a growl.

"Good evening, Professor Snape," Hermione said tartly, closing her book with a snap.

## Chapter 3

*Chapter 3 of 4*

Severus Snape is missing and presumed dead, but recently more and more people are claiming to have seen him throughout Europe. Hermione Granger is firmly convinced that he really is dead, but what if the rumours are true?

Sorry that it took so long to get this chapter up. I'll try to be posting more like once a week if I can.

Thanks to JK Rowling for the universe and my amazing beta, Elizabeth.

\* \* \*

Snape bestowed a malevolent glare on Hermione before trying to sit up, at which point he winced and fell back on the pillows.

"What have you done to me?" His hoarse question came after a moment of angry sulking with his eyes firmly shut.

"I haven't done anything to you but put a bandage on you. You crashed into a stone wall, so I imagine your ribs are bruised," Hermione mused, putting her book on the bedside table.

"I appear to have been taken against my will," he snarled viciously. The effort gave him a violent coughing fit; the force of it brought him up from his pillows again.

Hermione rushed to him with a glass of water, which he attempted to swat away but found that he couldn't because of the spasms. Grudgingly accepting the water, he gulped it down until his coughs subsided.

She shrugged. "I suppose, but can you really say that anything unfortunate has happened since?" With a wave of her wand she refilled the glass and set it on the table beside her book.

He opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by a muffled maternal voice in the hall..."Are you all right, dear? I heard you coughing."

"I'm fine, Madame, thank you," Hermione called back, glad that she had locked the door.

"Supper is in ten minutes," Madame added. A moment later her footsteps sounded on the stairs.

Hermione turned her attention back to Snape, who arched a brow. "You seem to speak fluent French," he commented acidly.

She shrugged and he glared at her, clearly not satisfied with this answer. "More time for that later. I have some questions for you *Professor*."

"And what might those be, *Miss Granger*?" he sneered.

"First off, I would be delighted to know why you're not currently rotting in the Shrieking Shack," she retorted, matching his tone. Intimidating her might have worked when she was a student, but now she was twenty-two. She was a fully-fledged witch, his equal.

"And I would be delighted to tell you that it is none of your business," he replied, though he didn't seem at all delighted.

"Very well," she said primly.

She stood up and pointed her wand at both of his hands and feet, apparently casting a nonverbal spell. Snape moved his hand to see what she had done to it, and found that he was unable to move it farther than about three inches from the bed. Upon attempting to test the range of motion of his other limbs, he found them in a similar state.

"What is the meaning of this?" he growled, pulling at his invisible restraints.

"Three things: you're not healthy, not clean, and not dead. I mean to explore these rather startling facts with you in due course ... especially the latter point. But, now, if you'll excuse me, it's supper time." She smiled smugly and left the room.

Dimly, Snape was aware of two muttered words: *Colloportus. Silencio*."

He was locked in.

No one could hear him.

Bugger.

\* \* \*

Hermione descended the stairs, knowing full well that she would have a furious Snape to deal with when she returned. But it was worth it, for what she planned to gain from him.

She made her way to the dining room, where her hosts awaited her. Madame was just setting out the silverware as she entered, her husband seated at the head of the small table. He rose to greet her with a kiss on both cheeks before chivalrously pulling her chair out for her.

"We are so pleased to at last have someone staying with us, and how wonderful that you are so young and beautiful," he said as he took his seat, smiling sweetly at her.

The old man reminded her of Dumbledore in the way his eyes twinkled when he spoke; in the way his primary goal seemed to be making her feel comfortable.

"I'm very happy to have found such a lovely place to stay," Hermione replied graciously.

Laid out on the table in front of them was a modest smorgasbord of French cuisine. There was bouillabaisse (a savoury fish soup), chitterling sausage, foie gras, and chicken drenched in red wine sauce.

"This all looks absolutely delicious," Hermione remarked as Madame sat down across from her.

"Thank you, dear, but it was very easy, really. I've been cooking my entire life." And Madame proceeded to launch into the story of her childhood and teen years, up until she met her husband.

"One night, he took me to the opera, and at the end of the first act he proposed. I knew even then that it would last," she concluded, refilling Hermione's glass with red wine.

"Is this wine produced here? It's simply wonderful," Hermione stated as she took a sip.

It was rich and heady, the flavour strong and sweet enough to almost be a dessert wine. She remembered what awaited her in her bedroom and put the glass down; she wanted to be aware for that encounter.

"Yes, this particular bottle is about ten years old. It is called Allemand Cornas, and is a very popular wine among our more wealthy customers," Madame told her with a wink.

"How lovely," Hermione murmured, swishing the liquid around in the glass.

"Tell us, then, how you came to France," said Monsieur after a moment, and Hermione began her story.

\* \* \*

That infernal twit dared to lock him in a Silenced room.

He hadn't stopped fuming since she had left, and he fully intended that she would bear the brunt of his rage for leaving him invisibly shackled like a common prisoner.

When she opened the door, he was ready to spit fire.

But he didn't.

His expression remained the same, as he had, after all, had many years to practise keeping it in place. But his eyes widened a fraction when he saw her. She was transformed.

Not transformed, exactly. She looked the same.

But she was glowing.

Not a magical glow, but rather a glow of self-assurance and happiness.

And it disappeared when she saw his face.

He had to blink a few times before he regained his composure.

"I don't suppose I am worth an explanation of your disturbing behaviour?" he snarled from his helpless position on the bed.

"Not just yet," Hermione replied, her breath suddenly short. Feeling a bit dizzy, she sat in the chair beside the bed.

She retrieved her wand from her sleeve and removed his ties to the bed. He didn't thank her.

"Would you like to tell me why you're alive, then?" she continued idly, placing a hand on her chest as her vision faded a bit, then returned.

"No, Miss Granger, I would not." This was the most polite he had been so far, yet she was still frustrated at his lack of cooperation.

"Well, know that you won't be leaving any..." She stopped short, breath turning thick in her throat and choking her. She slumped against the chair, her eyes rolling back into her head as her world went black.

*When she could see again, the light was dim and filtered through cracked, dirty windows. She was in a small, dingy room with various pieces of decrepit furniture shoved into corners, the floor coated with a thick layer of dust.*

*She was aware of her surroundings, but she wasn't in control of her actions as far as she could tell. Her brain sent the message to flex her fingers, but they remained motionless and out of sight. She was kneeling uncomfortably on the wooden floor, staring at the doorway nervously.*

*Her head moved, shifted as she looked down at the floor. Below her lay Snape, blood pooling from a wound in his neck. Dark spots appeared on his jacket. Hermione thought the spots were merely more blood before she realised that she was crying, bathing him in her tears.*

*She sensed that they were alone in the room in the Shrieking Shack. She felt Snape's pulse and found it still beating, but only weakly. She had no potions on her, nothing that could possibly save him. This man who had done so much for Harry, for the greater good, for the entire wizarding world, was dying before her eyes. There was nothing she could do for him.*

*She cried harder.*

*A light, rhythmic thumping sound reached her ears that grew steadily louder. It was more of a gallop, as though a horse was running up the stairs outside of the Shack. She swung her gaze up to the door in time to see it bang open, giving entrance to a magnificent white horse with a single sparkling horn on its brow.*

*The creature approached Snape, gently nudging his head with its nose and snorting in his ear. When he failed to move in response, the unicorn looked quizzically at Hermione.*

*"He's nearly dead," she sobbed quietly, not sure why she was speaking to the unicorn. Perhaps it was just that the creature was so beautiful that she couldn't help telling it of her sadness.*

*But it seemed to understand; it turned as though to look at its haunches, but instead drew its horn across its large thigh, opening its flesh to produce a thin line of pearlescent blood that slowly ran down its body.*

*The unicorn looked at Hermione expectantly.*

*Without understanding why, Hermione caught the blood in a cupped hand. Carefully she lifted Snape's head up with her free hand and poured the precious gift down his throat...*

"MISS GRANGER!"

She opened her eyes and found Snape regarding her with an expression both furious and marginally concerned.

"What happened?" she asked, rubbing her head.

"You appeared to be having a seizure and were muttering incoherently," he told her distastefully. "You could have warned me that you had a delicate condition before unceremoniously abducting me."

She glowered at him. "I do not have a delicate condition! That's never happened to me before," she said indignantly.

She then remembered chasing the strange, fragmented, yet somehow familiar pictures that had flashed through her mind as she chased him through the streets of the city. She paused.

"Except for earlier when I was running after you. It was like I was reliving something," she said slowly, her eyes widening. "You . . . you were in the Shrieking Shack and a unicorn walked in and gave its blood to save your life."

"That's ridiculous. No such thing ever happened." He refused to meet her dumbfounded gaze.

"I didn't say that it did, Professor Snape." She crossed her arms and stared at him knowingly.

Snape eyed her defensive stance and sputtered angrily, realising he had been trapped. He stayed silent, unwilling to betray himself further.

"So that's how you escaped. Unicorn's blood. Didn't it curse you, though?" she asked, suddenly timid.

"No, Miss Granger." He wasn't going to volunteer anything, apparently.

"Why not?"



He sighed in frustration. "Evidently the oaf didn't do his job properly," he muttered. "As you seem to know, he who selfishly takes an unwilling unicorn's blood to save himself will be cursed for the rest of his life. However," he paused as a cough seized him, "occasionally a unicorn will sense that someone with unfulfilled potential is dying. Someone pure at heart," he snorted derisively, "whose time in this world is not yet finished."

"The unicorn will seek out this person and willingly give its blood to sustain him or her. In this case, the blood is a gift and thus does not curse the drinker." He sighed. "While you may not have found me living the most comfortable life, Miss Granger, I can assure you that it is entirely my own doing. The unicorn was obviously mistaken in choosing me," he murmured, the crossness gone from his voice.

Snape turned from her in a gesture of silent dismissal.

Hermione still had so many questions to ask him, so many memories still flitting around elusively in her mind. But he was obviously done talking to her for tonight. With a heavy sigh, she conjured a sofa in the middle of the room, as well as a pillow and blanket. He deserved to sleep on a comfortable bed after all his trials.

But, Hermione, being of a determined and curious nature, found that sleep was not easy to find when her mind was so crammed with questions and suppositions. She could not get comfortable on her couch ... not with the one man who could satisfy her burning desire to 'know' just a few feet away.

She knew he was having trouble sleeping, too. She could hear him rustling the bed covers, but, though the words were practically ready to leap from her tongue, she forced herself to leave him alone. She was sure he needed rest for his weary body and mind. She was resolute that she would handle this situation maturely.

*Good night, Professor Snape,* she thought resignedly.

\* \* \*

Snape laid in the comfortable bed, his thoughts anything but comfortable. He was shaken by Hermione's sudden recollection.

He had Obliviated her for a reason, dammit!

He rolled over with a grunt. It was not unheard of for Memory Charms to break down, especially when the subject in question made contact with someone in the hidden memory. Flashbacks would occur, and eventually the subject would have access to the "blank spot" in their memories.

He was as good as done for. Of course she would reveal his existence to the Wizarding world. Being a Gryffindor, she would not understand his need for privacy and hatred of fame. *'The war hero deserves recognition!'*

If he had wanted recognition, he could have gotten it easily enough in the last five years. He lived as a destitute Parisian urchin because it suited him; no one bothered him except the occasional policeman shooing him from a street corner.

Another thing kept him living on the streets: guilt. Despite whatever he had done for the Order of the Phoenix during the war, he could not forgive himself for all of his sins in the name of the Dark Lord. They had haunted him every night even as he responded to the burning of the Mark, off to commit more horrors.

Because of him, countless Muggle-borns, Muggles, and even Death Eaters were dead. He had sometimes had to frame one of his supposed comrades for an obvious crime in order to deter the suspicions about his loyalties.

He still felt that Dumbledore had been far too forgiving in letting him spy for the Order. For what he had done even up to that point, he deserved Azkaban and nothing better. Even with that chance to redeem himself, he had been forced to commit more crimes, murder more people while he plotted his hidden sabotages.

He had fully expected to die in the course of the war, but fate had not dealt him a kind hand. In the Shrieking Shack, he had thought he would at last find peace. But then the unicorn and Miss Granger had seemed to conspire against his wishes.

Now that he had crossed paths with the harpy who had denied him his eternal rest, he couldn't help but wonder if she was somehow a part of his 'unfinished work'. He hoped to whatever benevolent or malevolent power controlled his pathetic fate that he would rid himself of her soon.

He rolled over again, and found himself staring at his captor. She was finally asleep, her hand dangling over the side of the couch, her mouth sloppily agape. Her wand lay on the floor just below her hand, which gave him an idea.

He slowly got out of bed, trying not to wince at the pain in his ribs and the dizzy feeling in his head. Silently he crept to where she slept and reached a hand down for her wand, but found himself unable to get closer than five inches to it. In frustration he thrust his hand forward, only to have it repelled as though some magnetic force kept him back.

Snape growled in frustration and skulked back to the bed. He should have known the little nit would protect her wand from him. He didn't want to know what she thought of him now.

But when had he ever cared what anyone thought of him?

It did him no good to care.

He crept back to bed with a silent curse, and eventually, he slept.

\* \* \*

When Snape awoke, the room was lit in a golden glow. Sunlight filtered through the blinds on the window, casting dancing patterns on the rug. He propped himself up on one elbow, looking around sleepily. At first glance, the room appeared empty, but then a movement in the corner caught his attention.

The sight before him stopped his breathing for a moment. He felt as though he were silently choking. For, back turned to him, Miss Granger stood in knickers and nothing else, wiggling a bit as she pushed her legs into a pair of jeans. What disconcerted him most about this image was her evident lack of bra; that was an image he wished dearly not to associate with the pushy know-it-all he had known in his time at Hogwarts.

He coughed loudly and averted his eyes as the expected shriek pierced his ears. She spun around, her jeans half-fastened, her arms crossed over her chest, and her face red with embarrassment.

"How long have you been awake?" she asked, voice trembling.

"Only a moment," he muttered, keeping his eyes focused on the lamp beside the bed.

She gave an indignant little huff, then picked up her wand and magicked the rest of the clothes onto her body.

"How did you sleep?" she asked absently as she tied her hair back.

Its bushiness had decreased in the years since Hogwarts, but it still needed to be reined in at times. When he didn't answer for a few minutes, she turned again to see him regarding her with a stony expression.

She wondered if he regretted telling her so much about his past earlier, and now wished to avoid speaking if he could. Well, that was fine. She didn't need him to speak for

now.

"As I was saying yesterday, you won't be leaving anytime soon," she commented, slipping into a pair of ballet flats. "It's clear to me that you're not in any condition to go out on your own. Why a man of your talents is even homeless in the first place is perplexing."

He snorted mirthlessly, staring up at the ceiling. She would know about talent, the know-it-all who couldn't bear anything below an 'O' on her exams. He didn't need some snooty little witch to tell him he had skill.

"Glad I amuse you," she muttered, rolling her eyes.

Moving toward him, she restrained his limbs once more and pulled his tattered shirt up to inspect his ribs. They were indeed covered in bruises, as well as protruding from the loose skin around them. His stomach didn't have the swell of malnutrition, but he was definitely undernourished.

"What in the name of Merlin are you doing?" he snarled, thrashing against his restraints. "Did I give you bloody permission to touch me?"

"No, you didn't. Sorry. But really, you don't have a choice, because I've decided I'm going to heal you until you're as well as you were at Hogwarts."

"This is outrageous! If you do not let me go *this instant*, I swear you will pay," he shouted, his eyes boring into hers.

"I'll pay? Do tell me, how will you make me pay? I've gotten the impression by now that you don't want anyone to know that you exist," she spat back. "So I think that alerting the authorities is rather out of the question, don't you? Besides, I can't see that you have your wand with you," she stated triumphantly, folding her arms.

Furious, he returned to his old tactic of keeping silent. He was burning to lash out, even strike her, but the invisible ties on his limbs prevented that.

"I'll let you go as soon as you're healthy again. I promise."

Grudgingly, he looked up at her face. Her impertinent, smart-arse little face.

"Very well," he said through gritted teeth.

## Chapter 4

### Chapter 4 of 4

Severus Snape is missing and presumed dead, but recently more and more people are claiming to have seen him throughout Europe. Hermione Granger is firmly convinced that he is really dead, but what if the rumours are true?

Thank you's going out to JK Rowling for her world that we get to borrow and my beta Elizabeth for being a wonderful editor!

\* \* \*

Snape's stomach growled loudly then, reminding him how small the piece of bread Hermione had given him the day before had really been. He had been a long time without a true meal.

"Oh! You need food!" Hermione exclaimed, jumping up as though prodded with something sharp. "How could I have forgotten food?" She flitted out of the room and returned a few moments later, carrying a tray with a full breakfast. Wordlessly, she removed his restraints.

"Don't eat more than you can stand," she warned as she set the tray on his lap. "If you eat too much on empty, you'll be sick."

"Thank you, mother," he sneered, tearing off a piece of a croissant with his teeth. He proceeded to eat the breakfast with no regard to how he looked or where the crumbs fell.

Watching him, Hermione felt a stab of pity for the man who had once been so respected and composed. It shook her to the core that living on the street for just four years could do this to him.

After a while, he became aware of her eyes on him and, without looking up, snarled, "Do you always scrutinise your test subjects as they eat, Miss Granger? If so, I do hope that they are fonder of you than I am."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Most of my 'test subjects' aren't so nasty without provocation," she returned, rising and going to stand by the window. "It's just that . . . I hate to see the teacher I respected most reduced to begging in the streets," she said quietly as she looked out on the quiet rows of grapevines.

Snape didn't answer; he was not accustomed to displays of emotion, however small. He had based his life and work upon stoicism and a total lack of concern for himself. It was an entirely new concept that someone should pity him. New, and disturbing. It unnerved him, so he responded in the only way he knew.

"Miss Granger, would you do me the immense favour of shutting the hell up?"

She turned around to stare at him for a few seconds somewhat uncomprehendingly. He met her stare with an unreadable expression of his own. Then, her nostrils flared and her eyes wide with anger, she marched straight out the bedroom door, slamming it hard enough to make the rafters shake.

Snape watched with mild surprise and found another emotion weighing on his shoulders. This one not so new, but one he hadn't felt in a while, nevertheless.

Guilt.

\* \* \*

Hermione, fighting back tears of mortification, practically flew down the stairs and out of the house, sprinting her way to the Apparation point on the road and disappearing with a loud crack.

She reappeared in the shadow of a deserted awning outside a bakery. She knew it was still in Lyon, but it was a district with which she wasn't familiar. She still felt tears in

her eyes, and she found that she didn't care. She just needed to think.

How dare he talk to her like that?

All right, yes, she had been remiss in not giving a decent meal before now. Perhaps hunger made him surly. But, honestly, all she had done was to express her sadness at his current pitiable state. Was he really so proud that so simple a sentiment as that could set him on his ear?

He had spoken to her as though she were an errant child ... like she was annoying him with inane prattle.

"How dare he!" she huffed again.

Hermione rushed into the bakery and in her anger snapped out an order for a croissant and coffee before sitting in a corner table and resting her head in her hands. Only then did it occur to her that she had left Snape unrestrained, the door unlocked. Oh, well. The bastard could run away and drown in the Rhône for all she cared.

Her order arrived and she began to eat sullenly. She did not really need the black coffee to wake her up, as Snape had seen to that by rowing with her. But, her head felt all muddled, and she hoped the caffeine would clear her thoughts. She liked her coffee dark and strong, unlike most of the English tea-drinking society.

With a sigh, her thoughts returned to Snape again. She shouldn't have expected that he would be any different than when she'd known him in school. She shouldn't really expect anything but snark from him anyway; she was holding him against his will, after all. But did he have to go out of his way to make it seem that she was the last person on Earth he wanted taking him off the street? Like she was so odious to him that he'd rather starve than receive help from her?

She snorted into her coffee. "Who knows I probably am that odious to him."

As to how he had come to be here ... well, she could guess how Snape had escaped from the Shrieking Shack; her sharp skills of deduction had picked up where her decimated memory had left off. After she had saved him, he had Obliviated her, probably with her own wand. Apparently, he'd had no wand.

The only reason she could think of that would explain his lack of wand was that it had rolled away and slipped through a crack somewhere. He hadn't had time to find it, so he had fled without it. And then a string of unfortunate events had brought him here.

"Bad day?"

Hermione looked up and saw a handsome man smiling down at her, a look of concern about his expression.

She smiled weakly. "No, just thinking," she muttered, taking a sip of her coffee and wincing.

He chuckled sympathetically. "Looks like a bad day to me. And, in my experience, the best thing to do on a bad day is talk to someone."

She looked at him for a few moments in disbelief. She didn't know this man, and he was offering to hear out her problems? Her first reaction was to be suspicious, her second to ignore it. She had her wand right in her pocket. She could whip it out in a moment. She would be fine.

Slowly she nodded. "I suppose you're right. Please, have a seat. I'm Hermione," she added.

"Anton." He smiled again, and she couldn't help but be charmed. "That is an unusual name. Unusual, but lovely."

"Thank you. It's English; my parents thought they were being clever . . ."

\* \* \*

Ron closed his suitcase with trepidation. He had packed enough for a week, more if he wore his underwear more than once. Molly had strictly warned against that, but he was a big boy...no, a man, now. He could do what he wanted with his tightie-whities.

Ginny stood in the bedroom doorway, arms crossed and expression doubtful.

"Are you sure you've got everything you need, Won-Won? You're not renowned for your infallible memory."

His ears turned red and he glared at her. "Shut it, Gin. I'm fine. You're sure you did the scrying right?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, for the last time, I did the scrying right. She's staying in Lyon! You'd better study that little French dictionary of yours, Monsieur Stupide," she said sarcastically, knocking on his bright red head.

"Cut it out, Gin! You're making me nervous," he muttered, swatting her hand away.

"Fine, fine, I'll leave. Just don't make a fool of yourself . . . not that I dare to hope."

He scowled as she left the room and picked up his bags, checking that he had them all, and Disapparated.

When the darkness disappeared, he found himself in the shadows just outside a nice hotel. Taking a deep breath, he entered through the spinning glass door and greeted the man at the counter.

"One . . . room . . . please," he said slowly, trying to sound out the words in French as best he could.

The concierge laughed. "We speak English here, too, monsieur," he assured him as he handed Ron a pen for the guestbook.

Ron reddened, but signed his name, and the concierge smiled and led him to the elevator and, at last, his room.

Ron left his luggage as it was on the bed, stopping only to fish out a scrap of paper he had stuffed into the pocket of a duffel bag. On it was written the address of the house where Hermione was ostensibly staying.

With fear in his stomach and an indescribable weight in his heart, he set out to win back the girl he loved.

\* \* \*

Snape groaned for the umpteenth time since Hermione had left.

This time, it was for his stupidity in not taking off immediately. She would probably be back any minute, ready to curse him as soon as he set foot out of the house.

And still he sat there like an idiot, when he should have taken his chance the moment she was gone.

With his luck, she might curse him for staying as well.

The sound of footsteps coming up the stairs put him on alert, and he braced himself for whatever he was about to get.

The door opened, and...

She was smiling.

That in itself was odd, but then his eyes travelled down to her arms, which carried several brown packages.

She closed the door with her foot and unloaded the packages on the sofa, opening them all with her wand and tossing each at him in turn.

Long black trousers. A black turtleneck. A flowing black cloak. Black socks. Black shoes. Black . . . boxers?

For the love of Merlin, he'd had no idea he used to wear so much black.

There were still a few more packages of different shapes and sizes which she was unwrapping more carefully.

With the first, she came over to him and pulled his shirt up without so much as a word; he didn't protest, though he watched her with some unease. She was holding a long tube of something; she squeezed a bit onto her hand. The stuff was bright yellow.

Oh. Bruise-healing paste.

He winced as she gingerly rubbed the stuff over his purple-tinged ribs, but felt the pain receding quickly as the paste was absorbed into his skin. By the time she had finished, the bruises were already beginning to fade.

The next bottle she unwrapped was a dull reddish colour, which he recognised as Blood-Replenishing Potion. He probably didn't need much of that. All the same, he obediently let her pour it down his throat. He glared at her heavy-handedness, though, just for good measure.

She looked at him with her eyebrows raised. "Why are you being so . . . cooperative?" she asked cautiously, stoppering the vial and putting it aside.

He pulled himself up into a sitting position, which didn't hurt as much as he had thought it might. "I have . . . realised that what you intend to do for me is more for my own good than anything else. And while I despise nee...requiring aid from anyone, I assume that you will let me leave as soon as I am back to full health," he finished, grinding the words out.

More even than he hated accepting help, he hated explaining himself. And it infuriated him that he was, effectively, at her mercy.

Her eyes were wide as she slowly nodded. Taking her wand out again, she began healing his slight fractures as she spoke. "That's right . . . but I also want your word on something." She looked up at him.

"And what is that?"

"I want you to give me your word that you will at least try to make a better life for yourself." She was embarrassed to say it; she knew that he scorned her, scorned anyone who told him what to do. She expected him to sneer at this, but it was worth a try.

He considered this for a moment. "Very well. I don't have to make an Unbreakable Vow, do I?" he asked sarcastically.

To her surprise, she chuckled. "No. After all, we don't have a witness." As she finished mending his bones, she remembered something that had been at the back of her mind for a few hours. "Why don't you have your wand, Professor?"

His lip curled. "Miss Granger, how much do you know of wandlore?"

She shrugged. "Not much. There isn't a great deal of definitive work on the subject."

He laughed without mirth. "Yes, a lack of textbooks must have thoroughly discouraged you." He cleared his throat before continuing. "I'm sure you can guess that, having been a Death Eater, I have done things with my wand of which I was not proud."

She nodded gravely.

"About one year before the war, I went to Ollivander to see if there was anything that could be done to prevent my wand from being used again in the instance of my death. You see, a wand that has performed Dark Magic such as mine would have easily begun to corrupt anyone who as much as touched it. Obviously, I went to him in disguise. With the war drawing near, I could not afford anyone knowing things about me that were none of their business."

She cleared her throat and began to raise her hand, but quickly dropped it. Old habits die hard.

"I thought that Ollivander remembered every wand he has ever sold. How would he not know it was you?"

He glared at her. "Of course I cast several glamours on my wand to ensure that he did not recognise it. May I go on?" he snarled in annoyance.

She nodded meekly.

He sighed and continued. "Ollivander told me that there was a spell that would, in the event of my death, make my wand dissolve. I was, with some difficulty, able to extract the spell from him, and I left immediately to cast it. When I lay in the Shrieking Shack that night, as you knelt over me, I was as good as dead. My wand evaporated into nothing in the pocket of my robes, and I was forced to flee without it."

Hermione's lips were set in a tight line as she finally understood.

"You never bought a new one because, by the time it was safe again, that would have been proof that you were still alive. And you didn't want anyone to know that."

"Indeed."

The silence was thick between them for a few moments, each contemplating what Snape had said.

"Once you're well again, I'll help you buy a new wand."

Snape's head snapped up to stare at her in mild disbelief. Slowly, so slowly, one corner of his lip curved up until it was a satisfied smirk because he wasn't disposed to smiling.

"Thank you, Miss Granger."

\* \* \*

Ron looked at the quaint little house, at the vineyards that stretched on behind it, and he could see why Hermione had chosen to stay here.

With a sigh, he knocked on the front door, three sharp raps that he hoped would be heard. He was on the verge of knocking again when the door opened to reveal an elderly man about the same height as Ron. He smiled and, presumably, asked what Ron was here for . . . in French.

Not trusting his French, Ron stammered, "Uh, Mademoiselle Hermione Granger?"

"Oh, oui, oui!" the old man exclaimed, beckoning him inside. "Un moment, monsieur."

Ron leaned against the wall of the foyer as the man climbed the stairs, knocked on a door, and spoke rapidly. In the midst of it he caught the words "très, très rouge!" To his surprise, a string of French, just as fluent but in Hermione's voice, answered. His heart picked up and his ears began to tint red at the knowledge that she was so near, as they always did when he was nervous.

He nodded to the man when he came down and wandered off into another room, and waited with his gaze fixed at the top of the stairs.

At last, she appeared. She looked more beautiful than he remembered: Her hair, still a bit frizzy as always, framed her face with its tangled curls. She was dressed in a casual but flattering ensemble of a white T-shirt and jeans.

When she saw him, however, her expression turned to something between shock, horror, and irritation.

"What are you doing here, Ronald?" Hermione asked levelly, crossing her arms.

"I-I came here to tell you how I feel," he stuttered, still in awe of what he had let slip through his fingers.

She looked on the verge of rolling her eyes, but seemed to think better of it and instead took his arm and pulled him outside and around the side of the house.

She was unaware that Snape now had a perfect view of the two of them from her bedroom window, and he, being a Slytherin, was not above eavesdropping.

"Ron, I thought I made myself clear back in England," she began, keeping herself a few feet away from him.

"You did, 'Mione, but . . . I'm not willing to let you go."

*Ah, a lovers' spat?* Snape thought wryly as he watched the exchange.

"What are you talking about?" Her voice was a bit unsteady now.

Ron got down on his knees, his hands clasped in a beseeching gesture. "I'm so in love with you, Hermione. Since you left, I've realised how much you truly mean to me. I can't live without you, I just can't. Please, give me another chance!"

Hermione covered her face with her hands, shaking her head from side to side. "No, Ron, just no. I'm sorry that you feel that way, but I have moved on. I'd like it if we could still be friends, though," she said gently, pulling him to his feet.

He rubbed his hand over his face, unable to believe that he had still failed to plead his case to her. He was willing to offer her his whole life, his heart, his everything, and she was denying him. Something inside him, something already hanging by a thin string, snapped.

He moved toward her and clamped his hands tightly on her shoulders. She tried to shrug his hands off, but he was gripping her so tightly that his nails dug into her shirt.

"Hermione, I love you! I love you!" he yelled as he shook her violently.

Snape growled and sprinted from the room. He reached the pair in seconds and grabbed Ron roughly, throwing him on the ground where the redhead lay dazed for a moment.

Hermione pulled out her wand and, shaking, she cast the Incarcerous spell. Within seconds, Ron was tightly bound in magical ropes, though he continued to struggle furiously. When he saw Snape, however, his eyes widened in horror.

"Is this who you've left me for? Snape?! He's supposed to be DEAD! What the hell is going on?"

"Silence, Weasley! Nothing of the sort has happened. And for the love of Merlin, stop shouting or someone will come to invest..."

"MURDER! HELP! MUR..."

*"Stupefy!"*

Ron was silent.

Finally.

"Okay, what are we going to do about this?" Hermione asked, panting with exertion.

Snape groaned quietly. "I won't have him knowing about me, Miss Granger. I don't trust him to keep my secrets."

"I don't, either." She sighed. "I suppose we'll have to modify his memory, like you did mine." She pulled out her wand and pointed it at Ron's forehead. *Obliviate.*

Instantly, she was inside his mind. Everything was black for a moment, and then it was filled with colour and light and sound, all jumbled together in a confusing mess of senses and memories. Hermione searched through it; everything seemed to be placed haphazardly, but she was able to locate the memories she was looking for.

She erased the part where Snape tackled Ron, and replaced it with the image of a burly man who must have worked in the vineyards, to make feasible his sudden appearance. She added in the man punching Ron a few times in the face, partly out of spite and partly to explain the unconsciousness, and then faded the new memory to black.

She allowed her mind to return to her own body and glanced at Snape sheepishly.

"Could you, um, hit his face a few times? I added on a little . . ."

"Certainly."

\* \* \*

Ron awoke on a bench; it was dark and it was cold. His head felt as though it had been pounded by several hammers and then dunked in cold water. He moaned and rubbed his temples; his next instinct was to look for his wand. Good, it was still hidden in the inside pocket of his coat.

He tried to remember how he had gotten there, on the bench in the dark and the cold, and vaguely recalled Hermione, and . . . attacking her, and getting clouted by a big, angry man.

He moaned again in despair and slapped his forehead, then hissed at the fresh sting.

There was nothing for it now. Hermione couldn't forgive him after this, and his entire trip had been a waste.

He trudged back to the hotel to get his things, and as he walked, he wondered what he was going to do now.

And then it started to rain.

Just bloody great.