

Meadowlark

by sc010f

Struck by a curse during the final battle, Hermione struggles to grasp what is reality and what is not. Is the curse merely revealing the truth that has been hidden for seven years?

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 17

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Chapter One

August, 1990

The shouts and shrieks of the children filled the hazy, late summer air, echoing off of the comfortable semi-detached homes that surrounded the playground.

Small boys covered in dirt tackled each other in the dust, kicking a battered football across the field. Girls gathered in twos and threes, swinging on the swing set, gabbling in the shade, clambering on the monkey bars.

Mothers and nannies sat on convenient benches, gossiping and chatting, calling out to wayward children, soothing fussy babies.

"Did you see what Pam brought into to the charity shop? Brand new it was..."

"He came home three days later, you know..."

"David! What do you have in your mouth?"

A girl with her bushy, curly hair flying free from its pigtails flung herself from her swing and ran to the slide. If her leap from the swing was a few feet farther than physics ought to have allowed, nobody noticed. In her wake, the swing slowed and stilled as if by an invisible hand.

"Watch me, Gran!" she cried from the top of the slide before hurtling down to the bottom, face first into the sand. She scrambled to her feet, face dirty and triumphant. Some of the other girls watched her, amused.

"Hermione! Be careful!" called her grandmother.

"Hermione! Come and make the merry-go-round spin!" shouted a little boy. "You can make it go faster than anybody!"

The girl scampered off and scrambled onto the merry-go-round. The other girls returned to their nine- and ten-year-old gossip, too mature for such babyish things as swings and slides. Surely Hermione should know that little miss smarty knew everything.

"Ready?" she cried. "David, stop that! You'll fall and get hurt! You know the rules; everybody hangs on or I don't go!"

"You're bossy, H'mione!" protested David.

"Rules are there for a reason," replied Hermione, crossing her arms. "Hang on, or I don't push!"

"C'mon, David!" chorused the other children, two smaller girls and a boy.

David pouted but hung on, and the merry-go-round spun into its dizzying spiral. Hermione stood by the merry-go-round, watching it spin, her right hand moving in a circle. If the children noticed that she hadn't actually *touched* the apparatus to make it start, nobody said anything.

Across the street, unnoticed by the throng on the playground, an old man, oddly dressed in a seersucker suit with a battered straw hat that would not have been out of place in a Key West bar, sat in the bus shelter. On his lap sat a cat on a lead of bright pink tape. The cat miaowed plaintively.

"I know, Smoochums," soothed the old man, "it's warm today, isn't it?"

"Miaow," replied the cat.

"What else did Dudley do?"

"Prr-mi-mi-mi."

"Oh," the man chuckled, "boys of that age... But remember, Smoochums, even that boy has a purpose."

"Prrr," said the cat and turned to wash her face.

As if from nowhere, another man appeared beside him, clad head to toe in black, with a bleak scowl.

"That's your idea of inconspicuous?" sneered the dark man.

The old man peaceably chucked the cat under the chin.

"Arabella was kind enough to loan me one Smoochums nobody notices an old eccentric sitting on a bench."

"With a cat on a lead of pink tape. Lovely." The younger man grunted as he sat.

"What did you discover, Severus?"

"They're dentists," he replied, "perfectly normal, perfectly harmless. Completely invested in their children. The girl is the eldest, but you see the toddler on the lap of the lady in the pale green? That's the younger sister Atalanta."

"It's Hermione we're interested in," pointed out the old man. "Her abilities are prodigious."

"Her parents are *Muggles*, Albus; they will not let her go easily. They are middle-class, educated, scientifically minded. It would not surprise me if they were secular humanists, too. Magic doesn't fit into their world."

Albus chuckled.

"You've been reading the Muggle newspapers again, haven't you, Severus? Well, we shall leave the convincing to Minerva, I think. I believe she will be the most persuasive. Certainly, she will appeal to their ideas on education."

The young man grunted again.

"Flitwick would frighten them, and Pomona?" He shuddered.

Albus chuckled.

"Yes, he would, at that! Perhaps in another year or two, he may have grown a bit, but I doubt that! Yes, yes, Minerva will have the chat when the time comes. I think it best. Such talent as this little girl has cannot be wasted."

"She's talented? You can tell through all that dust and hair?"

"And bright. *And* authoritative. You see that little boy with the smudge on his nose, David?"

"Yes."

"He's wrapped around her finger will follow her anywhere, just because she tells him exactly what to do. That will be useful to us, I think."

"Albus, why this interest? There are other students. Draco, for example, is being led down a dangerous path. God help me, the Weasley boy the youngest male of that clan is being left to tag along after his trouble-making brothers. Merlin knows what I'll have to clean up in my office when *he* arrives. Carlotta Zabini's married again; what do you think Blaise is going to do? Longbottom?" Severus shrugged. "I can't imagine what Augusta's done to him over the years not since Frank and Alice..." he trailed off.

"But those others aren't meant to be the companions to The Boy Who Lived, my boy. This girl this girl is his guide, his compass."

The dark man scowled at his scuffed Dr Martens. "So this is all in aid of Harry bloody Potter," he grumbled.

"Now, Severus, the boy could yet be put in your charge. He'd make a fine Slytherin."

"But her? *She's* no Slytherin."

Albus squinted across the street to the curly-haired witch with the dirty face who was now helping her sister to swing.

"No, not Slytherin, I'd say," he mused. "Ravenclaw perhaps, but maybe even..." He chuckled. "Wouldn't it be interesting to see her in Gryffindor? You missed her bravery, Severus how she throws herself into things."

Hermione suddenly stilled the swing, but before her sister could protest, she pointed to a spreading oak, offering shade to the playground.

"Look, Atalanta!" she cried. "Look at the meadowlark! It's a female! All of her chicks have flown away, and she's singing in the sunshine! Soon, she'll fly south so that she can stay warm!"

The smaller child giggled, the migratory habits of meadowlarks unimportant.

"Make it come here, H'monie!" she said.

The older girl whistled, and the lark flew from the tree to alight on the iron fence that surrounded the playground.

"Make it sing!" the toddler cried.

And Hermione did, whistling again as the lark began to warble its song of joy. Atalanta clapped and giggled, delighted by her older sister's gift.

"Impressive," Severus observed from across the street. "Not, perhaps, as useful as Parsletongue, but even if she can charm the birds from the trees..."

Albus chuckled.

"I told you," he said. "The girl has talent. It should be fostered."

"And wasted on nursemaiding the boy who..."

"My boy," the old man's voice held a hint of warning.

Severus subsided, and the two men sat on the bus shelter bench watching the children play. Smoochums napped beside them in the sunshine. Every so often, a bus would trundle past, stop, and carry on as the two men waved the confused driver away.

The girl, Hermione, played with her sister, giggling and laughing on the swing set until their grandmother rose from the bench and collected them to take them home for tea.

"Well, Severus?" Albus asked after the small group struggled past them on their way home.

Severus grunted noncommittally.

"She'll be a great asset and you know the war is coming, my boy. Even you have a task."

"They're just *children*, Albus."

"Then let us let them enjoy their childhood."

AN: Atalanta is not a typo for Atlanta - her name is taken from Greek mythology.

Not mine, no money.

Thanks to Subversa for the beta and current and future hand-holding and Savine_snape for the lightning-quick Britpick.

Thanks also to Annietalbot and Mollyssister for the initial consult.

Savvy television fans will also recognize the premise as the Buffy the Vampire Slayer episode "Normal Again." My hat is off to the incredible Whedon for the inspiration.

Two

Chapter 2 of 17

Struck by a curse during the final battle, Hermione struggles to grasp what is reality and what is not. Is the curse merely revealing the truth that has been hidden for seven years?

Chapter Two

May, 1998

The battle was over. Dolohov shook his head in disbelief.

Potter lived - bloody Harry Potter lived, and for the moment, so did he. Lucius had shoved him into the dirt as he and Narcissa sprinted for the castle in search of their son. Merlin only knew where Severus was, probably hiding in a cellar somewhere. Dolohov crouched behind a tree. Bodies of Death Eaters and Order members littered the ground. Behind him, Hogwarts castle heaved and smoked, flames belching into the dark sky.

Nearby a twig cracked, and two exhausted and battered young women emerged from the trees, their clothing spattered with blood. The redhead was crying.

"I need you to be brave, Ginny," murmured the girl with curly brown hair. "Your mum is going to need you very much right now."

"Why, Hermione?" Ginny asked her friend. "What's happened?"

"The Mudblood," Dolohov sneered as he took aim at Hermione, who had bent to help Ginny Weasley regain her feet. "Taught the werewolf a lesson; now to teach the Mudblood." His wand was cool in his hand. Avada was too good for her.

"Because," Hermione continued, "Ginny, something's happened. To Fred."

"But he's not... No, Hermione! No!" Ginny's cries filled the air, and she sagged to the ground.

"Ginny! Please be strong, Ginny!" Hermione begged her friend.

"For you, Mudblood," Dolohov hissed. "I'll teach the jumped-up whore to play with magic.*Unde Orieris, Ibi Adeste!*" Brilliant sparks flew from his wand, striking Hermione in the back.

The brown-haired girl screamed and crumpled forward, and Dolohov allowed himself to caper obscenely. One less Mudblood, even if it was too late. He straightened up and found himself staring at the business end of Kingsley Shacklebolt's wand.

"Going somewhere?" Shacklebolt asked calmly.

"YOU!"

"Me," Shacklebolt replied. "Antonin Dolohov, you are bound by law. Will you come quietly? The battle is over."

"Mud-lover," Dolohov cried. "You cannot do this cannot take me!" Taking his wand, he leveled it at Shacklebolt.

"Dolohov, don't be a fool!"

"Avada Kedavra!"

A sheet of green encompassed Dolohov as his own killing curse struck him down.

"Shit," Shacklebolt muttered, bending down to retrieve the dead man's wand.

"Kingsley, help me!" Ginny Weasley cried, struggling out from beneath the prone form of Hermione. "He hit her with a curse; she's alive, but she's not moving! Help me, Kingsley! Help me!"

Tucking the Dark wizard's wand into his pocket, Shacklebolt hurried over to the girls. Ginny's face was streaked with blood and tears. Hermione was filthy, dirt encrusted on her skin, blood beneath her fingernails, and traces of a memory clinging to her jumper.

Now that's odd, thought Shacklebolt, staring at the silvery thread, *where did that come from?*

Ginny whimpered.

"Fred," she whispered. "Fred's dead, Fred, Fred, Fred..."

"Come on," he said, pulling the redhead to her feet, "we need to get her to safety."

"But Fred I need to find Fred!"

"He's in the castle we've found him. Nothing... nothing's going to hurt him now."

There was light where there had been no light before.

Soft cloth enveloped her body. Cotton? She had been wearing jeans and jumper.

There was quiet where once there had been noise: explosions, chaos, confusion and curses.

Hermione struggled to open her eyes. Her head felt heavy, full of sand.

The room swam into focus. When had she opened her eyes?

A room.

A wall, painted pale yellow; in the wall, a grey door with a small window at the very top.

A white iron bed frame.

The smell of Muggle antiseptic and cleaning solution where once there had been smoke.

Muggle cleaning solution?

Where was she?

A bell chimed in the distance, and the grey door with the small window opened. An Indian man in a white coat walked into the room and over to her. He shone a small flashlight in her eyes, first the left, then the right.

She blinked.

"Good afternoon, Hermione," he said slowly, carefully, as if he were talking to a child. "How are you this afternoon?"

This wasn't right. She tried to talk, to scream, to murmur, but she was stuck, trapped.

Have I been Petrified again?

A noise came from her throat.

"Subject responds to conversational stimulus," noted the doctor into a Muggle tape-recorder. "Excellent progress."

He turned to Hermione.

"Hermione," he said, "do you know where you are?"

No.

"N-no..." It was a whisper and it exhausted her. The room began to fade around her again.

"Hermione," chided the doctor. "Stay with me, Hermione. You're in the Midvale Psychiatric Home; you know this, we've spoken of this before..."

But before he could continue, her world faded to black.

"She's coming round again."

"Blimey, 'Mione, you gave us a scare."

Harry first, then Ron.

What had happened to Dr Gupta? Who was Dr Gupta?

"Can't believe it; you almost went the way of old Snape. He's not woken up yet."

Snape? Did she know a Snape? Pieces of memory filtered back into place. She knew a Professor Snape - she had watched him die.

Dr Gupta's face faded away. She struggled to open her eyes.

"Where?" she croaked.

"Hospital Wing," Harry replied, sitting gingerly on her bed. In a corner of the cubicle of cloth, Ginny Weasley curled up in a chair, asleep, face streaked with tears.

"Ginny and Kingsley brought you here. You were hit by a curse."

Somebody swore at her? No, no, no, this was the magical world. She was at Hogwarts.

Hogwarts. Where she had studied Potions and Defense against the Dark Arts with Professor Snape.

"Professor Snape?" she croaked. Why was her throat so dry?

"You're mental," Ron chuckled. She moved her head slightly, and blinding pain shot through her skull. Where Harry had been seated, Ronald was standing by her head. "First things out of her mouth are questions about her Professors."

"Bu..."

"Oh, old Snapey's fine. Out cold, of course; right next to you actually." Ron gestured to the wall at her left. "You regained consciousness and made such a fuss when Kingsley and Ginny brought you in here after the battle that Madam Pomfrey sent a team of Healers down to the Shrieking Shack at once. Would you believe the old bastard's still with us? He probably won't wake up for a while or speak, but better that he not be able to take points, eh?"

"I don't..."

"What's that? Hermione?" Harry asked.

"I don't remember," she said. Something else was missing. What was it?

"Mione, I'm afraid, well, bad news..." Ron was talking, his hands twisting.

With an effort Hermione looked up.

"Fred's dead," Ronald blurted.

"Oh, Ron, I'm so..."

"s okay," Ron choked, "we're slowly getting used to it, but George... I don't know about George; he's not doing well at all. But as long as we're together, 'Mione, it's okay."

He reached down and took one of her hands.

"How long..."

"How long have you been here? Three weeks," Harry replied. "We've been here every afternoon. You're one of the last to leave Hogwarts. You and Snape."

"Mum will be happy to take you in at The Burrow when it's inhabitable again," Ginny said, stirring in her chair. "But right now, well, it's difficult for her to have people who aren't, well, us around."

Ron nodded. "But the minute you can, Hermione, you can stop with us for as long as you want."

"Or with me," Harry chimed in. "I'm going to be renovating Grimmauld Place, and I can use the help. And when you're ready, I'll help you with your parents. They're still in Australia."

"But..."

Harry's words tumbled over each other.

"And if you don't mind, I've arranged with Professor McGonagall to take Snape in when he's ready. It's the least I can do for him, after all he's done for us and for my mum."

Ronald snorted.

"The two of you are mental," he amended his previous statement. "Both of you all protective of Snape. Have you forgotten what a vindictive bastard that man is?"

"Ron, he saved our lives," Harry began.

The curtain rustled, and Hermione caught the scent of a familiar jasmine perfume and a whiff of Muggle antiseptic and cleaning solution.

"I don't remember..." The room began to swim.

"It's okay, love, we're here, you don't have to remember, just as long as we have you back."

Jocasta Granger took her daughter's hand in hers.

"My beautiful, brilliant girl," she murmured. "You've come back to us. I knew you could, my sweet, sweet, darling girl."

"Mum?"

"Of course you know your mum! I'm right here, darling."

Muggle antiseptic and cleaning solution.

Where are Harry and Ron? Why aren't you in Australia it's not safe yet!

Questions tumbled through Hermione's mind as her mother sat on the bed and gathered her into her arms. She smelled of jasmine. She smelled ~~of~~ Mum.

"It will take time, Mrs Granger," Dr Gupta said, sliding into the room. "But we have every hope that your daughter will make a full and complete recovery."

Recovery from what?

"I understand; it's just been so long... seven years... and now, to have my daughter back..."

"She's coming in and out I believe she wants to rejoin us, Jocasta, but, as I said, this recovery will take time. The fact that she ~~is~~*with* us more than she has been in the past seven years is a positive sign."

"Hermione?" Jocasta asked.

"Mum? Why..." Hermione tried to start.

"She knows me!" Jocasta's voice was triumphant.

"Mum, where am..."

"You're in London, dearest, at the Midvale Psychiatric Home. Don't you remember?"

"No... Why am I here?" Hermione furrowed her brow. Was it the effects of Dolohov's curse? Could that be playing tricks on her memory?

"You've been catatonic for the last seven years, ever since the, erm, *accident*," Jocasta explained patiently. "We've had so little contact with you only briefly five years ago, but you just sank back into your state." Her mother reached out and smoothed her hair from her face. Hermione noticed it was short. When had she cut her hair?

"I don't understand..." Hermione bit her lip and blinked back the tears. "Why aren't you in Australia?" she blurted.

Jocasta looked confused.

"Australia?" she asked as the room began to swim again.

"Mum!" she cried. Hermione blinked, and when she opened her eyes, she was back in the Hospital Wing at Hogwarts. The darkness of the ward pressed down upon her. In the cubicle beside her, she heard Professor Snape's steady breathing.

"Mum..." She couldn't remember the last time she'd cried, really cried perhaps when Ron had left them in the forest, perhaps quietly, when she had heard that Fred and Tonks and Remus had been buried, perhaps when she had discovered that Professor Snape was still alive, her eyes had stung with tears that she'd hastily swallowed *never cry in front of the boys* But now, she turned her face to her pillow and began to sob in earnest.

June, 1998

Harry and Ron visited her regularly.

She assumed they didn't want to talk about the after-effects of Dolohov's curse that still plagued her.

Madam Pomfrey was strict, of course, but when she saw Hermione was beginning to stir more and more, she allowed her to move about the Hospital Wing.

By this time, Hermione and Snape were the only patients left. Families had come to collect their wounded and recovering.

But nobody had come for Professor Snape or Hermione.

In the night, Hermione would write letters to her parents, telling them they*had* a daughter who loved them very much; explaining why she'd done what she'd done, why it was necessary to protect them; that she'd come to get them the minute she could. If Madam Pomfrey noticed her lack of sleep due to her scribbling, she said nothing.

In the mornings, she would crumple the letters and set them alight with her wand. Her letters were useless they didn't know her, and given her situation confined to the Hospital Wing, they never would. But in the night, when she tossed and turned, it always seemed so *necessary* to explain what she had done.

Sleep would bring odd dreams of her parents, a kindly Indian doctor, and a pale yellow room with a white iron bed and the smell of Muggle antiseptic and cleaning solution. Sometimes, the dreams became so vivid she would struggle to wake, head in a fog, clinging to the reality of the Hospital Wing and the gentle pacing of the school matron.

In the cubicle next to her, Snape slept on. Madam Pomfrey began to allow her to help change Snape's dressings and reapply the dittany to his wounds.

And it came to pass that her face was the first one that Professor Snape saw when he awoke one rainy morning at the end of June.

AN: I have made no money from this. Thanks go to Subversa and Savine_Snape for their invaluable help!

Unde Orieris, Ibi Adeste can be translated as "from whence you come, go there!"

Three

Chapter 3 of 17

Struck by a curse during the final battle, Hermione struggles to grasp what is reality and what is not. Is the curse merely revealing the truth that has been hidden for seven years?

July, 1998

"Hermione? Hermione! Stay with me!" Madam Pomfrey's concerned voiced echoed in her head.

She was in the pale yellow room again. A girl of about ten or eleven in denims and a pink t-shirt sat in a stiff chair in the corner, playing with a plastic box that beeped.

"Mada..." Hermione began to say, and the girl looked up, startled. The toy fell to the floor with a clatter as she leaped to her feet, face alight.

"Hermione!" The girl cried, "don't go... wait... I'll call..." she scuttled from the room shouting for Dr Gupta.

Back here. Where is here? Mid-something Midvale. Midvale Psychiatric Home. Wait. Psychiatric Home?

The door swung open again, and the girl returned. Like Hermione, she had brown hair and brown eyes. But the girl's hair was long and flowing not bushy like the mop around Hermione's forehead that fell into her eyes.

"Dr Gupta's coming," the girl said triumphantly. "Welcome back!"

"Who..." Hermione began, brushing the hair from her eyes.

The girl's face fell.

"They said you might not remember," she said, "but you remembered Mum, and I thought that..."

A name floated through Hermione's mind.

"Atalanta?"

The girl's smile was like the sun coming up.

"I knew you'd remember!" she crowed. "Wherever you've been, when you came back, you'd remember!"

"Atalanta. You are..." Hermione paused. Why did she know this girl?

"Your sister, silly!" Atalanta said. "Surely you remember your own *sister*."

I have a sister?

Atalanta looked at her with narrowed eyes.

"Did you... Was I there where you were?" Atalanta asked.

"N... no, you weren't," Hermione said before clapping her hand to her mouth. Whoever this girl was, she obviously thought that she played an important role in her life.

Atalanta's eyes grew wide.

"You didn't... I never... How could I not have existed for you?" she demanded.

Flickers of memory permeated her consciousness. Fights over socks left in the middle of the bed, arguments over toothpaste and who had access to Mum first.

"Atalanta," Hermione said, feeling her temper rising. "This isn't the time or the place. You have no idea what it's like..."

"Right," sneered the girl. "No idea what it's like to be Hermione. The special one. The one who was ~~so~~ bright and *so* promising. The one who left us for a world of what... What goes on in your world, anyway? Dragons and trolls and wizards and brooms?"

"Atalanta, I'm sorry... I can't control this. I can't control the magic, I can't control what happens here," Hermione said quietly.

Atalanta subsided and flung herself into the chair, pouting.

"Magic's not real, Hermione!" she yelled. "Magic's part of your *other* world the fake one!"

"It is so real!" Hermione replied sharply. "It is as real as you or I!"

"Whatever." Atalanta bent and retrieved her game.

Hermione sighed; her sister had always been difficult, always self-centered and awkward. Being the eldest, Hermione had taught her many things and there had been the good times, but where Hermione had gone, Atalanta had always wanted to follow.

And there were some places where Atalanta could not go.

Now, how did I know that?

The door swung open, and Dr Gupta and Mr Granger entered the room.

"Good afternoon, Hermione," Dr Gupta greeted her.

"Dad!" Atalanta flung herself at Mr Granger.

"Darling, how is Hermione?" Martin Granger asked his younger daughter.

"I'm fine, Dad," Hermione said quickly. "Atalanta and I were just... talking."

"Dad, she doesn't remember me," Atalanta blurted. "She says she doesn't have a sister, that she can't control what she remembers, that I don't exist..."

"Atalanta, I didn't... It's not like that," Hermione protested. "I just... It's hard for me to remember."

Dr Gupta nodded sagely.

"It seems," he said, "that while there are similarities between this world and the world that our Hermione visits when she's not with us, there are also some differences. You must not take it personally, little one; your sister has many miles to travel before she can be with us again."

"And I do remember you, Atalanta," Hermione said. "You've grown so much since the last time I saw you. What year are you in at school?"

Atalanta beamed. "I'm not going to the Comprehensive," she said. "I'm at Secondary now, and I'm going to be starting German next year on top of the French."

Hermione smiled wanly. *Make an effort, you belong here*, she told herself it felt so true, so right. It had to be real.

"Atalanta's every bit as bright as you were. Are." Martin Granger said to her, sitting down on the edge of the bed and taking Hermione's hand. "I think that soon you will be back at the books and the chemistry set the way you used to be."

"Dad," Hermione laughed, "it's not chemistry, it's *potions*."

An uncomfortable silence filled the room.

Martin cleared his throat, and Atalanta shuffled over to her chair.

"Yes, well," Dr Gupta said hurriedly, "let's see if we can test your reflexes..."

"How often does this happen?" Severus asked Poppy as the pair of them stood before the catatonic girl, who was staring, unseeing, at her books. The watery sunlight failed to permeate the gloom that surrounded the black-clad man.

"We didn't notice it at first, but she was comatose for weeks," Poppy replied. "But now, we can see that it happens more and more. Twice a day, sometimes. She'll stop whatever she was doing and *sit*. And I've noticed something else, Severus; these episodes are lasting longer and longer."

Severus shifted his weight carefully on his cane and grunted. Poppy looked at him, concerned.

"Was... Did anything happen to her that would cause this?"

Poppy nodded. "Dolohov hit her with a curse at the end of the battle. We don't know what it was," she added, forestalling Severus' next question. "Ginevra Weasley and Kingsley, and neither of them heard the incantation exactly. Ginevra said that the light of the curse was blue, and that's about it."

Severus frowned.

"It is unusual for Antonin to throw careless curses. It must have been something slow-acting, something that we'd not notice, at first."

"What do you think happened?"

"There are several hexes and curses that can Petrify an individual: they have similar effects to that of the stare of the Basilisk. But most of them are more involved than the 'point and shoot' method of casting that you describe and none of them involve a *blue* light."

Poppy nodded sagely. "You will be ... researching, then?" she asked.

Severus cleared his throat and grimaced. "I have tendered my resignation as Headmaster this morning. Minerva has not exactly offered me a position, either as Defense or Potions master. She said she preferred that I 'explore my options' before making any long-term decisions. Potter, of course, wants me to move into that hellhole in London that the Black family infested for so many generations."

Poppy pursed her lips.

"Minerva's encouraged him, I'm sure," grumbled Severus. "The woman apparently does not believe that I'm fit to be let off the lead."

"Well, I'm keeping you here, Severus," Poppy said firmly. "You're still healing, and I don't want you rupturing anything."

Severus stared hard at the catatonic girl, who held a quill loosely in her ink-stained fingers.

"What was she doing?" he asked.

"Writing to her parents. She writes to them every night, and every morning, she burns the letters. She modified their memories and sent them..."

"To Australia, yes, I know. Damned foolish thing to do. The Dark L...Voldemort barely even knew they existed. And she was with Potter; with the luck of that boy, nothing could have happened to her." Severus shifted impatiently, his dark dressing gown swishing against his pajama bottoms. Poppy would still not let him dress properly.

"Well, something *did* happen to her." Poppy clicked her tongue. "It's a shame, really. She intended to go and retrieve them this summer, but then these episodes began to become more frequent, and it's not safe for her to leave the Hospital Wing until we know what's happening to her."

"Indeed. Well then, it appears that I will have a project this summer, whether I like it or not," Severus replied ruefully.

"Severus, nobody is asking you to..."

"Poppy, if the foolish girl had not gone with Potter, if Potter had been less hot-headed, if I had not..." he trailed off. "Let us consider this a beginning."

"A beginning to what?"

Severus turned away and hobbled back to his bed. He sat down upon the edge and gingerly touched his neck, brushing the lank hair away from the white bandages with a grimace.

"Is it throbbing?" Poppy asked.

"Yes, it is throbbing, and it's hot, again," he croaked and fell silent as the school matron tended to his wounds, gently changing the dressing.

"A beginning to what?" she asked quietly when she was done.

Severus scowled at her the interfering witch and her pesky questions! "Atonement, perhaps?" he said quietly, fingering the new bandages. "Penance?" And then very quietly he added, "Peace."

AN: This still doesn't belong to me.

Thanks to Subversa for making this legible and Savine_Snape for the Brit-pick.

Four

Struck by a curse during the final battle, Hermione struggles to grasp what is reality and what is not. Is the curse merely revealing the truth that has been hidden for seven years?

Late July, 1998

The late morning heat was stifling. No breeze flowed through the open windows of the Hospital Wing. Hermione sat in a soft chair, book open on her lap reading as Snape approached, the tap, tap, tap of his cane giving notice of his advent.

How he *hated* that cane. But Poppy had insisted that the nerve damage was too great for him to walk unassisted, and the one time he had tried, he had fallen and pulled the curtains of his cubicle down around him. Poppy had made no comment, but he could not shake the feeling of utter humiliation, as he had lain on the stone floor in his grey y-fronts and nothing else, dressing gown inches from his hand.

He frowned and shook his head, as if to rid himself of the thought. It had not been long after that when Poppy had allowed him proper clothing: denims, shirts, even lighter weight trousers.

The girl did not raise her head from her book as he approached, her finger twisting around a clump of brown hair as she read, curled like her half-Kneazle in a puddle of sunlight.

He cleared his throat quietly.

"Miss Granger," he said.

"Good morning, Professor," she replied, closing the book and laying it aside. He noticed with approval the title on the spine *Types of Memory Damage* by Bancroft and Hicks leading authorities in the field (Lockhart notwithstanding).

"Miss Granger," he said again, "Poppy suggested that we discuss your... condition. Can you tell me exactly what happened the night that you... Can you describe the incident in detail?"

"It's a bit fuzzy, Professor," Hermione said. "I was helping Ginny, and then it felt like, well, like somebody hit me in the back of the neck. Here."

She lifted her wealth of curly brown hair to expose her pale neck. Severus bent down and saw at the base of her hairline an angry red scar in the shape of a spiral.

Snape sucked in a startled breath and caught the clean scent of her shampoo citrus.

"Thank you, Miss Granger," he ground out, and Hermione dropped her hair, sending out another subtle (and unwelcome) wave of scent. His knuckles whitened as he gripped his cane.

"Have you seen anything like it before?" she asked.

"The overall markings of the scar are similar to many other hex markings," Snape began to lecture, "but the specific gradations in the scarring itself are unlike anything I've seen before."

"Oh." Hermione's face fell as she stood. "Did you I've been researching," she said, "and I found some books that describe what's happening, but all of them relate to what happens when people are overexposed to memories in a Pensieve."

"Miss Granger, explain, please."

"Well, what happens is, when the curse takes effect, I the room starts to swim a bit, and then I blink to try and clear my head. But when I open my eyes, I'm not here anymore."

"Where are you?"

"I'm..." Hermione wrinkled her brow and gnawed her lip. "I'm in London, I think. And my parents are there, and a doctor. I'm in... *Where was it?*"

"Yes?" Snape folded his arms across his chest.

"I don't remember," Hermione confessed. "The books I read say that sometimes one can achieve a trance-like state if they've seen or absorbed too many memories, if they're not good at Occulmency, but I haven't been... Nobody's *ever* performed Legilimency on me, and I've never even looked into a Pensieve..." She trailed off.

"Awake may be an exaggeration, Miss Granger," Snape observed. "Your eyes are open, but that barely qualifies as *awake*. The youngest Weasley boy is more *awake* in my Potions lecture on 'Types of Healing Fungus and Their Application to Practical Potioning' with his eyes closed than you are with your eyes open during these episodes."

Hermione's face twisted into a wry grin. "Poor Ronald never had the patience for Potions," she observed. "But Professor, I never... What happens here is that I close my eyes, there are the impressions I told you about the hospital and my parents and the doctor, and the next thing I know, it's *hours* later! And when I'm there..." She paused, brow furrowed.

"What is it, Miss Granger?"

"Well," she explained, "when I'm *here*, it feels like I'm in a dream. Like, right now, my head feels sandy and heavy. But when I'm there, it feels *real*. Like I belong there."

"Poppy said this is happening regularly?"

"Yes. It happened this morning and lasted... I'm not sure how long. Atalanta wasn't there this time, but my father was and..." Hermione paused, eyes wide.

"Miss Granger?"

"Y-yes?"

"Who is Atalanta?"

Hermione frowned.

"I... I have no idea," she said and sat down rather suddenly.

Snape froze. There was no reason that she should remember *her*.

"Perhaps, then," Snape said slowly. "That is where we begin."

"With Atalanta?"

"With Atalanta."

"How do we start?" Hermione asked.

"Miss Granger, do you have any objection to Legilimency?"

Hermione smiled. "Do you want to see my worst memory?"

Snape scowled at her. "Flippancy will *not* assist you, Miss Granger."

"Right, sorry, Professor, it's just... I'm worried. I don't like being in this state of... well, it's more like a dream."

Snape relented, just a little. Gryffindor bravado was one thing, but she was still a child who had been forced into a situation not of her choosing.

"They're just children, Albus."

"Then let us let them enjoy their childhood."

His throat tightened, sending a spasm of pain through his jaw and down the back of his neck. He would be hurting this afternoon.

"It is a... worrying situation, Miss Granger," he replied. "But one that, hopefully, we can resolve."

She smiled. "Sir?"

"Yes?"

"May I ask, sir... why are you doing this?"

Snape paused. What did she know of his life, his existence, his motivations? What would she understand? What did she *need* to know? He settled on a suitably vague answer, no point in becoming *her* charity case as well. Poppy's worry was bad enough. Potter's completely unbearable.

Worse, he knew he ran the risk of her finding out just how much he was indebted to her, how much Albus had done to her.

"It seems, Miss Granger," he said, "that I at least owe you my time. And, seeing that I have no other pressing projects, you seem to be a suitable candidate for my energies."

Hermione frowned.

"Now are you going to sit up and let me perform Legilimency on you, or do we need to find another method?" he growled.

It was night when she opened her eyes again. A pale glow emanated from a lamp by her bed, but the room, the whole building seemed in a state of suspended animation.

Midvale again. It was odd, the relief that flooded through her, the feeling of being *safe*.

Hermione swung her legs off of the bed and gripped the edge, clenching her teeth to still the waves of dizziness and nausea that threatened to overwhelm her.

Come on, Granger, you can do this. You lived in a tent for all that time, for Merlin's sake.

She paused.

No, no, that was all a dream; remember what Dr Gupta said yesterday. That the new anti-psychotics were helping you not to have those dreams anymore

Carefully, Hermione stood. Her legs seemed to be in working order; that was a good sign. She took one step, then a second.

Quietly, carefully, she began to explore the small room. Not that there was much to explore—a bed, a nightstand, two chairs and a second door she hadn't noticed before.

Loo.

The overwhelming need to empty her bladder overtook her, and she hurried to the door.

Relieved, she washed her hands and looked into the small mirror above the sink.

A pale girl with big brown eyes, prominent front teeth, and short, bushy, curly hair stared back at her.

"Hermione," she said to the girl in the mirror. The girl in the mirror mimicked her. Hermione was struck by how scratchy her voice sounded. Obviously this mirror was not charmed to answer her back.

No, no, no mirrors don't answer you back, not here.

Reassured that she wouldn't be babbled at, Hermione traced the lines of her face. Who had cut her hair so short? Yes, it was unmanageable when it was long, but this looked like an ugly, unruly mop.

And she was so *thin*. Months of being on the run would do that, she supposed.

No, no you've been here the whole time. How did they feed me, anyway?

Hermione sighed. Dr Gupta was right—this was going to take time. Perhaps she could help him, find out more about her condition. Maybe there was a library she could explore. Maybe she could even go home and research there!

The thought of going home to her mum and dad and sister made the tears well up.

Home.

Home was where her family was—safe and sound and Muggle. At home, she would never hear of magic or wizards or potions. Home was where the dangers were annoyances from things like cars with their stereos turned up too loud, teenagers who kicked rubbish bins on collection days and put soap in the park fountains, and neighbors who smoked in their back gardens.

Home was *safe*.

Hermione smiled, and the girl in the mirror, who was also Hermione, smiled back.

Maybe she could even convince her parents to fix her teeth.

Hermione crept back to her bed and found a pad on the nightstand with her mother's scribbled writing. Thankfully, a pencil was beside it.

Taking a few moments to reacquaint herself with the Muggle technology *no, you've just not used it in a while*, she reminded herself. Hermione tore off a fresh page and began to write a list:

1. *What are the anti-psychotics am I on?*

She frowned; her spelling had always been excellent, but the writing was a chore. Perhaps she needed more practice. It had been what had her mum said? Seven years? She continued:

2. *When can I go home?*

3. *Will I be able to fix my teeth?*

4. *What schooling and tuition can I expect?*

5. *Will there be rehabilitation?*

6. *What research will I be able to do to alleviate my condition?*

7. *What will Ron think? Will I see him? Do I even want to see him again?*

Hermione stopped stared at the last question. Why would she care what her imaginary boyfriend well, they weren't really boyfriend and girlfriend, were they? Why would she care what a figment of her imagination, according to Dr Gupta, felt?

"They were imaginary," he had said. "Part of what we think has been happening to you. Part of your..." he had paused, "fantasy world."

Hermione scowled at the page and pressed down on the paper so hard that the tip of the pencil snapped.

If they were imaginary, then why had they felt *soreal* before Dolohov?

Snape frowned and tried to concentrate. The girl had slipped from him into her state of coma almost immediately upon his casting of the Legilimency spell.

It was too late for him to reverse himself without causing serious damage to her psyche, and he was now working his way carefully out of her mind.

If it could be called a mind.

Where there should have been memories and thoughts and feelings and ideas, there was nothing.

Snape had never given much thought to the characteristics and qualities of nothing before. Even the blackness of space, he knew, contained stars and gas and planets and asteroids. Even the veil, the shadow of death, had another side.

But this was simply the absence of, well, *anything*.

Carefully, carefully, Snape pulled his mind from hers and frowned at the catatonic girl before him.

"Hermione," he said, surprising himself at the casualness of his address. "What happened to you?"

Hermione did not reply. Outside the open window, a meadowlark sang his joyous song in the sun.

AN: I still have not made a cent from this. Special thanks to Subversa and SavineSnape for all their help!

Five

Chapter 5 of 17

Struck by a curse during the final battle, Hermione struggles to grasp what is reality and what is not. Is the curse merely revealing the truth that has been hidden for seven years?

July, 1998

"When can I go home?" Hermione demanded impatiently, folding her arms across her chest.

Her mother looked at Dr Gupta.

"Hermione, this is the difficult thing," Dr Gupta said slowly, his dark brow furrowed. "You may *feel* completely normal, but we still do not know what exactly is causing these states and until we know for certain that you are not in any danger, we cannot run the risk of letting you..."

"Out of this place?" Hermione finished for him.

"Midvale is the safest place for you right now," Dr Gupta explained patiently. "At least until you can choose to put aside the fantasies which you have created and join us again."

"*Fantasies?*" Hermione demanded indignantly, shifting on the bed. "They're as real as I am! Where do you think I got this scar?" she yanked on the hospital robe to show them the top of the scar that zigzagged its way across her sternum a souvenir of the Department of Mysteries and Dolohov.

Dolohov he cursed me before I came here. During the battle...

"What scar, Hermione?" inquired Dr Gupta kindly.

"This scar! Right here." Hermione looked down at the smooth, unblemished flesh. "But, it was there! I got it two years ago!"

"This is the sort of thing I mean," Dr Gupta explained. "The line between your fantasy world and reality is very blurry for you. Until you find a way to cope with reality and abandon the fantasy, it's safer for you here."

"Hermione, this isn't the first time we've argued about this. And, well, you haven't always been so... compliant," Jocasta said, rising from her chair to sit carefully on her daughter's bed. She smoothed her khaki trousers, and Hermione saw the glint of her solitaire diamond.

"What do you mean?"

Jocasta did not reply, but glanced at the far side of the bed, where a set of restraints was folded neatly on the floor.

"We haven't had to use them recently," she said. "Not since March."

March? What happened in March?

"March?" she asked.

"You ... you were violent when we tried to feed you. You screamed and began to hit when we tried to feed you. And then the seizures began ..." Jocasta trailed off and bit her lower lip, twisting her hands, knuckles white.

March. Malfoy Manor. Oh, God, Bellatrix.

"It's ... it's okay, Mum." Hermione reached out tentatively to her mother.

Jocasta flinched and recovered. "I'm sorry, darling," she said. "It's been difficult, but we ... we want the best for you. You know that, don't you?"

"I know, Mum. I know."

Maybe it wasn't real maybe I have been here all this time. Maybe...

"Hermione?" Her mother's concerned voice cut across her thoughts.

"It's okay, Mum. I'm still here. I was just thinking. I want ... I want to be with you and Dad and Atalanta, but it's not easy it all felt ~~so~~al."

"I know, darling. And we need you to fight that, to rejoin us. Don't you want that?"

Hermione smiled wanly. Did she? Was that what she truly wanted?

"I want to go home, Mum," she finally said. "And to do that, I guess that I need to... to start my recovery."

"Oh, my darling girl," Jocasta cried, throwing her arms around her daughter.

Hermione hugged her mother back, suppressing the feeling that her mother her calm, sensible, professional mother wasn't this emotional woman, but instead, Monica Wilkins, currently (presumably) shivering in a wintry Australia.

But perhaps this was her mum.

Dr Gupta cleared his throat and fiddled with his clipboard.

"I think, Mrs Granger, Hermione, that we can start talking about treatment."

"What did you have in mind?" Hermione asked as her mother sat back and smoothed the bedclothes.

"We're still not entirely certain what happened to you, but we think that your fantasy world began to manifest itself quite normally."

Hermione narrowed her eyes, and her mother stiffened.

"What do you mean, 'normally?'"

"I use 'normally' in the sense that all children have, to a certain extent, an active fantasy life. Do you remember your eleventh birthday?" Dr Gupta asked.

Hermione nodded.

"We had cake," she said, "and Atalanta made the icing."

Jocasta relaxed and smiled.

"Do you remember what you received as presents?" Dr Gupta asked gently.

"Yes. Books and a microscope."

"You were so happy to receive the microscope," Jocasta said, reaching out to smooth Hermione's hair from her face. Hermione twitched her head away impatiently.

"Of course I remember," she said. "And Auntie Muriel was there and Uncle Brian."

There was a silence.

"Uncle Brian?" asked Dr Gupta. Jocasta rose suddenly from the bed and moved to the corner of the room.

"Yes," Hermione said, "Uncle Brian from Scotland. He's Gran's cousin's brother-in-law. Mum and Dad met him when they were on honeymoon and he visited occasionally. He was very happy that he could make my eleventh birthday, said it was an important day because I didn't turn eleven every day."

"Hermione," began Dr Gupta and Jocasta choked on what sounded like a sob. "Hermione, you don't have an Uncle Brian."

Hermione laughed.

"Of course I do!" she insisted. "He's old, older than even Gran, and he always has lemon sherbets with him."

"Oh, God."

"Mum? What's wrong?"

Dr Gupta sat on Hermione's bed the first time she remembered him ever doing so.

"Your mum might have a hard time with some of this," he explained gently. "Sometimes what *you think* happened and what really happened are, well, disturbing to her."

"So... I don't have an Uncle Brian?" Hermione furrowed her brow in thought. He had been a jolly old man almost like Father Christmas, only slender. He'd worn purple that day: velvet trousers and a white shirt and a sport coat with shiny, silvery lining. And he'd seemed to twinkle.

She remembered one summer day after her birthday when he'd come to tea, and he had been wearing what he called a "Hawaiian shirt" that was a brilliant shade of mango. Atalanta had giggled when he'd hugged her hello and told him that he smelled of sherbet.

"No. Hermione, there is no Uncle Brian," Dr Gupta explained again.

"But he seems so real to me!" she protested, realizing she sounded petulant, like Atalanta.

"I know, darling, but he's not," interrupted Jocasta. "In fact, he was the first indication that something might be amiss. You started talking to him at your party but we didn't know who he was - and then it was as if he was visiting us for a few days and you'd talk to him a lot."

"And then?"

"And then you said he'd given you a book about a castle and about wizards and witches."

"Oh?" *Oh.*

"And then, well, then the next summer, you said that you received a letter from Uncle Brian inviting you to go to that castle for your... your schooling."

"I remember he was wearing a bright pink shirt."

"In your fantasy he was, but not ... not in reality."

Hermione did not reply the room was beginning to fade.

Schooling... Castle... Hogwarts... Uncle... Brian?

"Hermione?"

"Hermione?"

Bill Weasley's concerned voice penetrated the foggy state that was her consciousness.

"Anything?"

Professor Snape. Bill Weasley.

"I've never seen a curse exactly like this, but there are some trace elements in the scarring and her state that are very similar to some of the nastier Russian hexes that they've been known to use."

"I suppose."

Hermione struggled upwards through the fog.

"Is she... is she responding to Legilimency at all?"

"We tried it yesterday. She slipped into this state almost the moment that I entered her mind. I would like to try it again, but not until I know for certain that it won't send her back into that state."

"I see."

Silence. Then, the slow tap, tap, tap of a cane.

The room began to swim into focus. She was sitting, curled in a chair in a long room with beds and cubicles. Bill Weasley was kneeling beside her, a concerned frown on his scarred features.

"Welcome back," he said softly, brushing the hair from her face.

"How long ..."

"About seven hours. This, according to Severus, is the longest episode yet."

"Severus?"

"Professor Snape," said the dark man who was standing stiffly at the window with his back to the pair, hand wrapped around a black cane so tightly the knuckles were white and the veins stood out in stark relief. Hermione noticed that his hair was growing long. He needed a haircut.

A good shampooing wouldn't hurt either, I suppose.

Snape turned and glared at her.

"Of course, Professor Snape. Sorry, sir." Hermione blushed.

One thing she hadn't told Dr Gupta the next time she was awake was that she'd been dreaming a great deal about Professor Snape lately. He had to be the dark-haired man with the cane who read to her when he thought she wasn't listening.

Or am I awake now? Why is it so hard to tell the difference?

"Well, it seems you've decided to join the land of the living again," Snape snarled.

Hermione blinked in surprise and turned back to Bill. Bill was safer to talk to nicer, at that.

"Seven hours?" she asked. "And while I was ... out, what happened?"

"Severus Floo'd me. You had slipped into your 'state' the moment that he attempted Legilimency. He wanted to ask my opinion on the curse and what it seems to be doing to you."

"Oh."

"What do you remember about where you were?"

Snape turned from his window to listen to her answer. The cane scraped across the stone floor.

"I was..." Hermione thought for a moment. "I was in London. At the Muggle psychiatric home. And Mum and Dr Gupta were there, but not Dad or Atalanta. And we talked about my eleventh birthday."

Snape froze.

"Why that birthday?" Bill asked, casting concerned look at Snape.

"I think it was because that was the birthday that Uncle Brian came to."

"Uncle Brian?" Snape asked intently.

"Who is Uncle Brian?" asked Bill.

"He's my Gran's... some relation of my Grandmother," explained Hermione, staring at her hands, trying to grip the elusive memory that was fast fading. "He came to my eleventh birthday and that was the year that I also set the candles alight by myself after I'd blown them out. It was the first time I'd manifested my magic before..."
Hermione trailed off, frowning.

"What is it, Hermione?"

"I don't remember," she said, turning her stricken face to the two men. "It was there a moment ago, but now it's gone!"

"Do you remember anything about your eleventh birthday?" Dr Gupta was saying.

"Yes, there was cake. And Atalanta had made the icing," Hermione replied dutifully. "And I received books and a microscope."

"And who was there?" Jocasta asked intently. Dr Gupta quickly frowned at her and turned back to Hermione.

"You, Dad, Atalanta, and Auntie Muriel," Hermione replied.

"Nobody else?"

"Jocasta..."

"No. Nobody else. You bought me a book on birds, I remember."

Jocasta relaxed back into her chair.

Dr Gupta smiled.

"I think we've made real progress here," he said.

Hermione smiled.

"So, when can I go home?" she demanded.

Dr Gupta chuckled.

"Soon, my impatient one, very soon."

"Weasley! What did you do to her?"

"Severus! I did nothing she was here one moment, talking about her birthday and then, well, you can see as well as I what happened."

Snape moved to the other side of the chair.

"Can you help her?" he asked the scarred redhead intently, gripping his cane as if it was a weapon to attack the younger wizard.

Bill rose from his knees and winced.

"Not as young as I was," he noted wryly.

Snape snorted and glared at him.

"Can you help her?" he asked again, dark eyes boring into blue.

Bill sighed and adjusted his t-shirt.

"I think so," he said, "but it will take time. I'll do some research and Floo you."

"We do not have much time, Weasley. Her condition worsens every day."

Bill nodded and frowned, running a hand through his newly shorn hair, sending the fang earring swinging. Outside, the meadowlark trilled again.

Hermione sat between them, unseeing and silent.

"I know, Severus, I know."

AN: still don't own or make a profit from this venture. Many thanks to Subversa and Savine_Snape for beta and Brit-picking!

Six

Chapter 6 of 17

Struck by a curse during the final battle, Hermione struggles to grasp what is reality and what is not. Is the curse merely revealing the truth that has been hidden for seven years?

July, 1998

"So, erm, how are you?"

Hermione smiled and nibbled a Chocolate Frog. "I'm fine, Harry. It's actually rather nice here in the summer. It's quiet. Hot, but the Cooling Charms have finally started to work."

Harry chuckled. "That will be nice. It's comfortable right now, at least," he observed.

Hermione nodded. "Minerva says that the castle is healing with a lot of help from the house-elves. They're very enthusiastic. Even when they're not being paid." She frowned at the picture of Dumbledore on the card. Dumbledore twinkled at her.

"Erm, yeah. Listen, Ron says he's sorry he can't come, but he's ... he's going to start helping George with the shop, and he says it's keeping him busy, and he can hardly get away." The words came out in a rush.

Hermione's face fell and an icy surge of disappointment sank through her stomach. "Oh," she said. "I'd hoped to see both of you."

"Yeah, well ..." Harry tried to smile and failed miserably.

"Yeah, well," Hermione echoed, trying to think of something to say.

"Actually, I was hoping you'd actually be able to, well, if it's not too much, to be able to come to the Burrow next week. I've asked Ginny to marry me, and Molly won't let us get married until Ginny finishes school, but she and Arthur said that we could be engaged, and so we're throwing a party," Harry blurted.

Hermione forced a smile to her face. *Ron is just being Ron*, she thought. *He's not comfortable with me being ill*. Out loud she said, "Harry! That's wonderful!" She sat up to hug her friend.

"So you'll come? Ginny misses you, I think, and Molly always talks about how you're like another daughter to her."

"I'd love to, Harry. But Madam Pomfrey will have to approve. My episodes haven't been improving, but I'd not miss the party for the world."

"Wicked," Harry expostulated. "It's going to be sort of a private victory celebration, too. Minerva's going to be there and all of our other friends, too. Bill and Fleur are even coming down. It was Bill and Charlie's idea, actually. Molly's been taking Fred's death really hard, and they thought they could try to cheer her up."

"By making her cater for hundreds?" Hermione asked skeptically.

"No! Kreacher and Winky and some of the Hogwarts elves are actually doing the catering but being paid for it!" Harry hurried to explain as he caught sight of the set of Hermione's jaw.

"Oh, well, then. That's all right, I suppose."

Harry grinned. "Chocolate Frog?" he asked, offering another box.

"Thanks, but one is enough."

"Severus, it's time we talked about your future."

"It's lovely to see you again, Minerva. Is the Hospital Wing so far from the Headmistress' office that you haven't been able to visit?"

"Severus, don't be sarcastic."

"I'll be as I please. Was there something you wanted?" Snape flipped the page of *Types of Curse Damage*, Borgin and Brookshire, and ignored the impatient witch before him. Beside him, Hermione sat, curled into her chair, staring blankly ahead of her.

"Poppy informs me that you are making an excellent recovery. Have you considered what options you might wish to pursue this autumn?"

"I take it you are not offering me a position on your faculty?"

Minerva paused. Snape resisted the temptation to look up. Would this be it? His final sacking? Did Minerva have the Gobstones to go through with it?

"Would you care to return? I did not think that you would be interested after such a difficult year."

"How many owls have you received demanding my immediate removal?"

"I am not running a nursing home, Severus, nor am I interested in offering you unofficial asylum from Magical Law Enforcement. If you wish to reapply for your position as either Potions master or Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor, your curriculum vitae must be on my desk by five pm tomorrow. Is that clear?" Minerva snapped.

"Explicitly so. Rest assured," Snape replied, "I will give due consideration to the potential working environment present at Hogwarts before I take any further action"

regarding my employment."

He didn't need to look to see Minerva's lips purse into her "dissatisfied" moue. The air crackled with her displeasure.

Tough kippers, you crotchety old tabby.

He waited until he heard her measured tread move towards the door before he glanced over at the catatonic Hermione.

"Now then," he said quietly, "where were we? Ah yes, here: 'the quality of memory loss due to self-inflicted damage can be wide-ranging, more so, in fact, than memory loss caused by external influences.' Interesting thought, Hermione, that if you'd done this to yourself, you might not be with us at all at the moment."

Hermione did not reply, and Snape continued his reading, ears alert to the whispered conversation being held in Poppy's office. Did the women not realize the acoustics in the Hospital Wing were perfect for eavesdropping?

"How long has this been going on?" Minerva was asking Poppy.

"About a week. Ever since Bill Weasley dropped off that pile of books. Severus has been reading to her during the hours that she has been catatonic."

"And when she's *compos*? The poor girl, cooped up in here with *him*."

"Be fair, dear. When she's with us, she's reading from the stack as well. Or talking to him about the other world she's inhabiting, or her childhood. Potter and Weasley have visited occasionally, but they don't stay long. *He* makes them nervous, ever since Severus turned down Potter's offer of lodging at Grimmauld Place."

"Hermione talks about her childhood?"

Poppy paused. Snape heard the clink of china and gurgle of tea being poured.

"There are differences between this reality and the dream world she seems to inhabit. In her dream world she has a sister."

There was another silence. Snape stiffened. Minerva couldn't possibly have found Albus' file on the girl, not yet, not the way it was stored.

"How extraordinary," Minerva said. "I think I will need to visit more often, to check on her progress."

"I know she'd love to see you, Minerva."

"Oh, Poppy, I know, it's been so difficult trying to put the pieces back together, though I've only just convinced the house-elves to return, thanks entirely to Potter and his powers of persuasion over Winky."

Snape relaxed as the conversation moved away from the girl curled up beside him, hair afizz in the July humidity. He needed to make a decision, and soon.

"She's not treating you very fairly," Hermione observed from her chair, causing him to start.

"Miss Granger, welcome back."

"You called me Hermione just now," she pointed out. "When you thought I was... away."

"What I call you when you *arenon compos mentis* is my business and not yours."

"I doubt that."

"And how long have you been earwigging? Your mother would be ashamed of you, Miss Granger."

Hermione smiled. "I began to come back when Professor McGonagall started scolding you."

"An apt description."

"But I couldn't seem to move until just now. Not like I was Petrified," she hastened on, "but as if I'd been asleep and just couldn't bear to wake up."

"And how do you feel now?"

Hermione yawned. "I'm not sure. Awake, but relaxed. Ready to try Legilimency again, if you're ... if you're willing."

Snape allowed a corner of his mouth to flutter in an approximation of a smile.

"Prepare yourself, then, Miss Granger," he replied.

She turned towards him and her light brown eyes met his.

Snape took a breath.

"*Legilimens*," he said.

This time, her mind was awake and active.

That tickles, sir, she protested.

He ignored her and began to sift through her memories of the last few hours. Unsurprisingly, there were blank spots. What was most disturbing, however, was the large gap in memory that seemed to begin when she was seven.

A little girl played with her dolls, reading to them, lecturing them.

"Hermione, darling." A woman entered the room carrying a pink-wrapped bundle. "Would you like to meet your little sist..."

The memory ended abruptly, cut off completely.

Intrigued, Snape pressed on, rifling through random memories of Muggle primary school, Christmases, summer holidays, and could not find a single other memory of the pink bundle or a sister.

Albus had done his job well. But could that have caused the current trauma?

Suddenly, an encroaching darkness swept over her mind, leaving Snape alone in the emptiness that he recognized from their earlier attempt.

But this time, he noticed a subtle difference, a flickering of thought, as if a weak fairy light still flickered on a Christmas garland.

Hermione drew a startled breath and looked around the pale green bedroom.

Home.

She was in her childhood bedroom. She was safe. Dr Gupta had finally allowed her to go home if she promised not to struggle, and to call him if had any problems.

Home. Thank Merl- Thank God.

Carefully, she looked around. The room had not changed in seven years. Mentally, she checked off each detail: the poster of Albert Einstein, the light pink duvet, her treasured stuffed orange cat Crookshanks, the microscope holding pride of place on her desk, the bookshelves, creaking under the weight of their load, the picture of her and her parents from their holiday in Australia the year before Atalanta was born.

Where are Harry and Ron? There should be a picture of Harry and Ron right there. Wait, no. That was in the dream. Dr Gupta said that I needed to separate the fantasy from the reality.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a flicker of movement, as if somebody had just passed her open bedroom door.

"Dad?" she called, hurrying to the door.

But there was nobody in the hall.

"Curious," she mused, frowning. She was sure there had been somebody lurking just outside her bedroom door.

Shrugging philosophically, she walked back to her desk and picked up a brochure on the top of a sheaf of papers.

Coping With Memory Loss read the brochure.

Hermione sat on her bed and leafed through the brochure before hopping up to fetch a pencil and notepad. Lower lip between her teeth, she began to make notes.

Half an hour later, she threw the pencil down and sighed.

Severus would laugh, she thought. The tripe in this is worse than what Lockhart would write. I can't believe I had a crush on him. Professor Snape is so much more talented. And better spoken, too. Imagine, with a name like Gilderoy. Severus is so much more dignified.

She started out of her reverie. Was she crushing on her Potions professor?

No, Granger, you're crushing on a figment of your imagination.

"Shit," she muttered. "I have to get out of my head."

Atalanta poked her head around the doorframe.

"I heard you say a bad word," she announced. "I'm going to tell Mum."

Hermione raised her eyebrow expressively at her younger sister and did not reply.

Undeterred, Atalanta bounced down the stairs crying, "MUM! Hermione said a bad word! I heard her!"

Hermione snorted and returned to her notepad. She wanted to be sure to tell Severus everything she'd learned this afternoon. Perhaps she'd even be able to be well enough to attend Harry and Ginny's engagement party at the Burrow next week.

No, you want to tell Dr Gupta, not Severus.

Tears stung her eyes it was so unfair that she'd have to sacrifice such hard-won friendships for the sake of the safety of reality.

But what sort of reality could it be? She had no education, no skills. What employer would want her? What University would take her?

I don't even have a single NEWT! No, wait, they're A-levels.

"Hermione!" Her mum's voice floated up the stairs. "It's time for your medication."

"Coming, Mum!" Hermione tossed aside her notes and hurried out of her room.

You'd have been a credit to your NEWT class, Miss Grangere echoed through her head.

Hermione paused in the hall.

"Severus?" she asked.

"Hermione!" her mum's voice called again.

Just your imagination, she thought. Nothing more.

AN: Not mine, no money. Thanks to Subversa, Blusestocking, and Savine_Snape for their invaluable help!

Struck by a curse during the Final Battle, Hermione struggles to grasp what is reality and what is not. Is the curse merely revealing the truth that has been hidden for seven years?

Early August, 1998

"You brought her here? Severus, what were you thinking?"

"She wanted to come, Minerva," Snape replied, refusing to rise to his colleague's bait as he tucked the comatose Hermione into a comfortable chair on the lawn beneath a spreading oak. The birds chirped merrily overhead. "There, Miss Granger, now, if you decide to join us, at least you'll be comfortable. There is a book beside you if you get bored, and I will have one of the boys bring you some pumpkin juice or water if you prefer."

"Severus, she can't communicate with us how could she possibly want to come?" Minerva demanded impatiently.

"She expressed her wish before she slipped into this current state."

"And you *Floo'd* with her?"

"The Floo at the Burrow is large enough. I assure you, no harm came to your prize student. If you'd spent any time in the infirmary, you'd know that."

"Severus, I don't like..."

"Like what, Minerva?" Snape snapped, straightening, leaning heavily on his cane. Flooding with Miss Granger's weight halved had been challenging enough, but he'd managed not to fall or to drop his burden. He was proud of that.

"I do not like the fact that you chose without consulting me, I might add to..."

"Minerva!" Molly called from the patio. "Will you help me with the treacle tart? Winky has put too much vanilla in it, and it tastes terrible!"

"Coming, Molly," Minerva called back. To Snape she said, "Believe me, Severus, we will discuss this later. At length."

"I'm shaking in my dragon-hide boots," Snape snarled back.

Minerva pursed her lips and stalked into the house.

"Ignore the old cat, Miss Granger," Snape said, conjuring a comfortable chair and a blanket. "Instead, you and I will attempt to enjoy the antics of your friends." He nodded towards the sky as the surviving Weasley children, Harry Potter and one or two others swooped over the lawn in an informal game of Quidditch.

Hermione said nothing.

"You're supposed to be out enjoying the party," Minerva chided her friend.

"I am, dear," Molly replied, handing Minerva a glass of sherry and settling comfortably into a deck chair on the sunny patio.

"By meddling with the treacle tart?"

"What treacle tart? Sit, dear, and let's have a nice chat."

Minerva perched primly on her chair.

"Minerva, if I'm being forced to relax, so should you." Molly's voice held a note of warning.

"Well, I *have* been run off of my feet lately," Minerva admitted.

"And you're worried." Molly took a sip of comforting sherry.

"There's been so much damage, Molly. So much hatred."

"I know, dear, remember?"

"Yes, I'm sorry but I dread the reopening of the school."

Molly took another sip of sherry it was a nice vintage and after a few glasses, she found, the house didn't seem quite so empty anymore.

"I'm sure. Is the entire faculty returning?"

"I've asked Horace to return to fill the Potions position, but I have yet to hear from him. The Defense Against the Dark Arts position ... I don't know what to do about that. Severus has reapplied, but we may end up canceling the course for the year. Many on the Board of Governors feel it is for the best."

"Heavens to Nimmie! Why?" Molly refilled her glass.

Minerva shook her head when offered the bottle. "Well, they don't feel it's strictly necessary anymore, all things considered, and given the history of the past instructors, many of them feel that it's simply not safe for the students."

"Many of the *students* could teach the course themselves," Molly snorted.

"Many of them did, in essence," Minerva admitted. "Albus always did inspire that sort of loyalty. Unlike some." She looked pointedly at the pair beneath the tree. Ronald swooped down to the ground and approached them awkwardly.

"Is there any improvement?" Molly asked.

"No. But he won't leave her side. The Aurors are getting impatient Kingsley doesn't say as much, but I know that he's under a great deal of pressure to bring Severus in for questioning."

"Questioning?"

"Of course, I've not given him up yet. According to Albus' portrait, the school owes him that much, but now that he's developed this ... relationship with Hermione, I don't know how much I can allow."

"Oh, yes? More sherry?"

"Thank you." Minerva allowed her glass to be filled. "I don't like it, Molly but I was so distracted those first few weeks after, well, everything, that I barely even noticed he was awake and healing. Poppy said that Hermione, when she was *compos*, helped to heal him. It was she, after all, who insisted that he might still be alive."

"Yes, Ginny did mention that."

"But by the time I even noticed he was awake, Hermione had deteriorated to such an extent that I haven't actually been able to speak with her. And then he'd taken it upon himself to help Poppy care for her."

"He's very attentive."

"It's not right, Molly. He has spent the last seven years snarling and belittling her and Potter and now this? He's up to something."

Molly looked out at the pair, now a trio, as Ron continued to talk to the unresponsive Hermione. Snape assiduously read his book, ignoring the boy.

"Bill told me that her states of unconsciousness are lasting longer and longer," Molly said.

"And *he* won't leave her side," Minerva replied.

"What is it that is bothering you, Minerva?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"What is truly bothering you about them? He's not caused her any harm, has he?"

They watched as Ron patted Hermione awkwardly on the arm and walked away, broom dragging in the dust. Snape had put his book aside and seemed to be glaring after him.

"No." Minerva paused. "But I don't trust him, Molly. Not after all that he did."

"Such as saving my daughter from the Carrows? Protecting my son-in-law-to-be from Death Eaters?"

"What about George's ear? Or allowing the Carrows to be at Hogwarts at all?" Minerva demanded, turning in her chair to address her friend. "He's always been a coward, Molly. He failed the Order. He failed us all. I'm extending my protection over him solely on the grounds that Albus twisted my arm."

Molly was silent. Minerva continued. "And now, he's using her. For what I don't know, but when I find out..."

"Minerva," Molly interrupted the flow, "I think perhaps you need to, for once in all of this, give him the benefit of the doubt."

"Haven't you had enough sherry? Or have you completely forgotten about *your* son?"

Molly looked stern. "That was unfair, Minerva. There isn't a day goes by that I don't think of Fred, that I don't look at George and Arthur and Bill and Charlie and Ron and Ginny and want to weep for what's become of my family. But what's done is done. And if anybody knows anything about it, it's me. We've lost too many, dear, made too many enemies, suffered too much, to allow any more."

"Molly, I just don't think..."

"That's the problem, Minerva; I'm not sure you *are* thinking."

"Molly!"

"All you're seeing is the Slytherin Headmaster, appointed by Voldemort. And believe me, when I look at him, it's hard not to see anything else. But..."

"But what?"

"But, I don't know, Minerva I'm not clever like you but I think that perhaps we've lost too many friends already."

"You're right, Molly, you *aren't* clever. Perhaps you'd better leave well enough alone."

"Perhaps," agreed Molly. "But perhaps I know more than you think."

The sun began to slip from the skies, and the Quidditch players landed and began to troop up to the house. Molly ticked them off in her mind: Bill first, then Charlie, George, Ronald, Ginny and Harry with their hands clasped. Behind them came Fleur, pale hair bound at the nape of her neck. Molly narrowed her eyes. If the girl wasn't pregnant now, she would be by the time the summer was out.

Finally, a few yards behind the laughing, chattering, hungry group, Severus Snape came slowly, gently bearing Hermione in his arms, wrapped in his black jacket (for the evening had turned cool), her curly head pillowed on his white-clothed left shoulder as he leaned heavily with his left hand on his cane. Molly surmised that he had cast a spell on the girl to reduce her weight she couldn't see him Levitating her behind him up the hill.

On Severus' face was a look of abstract concentration.

Severus Snape was hiding something; Minerva was right about that. But whatever his motivation, his attachment to the girl was genuine. Molly sipped her sherry her second, or was it her third? It didn't matter; nobody would notice. Not as long as the food was on the table and the house was still standing.

And it dulled the ache in her heart.

"You're welcome to stay, Severus," she said to the dark man as he approached. "Winky made enough food for a legion."

A brief smile touched his features as he shifted his burden.

"Thank you, Molly," he said before he stepped over the threshold. "I appreciate the opportunity to consult with Bill."

"You are welcome to dine with us, too," Molly muttered at his back. Some things did not change, she noted. The man was still as awkward as a bat bogey.

Hermione woke with a start; she'd been dreaming the most splendid dream about a field and a spreading oak and a man with a velvety voice reading to her about curse breaking before a ginger-haired boy came over, somewhat awkwardly, to say hello.

"Ron," she whispered in the darkness of her room.

Rolling over and squinting at the Muggle clock, *no it's just a clock*, she saw that it was almost two in the morning.

"Hell," she grumbled. "It was such a nice dream."

Dr Gupta had warned her that she might dream of her fantasy world now that she was starting to sort out what was real and what was not.

"It will help," he had told her, "if you write down what your dreams are when you can remember them. Also include your reactions to them. This will help us document the incidents and allow you to make a better recovery."

Ever dutiful, Hermione thrust the duvet back and switched on her bedside light. The shadows in the room sprang back. Chewing her lower lip, she reached for the pad and pencil that sat by her bed.

The Burrow, she wrote. A summer afternoon August, perhaps?

Severus brought me there.

Minerva was present as well she is still angry with him for his actions this spring. She doesn't trust him.

Hermione paused. She vaguely remembered the argument that had accompanied her arrival at the Burrow, but something was niggling at her consciousness: something that wasn't about Severus at all, although he'd been present. She resumed her writing.

Ronald and the others were playing Quidditch, but he flew down to see me after I'd been settled.

He said something about having something to say to me.

Then he said that he was sorry that it wasn't working between us. That he'd had doubts for a long time and wanted to remain friends if I ever recovered.

He was blushing, I think. I couldn't see him he made sure not to stand where I could see him, I think.

He said that he was sure I'd not want him to wait for me to heal, and it wasn't fair to the both of us.

Severus didn't say anything, but I could almost feel him seething next to me.

I wanted to leap out of that chair and hex him. Ronald, I mean. Seven years we've been friends. Seven years we've been dancing around each other and now this!

I'm glad he's not real, she wrote vindictively, because if he was, I'd make sure that he'd not be able to sit down or stand for at least a week!

Suddenly it felt as if a great weight had been lifted off of her shoulders. She blinked and looked down at the paper.

I'm glad he's not real.

And that was it. The act of writing those words seemed to ease him away from her. Where before there had been a lanky, long-nosed boy with light blue eyes and a quicksilver grin, there was just a memory, fast fading, like the memory of a daydream from childhood.

I did it. Ron's not real. I'm not crazy, and I'm healing. It's a small step. But it's one step closer.

"Thank you, Bill; this is most helpful."

"Anytime, Severus, I'm glad that we found this. The *Unde Orieris* Curse hasn't been used in a hundred and seventy years, but it seems to have the effects we're looking for."

"It's not much," Snape said, lowering himself carefully onto the chair at the now-cleared table. His neck and leg were throbbing.

"It's one step closer, though," Bill pointed out. "One step closer to knowing."

Suddenly, a scream rent the air.

"Ronald! What Minerva! Arthur! Come quickly! Ron's disappeared!"

AN: Not mine. No money. Thanks go again to Subversa and SavineSnape for their tireless assistance!

Eight

Chapter 8 of 17

Struck by a curse during the final battle, Hermione struggles to grasp what is reality and what is not. Is the curse merely revealing the truth that has been hidden for seven years?

Early August, 1998

Bill upset the books from the table with a thud as he rose and hurried towards the kitchen. From all over the house, footsteps thundered: on the twisting stairs, from the sitting room. Doors slammed and a moderate babble set up as people converged upon the scene in the kitchen

By the time Snape arrived, the mass of humanity had managed to bring Molly to her kitchen table, where she sat, clutching a tea towel, rocking back and forth and keening, "Ron, Ron, Ron!"

Winky wormed her way next to her and was holding out a tumbler of something light brown. Snape guessed, from the fumes wafting towards him, that it was sherry.

"Missus Molly must calm down," Winky squeaked above the general babble of voices. Unnoticed, Snape leaned against the doorframe and closed his eyes and sifted through the tumult.

"What happened?" Ginevra's voice first.

"I don't know I heard the scream and crash." Potter.

"Charlie, what's going on?" Bill.

"I don't know; I was with Dad in the shed."

"Ron's disappeared." George.

"What?" Bill.

"Just disappeared he was helping Mum and Winky with the dishes, and poof!" George again.

"George you must not joke about such things. You see how your mother is." Fleur.

"Swear on my brother's grave, Fleur, he was there one moment, and when I came back from the pantry, he was gone!"

"Molly, Molly!" Arthur was speaking. Snape opened his eyes and watched the older man shoulder his way through the crowd. Snape noticed that Arthur's face was grey and his hands were shaking.

"Ron's gone, Ron's gone," Molly cried, dropping the towel and turning to her husband with a wail.

"Molly, what happened?" Arthur enfolded his wife in his arms.

"He ... he was there one moment, and the next, flickered and then he wasn't! I was handing him a plate and ..." She trailed off and began to sob great gulping hysterical sobs. "Arthur, I can't do this again can't lose another one! Arthur!"

"Hush, hush ..." Arthur began to rock his wife back and forth.

Bill came out of his shocked reverie first. "I think we all need to go..." he said, nodding meaningfully at the door. "Winky, will you finish the dishes? Ginny, why don't you pour us all some wine, and we can sort this out in the dining room."

There was a murmur of agreement as the company filed past Snape into the adjoining room. Minerva stayed behind in the kitchen for a moment, staring hard at him from the outside door where she had watched the scene.

He stared implacably back.

Did you...? her look seemed to ask him.

He raised an eyebrow. She pursed her lips. *I'm watching you*, her look said.

He smirked. *Watch away; there's nothing to see here.*

Molly continued to sob quietly in Arthur's arms.

The moment stretched taut until a soft touch startled him and he turned.

"Severus?" Hermione asked. "What's happening?"

Minerva gasped.

Snape glared at her and turned to Hermione. She was pale, but appeared steady on her feet. Inexplicably, his heart lightened to see her with them even at such a time.

"Welcome back, Miss Granger," he said, allowing her to see a quick smile. "How are you feeling?"

"Confused. We're at the Burrow, right?"

"Correct."

"For Harry and Ginny's party?"

"Yes. Very good, Miss Granger."

She made a moue of exasperation at his sarcasm.

"And you brought me here."

"Again, you are a credit to your year."

"So why is Molly crying?" Hermione asked, peering curiously around him into the kitchen.

"It appears that your friend, Ronald, has vanished." The words seemed to galvanize Minerva into action as she hurried across the room to them.

Hermione laughed. "Oh, I don't think Ronald's my friend, anymore," she said and then paused. "I'm sorry," she continued, "that was a very Luna thing to say, wasn't it? I meant ... that ... dear God, what happened to him?"

"Oh, Hermione," Minerva interrupted, enfolding the girl in her embrace, "I'm so happy to see you up and about; let's get you settled. And poor Master Weasley; we don't know what's happened." She shepherded the girl into the dining room, buffeting Snape with an icy glare.

In the kitchen, Molly's sobs had subsided, and Arthur sat beside her, holding her hand and murmuring to her.

Snape turned and hurried to the sitting room. Grasping for the Floo powder, he turned towards the fireplace.

"Hogwarts Infirmary," he bellowed into the green flames, but before he could step into the fire, he heard his name.

"Severus, wait!" Bill's voice called to him. "Hermione might need you."

"Harpy shit," Snape snapped. "Minerva's caring for her without my assistance. Let us keep the tabby happy, shall we?"

Bill strode forward and put a hand on his shoulder. "Severus, wait."

"Don't touch me!" Snape twitched away.

"Severus, wait. Please. Just ... for Hermione's sake?"

Snape glared at the eldest Weasley offspring.

"I think," Bill said, twisting the knife, "that Ron's disappearance might have something to do with the curse."

"I'm so glad you came, Dr Gupta."

"Not at all, Mrs Granger. How long has she been like this?"

"I found her an hour ago when I called her to breakfast and she didn't come, but it looks as if she's been this way all night her light was on, and the journal you gave her was, well, look!"

Dr Gupta followed Jocasta into the room and noted the position of the bedside lamp and the book.

"And it appears she has been writing," he mused. "May I?"

Jocasta nodded. "I need to make sure Atalanta is up. Martin will get you a coffee, if you like."

"Of course, thank you; a coffee would be very nice. I will let you know if I have need of you."

Jocasta left the room, and Dr Gupta sat carefully on the edge of Hermione's bed.

"Now, young Hermione," he said, gently taking the notebook from her unresisting fingers, "let us see what you have been writing."

"How could it be related to ... what's been happening to me?" Hermione asked.

"It's a possibility but I'm not positive. We know so little about the *Unde Orieris* Curse. But any avenue of exploration is worth traveling at this point," Bill admitted from his position at the head of the table.

Hermione was struck by how much the meeting resembled an old Order meeting. Sadly, she listed those not present: Remus, Tonks, Moody, Fred, Sirius. At least Severus was there (glowering in the doorway) and Professor McGonagall. But who was missing? Something niggled at the back of her mind she thought perhaps she missed a flash of purple, but dismissed the stray thought.

"Hermione?" Minerva's voice held an edge of panic. Hermione jerked her head and smiled at her teacher, her friend.

"Sorry, I was just thinking trying to remember."

"Well, we know that Ron was here one moment and then Mum turned to hand him a plate, and he wasn't there," Charlie said.

"When did you awake?" Bill asked Hermione.

"At around that time," she replied.

"Hermione, what makes you think there's a connection?" Minerva asked.

"I'm not sure, but ... it seems that there's always a bit of time between when I'm *here* and when I'm at home; I mean that there's stuff I remember. And I think I remember ... Oh, God!"

"What is it, Miss Granger?" Professor Snape asked from the doorway, staring at her intently.

"I just remembered ... Oh my God, I just remembered what I'd written."

"Written?"

"Yes!" She turned eagerly towards him. "Dr Gupta the Muggle doctor who is treating me said I should write things down I remember from being here. I was remembering that Ronald had said he wanted to be my friend, but not my ..." She trailed off and blushed. Then holding her head up, she continued, "I remember I was writing that I was glad that Ron wasn't real because he'd been such a prat to me tonight, saying that he didn't want to wait for me to ..." She clapped her hand over her mouth and looked at Snape in horror.

"Hermione," Bill said quietly, "what exactly did you say?"

Hermione turned to Bill. "I ... I don't remember," she whispered, stomach sinking. "Just that I was glad that he wasn't real because he was ..." She frowned. "It's ... I'm so sorry, Bill; it's gone. And now ..." She looked around the table. "I'm sorry; who were we talking about?"

Ginny gasped and spilled her wine. "You!" she exclaimed.

"Shit!" Harry sprang up and began to blot at the table.

"Here, Mr Potter, Harry." Minerva drew her wand and said *Evanescio*, disappearing the mess.

"Hermione! How could you?" Ginny cried.

"Ginny," Harry said, reaching for his fiancée. "She couldn't have ... I don't think she can help it."

"Severus, what's going on?" Hermione turned back to him. "Why is Ginny what's...?"

"I think ..." Snape stepped forward, putting his hand on her shoulder. "I think it's time I took you back to Hogwarts."

Hermione clutched at his hand. "I'm so sorry," she whispered. "I'm so sorry."

Snape bent and helped her up.

"Miss Granger," he replied, "we will solve this."

Bill looked across the table at the pair. Minerva sat stiffly in her chair, staring intently at them, lips pursed.

"Take care of her, Severus; we can solve this from here," Bill said.

Snape nodded briefly. "I will. I do believe this might be a result of the *Unde Orieris*. Or ..."

Bill shook his head. "It might be, but there's not much written about it."

"Understood. I think, perhaps, there's another reason for this."

"What is it?" Bill asked.

Hermione looked between the two men.

"So this isn't part of what's been happening?" she asked.

"It may be, Hermione," Bill explained.

"But it also might not be," she said. "Severus, Professor Snape, I mean, will you take me back to Hogwarts? I think ... perhaps there are some books there that might help."

"But if she did this, we need to figure out how!" Ginny exclaimed, breaking free of Harry's grasp. "We need to bring Ron back!"

"Ginny," Hermione began, "I'm sorry, but I just don't ..."

"We will," Bill told his sister as Charlie moved to her other side.

"But I reckon Professor Snape needs some time to work his magic, eh, Gin?" Charlie asked.

"Thank you, Charlie," Snape said quietly. "Ginevra, please rest assured that we will do *everything* to restore your brother."

"You bastard!"

"Ginny!" Hermione gasped.

"Ron is right you are a right bastard, Severus Snape!" Ginny cried.

"You are, of course, entitled to your opinion, Miss Weasley, but let me assure you ..."

"Severus, this is a bad idea," Minerva finally said, cutting through the tumult.

"And you have a better one?" Snape asked icily as he took advantage of the lull to lead Hermione to the Floo.

"Yes," Minerva said firmly. "Leave the care of Hermione to those who do, in fact, care for her."

"How dare you suggest that I do not care for her?" Severus hissed, turning to the older woman.

"Severus!" cried Hermione. "I can ... Minerva, let me go back to Hogwarts, please!"

"Child, you cannot possibly know," Minerva began.

"I can help solve this!" Hermione protested. "I know I can!"

"And I'm sure we will, Hermione," Minerva said patiently, "but at the moment, it's not safe for you to stay ... Hermione? Severus, what's happened to her?"

Severus turned and caught the girl before she crumpled to the floor, staring blankly before her.

"Minerva, Bill," Severus said into the horrified silence. "I think you two need to come with me. There's something at Hogwarts that you need to see."

"Welcome back, Hermione."

"Dr Gupta! Dad! Was I ... I am back, aren't I?" Hermione felt a flood of relief and smiled at the doctor sitting on the foot of her bed. Martin Granger was standing behind him.

"Welcome back, sweet pea."

"Oh, Dad! I'm so glad to be back!"

"Do you remember where you were?" Dr Gupta asked.

Hermione frowned. "I was ... there was ... shouting, an argument. And Severus said that there was something else ... and ..." She trailed off. "I don't remember," she said.

"Don't remember what?" Mr Granger prompted.

"But it doesn't matter," Hermione replied, smiling at the doctor and her father. "Because I'm *here*. And I want ... I want to stay here."

"Good girl," Dr Gupta said, patting her knee. "That's our good girl."

Mr Granger smiled.

High atop the Headmaster's tower, in a back room where nosy portraits could not penetrate, Severus Snape stood watch as Minerva and Bill rapidly scanned the dog-eared file marked "Granger, Hermione J."

Minerva reached the end first. "Dear God," she whispered, face white.

Snape nodded as Bill lurched from his chair.

"If you're going to vomit, Mr Weasley, please have the grace to cast *Evanesco* thoroughly when you're done," Snape remarked.

"Um, fine," Bill muttered, returning to his chair, white as a sheet. "It's just, oh, holy fucking Merlin..."

"Indeed."

"But why would Albus...?" Minerva began.

"That, I do not know for certain. I have some theories, of course," replied Snape. "But I do believe that once again, the old lunatic has grievously blundered."

AN: These characters are still not mine. Special thanks to Subversa, SavineSnape and Bluestocking79 for all their help!

Nine

Chapter 9 of 17

Struck by a curse during the final battle, Hermione struggles to grasp what is reality and what is not. Is the curse merely revealing the truth that has been hidden for seven years?

August, 1991

"Uncle Brian! Uncle Brian!" cried Atalanta, racing down the path to the jolly, twinkling man in the bright green and yellow shirt, entering at the gate. In the arching oak that stood by, a meadowlark sang.

"There's my Atalanta!" Uncle Brian laughed, sweeping the little girl high into the air. "Where's your sister?"

"Hermione's coming," Atalanta replied, giggling as the old man tickled her. "She never runs anymore. Not after she turned eleven and got *allnature*. Do you have any sherbet lemons?"

Uncle Brian chuckled in return and set the girl down, handing her a candy. "Don't tell your mum," he murmured as the front door banged open and Hermione skipped down the path.

"Uncle Brian!" she exclaimed, "I've been reading like you told me and I've been practicing, too! We went to Diagon Alley last week and look at my wand! I can make bluebells!"

"Have you, my dear? That's wonderful!"

"Can I show you?"

"Of course, but perhaps later we'll have practice later! I have something very special that I want to show you."

Hermione smiled broadly, and the two girls each clutched a hand and ushered the old man into the house, chattering and laughing.

August 1998

The song of the meadowlark drifted on the early morning breeze that stirred the curtains of the tiny room atop the Headmaster's tower. The errant breeze also ruffled the papers on the table.

The trio in the tower paid it no heed.

"This is horrifying," Minerva murmured.

"And it gets us no closer to retrieving my brother," growled Bill, shoving away from the table.

"I'm so sorry, Bill. We are doing the best we can."

"I know... It's just, Ron's my brother and... we've lost so many already."

"*Unde Orieris* does not, as far as we know, affect people other than the victim, correct?" Snape interrupted from the window where he was watching the sunrise.

"Correct. Severus, we've covered this."

"And the *Unde Orieris* Curse has affected Hermione's memory, correct?"

"Also correct."

"So what if what Albus did to her effectively erasing Hermione's memory of her sister for whatever reason, has combined itself with the *Unde Orieris* Curse to allow her to not only move between the two realities but also..."

"You're saying I can affect one reality while I'm in another?" Hermione asked suddenly from the corner.

Minerva and Bill jumped, and Bill cursed as his knee banged into the table leg.

Snape restrained a start. Hermione's popping in and out of reality was grating on his already taut nerves. Not that he'd admit that to either Weasley or Minerva.

"Miss Granger. Welcome back," he allowed.

"I wish you would call me Hermione when you know I'm here, Severus," Hermione huffed.

His heart tightened. The girl had no business trusting him.

"Hermione," Snape said, stepping carefully towards her, "how much did you hear?"

"Only that the *Unde Orieris* Curse can allow me to affect what happens here while I'm at home."

Snape looked expectantly at Minerva; if she wanted to play Headmistress over her prize pupil, he was more than willing to allow her to answer ~~that~~ that question.

"Hermione," Minerva said, "do you think you can stay with us for a while?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes," she replied, "I want to ... I want to help."

"I know you do, dear," Minerva replied. Hermione smiled and Bill eased back into his chair. "But there are things that are... complicated."

"There are unpleasant facts, Miss Granger," Snape said, "and these facts involve you."

"Me? More unpleasant than the fact that I caused my boyf- my ex-, my friend to vanish?" Hermione demanded.

"I'm afraid so, Miss Granger."

"Hermione, it seems this is not the first time that your mind has been ... tampered with," Minerva said.

Hermione looked stricken. "My mind?"

"By somebody other than Dolohov."

"By whom?"

There was a long pause. Bill stared at his hands. Minerva watched Snape.

"It appears that the summer before your first year at Hogwarts, certain events, certain members of your immediate circle, were removed from your memory," Snape recited dispassionately.

Hermione sat down suddenly. "Who would have done this?" she whispered. "How would it have affected what's happening now?"

Snape took a long breath. "It may have an impact on what is happening now because your *perception* is altering the very fabric of the reality around you."

"I don't... I don't understand."

"Miss Granger, were you aware that you had a sister?"

Hermione laughed; silvery peals of mirth danced on the air with the motes of dust in the early morning light. "A sister? Don't be ridiculous!"

"Miss Granger, Hermione," Snape tried again, "I'm not joking. Do you know who Atalanta is?"

Hermione sobered. "No," she replied. "I don't."

The silence in the room was heavy. Bill was now standing by the window, gnawing on the side of his finger. Minerva had been called away by a deferential house-elf to supervise some task within the castle.

Hermione stared at the file before her as Snape sat silently, impassively, across the table.

"How ... How could he have done this to me?" she whispered.

"He obviously felt that any attachment to a sibling would be a hindrance to whatever plans he had for you." He laid his hands on the table pale with burn scars on the sides of his fingers.

"Plans?" Hermione stared at his hands roughened by work, nails clipped short. They looked strong, capable against the dark grain of the wood.

"To be Potter's sidekick."

"But I didn't even talk to Harry until that Halloween! Not after his awful friend made fun of me for not having any friends!"

"Awful friend?"

"Harry was friends with a redheaded boy, I think. I never knew his name but he was horrid. He used to make comments about me and other people all the time that weren't nice, and then he said that I didn't have any friends and that's when I hid in the girls toilet and got trapped by the troll!"

"His name was Ronald," Bill said intently, gripping the windowsill so hard his knuckles were white. "And he was my brother."

"And I... I made something happen to him?"

"I'm afraid so," Bill replied tightly

"What?"

"You made him vanish. As far as we can determine, Miss Granger, you made him disappear," Snape said calmly. His voice soothed her *If Professor Snape is lecturing me*, she thought, *I can focus. I can learn what's wrong, and I can fix it*

"Oh, God. How?" She fought the rising panic in her stomach.

"According to what you've told us, you wished him out of existence."

The room began to swim. When Hermione spoke, her voice sounded very far away to her ears. "How did I do that?"

"We don't know," Snape replied. "But there seem to be two spells affecting you."

"I don't ..." Hermione felt the room begin to spin.

"Miss Granger, you need to focus," Snape said. "As I was telling you, you wished Mr Weasley out of existence. Now, I believe that there are two factors at work here: one is the *Unde Orieris* Curse that effectively shunts you out of reality, and a spell known as the *Refracto Legilimentis* that Albus cast upon you the summer before your first year."

"And you believe that..."

"It is our belief that these two spells are working in tandem with each other to affect your reality."

"I don't ... I don't feel so well." The nausea returned and the room began to fade.

"Hermione! Stay with us!" Bill's voice held a note of panic.

"Miss Granger! You *will* attend to me!"

"Severus, don't shout at her. Hermione, you must try to focus!"

I'm trying, Bill.

"Hermione, can you hear me?"

I'm coming, Dad, but I need to solve this first.

"Severus, we're losing her!"

"Dammit, Weasley, stop whingeing and help me if she slips away from us again, who knows what she'll do! Do you want to be next?"

Why is Severus yelling?

"Hermione, my darling girl, please try to fight this I know my bright, shining girl is in there. Come back to us, please!"

I know, Dad, I know, and I want to, I really do.

"Can we do something? Anything?"

"We can try this."

"What Albus did? Severus, are you mad? It could destroy her mind completely!"

"Do you have a better idea?"

"No."

What does he want to do to me?

As if she were waking slowly, head filled with sand after a long night of restless dreams, Hermione's blue-painted bedroom began to come into focus. Her father sat on the edge of the bed, clasping her hands. She noticed Atalanta was standing in the doorway arms folded.

"Refracto Legilimentis." The words echoed through her brain.

Bill. That was Bill's voice. Bill Weasley was calling. He must hate me so, for what I did to his brother. I wish, I wish I could remember.

Suddenly, she felt the pull into the real world the world of her parents and sister. A world where she was safe.

But that means leaving Severus behind.

The waking stopped and the blue room began to fade again.

"Hermione! No, stay with me!" her father cried out, and his voice jerked her back into her bedroom.

Her father sat upon the bed, his beard silvering, his brown curly hair flopping onto his forehead, worry lines etched into his face. He smelled of pipe tobacco. He smelled of *home*.

"Dad," she whispered, "it's okay, I'm here."

"Oh, my girl." Her father folded her into a tight embrace.

"I'm here, Dad. I'm here." *I'm safe here nobody hates me here, I can't make... I can't make people vanish here.*

"Severus, help me!" The voice echoed, far, far away like half-heard conversation through a wall.

"Can't you do anything properly? Refracto Legilimentis!"

No, I... what do I want? Why am I... Oh, God what's happening? The room began to sway.

"Hermione, fight this! Please stay with us!"

"Dad!" she cried, reaching out to him. "I want to stay, don't make me leave this place! I want to stay home!"

But, as if she were being sucked backwards, the blue-painted bedroom disappeared into a pinpoint of light and a plain room of drab grey stone began to come into focus.

A dark-haired man stood before her, holding her chin in a cool, dry hand, staring intently at her. Behind him, a younger man stood, his scarred face twisted with concern. Both men were pointing sticks at her.

She blinked. *What the hell is going on?*

"Welcome back, Miss Granger," the dark man said as the younger man, red hair aflame in the sunlight that streamed through the casement window, sighed his relief and spun away.

She swallowed. *Who is Miss Granger?*

"Where..." she began, "where am I?"

"You're at Hogwarts, Hermione," answered the redhead. She noticed he had shaggy hair and an earring that swung with every movement of his head.

The dark man still held her face in his cool grasp, his eyes watching her carefully, his hair hanging limply about his shoulders and face. His expression was angry, worried, and relieved all at the same time.

"Who are you?"

The dark man laughed softly as a tall, thin woman with pursed lips burst into the room.

"Severus, I've just been talking to Albus and would you believe... Hermione, how are you?"

Hermione blinked and struggled to answer the question.

"I ..." she began.

"Severus, what are you doing to Miss Granger?" asked the thin woman.

Suddenly, there didn't seem to be enough air in the room. Hermione, whoever *she* was, gasped and wrenched her face away from the dark man. He was familiar her brain grasped for a name. *I know it, I know it* The room began to fade she felt sick.

"Severus!" she heard a shout as the sweet relief of blackness enveloped her.

"Get Poppy," she dimly heard

"You've lost her. Severus, what did you *do*?" the woman cried.

"No, you interfering old... she's not going into another state she's merely ... Oh, hell, the damn girl's gone and fainted."

"Atalanta, get Dr Gupta on the phone."

"Dad..."

"Atalanta, don't argue!"

AN: Not mine no money. Special thanks to Subversa, SavineSnape, and Bluestocking79 for their invaluable help!

Ten

Chapter 10 of 17

Struck by a curse during the final battle, Hermione struggles to grasp what is reality and what is not. Is the curse merely revealing the truth that has been hidden for seven years?

Early August, 1998

A few hours later, Hermione was awake and sitting up in a bed in the Hospital Wing.

At the window across the room, two men were standing in quiet conference. Hermione recognized them as the men who were staring at her when she awoke in the grey stone room. She was proud; she could even remember their names after a few minutes of careful practice: Professor Snape (sometimes called Severus) was the dark-haired one with the cane and sour expression, and Bill was the redhead with the odd earring. Beside her sat a plump, motherly woman who introduced herself as Poppy.

Hermione turned to the thin woman on the other side of her. *Minerva*, she reminded herself.

Hermione stared at the photographs spread on the bed before her.

"That's me," she said, pointing to the bushy-haired girl standing in the middle of two boys. They were all dressed in school uniforms with matching crimson and gold ties.

The girl waved at her. Hermione had screamed and dropped the photograph the first time it had happened, but now, a few hours later, it seemed almost commonplace.

Familiar. It was familiar. Not homey not the way she thought things should be, but it was familiar.

"And that's Ronald." She pointed again this time at the cheerful redhead that looked like the man in the corner. "And that's Harry."

"Excellent, Hermione," Minerva said. "Is this helping at all?"

"A bit," she admitted. "But, it's like a dream a dream I can barely remember."

Minerva nodded sagely. Hermione noticed that despite the heat, the older woman was wearing a tartan skirt and white blouse with a tan jacket.

"It will be like that for some time," Minerva replied.

Hermione frowned at the pictures, and then something in the back of her mind clicked into place. Images, sounds, memories began to shuffle in her memory. All the familiarity that had permeated her encounter with the moving pictures seemed to slide home.

"Harry!" she exclaimed. "I remember Harry!" She looked around at the assembled company. "So it was true," she whispered.

"What was that, dear?"

"All those things Uncle Brian said!"

"Uncle Brian?" Professor Snape looked up sharply.

Hermione nodded. "Uncle Brian. He's the first person who showed me a photograph that moved."

"So you remember?" pressed the dark-haired man.

"I remember him. I remember being so surprised when I found out he was the Headmaster."

"And do you remember your friends?"

Hermione nodded slowly. "Harry and Ron. Ron's a little hazy like somebody whom I may have been introduced to once but don't really recall meeting."

"And they exist for you?"

"Yes they're my friends, I suppose. Why aren't they here?"

There was a bang as Bill hurried towards the office at the back of the room.

"Hermione are you absolutely sure?"

"Severus, don't press her. Are you all right, dear?"

Hermione blinked the room was spinning. "Sorry," she said. "I'm a little dizzy."

"It is to be expected," Minerva said. "You've had quite a shock. Why don't you sit back and relax a bit?"

"Yes," Hermione replied faintly, trying to focus on the older woman and not the echoes in her head.

"And we've lost her again. I'm so sorry, Mr Granger. Martin. It appears she's had a relapse."

"Does this mean she's going back to the hospital?"

"Atalanta!"

"Possibly not, little one. From what I've read in her journal, she's made such rapid progress in the past few weeks that a relapse is to be expected."

Relapse?

"Hermione, are you all right?"

"I'm sorry," Hermione replied smiling wanly at Poppy. "It's just... I keep hearing echoes."

"Echoes of what, Miss Granger?"

"How long do you think this state will last, Dr Gupta?"

"I do not know, Martin, but I think we can rest assured that she will not be gone for long this time."

But I'm here, Dad, I'm right here.

"Severus, we need to talk. I've had a long chat with Albus."

"I'm thrilled for you. How is the decrepit lunatic these days?"

Minerva made a moue of irritation.

"He wants me to remove you from Hermione's care. He even suggested you'd be better off away from Hogwarts."

"I bet."

"Severus, he said that you've only told me half the story. I think... I think it would be best if you stayed away from Hermione for a while."

"I beg your pardon?"

Hermione stirred and murmured in her sleep. Minerva took Snape's elbow and drew him away from the girl.

"Let go of me," Snape growled.

"Severus, Albus told me that you've only provided half of the story," she repeated. "And that you should tell me the rest."

"Oh, he did, did he? And you believed him? Minerva, may I remind you that he has lied to us. Repeatedly."

"And you haven't, Severus?"

"Under duress." Snape scowled. The reminder of the past year sent a tremor through his hand. He prayed Minerva did not notice. With a mighty effort, he calmed himself. "Explain," he ground out.

"Albus claimed that Hermione was actually in grave danger from Atalanta. Have you noticed, Severus, that most of our Muggle-born students are only children?"

"Lily Evans wasn't."

"Albus said you'd raise that objection. But Petunia was a special case, he said."

Snape said nothing and moved away from the witch back to the edge of the cubicle where Hermione slept.

Snape tightened his grip on his cane.

"He said," Minerva continued inexorably, "that if the *Unde Orieris* is, in fact, what she is cursed with, that any attempts you might make to reverse the spell would only damage her further. That a soul cursed by *Unde Orieris* could be severely injured by the caster of the *Refracto Legilimentis* - that the two spells were intertwined."

Snape refused to reply. He would not dignify Albus' ravings with a response not if Minerva chose to believe them.

"Did you cast the *Refracto Legilimentis*? Albus told me to ask you."

"I cannot believe that you still trust the old bastard over me."

"Severus, Albus told me the truth he cannot lie not in his state as a portrait."

"Minerva, that is harpy shit, and you know it. The fact that you're choosing to believe the ravings of a disgruntled, oil paint-fume addled ~~ph~~portrait is an insult to both of us." Pain and frustration at the constant niggling of insult and suspicion gave way to rage. "Albus manipulated us, you stupid woman," he roared, spinning to face the older witch. "He manipulated and played us like a couple of stringed instruments: sent *children* to their deaths, all the name of the greater good!"

Snape felt the bile rising in his throat how easily they had been taken in by the man! How easily had Minerva gone back to him!

"Severus, this is not about personal vengeance or any grudge you may have!"

"How many lies has he told, Minerva? How many people have to die before you realize what he's doing even from beyond the grave?"

"Severus ..."

"How willing you are to believe him! Is it because you dislike me - the greasy Slytherin? Is it because I could not tell you everything about what I was commanded to do? Because I am bound by oaths not of my choosing? Or do you refuse to trust me because I refuse to die to leave you and your precious portraits and schoolchildren to rebuild the image of Albus Bloody Dumbledore as a hero?"

"This isn't about you."

"The hell it isn't. You can't sack me because Potter's taken on my case. But you can allow Albus to poison your mind against me. He's taken everything from me, Minerva and now you and he want to take my atonement too!" *Shite*.

"Is that what this is about? Atonement?" Minerva's voice was shocked.

"Is that so hard to believe?" he mocked. "Slytherins can atone as well, you know."

"Then you are no better than he is," Minerva snapped, stepping up to him. She was not a short woman, the top of her head at his brow. "Using Hermione to atone for your sins?"

"I am not..."

"You just admitted it! Your desperate search for a cure your work with Bill Weasley, your constant attention to Hermione she's your penance!"

"It's not specifically about *her*."

"Is this about Evans? Are you turning Hermione into the Muggle-born you *can* save?" Minerva's voice was rich with emotion.

"Hermione is a girl who is just as much a victim as you or I! Her parentage, her birth is not the issue." He paused and rubbed his temples. The throbbing in his neck threatened to spread to his head and shoulders.

"She is a girl whose mind you almost destroyed! A girl who can barely remember her own name!" Minerva snapped her lips closed.

The headache that had been brewing burst into full flower sending black spots in front of Snape's eyes. The rage, which had fueled his shouting match with Minerva, fizzled and died as quickly as it had grown.

Turning away from her, he stared at the girl asleep in the hospital bed. Poppy must have cast an Imperturbable Charm, for Hermione slept peacefully, undisturbed by the argument not five feet from her.

In sleep, she looked impossibly young bushy hair spread in a halo on her pillow she looked *fragile*. But he knew, after months of caring for her, of being cared for by her, she was no girl, but a woman of iron.

"She is stronger than you think, Minerva," he said quietly.

"The damage to her mind is extensive, Severus; you must admit that." Minerva was not one to give up an argument.

"I do not deny it."

"And your casting of the *Refracto Legilimentis* did damage her."

"Minerva, you know the circumstances under which I performed that spell."

"You cannot solve this alone."

"I will not deny that, either."

"Severus I believe you may have been the primary caster of the *Refracto Legilimentis*."

"Is that what Albus told you?"

Minerva's silence was his answer.

The moment stretched. Snape turned away from the bed. "Minerva," he said quietly, "you cannot know what the old bastard held me to."

"Do you admit that you cast it?"

"I admit nothing."

"But..."

"Minerva, if you keep pressing this issue, you *will* be forced to summon Kingsley and his awkward squad. And the fact that you have not already chosen to do so and have me hauled away in chains ..." Snape left it hanging. Minerva did not reply. "Or were you waiting for school to begin? To make an example of me in front of your Gryffindors?"

"My dear boy." Minerva's voice broke. Snape knew he had won, but there was no joy in the victory.

"Don't."

"I ... Severus, do not think that I believe *everything* Albus said to me. But this I do know you cannot be the one to heal her."

Her tone was gentle, and Snape closed his eyes. Hers was a voice that had chastised and guided him for years longer than he cared to admit. Hers was a presence that, though she'd never know, calmed him: her no-nonsense manner guided him, the sensible aunt, the mother he'd wished for since he'd been eleven. The last scene between them before ... well, *before* still haunted him. And now to hear her, not in their usual sparring, but in broken honesty telling him what he knew to be true but did not want to admit rent his heart.

"Minerva, have you so little faith in me?" he asked finally.

"There was a time, quite recently, Severus, that I had no faith in you. But now," she paused, "now is not that time."

"But..."

"But I cannot risk Hermione's mind, or yours. According to your research, and to what Bill and Albus have told me, her rehabilitation will take many intense hours of Legilimency."

"And whom do you propose as capable enough to heal her?"

"You will not like this, Severus, but there is only one person living whose ability at Legilimency would rival yours."

A dreadful suspicion began to dawn upon his mind. "Minerva, you cannot be serious!" He paused and something like a laugh gurgled from him unbidden. "Why am I not surprised? I have liked precious little in this conversation thus far."

"I have written to him, and he will come to the castle for the beginning of the term. It's for the best, anyway; he deserves a chance at ~~some~~ decent NEWT scores. You will, of course, tutor him in the finer points of Legilimency. He has talent, but his skill ..."

Snape smirked.

"And if Potter can bring his tutor back to us better and more of a know-it-all than before where is the harm in that?" he asked acerbically.

AN: Not mine. No money. Thanks to Subversa, SavineSnape and Bluestocking for their invaluable help!

Eleven

Chapter 11 of 17

Struck by a curse during the final battle, Hermione struggles to grasp what is reality and what is not. Is the curse merely revealing the truth that has been hidden for seven years?

August, 1998

"I trust, Potter, that this experiment in the magic of the mind will have different results than the last attempt we made?" Snape asked the youth sitting in the other wing back chair in his quarters.

"Yes, sir er... Severus." Potter squirmed, much to Snape's glee.

"As long as we understand each other."

"Of course, Severus."

"Satisfactory. You understand, of course, that there will be no gratuitous emotional outbursts from you regarding either of your parents."

"Yes, Severus."

"And there will be no *snooping* where you are not welcome. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Severus."

"Very well." Snape could not suppress the smirk baiting Potter had been easy enough when he was a child baiting him as an alleged adult was even more satisfying, especially as the youth was still in the throes of hero worship. Dying and, in the process, spewing out his embarrassing memories of Lily had, apparently, served a purpose.

"What ... what would you like me to do?" Potter fidgeted with his hair and glasses some habits apparently died hard: the boy was still intimidated. Excellent.

"Your task, as I see it, Potter," Snape purred, "will be to help Miss Granger restore her full mental capacity through the judicious application of Legilimency. In short, you will be retrieving her memories, her intellect, her very self, which I believe is buried somewhere within her consciousness. Is this comprehensible to you, Potter? Or am I going too fast?" He lifted an eyebrow.

Potter nodded. "You're saying that Hermione is still in there, but that this curse, the *Unde Orieris*, is doing something to ..." His brow furrowed in thought. "*To*hide her?"

"In a sense, Potter." Snape nodded and steepled his fingers, pressing the tips to his lips. "Perhaps you are not quite as unlettered as you appear."

He had the distinct satisfaction of watching the fire of indignation flare in Potter's eyes when something very interesting happened. Potter grinned at him.

"Nice one," Potter said. "You certainly know exactly what to say, don't you?"

"I beg your pardon?" Snape feigned innocence to hide his surprise.

"You're still trying to rile me to provoke me." Potter smiled. "It's ... I'm sorry, Severus, it's not going to work. I know you work on hating me but don't you think that bygones should be bygones?"

"Potter, what in Merlin's name are you burbling about?"

"Hermione once pointed out that most of what you did was to keep me from completely flying off the broom. And, of course because you hated my father." Potter ducked his head apologetically. "It's totally understandable, too. But after everything we've been through all the battles, all the bitterness - don't you think, well, let's start by you calling me 'Harry' and accepting my apology for, well, being a boy." Potter stood and extended his hand.

Snape stared at him in wild surmise. Was the little twerp actually trying, in his limited, puerile way, to bury the hatchet? It certainly appeared to be the case. Snape allowed himself to smile.

"Well, then, Harry," he said. "If you can keep your mind where it belongs, any outpouring of emotionalism to yourself, and pay attention, you might just be able to save your friend's life." He took the proffered hand.

Harry's grin got wider.

"Anything you say, Severus."

Snape repressed a sigh. Merlin save him from Gryffindor enthusiasm. *With a friend like this*, he reflected, *who needs a Dark Lord ... or Albus?*

"Well then," he ground out, "let us begin. The magic of Legilimency relies on three factors..."

When Hermione opened her eyes, she was still in her childhood bedroom. This time, however, she was tucked into a comfortable chair by her window, which looked out onto the back garden a peaceful suburban oasis.

"I thought you might like it," Jocasta said gently. Hermione turned. "Even if you can't always see it, I like to think that somehow, you can."

"Mum," Hermione said, smiling. "Thank you."

Hermione? A familiar voice echoed in her mind.

Jocasta moved across the room and enfolded her daughter in a tight embrace.

"Mum," Hermione said again, relief flooding through her. "I love you so much." Every time she awoke, the constant worry, the fear, crept into her very marrow *Where are my parents? Are they safe? Will they even know me?*

"I love you too, darling. And I'm so glad you're here," Jocasta murmured.

Hermione? Are you there?

"I'm glad too. Did I ever tell you that in ... in the other place, I don't have you?"

Jocasta knelt. "You did, once right when you began to recover. You said something about Australia."

Hermione nodded. "I had to ... I had to send you away; it was too dangerous in England."

"Well," Jocasta said, smiling brightly through the tears that welled up in her eyes, "as you can clearly see, my darling girl, I'm here, your father's here, and even Atalanta."

"I know," Hermione replied pressing her curly head to the top of her mother's, "and it's wonderful. Perfect, in fact. My family's here but Mum, I ..."

"Yes, darling?"

"I wonder, as I recover, what am I to do in this world?"

"Do?"

Hermione nodded she remembered worrying about this before her last relapse into the magical world. "What skills do I have?"

Hermione! Please! Answer me! Are you all right?

Was that Harry?

"Well," Jocasta began slowly, "you were always a bright girl. And there are programs to help you perhaps we can look into some further education programs."

Further education? After six years at Hogwarts, why would she need further education? Oh ...

"You can still get your A-Levels," her mother continued. "I've been gathering brochures, and the college of further education can help. You don't even need GCSE's but they will want to interview you."

Hermione nodded. It was, she supposed, a logical course of action. *And if I'm stuck here, I might as well make the most of it. I suppose I can always use my Arithmancy skills in accounting or something. Oh, God. Accounting.*

Her mother was still talking. "And before that, you could always work."

"Work?"

"Not yet, of course." Jocasta sat back on her heels. "But when you're ready. The catalogs and Dr Gupta both say that you would need some acclimatization to the real world first. There's always the new Sainsbury's opening up in the High Street."

Hermione felt her stomach drop.

"But it's really too soon," Jocasta continued. "I do, however, want my darling girl to be prepared for anything! And you'll want to start adding to the savings we've started for you. You never know, after all."

"Constant vigilance," Hermione murmured, trying to blink back tears.

Hermione, if you can hear me ... it's okay, I just need ... I need you to be strong and come back.

"What was that?"

"Oh, nothing ..."

"I see what you mean, Severus," Harry said, straightening up and frowning. He was proud of the fact that his sessions with Severus had gone well after only three weeks he had been allowed to attempt to cast the spell on Hermione. The intense tutoring he had received from her during her lucid periods had also helped spur him along. "There's a presence, but it's faint."

"What do you see?"

Harry shrugged. "It's almost like I had to squint through a fog. I could see a room and a woman, and there was faint conversation about her parents, but ..." he trailed off.

"Did you attempt to speak with her?"

"Yeah. And there was a flicker of recognition when I said her name, but other than that, nothing."

Snape sat back and looked speculatively at the young man.

"Perhaps you are not completely incompetent, then," he mused.

"Well put, Severus." The Savior of the Wizarding World grinned lopsidedly. "She's not happy, though," he said after a pause.

"Oh?"

"It was one of the few things I could tell. There was sort of a..." Harry's brow furrowed as he thought. "An overwhelming disappointment."

"Disappointment?"

"A feeling that... that she didn't belong, I suppose."

"Of course not," Snape growled. "She belongs here. *Withus*."

"Sentimentality, Severus? For one of the Golden Trio?" Harry looked as if he would giggle.

"If you tell anyone we had this conversation," Snape snapped, "I'll hex you."

Late October 1991

"Why so unhappy?"

"Headmaster!" The young girl leaped to her feet, the thick tome falling to the leaf-strewn ground. She and the old man bent to retrieve it, each grabbing an end.

"Advanced Spell-work. Percy Weasley's copy, to boot. Ambitious for a first year," he observed. "Pear drop?"

"What happened to the lemon ones you used to give me and Atalanta?" Hermione smiled at his twinkle.

"Sometimes, we all prefer a change. I was talking to Professor McGonagall sit down, child, you needn't be formal on a beautiful Saturday."

Hermione sat and accepted the sweet.

"You were talking to Professor McGonagall?" she prompted.

"And she said that you were doing remarkably well, academically."

Hermione nodded vigorously.

"The reading has been very easy to keep up with," she said. "And it's interesting, too! I'm looking forward to learning more even Potions. I'm thinking of taking a NEWT in it. And in Ancient Runes and Arithmancy. Charms and Transfiguration, of course as well." She paused. "I'm also thinking about History of Magic, but Professor Binns is a bit..."

"Oh yes, poor old Cuthbert. He doesn't usually have NEWT level students. Finding out someone's even interested might cause him to expire all over again. Ambitious plans, my dear," mused the headmaster. "But there is more to Hogwarts than just study."

Hermione fought the blush in her cheeks. *How did Uncle Brian always seem to know?*

"Well," she said, "I've made friends with Percy Weasley. A bit. He knows where everything is and is very responsible. *And maybe I can get to know his family better. His obnoxious brother, for example. The one I can't stop thinking about.*

"A worthy friend."

"And it's hard ... making new friends sometimes," Hermione confessed, wondering how her Uncle Brian winkled secrets from her so easily. "I don't have much in common with many of the students here, and well, I miss my family."

"I'm sure many of the others do, too. Do you like your dormitory mates?"

Hermione shrugged.

"They're all right. Lavender and Parvati got along really well at the start, and often, it seems like there's not much room for three. I try but most of the time, I end up doing their homework for them." She gasped and looked up at the headmaster with a stricken face. "I didn't ... I don't ... they aren't *cheating*," she fumbled.

The headmaster chuckled.

"I'd never believe for a moment that you would condone cheating, Hermione," he said.

"And I never would!"

"What about the youngest Weasley boy? Ronald? Have you tried making friends with him?"

"A bit," she confessed, blushing furiously. "But he's not ... he's not very bright, is he? Not like his brother, I mean."

"I wouldn't worry too much about missing your family," he said. "You'll see them at Christmas, and soon ..." He smiled. "Well, we'll leave that for later, perhaps. But, in the meantime, remember, even the dimmest of candles can burn brightly with the right spark." He rose from the bench and patted the girl on the shoulder.

Hermione sat alone on the bench, book on her lap, biting her lip.

Even the dimmest of candles can burn with the brightest spark Did Uncle Brian no, where did ... Did Headmaster Dumbledore really want her to be a spark for Ronald Weasley? He was cute, but he and Harry Potter were such good friends how could there be room in that pair for a third?

Hermione rested her chin in her hand, bushy hair swirling around her face.

She'd been sorted into Gryffindor for a reason; perhaps for approaching and making friends with the boy she, against all her better instincts, fancied. And he definitely did need somebody to help him, starting (but not ending) with Charms. One of these days, he would pronounce *Wingardium Leviosa* correctly.

August, 1998

"Good evening, Miss Granger."

When the room swam into focus, she found it was darkening with the late-summer twilight. Snape, sitting beside her bed, gently laid a huge tome on the nightstand.

"What time is it?" she asked groggily, rolling to squint at the man. His hair had been tied back, and his face was relaxed more than she'd seen it to be in, well, ever.

Has he found something helpful?

"Almost nine. Filch is working on installing the end of class gong, and it must have woken you. How do you feel?"

"Hmm, I feel ... refreshed. A little foggy. What happened?"

"Pott- Harry has been to visit you we have been conducting some experiments in Legilimency to restore your memories."

"And Ronald?"

"Is restored to us in all his Weasley glory. His elder brother Flooded me this morning."

Hermione smiled wanly.

"Bill tells me he'll come to visit you in a few days," Snape continued

"That's nice. I suppose he was sincere about his offer of 'friendship'." Hermione rolled her eyes and stifled a giggle as Snape snorted eloquently, rising from the stiff chair by her bed. She noticed that he still leaned upon his cane, but the knuckles of his hand were no longer so white.

"Do try not to make any more people disappear in the meantime, Miss Granger," he growled, reaching out his other hand and brushing the hair from her face.

Hermione blushed did Severus Snape realize what he had just done? She hoped so, because explaining to him that his touch made her go all tingly (in a very good way a way that Ronald had never managed to achieve) was certainly something she did not feel up to doing.

"I'll have a house-elf bring you some dinner," he said.

"I'm starving," she blurted, blushing again.

He smiled briefly. "It's good," he began, "it's good to have you with us again, Her- Miss Granger. We'll talk later," he finished hurriedly, moving from the cubicle as a house-elf popped in with a tray.

Hermione, feeling more hopeful (and more hungry) than she had in a long time, tucked into her dinner.

He must have found a cureshe told herself, Certainly he wouldn't be this affectionate otherwise.

Really, it was almost more than a girl could hope for.

AN: I still do not own these characters. Even the plot is borrowed from Joss Whedon. Special thanks go to Subversa and SavineSnape and Bluestocking. They are amazing!

Twelve

Chapter 12 of 17

Struck by a curse during the final battle, Hermione struggles to grasp what is reality and what is not. Is the curse merely revealing the truth that has been hidden for seven years?

September, 1998

"You're late," Snape growled from the small dining table littered with paper. Minerva had given him the Potions syllabus to review at long last (Horace's changes had been execrable). When he had dared inquire as to the possibility of the Defence Against the Dark Arts position, Minerva had curtly told him that the Board had decided not to continue that curriculum this year. Back to Potions for him, he supposed.

"Excuse me?" Hermione dropped her books on the coffee table with a heavy thud and hurried to the kitchenette. Tapping her wand on the kettle, she bent and rummaged for the tea tin.

"You and Potter should have finished his Transfiguration revision half an hour ago. And what in the name of Nimue, Merlin, and Circe do you think you ~~are~~ doing?"

"I'm sorry; I'm looking for your tea tin. Why do you always hide it? You get grumpy when you can't have your tea in the afternoons I thought I'd start it for you."

"An admirable notion, but entirely unnecessary, I assure you. Kindly cease burling about *tea* and explain your lateness."

Hermione straightened and harrumphed. "I stopped to talk to Professor Dumbledore on my way here," she said as if speaking to an idiot. "He was reading *Winnie The Pooh* to Ethelfred the Ensnared in the north part of the second floor corridor."

"Was he really?" Snape sneered. "You'd be advised, Miss Granger, to stay away from that interfering, decrepit blob of oils. People who associate with the old fart tend to wind up dead. Or bitten."

"Professor Dumbledore was a powerful wizard for the side of Light," Hermione exclaimed, "and you should be more respectful of him! Honestly, it's just like being with Harry and Ron all those years and reminding them that as much as *you* tormented them, you still deserved their respect."

"Indeed?" Snape arched an eloquent eyebrow and moved carefully to the kitchenette. "*Accio* tea tin."

"That's what Harry told me," Hermione admitted, ducking as the tin sailed by her head. "It's a bit fuzzy, but I do vaguely remember that being one of the lectures I'd give the boys." She hopped up onto the tall stool at the edge of his counter and accepted the tin from Snape's outstretched hand.

"I, for one, am glad to hear at least *somebody* in the Golden Trio was on my side," Snape muttered. "Now, take your potion. The tea will keep until later." He handed her a vial of oily, grey liquid.

"The meditation exercises you taught me are going well," Hermione admitted, swallowing the potion. "But does this memory-enhancer have to taste so foul?" she asked, screwing up her face.

"Unfortunately, there is no way, despite what Muggles think, to counter the taste of the ginkgo biloba and the fish oil."

"Oh, well." Hermione sighed and gulped down the rest of the vial. "Now what?" She scrambled off the stool upon which she had perched.

Snape moved back to the table and retrieved his cane.

"The hearthrug, Miss Granger," he commanded, pointing to the worn red carpet. "You will want to cast a Cushioning charm, of course."

She smiled and flicked her wand as she settled gracefully upon the floor before the fire, at the foot of the battered leather chair, which had been a gift from Lucius upon his first appointment to the faculty. Beside the chair, a floor lamp, a relic from the wreck of Spinner's End, cast a gentle glow. She looked up expectantly and smiled.

"I'm ready, Severus," she said.

Slowly, he followed her, wincing as pain shot from his shoulder down his spine.

"Very good," he said, suppressing the urge to touch her face as he moved to the chair. "Close your eyes," he managed. "We will try to draw out more of your memories of the summer before you began your study at Hogwarts. To achieve this, you must begin with meditation. This will clear your mind." Snape waved his wand, and his sitting room darkened. Hermione settled herself upon the hearthrug, legs crossed, eyes closed. She looked impossibly calm for someone in her position, he reflected: impossibly calm and entirely too trusting. *Does she really think I can heal her? More fool her!*

"Draw your attention into this room," Snape murmured. "Focus on the sounds of the castle around you, the fire crackling, my voice." He dropped his voice to a murmur. "Feel the floor beneath you. Now. Draw that focus inward. Focus on your breathing."

Snape waited. The tension she had worn upon her face for the last two years began to fade as she relaxed and focused. The lines of worry that had etched themselves into the corners of her eyes (should an eighteen-year-old girl have the face of a woman of thirty?) faded in the firelight, eased themselves from her as her countenance resumed the fresh look of the girl he'd so studiously ignored for all those years.

"Now, Miss Granger," he said quietly, "I want you try to remember. It doesn't matter what, but pick something. Let it be a thought, an idea, a notion, something from the summer before your first year. Let your mind wander until it arrives at its destination that which is the most important will come to us by a seemingly random process."

He waited. Hermione's steady breathing and the gentle crackle of the fire (for even in early September, the dungeons were chill) were the only sounds.

Come on, girl. Find it, find it, there must be something there

August, 1991

"Are you sure about this, dear girl? What I am asking of you could affect the rest of your life. How you live, how you interact with others." Albus sat in the Grangers' living room, the flowers on his shirt clashing horribly with the flowers on the sofa. It pleased him that he could clash so. Severus would have insisted he blend in more, but Severus was notoriously hidebound when it came to fashion.

Martin's jaw was set he looked ready to lash out. And no wonder! Jocasta was staring at her hands, folded tightly in her lap, a curtain of brown, curly hair hiding her face.

"It's not a decision that she should have to make alone," Martin declared.

"No," Albus agreed. "But it is a decision that she will ultimately have to bear alone."

"She's eleven years old, for God's sake!" Martin cried.

"Dad!" Hermione interrupted. "I may be, but if what Uncle Brian is saying is true, we need to think carefully about this!"

"Darling, you can't possibly know..."

"No, Dad, I can't. But I do know that I'm *different*, and that's enough to warrant thinking about what he has to say."

"Even still, you are not old enough to make this decision!"

"But old enough to go away to school?" Hermione asked defiantly.

"Hermione!"

"Your daughter's a brilliant girl, Martin," Albus interrupted. "She deserves an environment where that brilliance can be put to use."

"And I've been practicing all summer, Dad. And I have books. Whatever happens, I'll be prepared. And it's not like I'm going to live in the woods by myself for the school year. I'll be coming home for the holidays, and there will be other teachers and students around."

"But at what price?" Martin demanded. Jocasta looked up from clenched hands. "What price to send you away where there are men who want to kill you? Why can we not keep you safe here? At *home*?"

Albus was silent for a few moments as Martin's words hung heavily in the air.

"I will not pretend," Albus finally said, "that there are not difficult times ahead for these children. But they are the ones who will lead us from the Dark into the Light. Without them ..." He trailed off.

"And you're certain of this ... this danger?" Jocasta asked.

"More than I am of my own name," Albus replied gravely.

"And I can help?" Hermione demanded.

"You will be a hero a savior, in many ways when our world so badly needs one." Albus smiled at her; the girl was Gryffindor, through and through, despite her academic potential. He'd have to be sure to have a quick word with the Sorting Hat later that day. "But the decision to do what is right, to accomplish what must be done, is often much more hazardous than we at first think. It is only fair that I should warn you of this."

"But there are things you can do, things I can do to prepare?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, yes, dear," Albus replied, "a great many things." He paused. "Perhaps we ask too much of our children," he continued quietly. "But perhaps, we have no choice. The choice must ultimately lie with each individual."

Hermione's parents frowned at one another.

"At eleven," Jocasta said, "I was beginning to put aside my dolls and think about clothes and boys. At eleven, Hermione is reading books that make my head spin and thinking of Universities and studies. But she is still a child. She is too young, too inexperienced to be making life or death choices."

"Mum!"

"Your mother is right," Albus replied. "You have far to travel and many choices to make as you grow into the woman you are destined to be."

"But this first choice," Hermione said, "to go or to stay, will lead to others. Others I must be prepared to make as I tread this path."

"Yes."

"Then I choose to go."

"Hermione!"

"Mum, I can't stay. Not when I could lose all that I've learned this summer, all of what makes me *me*. You've always said I was special." Hermione smiled bravely the smile of a much older girl. "I think we're about to find out how special I really am."

"It is a good path, dear girl," Albus said, "and one I would die helping you to travel."

Hermione nodded. "Thank you," she said. "I will try to ... I will be what you need me to be."

Albus smiled. Her enthusiasm, borne of youthful confidence and intelligence, was endearing. "We're not quite ready for life and death declarations from you yet, dear girl, for your life is still long and full of promise. When you become old and withered like me, perhaps then you can make such grand statements."

"Are you sure, Brian?" demanded Martin.

"I have to be, Dad. It's a task that I've been offered," Hermione answered eagerly, cutting Albus off.

"You know you will always have a home here." Jocasta rose and moved across the carpet to her daughter, embracing her, eyes moist.

"I do, Mum."

Albus watched as she snuggled into her mother's embrace. "Good." He rose and rubbed his hands together. "A safe place for our dear girl to go will be vital in these coming years."

"You mentioned that there were precautions that you must take?" Jocasta asked.

"Yes," he replied, pulling out his wand. "And it's time to begin."

As the girl turned towards him, eyes wide and trusting, Albus sought to forget the conversation in his office that morning with Severus:

"It isn't fair to her, Albus," his Potions master rasped. "No eleven-year-old should have to shoulder such a burden."

"I did not create this world, Severus, but we must try to live in it." Albus replied calmly, pouring the tea and handing him a steaming cup.

"Do not insult me with semantics, old man." The younger man glowered at him and sipped his tea.

"She is our hope, Severus; she will ground the boy when he needs it most. And at eleven, she is more capable than most are at eighteen."

"You would remove her completely from what she loves best?"

"When it is a danger to her, yes."

Albus looked around the neat, suburban sitting room. For Muggles, even, they looked *sonormal*. Who would have thought that she who would guide Harry Potter himself could have flourished here?

"I need to have Atalanta here, too, I think," he said to Martin and Jocasta. "Will you fetch her for me?"

The place between the worlds was grey a soft, green grey that enveloped her like a cloak.

Distantly, she could hear the voices of her parents and Dr Gupta.

"The signs of brain activity are not encouraging, I'm afraid, not since last week," Dr Gupta sounded concerned.

"Are we losing her again?"

"That is up to Hermione. If she wished it, she could rejoin us at any time."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, Martin, that Hermione controls her own reality and her ability to slide in and out of these mental states. The anti-psychotics help keep her grounded."

"She's expressed a desire to come off of them, when she's lucid, that is."

"I can understand that. But this is a critical time for her where she can choose to work with us or not. The anti-psychotics are keeping her with us to a certain extent, but she needs to choose to take those next steps and rejoin us fully. We cannot increase her dosage, but we must wait. I know that she can hear us, for example look how she responds, even as we speak."

"How do we get her to choose? To choose us? The life she knows?"

Dr Gupta chuckled.

"If I knew that, Martin," he replied, "I'd have retired by now. Time will be our greatest ally."

"Miss Granger, I want you to come back into this room. Focus on the breath first, then the sounds that you hear the sound of my voice, the crackling of the fire. Turn your head first left, then right, as slowly as if you are not moving at all."

Snape's voice filled her mind, seeping into her consciousness like heat from a warm bath.

"Severus," she breathed.

"Return to this room, Hermione," he said gently. "Bring your mind back here."

"It was a choice," she murmured, "always a choice."

"Focus on the sound of my voice and begin to open your eyes."

Slowly, almost painfully, her eyes fluttered open. Professor Snape, *Severus*, clad in a plain white t-shirt and black tracksuit bottoms crouched opposite her on an ottoman. She felt the warmth of his hands as he reached out to brush the hair from her face and sighed as she leaned, almost unconsciously, into his touch. He smelled of parchment and wood smoke. He looked relieved as she opened her eyes.

"Severus," she murmured. "I *wanted* to choose this life. I didn't care what my parents thought I knew this life was the one I had to choose."

Her hair was burnished mahogany in the firelight. Her skin was cool and smooth, and as her eyes fluttered open, he caught the look of complete trust and contentment as she focused upon him.

She had focused upon him. She had murmured *his* name before anything else.

The teakettle shrilled, jerking him from his reverie and her from her nap upon the sofa.

"Do not stir," he said to her. "Despite the relaxation that your meditative state brings on, it still can be exhausting. I will fetch the tea."

"Thank you." Hermione yawned.

In the kitchenette, he allowed himself to watch the woman curled up upon his sofa stretch luxuriantly.

"Hermione," he murmured to himself, "is this the life you truly chose?"

Dismissing the desire to be part of her life at all, he slammed open the cabinet and pulled the cups from their shelves *Old, disgusting pervert*, he berated himself, *you're no better than Albus*.

AN: Not mine, no money. Special thanks to Bluestocking, Subversa and SavineSnape for their help!

Thirteen

Chapter 13 of 17

Struck by a curse during the final battle, Hermione struggles to grasp what is reality and what is not. Is the curse merely revealing the truth that has been hidden for seven years?

September, 1998

"So, you're saying it's something I can manage?" Hermione watched her mother's face carefully.

"Yes, exactly." Jocasta sounded as if she was trying very hard to control her excitement. "Dr Gupta says that you have the ability, now that you're back with us, to choose to stay here, to live with us to carry on your life as you should."

"Will it get me off of the anti-psychotics?" Hermione was tired of waking in her room, feeling as if her head was full of sand. She was tired of the nightmares of forests and Dementors. But there was also security and a tingling of excitement when Severus was near. She wasn't sure she wanted to give that up.

"Perhaps," her mother replied. "You'll have to ask Dr Gupta. He's coming by tomorrow. And maybe those awful dreams will end, and you can begin to find a place here."

But is here where I want to stay?

"Hermione?" Atalanta shuffled in the doorway, a small voice from a growing girl.

"Yes?" Hermione looked over her mother's shoulder at her sister.

"Hermione, I know it's odd, but ..." Atalanta stopped, clutching a book in her hands.

"Atalanta, this isn't a good time," her mother interrupted.

"No, Mum, it's okay," Hermione said. "What do you want, Atalanta?"

"Hermione, I was wondering if ... well, back when we were small, you'd read to me, and Dr Gupta said it was good for us to," she scrunched up her face in concentration, "for us to resume normal activities do things that we did before."

"Of course."

"And one of the things we used to do is, well, you used to read to me, and I was wondering if ..." She trailed off, blushing furiously.

"Would you like me to read to you now?" Hermione asked.

Atalanta nodded vigorously. "I've been reading these," she exclaimed, waving a battered book. "They're not thick, like the ones you used to read when you were my age, but it's fun."

Hermione held out her hand. "Whatever you'd like me to read, I'd be happy to," she said.

Atalanta beamed and hopped up onto the bed next to her sister.

Hermione opened the slim volume and began,

"If one had to pinpoint the event that sent the Bagthorpes plunging into the madness that would possess them for a whole season, then that event would be the burglary. There were other factors, of course, not the least among them the infuriating rise to fame of Zero, Grandma, and Daisy. But it was the burglary that really set things off."

Atalanta snuggled closer to Hermione as the two of them plunged into another hair-raising episode in the saga of the Bagthorpe family.

Jocasta smiled and quietly left the room, unnoticed by either of the girls.

Hermione smiled as she read she knew her sister could be reading "better" books, but for the moment, this was perfect.

I suppose I'd forgotten this, she mused, turning a page and giggling in spite of herself. *Perhaps Atalanta isn't such an annoyance, after all.*

"We've lost her again," Snape said to the panting young man who had just raced into his office.

"How long, do you think?" Harry shoved his hair back and examined the still girl.

"It is hard to tell we were speaking of the NEWT Potions curriculum, and then, as if somebody had snuffed a candle, she was gone. Why did you not attend the revision session, speaking of which?" Snape turned towards his desk, knuckles white as he gripped his cane, trying to cover his impotent rage at the setback and Potter's indolence.

Harry's brow wrinkled. "Do you think ... do you think this is a good time to try Legilimency?" he asked, dodging the second question.

"You can try, Potter Harry," Snape replied, suppressing a sneer, "but I'd hate for you to lose your mind as well. An over-indulgence in Legilimency can have unfortunate side effects."

Harry grinned.

"Well, you've not had to watch Ron and Lavender argue over their wedding plans, have you? Why don't I have a go? If my mind goes, it'll be a relief. *Legilimens!*"

It took Snape several moments of outraged fury at the boy's flippancy before he realized that the little idiot had been, in his limited way, attempting to make a joke.

"Good luck, Potter," he drawled, easing into the battered desk chair and taking up his quill. School would be starting soon, and he did, after all, have work to do: work that did not involve *her*. He reminded himself of his pledge from that morning he must maintain an emotional distance, for to get too close to her, a former student, was highly unacceptable.

Bitterly, he ignored the memory of her face from the night before, luminous in the firelight as she sat before him.

"Tea's ready!" Jocasta's voice echoed through the house.

"Coming, Mum!" the girls chorused from Hermione's bed. Hermione tossed aside the book.

"We can finish this later, Atalanta."

"Okay," agreed her sister.

"Make sure you wash, first!" Jocasta called.

"Go ahead," Hermione said. "I'll be right behind you."

The girl bounced off the bed and Hermione followed more slowly. The buzzing in the back of her mind that had begun only a few moments before was becoming more insistent, and she couldn't seem to shake it.

Hermione!

She stared hard at the girl reflected in her mirror, willing the buzzing to stop.

I can feel you, Hermione; just try to relax and give me a sign that you can hear me. We're trying to get you back, I promise! But you have to work with us.

It was Harry's voice. Harry. Harry, who had stuck with her in the forest. Harry, who had gone with her when they'd rescued Buckbeak and Sirius. Harry, who had always listened to her eventually. Harry, who was her *friend*.

Harry, who wasn't real.

She sighed. It was too much for them to be asking of her too much for her to keep one foot in reality and the other in her dream-world. Or was it? As the days had progressed, the line between worlds had been more and more blurry.

I'm here, Harry, she thought, taking a deep breath and trying to focus.

Hermione! Harry's thought crackled with relief.

Harry, I need ... I need time. Please. Just give me time.

"Hermione! Tea!" Her mother's voice jerked her away from her friends.

Hermione turned and hurried from the room. Harry did not reply, but she knew that he was still there that he'd not leave her.

That afternoon, Snape paced his quarters (Poppy had been nagging him about moving about more), deep in thought. Potter's attempt at Legilimency had yielded some results both he and Hermione (when she emerged from her state) claimed to have been able to hear the other.

"Harry!" Her voice had been filled with a joy that almost pierced Snape's heart. "You didn't leave me!"

"I told you I wouldn't," Potter had replied, reaching out for her hand and squeezing it.

"Miss Granger, do you remember what happened?" Snape had interjected, quelling the tightening in his throat.

"I had tea with Mum and Dad and Atalanta," Hermione told them, smiling wryly. "And then I read to Atalanta some more."

"Where are you now?" Snape asked.

"Dreaming," she replied vaguely. Snape was reminded, unaccountably, of the dreamy Miss Lovegood.

"Hermione?" Potter's voice cracked in anxiety.

"I mean, *there* I'm dreaming," Hermione hastened to explain. "I'm dreaming I'm at Hogwarts, talking to you."

Snape felt a flicker of worry Hermione's vagueness was a new symptom: a symptom eerily reminiscent of a young Bellatrix Black, just as she was beginning to truly follow the Dark Lunatic. Frowning, he hurried to his bedroom.

The room was almost bare thankfully, the Salazar Slytherin bed had been destroyed by Merlin only knew what during the battle. The camp bed that the elves had pilfered from the Hospital Wing suited his needs perfectly it was more comfortable, truth be told, than the ornate monstrosity. Other than the bed, rickety bookshelves groaned under their weight. The simplicity suited him.

Selecting three volumes, he sank down onto the bed. Kicking off his shoes, he began to read about the effects of Legilimency on a mind not fully Occluded.

"Severus! Where are you?" A shout echoed through his quarters before he could find the answer he sought. Clad in grey socks and his school robes, he fumbled for his cane and rose, shuffling into the sitting room.

Bill Weasley's head poked through the Floo, the green flame clashing oddly with his red hair.

"Severus!" he exclaimed, eyes alight with excitement even through the Floo. "I've found it I've found the counter-curse!"

Hope leapt within Snape's breast. Hermione could be healed!

What happened to distance, you old pervert?

"But there are some problems look, can I come through?"

"Of course." Snape stepped back to allow the other man to tumble through.

"What have you found?"

"Many things. And many problems, unfortunately." Bill brushed the soot from his ridiculous t-shirt, emblazoned with the slogan *Weird Sisters World Tour, 1989*. On it, the Weird Sisters cavorted with their instruments.

"Start with the problems," Snape said, determined to ignore the Weasley penchant for outlandish clothing. Perhaps it came from Molly?

"Ever the optimist, you are. One problem is--" Bill paused to catch his breath -- "one problem is that Hermione must be the one to cast the spell."

"Elucidate, Weasley; how, exactly, is that a problem?"

"Well ..." Bill sank down onto the sofa and then leaped up as Snape glared at him. "Well, there are complications."

"Name them for Merlin's sake, man, what has your robes so twisted?"

Bill raked his hand through his hair. "Can I sit down?" he asked plaintively. "Fleur's just told me that she's pregnant and that's why she's been throwing up all night. I'm a little scattered."

"Congratulations, and welcome to the joys of parenthood," Snape sneered. "Now *tell me*, Weasley, or do I have to hex it out of you? I'm sure Miss Delacour would be more than pleased right now if your impending child did not have brothers and sisters!" To emphasize the point, he drew his wand.

Bill looked a bit nervous and remained standing, arms crossed. "Fine," he placated. "The problems are these. One: to cast the *Reparo Legilimentilis*, which would counter the *Unde Orieris*, requires an enormous amount of magical ability."

"I fail to see how that is a problem for Hermione. She is a strong and powerful witch." Snape chose that moment to sink into the wingback chair by the fire.

"Well, that's the first part of the problem. Problems." Bill began to pace.

"Go on."

"The difficulty is that if one who has had the *Refracto Legilimentilis* cast upon them casts the *Reparo Legilimentilis*, it is possible she can erase her mind entirely. The two spells tend to work in tandem, like an *Obliviate* gone wrong."

"Explain. And for Merlin's sake, if it's that important to you, sit down and stop wearing out my hearthrug!"

Bill flopped onto the sofa and folded his hands, cracking his knuckles one by one. "It works like this: when one casts the Refracto, one also follows up with the Reparo, to restore certain memories. But one has to cast both spells on oneself. It's sort of a more efficient version of *Occulmens*, actually.

"But if the Refracto has been cast by someone else, the effects of the Reparo can be dangerous. It would stop the Unde Orieris, but it could also completely erase the subject's mind." He sank back, spreading his hands.

"I see," said Snape after a pause. He frowned, concentrating. "Hermione must cast the spell herself. But if she does, because someone else cast the Refracto *Legimentilis* upon her, she stands not only to stop the effects of the *Unde Orieris* but also lose her mind entirely."

Bill nodded glumly. "Exactly. But she needs to know, Severus; we can't hide the truth from her."

"No, we can't. But let us do some more research, Weasley. As you know, she's a Gryffindor like you she'd fly off without a broom if she discovered what we know."

Bill nodded and grinned. "You're right, of course. I'll Floo you tomorrow, and we can work some more on this. I should be getting back; Fleur will be missing me."

"Weasley?" Snape rose, leaning on his cane.

"Yes?" Bill leapt from the sofa.

Snape shuffled to the kitchenette and reached into a cupboard.

"Before you go, take this." He tossed a small vial at the redhead.

"What is it?"

"Nausea Potion. It's perfectly safe."

Bill's smile was broad as he caught the vial with a flourish. "Thanks, Severus," he said. "I reckon you weren't ever really a bad sort, were you?"

"Get out, Weasley," Snape growled, glaring at him.

He remained glaring at the spot Bill had occupied long after the Floo had ceased to glow green.

He was trying to sleep. Merlin knew he was exhausted beyond exhausted but Bill's words rattled through his head:

"She needs to know the truth, Severus."

"Too much truth has already been hidden, Albus; she deserves to know."

"When she's ready, Severus, then she will know."

"You decided she was ready at eleven! How is this different?" he demanded of the portrait.

"When the battle's done, Severus, when her parents are home and safe, we can restore all she's lost."

"You can't restore ..." Snape trailed off as the wards on the Headmaster's office began to shimmer. Alecto, again.

"I'll leave you to your important business, of course," Albus said with crushing humility, "but you must try to see the big picture, dear boy."

"That's rich," Snape muttered, "coming from the likes of you." Raising his voice he called out, "Enter, Alecto!"

AN: Not mine, no money. Special thanks to Subversa, Bluestocking79, and SavineSnape for making this readable!

The selection Hermione reads to Atalanta is from Bagthorpes Unlimited by Helen Cresswell and does not belong to me.

Fourteen

Chapter 14 of 17

Struck by a curse during the final battle, Hermione struggles to grasp what is reality and what is not. Is the curse merely revealing the truth that has been hidden for seven years?

September, 1998

"We can do it. We can stop the shifting between reality and the Muggle fantasy world," Bill announced to the pair in the Headmistress' office.

Hermione's eyes grew wide, and she clasped her hands to her mouth. Snape turned to the window, avoiding the curious stares of the Headmasters who were awake (Albus and Phineas). Hermione watched him, wondering why such good news would produce such a reaction.

"Really?" she whispered, setting aside her proposal to Minerva for a comprehensive assessment of house-elf rights in wizarding Britain as part of her NEWT project for History of Magic.

Bill smiled gently. "Really. It's all there." He sat across from them, pushing the documents towards the pair.

"Are you certain, Bill?" Minerva asked, toying with the edges of the parchment.

"Yes, of course we're certain," interrupted Snape, turning abruptly from the window. The equinoctial storm was whipping around the turrets of the castle, sending sheets of rain into the windows. In the courtyard below, sodden students raced for shelter.

High atop the tower in the Headmistress' office, the portraits and a contented Crookshanks snoozed to the sound of the wind and rain. On the table littered with papers, four mugs sat, sending their fragrant steam into the air.

"I'm just asking, Severus," chided Minerva. "We've gone through so much already, it would seem a shame to have made it this far and..."

"I assure you, Minerva," Snape said acidly, moving towards the door preparatory to leaving, "Bill and I have examined every angle. If you would be so kind as to read through the proposal we have prepared, most of your questions will be answered."

Hermione eagerly reached for the sheaf of parchment Bill placed carefully on the worn conference table.

"We thought it best if you and Minerva had something on parchment," Bill explained.

"So if you had any impertinent questions," Snape commented from the doorway, "you could write them in the margins, consider them carefully, and *then* ask them."

Hermione exchanged a long look with Minerva.

"It is good to see your sense of humor returning, Severus," commented Minerva.

Both Bill and Hermione hastily reached for their tea mugs. Phineas Nigellus coughed.

Snape shot a poisonous glare at the trio in the office and stumped out. Hermione was reminded unaccountably of Mad-Eye Moody on a day when his Eye was acting up.

"Excuse me," she murmured, rising and pushing away her chair.

"Severus, wait!" Her voice rang out down the stairwell.

"Professor Snape," he corrected, pausing nonetheless. "I trust, Miss Granger, that you have something important to reveal? Or do you enjoy flaunting the privileges of a seventh-year plus in front of your school mates by daring to address me by my given name?"

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Really, Severus," she chided, "it isn't as if there are *that* many students here. Furthermore, none of them seem to be hanging about this particular stairwell. Therefore, none of them could have possibly heard me 'flaunting' the privilege of calling you by your given name." She finished, looking satisfied.

Snape grunted and shifted his weight to his other foot. His neck and shoulder, and entire right side, for that matter, never felt quite right during rainstorms.

"What do you want?" he asked acidly. "Now that you've finished trying out your unconvincing Gryffindor-style rhetoric?"

"Is that really your worst insult?" Hermione asked, smiling. "I wanted to thank you."

"Thank me?"

"Yes, to thank you. Bill's a brilliant curse-breaker, but only you have the knack of putting together a solution so that one can truly understand it."

"And you believe that I..."

"I'll know who wrote which parts of your proposal," Hermione insisted. "And thank you. I hope that when you publish it, it will be successful."

"Miss Granger, I hardly think that this is the time or place for you to be considering my *academic* aspirations. Have you even read the document in question?"

Hermione laughed, a burbling, trickling cascade. "Not yet," she admitted, "but it's still a brilliant idea. I reached the end of the introduction, recognized your style and wanted to make sure... to make sure you knew."

"Well, now that you have done that, why don't you return to the tower and *read* your assignment?" he growled.

Hermione made an exasperated moue and leaned up on her toes.

"Just let me thank you, sir," she said, grinning impudently, and kissed him on the cheek.

Snape drifted through the rest of that Saturday in the eerily empty castle with his cheek tingling as if it had been burned.

The candles burned low in their sconces as Hermione curled up in Minerva's tartan-covered chair by the crackling fire. Around her, portraits (and Crookshanks) still snoozed the evening away. Outside, the wind and rain howled around the towers and turrets.

Hermione, however, did not notice the differences between outdoors and in. Her focus was entirely on the parchment before her, her quill scratching furiously.

She had read the section on the effects of the *Unde Orieris* on the mind and body with satisfaction. Bill had done his work well. But it was with a growing sense of unease that she read about the effects of the *Refracto Legilimentis* when combined with the *Reparo Legilimentis*. Unease turned to horror as she read of the full effects of *Reparo* and *Refracto Legimentilis* upon the unoccluded and unprepared mind.

When she reached the end of the page, her quill fell from her hands and she sat, staring into the fire.

"Just what the hell have you done, Hermione?" she murmured.

Crookshanks jumped from his perch on the bookshelves next to the fireplace and stretched.

"Mrow?" he asked, squashed face inquisitive.

Absently, she reached down to pet him, but the dinner bell sounded, and he darted away. Far below her, the clattering of books and students arose as the denizens of Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry filed to their evening meal.

"No," she whispered, "it was supposed to be *safe*. I double-checked it. I read the books! I did the research! This wasn't supposed to happen!"

On the mantle, Minerva's ormolu clock (with appreciation from the Malfoy Family) chimed the hour.

"No, no, no, no, no." Galvanized to action, Hermione sprung from her chair, scattering parchment, quills and a Gryffindor throw.

"Well, now!" huffed a startled portrait.

"Where's the fire?" jeered another one.

From his corner, Dumbledore looked up in interest.

"Miss Granger, wait," he called out from his frame.

Hermione heard none of them as she tore from the room, letting the heavy oak door slam behind her.

Down, down, down the stairs she hurtled, almost concussing herself on the guardian griffin at the bottom. It was the dinner hour; nobody would be in the library. She could prove that Bill was wrong.

She *had* to prove that Bill was wrong.

Anxiety made her swift as she raced through the corridors, into the darkened library. She banged her knee on a chair, carelessly left out, and screamed at the shadow of a monster looming before her.

"*Lumos!*" she cried, and the darkness sprang back. The monster was Madam Pince's return stack and *Silence!* sign.

Growing panic made her clumsy as she stumbled through the stacks back into the Restricted Section (being a post-seventh-year had its privileges) and grabbed for the books she had pulled so long ago, just in case. *They had to be right*, she thought, *They would've said if something like this could happen. Bill has to be wrong*

"Accio proposal!" she cried, waving her wand with one hand and grasping at the stack of books with the other. The parchment zoomed through the library and settled on the desk.

"Come on, Granger, come on..." she muttered to herself, frantically flipping through the volumes before her. "You can find it..."

The dinner hour wore on, and Hermione knew she had little time before Madam Pince and the few students who would be studying on a Saturday night returned.

"Please," she murmured as *Ancient Magic of the Mind* fell open to the page she had marked what seemed like ages ago (had it only been a year and a half?). "Please," she begged, "no."

Sweating and gasping for breath, Hermione sat up in bed, entangled in damp and clinging sheets.

"Oh, God," she whispered. The luminescent numbers of her bedside clock read 2.10.

Relief flooded through her and she sank back onto her pillow.

"Thank God," she said aloud. "A dream. Just a dream."

Something niggled at her, an insect bite in her consciousness. She disentangled herself from her sheets and rose from her bed.

"Try it," she said to herself, "it can't hurt. You've never actually made an attempt here."

Hermione took a deep breath and waved her hand.

"*Lumos!*"

Nothing happened. Relief flooded through her as she reached over and clicked on her bedside light. Straightening, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror above her dresser.

"Hello, Hermione," she said to her reflection.

The girl in the mirror merely reflected her, as she hoped: mouse-brown, bushy hair, finally growing out, brown eyes, slightly protruding teeth.

"Hello, Hermione," she said again.

"Hermione?" her father stood in her doorway, clad in purple pajamas and a robe.

"Sorry, Dad," Hermione said. "I had... I had a nightmare and I just needed a moment to reorient myself."

The relief on her father's face was plain.

"Okay," he replied, "I just heard something and..."

"I'm fine, Dad. Go back to bed."

Her father smiled and walked into her room. Wrapping her in a tight embrace, he kissed the top of her head.

"Never apologize, pet," he whispered, "as long as you're here, with us, you can wake me any time you like."

Hermione hugged him back, blinking back the tears.

"Now, missy, go back to bed. You have a big day tomorrow."

"Yes, Dad," Hermione said dutifully, biting back a smile. Her father had *always* said that, even when a "big day" involved weeding the back garden. This time, her big day involved an interview with the college of further education. Hermione was excited it was the first step, her first step back.

Back to the real world. The world where she belonged. Where her parents were safe. Where her sister was real.

"Sleep well, pet." Her father turned to leave.

"G'night, Dad."

Hermione climbed back into bed. Outside the wind and rain of the equinoctial storm murmured around the snug suburban house. Inside, Hermione snuggled between her sheets and turned out her light. *Oh, it's nice to be me again* was her last thought as she fell asleep.

Peeves swooped through the Great Hall, ignoring the shouts of irritation and screams of disgust as the dungbomb he'd planned to set off in the Hufflepuff dormitory fell from his ghostly robes and dropped into the Gryffindor soup tureen.

The Great Hall flew into chaos, and order was not restored until very late that evening. It was not until the next morning that Madam Pince found the still form of Hermione, quill gripped in stiff fingers and the tracks of tears on her cheeks.

On the parchment Madam Pince showed to a very concerned Minerva were scratched frantic notes in Hermione's writing. The last words, however, caught the Headmistress' attention: *I never meant to. It wasn't supposed to happen like this. The books weren't supposed to be wrong.*

Minerva's first mistake was summoning Snape to her office to show him the parchment. Her second mistake was showing him the parchment. Her third produced the most spectacular results.

Colin Creevey, apprentice to the Messers Bogs and Blotters (painters of Hogwarts Headmasters for centuries), assured Minerva and the rest of the portraits that Albus Dumbledore's portrait would be able to be restored, but that the process could take at least six months, more likely a year.

Phineas Black observed, after everybody else had left, that Eileen Prince's boy had always had the propensity to hex first and ask questions later, declaring that ~~he'd~~ been in Minerva's position, he'd have had the good sense to disarm the man before she showed him where the Granger girl had gone wrong. Then, he stated, maybe the one being in the castle who had an inkling of what had happened to her and why wouldn't be trapped in the Bogs and Blotters workshop for the foreseeable future.

Minerva restrained the urge to expand the outer limits of her vocabulary and went to the cupboard where Albus stored his collections of Pensieves.

She did not ask Snape to join her.

AN: Special thanks to Subversa, Bluestocking79, and SavineSnape for hand-holding, beta-ing, and Brit Picking!

Fifteen

Chapter 15 of 17

Struck by a curse during the final battle, Hermione struggles to grasp what is reality and what is not. Is the curse merely revealing the truth that has been hidden for seven years?

September, 1998

"Try it again, Potter."

"Severus, I'm doing my best."

"Try it *again*."

"Really, Severus, the lad is doing his best," Minerva interjected. "Perhaps, Harry, you could try and focus a little harder."

Snape subsided, sitting back in the uncomfortable chair in the corner of the cubicle Poppy had hastily erected in the Hospital Wing.

Potter sighed and gave him and Minerva a reproachful look.

"I take it," Snape demanded acidly, "that several hours deep in the mind of Albus the flaming lunatic Dumbledore yielded no new information?"

Minerva glared at him.

Snape both felt and looked smug.

"Would you mind?" Potter snapped, uncharacteristically authoritative. "This isn't exactly easy!"

Indeed, the young man was sweating as again and again he murmured *Legilimens*, trying to enter Hermione's mind.

Outside, younger students romped in the unseasonably warm sunshine as the trees adorned themselves in their autumnal glory. A late meadowlark trilled its tune.

With a dispirited shrug, Potter turned away from his efforts to reach his friend.

"I can't find her, Severus. I'm sorry. Wherever she is, she's not in there."

The buzzing in her head was not as irritating as it had been in weeks past, Hermione noted as she carefully applied her makeup before the mirror.

Blusher, lippy, there. Ready to go. Resolutely, she ignored the temptation to ask the mirror what it thought. The dream of last night still hung heavy upon her: confusing visions of a running through a castle's corridors, odd smelling books with frightening symbols, and a growing sense of horror.

"Hermione? Are you ready?" Jocasta's voice called up to her.

"Coming, Mum!" Hermione smiled at the reflection in the mirror: partly pleased with her first efforts at dressing to go out, and partly relieved to hear her mother's familiar voice.

"Bill and I will have to go." Potter looked resolute.

"What about your studies?" demanded Minerva, pursing her lips as an unusually rowdy bunch of Gryffindors rioted past the open door to the hospital wing. Behind them, a harried Prefect tried to herd them back to their dormitory. Even with the Houses half-full (and Slytherin almost decimated), the children still made an unearthly racket.

"Hermione is my priority," Potter insisted, rising suddenly from the hard chair beside Hermione's white draped bed. "And if I can make contact with her parents, then, perhaps there's hope. I *won't* have her becoming another victim of Voldemort."

Snape flinched, despite himself.

"Who else will go, Minerva?" he asked, shifting his weight on his cane. "I'd not dare incur your wrath by seeming to shirk my duties as Potions master and Head of Slytherin House, you cannot leave the School for any length of time at the moment (unlike some Heads I could name), Filius has his hands full with the first years, Poppy cannot be expected to leave in the middle of Quidditch season..."

"So it's settled, then," Potter said, heading for Poppy's Floo. "I'll call Bill, and we'll be back by the end of the week. We won't be able to arrange for an international Portkey until Wednesday at the latest, so, that will give me plenty of time to pack and, erm, finish my homework," he amended with a guilty glance at Snape and Minerva.

"Good thinking," Snape muttered, turning away. "And best of luck with Weasley," he added. "Ever since Miss Delacour fell pregnant, he's more attached to his home than ever."

"Heavens, Severus!" Minerva exclaimed. "Fleur is pregnant? How did you know? Why did you not tell me?" She hurried past Potter, all but shoving him aside in her haste to reach Poppy's Floo.

Snape allowed himself a quiet smirk.

"Erm, well," Potter said, "I suppose I ought to go and see if I can get a word with Bill, then."

"Yes, I suppose you ought," Snape replied, turning to lean against the frame of Hermione's cubicle.

Behind him, he heard Potter shuffle awkwardly. He allowed himself another quiet smirk at his success in discomfiting the boy.

Before him, Hermione lay as if Petrified, sightless eyes fixed upon the ceiling.

"So, tell me," asked the kindly lady behind the desk in the admissions office. Her nameplate proclaimed her to be Miss Haverworth. "Tell me what you want from your life."

"I'd like to be a barrister, a human rights barrister," Hermione replied, folding her hands in her lap and meeting Miss Haverworth's gaze confidently.

"Oh, a barrister!" replied Miss Haverworth, "that *is* ambitious. We don't get many fledgling human rights barristers at Guildford College."

Hermione managed a smile. "I suppose not."

"Now, what A-levels do you have?"

"Erm, none."

"GCSEs?"

"None. As I stated over the phone, I've not been in a traditional school setting since I was eleven."

Miss Haverworth frowned. "Oh yes, of course," she replied. "If you don't mind me asking, what happened?"

"There was an accident," Hermione replied flatly. "I have only just begun to recover."

"Well," Miss Haverworth said briskly, "you'll have to demonstrate competency in several subjects. And I would suggest you investigate our AS and A level courses. Perhaps even a Foundation Course." She handed a sheaf of leaflets across her desk.

"But these are all about business courses and accountancy and information technology!" she protested.

"Well," Miss Haverworth rejoined, glaring at Hermione over her glasses, "one *does not*, after seven years out of school, with no GCSE's or A-levels, merely waltz in here and expect to become a lawyer."

Hermione forced a smile and tried again.

"Perhaps I didn't make myself clear," she began.

The weather in Enmor was surprisingly cool.

"It is early spring, here," Bill pointed out.

"I suppose so," Harry agreed. "What's that address again?"

"Fifteen Arcadia Lane right down this street."

Together, the two men turned the corner and walked confidently down the pleasant, tree-lined suburban street. It had taken a great deal of fast talking for Harry to convince Bill to come with him to New South Wales to find Monica and Wendell Wilkins.

But Bill had eventually agreed to accompany Harry in hopes of finding Hermione's parents and discovering what Hermione had done to them.

"Here, it's this one." Harry pointed. In the small front garden, a curly-haired woman was clearing out old, dead undergrowth.

"Have you ever met them?" Bill asked.

"Once at Flourish and Blotts right before our second year."

"And?" Bill raised an eyebrow in an uncanny imitation of Snape, albeit a redheaded Snape.

"It *looks* like Hermione's mum."

"Shouldn't she be at work?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know maybe she's taking the day off or she only works in the mornings? I really don't know, Bill."

"Uh, Harry?" Bill asked. "Are you sure you have the address right?"

"Yeah," Harry replied, referring back to the paper. "Why? That's definitely her mum."

"It has to be the wrong house," Bill insisted, frowning.

"It can't be we did the tracking spells. It's the right house," Harry argued.

"Harry... look."

Harry's head snapped up and he reached for his wand.

"Oh, shit," he gasped, "She wasn't... how did *that* happen? I thought that..."

A curly haired girl of about eleven or twelve was coming down the street from the opposite direction. Confidently, she turned at the gate of Number Fifteen.

"Fiona?" the woman looked up from her task. "How was school?"

"Fine, Mum!" Fiona replied, swinging a heavy book bag off her shoulder. The gate closed behind her, and Hermione's mum rose and dusted off her hands. "I'm starving," continued the girl.

"How about a quick snack before tea, then?" asked Monica Wilkins.

"Wicked!" enthused the girl.

Bill and Harry stood rooted to the pavement.

"What the hell?" Bill began.

"Who the hell?" Harry asked.

"You're sure this is the right address?"

"Yeah. And that's Hermione's mum."

"D'you think they could've adopted? No," Bill immediately answered his own question. "Fiona is the very image of Hermione at twelve."

"Yeah." Harry scratched his head. "Now what?"

"Well," Bill said slowly, "I'm not sure. Do you still want to talk to them?"

Harry frowned.

"It can't hurt, I suppose," he agreed.

Hermione sat up in her bed, scribbling frantically on a yellow pad by the light of her bedside lamp. Around here were scattered GCSE review books and A Level brochures.

"Hermione, darling, it's late." Jocasta stood in the doorway, wrapped in a dressing gown. Outside, the sunny day had given way to a cool, rainy night.

"I'll go to bed in a bit, Mum, I promise."

Jocasta smiled sympathetically. "I'm sorry that today didn't work out the way you wanted it to," she said.

"Thanks, Mum." Hermione did not look up from her notes.

"But you'll start working, and maybe we can find you an apprenticeship somewhere."

"Mm hmm."

The silence between mother and daughter stretched. Outside, the rain slammed into the house and the wind whistled among the trees.

"Just... don't stay up too much longer," Jocasta said.

"Mm hmmm."

October, 1998

It was late. Outside, the rain slammed into the windows and the wind moaned among the turrets of the castle.

Completing his rounds, Snape crept silently into the hospital wing. Gentle snores emanated from the house-elf on duty.

In Hermione's cubicle, a candle burned low.

Drawing a chair close, Snape eased into it and sat beside her bed, leaning his cane on the headboard.

"You must try, Hermione," he murmured, taking her hand into his own. It was cool, the skin soft. "You must try. Potter's worried sick about you. Minerva can barely stop fretting over you. Filius needs his star pupil back, even if you are a Gryffindor. And I ..." he paused. Somewhere deep in the castle, a door slammed. Peeves, probably, frightening the first-years in their beds.

"Try, Hermione. For my sake. For the sake of a broken old man who doesn't need one more fatality weighing upon his soul."

Hermione did not reply, but as Snape sat in the dimly lit cubicle, he felt her hand tighten around his.

Poppy found them in the morning Snape, asleep with his head pillowed on the edge of her bed, and Hermione, out of her trance and gently sleeping with her hand on his lank, greasy hair.

AN: Not mine, no money. Special thanks to Bluestocking, Subversa, and SavineSnape for their invaluable help!

Sixteen

Chapter 16 of 17

Struck by a curse during the final battle, Hermione struggles to grasp what is reality and what is not. Is the curse merely revealing the truth that has been hidden for seven years?

October, 1998

A few moments after awakening in the hospital wing, Hermione decided not to tell Severus where she had found her hand. Instead, she closed her eyes and feigned sleep as he stirred, grunted, and jerked his head off of her bed.

"Good morning," she murmured, smiling at him.

"Miss Granger," he rasped. And then, as if her smile had melted some of his icy façade, "Hermione." The moment of peace stretched between them.

"How long has it been?" she asked, praying that the moment would last.

"A long time," he replied. "Almost a week. Do you remember much?"

Hermione noticed that his hand was almost touching hers. She inched hers closer, feeling the warmth of his skin against hers.

"I remember that I was home," she said, "and happy to be there. But then ... then things started to go wrong. Not badly so, but I've been ... I've been so much a part of this world that going back to the other one was ..." She trailed off, uncertain of how to express her disappointment, her failure.

"Hermione, you don't have to ..." His hand covered hers and grasped it.

"But if I stay here," she argued, "I'm alone. No parents, no sister, just ... just magic. And what has that done for me, lately?" Her mouth twisted.

"You're not alone, Hermione." He said it so quietly that she wasn't sure she heard it. Perhaps it was better ignored no sense in pushing him where even Ron had feared to tread. Instead, she took in the silence and the warm pressure of his hand upon hers.

Bill and Harry suddenly spun into existence in the middle of the room. Bill dropped the sandal and hurried to the Floo, shouting for Minerva as Harry stumbled into a table, sending the metal tray holding glasses, phials, and plates crashing to the floor.

The house-elf on duty squeaked in alarm and dove for the wreckage.

"Well done, Potter," Snape sneered, rising from Hermione's bedside, still an impressive figure, despite the cane in his grasp.

Harry blushed and bent to help the house-elf, who squeaked in alarm again and snapped its fingers. Instantly, the mess disappeared, and Harry was left crouched over awkwardly, grasping at a mess that was no longer there.

Hermione repressed a giggle the first one she'd felt rise in her chest in days ... months, perhaps?

"As soon as you've finished making a fool of yourself, do you suppose we can discuss what you and Bill have found?" Snape asked as Harry scrambled to his feet.

"Minerva's coming," Bill said, withdrawing his head from the Floo and brushing the soot from his red hair, tidying the ponytail as he did so, fang earring swinging.

"And then?" Hermione demanded. "Then will we know if ... If we can stop this? If I can get my parents back?"

"Well, Hermione," Bill said, "I'm afraid that it's a bit more complicated than that."

The door to the Hospital Wing banged open, and Minerva hurried in with a flourish of McGonagall tartan.

"I'm so glad you're back," she said, Summoning a chair from the corner and settling next to Hermione. "How are you, my dear?" she asked.

Hermione smiled. "I'll be better in a moment, when I know for certain that I can restore my parents. I mean - that's what you went to find out, right, Bill?"

Bill pulled a chair across the floor, its wooden legs screeching on the flags. Harry sat upon Hermione's bed as she scooted over to make room for him.

Snape resumed his chair with a grimace. Outside, the rain beat against the mullioned windows, and the unquiet wind moaned around the turrets.

"Well," Bill began, "we found Monica and Wendell Wilkins in New South Wales, right where we'd hoped. But we also found somebody else."

"Who?" Hermione demanded.

"We found Fiona Wilkins," Harry interjected. "Hermione, we found your sister."

"Is there anything?" Jocasta asked.

"No. I'm sorry, Mrs Granger, not even a flicker."

"How could she do this? We were so close! She had an interview yesterday with a college! She was supposed to start a job next week!" Jocasta sank to the bed where her daughter sat, surrounded by a litter of papers and books and pens, bushy hair illumined by the glow of her bedside lamp.

"I'm sorry, Jocasta," Dr Gupta said again. "What's happening in Hermione's mind ... is complicated. But ultimately, as I've said before, she will choose how she wants to live. Here, with us in the real world, or in the fantasy world of hers that she's created in her mind." He picked up the small leather bound notebook from beneath the papers.

"Hermione," Jocasta whispered, turning to her daughter and smoothing the wild tangle of hair. "You must try. For our sake, for the sake of your sister, who looks up to you so much, who wants her big sister back to loan her clothes, to read to her, to fight with her, even! Please, Hermione, please come back to us."

Outside, the October rain beat against the quiet suburban house.

"I'm sorry, Mrs Granger," Dr Gupta said.

"They're happy," Hermione said faintly.

"Very much so," Bill replied. Harry pressed her hand in silent sympathy. "They have a good life, Hermione you did well in establishing that."

"And ... Atal- Fiona?" Hermione asked.

"Thriving. She loves her school she's at the top of her class."

Snape and Minerva both smiled until Snape caught her eye and frowned.

"Do they even know that they had another daughter?" Hermione blurted. "No," she amended, "of course not."

"I'm afraid you're right, Hermione," said Harry quietly. "They have no idea at all."

"Bill, wait," Minerva said, sitting up straighter in her chair. "I thought Atalanta Fiona, wasn't...*who* is she?"

Bill stretched his long legs and glanced at Harry, who rose from Hermione's bed quickly.

"We're not sure," Harry finally admitted, beginning to pace. "Until this point, all we've had was a reference to her existence in Dumbledore's files."

"She *does* exist in this world. She *is* real," Hermione whispered.

"But how was Hermione able to modify her memory as well, if she didn't even know of her existence?" Minerva asked.

"That, we don't know," Bill admitted.

Snape shifted, crossing his leg and instantly regretting it as pain shot through his lower back.

"Headmaster, this is madness! You can't simply make somebody disappear."

"She will exist, Severus: to her parents, to Muggles, even to other wizards, but not to Hermione. That is the beauty of the Refracto Legimentis - it allows us to select what memories to keep and which ones to remove."

"But what if something happens? This is madness! If she needs to hide her family, or to protect them, how can she protect them all?" Severus strode angrily to the window and glared out at the springtime clouds scudding across the sky.

"You're not listening, Severus." Dumbledore's voice took on a hard edge. "Any spell Hermione, or anyone on the side of Light, casts upon her family to protect them will automatically cover Atalanta. Hermione simply won't be aware that it's extending to one more person."

"It was only to hide her from me," Hermione said suddenly as if she'd heard his thoughts. "But when I cast the *Refracto Legilimentis* on my parents, I also cast it upon her."

"I'm afraid so, yes," Snape replied.

"Severus ..." Hermione began, groping on the bed.

His hand found hers. He didn't care if Minerva pursed her lips or Potter adjusted his glasses and coughed, or if Bill raised an eyebrow. Her hand was warm under his; he answered her squeeze with a gentle pressure of his own.

Hermione gave a long, shuddering sigh and swung her legs over the edge, letting go of Snape's hand. He was bereft but ignored the disquiet as she pushed herself off the bed. He moved back to give her space, to give himself distance.

"Hermione, you don't have to ..." Potter began, moving forward as Snape shifted to the foot of the bed, grasping the metal frame.

"Yes, Harry, I *do*," she insisted. "I have to find out if there is a way for me to restore their memories. Not only for them, but also ... also for Atalanta. Even if I can't remember her, I can give her life back to her. And maybe ... Maybe I can begin to remember her!"

"Miss Granger..."

"Hermione ..." Snape and Bill began in unison, each falling silent as the other spoke.

"Hermione, I'm sorry, but ... there's no way that you *can* restore their memories," Harry said.

"No, Harry," Hermione insisted, shaking her curly head. "There has to be a way. We have to find it."

"Hermione," Snape said gently, "I'm afraid Potter is right. They ... Monica and Wendell Wilkins are Muggles. If you cast the *Reparo Legimentis* upon them, you could very well end up erasing their minds entirely."

"But, I ... even though they were not affected by the *Unde Orieris*?" Hermione demanded.

"It is because they are Muggles. Their minds are not ... not prepared for such a shift in their perceptions. And ..." Snape moved away from his post at the foot of her bed.

"And to shift them back to Jocasta and Martin Granger would effectively destroy them." Hermione finished his thought, sitting abruptly back down upon the bed.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," Potter began, sitting beside her. "But you need to know; they're happy where they are. And Fiona, Atalanta, your sister, is happy, too."

"Did you know, Harry?" Hermione demanded, rounding on him. "Did you ever see her? Was she in Flourish and Blotts the summer before Second Year? Did she ever come with my parents to platform nine and three-quarters?"

"Hermione," Potter tried again, moving forward to put his hand on the girl's shoulder.

"You don't know!" she cried, furious. "You've never lost somebody because of something *you've* done, because you've always been allowed to do whatever you wanted, because you're Harry bloody Potter, the boy who fucking lived! You've never had to be held responsible for anybody or anything because everything's always been done *to* you!" She paused and gulped.

"Hermione, you can't ... you're still not feeling yourself. And that's not fair," Potter protested. "I lost my parents, and Sirius, Remus - what about Fred? Or do you not remember what happened in May? Not a day goes by that I don't wish that I had ..."

"You may have lost your parents, but everybody bloody worships at the altar of James and Lily Potter and the Mauraders, don't they?" Hermione hissed. "The brave members of the Order of the Phoenix who nobly sacrificed themselves for the side of Light!"

"But what sacrifices did Monica Wendell and Fiona Wilkins make? Were they really in any danger? Were there really Death Eaters after them? Really?"

Bill tried to interrupt. "Obviously, Dumbledore thought that Atalanta, at least, would be dangerous to you."

Snape glared at him and he fell silent.

"Or was their daughter just paranoid having heard too many lectures about 'constant vigilance' too eager to use her magic to fully investigate the consequences?" Hermione continued bitterly.

"Hermione," Minerva began, "you're distraught, but I'm sure that ..."

"Minerva! Shut up," Snape snapped, surprising himself.

"Severus, you will not speak to me ..." Minerva rose suddenly from her chair.

"Hermione, you're not yourself, you can't ..." Bill moved from his post by the window to the girl.

"Bill! Shut it!" Hermione cried. "All of you, just shut up! I made a mistake. The brightest witch of her age made a mistake and now, now I have to live with the fact that I have no parents, and for all intents and purposes, have no sister! And it's completely my fault." She paused and glared at each one of them in turn. "And now I have to decide if I want to live with those consequences here, where people want to wrap me up in cotton wool and save me from myself, or in a reality where I have no prospects, no education, and no future! So all of you can just shut the fuck up and let me think!"

She grabbed her dressing gown from the floor, and shoving the hapless Potter to one side, stormed from the Hospital Wing, slamming the heavy oak door behind her in a burst of furious magic.

"Well, I never ..." Minerva began. "I'll go after her."

"Minerva," Potter interrupted, "no."

"Excuse me?"

"I said," Potter replied, straightening and looking his Head of House in the eye, "no. Let her go."

"Mr Potter," Minerva said sternly, "I'm afraid you don't understand. Hermione is upset, and she could easily do herself harm!"

"No," Potter insisted, "this is Hermione we're talking about. She's too sensible for that. Give her what she needs."

"Oh? And what is that?" Minerva demanded.

"Give her time." Potter shrugged.

Snape found himself in the wholly uncomfortable and unthinkable position of being actually *proud* of James Potter's whelp. He hoped the moment would soon pass.

AN: Special thanks to Bluestocking, Subversa, and SavineSnape for their invaluable help.

I don't own these characters. I have made no money from the writing of this.

Apologies for hiatus. RL took priority. One more chapter remains.

Seventeen

Chapter 17 of 17

Struck by a curse during the final battle, Hermione struggles to grasp what is reality and what is not. Is the curse merely revealing the truth that has been hidden for seven years?

October, 1998

He found her, finally, under *his* tree, furious and tearing up fistfuls of winter-brown grass.

"Do you wish to discuss it?" he asked.

"What's to discuss?" she asked bitterly, not looking up.

He grimaced, kneeling first on the grass and then easing down to sit beside her.

"The Gryffindor has nothing to say?" he taunted gently. "You certainly gave Potter an earful just now. If I were being honest, I'd say that it impressed me you accomplished more in five minutes with that dunderhead than I did in seven years."

Hermione smiled faintly. "Stop trying to cheer me up," she grumbled. "I can't imagine Minerva sent you to *do that*."

"No, she wanted to come herself. Potter stopped her."

"Harry?" Her head jerked up, and he could see the dried tracks of tears on her cheeks.

"Why do you think you managed to impress me?" *Not that you don't manage impress me on a regular basis.*

"I'm ... I'm glad you think I impress you," Hermione replied, managing a watery smile. "I haven't done much to warrant that lately, despite seven years of trying."

"You've always made the best choice you can, under the circumstances," he told her, shifting to be closer to her beneath the tree.

"Until now," she interjected bitterly.

"Ah, Hermione, do you think you really had *agoood* choice?"

She paused and drew a shuddering breath. "Were there ever Death Eaters coming for my parents?" she asked.

He could not lie to her. Not now. Not after all that had been said and done.

"No," he replied. "Lucius was barely aware of your existence until you turned up at the Manor. The Dar - Voldemort never made the connection between you, a member of the Order, and any of the other countless Muggles, Muggle-borns, and half-bloods he loathed." He made himself watch her face as he told her.

"But I... I was there," she protested. "At every battle, Quirrell knew who I was, the Snatchers knew who I was when they found me with Harry~~Draco~~ knew my parents were - are - Muggles."

"And none of it ultimately mattered," he replied finally. "All that mattered was Potter. You ... you were just in the way."

"The sidekick," she said faintly.

"It was... ultimately fortunate for all of us," he confessed, "that they underestimated your talents and abilities."

"But I still chose this path," she said.

"And if you hadn't... who knows?" Snape replied quietly. "You are not a Seer. How could you,*any* of us have known? You made a choice."

"And how would you know?" she demanded, rounding on him.

He felt a flash of resentment.

"Surely you don't think you're the first person to have no good choices available to them?" he asked. "Do you think that, eighteen years ago, I had any good decisions available to me? Do you think that there was any choice I could have made that would have resulted in Lily living? In not being enslaved to the Dark Lord? To Dumbledore?" He spat the name and subsided.

Hermione did not reply, but scowled at her knees, her wealth of bushy hair cascading down the side of her face. He brushed it aside, tucking it neatly over her shoulder. She relaxed into his touch.

"We have both made choices, Hermione," he said quietly as his impotent fury built - fury at Dumbledore, who'd manipulated so much, the Dark Lord, who had demanded too much, and Lily - Lily, whom he'd thought he'd loved beyond reason. "And not all of them can be good ones."

"So, how do you do it?" Hermione asked finally, looking up from her denim clad knees. "How do you live with the choices you're forced to make?"

He smiled - he supposed the girl was hoping for a lecture. She would be disappointed.

"You breathe," he said. "Your heart beats, and you continue to exist."

"And what do I do?" she asked.

"You have another choice to make," he said. "And nobody else can make it for you."

"Severus?" her voice was small. "Do you think I can make *theright* one?" She slid across the grass, pressed against his side.

"I know you can," he said, arm winding around her as she tucked her curly head under his chin.

The moment stretched as the cool breeze blew, and grey clouds scudded across the sky. They sat together in silence, peace.

After a few moments, Hermione shifted. Curious, he looked down. She smiled and reached out to brush his lank and greasy hair from his face. Her touch was warm, and he leaned into it, letting his eyes close. He heard her move, felt her turn to him.

"Hermione," he whispered. "I think..."

"So do I," she replied as she pressed her lips, warm and soft, against his.

The reasons why not raced through his brain - she was too young, too damaged, too innocent - despite what she'd done - too Gryffindor... and she still had to choose. She could not choose while her ugly old former teacher molested her beneath an ancient oak tree on school property.

But that choice, the hope that she would choose *him*, was the reason why he responded, feeling her beneath him, rejoicing in her arms winding around his neck as he gathered her to him.

"I fear, Martin," Dr Gupta was saying, "that we may be losing her."

Hermione blinked, orienting herself in her childhood bedroom - her father sitting on her bed, holding her hand. Familiarity and nostalgia overwhelmed her.

"Dad," she said.

"Hermione!" Martin cried.

"Dad, I'm so sorry."

"Darling, you never, ever need to be sorry," Martin said.

"But Dad," she tried again. "You don't understand what I've done."

"You have to understand, Hermione," Bill said gravely, "if we, if you try this, there could be far-reaching consequences."

"I understand, Bill," Hermione replied impatiently, smoothing her skirt and fingering her wand. "I've read your report. I know the possible consequences. But this is something I have to do. I can't continue the way I am."

She looked around - at Bill, seated opposite her at the shining table in Minerva's office, looking as if he'd not slept in weeks; at Minerva, standing behind her chair grasping the back so hard her knuckles were white; at Harry and Ginny, holding hands on the low settee in the corner, watching her every move; and at Severus, at his usual post at

the window, arms folded, expression closed except for a glint in his eye a glint that up until the day before, she would never have seen.

The portraits had been moved to the Great Hall for an airing. Flitwick had organized the session the students were being treated to the best History of Magic class known to Hogwarts. Only the scorch marks remained where Dumbledore's portrait had been, a mute testimony to Snape's fury.

"You know we will always be there for you," Harry said as Ginny nodded.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," she said. "I'm sorry I called you all those names this summer."

"It's okay, Gin," Hermione replied, smiling at her friend.

"Hermione, if you have any doubts at all ..." Minerva began.

"I can't, Minerva," Hermione said. "This is something that ... that needs to happen."

"Do you know how to begin?" asked Bill.

Hermione nodded. "Yes. But first, I need a moment alone with Severus."

"With Severus?" Minerva's eyebrows shot up.

"I need an anchor if I'm going to do this," Hermione said, frowning. "And I choose Severus."

"Why can't we be..." Ginny began and subsided as Harry squeezed her hand. "Oh."

Snape pushed himself off of the windowsill and moved across the room, as Hermione stood, and the others filed out.

"Are you ready?" he asked, as the door clicked shut behind the others.

"As long as you promise me something," she said.

Immediately, he frowned. "Hermione, I gave up making promises that I can't ..." he started to remonstrate.

"Hush," she said, laying a finger across his lips, wishing instead to press her own lips against his. "All I want you to do is promise to be holding my hand." She had to smile at his shocked expression.

"Yes," he whispered. "I promise."

"That's settled then," she said, grasping her wand.

"Shouldn't we wait until they return?" he asked.

Hermione sighed. "I suppose so," she said. "Just remember, you promised."

The look on Minerva and Harry's faces when they trooped in and saw them sitting, facing each other, Snape's hand clasped in hers, was almost worth every disapproving glare she'd received as a Muggle-born.

"Are you ready?" Snape asked.

Hermione nodded. "I am." She lifted her chin, quelling the *thrill* of fear that crept into her soul. The pressure of Snape's hand increased almost infinitesimally, and the fear faded.

"Cast the spell," his voice commanded.

"*Reparo Legilimentis*," she cried, and blackness swept over her.

January, 1999

She awoke in an unfamiliar room. Beside her sat a man, dressed all in black. He was holding her hand. Weak sunlight filtered through a mullioned window. On the bedside table were a bouquet of flowers and a photograph of her and two boys a redhead and a black-haired boy with glasses. The people in the photo waved at her.

"Hermione," said the man as she moved.

"Good morning," she said. Something in her brain awoke. "Good morning, Severus."

The relief on the man's face was pronounced. "You remember?" he asked.

"Not everything," she replied, frowning at the picture on the bedside table. "I know that's me," she said, pointing to the waving girl, "and I know that those two boys were, are my friends. But..."

"It is all right, Hermione," Snape said, smoothing back the hair from her forehead in a gesture that felt achingly familiar to her. "It will return."

June, 1999

"I'm sorry, Martin, Jocasta. There's nothing more we can do for her but make her comfortable. She will be cared for here as she has been."

"We came so close," Martin said, shaking his head as Jocasta began to cry quietly.

"She's beyond our reach," Dr Gupta said. "I'm terribly, terribly sorry."

Around them swirled the day-to-day sounds of Midvale Psychiatric Home.

July, 1999

"Mum, Dad!" Fiona sat up in bed, sheets and blankets twisted around her.

Wendell Wilkins hurried into her room. "What is it, peanut?"

"I had ... I had a bad dream," Fiona whimpered, throwing her arms around her father. "There was a witch, and she cast a spell on me, and I couldn't remember who I was!"

"Hush, darling," Wendell soothed his only daughter. "It was just a dream."

July, 2000

The cottage was perfect nestled in the dale by a stream, surrounded by the orchard. Hermione's look of delight warmed his heart.

"It's perfect," she whispered, clasping his hand. The diamond on her left hand sparkled in the sunlight. Her hair, still crowned with roses, glowed. Verily, he beheld his angel.

"As often as we can," he promised, "we'll return here."

She kissed him.

It was evening. The setting sun illumined the white-draped bedroom with a rosy light. The couple in the bed, however, was not in a position to appreciate the sunset.

"Hermione, are you..." The words stuck in his throat.

Hermione glared from beneath him. "What did you think?" she demanded, shifting so that she was beside him, tucked beneath his chin. "When was I going to have the opportunity?" she muttered into his shoulder.

He bent slightly and pressed a gentle kiss to the top of her curly head, tightening his embrace.

"True," he agreed. "And I cannot see you extending yourself during your years at Hogwarts."

"You know, it's not as if there was a nightly orgy in the Astronomy Tower."

"Also true," he agreed. "Although if Filch were to be believed..."

Hermione giggled. "Exactly. I remember Lavender Brown, Weasley now, was the Gryffindor House broom, so to speak, and I'm not sure she really ever actually *shagged* anybody but Ron."

"Well, I caught her once or twice," Snape mused. "But you're right; nothing to measure up to her reputation. And, as it is, you were much too involved in keeping Potter, and Weasley alive to worry about..."

Hermione kissed him. "Well, it's not as if I haven't had *some* experience, you know," she pointed out, breaking the kiss.

"Indeed?"

"Oh, yes. Allow me to demonstrate, *Professor*."

"Hermione!" Snape gasped as she kissed her way down his chest and stomach.

"Mmm, you like?"

"Merlin, yes."

"Good." Her reply was muffled as she took him into her mouth.

"Gods," he groaned as he grasped the bedcovers, striving not to come.

"Excellent," Hermione murmured a few moments later, releasing him with a soft sound. He was still hard, and clinging to his self-control.

"So," he panted, "you've demonstrated quite some skill in that area, then."

Hermione laughed not the giggle of the schoolgirl, but the bubbling, sexy laugh of a mature woman and sat on her haunches.

"You enjoyed that?" she asked, brushing her long hair behind a shoulder.

"Oh, yes."

"Good."

"Now let me return the favor," he replied, thankful for the respite. "Teasing witch."

"Gladly. Just don't ..."

"It won't hurt much," he promised.

She laughed again.

"No, Severus, just don't hurry." She stretched beside him as he rolled over her.

"Don't fret," he reassured her, "we do have the rest of our lives."

August, 2022

The children played in the hazy, late August Devonshire sunshine.

At the edge of the meadow beside the stream, the two couples lounged in the shade of a spreading oak, thankful to escape the August heat.

"Be careful, Atalanta!" called the brown-haired woman, her head pillowed in her husband's lap.

"Watch out for your sister, Albus!" cried the redheaded mother as the children zoomed a few feet off of the ground on their toy brooms.

"Who would have thought my daughter would love to fly," mused Hermione.

"She'll be a star Seeker," Albus' father said. "She can give James Sirius a run for his money."

Hermione threw a grape at him that bounced squashily off of his forehead.

"I suppose we'll find out in a few weeks. Quidditch tryouts are still held the first week, aren't they, Severus?" asked Harry.

Severus nodded and then chuckled. "You used to fly, you know," he said to his wife. "When you were a child."

"Hmmm, really? I don't remember." Hermione closed her eyes against the bright sunshine.

"Indeed. In fact, the first time I saw you, you were flying from the swing set and talking to the birds. The meadowlark on the edge of the playground was very impressed."

Hermione laughed and then paused, as twenty years of stillness settled over her.

"That's the wrong side of the timeline for me," she said.

Severus brushed her hair from her forehead.

"I know, love," he whispered, leaning down to kiss her yet unlined forehead. "But the meadowlark still sings for you. Listen."

Above them, in the branches of the oak tree, the meadowlark sang her song, the gleeful noise not drowned out by the joyous shrieking and laughter of the children romping in the meadow.

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