

# Aftermath

*by WaterSinger*

Severus Snape saved Hermione Granger from the desolation of the battlefield after the last fight with Voldemort. Now, five years later, Hermione wants to know why and she is determined to find out.

## Prologue

*Chapter 1 of 6*

Severus Snape saved Hermione Granger from the desolation of the battlefield after the last fight with Voldemort. Now, five years later, Hermione wants to know why and she is determined to find out.

### Prologue

He strode intently through the clinging smoke of battle, a man on a mission. A dark avenging angel, it would later be said. She lay limp in his arms, disconnected from the world. The countryside about them was quiet; a silence born from the pain and suffering ended such a short time ago. Naught else stirred; all of the others had left or were no longer able to move. He clutched her to his chest, relief flowing through his veins every time her heart beat. So many had died, he could consider her current survival a miracle. Later, he would weep for the dead; now was the time for caring for those who still lived. Such was the way of war. Such was his way.

The light blinded her, after so long in the dark. She felt as though she swam upstream, fighting an inexorable current that was ever so slowly sweeping her back towards the darkness. She heard a voice calling her name, calling her to come back to where she belonged but, in the instant that she was distracted, the darkness came to overwhelm her. She fought with all her strength, pushing out mentally. Repeatedly she battered herself against the inevitability of her submergence, but, at last, when her mind and body were exhausted, she let go of her grip on reality and slipped away.

He held her hand, refusing to let go despite numerous requests to move away. She could not die; he had only gone back into the hellhole that was the battlefield to save her, because he could not believe she was dead. He had emerged victorious, bearing her unconscious, yet still alive, body. He had pulled the woman he knew was capable of curing her forward, although, at the time, he could not think of this nurse's name. Still, it was enough that she had the expertise needed. He sat, waiting, watching. Seconds, minutes and hours melded together, rushing by in an interminable blur. The only time he really noticed anything was when the body at his side stirred, even if only an infinitesimal bit.

She saw the light again, only this time it did not blind her. Indeed, instead of the hard, cold light that had greeted her before she was being called by a gentle golden glow, one that warmed her heart even as it showed her a path. She knew, instinctively, that her eyes were closed and that she was seeing with her mind but it didn't worry her. Rather, she felt reassured, as though no harm could come to her. And perhaps, she reflected, such was true. There certainly shouldn't be anything that could possibly hurt her, not as far as she knew. And yet...there was something waiting there for her, something that could not be evil, not with the way it dwelled in the golden light. She opened her eyes unknowingly, all control over her movements gone. For an instant, she met the ebony eyes that stared down at her, and then she was falling into them, back into the darkness that she had inhabited for what seemed like eons and yet, at the same time, like seconds. Only this time, the darkness was different, more welcoming. Without realizing it, she settled her mind into it, like a cat into a favoured chair. She had come home.

# Beginning

Chapter 2 of 6

Severus Snape saved Hermione Granger from the desolation of the battlefield after the last fight with Voldemort. Now, five years later, Hermione wants to know why and she is determined to find out. Chapter 1---Hermione reflects, a bit about what happened after the battle, and Hermione is offered a job at Hogwarts. (Character Death warning to be safe)

Disclaimer: I own none of the characters found within this story and none of the places. The only thing I own is the writing itself.

A/N: I've added a Character Death warning in order to be safe, for, although we do not see any death, there is mention of many important characters in the actual books being dead. You are hereby forewarned.

---

## Chapter One: Beginning

She could have lived a thousand years and never understood him. To Hermione Granger, once student of Hogwarts and Head Girl, Severus Snape was an enigma. Harry and Ron might have considered him an anathema, but to her he had always been a puzzle she couldn't help trying to solve. And he was one more link to the past, a past that was swiftly being forgotten by all except those who had experienced it first hand. Five years seemed like a short amount of time for such monumental acts to be forgotten, but the first year students now had only been six when the Last Battle had taken place. They could hardly be expected to remember something that had happened when they were only children.

She still saw the marks of it, however. Albus Dumbledore would never again look at her with his twinkling blue eyes; those fires had finally burned out after two months in St. Mungo's. Minerva McGonagall had fallen at the end of the battle, dying protecting two students who had been knocked unconscious. And, hardest of all for Hermione, her two best friends, Harry and Ron, had both died, victims of a Death Eater's last-ditch attempt at escape. Snape had killed the man, but not before it had been too late. Hermione herself had nearly died; apparently, she had Severus to thank for her rescue. He had, according to numerous witnesses, returned to the battlefield and, after nearly fifteen minutes, emerged bearing her body in his arms.

"It was incredible!" Ginny Weasley had said when Hermione had asked for further information regarding her rescue. "He just came out of the battle smoke like....like....some dark avenging angel. He put you down on a blanket then turned around, reached out, grabbed Madam Pomfrey by the wrist and pulled her over to you. She got to work right away, but he wouldn't leave until he was sure that you were fine. It was odd to see him so concerned about someone."

Hermione had checked the story with Poppy Pomfrey when she had run into the nurse a few weeks later. It was only to satisfy her curiosity and to hear the story from a different point of view, she had told herself, not because she didn't believe Ginny. Madam Pomfrey's story had been almost exactly the same as the red-haired girl's, perhaps differing a bit in the descriptions but otherwise eerily similar. But the one thing both tales had lacked was the Potions master's motive for saving her.

So for five years Hermione had been trying to talk to Severus Snape, merely to assuage her curiosity, she assured herself. Every time she had visited Hogwarts---which was not very often seeing as she had had few reasons to do so---she had tried to pull him aside to speak to him. And every time he was called away to deal with something before they had even finished exchanging greetings.

Not anymore, she thought to herself, the hint of a feral grin on her lips. Professor Flitwick, the new Headmaster, had Owled her two weeks ago with a request that she come fill the position of Transfiguration Professor. Hogwarts had managed to fill all of the empty positions by the beginning of the school year, even after all of the deaths from that last battle in July. Many of the new professors, however, had been older witches and wizards and were now retiring, or would be in the next few years. So Professor Flitwick had sent out owls to those he knew could handle a teaching position at Hogwarts.

Hermione had replied immediately, affirming that she would be willing to teach at Hogwarts. And, within the week, the owl had returned, bearing a contract that needed only her signature. She had read it carefully, three times, signed it then, as it had instructed her, cast a simple charm to triplicate it. After giving the owl a bowl of water and a few Owl Treats, she had handed it two of the copies and sent it on its way. She had stored the third copy in a spell-protected chest she kept especially for such important documents.

She had wondered how Flitwick had known that she had just finished her last job as a Transfiguration master's apprentice. Nearly five years of aiding in and observing many different spells had lent her expertise beyond what she had ever hoped to have when in Hogwarts. This, she supposed, was why Flitwick had offered her the position. That and the fact that she had received the highest NEWT scores of any witch in Hogwarts history.

Now she stood in her old bedroom, looking around at the mementos of her youth. She had always loved her parents' house, had always enjoyed coming back for the few months she had between her years at Hogwarts. Yet she had always enjoyed returning to the school just as much, for part of her revelled in the learning atmosphere that was prevalent there. Over the years, she had accustomed herself to the animate portraits and moving staircases until she almost considered them normal. And in the wizarding world, she knew, they were.

Hermione sighed to herself and returned her attention to her packing. In two days, she would be leaving her parents and moving into the chambers provided for her in the school. They would be hers until she chose to retire. *Two days*, she thought to herself. *Two days until I go back to Hogwarts and then a month until the students return. I only hope that I'm ready for them.*

# Return

Chapter 3 of 6

Severus Snape saved Hermione Granger from the desolation of the battlefield after the last fight with Voldemort. Now, five years later, Hermione wants to know why and she is determined to find out. Chapter Two---Hermione has a run-in with Snape, but not how she expected.

Disclaimer: I own none of the characters found within this story and none of the places. The only thing I own is the writing itself.

---

## Chapter Two: Return

"Wonderful," Hermione spat, her voice laden with sarcasm. "Just lovely." She threw herself backwards onto her new bed, shifting slightly once she had landed to make herself more comfortable. She allowed her eyes to slide closed with a sigh and sought the calm she knew was within her mind. It was very much unlike her normally phlegmatic personality, this outburst of annoyance and anger at so small a thing.

"Deep breaths," she whispered to herself, unconsciously falling into the meditative pattern she'd developed over the last seven years. As much as she did not believe in the reliability of anything even slightly related to Divination, she found this ancient ritual worked more along the lines of a mental purification than the spiritual one it was intended to precipitate. *Merlin knows I need something to clean up my mind*, the young woman thought to herself, *considering how fast things have been moving. Hard to believe it was only two months ago that I was still a 'lowly apprentice'.*

Rather than allow herself to laze about and get nothing done, the bushy-haired brunette hoisted herself off the comfortable bed and set out to re-explore the ancient castle and its grounds. She padded softly through the halls on cat-quiet feet, every nerve in her body attuned to the air currents around her. That was something she had learned during her apprenticeship: the importance of knowing one's surroundings---when one was casting a spell especially, but at all times in general. She hardly even noticed that she was doing it any more; it had become such an ingrained skill.

She wended her way down from the upper levels until she was pausing at the door to the dungeons, hesitant to cross the threshold. *Silly*, she told herself, confronting her deeply buried fears. *Snape's not here, that's why you were upset; he can't very well pounce on you and deduct house points! You're a professor now; he will not have control of you even when he does return.* Her fear subsided slightly, she slipped through the wide doorway--hugging against the jamb as tightly as she could--and stepped down the stairs nervously.

Memories rose from the depths of her mind like scraps of mist from a damp roadway on a cool summer's morn; flashing before her eyes, presenting her with images of times long past. Flickers of Potions classes; black robed students with blackened metal cauldrons mixing ingredients at the direction of the black robed professor. Red, gold, green and silver flashing from ties and crests, brief sightings of other colours midst the student body. Snape's colours were unrelieved, black and pale flesh from head to toe.

With an almost physical shake, Hermione pulled herself back to reality. As her consciousness returned to her body, she realized that she was shaking and covered in sweat. Leaning against the wall, she forcibly slowed her breathing and pulled herself back into her usual calm. In the air went, passing down her trachea, through the bronchi and bronchioles, finally ending up in her alveoli, where the surrounding blood vessels brought their loads of cells to exchange waste gasses for oxygen. Out again, pushing with a slight bit more force now, seeking escape from the tightly confining lungs.

Her body returned to its natural state, the young professor continued down the dim hallway, one hand touching the slightly damp wall as though to reassure her that it was still there. Her fingers found the rough and uneven spots, exploring them in lieu of her eyes, which were fixed firmly on the ground in front of her. Slowly, she descended, each step forward lowering the floor by another millimetre or so. She bypassed many empty rooms, ignoring them in favour of her final destination. At last, she looked up at a familiar door--the one to the Potions classroom.

She pushed the heavy oak door open just far enough to permit her access and slipped through, closing the portal again once she was fully inside the large room. She slit her eyes slightly despite the fact that there wasn't a particularly large amount of light in the room. As a matter of fact, there was a notable absence of light, the lack of windows leaving illumination up to candles. Said candles were not in evidence now, as it was summer, and there would be no need to cast light upon an empty classroom.

Looking around at the walls that she remembered so clearly, Hermione noticed a door that she had not ever entered during her years as a student. Walking up to it, she examined it closely with both fingers and eyes, noting that it was similar to the classroom door in grain, texture and wood. Testing the handle, she was slightly surprised to feel it give under her hand, retracting the bolt from its former niche. She opened the door cautiously, well aware that she was more than likely outside of her rightful boundaries but unable to quash her natural curiosity.

The room she entered was austere, furnished mainly with dark wood and dark green velour. She went over to examine the large desk placed prominently in the middle of the room, running fingertips over the finely carved ornamentation on the sides. She did not recognize the wood--not surprising, really--but judging by its texture, it was a difficult wood to work.

"Ironwood, Miss Granger," a familiar cold voice told her almost dispassionately. She whirled to be confronted with the face of her ex-Potions professor as his likeness glowered at her from a life-sized painting. "Muggles can barely work it; it takes the most expert of wizard carvers all of their skill to create a piece such as that." He nodded at the desk, and Hermione noticed the faintest traces of a humourless smile hovering about his thin mouth. "One of the few bits of my inheritance I've chosen to keep around me in my every day life." Suddenly, his face closed in, and he glared at her.

"And what, pray tell, are you doing in my office, Miss Granger? I do recall that you have left the school and therefore have no business here." He glared at her, as though he expected that to scare her away. *Perhaps he does*, she reflected.

"As a matter of fact, Professor Snape, I do have business here," she replied calmly, enjoying the brief flicker of surprise that crossed his face. He was clearly not used to having students, even former students, speak back to him. "You see, I'm the new Transfiguration professor, and as such, I need to know what you will be teaching your students. I believe most teachers keep their course syllabus in their offices." She arched one eyebrow in challenge, disregarding for the moment that she was speaking to a portrait. "As well, I have a few questions I must ask your flesh-and-blood counterpart. I don't suppose you know where he is?"

---

A/N: It has been brought to my attention that there is another story by the same title as this one by cocoachristy. They are, obviously, not the same story nor do they have the same plot line, as far as I am aware. I'm very sorry if I have confused anyone due to the title.

## Will-Fire

### Chapter 4 of 6

Severus Snape saved Hermione Granger from the desolation of the battlefield after the last fight with Voldemort. Now, five years later, Hermione wants to know why and she is determined to find out. Chapter 3---Hermione has a conversation with Snape's portrait while the real professor sits and thinks.

Disclaimer: I own none of the characters found within this story and none of the places. The only thing I own is the writing itself.

---

### Chapter Three: Will-fire

She had chosen her words well, she had known that at the time, but she had not expected the reaction she got from the painting. Rather than the sharp glare or sneer she knew so well, Painted-Snape's mouth dropped open slightly and his eyes widened. Not sure what to do with a Snape, albeit not **the** Snape, showing such a human reaction as surprise, Hermione cleared her throat gently, hoping to bring him back to the man he was supposed to represent. The sound seemed much louder than it actually was in the quiet room and did indeed have the effect she was hoping for. Painted-Snape drew himself up slightly, shut his mouth and looked down on her with his infamous sneer.

"Be that as it may, Miss Granger," he answered, "I fail to see why you think that you have the right to come rummaging about in an office that is not yours without the permission of its current occupant." He was trying to challenge her, she could hear it in his voice, but she refused to rise to it. The simple memory of all the embarrassment and taunting he had thrown at her throughout the years kept her mind focused on earning his acceptance rather than humiliating him as she now could. "Revenge will only last for a short time before it is forgotten," her grandfather had told her many years ago before she had been accepted into Hogwarts, before his sudden death in an accident. He had then winked at her and continued. "Making people change their minds about you will last much longer, especially because you've made them take back their own words."

Hermione smiled now at the memory of him, although she was careful to keep it inside of her heart. Her face showed nothing but a slight humour and a cool, calm and collected friendliness.

"You are entirely correct in that matter, Professor," she murmured, giving him a slight bow of the head. "It was wrong of me to come into the office of another teacher, regardless of my reasons for doing so, and I beg your forgiveness for my misplaced enthusiasm." She bobbed her head again, although this time it was more to hide her amusement than to make him feel honoured. "However, I do require some moments of your counterpart's time, and I would appreciate it very much if you could either tell me where to find him, or let him know when he returns here that I desire speech with him." She held her gaze firm upon that of the painting, knowing fully well that her patience would last longer than his were he fool enough to initiate any kind of competition. Indeed, she had only moments to wait before he shifted uncomfortably and cleared his throat.

"You may find him in the west wing, Professor Granger, on the third floor. He was headed for the room concealed by the tapestry of Clidna, last I knew. Now, please remove yourself from these rooms." The young woman allowed herself a smile at that and turned to leave, only stopping at the door through which she had entered when she remember a question that had been hovering at the back of her mind since she had seen the painting.

"If you would not mind," she said, drawing Painted-Snape's attention back to her, "I have one more question that you may be able to answer for me." When he did not protest immediately, she rushed on. "Why in the name of Merlin does Professor Snape have a portrait of himself hanging in his office?"

The smirk on the face of the painting was so realistic that Hermione might have thought she faced the man had she not known better.

"I suppose you will have to ask him that yourself," the painting drawled, before turning his face away from her in clear dismissal. She huffed out a short breath in irritation then whirled around and walked out the door.

~@~@~@~@~@~@~

Severus Snape was not a kind man, nor did he consider himself a good one. He had never been the sort to over-analyze himself, to pick apart every action and thought to determine his own motives, and so he came across as uncaring and cold to most who knew him. Most who had truly understood him and his nature were now dead, and he cursed the now truly departed Dark Lord for taking them in his insane thirst to rule all. Even so, he counted his blessings, most particularly that of Professor Flitwick.

Flitwick had saved him, Severus knew, from a life of being turned away by every 'respectable' witch and wizard, much as Albus had so many years ago. Despite having his role as a spy revealed, the majority of the wizarding world was still distrustful of one Severus Snape, and many still believed him to be a true Death Eater. Regardless of this all, Flitwick had invited him back as the Potions professor and had even apologized for his inability to give him the Defence Against the Dark Arts position. The Potions master could even recall his exact words on that day some five years ago.

"You see, Severus," the minute wizard had said, standing atop a pile of books placed upon Albus's old chair in order to see over the desk, "people just wouldn't accept you as the Defence Against the Dark Arts professor. I know, as do the rest of the staff, that you were a spy and that your role as a Death Eater was simply a sham, but the rest of the wizarding world is not ready to believe that and so would not be willing to have you teach such a questionable subject. Your unquestionable proficiency in Potions will protect your job there, seeing as it is has a lesser correlation with the Dark Lord. Giving you the position you desire is unfeasible, as much as I would like to do so."

Even now, Severus could feel the disappointment he had allowed himself to experience for a moment before he had shifted it to the side to deal with what Flitwick was saying. That was a skill he had acquired in his years as a student at Hogwarts; he had often needed to study or do assignments a short time after being humiliated by the elder Potter and his friends. The ability to put aside all emotions was also integral to Occlumency. *Exactly why Potter was never any good at it*, Severus smirked to himself. *So used to having his feelings catered to that he never learned how to ignore them.*

"Severus," a voice whispered from just behind him. He turned to acknowledge the portrait of Rowena Ravenclaw hung on the wall behind him. She looked like a nature goddess, her black hair billowing in the wild wind that whipped through the scenery.

"There's someone looking for you. The new Transfiguration professor." It took Severus a moment to recall whom Flitwick had appointed to the post, and even as he did so, she walked in.

"Hermione Granger.

## Invasions of privacy

*Chapter 5 of 6*

Severus Snape saved Hermione Granger from the desolation of the battlefield after the last fight with Voldemort. Now, five years later, Hermione wants to know why and she is determined to find out. Chapter 4---Hermione and Severus exchange some words.

Disclaimer: I still don't own any of the characters or locations. Except Rowena's raven. He's mine. \*glares threateningly\* The rest are JKR's. I just play with them.

"Hermione Granger."

At the sound of her name, Hermione stopped dead in her tracks, only half-way into the room. She observed the tall man before her with calm eyes, despite the feverish speed of her thoughts. *He said my name. My full name. What have I done? Perhaps he's just surprised. Surely, he wasn't expecting me to barge in on him. At least, he wasn't expecting me!*

Her mind calmed slightly, she allowed her eyes to wander away from the figure that was Severus Snape and surveyed the room he had attempted to hide himself away in. On the wall to her right hung a life-sized portrait of Rowena Ravenclaw. The Founder gave her a quick amused look with her deep blue eyes before resuming what appeared to be a conversation with a bird whose pinions nearly matched the darkness of the woman's hair.

"Miss Granger," Snape's voice snapped, returning her attention to him.

"Professor," she replied, unthinkingly.

"Yes, Miss Granger, that is what I am."

"No, Professor Snape. I am a professor, and I would ask that you honour me enough to use my proper title if you are unwilling to call me by my first name." She watched his eyebrows rise marginally, but refused to back down now that she'd made her stand. *I can't let him think that he can still intimidate me, as he could when I was a student here, she thought to herself. If we're to work together, he must respect me as an equal. There's no other way things can work.*

As though he sensed her thoughts, Snape's eyes flickered with a trace amount of respect, and his next words were slightly less caustic.

"Indeed, Professor Granger. Now, would you be so kind as to tell me why you have sought me out when I so clearly desired solitude?"

The acidity of his voice was still there, she noted, but it seemed less disconcerting that it had when she was a student. *Either he's losing his touch, she mused, or I'm not as frightened by him as I used to be.*

"I need to know what your lesson plans are, sir," Hermione said respectfully, keeping her eyes fixed on his. "The last Transfigurations professor wasn't very good at keeping things organized, and I believe it would be easier for me to rewrite my lesson plans entirely rather than attempt to sort hers out."

"And you need to make sure that you don't attempt to draw on knowledge the students don't already have?" His eyes were dark enough to make her feel as though she were gazing into a black hole. A gravitational pull, almost. She blinked and looked back at the portrait of Rowena Ravenclaw swiftly. The haughtily beautiful woman was watching the two of them out of the corner of one eye. Noting Hermione's glance, she winked one blue eye at the young professor and gestured encouragingly.

"Very well, Professor Granger," Snape said, drawing her attention back. "Accompany me to my office where I will give you an extra copy of my lesson plan. If you have any questions in the future, however, I would ask that you simply ask a house-elf to bring me a message rather than intruding upon my privacy yourself." Hermione ducked her head and blushed, only now recognizing how foolish she had been.

"Yes, sir," she murmured, keeping her eyes fixed on her shoes as she followed the intimidating professor through the school hallways. Indeed, she was so fixated on the sensible black leather that she didn't notice him stopping until she walked into his chest. Withdrawing speedily from the wall of black cloth, she flushed and looked swiftly up at him, only to look back down at the floor in seeing the blank disapproval in his eyes.

"Sorry, Professor Snape," she mumbled to the silver buckles holding her shoes closed. She heard his snort of derision then one long cool finger lifted her chin.

"As much as I appreciate an apology when it is deserved," he said, his cool voice dry, "I do think that you should accustom yourself to treating other staff members as your equals, *Professor* Granger. It wouldn't do for the children to see you as having any sort of weakness, after all." He chuckled at her as her eyes snapped up to his, fury burning in their depths. She'd show him weakness, she vowed.

*Yes, little lioness*, an unfamiliar voice whispered in her head. *I'm sure you will.* She could feel her eyes widening in shock and focused all her fury on the man in front of her.

"That, *sir*, is a blatant violation of my rights as a witch. I would ask that, in the future, you keep your prying mind to yourself!" Her tirade finished, Hermione glared once more up into startled black eyes then whirled about on her heel and stalked away, unconsciously imitating the professor currently standing staring at her in complete shock.

However, her departure wasn't fast enough to miss his whispered, "But I didn't..." before she turned the corner and marched off to cool her fury in her rooms.

## A Truth

*Chapter 6 of 6*

Severus Snape saved Hermione Granger from the desolation of the battlefield after the last fight with Voldemort. Now, five years later, Hermione wants to know why and she is determined to find out. Chapter 5---Hermione meets a surprising new friend

Disclaimer: Anything you recognize isn't mine. It's all JK Rowling's or Scholastic's or... well, someone's, someone not being me.

A/N: OK, I know it's been a long time since I last updated so if you feel the need to yell at me, I understand. I'm terribly sorry... I quite honestly just forgot about the story. That being said, I'm hoping I can get back to some kind of decent updating schedule, as I still want to finish this story.

I'm not sure how out there my idea about ghosts being able to retain some magic is, but as this fic is AU after HBP and DH, I'm not too worried about it.

Oh yes, this fic is VERY AU now. I started it before HBP was published and so it's AU in terms of the last two books.

Hermione could barely keep her fury contained as she stalked through the stone hallways of Hogwarts castle. Many of the portraits scurried into what shelter they could find upon seeing her, only emerging once she was safely past. Their whispers followed her, though she ignored them.

"Self-righteous, interfering bastard!" she muttered to herself, flaring her nostrils slightly in her anger. "How *dare* he think he had the right to do that?"

*He didn't, Lioness,* the voice told her, startling her. *Even that most arrogant man does not have the gall to do such a thing to a witch like yourself.* Hermione whipped her head about in a vain effort to find the speaker, but could see nothing beyond the statues and portraits that lined the halls.

"Who are you?" she whispered to the empty hall. "*Where* are you? Why don't you show yourself?" Her words echoed against the stone slightly, giving an eerie tone to her voice.

*I do not believe that you need to see me at this moment. As for your other question ...*, the voice hesitated. *I was once a man. My name was Salazar Slytherin. Now, I am no more than a ball of energy and thought. You would know me as a ghost, I suppose, though I am not quite that.* The uncertainty in the voice—Salazar's, she supposed—faded, and he continued with more force. *You needn't think that I was trespassing in your mind intentionally, Lioness. My ability, which most would call a gift, is far more of a curse. We remnants, ghosts if you will, generally do not retain our powers after death. Only the strongest of us can hold onto even a little magic. My strongest ability when I was alive was Legilimency, and so I retain my ability to use it.*

"How can that be a curse?" Hermione asked, her eyes still flicking back and forth despite Salazar's assurance that he would not show himself. "Furthermore, why do you feel you have the right to intrude upon other's minds? I would not take such arrogance from Professor Snape and I certainly won't accept it from you!"

*Ah, therein lies the crux of the issue,* his voice sighed, a mixture of sorrow and resignation almost dripping from the words. *I may have retained my ability, but I have lost my control over it. I can no more choose when I do and do not read minds than you could have chosen to block me. The most I can do is avoid meeting the eyes of everyone I come across. You might understand where that might become difficult, being a ghost.*

Hermione considered this for a moment before sighing and shrugging her shoulders. "Yes, I can see where that might become a problem. I would never have thought that life as a ghost could come with difficulties such as that."

"Most don't," Salazar's voice said from behind her, and she whirled to face his pearly form. He was tall and slender to the point of almost being gaunt, with a long beard and short, sleek hair. His eyes could have been cruel if not for the smile that hovered at their corners. In a way, he reminded Hermione of her grandfather, harsh to those he did not know or who offended him but deeply devoted to his loving family.

"Why?" she blurted, not even realizing her question until after it escaped her lips. "Why are you speaking to me? You hated Muggle-borns; you didn't even want us at Hogwarts. I can hardly suppose that you don't know what I am, so why are you even speaking to me, never mind being so polite?" The smile on Salazar's face faded a bit and became a sad one.

"So that old bone is still being gnawed, is it? I would've thought Godric possessed the honour not to try to make me look bad even after forcing me out of my home. Then again, he always did speak so vociferously of his 'brave and daring deeds'. I suppose tossing mean, old Slytherin out and away from his precious children was just one more to him." He looked at her sadly and the bitterness faded from his voice.

"Little Lioness, I never wished to keep the Muggle-born children from our school. I only intended to keep the school safe from the witch-burning, magic-hating frenzies of the Muggles at the time. I protested the free admittance of so many children who could easily return to their homes and lead mobs to our gates. I worried, also, for those children whose families would fear and loathe them because of their powers. I only wanted to admit those who would be safe, both for us and from the hatred of the superstitious foolishness of the time. Unfortunately, that has been skewed over the centuries into portraying me as a hater of Muggle-born witches and wizards, which couldn't be further from the truth."

Throughout his speech, Hermione had stared in utter disbelief at Salazar. *Surely* Hogwarts: A History *couldn't be wrong!* she thought to herself, having based so much on the book throughout her seven years at Hogwarts. Nonetheless, listening to the ghost's impassioned voice, she could hardly disbelieve what he was saying. *History is written by the victors, Hermione. You knew this about Muggle books. Why should it not be true about Wizarding works as well?*

"This is... a lot to consider," she said at last, looking up at Salazar with eyes that she knew conveyed her confusion. "This whole day has been. It's been so long since I've been at Hogwarts... I'd almost forgotten how overwhelming it can be at times." Salazar nodded his head in silent agreement, his eyes now returning to their previous kind softness.

"If you would permit me the honour then, Lioness, I will walk you to your chambers," he said, holding out an ethereal hand to her. She hesitated for a moment, unsure of what to do.

"I'd rather visit the library," she admitted, looking down at her shoes and blushing. "If you don't mind, that is." He chuckled at her kindly then floated a few steps nearer.

"I don't mind at all. Rowena always said that if I'd been born a generation later, I would have been one of her students. Lead on to the library, Lioness." Hermione nodded and set off at a sedate pace, Salazar floating beside her. As they headed up a set of stairs, she hesitated and turned to him slightly.

"You know, you can call me Hermione, if you'd like."

"I don't think I'd mind that... Hermione," he said and they continued on, heads together, discussing things as though they were old friends.