

Amende Honorable

by pinkbunny

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1: The Other Side of Color

Chapter 1 of 5

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The leaves outside had barely begun to take on the hue of gold, falling idly when the wind blew just right. Hermione Granger stood amid the swirling colours, looking out over dark, churning water. The speck of land in the distance held a tall fortress, foreboding against the gray sky. Her eyes narrowed as she gazed up further, noting the swell of the clouds. Rain, most certainly, would be falling soon.

Everything across the waters of the cold North Sea was in shades of gray and black and white. She looked once more to the leaves and took a deep breath before moving forward, climbing into the small dingy that was docked to the shore.

"Ready then?" asked the familiar Auror, giving Hermione a brief smile. Hermione replied with a short nod to Nymphadora Tonks before clutching the side of the boat tightly. Even though it was enchanted to withstand the rougher waters, it still scared her. Hermione would never be used to differences between the way items behaved in the Muggle and in the Wizarding worlds.

Tonks nodded shortly and untied them from the dock; she then pushed off with one muddy boot. "Shouldn't be long," she said, leaning back and letting fingertips trail in the water as the craft moved fluidly through the waves with ease. The older witch watched her for a moment, her head tilting to the side. "You look down, Hermione."

Her brown eyes shot up sharply, brow furrowing. Of course she looked down -- she *was* down. It had only been three months since Voldemort's fall, since the last few raging battles. Three months since she'd lost nearly every friend she'd ever had while Tonks had been a war hero and been awarded Order of Merlin, First Class; she'd even finally gained her long sought-after Lupin. What reason would she have to look down when she obviously had everything she wanted?

Hermione swallowed and looked back to the water, forcing the bitter tone she wanted to use down before speaking. "Thoughtful," she corrected.

She'd become quite thoughtful over the past few months. Her usual boldness and quick-wit had faded into the background, replaced by quiet contemplation, anger, bitterness... The world may have been saved for the rest of the Wizarding community, but for her it had all been destroyed. Her parents, Ron, Harry, Luna, and scores of acquaintances -- murdered. Granted, Harry had died doing the very last thing he had to do, but it didn't make the pain any less.

All she had left in the way of friends and family was Ginny and the remaining Weasleys.

Tonks nodded slowly, then remained quiet for most of the rest of the trip. The boat sliced through the water, the waves lapping up against the side noisily, minutes passing by without either of them speaking. As the wizard prison grew nearer, Tonks leaned forward with curiosity in her eyes.

"Remus has said you're leaving," she said softly. Her eyes were interested, but with a touch of sadness. "Is that true? You're really just... going to go?"

Hermione looked to her, feeling invaded. Those were her thoughts and decisions that she'd contemplated, and she didn't like them being questioned. What was left for her here? Her friends were gone. Ginny was moving on with her own life, and Hermione couldn't hang on to her forever.

"Yes," she replied, her tone cold and closed off. "After I finish what Harry wished me to do, I'm leaving."

The boat came to a slightly rocky stop, and Hermione tore her gaze from Tonks. She looked back up at the fortress that was now towering high above them, looming ominously up to the clouds. With a nervous swallow, she stood on shaky legs and climbed out onto the rocky shore. No grass grew here, no weeds or trees to splash the gray with colour. Everything was lackluster and dull, appropriately.

She made her way up the path to the entrance, her strides long and purposeful. Her hair had been tamed back into a knot at the back of her head, curls tucked behind her ear. She was the picture of professionalism, on a mission. Tonks jogged after her, tugging her wand out of her pocket and still trying her hardest to make small talk.

"It's not too bad, y'know," she said, almost cheerily. "I mean, yeah, it's still solemn and depressing, but without the Dementors around -- it's all right. The prisoners wallow in their own guilt instead of having the life sucked out of them." She shrugged, offering a small smile as she cast the proper charms on the door.

The process to enter the prison was long and tedious. Charms were cast, identification for entrance similar to Gringotts' vaults had to be gone through, and then Hermione, as a visitor, had to surrender her wand and be checked thoroughly for devices and potions.

"Scrimgeour's waiting for you in the office," Tonks said softly, depositing Hermione's belongings into a safe and labeling it accordingly. "Another Auror will be along to escort you there -- you won't have to go passing through the cells just yet, so you can have a moment to relax." She nodded and then gave the Auror within the front entrance office a squeeze on the shoulder. "I'm heading back out for gate-duty until Miss Granger's done."

The other Auror gave an understanding glance before looking back down at paperwork. Hermione sighed and turned, pacing the entrance way and awaiting her escort. Even though the Dementors had been taken out since their rejoining with Voldemort the year before, the prison still felt draining. The tiniest bit of happiness that might've been left in Hermione was quickly fading. She supposed it was simply the memory still living in the stone walls.

"Miss Granger?" came a voice. She turned, looking to her escort with a bit of interest. The first sign of a smile made its way onto her lips as she recognized Wayne Hopkins, a former Hufflepuff.

"I didn't know you'd gone into Auror training," she said softly, giving him a nod in greeting.

He grinned and shrugged, waving it off as though it were nothing. "Still in it, actually. Get to do the usual dirty work -- was just whinging about having to escort some Ministry official, when lo and behold it's Hermione Granger!" He gave a light laugh, briefly making Hermione wonder how he managed to stay cheerful in such a place.

"Yes, well.. business, you know," she said, feeling that horrible lull in conversation looming. Deciding to move along, she stood straighter and looked up to him, squaring her shoulders. "I'm to see Rufus Scrimgeour."

"Right, right," he replied, nodding. "Right this way, then." He smiled again and then gestured for her to walk with him down a side corridor.

She followed silently, taking in the path with excellent perception. She'd learned to memorize her way, mostly out of paranoia. Satisfied that she knew the way out if in a hurry, she nodded as he stopped in front of a large door. "Go ahead, he's waiting for you."

Hermione pushed the door open, nodded to the Minister of Magic, and then promptly closed it behind her. "Good morning," she said softly, shaking his hand with the utmost manners before sitting and pulling a flask out of her pocket. One that had been checked and tagged for safety at the entrance.

"I'll get straight to the point," she said softly, gesturing to the vial as she placed it on the table.

The Minister's eyebrows rose, but he nodded and leaned back in his chair, listening.

"In that vial is one of Albus Dumbledore's memories." She nodded slowly, making sure her point sunk in before she could continue. "You know as well as I do that memories are one of the strongest cases for the defense and conviction of dark wizards. This vial was left to Harry Potter after Dumbledore died last year, and was in turn left to me following Harry's death just months before."

She paused, taking a long, ragged sigh. "I hadn't though much of it -- Harry left many of his possessions to myself and another friend, and with all that has happened I hadn't had the time to consider what it was or how it might've been important. But, after finally looking at this memory in a Pensieve, I knew what it was and why it was so important."

She leaned forward, picking the vial up again and holding it as though it were precious -- and it truly was. "Did you bring the Pensieve?" she asked, much more quietly.

Scrimgeour nodded at last, passing a hand over his brow. "I don't know where you're going with this, Miss Granger, but I trust you've every reason to not waste my time?" He stood slowly, moving to a small trunk on the wall that he'd obviously brought with him. "I'm a very busy man," he continued, opening it and reaching down, pulling out a glowing basin carefully.

"We're backed up with trials at the Ministry and --"

"I assure you, sir, this will take no longer than five more minutes of your time," she interrupted, eyes steely. She'd not usually interrupt, but this was important, and she was tired of all the stalling and small talk.

She stood as he placed that basin on the desk and slowly uncorked the vial before emptying its contents into the swirling, silver liquid. A quick poke of her wand, and she gestured to the Minister to look, before following herself.

Hermione felt the tug of falling down into the memory, landing as if she'd Apparated there or been transported via Portkey. She shook her head of the dizzying feeling, then looked around her. She'd seen this memory at least ten times -- fallen into it over and over and over again, trying to figure out why she'd been left such a thing. Yet the answer had been right there in front of her the whole time.

"This is the Headmaster's office," Rufus said softly, causing Hermione to give him a curt nod. She waited, knowing the scene that would play out by heart.

Two familiar voices were heard, growing louder as they rounded the corner and came into view. Severus Snape and Albus Dumbledore, both looking expressive and concerned as they came to a stop in front of the perch that Fawkes the Phoenix had rested on for so many years.

They both looked considerably younger than Hermione remembered seeing them -- she hadn't been able to do much research, but she'd assumed that this was when Snape had first come to teach at Hogwarts and turned spy for the Order.

"Albus, I don't expect --"

"Severus, no," he replied sharply, waving his hand at the younger man. "I know that you are doubtful, you always have been. But I assure you that should anything happen, you will be cleared. I am not a thoughtless man -- every record of mine is kept safe, as yours will be. The proof lies forever to redeem you, my boy."

Snape's brow pinched in frustration and worry as he looked from Dumbledore, gazing out the window thoughtfully. "Something *will* happen," he replied, tone soft but words still enunciated and crisp. "None of this can end well."

And just like that, the memory slowly faded.

Hermione found herself standing over the Pensieve again, blinking into the glowing strands of memory. She pulled back and used her wand, picking up the delicate strands and slipping them back into the vial. She did not speak, but waited for the Minister to initiate the conversation.

"And just what is that supposed to mean?" he asked, growing a bit irritated and impatient. "That memory was from years and years ago, Miss Granger."

Hermione stood straight and pocketed the vial, her eyes cold. "That shouldn't matter; the point is that there is evidence to free Severus Snape and --"

"*Miss Granger*," he interrupted sharply, eyes narrowing. "As I stated, this memory is from years ago. I firmly believe that the 'clearing of his name' that they spoke of was in regards to the accusations against Severus Snape as a Death Eater, and Albus Dumbledore's speaking on his behalf--"

"And I firmly believe, with all due respect, sir, that they were speaking in regards to everything he did for the war against Voldemort." She balled her fists at her side angrily; this was not about loyalties or what she might've believed. This was about fulfilling something that had been passed down to her through tragedy.

Scrimgeour paused, looking her over briefly. For a moment, the old Hermione broke through; all fire and passion for her cause. "Even if you're right, what good do you hope to do here? Severus Snape's been imprisoned for three months and has spoken to no one."

She calmed slightly, letting her posture become more relaxed. "All I ask is counsel with Severus Snape. If I'm to find this evidence that Professor Dumbledore spoke of, I need insight. This is all I've got, sir -- and it isn't nearly enough to go on. He's the only other person alive who would know where to find ... whatever it is I'm to look for."

Scrimgeour shook his head slowly, the doubt pooling in his eyes. "As impassioned as you are, Miss--"

"Every wizard deserves a fair trial. Or would you rather follow the leaders that came before you? Leaving innocent witches and wizards to rot in this hell hole?" She was glaring, but she kept her posture polite. "Please, sir. Let me speak with him. If I find nothing, I'll forget it. And if I do, allow me more time. Let me build a case in which he can be properly defended."

She swallowed, her jaw tight as she watched the Minister mull over her words. After what felt like a very long moment, he gave a slow, short nod. "Half an hour," he said softly, gesturing to the door. "The Auror outside will escort you to his cell."

Hermione nodded and swept from the room, almost excitedly. She'd been granted permission to do this, to find the evidence Dumbledore had wanted the Ministry to know of. To clear Snape's name.

As her former schoolmate led the way deeper into the prison, she began to grow a bit nervous. She'd not seen Snape since the incident over a year ago, and despite her own desire to believe he was innocent, it still terrified her. He had always been intimidating, but now? He was imprisoned as a Death Eater and murderer of the great Albus Dumbledore. That was far more than imposing.

She swallowed, looking around them as they moved past pitiful prisoners. Some of them had committed lesser crimes, like unlawful harbouring of illegal items, or the misuse of Muggle artifacts. Simple crimes that warranted a stay in the wizard prison, but not a life sentence. Those were not the prisoners that were held where they were heading.

The expressions on the faces behind the bars grew more troubled, the deeper they traveled. Darker crimes, darker prisoners. Even the air itself felt thicker and heavier as they moved on. Hermione noted that now, a few of the dark eyes followed their forms. She straightened, trying to not look affected as they walked past.

Finally, he slowed and gestured to a cell that had at first appeared to be completely empty. She stepped forward, brow furrowed as her eyes scanned the dingy hold. There, settling on a barely visible outline in the shadows, she stopped. "Hello, Professor Snape," she said softly, giving the faceless shape a small bow of the head.

She waited with bated breath, unsure of how she would be received. Slowly, the figure emerged, and she had to blink several times to adjust to what she saw -- black eyes that were bottomless, deep scowl lines, dirty skin, greasy hair, thin frame... He looked positively gaunt, haunting there in the prison cell. She swallowed, watching him with a sad, sympathetic gaze.

His eyes were trained on her for just a moment, a slight look of confusion that slowly faded into a narrowed gaze. "Granger," he drawled, bringing thin arms up to cross over his chest. "What are you doing here?"

Merlin. He was no longer her professor. He was no longer even a member of society, and yet he still made her feel like she had to answer to him.

"I've come to ask for your help," she replied, voice shaking slightly. She couldn't bear looking at him, so ill looking and unhealthy, and yet she couldn't look away.

Snape's eyes flicked to the Auror that stood behind her, lips sneering slightly. "I am hardly in the position to help anyone, if you weren't aware of the circumstances." His arms fell open in a flourish, gesturing to his living arrangements. Dusty stone floors, damp darkness, graying and thin bed linens.

She slowly shook her head, and reached into her pocket to retrieve the vial. "Professor, this is--"

"I'm no longer your professor, Granger. I am no longer anyone's professor. You'd do well to remember that."

She frowned slightly, not correcting herself before continuing. "This was left to Harry by Professor Dumbledore. And then when -- well, after the final battle, it was left to me." She looked down at the shimmering bottle thoughtfully before meeting his gaze again. "It's one of Dumbledore's memories."

Snape's eyes narrowed a touch further, and he moved closer to the bars. Hermione swallowed nervously, tempted to take a step back -- but she'd not back away from him. If she were to truly believe in her cause, she'd need to not be afraid. "Of what concern to me is a dead man's memory?" he asked, voice barely above a cold whisper.

Hermione visibly tensed at his words. She looked away, taking a deep, calming breath before looking back at him. "In this memory, you and he discuss... your post at Hogwarts. And what you were doing to help. He said that he would ensure your freedom should anything go wrong, guarantee your name cleared. I need to know where the evidence is."

She hoped that would suffice -- direct and to the point.

Snape stiffened, listening to her words with a tight jaw. He remembered that promise all too well. Remembered feeling comfort at his words, feeling safety for the first time that didn't involve dark magic. And he'd been let down. He'd been tossed into Azkaban as soon as possible, barely a trial to his name. Where was his evidence? He had no bloody idea.

"What makes you think that such a thing exists?" he hissed, leaning closer still. Thick, unctuous hair hung around his face, framing his eyes and making him look absolutely mad. "Since I am, so obviously, *in here*?"

Hermione felt that familiar tightness in her chest that she'd always felt when he intimidated her. That much, at least, hadn't changed. "Please, sir, there has to be

something.. Somewhere. More memories, perhaps? Did you store any memories that would prove your loyalty?"

She swallowed hard, feeling a bit lost. She hadn't imagined how he would react, but she'd certainly hoped for more compliance than this. She was grabbing for something to hold on to, something that would make him offer a bit of assistance. After all, didn't he want to be free?

He glared at her for a moment and then turned to the Auror. His entire posture changed as he addressed him, as though Hermione were not standing just a few feet away. "My effects," he ordered, voice deep and still. "Give them to her." He eyed him for a moment, before turning back to Hermione.

"That is all I have to offer, Granger."

A/N: The title, *Amende Honorable*, is inevitably something that will come into play later on; Wikipedia defines it as being 'a mode of punishment ... which required the offender, stripped to his shirt, and led into court with a rope round his neck held by the public executioner, to beg pardon on his knees ... now used to denote a satisfactory apology or reparation.'

2: The Key

Chapter 2 of 5

Hermione manages to find a key piece of evidence -- quite literally -- and attempts to discover where that leads her next.

Hermione had tried to question Snape further about what it was he'd instructed Wayne to do. "Why do I need your belongings?" she'd asked, confused. But he had simply slipped back into the shadows, saying no more. She had frowned and turned back to the Auror, shaking her head and giving him a gesture to lead her wherever.

He had; deeper down into the fortress until they landed on a wide, expansive floor, much like a dungeon or Muggle basement. The walls were lined with safes, and he silently led her around the room until they reached the appropriate vault. Using his wand, he murmured softly and unlocked the tiny metal door.

The box itself was perhaps only big enough to slide one's hand inside, but it -- like many containers in the magical world -- was enchanted to hold much more than appearances would have one think. He reached in, pulling out a large sack that seemed to grow and expand as it was tugged free. It wasn't *terribly* large; perhaps the size of a small rubbish bag.

"This appears to be all," he said softly, reaching back in and feeling around. "Yeah, that's it." He gestured to it as he handed it over, offering a small shrug. "Hope it's whatever you need," he added, giving her a tiny grin.

Hermione nodded slowly, giving him a halfhearted smile. "Me, too," she replied, holding it up. She looked at it curiously, noting the many bulges and shapes behind the rough, canvas fabric. She wouldn't deny that she was interested in what was in the bag. Severus Snape's belongings, things that had been kept despite his being thrown into Azkaban, were things that definitely piqued her interest.

"What sorts of things are usually in the prisoners' belongings?" she asked suddenly, looking back to Wayne.

He shrugged as he locked the vault again and turned, gesturing for her to follow. "Usually whatever they had on them at the time of their capture. Ministry would rather we get rid of everything, but with all the releases and trials going on..." he trailed off, offering another shrug. "Suffice it to say that ex-prisoners get a bit touchy when they realize their belongings are gone."

Hermione nodded slowly, following him back up the stairs and along the paths back to the entrance. It made sense -- though she was still curious as to how whatever it was he'd had on him at the time of capture would be of use. She pondered the possibilities as they went through the paths, still contemplating what on earth she would do now. She figured the best plan of action would be to return to her flat and go through the things, trying to find the next step.

Which was exactly what she did. She bid a soft goodbye to her old schoolmate and then rode back across the lake with Tonks. Thankfully, she'd remained quiet during this trip, and Hermione used the time staring at the water to think. It took everything in her to keep a strong hold on the sack and not look inside. Her curiosity was building to a gnawing strength.

As the boat came to a halt, Hermione climbed out silently. She was ready to leave, to get to work on finding the evidence, when Tonks' voice inevitably broke her train of thought.

"Will you be at Molly and Arthur's this evening?" she asked, standing in the softly rocking boat. Hermione frowned, ready to say no. To tell her that she had work to do and didn't have time for dinners and socializing. "Please, Hermione? They're so looking forward to it."

Hermione hesitated, then gave a short nod. "I'll be there," she replied. She gave Tonks a small smile, then turned back to the shore and Disapparated.

Hermione had gone straight to her flat and set to work. She was incredibly organized -- before she'd even opened the sack she, had grabbed a few spare pieces of parchment and her quill, ready to take any notes she might need. Clearing the desk of everything else, she opened the sack at her feet and pulled out the first item.

Which she almost instantly dropped.

A ghastly mask of a skeletal face stared back at her. It was, quite obviously, his Death Eater mask. She swallowed, tearing her eyes away from the sight and placing it on the smooth surface before turning back to the bag. What followed, ironically, were the heavy, hooded robes that went along with the mask. She cringed, hating to imagine her former professor in that horrid garb.

A few obvious items were pulled out next -- his wand, dusty leather boots, and an antique-looking ring. It wasn't extravagant and looked to be older than Hogwarts itself. Just a dirty silver band with dull emerald in the center. The last thing in the sack was a tiny velvet pouch, rich green in color. Her brow furrowed as she tugged at the opening, the drawstring pulling as the mouth widened.

She gently emptied the contents and surveyed them with concentration. Another ring, similar in style and color to the previous ring, but much more dainty, was on a delicate silver chain. Also, an antique key -- large and heavy, a bit rusted. The key was her biggest concern -- whatever it was a key to was certainly important, right?

Contemplations led her to a few choice ideas -- it was either the key to a Gringotts vault, a safe of some sort, or, just perhaps, his home. Hermione wasn't even aware that he *had* a home. She'd always assumed he stayed at Hogwarts. This was going to be much more difficult than she'd thought.

The day wore on with her making notes and writing out her thoughts on the parchment before she leaned back in her chair, stretching. Crookshanks hopped down onto large feline feet and wound himself through her legs, purring loudly. She pushed back, then leaned down to scoop his large, furry body into her arms.

With a sigh, she scratched at his head affectionately, still thinking. It was then that she realized how late it was and gave a soft groan. She'd told Tonks that she'd go to the Weasley's for dinner, and she couldn't back out of it now. She kept petting Crookshanks idly, thinking of how out of place she felt there. When Harry and Ron had been around, she'd always felt welcomed and like she fit in perfectly. Now, however, it was different.

Everyone seemed to be paired off. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Fleur and Bill, Remus and Tonks -- all of them were together, and she was left with Ginny, whom had been slightly closed off for a while, herself. It was understandable, of course, but it wasn't easy. She really only comforted herself with knowing that Ginny needed someone so that she didn't feel the couple-pain. After all, it had to have felt far worse for her.

Hermione sighed, trying to forget the depressing thoughts before scooping the furry mass from her lap and setting him back on the floor. "Go play," she chided gently, letting her hand slip around his tail as she slicked the fur back completely. Turning back to the desk, she surveyed the items and notes one last time.

She still was at her same decision. The only thing she'd concluded was that she needed to find out what the old key went to and hope that her next clue was locked inside.

Dinner, as usual, had been amazing. Molly Weasley always knew how to fill bellies and keep everyone cozy and at home. Hermione had nearly stuffed herself on dessert before the group finally retired to the sitting room. The company was quite nice for a long time. Everyone discussed what they'd been up to over the past few weeks, as it had become a bit of a tradition for them all to see each other at least once a month.

Bill had gone on for a bit about his latest curse breaking work while Fleur listened to her husband attentively. The conversation then shifted to a bit of talk about Potions masters that could brew the Wolfsbane for he and Remus, and they compared their latest notes. Apparently the brew Remus had taken the last moon was the closest he'd had to Severus Snape's, and Bill quickly took down the name. Obviously, his last hadn't been the best.

At the mention of Snape, eyes had shifted to Hermione somewhat nervously, and she was expected to reveal a bit about her meeting earlier in the day. She had laughed lightly and tried to brush it off as though it were nothing at all. She caught Molly's uneasy glance and felt that dread pool in her stomach. Molly had been against Snape since Dumbledore's death and had adamantly made her opinion known that she didn't believe a word to the positive regarding his actions.

Knowing the easiest way to change the subject, Ginny had turned to Tonks and asked about her wedding plans.

"She refuses to set the date," Remus murmured, playfully squeezing Tonks' arm as he gave her a soft smile. "She's terrified it'll be too close to the full moon, even though I marked the Absolutely-Not dates."

Tonks squirmed, grinning at him in return. "Oh, stop it. I told you I'm afraid of cutting it too close. It's just paranoia." She shrugged, trying to look as though setting the date of their wedding did not matter.

Hermione leaned back on the couch, trying to either block out the conversation or at least keep a small smile on her face. Lovey-dovey mushiness all over the place. Honestly, didn't they consider Ginny's feelings at all? She looked to the younger girl, noting that her expression looked at peace as she watched her friends and family. *Poor girl. Hiding it all inside, isn't she?* Hermione thought. Yet, she didn't seem to recall the fact that she had been the one to bring it up.

"Hermione, you been seeing anybody?" Bill asked, nodding her way with a grin. "Got a mate you'd be just right for, y'know."

She visibly cringed, shaking her head. Why did people feel the bloody need to ask questions like that? Bill should have known better, considering how often he and Fleur were asked about when they'd start a family. But, then again, he always seemed so proud to answer it.

She sighed and tried to not vocalize an answer to egg the conversation on, but Tonks' voice quickly added fuel to the fire. "She looked right happy to see Wayne Hopkins earlier today!" she chimed in, giving Hermione what she probably thought was a secretive, knowing grin. Hermione, however, did not return the lighthearted expression.

"I was happy to see him because he's a former classmate," she replied, a bit more indignantly than she'd have liked. She curled her arms around her torso a bit tighter, hiding away in her subtle body language.

"Ah!" Fleur cried, leaning forward with a dazzling smile. "And was... was 'ee 'appy to see you?" she asked, looking very much like the child who had just discovered the cookie jar. Hermione sank lower into the couch, not even understanding why she was so utterly embarrassed by the situation. She didn't *like* Wayne. She barely *knew* him.

Molly shook her head and waved her hand at the girls, but her smile told Hermione that she wanted very badly to discuss the situation as well. "Now now, girls, leave Hermione alone." Her demand was serious, but her tone was nothing but playful.

"I've got to get going," she finally said, voice more stiff and awkward than she'd intended. "Ah, early wake up for a bit of work tomorrow..." She stood quickly and moved across the sitting room into the kitchen where her light coat hung over a chair. She shrugged into it before collecting a few parcels into her arms and uneasily making her way to the front door.

Remus stood quickly, with a bit of an admonishing glare to the rest of the room, and moved toward the door to catch it before she could close it completely.

"Hermione," he started, his voice cut off with an expression that spoke volumes. One that told her he really had no clue what to say to make it easier. She looked up, waiting for a moment, before giving him a soft nod of understanding. He tried, at least.

"It's all right," she murmured, giving him a small smile. She turned, starting down the path to walk a bit before Apparating home, when he called out once more, causing her to turn.

He stood there, watching her for just a second, before leaning forward and calling softly, "Happy Birthday, eh?"

"Flowers?" Hermione asked quizzically, holding the small bouquet out at arm's length, as if afraid that Venomous Tentacula buds were embedded in the arrangement.

"Yeah, why didn't you tell me it was your birthday yesterday?" Wayne asked, grinning as he led her down the familiar paths back to Snape's cell. "Tonks told me after you'd gone, and I could have kicked myself."

She cautiously brought the blooms to her nose, sniffing carefully. They were really quite pretty, a small bunch of wildflowers that had been enchanted with a few tiny butterflies, zipping in and out of the colorful buds. "Thank you," she finally replied, brow still furrowed in confusion. "And I don't make it a habit to waltz about, notifying everyone of my birthday. So don't worry about it."

She shrugged, finally letting her arm fall to her side as she walked with him. It was considerably later than the time she'd visited yesterday, already early afternoon. She had gone to Gringotts and attempted to nonchalantly request Severus Snape's vault, and even dangled the key, as though she were very important. However, the goblins had looked at her like she was insane, especially when they had asked for the vault *number*. She'd been able to do nothing but stare at them wordlessly.

She really hadn't wanted to go back and bother him with more questions, but she really was at a loss if she didn't find out his vault number. A key was useless without the lock it fit. So there they were, heading back through the paths to his cell, her stomach twisting in light knots.

"Snape!" Wayne called, reaching out his wand and tapping it along the bars loudly. Hermione frowned at the disrespectful title, the rude clanging sound he made. That wasn't something she'd have ever thought of someone doing to Severus Snape.

He emerged from the shadows again, this time looking slightly better kept. She wondered briefly if she'd perhaps woken him yesterday or caught him at a bad time. Now, however, he had more color and looked less battered. "Hello, Professor," she greeted, not reverting from his previous respectful title.

He did not speak, but merely gave her a slow nod of the head in greeting. His eyes remained on her, questioning her arrival without uttering a single word before flicking slightly down to the bouquet she held.

She swallowed, fidgeting slightly with the flowers as she tried to remember the small speech she'd had planned and the questions she'd formulated in her head to ask him. Finally realizing she needed her hands, she thrust the flowers back into Wayne's grasp before fishing into her robe pockets.

"I--I went through your things," she began, grimacing already at her words. *That sounded so terrible*, she thought, shaking her head. Even though she knew he'd expect that she had, it felt like an invasion of his privacy. "And-- well, the key, you see," she continued, pulling it out of her pocket. She noticed his eyes flick ever so slightly down at the heavy key before meeting her gaze again, a soft nod for her to continue being his only real reaction.

"A--anyway, I went to Gringotts but they wouldn't allow me into your vault without the proper vault*number*, even though I stood there waving the key at them, so I had to come back and ask you. I would have spoken to anyone else, but I really didn't know who might've known or where any record might have --"

"That key is not for a Gringotts vault."

His smooth, deep voice finally echoed in the stone corridors, each word enunciated with such perfection and clarity. Hermione looked up sharply, her brow furrowed in confusion as she waved it slightly as if to ask if he were sure. "But-- well, what does it go to, then?" she asked, head tilting to the side.

She instantly felt daft in assuming -- surely it went to his home? *Oh, that's awkward*, she thought, feeling her cheeks burn slightly. She didn't know about the idea of going to his home. That was far more private than a small bag of belongings.

Snape's eyes flicked to Wayne suspiciously, his brow furrowing just the slightest bit. "May I have a moment," he requested, though his tone was far from questioning. It almost held that familiar timbre of a demand. Wayne looked to Hermione, and despite her reassuring look, he shook his head.

"Afraid not," he replied, giving a soft sigh and shrug. Hermione frowned, knowing that whatever it was he had to tell her was important.

"Fine," she replied sharply, reaching into her pocket and slipping the key back inside. If Wayne didn't trust him enough to turn and walk away for two minutes, then she'd simply show more trust than he was capable of. She turned back to Snape and took three long strides to the bars, turning her head and leaning in for him to speak softly.

The two men looked at her for a long moment, both a bit disbelievingly. Wayne looked to be on the verge of pulling her away but too shocked to move while Snape seemed genuinely surprised at her level of trust. He stood straighter before closing the distance and leaning against the bars.

One hand wound around the bar directly in front of her eyes, and she noted the familiar look of his ink-stained nails. She wondered briefly what he'd been writing during his time in captivity, but was quickly brought back to reality as his voice murmured near her ear.

"The key is to the private potions storage room within Hogwarts," he replied, hot breath trickling along her ear and neck. She swallowed, giving a small nod, waiting for him to continue. She knew there had to be more than just that -- after all, something so simple hadn't needed to remain so secretive.

Sure enough, he continued, more softly, mouth closer to her ear.

"There is a safe, eleven shelves up, behind three rows of asphodel root. The key fits that safe, which might be of a bit of use to you." He finished, but did not move right away, causing Hermione to feel a bit unnerved. She hesitated, then pulled back slightly to turn and look at him. He was very close, and she was sure she would have felt afraid if it weren't for the thick, iron bars.

He looked as though he'd say something else, but instead gave her another slow nod. She backed up again, feeling her knees trembling slightly from the slight bit of fear and adrenaline that was coursing through her. "Thank you," she finally said, giving him a soft smile before turning to Wayne, letting him know she was ready to go.

He looked to her, an eyebrow raising in question before he handed her flowers over again and heading back down the corridor. Hermione looked to Snape once more, finding him shrouded in the shadows again. Unable to see him, she gave a tiny wave goodbye before turning on her heel and walking briskly to catch up to the Auror.

3: The Address

Chapter 3 of 5

Hermione goes straight for her next piece of evidence -- which only leads her somewhere that makes her feel uneasy.

CHAPTER THREE: THE ADDRESS

Hermione had left Azkaban for the second time in only two days. She knew that if the Dementors had still been there, she'd have been feeling the effects by now. She took a moment to check her pocket watch, wondering if she had time to visit the school today. She was somewhat disappointed when she discovered that it was already nearly five o'clock. Despite her lack of outward enthusiasm, she found herself eager to find more evidence. Why, exactly, she didn't know.

At first, she'd felt a sense of obligation. To simply continue the work that first Dumbledore and then Harry had. Now? She had a real passion for the evidence she'd already seen. She wholeheartedly believed that he had acted on Dumbledore's own wishes, and therefore deserved to be free.

With that thought on her mind, she Disapparated from the familiar shore out from Azkaban, barely bidding Tonks a goodbye wave. Her mind was filled with a million thoughts, all flying into one another and crashing before new ones were born, taking over instead. She had every intention of going back to her flat in London, but had changed her mind at the last possible second. With the familiar whoosh of Apparation, she came to a halt in the town of Hogsmeade.

She always enjoyed Apparating into Hogsmeade; one never had to be conscious of where they ended up. The town was exclusively wizards and witches, so she usually encountered a few startled gasps, then the residents moved along as though it were nothing. She quickly straightened her robes before walking down the main cobblestone street, heading toward the end of town where the road twisted up toward Hogwarts.

It wasn't a long walk, but felt slightly unfamiliar. After all, it had been over a year since she'd taken this path. She fought to not slow her steps and enjoy the scenery, the slightly chilling air of the coming dusk, and the soft sounds coming from the forest along one edge of her trek. Keeping her pace steady, she made it up to the front gates and promptly managed a strong Patronus. The silvery wisp was long and curling, gone in a flash before she could even get a good look at it.

One thing was certain -- it was *not* the scuttling otter that normally formed out of her wand. She frowned, curious as to why her form had seemingly changed. She had a good idea, and it was one that she'd prefer to not think about. The stress and trauma she'd been through months ago had more than likely forced her form to remind her of those events, and that wouldn't have been a good purpose for an effective Patronus.

She waited, bouncing on her heels before shifting her weight, then leaning against the gate. Every five seconds she fidgeted or changed positions, unable to remain still. It wasn't until she heard frantically scuffling feet that she turned to see Headmistress McGonagall coming down the path, her wand at the ready. "Who--" she began, then slowed as she peered ahead in the dimming light.

"Miss Granger?" she asked, voice raising an octave. "What in Merlin's name...?"

"Professor," Hermione greeted, giving her a weak smile and a bow of the head. "I'm sorry to have come without any sort of notice, but--"

"Miss Granger, your Patronus frightened every single first year at supper!" she cried, working through the intricate spell work of the front gate. Hermione frowned, her brow furrowing in slight confusion. "When in Merlin's name did you decide that *that* was a proper-- well, no mind, no mind, you've not control over what it is, I suppose. Come in, child."

She opened the gates and ushered her in, causing Hermione to stare at her, nonplussed. She was half-tempted to ask her what she was talking about; or better yet, ask just what form she'd seen. However, asking what her own Patronus form had been would have sounded utterly ridiculous. She should have known those things.

"What can we do for you, Miss Granger?" she asked, gathering her robes as she began walking back up the path toward the castle. Hermione pocketed her wand and followed, feeling slightly intrusive. Life was going on as usual at Hogwarts, and she just burst in with no prior warning or notice. It wasn't like her; that was sure.

"I'm here to do a bit of research, if that's all right," she replied softly, looking up at the dazzling castle windows, trying to keep her mind occupied.

"Of course, Miss Granger!" she replied happily, nodding. "You know that our library is always at your--"

"Not," Hermione interrupted, looking to her quickly, "in the library. I apologize, I didn't clarify." She fidgeted slightly with the hem of her sleeve, before crossing her arms tightly to resist the urge to fidget further. "I, ah, I am here on the behalf of Severus Snape."

McGonagall's eyes turned to her sharply, lips tight in a pursed line. "Miss Granger, I do not believe you'll find anything here regarding Severus Snape," she replied quickly, nearly biting out his name. "All of his belongings were shipped to his home after they were carefully combed through to detect any dark magic."

"And was any found?" she asked quickly, almost indignantly. Her eyebrows rose as she regarded her former Head of House, waiting for a response.

McGonagall, looking slightly miffed, shook her head slowly. "No. No, there wasn't." She turned back and stared at their path for the remainder of the journey, Hermione doing the same. The wheels in Hermione's head were turning, pondering over how much she hated these times. Everyone in the world was against Snape. The only person who had ever trusted him was gone, and now that she'd taken up that duty she as alone.

"I won't be in the way," she added softly, slipping into the big heavy doors behind the Headmistress. "And I won't be long."

McGonagall gave her a bit of a sad nod, as if to show how disappointed she was in her formerly prized pupil. So disappointed that she was entering those hallowed halls with the purpose of clearing a murderer's name. Hermione pointedly ignored the small stab that look gave her and instead nodded politely before heading down the main corridor toward the path to the private stores.

"Miss Granger!"

Hermione turned quickly, her footsteps pausing for just a moment as the Headmistress wrung her hands in front of her. "Come to supper. If you'd like."

She gave a sharp nod before turning and walking toward the Great Hall. Hermione watched her for a moment, thankful for the kindness -- yet she knew that it was nothing more than an obligation to be cordial. She took a deep breath and continued on her trek to the storage facility, heedless of the good time that was no doubt occurring in the Great Hall.

She was on a mission and couldn't let the temptation of good food and warm atmosphere distract her.

It took a few twists and turns before Hermione had stumbled across the familiar corridor that his private stores were on -- *his*. A small smile came to her lips. She had never stopped thinking of the storage closet as his. Never stopped considering Potions *his* class. Not even when Slughorn took over in her sixth year had she been able to brew her Potions without wondering if what she did would please him. It was strange, really.

With a deep breath, she pushed the door open and slipped inside, before closing and locking it behind her. She was instantly disgusted at the lack of organization the current Potion master exhibited; jars and bottles were dusty and turned at all different angles. Frowning, Hermione sighed and moved toward the tall ladder and tested it warily. One foot was firm on the bottom rung, before she pulled the other up to match. Carefully, she bounced, swayed, and pulled her body back. When the ladder held firm, she took a deep breath and climbed upward.

"...Nine, ten, eleven," Hermione counted, concentrating on the number of shelves she passed instead of just how far up she was. She forced herself to not look down -- the nerves would no doubt get to her and cause her to either lose her balance or grip on to the ladder fearfully. As she reached the proper shelf, she carefully reached out and took down the jars, placing them on the shelf below. She moved back three rows until a flat surface could be seen much further up than the back wall.

Her heart pounded as she reached in and gently gripped a rusting metal box, pulling it out and being extra careful to not bump any jars or lose her balance. Once the box was securely cradled in her grasp, she shakily began to make her way back down the ladder. She was positively thrilled to have yet another bit of evidence, hints, little riddles to follow. If it weren't for the fact that this entire ordeal was so serious, she'd have found it *fun*.

She was almost unable to wait. Every fiber of her being wanted to sit there on the floor of the Potions store room and go through that box. In fact, she almost sat -- but then had second thoughts and figured that it wasn't the best place. The room was quite warm and without ventilation, and some of the pickled animal parts gave a slight stench.

Making a decision, she promptly exited the room and stalked down the hall, feeling chilled by the difference in the air. She walked until she was in the middle of a corridor filled with classrooms. Picking one at random, she entered and cautiously looked around. The faintest, genuine smile came to her lips as she confirmed that it was empty. With ease and silence, she slid the door closed and eagerly sat down on the floor, her back leaning against it.

Thankfully, she just so happened to choose a room with enough moonlight filtering in that she had no need to cast Lumos. Unless, that was, she found something that needed extra light. Almost shakily, her hand fished into her robe pocket until she gripped the key. With a hard swallow, she retrieved it and watched with a strange intensity as she entered it into the rusty, old lock. She closed her eyes and said a silent prayer before giving it a turn.

When the lock clicked as though it were brand new and the lid to the box popped open, her face was lit up with the brightest smile that she'd worn since ... since over a year ago, she'd say. Before the loss, before the final few battles -- before Dumbledore had died. *That long ago*, she thought, shaking her head of the saddening thoughts.

Her excitement returned when she remembered that a box of clues awaited her. She quickly placed it on the floor, trying to be as silent as possible, and opened the creaking, rusty lid the rest of the way. Much to her dismay, the box was full of things that she could do absolutely *nothing* with to instantly gratify her desire to find out more.

Two more keys, a slip of paper, and about half a dozen more vials of what she assumed were memories.

Hermione frowned slightly, disappointed to see that she could not investigate further, right here in the middle of the floor. She fished through the box further, making sure that this was all there was, before sighing softly in defeat. While it was true that the items in the box would be of use, she was still let down that she could not do anything at the present time.

With a sigh, she pulled the slip of parchment out and unfolded it. It was rather old, with raw edges and smudged ink across the grain of the paper. She read the scrawling script, her eyes widening slightly. Oh... no. No, no, no...

The thing that she had dreaded earlier was slowly becoming a reality. She should have expected it, really; it was going to have to come to this at some point. She frowned, reading it again, as if to be sure that it *really* said what she'd read the first time.

264 Spinner's End W., Manchester

Hermione's tiny bit of evidence had led her to Severus Snape's home.

Hermione woke the next morning with the strangest feeling. She was up and about like a child on Christmas morning, ready to dig into the presents and sate their boundless curiosity. Yet she also had an uneasy fluttering in her stomach, as though she were preparing to walk into a horrendously difficult examination. Excited, yet unnerved.

She silently bustled around her flat, getting ready to make the trek to the address she had read the night before. As she'd never been anywhere in the area, she would have to take Muggle transportation. That eased her nerves slightly, to know that she would at least have the comforts of a train, and possibly the tube, depending on where her final destination was. She'd not even had the time to research and get herself a proper map -- which only added to her nerves.

Her journey wasn't terribly long, but by the time she had arrived in downtown Manchester, it was nearly noon. She gripped the map she held and looked up, frowning at the overcast sky. The house wasn't far, and she'd opted to walk; yet, now it looked as though it would surely rain. She frowned and took a deep breath before turning and twisting the map, facing a different direction, and figuring out exactly where she was. Positioned at last, she took quick, rushed steps in her designated direction.

She had nearly three blocks to go before heading east, and her surroundings were slowly growing less shiny and more run-down. She tugged her coat around her more tightly, her hand concealed in her pocket as she gripped her wand. As she turned in her new direction, her eyes took in even more dilapidated buildings and homes. It was slowly becoming less crowded, but the industrial side of the city could still be seen. Some of the yards had grass and a few shrubs.

Spotting an aged street sign that read 'Spinner's End,' she promptly hurried her footsteps. The tiniest sprinkling of rain could be felt, and she was in more of a hurry now than before. However, as she surveyed the homes along the street, she wondered if she'd be so anxious to enter when she arrived. None of the houses looked inviting or warm. Most had bars on their windows and door, and she'd have assumed they were all abandoned if she hadn't seen flickers of light inside.

A low rumbling of thunder accompanied her gasp the moment that she spotted the wrought iron numbers on the mailbox. Double checking her slip of parchment, she nodded and quickly walked up the cracked sidewalk to the front door. This home certainly had a different feel -- whereas the others *looked* empty, this one *felt* it. Retrieving the two keys, Hermione took a deep breath. She first tried the larger one, then switched to the smaller as the first wouldn't even slip into the lock.

The smaller one, however, did; as she turned it, she felt the familiar anxiety of unlocking the box she still carried. With soft clicking, the lock turned over and the doorknob was free to turn. Hermione smiled and pushed, the door creaking open ominously. It was, perhaps, the last thing needed to complete the eerie scene -- rain outside coming down more freely, thunder rolling in the distance, a dark and empty house, and now? A creaking door.

She entered and closed the door behind her, instantly grateful for the fact that he kept oil lamps all around. It looked as though the electricity had long ago been shut off. Hermione pulled her bag from her shoulder and removed her coat before using her wand to light the lamps. The room instantly flared to life under the soft glow of the flames, but it was still drab and unkempt.

Her breath caught as her eyes surveyed the walls of his sitting room. Absolutely *covered* with books. She fought herself to not go to them and absolutely lose herself in his massive collection.

Keeping to her work, she pulled the box from the shoulder bag she had carried and set it down on the peeling, unsteady coffee table as she sat on the dusty couch. She opened it, and stared at the contents with a small sigh. She wasn't sure what she thought she'd accomplish by coming here with the box, but she kept everything together just in case. She'd even thrown the smaller items from his personal effects into the box -- everything except his garments.

She slowly realized that if she hoped to accomplish anything, she'd *have* to snoop around his home.

Standing, she comforted herself with reassurances that he'd known she'd have to do this. He'd expected it, right? She sighed, rubbing the heel of her palms against her eyes in aggravation. She didn't *want* to go through his belongings. She'd not even been able to go through that small sack without feeling as if she'd invaded his privacy. And now, investigate his home? It was *impossible*.

With a groan, she thought back to the evidence she already had. Anything to prolong the actual process of going into other rooms with the purpose of nosing around. The vials -- surely, she could look at those first? Oh, but that would be such a waste to go back to the Ministry to look at the memories when she was already *here*--

Hermione straightened, looking back to the open box. Surely... Someone with so many vials of memories must own a Pensieve?

She swallowed, her heartbeat quickening. Of *course* he did... Harry had mentioned him having one, but would never tell them how he knew. Just mentioned seeing it. With a small, excited smile, she began pacing the tiny sitting room. Where would he have kept it, though? She'd have assumed in his office at Hogwarts, but McGonagall had mentioned his belongings being sent away. *To his home*.

With a renewed energy, her fear of snooping through his belongings left her. She quickly stepped through the hallway, into the kitchen. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, there. She was looking for boxes, things that had merely been dropped off and left. Surely his things wouldn't have been unpacked after they were delivered. She moved back through the hall and wandered deeper into the house, opening each door she came to.

First was the small bathroom, then a linen closet, and a small bedroom -- which she *immediately* moved past -- and at last, a very tiny, cramped study.

More books lined the walls here, though they were all more directed toward his line of work. Potions, medicinal herbs and animal parts, and a few empty spots. She wondered briefly if his home had been detoxified as well; it would explain missing books that had more than likely been on the Dark Arts. The desk was clean and organized, if a bit dusty, and another oil lamp sat on the edge.

However, the most noticeable difference in this room compared to the others were the boxes in the floor. At least five large boxes, all taped and labeled with his name and a stamp that simply stated 'Clean.' Feeling anxious, Hermione quickly used her wand to slice the tape and open the boxes before she knelt in the middle of them, digging in quickly.

The first two held more books, the third and fourth his private ingredients, and the last his personal belongings. Quills, rolls of parchment, paperweights and desktop gadgets that looked to be long-forgotten gifts from Dumbledore, and in the very bottom... A smooth, porcelain basin. She quickly pulled it out, handling it carefully and letting the other objects settle back down into the box.

A small envelope rest in the basin, and she almost left it behind as well -- however, the neat manuscript caused her to read it again. 'The Pensieve,' it stated in neat, elegant writing. She swallowed and stood, cradling the basin to her as she made her way from the study, back to the sitting room. She sat on the couch and placed the Pensieve on the table next to the box of vials. Her hand shakily retrieved the letter and opened it, feeling much more invasive now than before.

The same script that had been on the envelope continued on the inside:

The Pensieve is a useful tool, one that is to be guarded and kept with the utmost care and respect. It is for this reason that in case of any absence, I leave this Pensieve to Severus Snape.

Hereby signed, Albus Dumbledore

4: Amortentia & Memories

Chapter 4 of 5

Hermione slips into Snape's memories, and finds a couple that are incredibly surprising.

Hermione had stared at the letter for a good five minutes, feeling her chest tighten at Dumbledore's familiar handwriting. So Snape hadn't had a Pensieve; at least, not until Dumbledore had left him his. She was incredibly grateful for that fact, and quickly slipped the parchment back into its envelope.

The envelope had also included instructions for refilling the Pensieve. Hermione followed them, thankful that Snape was a well-stocked Potions master. She had found the liquid that she needed to add to the water, activating the Pensieve in a way. As soon as it was done, she leaned over it, inspecting the fluid. It looked like a normal Pensieve. She could only hope it worked properly.

With a deep breath, she reached for the first vial; it was shaped differently, and so she wanted to see the memories it contained first. What if they were more important? However, as she uncorked it, she caught a familiar whiff of *potion*. It was not the odorless memory that she'd expected. Her brow furrowed as she glared at the box, wondering if she'd simply stumbled across a box of potions.

She wafted the aroma toward her nose, taking long, slow sniffs. She frowned, knowing that the odor was familiar but not recognizable. It had been too long since she'd studied potions, and her mind was unfortunately rather rusty. She gave in, and corked the vial before setting it aside and moving to the next one. She uncorked it and smelled it timidly, silently praying that it was not another potion.

No odor.

Hermione smiled triumphantly before emptying the vial into the Pensieve, watching the silvery, threadlike liquid swirl and swim in the basin. After the last bit slipped out, she set the empty vial on the table and took a deep breath. Leaning down toward the Pensieve, she steeled herself.

Most of the memories were inconsequential. Some were childhood incidents, and while they did indeed cause her to pity the prisoner, they did not help her case to free him. Others were more substantial and slightly alarming; his first meeting with Lucius Malfoy, the night he received the Dark Mark on his left arm, an event in which he overheard the Prophecy regarding Harry.

Only two more vials remained, and she noticed for the first time that one of them had a small notch in the glass, as if he had used something to carve out a mark to indicate that this one was important in some way. Feeling anticipation swelling in her chest, she quickly poured it in and waited for the soft glow to emanate from the basin.

Sure that it was emptied completely, she leaned forward.

While most of the memories that she'd fallen into were dark and ominous, this one held a much different feel. The air was thick and warm and the only light came from a softly flickering fire. Hermione instantly felt as though she didn't belong; she was invading something different, something that made her stomach twist slightly.

She wasn't positive, but she looked to be in the dungeons of Hogwarts. The stone had that same design, same mortar and lay. Was it possible that these were his private quarters?

As she turned and surveyed the room, she finally saw Snape's tall, dark figure. He was standing, swaying just slightly. She wondered if he was sick, or weak; as she moved closer, she saw that he was not alone. A small gasp escaped her mouth as she saw a smaller, feminine figure in his arms. His robes had draped over his arms, almost concealing her completely.

She was instantly shocked. She'd never assumed Snape to have had someone before, at least not in the sense that she saw him holding her. She'd expected that he'd had relations that weren't of the most savory nature, being a Death Eater, but she'd not expected the tenderness that was exhibited before her. Furthermore, they appeared to be dancing -- slowly, without form or proper step, but dancing nonetheless. Hermione moved closer, studying the pair.

Snape was, by far, much younger than he was now. She would have guessed that he was twenty-two or twenty-three at the oldest, and the young woman looked to be no older than Hermione herself. Possibly a year or so younger--

It was with that startling realization that her brain turned over the situation in her mind. This must have been at the very beginning of Snape's teaching career, and this young woman was, as best as Hermione could guess, a student. She swallowed, wanting to feel utterly disgusted at the thought. However, being ever analytical, she pondered the situation. Snape was so young. They must have known each other when he was in school. That didn't make it right, or okay, but it made more sense.

He didn't appear to be particularly affectionate toward the young woman, but she didn't seem to mind. She had her head against his chest, a soft smile on her lips, while his

arms wound around her securely. His eyes were trained on the wall behind her, and he looked to be in deep thought. Hermione moved closer, staring at him with a bit of wonder. He looked so different... So unaffected and young; quite handsome, though still stern and cold.

He startled her for a moment as he spoke; she'd almost forgotten that this was only a memory.

"I have to leave," he said softly. Hermione was amazed at how the commanding voice had turned into absolute velvet for the young woman in his arms. Hermione watched as she pulled back, an expression of concern on her face.

"Now?" she asked, her throat convulsing in a hard swallow.

Snape nodded slowly, his eyes closing in a sharp movement as he winced. He unwrapped his arms from around her and pulled his sleeve back, showing her the Mark that had agitated flesh into redness before the dark black color slowly bled into the skull and snake. The veins in his arm were pulsing as muscles clenched tightly, his fist balling in agony.

His voice and words, however, remained calm. "Remember what I told you," he said, nodding. "Do *not* leave this room. Wait for me."

The young woman nodded, her eyes wide with fright. "Severus... please be careful," she murmured, reaching up and cupping his face with her hands. It was then that Hermione noticed something extraordinary. The delicate emerald ring she'd found in his belongings was slipped onto the girl's wedding ring finger.

Had Snape been-- engaged? Betrothed? Promised, to this young woman? If so, where was she now?

She shook her head of the thoughts and watched as he kissed her; it was a long, smoldering kiss, that left even Hermione gasping for breath. To see Severus Snape exhibiting such passion, such feeling, was incredible. He broke apart from her and quickly rushed to the fireplace, where he grabbed those familiar black robes and mask that had hung next the mantle on a hook. He threw them on, gave one last look to his lover, and threw the Floo powder into the fire.

With a green blaze, and words Hermione couldn't quite make out, he was gone.

Hermione wanted to stay, to observe the girl. She had a strange fascination with her, a desire to know more -- but as this was Severus Snape's memory, the surroundings slowly faded away until she was left sitting on the couch with her nose inches from the liquid's surface. She sat up, her heart pounding. Whatever she had seen had been so unlike the Snape that she knew, so caring and tender. She wondered if he had lost this relationship, and that thought made her heart ache with pity.

No, Hermione had never been one to believe so readily in love; what she'd seen had been something special. It was obvious why this memory was kept, marked, and locked away.

Her hands were shaking slightly as she fought not to dwell on what she'd seen, and she quickly emptied the last memory into the Pensieve. It was the last chance for evidence, for proof, for any indication that Snape was indeed innocent. She'd never been more hopeful in her entire life as she leaned back over the basin, waiting for the memory to take her.

Instantly, she was taken back with shock.

She found herself in the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts, but the scene unfolding before her was angry and filled with fury. Snape flung his arm out, knocking countless gadgets and gizmos to the floor, bits shattering. He was screaming, his face red with hatred and-- pain? Hermione moved closer, his wild movements passing through her as she watched him. He was yelling, looking positively livid, but his eyes held a sadness in them.

She looked to Dumbledore, noting that the Headmaster was simply pacing behind Snape, his wand pointing at the broken things as they flew from his desk. They levitated, piecing themselves back together, before settling back onto the smooth wood. She frowned as she saw his right hand, dark and cradled against his chest protectively. This memory had not happened long ago.

"Severus," he said calmly, his voice as gentle and easy as it had always been. Hermione felt tears prickling at the backs of her eyes; just seeing him, alive again -- it was too much.

Snape whirled around, his voice still booming and echoing about the office. The previous Headmasters frowned from the canvases, shaking their heads distastefully at the Slytherin man's behavior. "Pipe down!" Dippet yelled, waving his hand angrily.

Hermione frowned and turned back to Snape, trying to listen to his raging words. "I'll not do it, Albus!" he roared, shaking his head. "My hand is already dirtied by someone else's blood. I'll not have yours on it as well!" She couldn't help but catch the slight breaking in his tone.

"You said you'd do all that I asked of you, Severus," Dumbledore reminded him gently, his wand finally resting, as Snape had stopped throwing and flinging his belongings. "Need I remind you?"

"I cannot do this," Snape replied, shaking his head. Hermione gasped as he looked up, and saw the tears in his eyes. Severus Snape had angry, bitter, frustrated tears in those dark, black eyes. "I am not a coward, Albus. I cannot obey your orders."

"It is cowardly of you to refuse," Dumbledore stated calmly. "And courageous of you to accept." He shrugged, an elegant and soft sort of movement.

Snape glared at the older man, the muscle in his jaw clenching and loosening over and over again as he contemplated everything. "I can't," he admitted, but there was a flicker of doubt in his eyes.

Dumbledore did not accept his answer. He moved to Snape, holding out his hand and staring at him with an unnatural intensity. "Vow it, Severus."

"I *can't*!" he shouted, causing Hermione to jump. "I'd rather break the vow I made to Narcissa Malfoy in order for you to live, Albus. The war needs *you* more."

"Vow it, Severus," Dumbledore repeated, his voice never raising the slightest decibel. "Vow it with me. I, Albus Dumbledore, vow to ..."

His voice was drowned out as Snape slumped into a chair, his head hung low. He was outwardly sobbing, and Hermione had never felt her chest so tight in all her life. The tears that had formed in her eyes when she saw Dumbledore were now spilling out over her cheeks.

"...Ensure the safety and innocence of Draco Malfoy. Should he fail in his task, Severus Snape shall take over and finish it for him, and I will not resist. If I break this vow, may death take me." His hand held steady, and he waited for Snape's response.

Hermione swallowed hard, the realization washing over her. Snape had no choice. None, whatsoever; Dumbledore had just twisted the Unbreakable Vow. If Snape chose to sacrifice himself and not carry out the deed, Dumbledore would die anyway. She watched as Snape looked up, his face twisted in pain and grief.

"Damn you!" he roared, but his hand flew to connect with Dumbledore's. He sat, crying and staring at the man who trusted him, while Dumbledore gave him a small, reassuring nod. The flames twisted and wrapped around their joined hands, sealing the vow in deep magic.

The room was harsh. Sconces on the wall burned brightly, making the circular tower hot and stifling. The nerves of the people inside only added to that thick tension. Severus Snape sat in one seat, his hands and feet shackled to the chair. His head hung low, letting his hair fall in a curtain around him. Hermione could see his eyes flickering in the light, but she could not tell if he looked pleased.

He should have been, she thought. She had, after all, at least earned him some bit of privacy and respect. Before she'd shown the Minister of Magic that memory, she'd not even been allowed alone with him with bars between them. Now, they were given an entire interrogation chamber to themselves. Hermione sat in her seat across from him, leaning forward with concern on her face.

"Are you going to speak to me?" she asked, somewhat timidly.

"You're afraid of me," he replied simply. He did not move, did not look up.

Hermione swallowed, his words piercing through her. "I'm not," she replied defiantly. "I was, but.. not any longer. I've seen the truth, Professor."

Snape finally looked up, his eyes burning into hers. "And what would that truth be, Miss Granger? Do enlighten me."

His voice was ragged, but still held that commanding tone. Hermione took a deep breath and leaned back in her chair. With a nervous grip on her seat, she began talking.

She told him everything -- about how her search had sent him to his home, into the Pensieve, how she'd seen the vow he'd had to take. She had been terrified of telling him *everything* she'd seen; after all, some of it was more intimate and not necessary for the cause. However, he merely nodded slowly, his eyes still on hers.

"And the Ministry?" he asked, voice hoarse.

"They'll be reviewing it tomorrow," she replied, offering a timid smile. "Scrimgeour's already seen it; he thinks you have a good chance of being pardoned. I agree."

He did not smile -- not that she'd truly expected it -- nor did he look pleased that he may have a chance to get out of Azkaban. This made her frown slightly, and she leaned forward to look at him more intently. "You'll be freed, Professor, I promise." Her voice was soft, pleading with him not to look so forlorn.

Which was a completely vain request.

"Promises mean nothing to me, Miss Granger," he replied. He glanced down at the shackles before speaking again. "Please notify the Auror that I'm ready to be led back to my cell." He was obviously ready to finish this meeting and be put back into the dark solitude.

Hermione's eyes softened as she watched him. She wondered briefly if he would ever become the man that he had been before he was put into Azkaban; he had never been happy and cheerful, but he had at least been confident and sure of himself. Now he seemed beaten, defeated.

"What happened to her?" Hermione asked quickly, before she could even think. "...The woman that you danced with?" She swallowed hard as he glared up at her, his eyes dangerous and dark.

"That was a private memory," he growled, looking more deadly than she'd ever seen him look before. She had told him that she wasn't afraid, but now she was feeling very much like he would hex her if he was given the chance. "You had no right --"

"I didn't intend to," she replied quickly, shaking her head. "Th-- the vials, they weren't labeled; I didn't know." His fierce loyalty to the memory made her stomach jolt slightly; he obviously had a great affection for that woman, that memory. Part of her felt pity -- part of her felt envy. Someone had been able to capture his attention, to make him be caring for a moment.

"How much did you see?" he asked, eyes narrowed. "Tell me." His tone was so demanding that she dared not decline his request.

She shifted uncomfortably, then looked at him with the pity that she felt in that moment that she saw his memory. "I- I saw it all," she replied, frowning slightly. "The dance... and then you had to leave..." She didn't add *why* he'd had to leave. After all, it was his memory. He'd know the answer to that.

She was trembling now, terrified that she had displeased him in some great way. However, he merely nodded slowly, then looked to her with a much softer, warmer gaze. "Miss Granger," he began, voice slightly weaker, "if I am not cleared, I will ask you to bring that vial to me. Is that understood?"

She nodded quickly, her grip loosening on the arm of the chair. "Yes, sir," she replied, barely above a whisper. She wanted to ask more, to ask if he'd want a Pensieve as well, or to try and get more information out of him regarding his mysterious relationship. He spoke again, getting her attention.

"Now please. Notify the Auror that I am ready to be led back to my cell," he repeated, before hanging his head again, keeping his eyes away from her.

"Professor Snape, please," she pleaded, her brow furrowing. "I have questions, I--"

She shook her head, knowing that the things she wanted to ask had nothing to do with the case. But she was utterly curious. He looked up, hesitating only slightly and giving her the chance to speak.

"There was another vial, a-- a potion. I couldn't make out what it was, and I--"

"You couldn't make out what it was?" he repeated, eyebrows raising in the first bit of expression he'd shown. "Seems you *don't* know it all, Miss Granger."

She blushed slightly, then continued. "What was it? I assumed it was something rather important, to be locked away like that, yes?" She thought that perhaps it had been Veritaserum, but that potion was much more recognizable.

"It is Amortentia," he replied slowly, not meeting her gaze. "A most powerful -- and illegal -- love potion. I had recovered it from the grasp of a lovesick student a few years before you arrived at Hogwarts, and kept it locked away. I admit it was for my own selfish reasons; I wished to study it, to uncover the process of brewing the potion. I knew it was illegal, but my ambition to learn about the potion was stronger than my fear of being caught. You have, I presume, turned it over to the Ministry?"

Hermione watched, her mouth slightly slack as she listened. She hadn't expected something so... well, silly. "No, no, I haven't done anything with the other bits of evidence. Just the vial with -- well, you know," she amended, sure that he didn't want the memory to be replayed so often. "It's still back at your home."

"How is my home?" he asked, voice very quiet now. She frowned, not sure why he was speaking so low, and no longer trying to get away. She thought back to the condition of the house, and shrugged lightly.

"It's dusty. Empty. But nothing looks out of place." She watched him, waiting for his reaction. He did not offer much for her to see, however, as he merely gave a soft nod.

They fell into a somewhat comfortable silence. After a moment, Hermione stood and stepped past him, toward the exit. She took the briefest pause next to his chair, and laid a comforting hand on his shoulder. "I'll let the Auror know," she said softly, giving him a weak smile as he looked up at her. He looked to be somewhat shocked by her contact, and the tiniest bit grateful.

"Tomorrow," he replied, giving her a small nod. Hermione nodded in return.

5: The Honorable Amendment

Chapter 5 of 5

The day of reckoning for Severus -- and for Hermione.

Hermione sat in the large, oval room anxiously. The Wizengamot sat regally along the front row in vivid purple robes, their notes in hand as they chattered to themselves softly. Not many others were present, which she was silently thankful for. She had expected a slew of people against his release, there to protest and give their testimony on his past. Things were most certainly looking good.

She settled into the seat quietly, and her hands folded in her lap serenely. She looked to be perfectly at ease, but she was in fact a nervous wreck. She was absolutely terrified that her work would prove fruitless; afraid that she had gotten the man's hopes up about being released and they would deny him. She swallowed hard, before checking a tiny, delicate pocket watch that hung like a charm from her wrist.

The proceedings were scheduled to start any moment now. She leaned forward slightly, eager to see it under way. She was eager to see the evidence presented, to see the outcome. The door high above her opened, and she turned to see who had entered. Her heart sank as she saw Professor McGonagall, still clad in her usual school robes. She made her way along the top row, not meeting Hermione's gaze.

This was what she had feared.

She was about to stand and approach the Headmistress, when the doors below opened. She turned back around quickly, her heart pounding as she watched Severus Snape being led into the room. She gasped softly, her brow furrowed as she caught a good look at him. They'd stripped him down to nothing more than a dingy gown-type garment that one wore beneath a robe. Around his neck lay a visibly charmed lasso.

Hermione frowned at their treatment, fighting everything in her not to demand that he be treated like a human being. She wondered if they'd transported him all the way from Azkaban like that.

Swallowing her anger, she took deep breaths as she waited for the hearing to commence. Snape's eyes flicked up to her, and she gave him a soft, encouraging smile. He looked a bit surprised to see her, which was hard to discern considering his unreadable expression. He was led to the center of the room, and to Hermione's horror, forced onto his knees. Her anger flared -- where was the standard chair? Why not the chains? This was an outrage.

"Severus Snape, you are here in accordance with our laws to review your case and plead pardoning, is that correct?" the Chief Warlock bellowed, his voice echoing around the room. Hermione leaned forward, trying to get a good look at the wizards, but failed. She didn't recognize any of them.

Snape's voice replied, soft but strong. "Yes."

"You are aware that the terms you were imprisoned under included *murder* of Albus Dumbledore? Use of Unforgivable Curses? Dealings with Death Eaters and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?"

Another soft, strong, "Yes."

"Hermione Jane Granger!" the voice bellowed, but its owner not turning to survey the room. "Present?"

Hermione's eyes were wide as she stood shakily. "H-- here!" she called out, her voice trembling as much as her legs. Her hands clasped awkwardly behind her back. What on earth did they want with her?

"Do you attest here before these Interrogators that your actions involving this case were of your own accord, and that you were not acting on any other wishes, or an Imperius Curse?" he bellowed. She swallowed, his tone of voice quite frightening now that it was directed toward her.

"Y-- yes, sir," she replied, nodding despite the fact that he was not looking at her.

"Very well, you may sit," he replied. She obeyed happily, sinking back into her chair with a shaky breath. She looked down to Snape, catching his gaze on her again. She wanted to offer another smile, but she was a mess of nerves now. It was only when she calmed herself that she realized that she had partially lied to the Chief Warlock. In a way, she *had* been working on the wishes of others.

"Are there any here who would like to put forth testimony for or against this prisoner?" he called, pausing to let a silence fill the large room. The only sound that filled the quiet was the soft flickering of the torches along the wall.

"I would."

Hermione cringed. She knew this would happen. She turned, looking into the stern face of Minerva McGonagall. She was standing in the back of the room, her expression angry and filled with concern. Hermione shook her head slowly, feeling every ounce of hope leave her chest. She could almost hear the words the Professor McGonagall would say.

She would go on to tell the Wizengamot how she had been Dumbledore's confidant; his trusted right-hand woman. She would tell that he would have never put forth such a circumstance.

Hermione swallowed and sank into her seat, an expression of defeat coming over her.

"Headmistress McGonagall," the Chief Warlock said, sounding somewhat surprised as he finally turned in his seat. "Do go on."

McGonagall took a small step out from the aisle she sat in so that she stood in the main walkway, unobstructed by the rows of seats. "Professor Dumbledore was a brilliant man," she began, her voice wavering but strong. "I worked closely with him for many, many years. I knew of his plans, his studies, his past."

She paused, and Hermione thought she'd die of anticipation. She wanted to stand up and yell at her former Head of House, to tell her to spit it out, to condemn the man to a life sentence, rather than dragging it out.

"It's for this reason," she continued, voice breaking slightly. "That I trusted him more than I've ever trusted anyone. And I will say that whatever evidence proves Albus Dumbledore trusted this man," she stopped to gesture to Snape, her sleeve whipping out with the quick movement, "is enough evidence for me."

Hermione turned to stare at the older witch, speechless. McGonagall gave the men on the Wizengamot a small nod, before gathering her robes and sweeping silently out of the room. Hermione slowly looked back to the pit of the room, seeing Snape's reaction mirroring her own. Her heart was pounding as the members of the Wizengamot mumbled amongst themselves for a few moments.

"Severus Snape, if you are prepared to make your statement and amend your past transgressions, we will release you. The evidence that Miss Hermione Granger has

presented to us is by far substantial, and it shows your overall dedication to the wartime efforts. Do you agree to these terms?"

The voice rang out in an echo for what seemed like an eternity as Hermione waited with bated breath. "I do."

She let out the breath she'd been holding, and swallowed hard. This was it. He was going to be freed, and she would have finished what she'd started to do. She'd succeeded. For Harry, for Dumbledore. For Snape.

Snape's voice continued, his words sounding lackluster and memorized. "I, Severus Snape, do publicly renounce my past crimes and apologize to all who suffered due to my decisions and actions. I hereby pledge myself here and forever more to the side of light. My loyalties lie with all those who promote Wizarding World Welfare, and nowhere else. My trust lies in the Ministry of Magic."

Hermione noted that bitter note in his voice as he said 'Ministry of Magic,' and she couldn't help but feel horrible for him. Forced there, on his knees, with a rope around his neck. Like an *animal*!

"Very well," came the loud reply. "Miss Granger!"

Hermione nearly squeaked as her name was called again. "Yes sir!" she cried, a bit quickly and fearfully.

"You will escort Severus Snape back to his home, as you are not only a Ministry official but are aware of this case. Is that understood?"

Hermione agreed, but looked down at her hands. She wasn't sure how she felt about this assignment. Part of her was glad that she'd have a chance to talk to him, to congratulate him on his newfound freedom. Yet, she also wanted to be done with this. To distance herself now that she was finished, and wash her hands clean of the entire ordeal.

She leaned back in her seat, contemplating the turn of events while the proceedings were closing. She finally decided that she would just keep it all as professional as possible. Do her job, be done with it all. As the bang of the gavel shook her of her thoughts, she leaned forward to see them letting Snape to his feet. She swallowed and headed down the aisle before turning and walking carefully down the steps into the pit of the room.

A guard at the bottom put out his arm, but she quickly flashed him the laminated badge that was clipped onto her lapel, and he nodded before dropping his arm and letting her pass. She approached Snape, and noticed that while the Aurors around them worked to uncharm the bonds he wore, no one had removed the vile rope around his neck. She frowned angrily and reached up without a second thought, snatching it over his head and tossing it away.

"He's not a dog," she spat, more to herself than to the Aurors. They, however, caught her vitriolic tone and exchanged a glance.

Snape looked down at her, his eyes dark and unreadable. "Congratulations on your freedom, sir," she said softly, giving him a smile and a nod.

He did not reply, did not smile; he merely inclined his head, his eyes intense upon hers as his wrists were released. He only looked away to observe his hands and arms, rubbing gently.

"Right," she said softly, nodding. "Well, let's get you out of here, eh?" She offered another smile before gesturing to the doorway, where another Auror held a basic black cloak. She walked ahead of him and took it, shaking it out and holding it for him to slip into. She was trying terribly hard to be polite, to put him at ease. It must have been strange, being let out and trusted so suddenly.

He allowed her to help him, but he did not thank her. As soon as the cloak was slipped on, he moved past her as he closed the small clasps. Hermione sighed and studied him for a moment before walking after him.

"There may be protestors outside," she advised as they made their way down the corridors. "Or simple observers. Don't pay them any mind--they didn't see the evidence, they're ignor--"

"I know, Miss Granger," he replied, his voice bored and monotone. He finished straightening the robes, not looking down to his former student. Hermione took a deep, quiet breath, and did not speak again. She merely guided him out of the building, and quickly pulled him down the side steps toward the alleyway on the west side. There were a few reporters milling about, attempting to look like Muggles on the busy street, but they didn't fool Hermione.

He let her lead him without the slightest hesitation or arguing. She wondered briefly if he was even *all right*; he was being so utterly complacent.

"I'm afraid we'll need to Apparate to my flat first," she said softly, shaking her head. "Unless you'd rather me send your belongings to you--either way, it's fine, really." She looked up as they stopped in the safety of the alley. She waited, wondering if he would just rather her escort him directly to his home. Surely he would. There was no reason for him to stand around, wait--

"That will be fine," he replied, staring at the wall behind her with those empty eyes.

Oh.

She nodded, then grabbed his arm firmly as she Side-Along Apparated with him. He wouldn't know where he was going if he'd Apparated, and furthermore had no wand. The familiar tug slowed, and they reappeared outside her flat in a small, enisled entry way by her door. It was three tall brick walls covered in moss and ivy, with only a side entrance that faced a large bush. It was her favorite place to Apparate to when returning home.

She noted how Snape observed his surroundings, with an expression somewhere between curiosity and the desperate need to know how to escape. She felt that small tug of pity again.

"Right, well, do come in," she offered as she unlocked and opened the door to him. She gestured inside, and then smiled as he accepted her offer. She followed him in, shoving her keys back into her pocket as she moved past him, heading up the stairs to grab his things. With a deep breath, she shoved his belongings back into the enchanted sack and turned around to head back down, holding out his wand.

She hadn't expected him to follow her, so when she saw him standing at the top of the stairs silently she gave a small jump. "You scared me," she confessed, smiling nervously. She fidgeted with the bag, watching him. He was so incredibly subdued; just standing there, looking around the upstairs of her flat.

"You have a nice home, Miss Granger," he replied softly, before turning and heading back down the stairs. She stared after him, somewhat shocked. Had he complimented her flat? She swallowed and quickly followed behind him before offering the bag.

"And your wand," she added, handing it over as well. He took the belongings and nodded solemnly, his hand wrapping around the wand as if he couldn't quite believe that he was holding it again. He gave another nod, but then looked to her again, his eyes narrowing just a touch as his lips pursed. She waited, sure that something was on his mind.

"When you entered my home, were there any wards in place?" he asked, head tilting back slightly so that he looked down his nose. She thought for a moment, then shook her head. She opened her mouth to give a more vocal response, but he swiftly grabbed her arm and she felt the tug of another Apparation.

They stopped, and she found herself in his sitting room again. She let out a deep breath, and steadied herself. "We could have been spliced if--"

"The wards were gone," he replied simply, letting her go and moving through his house, eyes observing everything with a fierce, critical gaze. Hermione stood awkwardly, wondering what on earth she was supposed to do now. She hadn't even planned on entering his home, and now there she stood. He moved through the house

purposefully, his strides more energetic now than they had been before.

"Where is the box?" he asked, standing in the hallway with his hand on the smooth wall. "With the vials?"

She blinked at him for a second, noting that he finally looked to show some sort of expression. She turned quickly and moved to the coffee table, and knelt to pull the box from beneath it. "Ah, here," she offered, carefully setting it on top of the table. She gestured to the bag he'd set down. "Key's in there."

He nodded, moving swiftly from his spot in the hall to where she was. She still knelt on the floor, and she watched with curiosity as he fetched the bag and sat on the couch. Small puffs of dust clouded in the air, causing her to bat it away from her face. Hermione knew she should stand and head out, but she was intrigued, rooted to the spot.

He made no movement to shoo her away, nor did he glare at her for remaining. She decided to wait it out as long as she could. As he opened the box, she perked and looked over the coffee table for the envelope that had been in the Pensieve. Spotting it, she grabbed it and held it out with a soft smile before gesturing to the waiting Pensieve.

He looked to her, brow furrowed slightly as he looked down at her offering. She nodded, pushing it toward him gently. Despite all the aggravation and annoyance she'd felt over the past few months, she was finally being patient and understanding. He needed that right now; she had no right to be angry with him for his reluctance or distrust.

He took it at last and opened it without a word, his black eyes scanning over the page slowly. When he finished, his gaze was softer, and he cleared his throat. "Thank you," he murmured, pocketing the letter in his robes. Hermione gave a small nod, smiling at his change in expression. That was a start, she supposed. He continued on with what he was doing, and she watched with interest.

He sifted through the box, reaching in and grabbing vials at random before feeling along the sides. She thought about it for a moment, and then realized that he was looking for the memory with the notch in the glass. "It's this one," she said softly, reaching in and rummaging until she felt the small velvet sack that once held some of this personal items. "I figured it was one that you actually marked, so.."

She trailed off and shrugged as she pulled it out and handed it to him. He looked down at the sack, then to Hermione as if realizing she was there for the first time. He stared at her, silent, before gently pulling the drawstring open and reaching inside.

His long fingers held the vial for a moment, tracing over it until he felt the notch. She watched him, feeling sorrow and sadness for him. He'd been through more than she could fathom. She had been feeling so sorry for herself, weeping over the things that had happened--and he was far worse off than she'd ever be.

Snape didn't look at her again. He simply tipped the opened vial over the Pensieve and went about his business as he watched the memory. Hermione's throat was tight, knowing that what he was seeing must have been hard. She wondered how she would feel if she watched a memory of she and Ron? The thought alone made her take a deep, shaky breath.

She sat there, on the floor, waiting patiently. Part of her wanted to be there in case he was upset, in case he needed someone to talk to. That thought was a touch absurd, as she couldn't imagine Severus Snape ever needing to talk to anyone. And yet, she also had the slightest hope that she could ask him more questions about that particular memory.

It intrigued her, it made her want to know more.

When he finally pulled back, his expression was striking. He looked, for that moment, like her old Potions professor; lips pursed, brow raised, a look of sneering disdain on his face. He moved fluidly as he used his wand to pull the memory back up into the vial, not speaking to Hermione or even acknowledging her. With ease and a much more calm, calculating demeanor, he slipped the vial into the pouch and finally looked to her with a sneer.

"You're still here?" he asked, voice annoyed. "Your work here is done, Miss Granger."

He stood and strode to his front door, pulling it open to gesture for her to leave. It was obvious that he was quite tired of her company.

Hermione stood and followed, a look of confusion on her face. He had been unlike himself before, yes, but he had at least been somewhat pleasant! Now he was acting just as he always had! She frowned and turned to give him one last word in parting as she stood on his front step.

"You're--"

The door slammed in her face, leaving her staring at worn, old wood angrily.

"--welcome."