

# The Only Thing that Speaks the Truth is the Eloquence of Passing Time

*by flaminia\_x*

Severus survives the final battle, but only a few know it. The Ministry is unable to clear his name right away, so he becomes a hermit and is indebted to Hermione for the potion that allows him to stay alive. But can Hermione convince him to trust her?

## Chapter 1

*Chapter 1 of 6*

Severus survives the final battle, but only a few know it. The Ministry is unable to clear his name right away, so he becomes a hermit and is indebted to Hermione for the potion that allows him to stay alive. But can Hermione convince him to trust her?

"Collarbone" by Poi Dog Pondering

Desire hangs on for dear life

on the window sill of the collarbone

of the one I love

And a glimmering shimmer

of sweat gathers into a pool in her palm

from a well in her wrist

And the only thing that speaks the truth

is the eloquence of passing time

the spoken word is a jacket too tight.

There's a shimmering vision

by the window pane

a cellophane figure speaking in

tongues from above

There's the curve of a stone

and the crest of a wave

here are the lips that cracked

and the sound that they made

Desire hangs on for dear life

on the window sill of the collarbone

of the one I love.

The grass spills out and catches a flame

the trees stand up and scream their blissfulness.

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Part I

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"Look ... at ... me ..." Severus Snape whispered, his life's blood streaming out onto the wooden slats of the Shrieking Shack. Harry grasped his hand, mouth working silently as he watched his hated professor die before his eyes.

"Harry Harry, there's no time," Hermione said urgently, rushing to his side. Kneeling, she took the small vial of memories from Harry's fingers. Taking his shoulders, she forced her friend to look at her. "Snape's gone, Harry, but whatever these memories are, he wanted you to see them. Now. Come on, before Voldemort comes back!" Tugging at his shirt sleeve, she got Harry to his feet and took off for the secret tunnel, Ron on their heels.

Hours later, alone in the dusty room, Severus Snape twitched, swallowing, then fell still, one hand pressed to his collarbone.

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"Hermione, Ron, come with me," Harry whispered, distracting them from the celebration in the Great Hall. Motioning them to be quiet, he headed toward the Headmaster's chambers. After rather rudely shushing the room's portraits, Harry collapsed in a heap on the floor, exhausted, and began to fill in his best friends about the end of the battle. "... and so I died, but then I came back, only Voldemort didn't know it, and so I used my Invisibility Cloak to hide, and then at the end, his wand wouldn't work properly against me, because I was its rightful owner, you see, and so the Killing Curse that he sent at me rebounded and killed him instead."

Ron and Hermione sat facing him, mouths gaping.

"Look, I'm sure that you all," he said, shooting a particularly meaningful glance at Albus Dumbledore's portrait, "have a lot of questions, but I'm really rather tired, and I'm not entirely sure that I understand it all myself yet anyway, so d'you think we could perhaps save the interrogation for the morning?" Harry asked, half-jokingly.

Ron and Hermione jumped to their feet, nodding vigorously. Seconds later, the Headmaster's desk had been transformed into a bed big enough for the three of them, and curled up together, they slept at last.

The next morning, they rejoined the rest of the survivors in the Great Hall. Another round of applause faced Harry as he entered the room. He was already tired of it, but he supposed that it would just be something else to get used to. Soon enough, everyone had divided themselves into groups to take care of the battle's aftermath. Harry, Ron and Hermione elected to help with the search for survivors. Trudging outside, they stopped, gasping with shock. The battle had taken place at night, but here, in broad daylight, everything seemed so ... real. Bodies littered the grounds, and rubble was scattered everywhere. Picking their way carefully across the field, they stopped next to Kingsley Shacklebolt, who was standing over the body of Lucius Malfoy.

"Harry," he said curtly, prodding at the body with the tip of his shoe. "Thought you might be resting."

"Too many people inside, too many cheers. Need to be doing something ... something besides just standing about being accoladed," Harry muttered, looking down at his erstwhile foe, now blackened and blistered.

Kingsley nodded his understanding. "You come across survivors that can get back to the castle on their own, just send them to the infirmary. We've got medical folks in from St. Mungo's to help them. Anyone needing assistance, you send up some red sparks, and someone will be along shortly with a stretcher. Anyone dead from our side, that is you send up blue sparks, and they'll be taken up to the Great Hall."

"What about Death Eaters?" Hermione asked quietly.

"Anyone you find, dead or alive, that was on Voldemort's side?" Kingsley said, prodding Malfoy a bit harder with his boot, as though there were a chance that the mangled corpse would spring to life. "You can send up black sparks, and an Auror will be along to ... take care of them."

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*Just a bit further, Severus,* the man thought, digging into the dirt with his broken fingernails. *Just ... a bit ... further ...*

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Once they were out of earshot of Shacklebolt, Hermione grabbed Ron and Harry, pulling their heads in towards hers. "Harry, we can't let him "

"Find Snape. I know," Harry said grimly. Together, they headed off toward the Whomping Willow. The poor tree had not fared well during the battle, the crossfire having destroyed a number of its branches. When the three arrived, it had barely enough strength to wave at them. Dashing inside, they raced down the tunnel toward the shack. But they soon realized that something was amiss.

"Harry, Hermione," Ron said, astounded. "Where, exactly, did Snape go?"

The three of them gaped at the stain on the floor. So much blood, and yet no body. "But but I watched him die," Harry gasped.

"I know, Harry. I saw him too," Hermione whispered. Ron tapped Hermione on the shoulder and pointed toward one side of the stain.

"There, d'you see?" Ron asked.

Concentrating on the floor, Hermione saw it too. The blood was smeared to one side. "Looks like someone might have beaten us to him."

"What?" Harry said, snapping out of his reverie. "Someone took his body?" Shaking his head, he leapt to his feet, ignoring the sudden wave of dizziness that overtook him, reminding him that none of them had eaten in probably two days or more. "No, no, no we have to get him back, Ron. We can't let the Death Eaters have him. They'll tear him apart!"

"So would the Aurors," Hermione said grimly.

Ron motioned them toward the door to the shack. "Look, Harry, Hermione there's blood here. A smear here " he pointed at the floor, "-and there," he said, motioning at the doorframe. The door itself lay ajar, although none of them had noticed at first. "Let's check outside maybe there will be more traces, evidence, something to show us where he went."

"Right. Wands at the ready," Harry said, creeping through the open door. The fields around the shack had always been overgrown with weeds and brambles added to the mystique of it, Professor Lupin had once mentioned so a rather flattened section to the right of the doorway caught Ron's attention.

"They must have dragged him off this way," Ron said, eyes examining the small trail for clues.

"Not they," Hermione said in a whisper. "He." Looking ahead, she pointed at Severus Snape.

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Three Days Later

*Oh. Oh, my head,* Severus thought wearily. He tried to raise his arms to massage his aching temples, but he couldn't quite seem to move them. The sun was so bright, and yet he couldn't move his head. Why couldn't he move? Panicking, he tried to kick his legs, to get up, but nothing seemed to work. He had to get up ... had to ...

"Shhhh, sir, it's alright," a soft female voice said concernedly. "You're in the infirmary. You're very weak, sir. You lost a lot of blood." The voice moved closer to his head. So soothing, that voice.

He calmed a little, and then her words sunk in. Blood. He had lost a lot of blood, but ... he was alive. It had worked! And he was at Hogwarts ...

"S over?" he mumbled, his dry lips cracking open.

"Yes, sir. It's over, and you're alive," that voice said softly. He could rest.

When he finally opened his eyes, it was blissfully dark. Lying perfectly still, he took a deep breath, and then another. He was alive. Slowly, carefully, he tested every extremity, first lifting one arm, then the other, wiggling all fingers and toes, rotating his head from side to side. He quickly realized that everything seemed to be in working order, although his neck and shoulder were extremely sensitive to movement. At least his head was better than it had been earlier, but he seemed to have developed a most urgent need for the lavatory. Taking a deep breath, he swung his legs off the bed and promptly fell to all fours on the floor, retching with the sudden movement. He had the most unnerving notion that he might have lost control of his bladder.

He heard footsteps running frantically toward him. "Sir! Sir, are you alright?" That voice spoke to him from out of the darkness. "Here, let me help you." The young woman bent down, tentatively touching his arm. Severus tried to brush off the woman's hand, but lost his balance, almost falling into his own spittle. Licking his cracked lips, he breathed deeply, trying to stop the dizziness. She touched him again, this time more firmly. "Come on, sir, up you go," and carefully she helped him back into the hospital bed, drawing the covers up around his waist. He heard her whisper a quick *Evanescio* and could only fervently hope whoever she was hadn't known what he had done.

"Who are you?" he croaked, unable to make out the woman's features.

"It's Hermione Granger, sir," she said softly. "Would you care for a little light?"

Closing his eyes, he nodded weakly. Of course, it would have to be her. He heard her say *Lumos*, and a soft light gleamed from the tip of her wand. "Watch your eyes. You've not had them open in a while. It might be a bit bright."

He steeled himself and opened his eyes, wincing as his eyes adjusted. Looking around him, he realized that he was in a private room of some sort. "Where am I?" Severus whispered harshly.

"It's ok, Professor. You're in the infirmary at Hogwarts," Hermione answered, sensing his alarm. Severus shook his head, but she continued, "You're in one of the private rooms in the back, sir. Away from prying eyes. No one knows you're here. You're safe."

At her words, he relaxed minutely. "Why are you here, Miss Granger?" he asked, mouth dry as dust.

"Because Harry asked me to be here, sir," she responded. "And because you've been gravely injured. I thought you might need some help."

"Potter?" Severus asked, no little surprise in his voice. She nodded tiredly, sitting back down in the armchair by his bed. "How long have you been here, Miss Granger?"

"Since you got here, three days ago," she answered with a yawn. "Off and on, that is. Madam Pomfrey and Harry have been here a lot as well, but well, they're a bit overworked at the moment, understandably."

Severus lay silent for a moment, trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together. He had managed to survive the war and apparently, so had Potter. But how? The memories he gave Potter in the shack clearly showed him that he had to die in order to win. But Miss Granger said the battle was over, and if the Dark Lord had won, then surely Potter would be dead anyway. "Perhaps if you were to explain to me what has happened since I was since I arrived here?"

"Oh. Oh, of course," Hermione replied a bit sheepishly. "You wouldn't know."

Carefully, she laid out for him what had happened, starting with his supposed death in the Shrieking Shack, then Harry's miraculous victory, then finding him and bringing him to the infirmary so that those who didn't know about his true allegiances wouldn't know he had survived.

So. So Potter had died, had gone to his death like a lamb to sacrifice. And had not only come back to life, but had won. The Dark Lord *noVoldemort* was gone. Severus sighed, equal parts pain, exhaustion, relief, and sadness.

"It's alright, sir," Hermione said softly. Leaning over, she picked up his right hand in hers, stopping it from rubbing his left forearm. He hadn't even realized he had been doing it. "Look." Looking down, he watched as she pushed up the sleeve of his infirmary gown, exposing his smooth, white skin. "It's gone. You're free."

Free. Free. So long since he had dared utter that word so long that he wasn't even sure what it meant anymore. With a small grunt, he snatched his hand back from Hermione's, tracing what used to be the Dark Mark on his skin, hardly believing it was gone. But gone it was, leaving only the mirror image of his other arm. Free. He rubbed harder, as though it were merely covered up, enchanted somehow.

"Sir, Professor Snape, please, you'll hurt yourself," Hermione said anxiously, watching his nails dig into the flesh of his arm. He stilled his movements, but his breathing remained rapid, shallow. Trying to distract him, she asked, "Sir, if you don't mind, would you would you tell me how you survived?"

His head was turned away from her, but she could hear him take a shaky breath. "Miss Granger, you go too far "

"Please, sir," she interrupted. "I watched you I watched you d- die. I found your body I mean, at the shack. I brought you here. I just want to know how it's possible ... all that blood ..." The girl's voice trailed off as she pictured him on the floor of the shack, dying.

He had had no intentions of answering her impertinent question, but something in her voice struck him. She had always been an adult masquerading in a schoolgirl's uniform, but now, she sounded bone-weary, like she had seen too much for her years, and it resonated with him. If, as she had told him, she were one of the ones responsible for seeing him safely to the infirmary, let alone having the presence of mind to hide him in the back where ... unfriendly ... people couldn't find him, then he supposed it was the least he could do for her and her overly inquisitive mind. Sighing, he acquiesced. "I had little reason to suspect that I might survive the war without somehow incurring the Dark Lord Voldemort's wrath." He paused a second, still unused to saying his name. "I thought at the very least I might be able to distract him while Potter did whatever he had to do to insure his defeat. But one does not remain in the services of V-Voldemort for long before one becomes familiar with all of his preferred methods of ... execution. To that end, I had ingested a number of preventative potions that morning. Among them was an automatic blood replenisher and coagulant, which apparently were just potent enough."

"But sir, Nagini is was a poisonous snake. She injected you with venom. Even without the blood loss, surely the toxins " Hermione interrupted anxiously.

"I'm quite aware of what Nagini ... was," he snapped, a bit harsher than he had intended. His head was starting to hurt again. Truth be told, while he had foreseen many different types of attack, including this one, he wasn't quite sure whether any of the potions he had taken would have been sufficient, even in combination with one another, to subvert the poison of her venom. His hand moved up to his neck, his fingers moving lightly over the barely healed wound. "Something in ... one of the ... po "

His voice trailed off, and suddenly his head was thrown back, mouth gaping in the parody of a grin. His limbs locked, and yet he was vaguely aware of his legs pounding the bed. Why couldn't he move? Somewhere far away, he heard her call out, "Madam Pomfrey, he's seizing again!"

## Chapter 2

### *Chapter 2 of 6*

Severus survives the final battle, but only a few know it. The Ministry is unable to clear his name right away, so he becomes a hermit, and is indebted to Hermione for the potion that allows him to stay alive. But can Hermione convince him to trust her?

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Part II

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The Following Week

"Professor, if you're ready ..." Harry said, holding out the older man's cloak. Ron and Hermione stood next to Madam Pomfrey, who was giving them last-minute instructions on how best to deal with Severus' condition.

"Well, well, Potter. Never thought I'd see the day when you'd be so anxious to welcome me into your home," Severus muttered. "And seeing as how I am no longer your or any other student's professor ..."

"Of course, sir. Right, sir," Harry said, anxious to correct himself. Ever since having seen Severus' memories in the Pensieve during the battle only to discover that the man had somehow survived, he had fallen over himself to help his former nemesis in any way possible. He had been well and truly distraught to have been pulled away from Snape's bedside so quickly, and had made Hermione promise to stay with the man as much as she was able until such a time as he was well enough to recuperate in the more comfortable and more private Grimmauld Place. Luckily enough, Harry and a few of the surviving Order members had been able to get the house cleaned up and warded several days before Madam Pomfrey had given her reluctant permission for Severus to leave her care. She had made sure that everyone who had access to the house Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and Professor McGonagall, to start had received a thorough lecture not only on Severus' potions regimen, but on what to do should he seize in their presence. Fortunately, she had had the foresight not to do so within earshot of the man himself, who would have been furious at their intimate knowledge of his physical condition, regardless of whether it was for his own good.

Seeing the eager look on the young man's face, Severus inhaled swiftly through his nose and exhaled slowly. Surely his time as Voldemort's lackey would not prove to be such a tribulation as living with Potter, he thought. "Actually, Potter, before we retire to your ... charming ... home, there is one thing I would like to do."

Minutes later, he found himself accompanied by Ron and Professor McGonagall just outside the Headmaster's chambers. "I don't suppose I could have a few moments alone?" he snipped.

"Sure, Prof sir," Ron said. "But won't you need some help up the stairs?"

Severus sniffed. As much as he didn't want to admit it, he knew he was not yet fit enough to climb those twisted stairs by himself. However, the former Headmaster was not about to accept physical assistance from anyone that wasn't absolutely necessary. "Thank you, Mr. Weasley, but I'm afraid that won't be required." Pulling his wand out of his sleeve, he cast a quick charm, and the heavy stone staircase began to spiral upward. Stepping on, he smirked as he rode into his old quarters.

Once in the room, though, his smirk disappeared, replaced by an expression that was weary, pained, so utterly un-Snape. From out of the corner, he heard, "Oh, my dear boy," and Severus slumped to the floor, consumed by a great wracking sob.

"How?" He managed to croak out. "It was so easy for you to send Potter off to his death. Merlin's beard, Albus, I sent him off. Like a piece of meat!"

"Yes, Severus, you did. You knew, as I did, that it was the only way to render Voldemort mortal again." Dumbledore's voice softened. "We had no choice, Severus. You had no choice."

"I know that, Albus! I just it was much easier when I thought I'd never have to see him again. He'd be dead, and if luck was with me, so would I." Severus said.

"Oh, Severus," Dumbledore sighed. "I must admit, I held very little hope that you would survive, but I cannot begin to tell you how happy I am that you did. Your life is once more your own, after all these years. You're free."

"Free. Always that bloody accursed word, free," Severus spat, rising to his feet angrily. "I shall never be free, Albus. I may not have to answer to the Dark Lord anymore, and you no longer have me in your thrall, but what freedom do I have? To hide until the Ministry decides I'm one of the goodies? We know how that worked out for Black,

don't we?" he sneered. "And where am I to go until that blessed day? To Saint Potter's house, to be smothered by his little case of hero worship? Or perhaps I could leave the country, hmm? It's not like I would be missed overmuch!" His last words came out in a spittle-flecked hiss.

Albus sighed heavily. "My boy, the burdens you have been asked to bear I will be the first to admit that I have not always made your journey easy, but this, this is the end toward which we have worked all these years! Voldemort is gone, Severus. The future may be difficult for you, but at last, it is up to you and you alone as to how you choose to face it."

"I don't want to choose anymore, Albus! I just want " he stopped, gasping for air.

"What, Severus?" Dumbledore whispered.

"I don't know," Severus whispered back. He stood in the middle of the room, staring off into space, for what felt like ages. Finally, with a quick breath and a shake of his head, he wiped his eyes and straightened his clothes. Nodding at Dumbledore's portrait, he turned to leave.

As he stepped onto the still-moving staircase, he heard Dumbledore behind him, saying, "I'm always here if you need me, Severus." Shaking, he barely noticed when Ron took his arm and led him back to the infirmary.

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That evening found a very distressed Severus Snape sitting at the kitchen table, nursing a mug of tea with a large drop of brandy in it.

Upon arriving at Grimmauld Place by Floo earlier that day, he had almost immediately seized, this time rather badly. Harry had almost had a fit himself, falling over himself in his efforts to make Severus comfortable, but Ron had been the one to turn him over to his side and keep him from choking. After Severus' seizure had passed, Ron and Harry got him onto the couch while Hermione double-checked his potions schedule.

"He's on track with all of his medications," Hermione read from Madam Pomfrey's color-coded list. "He's supposed to take a Calming Draught once in the morning and once before bed, plus a vial of Blood Replenisher to help his body replace what he lost that one is only for one more week and this one, an antivenin, once a day." Madam Pomfrey had explained that she thought that Snape's seizures were being caused by a buildup of snake venom; while the coagulant and blood-replenishing potions that he had taken had saved his life, they had also had the misfortune to trap enough of the snake's venom in his body and re-circulate it throughout his entire body. But she thought that a few weeks of increasingly smaller doses of antivenin would soon rid his system of the toxins, thus stopping the seizures. One week was too soon to tell, but this last seizure of his had certainly been the worst thus far, Hermione thought to herself.

Worried, she looked at Severus, laying on the couch underneath an afghan that Harry had raced to get for him. His face was pale and drawn; he looked exhausted. From watching him in the infirmary, she knew that even while unconscious, his seizures took a lot out of him. He'd probably be asleep until dinner, if not the morning, by the looks of that one. Tucking the blanket around his torso, she motioned her friends into the kitchen.

"How does he look, Hermione?" Harry asked anxiously. "Is he alright? Should I Floo Madam Pomfrey?"

Hermione sighed, sitting at the table. "I'm not sure, actually. I mean, I saw him have a few seizures in the infirmary, but that one was definitely far worse."

"D'you think maybe the Floo set him off?" Ron asked. "It does spin you around awfully, and the flashing lights probably didn't help."

"Bloody hell, I should have thought of that," Harry said angrily. "I could have brought him here by Portkey, or even the Knight Bus or something."

"Harry, relax," Hermione said. "Ron's suggestion is a smart one, but it's just a suggestion. We don't know for sure that the Floo triggered it, and if it did, then a Portkey or Apparition or any other mode of transportation could have done the same thing."

Harry pulled out a chair and slumped into it morosely. Ron cast a curious glance at him, then turned his attention back to Hermione. "If that was the worst one yet, should we expect that they'll keep worsening?"

"I don't know, Ron. Obviously, I'm not exactly a trained mediwitch," she replied cautiously. "But something just doesn't seem to be right. If the potions that Madam Pomfrey has been giving him were working, then clearly you'd expect that his seizures would be lessening, not the opposite. Still, he's in a brand new place, and I'm sure that a bit of rest can't hurt. Let's give him a few days to adjust to his new home, and if they keep getting worse, then we can have her here in a tick for a check-up."

"Sounds reasonable to me," Ron agreed. "Harry? You alright?"

Harry thumped his fist on the table. "It's not fair. After all he's been through, after all he's done for me, and all I can do is sit here and watch him jerk about on the floor. He shouldn't have to go through that. He shouldn't have to hurt more."

"No one's arguing that he should, mate, but unfortunately there's nothing that any of us can really do at the moment, except keep an eye on him and make him as comfortable as we can," Ron rebutted.

Harry grunted, tapping his fingernails on the tabletop restlessly. "Well, there might not be anything I can do about his fits, but I can make damn sure that people know about who he is and what side he really fought for. The Ministry "

"The Ministry is in a bit of a shambles right now, mate," Ron said. "Don't know as they're in much of a position to get anything accomplished right now, even for you, Harry. Give it time. It'll all sort itself out, I know it."

The three of them sat around the table for some time, lost in their own private thoughts. Eventually Hermione was the one to break the silence. "What are we going to do about tomorrow, then?"

"The funeral, you mean," Harry said.

"Funeral?"

The voice came from the doorway. Startled, the three whipped their heads around in an almost-comical unison. If Severus' head hadn't been fit to burst, he might almost have laughed.

Harry jumped up and grabbed the man's arm, leading him to a chair at the table. "Here," he said, grabbing him a glass of water, "are you thirsty? Can I get you some tea, toast?"

"Relax, Potter." Severus exhaled as he sat down gingerly. "I didn't come here to fall apart in your kitchen."

"No, just the living room," Ron chuckled quietly.

"Ron!" Harry and Hermione hissed at him simultaneously.

"Well, he did," Ron said under his breath.

"Ten points to Gryffindor for Mr. Weasley's keen and insightful observation," Severus snidely rejoindered.

"Look, Sn- sir, there's no need for hostilities. We're all concerned for you, and seeing as how you'll be living here for the ... well, for the time being, it might be nice if we

could make an attempt at civility," Ron said reasonably.

"Very well. Seeing as how you have so graciously opened up your home to me in my time of need, I shall take it upon myself to act with equal grace," Severus replied, entirely unconvincingly.

Ron cracked a grin. "See? That wasn't so hard, was it?" But catching Harry's set jaw and Hermione's stern glare, he sat back in his chair and waved them on.

"I believe someone mentioned a funeral tomorrow?" Severus continued, sipping at his water.

"Sir," Hermione ventured, "tomorrow's the funeral. For everyone."

Everyone. Severus knew there had been casualties, of course. It was war. There were always casualties, in the plural, never just one. "Who?"

The three of them exchanged glances with one another before Harry replied. "Professor Moody. Professor Flitwick. Colin Creevey. Lavender Brown. Remus Lupin and Tonks." At their names, Harry sucked air through his teeth, blinking, but continued the litany. "A bunch of Aurors. Several of the townspeople from Hogsmeade. A few other students. Those are just the ones we know about. There are still a few people missing."

"And of course the Death Eaters were taken care of already none of them receive a proper burial tomorrow," Ron explained.

"Oh, Mr. Weasley?" Severus interjected in a deceptively calm tone. "And exactly what happened to them?"

An uncomfortable silence ensued. Suddenly the three of them felt like first-years in Potions class again, as Severus turned his black gaze on each of them in turn. Finally, Hermione answered, "We're not entirely sure, sir. We know that "

"Hermione," Ron whispered warningly.

She gave him a look that brooked no argument, and continued, "We know that Kingsley Shacklebolt and some of his Aurors were put in charge of collecting Death Eaters after the battle."

"Dead ones, Miss Granger, or survivors?" Severus interrupted smoothly.

"Both, sir," Hermione replied quietly. "We're not sure exactly where the survivors went, but ... no one's seen them since."

"They certainly weren't brought to Hogwarts." Ron picked up Hermione's line of thought.

"When we found Kingsley on the grounds, he was with Lucius Malfoy's with his body," Hermione said.

Severus started at the name. *Of course Lucius would have gotten himself caught in the crossfire*, he thought to himself with a little less malice than usual.

Hermione continued. "He was ... just sort of nudging him with his boot. We didn't stay with him long enough to find out what happened."

"We didn't want to," Harry said. "The look on his face ... we knew we couldn't let him find you your body. Whatever they were doing to them, you didn't deserve that."

"How touching," Severus drawled. "Potter to the rescue again." Harry looked at him with a pained look on his face.

"Sir, we just wanted to make sure you were safe. That you would receive the funeral and the recognition that you deserved, not not desecration by those you actually fought with, not against," Harry pleaded.

"As you can clearly see, I no longer require a funeral," Severus snarled. "And as for recognition," the older man spat, "I don't plan on holding my breath, and as much as I would like to advise you otherwise, I am forced to suggest that you do the same."

"Prof sir," Hermione said. "We will make sure that everyone knows about your true loyalties. It's just that " she paused and looked at her best friends. "Well, the Ministry, obviously, is in a right state at the moment. Half of its main members either died or disappeared. We haven't had a Minister for Magic in weeks."

"Dad's been working hard trying to pull things together, but it's hard work sifting through the rubble," Ron continued. "Everything has to be redone filling positions, redoing paperwork, rebuilding the building ..."

"But that won't stop us, sir," Harry said earnestly. "Once everything's back in place, once everything's running the way it ought to be, we'll make sure that your name is cleared. I swear it."

Severus cleared his throat. "And exactly what should I do in the meantime, Mr. Potter?"

"Oh, don't worry, sir," Harry leapt to explain. "You're welcome here as long as you want. As long as it takes. My home is your home too. You're safe here the building has been re-warded. No one can come in without my permission, so you don't have to be concerned about anyone else finding out about you."

"Anyone ... else," Severus said thoughtfully, hands clenching on the table. "Who, if I might ask, knows that I am still alive?"

"Madam Pomfrey and Professor McGonagall, of course," Ron said.

"And Ginny, and Hagrid," Hermione added. "That's pretty much the lot, at least for now."

"It's just not safe yet to tell more people, sir," Harry said. "Not until we know who the new members of the Ministry will be. I don't think we can trust Kingsley, not just yet."

"And Mum and Dad would be happy to know you're alive," Ron said, "well, once we told them about the real you. It's just that until we know who's who around the Ministry, Dad knowing about you might do more harm than good."

Severus took several deep breaths. Inhale through the nose, exhale through the mouth, he thought. "Allow me, if you will, to summarize my situation, then," he spoke after a minute. "I managed to save myself from certain death only to find myself imprisoned here, with only the three of you and the occasional other unwanted visitor for company, until such time as someone, as yet unknown, obtains the proper authority to proclaim me worthy of rejoining a society that, as of right now, neither knows nor cares that I still breathe."

Hermione and Ron glanced at each other, then lowered their gazes to the tabletop. But Harry implored, "No, sir, you don't understand. We I care that you survived, and I still have the Pensieve memories. Once everything's back in order, we'll make sure that everyone knows the truth! You'll see, sir everyone will understand what you did, and you'll be given a hero's welcome!"

"Oh, just what I've always wanted, Potter for the majority of wizarding society to know about my innermost secrets," Severus mocked. "That, I promise you, will not happen. If that is what my 'hero's welcome' will cost, then I refuse to pay it."

"It's alright, sir. We'll find a way. You'll see. One day, everyone will know the truth about you," Harry said intensely.

"Leave me," Severus whispered. The three of them didn't budge. "Get out!" he shouted, fists banging the table. Hermione looked at the other two and nodded toward the door. Silently, the three filed out. Ron and Harry made their way upstairs to bed without a word, but Hermione paused by the doorway. Out of Severus' line of vision, she

stood watching him. He looked ... drained, she thought, and not just physically. As much as he tried to pretend, he just wasn't the same Severus Snape. The fire was gone.

## Chapter 3

*Chapter 3 of 6*

Severus survives the final battle, but only a few know it. The Ministry is unable to clear his name right away, so he becomes a hermit and is indebted to Hermione for the potion that allows him to stay alive. But can Hermione convince him to trust her?

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One Week Later

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It had been a week since the funeral, Hermione mused. She had been reluctant to leave Severus alone so that all three of them could attend the ceremony at Hogwarts, but he had absolutely refused to accompany them no surprise there, she thought. In the end, she had insisted on giving the man one of her charmed coins left over from the DA. It had been modified to sense not a squeeze but any sudden motion, so if he were to fall down or flail about during a seizure, it would alert the bearer of the other coin, which for that day would be her, and she could return immediately to Grimmauld Place to attend to him. He had initially refused such measures, but she reminded him forcefully of the one seizure he had had at Hogwarts in which he had almost bitten off his tongue, and he relented, although not graciously. Fortunately, that day had gone off relatively free of Snape-related drama, but since then, he had had three episodes, each of them increasingly worse. She tried to keep his deterioration from the others, but even they could see that his seizures lasted longer and left him more and more fatigued. The last one he had had left him unconscious for the better part of twelve hours and had required an emergency visit from Madam Pomfrey. Whatever was causing this, she thought, the potions were not helping.

So, while Harry had dived into the efforts to rebuild Hogwarts and Ron had been assisting his father with Ministry issues, Hermione had begun researching. After all, she surmised, research was what she had always done best. It was where she could be the most helpful, at least for now. And it kept her mind off her grief. Ron had been lucky his entire family had survived the war unscathed, aside from George's ear, and so while he was appropriately sombre at the funeral, and truly mourned the losses of his friends and colleagues, he had rebounded faster than any of them and really tackled his projects with energy and vigour. Harry's main focus in life, though, seemed to be clearing Severus' name, but even he had realized that that wasn't possible just yet, and so he threw himself into reconstructing Hogwarts as a means of distraction. Aside from that, he barely noticed anything, not even Ginny. But Hermione couldn't move on so quickly or simply choose to ignore her feelings. She knew that Harry and Ron missed Remus and Tonks, and Colin, and the others, but not to the point where it kept them up at night, stifling their sobs with their pillows, like it did her. But a research project that was exactly what she needed to occupy herself.

It was difficult at first, since she had rationally concluded that the only logical starting point was with Nagini herself, and of course Neville had killed her. The snake's body had been destroyed during the cleaning of the grounds after the battle, so she no longer had that to use for tests, and Severus was, of course, less than forthcoming with his knowledge, preferring to spend most of his time brooding in his quarters. Reading, he called it, but Hermione noticed he never seemed to turn the pages of the book he had been staring at all week. So, for now, her main focus was to determine exactly what type of venom such a snake would have produced, and what its effects would have been. But it was difficult, with such little information to go on, so most of her calculations were based on nothing but educated guesses.

"Bah!" she spat, slamming yet another heavy tome shut and sitting back at the kitchen table. Resting her head in her hands, she tried to still her restless mind. So many ideas, so many things to test, and no way to get the answers.

"Problems, Miss Granger?" Severus asked in that irritatingly calm voice. Hermione jumped. She hadn't even heard him enter the room, and she hated that tone of voice. She could never be entirely sure that he wasn't making fun of her.

She sighed, slumping, then straightened up. The last thing she needed was for him to start thinking of her as nothing but a petulant teenager. "Actually, yes," she said in exasperation. "I keep trying to find out more about the properties of Nagini's venom, but none of these books have anything to say about snakes like her."

"Not surprising," Severus spoke, "given that she was the only one of her kind."

Hermione sat up even straighter, surprised that for once, he had volunteered information. "But how is that possible, sir?"

Severus sighed as he put on water for tea. "Miss Granger, do use your brain. She was Voldemort's familiar. Surely he would not have chosen just any common creature."

"Do you mean to say that he had her ... bred? Engineered, somehow?" she queried.

"He made her himself," the man replied, looking out the window.

The implications of his words struck her, and she growled in frustration. "But that means "

"Yes, Miss Granger," he said, whirling to face her. "Clearly, you have been under the impression that I have been how did Mr. Weasley put it yesterday? Sulking like a first year in detention? I assure you, I have given my ... condition ... a great deal of thought. I realize that I am not improving. Quite the opposite, in fact. I also realize that it must be related to my particular wound. Poppy's potions might be staving off part of the effects, but without an antivenin made from Nagini's own venom, I will continue to worsen. It will probably be a slow and painful process, resulting in a seizure so strong that I am unable to recuperate." His voice rose as he spoke, and by the time he finished, his hands clutched the counter, white-knuckled.

She gasped at his frank words. She hadn't realized that he had been so cognizant of his own condition or, if she were truthful, that he had been giving much thought beyond being stuck here with the three of them. "Surely there is an alternative, sir. Couldn't we try other antivenins, or different combinations?"

"Combining antivenins from different breeds of snake is tantamount to an immediate death sentence, and while I am not entirely sure that death would not be an improvement over my current state of existence, I'm quite sure I would prefer a less excruciating end," Severus retorted.

"But "

"Miss Granger!" he snapped. "Your persistence, while admirable, is foolish. There is nothing that can be done."

She sat back, stunned. Had Snape just complimented her? She shook her head. That wasn't important. What was important was that Severus Snape had given up. "I can't believe you," she spat. "After everything you did to stay alive all these years, and everything you did to try to survive the battle, and now, in the face of a little ... adversity,

you're just going to let yourself die?"

"Do not presume to know what I am thinking, Miss Granger!" Severus thundered. "Regardless of what you and your imbecilic flatmates think you understand about my personal life, you know nothing!"

"Oh, but I do, *Mister* Snape," Hermione hissed, brown eyes blazing. "I know this much. You've given up. Well, you might be content to let yourself die, but I certainly am not. You mark my words. There *is* a way, and I will find it!" And with that, she stormed out of the kitchen, tears streaming down her face.

She slumped on her bed, hiding her face in her hands as though to mask her tears even from herself. Why did he frustrate her so badly? It wasn't just that he was ill, although of course she fretted about his condition. And of course his situation with the Ministry was precarious and grossly unfair. It would take weeks, if not months, for them to have cleaned up the thousands of messes that Voldemort's lackeys had caused, let alone be prepared to handle a case like Snape's with anything akin to fairness. Still, the man had been caught between two masters for the better part of twenty years, she thought. A few more weeks shouldn't be enough to make him give up all hope. It wasn't even his horribly unthankful attitude toward her and Harry and Ron. Not like they weren't used to his derision by now, Hermione thought. What really bothered her, she realized, was that that ferocity, that spark, that ... essence of Snape ... was just gone. Oh, he fussed and mocked and sneered, but it was somehow empty, though no less cruel at times. He just wasn't the same man anymore, and for some reason, the idea of him living like that was more frightening than thinking of him dying.

Severus sat at the table, sighing. It was difficult for him to admit it, but Miss Granger had struck a nerve. Why, indeed, had he struggled so hard to survive during the war only to find his present conditions so bloody unbearable? His seizures were difficult and painful, to be true, but no more so than the Dark Lord's *Cruciatius*, which he had borne more frequently and for longer periods of time than his current affliction. He certainly didn't care what the wizarding public thought of him, either. He had done what he had to do, what he had sworn to do, and he'd be damned before he'd share his motivations or his memories with society just to become acceptable. And while currently he was stuck in this hovel with three faces he had hoped never to see again, he had only to wait for the Ministry to shake off the dust and pass him a pardon. He had been patient before; he could be patient again. But for what?

Severus looked down at his hands, pale and shaking. Dumbledore had said the future was in his own hands at last, that he was finally free to control his own fate. And for the first time, he realized that he had completely forgotten how.

Neither Hermione nor Severus came out of their rooms for dinner. Ron knocked on their doors, but, getting no answer, called out that he had left them plates warming on the counter, and that he and Harry would be back after their meeting with Arthur at the Burrow something to do with electing a new Minister of Magic. It was long after nightfall before Hermione dared to venture out, her need for the lav overcoming her desire not to run into Snape. Finishing her business, her stomach growled quite loudly, actually and she realized that she hadn't eaten at all that day, having previously been too fixated on her research. She chuckled grimly to herself. *Won't make that mistake again, will you*, she thought and headed for the kitchen. But as she turned the corner, she saw something that made her stop in her tracks.

Severus Snape sat at the kitchen table with the books she had been reading earlier. A stack of scrap parchment sat to one side, and his quill had been charmed to edit her calculations as he muttered out loud. She fought between distaste at seeing him and curiosity at what he was doing, and per the usual, her curiosity won out. She could only catch a few words out of what he was whispering, but it sounded to her as though he were doing a series of calculations for antivenin. She gasped. Could he actually be on to something?

"I heard you well over a quarter of an hour ago, Miss Granger," he said mildly, without turning around. "If you're so curious, you might as well come in."

Hurriedly, she rushed into the kitchen, all thoughts of dinner pushed aside. "What is it, sir?" she asked.

The corner of his mouth twitched almost imperceptibly. *Back to sir, was it*, he thought; never could get the know-it-all to stop thinking. "Quite obviously, you overlooked several main factors in your Arithmantic calculations, Miss Granger. I'm rather surprised, actually; some of them were things of which you should have been well aware."

Her face burned at his criticism, but a distant part of her brain registered that there was no real frost in his voice. "What what had I not taken into account, sir?" she asked, a bit more politely than before.

"First of all, you were basing all of your calculations on the qualities of Madam Pomfrey's potion. But as you had already mentioned, that potion was not created using Nagini's venom, so it is inherently flawed," he replied, eyes still glued to the pages in front of him. Not once had he looked at the young girl sharing the table.

"I know," Hermione replied, "which is why I had been hunting for information regarding Nagini's venom. I figured that if I knew about its properties, I could replace the values of the venom used in Madam Pomfrey's potions with the values of Nagini's, and reconfigure a way to create a synthetic version, but I couldn't find out what they were "

"You couldn't, because as I mentioned before, Nagini was unique. There has not ever been a mention of her kind in a text or tome, so there is no recorded information about the characteristics of her venom." Snape's quill scratched a few more lines onto one sheet of parchment before flurrying back to Hermione's notes, adding signs and symbols in a different-colored ink.

"So so then, what "

"Secondly," Severus continued blandly, as though she had not spoken, "you failed to take into account the relative sizes of the beasts themselves. Not only is was Nagini unique, but she was also a very, very large snake. In case you had forgotten." His quill scratched again. "The types of snakes upon which Madam Pomfrey's potions are usually based are between ten and twenty times smaller. Therefore, your calculations, even had they had the correct values for Nagini's own venom, would have been woefully disproportionate in terms of potency."

"Of course," Hermione said excitedly. "That must be why my first attempts to come up with a working model failed. I didn't think that Madam "

"You didn't think, Miss Granger," the older man interrupted yet again. "That much is clear. Had you stopped to think, you might also have realized that no magically-created venom such as Nagini's could ever be replicated using non-magical snake venom, no matter what the combination, qualities, or amount."

Hermione thought frantically. She had had no idea about Nagini being a magically-created snake until just that afternoon, so of course she couldn't have known that, but "Wait, sir. Does that mean that you think we can create a synthetic version of the venom magically?"

"We, Miss Granger?" Severus asked deceptively.

"Well, I mean, I just thought that I you we could " Hermione stumbled over her words, blushing. This was so exciting! Magical synthetics of naturally existing elements were fairly easy to do, and were generally taught in upper-level Transfigurations and Charms at Hogwarts, but coming up with a magical synthetic not just of a magical element, but of one that was no longer in existence, was beyond Master's level work and there was no way she was going to let him do it without her.

"Sadly, the work that we will need to do yes, *we*, Miss Granger, please do close your mouth requires two people to cast simultaneous spells, and since I am most loath to even contemplate allowing Mr. Weasley or Mr. Potter near such a delicate experiment, I suppose I must suffer your company. But I warn you if you do not listen carefully, if you do not follow my every direction with the utmost care and attention, I will dismiss you from the project and do it myself, spells or not. I trust I have made myself abundantly clear," Severus stated.

Hermione sat back in her chair and allowed herself a small smile. That almost almost had sounded like the Professor Snape she knew and despised. Perhaps he hadn't quite given up after all.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 of 6

Severus survives the final battle, but only a few know it. The Ministry is unable to clear his name right away, so he becomes a hermit and is indebted to Hermione for the potion that allows him to stay alive. But can Hermione convince him to trust her?

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Part IV

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June

It had been three weeks since their well, Hermione wasn't sure what to call it. It hadn't really been an agreement, since she hadn't agreed to much, and it certainly wasn't a truce. When Harry and Ron were around, Snape was as prickly and unforgiving as always. She was almost happy to hear the vitriol in his voice. If he didn't sound defeated, she reasoned, then he wasn't. Not yet.

Interestingly enough, in the short time they had been working together, he had grown, if not quite companionable, then a lot less condescending toward her. Even though, as usual, every other word out of his mouth was a thinly veiled insult or threat, she could tell that when they were directed at Ron or Harry, they sounded contemptuous, but when directed at her, they were tame, almost humorous. She never thought she'd have one day found Severus Snape amusing. He even complimented her work a few times, when he was too caught up in the complexities of what they were doing to watch what he was saying carefully enough. The work seemed to be good for him he had only had, on average, two or three fits a week, although they were gradually increasing in intensity. Sadly, although they had been working on alternative potions all this time, they had yet to come up with a reliable substitute that had any sort of positive effect on Severus' condition.

"What we need," she growled for the millionth time that week, "is a sample of Nagini's venom! If we only had that "

"we could create a synthetic version, yes, I know, Miss Granger," he snapped back distractedly. "Now hold still this portion of the spell is very tricky."

She froze in place obediently, wand pointed at a 90-degree angle to the cauldron. Severus moved about her counter-clockwise, sweat filming on his fallow brow. "Concentrate ... now!" As he reached the point in the circle exactly opposite hers, they both chanted the words of one of the transformative spells. A minute later, their potion turned from a clear, crystalline blue to a sickly, murky green. With a burp, the liquid congealed.

Severus sighed. It had been worth a try he and Miss Granger had been reading up on magical transformations of common snake venoms, in the hopes that by forcing the snake to grow to a size comparable to that of Nagini magically, its venom's potency would also grow, and could be altered to make a reasonably close substitution for the antivenin his body so desperately craved. But according to their configurations, the potion should have merely turned purple, not formed this ... grayish green gunge. Lowering his wand, he wiped the sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his tunic a most un-Professorial behavior, but it was so blasted hot in their brewing room all the time that they had quickly exhausted their supplies of towels, and neither one of them could afford to spare the moment's concentration it would take to charm themselves or the towels dry.

"Merlin's great hairy "

"Miss Granger!" Severus exclaimed in surprise. He'd never heard her utter so much as a whispered "Damn" when their potions backfired. "I'll thank you to keep a civil tongue in this laboratory, dreadfully hot as it may be."

"Sorry, sir," Hermione muttered, smirking at the almost-smile that that 'slip of the tongue' had wrested from Severus. Once or twice, she had actually seen him grin, usually when he thought the potion was proceeding better than they had hoped. It was amazing how it changed the landscape of his face, she reflected. If he would keep his hair tied back like this more often, and smile, he could almost be considered handsome. Almost. She poked at the pea soup in the cauldron with the tip of her wand, rather disappointed, and with a quick charm, the ruined potion vanished.

"What do you suppose went wrong?" she asked, looking for as dry a towel as she could find to clean off her face. Finding none, she pulled her hair up into a loose knot at the back of her neck, fanning her face with one of her parchments.

"This time, you mean," Severus clarified, moving toward their stacks of notes. "I would imagine it's the same problem we've had every single time. No snake venom we can find, create, or alter can replace Nagini's."

"Yes, yes, I know, but why?" she asked impatiently. Surely something they'd tried so far should have worked. Magically enlarged poisonous vipers, venom extracted from common snakes and then charmed, transfigured, diluted, concentrated. They'd even tried to recreate a Nagini of sorts by both charming and transfiguring the snakes themselves, but to no avail. All of their subjects had sadly perished. Not even Harry could wheedle any information out of the snakes. They had no idea how the Snake Lord had created Queen Death, as they called her. Whatever Voldemort had done, it was something only he had known how to do. "If only we had some sort of snake her size to work with. Maybe then "

"Miss Granger, we've been over that territory before," Severus rebutted. "Remember? We grew snakes to her size magically their venom remained at its original potency. All that changed was the snake's physical dimensions."

"No, I meant one already her size to begin with," Hermione panted, sweat running in lines from her temples down her neck to pool at her collarbones. "Not one we've already magically treated."

"And where do you propose we find such a specimen?" Severus challenged, equally out of breath.

Hermione grunted as she sat down on the lone chair in the room. Harry had, of course, immediately cleared out one of the studies to make a laboratory for Snape the minute the two of them requested it, but it was woefully bare and, being on the top floor, was incredibly hot, despite the open windows. Sadly, cooling charms interfered with the complicated dual spells they had to cast on some of the potions, and so they had, after one incredibly short day, come to terms with more ... informal ... clothing. The girl pushed up the sleeves of her thin shirt, responding, "How would I know? I've learned more about ruddy snakes than I ever dreamt was possible in the last three weeks, but neither you nor I have ever come across any mention of a snake the size of Nagini, and you know that."

"Then why, Miss Granger, did you bring it up "

"Because it's the only thing I can think of," Hermione exploded. "Short of somehow sucking a sample of Nagini's venom from your very flesh, I don't see how else to fix

these calculations."

Severus paused for a moment. Could the girl be correct? Is it possible that somehow they could take his blood or tissue and extract the venom, or at least the venom's unique magical characteristics? Hermione noticed the older man had stilled.

"S-sir," she said, "what is it? You're on to something, aren't you?"

"Miss Granger, clear a workspace. We have some work to do," he answered distantly. Perhaps if they just used a simple separation charm ... Hurriedly, he filled Hermione in on his thoughts. Hunched over the worktable, the two of them hastily worked out calculation after Arithmantic calculation. After about an hour of serious discussion and debate, Severus stood, his back cracking in the process. Stiffing a yawn, he walked over to the chair and sat down. Rolling up his sleeve, he beckoned her over.

"Miss Granger," he said, "I don't suppose you have ever witnessed Madam Pomfrey taking a blood sample from a student for tests?"

"N-no, actually, I haven't," Hermione answered. "I've seen it done loads of times the Muggle way, but never through magic. Madam Pomfrey seemed always to use diagnostic spells and the like."

"You're correct," the man continued. "Magical medicine rarely involves actual use of the bodily fluids or tissues. Most, if not all, conditions can be cured either through spells or potions. Muggle extremes, like surgery and the like, are considered barbaric." Fixing his sleeve above his elbow, he held his arm out. "That doesn't mean it isn't done, though. The spell to withdraw blood from a body is *Extraho Sanguine*. You point your wand here " he pointed her wand's tip at his largest vein, "and then to one of those empty vials. When it is full, you merely remove your wand from my arm, as though you were withdrawing the needle. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," she said in a subdued voice.

"Alright then, Miss Granger," he whispered, steeling himself. "You may proceed."

With the whispered spell, she transferred his blood into the vial; a flick of the wrist later, and the procedure was done.

"What do we do now, sir?" she asked, staring at his blood as though she had expected it to change color. He rolled his eyes, glad for once not to be in the younger woman's line of vision.

"What do you think, Miss Granger?" he inquired blandly, reaffixing his sleeve at his wrist.

She blushed, brushing tendrils of damp hair away from her face. "I mean, I would assume, sir, that we would divide up the sample so that we'd have enough for several tests." At his affirmative nod, she waved her wand, and soon five smaller vials stood before them. "But now what? How do we try to extract the venom?"

"You must understand, Miss Granger, that I'm not entirely sure it can be done just from blood alone. But, since I had taken not only a blood replenisher but a coagulant, it would seem as though Nagini's venom was trapped in my body, both in my flesh and in the new blood that formed. So there is a chance, at least, that some of it is still carried in that manner. Now, as for how to separate it. I think our best chance is with this."

At that, he pointed with his wand to the last of their calculations. "This allows for the separation of the magical and non-magical elements of a substance. If, as we think, Nagini's venom is entirely magical, then the spell should pull it out of my blood, which is of course a natural substance. Do you feel that you are able to cast the spell without blowing us up?" he asked, a bit testily. The spell had left him a bit light-headed, and given that that most likely meant a seizure later, he was understandably a bit cantankerous.

Reviewing their calculations, Hermione nodded. "Yes, it seems fairly straightforward to me. The spell is a basic one, and the wand movements aren't so complicated. But it's best that I try it first. You look a bit peaky, sir would you like some tea, or some biscuits?"

Severus, weary, only nodded. Seems the younger woman was more and more able to see through his pretenses these days, although that was only likely, given their close quarters. He gratefully dug in to the plate of chocolate biscuits and mug of Earl Grey his favorite that suddenly appeared next to his chair.

A minute later, Hermione performed the spell. The vial she targeted hovered above the table, its contents roiling. Soon, the vial itself shattered, but the blood itself remained suspended in mid-air, bubbling inside a transparent globe of magic. Seconds later, the ball of liquid shuddered and heaved, splitting apart. Half of it remained red, drifting to the right, while a silver substance streamed to the left.

"Quick, Severus another vial!" Hermione shouted, all her concentration focused on maintaining the spell.

Severus rushed over to the table, grabbing two clean vials from the collection, barely registering Hermione's use of his given name. Carefully, without touching the globe with any part of his flesh, he set each vial directly underneath each substance. Slowly, Hermione aimed her wand downward until the liquids were hovering just above the containers. Sweat ran down her neck, disappearing into the vee of her simple shirt, but she didn't dare break her concentration to wipe it away. With an anxious command from Severus, she completed the spell. The globe shimmered and split, funneling the two fluids into their respective vials, and then without a sound it disappeared.

Exhausted, the two sagged to the floor. "Did we did it work?" Hermione asked, gulping for air.

"We won't know until we try, Miss Granger," her former professor murmured, wiping his face on his sleeve yet again. Suddenly seeming to realize how unsightly he must seem sprawled on the floor, limbs akimbo, he pulled himself to his feet, immediately straightening his clothes. Hermione wearily gave a half-smile at his endeavours, noticing that even Severus Snape's sense of propriety did not extend to buttoning his white collared shirt all the way to the top, not in this heat. In the back of her mind, she realized that his choice of colors didn't surprise her anymore. In fact, white was rather well-suited to him, in a strange sort of way. Much less gloomy than his usual school robes. Not that she planned to tell him that, though. They'd been getting on fairly well, but somehow she sensed that he would consider such a personal remark grossly impertinent.

"Unless you have suddenly come up with a way to test the venom from the floor, Miss Granger, perhaps you would deign to join me at the table ..." Severus drawled, scowling down at her.

Stiffing the urge to tell him she had learned to brew with her toes, Hermione picked herself up with a sigh and went back to work.

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Two Weeks Later

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"Now, sir, your last seizure was when?" Hermione asked him.

"I'm reasonably certain that you are as familiar with the timing of my ... episodes ... as I, Miss Granger," Severus responded blandly.

The younger woman sighed. Of course she was, but she needed to make sure that he was as well, just in case the unthinkable should have happened and he had had a seizure in one of those rare moments when one of the three of them wasn't with him. "Just answer the question, sir," she sighed.

For a moment it looked as though he was going to reply with something nasty, but instead he simply answered, "Six days ago."

"And what is the greatest length of time that you have gone without a seizure since you since the incident?" she continued, checking her notes.

"Six days," he replied. This last stretch of time had been, to Severus, a strange mixture of calmness and anticipation. He felt thin, stretched, like at any moment he might fall to the floor in another fit, but yet his confidence in his own abilities, and although he was loathe to admit it, in Miss Granger's, led him to think that perhaps they had come up with, if not a cure, then at least a treatment.

After they had successfully extracted some of Nagini's venom from Severus' blood last week, they had immediately set to work determining what they could and could not do with the sample. At first, Hermione had boldly suggested that if they could remove the venom from that particular sample, perhaps they could remove all of the remaining venom from his entire body, thus rendering the need for treatment moot. But Severus had quickly shown her the error of that line of thinking, for it would not only require the removal of all of his blood, which would of course leave him dead, but it would also not be enough to remove the venom from his tissue and bone.

Discouraged, Hermione threw out idea after idea, only to have them rejected by her former professor. Strangely, though, she got the feeling that he wasn't being deliberately antagonistic as much as he was trying to get her to think through a particularly difficult problem. Finally, she asked him if the sample could be duplicated or magically recreated.

Caught off guard, he questioned her line of thinking, but when she explained that being able to reproduce the venom would save them from having to weaken him through constant bloodletting, she could have sworn she saw a look of sheer admiration in his eye before he nodded and looked away.

Once it was determined that they could, in very small amounts, duplicate the venom, they set about brewing yet another antivenin potion. The first tiny batch had been completed six days ago, at which point a rather shaky Severus Snape consumed it. They both knew that if they had at any moment during the completion of this potion made the tiniest of errors, the reintroduction of Nagini's venom to his body could well prove fatal. But luck had been with them, and six days later, Severus was still seizure-free. It was, of course, too early to tell if they had created an antidote or merely a form of treatment, but so far, the future was looking bright.

Since they had begun working on this particular approach to his treatment, she was struck one day by the amount of silence that pervaded their laboratory. Their initial partnership had been filled with snarky quips from Snape and hushed apologies from Hermione, but had gradually faded into something akin to conversation. Now, though, they had become accustomed to each other's work habits and patterns, and found that there was little need anymore for idle chatter. Instead, they worked together quietly, but amicably. All in all, she thought, it was turning out to be a rather pleasant sort of environment. Peaceful.

"May I," Severus spoke suddenly, fingers fidgeting at the ends of his sleeves, "thank you for your ... assistance ... by procuring for us a bottle of wine this evening?"

Hermione was dumbstruck. S-Snape? Wine? What on earth ... "You're not feeling poorly, are you, sir? Do you have a headache?"

He sniffed, pulling his hands into his sleeves and crossing his arms. "Very well. I can see that my gesture of gratitude was unnecessary "

"No, sir, I just ..." her voice trailed off. "I just hadn't expected it, that's all." Sitting up primly in her chair, she looked him in his eyes and said, "That would be lovely. But I can go for it, seeing as how you're "

His black eyes darkened before he turned away, dark hair falling softly about his hollow cheeks. "Still here. Yes. In fact, I had thought that you might be able to ... go for it, as you said."

"I don't understand, sir," she asked. But instead of answering, he stood swiftly and took her by the hand.

"Trust me, Miss Granger," he said, and the world went black.

## Chapter 5

### *Chapter 5 of 6*

Severus survives the final battle, but only a few know it. The Ministry is unable to clear his name right away, so he becomes a hermit and is indebted to Hermione for the potion that allows him to stay alive. But can Hermione convince him to trust her?

With a sickening pop, the two of them reappeared inside what looked to Hermione to be a smaller, dirtier replica of Hagrid's hut.

"Wh-where on earth are we, Se-sir?" she asked, a bit dizzy.

He stood at the one window, grimy with decades of dirt, lost in thought. Drawing a swift breath, he turned to one side and began to rummage through cupboards. "This," he said, his voice muffled, "was my grandfather's house."

Turning toward the door, barely recognizable as such by a tiny outline of sunlight around its edges, she smacked her shin on something hard and wooden. Gasping at the unexpected sting, she cursed under her breath.

"Miss Granger, I have warned you about that uncivil tongue of yours," he said. With a grunt, he re-emerged into the room, hands grasping two extremely dusty opaque bottles.

She bit her lip to keep a sob from escaping. Whatever she had run into had really rather hurt. She felt her leg cautiously; it seemed to be bleeding, but she couldn't tell quite how badly without some light, and he had Apparated them without warning so her wand was still at home. Making his way over to her, he took her arm in his and prepared to Disapparate. A second later, they reappeared in the kitchen of 12 Grimmauld Place, almost exactly in the same positions as they had been minutes before. Stumbling to the bench, she sat down, wincing as she examined her battered leg.

Noticing her sudden hiss as she sat down, Severus glanced over at his young assistant, and a split second later, he was kneeling at her side, wine forgotten on the counter. "Miss Granger, what on earth" he exclaimed, looking at the deep gash on the front of her right leg.

"I'm not sure, sir. I bashed it on something at the your house," she said, pressing her lips together to keep them from quivering. Looking around for her wand, she realized it must have been left upstairs in the laboratory, where they had run some more tests earlier. But Severus had placed a hand tentatively on her knee, and muttering a few short spells, most of which Hermione had never heard, he stanching the blood flow and knitted the flesh back together. His hand lingered only a moment longer than necessary on her leg before he stood quickly and went to the sink, returning a moment later with a damp cloth.

"I should have warned you not to move about in there without some more light," he said as he handed her the cloth. "I'm afraid you walked into one of his confounded Muggle farming tools. After all these years, they're still dreadfully sharp."

Hermione busied herself by cleaning up her leg, but in reality she was trying to come to terms with what had just happened. That was the first time she could recall Snape ever mentioning personal information so freely, let alone the longest statement he'd ever made in her presence that was neither unfriendly nor insulting. Smiling, she pressed the cloth to her leg. "Where, exactly, was the house, sir?" she asked.

"The hovel, as I would call it, stands on the northernmost coast of the Isle of Man," he answered slowly, as though he were afraid he might reveal too much. "My grandfather was a Muggle. He ... died. Before I left for school. Even though the Ministry repossessed my former home and accounts, I believe the house is still mine." Sensing her curious eyes on him, he continued, "However, magic there is a different animal entirely. Limited amounts of magic can pass untraced, but anything more intense or longer in duration than the Apparation we did earlier triggers sensors here in Britain, sensors meant to trace runaways from the law." He chuckled grimly at the irony. "No, the Isle of Man is not entirely the friendliest of places, not to wizards, anyway."

"But you could live there, be free"

"And live like a Muggle. Powerless and weak. No, it seems that my preference for magic is greater than my distaste at the company I have been forced to keep," he snapped.

"Well, Hermione, sounds like you've really gone and done it now," Ron chuckled from the doorway. "What's got his knickers in a twist tonight? Not another fit, was it?"

"Ronald!" Hermione scolded. She knew he didn't really dislike Snape anymore, but why did he have to be so bloody galling? It was hard to tell whether he did it to try to goad the older man into taking more of an interest in life, or whether he did it just because he could.

"Sir, I'm sorry, I've tried so hard to convince the new Ministry that they should issue you a posthumous pardon, but Arthur only has so much clout" Harry interjected, a look of desperation on his face. His fists clenched at his side as he tried to persuade Snape to believe him.

"If you two imbeciles are quite done with your babbling, I believe I will retire for the evening," Severus said, trying to block out the noise. "I'm quite sure you can help Hermione see to her leg." And with that, he swept from the room.

"What was that all about, 'Mione?" Ron asked, walking toward the kitchen table. "What does he mean, see to your leg?" Harry came over, looking down at her bloodied jeans.

"Hermione, what happened?" he asked, kneeling down next to her, his hand touching her knee where Severus' had rested earlier.

Hermione had absolutely no inclinations toward telling either of them about their evening, though. It seemed ... private. Personal. And besides, she thought disgustedly, neither one of them deserves one ruddy word of explanation from me, after the way they've been behaving. Harry, fawning over Severus as though he could explain his way into the older man's favor, and Ron, arrogant and self-assured, never passing up an opportunity to ruffle Snape's feathers. "Come on, you two," she said instead. "Help me to my room."

The bottles of wine that the two of them had brought back earlier lay untouched and unnoticed on the countertop.

The next day, Severus had another seizure.

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He had gone to bed without dinner, feeling out of sorts. He had lain there, watching the sun go down, and tried to determine exactly what had him off-balance. Potter's shallow hero-worship bothered him, yes, but it was a minor irritation, nothing he couldn't ignore. Weasley's childish antics were also bothersome, but he had become accustomed to much sharper barbs over the last twenty years, to be sure. But Hermione *when had she become Hermione*, he wondered he had actually wanted to thank her this evening. After all, even if the potion they had concocted wore off, it had still been weeks and weeks in the making, more than their share of long, hot hours in the laboratory, when she could be off doing ... whatever she might want to do. And yet it seemed as though she actually enjoyed the work. The way her brown eyes shone with flecks of gold when she was excited about an idea, the way her brow furrowed when she puzzled out a problem, and every once in a while he found himself fascinated by the trails taken by the beads of sweat that hung on her upper lip, watching them trickle toward her chin, or neck, or ... He inhaled sharply. He may no longer be her teacher, or her student, but she was still incredibly young, and he had no right to fantasize about her in such a fashion. Especially given his current ... situation.

His head hurt.

She found him on the floor sometime after midnight, dressing robe wide open, arms pinned in the bed sheets that he had dragged with him as he fell. Ron and Harry ran in minutes later, hearing her panicked cry, and after his fit passed, they managed to get him untangled and back into bed. Straightening his limbs, Hermione checked his vital signs with some quick diagnostic spells, and determining that he was alright, if weak, she gently covered him with the duvet and settled into the wingback chair near his bed.

"What are you doing, 'Mione?" Ron yawned. "Won't the coin thingy tell you if he falls out of bed again?"

She pulled a blanket up over her knees and crossed her arms. "It would, but it's not another seizure I'm worried about. This is the first one he's had since he took the potion, and I have no idea whether there might be other side effects as well."

"So you're going to stay with him all night, Hermione?" Harry asked. "I can stay too, I could sleep on the floor, if you need me to."

Hermione rolled her eyes. Maybe she'd been spending too much time with Severus and not enough time with Harry, but the constant adulation was starting to wear on her too. "No, thanks, Harry. I promise I'll call you if I need you though." Nodding, the two men headed back to bed.

The next morning, she awoke with a painfully stiff neck, but was relieved to see that Severus had not apparently stirred throughout the night. Checking him once again and seeing that he was sleeping soundly, she fixed herself a cup of strong tea and began yet another set of calculations. Now that they knew for certain that the potion they had prepared was only a temporary treatment and not an absolute cure, perhaps she could narrow down exactly how long it would last. By lunchtime she thought she had it figured out, but she would need to run some tests on him later to double-check her hypotheses.

Severus didn't wake up until close to dinnertime, though, and unlike past episodes when he had been fatigued but lucid, this time he was groggy, incoherent. She kept him in bed for the remainder of the night and consigned herself to another stiff neck as she settled in once more into the wingback chair. *At least I had had the presence of mind to bring a good book*, she smirked, *given that my present company is less talkative than usual*. But less than a chapter into the latest romance novel that her mother had sent her from Muggle London, he began to mumble.

Setting the book down, she went over to his bedside. He seemed feverish, moving about restlessly under the covers. *This was definitely unusual*, she thought. Perhaps a delayed effect of the potion, or could he have injured himself during the seizure? His vital signs had seemed fine earlier, she knew. Feeling his forehead, she realized he was quite warm, but when she turned away to fetch a glass of water from the bathroom, his hand clawed at her wrist. "No ... no, stay, please," he muttered, dark eyes wide open but not entirely seeing her. "M-mione, stay with me."

She froze, both at his words and at his touch. His skin, dry as paper, and he had called her 'Mione. Had asked her to stay why? "I'm right here, S-Severus," she whispered, and a ghost of a smile flitted across his face. Pressing her hand to his lips, he kissed it, then clutched it to his side as he fell back asleep. She sat there for the remainder of the night, uncomfortably ensconced on the edge of the bed, but absolutely unwilling to let go of his hand.

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Two Weeks Later

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"Alright, Severus," she said briskly, handing the man a vial. "This should do it. Bottoms up!"

Severus' upper lip curled into the semblance of a sneer, but wordlessly he swallowed the bitter brew. After his seizure, or so he had been told, he had slept for the better part of an entire day. He remembered little about the fit itself, but he did remember Hermione taking care of him. He was less than comfortable about that, if he was utterly honest with himself. He recognized that not only was he growing comfortable with her company, he was actually attracted to her, both physically and mentally. *Of course nothing could ever come of such a thing*, he chided himself. She was far too young, let alone his former student, and one he had hated to boot. He could only hope he had behaved properly, but she had never hinted at anything of the sort.

Once he had become fully awake, Hermione had filled him in on what had happened and shared with him her notes on possible adjustments to the potion. Once he was well enough to join her in the lab later that afternoon, they had run a few scenarios and had realized that if they changed the formula minutely, they could brew a version of the potion that would be virtually guaranteed to provide Severus with one week without seizures. Of course, that meant that he would need to take a draught once a week for the rest of his life, or until they found a cure, but it would almost certainly prevent him from having any major seizures again. By dinnertime, they had brewed the latest of the trial potions and had decided that he would try it in the morning, after one more night's rest. Two weeks had passed since he had taken the new potion, and so far, it seemed to be working.

"Would you like to rest a while before dinner, or would you like to get back to work?" Hermione asked, taking the empty vial from Severus and adding it to the collection to be cleaned.

"I see no reason to wait. Since this potion seems to be effective, I believe we could safely stockpile several months' worth. It would certainly free you to pursue ... other things," Severus said cautiously.

"What do you mean?" she asked, casting a sterilization spell on the vials so that they could be reused.

"I mean that while I appreciate your assistance these past few months, it would seem that I no longer require your help," Severus stated.

"I don't understand," she said. "I thought"

"You thought wrong, Miss Granger," he barked, infuriated with her and with himself. "You have no need to waste your mind, your life, on these meaningless potions."

"Meaningless?" she shouted, stung at his words. "These potions save your life, and you think they're nothing but drivel?"

"I assure you, Miss Granger, you know nothing about what I think," Severus rejoindered.

"Clearly," she said, fighting back tears.

"Oi, what's going on here?" Ron and Harry trotted into the room. "What's with all the shouting?" Harry said. "Is everything alright? Hermione, why are you crying?"

"Probably because Snape here has been pardoned," Ron said with a smile. "Great news, eh?"

"Indeed, it is perfect timing," Severus said. A second later, he was gone.

## Chapter 6

### Chapter 6 of 6

Severus survives the final battle, but only a few know it. The Ministry is unable to clear his name right away, so he becomes a hermit and is indebted to Hermione for the potion that allows him to stay alive. But can Hermione convince him to trust her?

August

It had been over three weeks since Severus Snape had left Grimmauld Place. His room remained untouched, although several vials of the potion, as well as their notes, had vanished later that day.

Ron had taken it all in stride, figuring that being pardoned, the man had simply gone on to a new life. It really wasn't of interest to him as to where Snape had gone, although Ron repeatedly said that he wished him well. Harry was ecstatic at first, having finally convinced the new Ministry that not only did Severus deserve a pardon, but that being alive he was to be left alone. But he was also distraught, thinking that perhaps he had not been hospitable enough, had not convinced Snape of his sincerity.

Hermione, though, was sick with worry, although she tried her hardest not to let on to her best friends. She was terrified by the thought that he was ill somewhere and had no one to look after him. *And what would he do when he ran out of potions*, she thought frantically. Wherever he was, she hoped he'd be able to recreate the brew.

Later that afternoon, though, she felt a familiar sensation, and her heart leapt into her throat. The coin! Severus he was having a seizure. But where was he? Grabbing her wand, she closed her eyes and squeezed the coin.

She landed with a thud on the top of a grassy hillock. The wind whipped her hair painfully across her face, causing her eyes to water. Where was she? Looking around, nothing looked very familiar. But there was a cabin a few metres away could it be? Stumbling toward it, she became convinced. *This must be his grandfather's house*, she thought with no small surprise. He couldn't have been living here this whole time as a Muggle! *No matter*, she thought, shaking her head. He was hurt, and she had to get to him. Where he'd been was of no importance if she couldn't find him.

Opening the door to the house, she peered inside. Remembering at the last minute that using large quantities of magic would set off unwanted alarms, she grabbed the Muggle torch by the door and shone it around, expecting to see Severus' twitching body on the floor. But the house, surprisingly, was empty. Where could he be? The coin had brought her here he, or it, had to be around here somewhere. Racing back outside, she jogged back toward where she had appeared. Maybe he had been outside, fetching water or wood for a fire. As she approached the hill overlooking the water, though, she saw him walking away from her down the coastline.

"Severus!" she called, one hand holding back the hair from her face. The black figure spun around, scanning the horizon with his dark eyes. When they landed on her, he froze, watching her jog toward him. When she finally caught up to him, they stared into each other's eyes.

"What on earth is going on?" she asked, breathless. "Are you alright? You're not hurt have you had a seizure?"

"Miss Granger." It was a statement, not a greeting. "I demand that you tell me at once how you traced me here."

"You you mean you haven't had a seizure?" she asked, confused. "But the coin the coin signaled me."

"I threw it into the ocean," he said coldly.

"Oh," she sighed, deflating. "The coin - I thought you were "

His eyes flickered for a split second. "You came to help me." Again, a statement, not a question.

She looked up into his eyes. "Yes," she replied simply.

He turned away from her and began walking back toward the house silently. Wordlessly, she followed him, unsure of what to say. By the time they reached the house, though, she realized that words weren't entirely necessary. Deep down, she knew why he had fled it was the same reason that she had stayed at Grimmauld.

He paused, his hand on the latch. "What are you afraid of, Severus?" she asked in a whisper.

"You," he whispered back.

She walked up behind him and gently, tentatively, placed her hand on his back. He stiffened under her touch, but she insisted. Pressing in close to him, she wrapped her arms around his waist and laid her head upon his back, deeply inhaling his scent.

"Miss Granger, I don't think " he began, but her hands worked their way inside of his shirt, their coldness an intense contrast to his burning hot skin.

"Shhh, Severus," she said quietly. "It's alright. I I want you too."

Whipping around to face her, he said roughly, "I have no idea what you "

"Yes, you do, Severus," she whispered back at him. "That's what all of this has been about for both of us. Fear of rejection, of not having a place, of not knowing what we want. But we're here, and we've found something, a start, at least. Don't be afraid of that," she implored, her hands caressing the bare, smooth skin of his chest.

He trembled under her touch, and slowly, his hands came up, hovering just to either side of her face. "Miss Gra Hermione," he said softly, "I have nothing to offer but a life of potions and pain and this ridiculous hilltop. You could have anything you wanted."

"After the battle, I felt lost. Dead. Until you gave me something to work on, to work toward, that is then I felt alive, like I was useful. With you gone these past few weeks, I felt lost again. We fought that battle to stay alive, Severus. Let's not waste that," she said.

Severus could barely believe his ears. This young woman, this beautiful, intelligent creature who could have the world at her feet, wanted him. Overcome, he lowered his head to hers and kissed the lips he had dreamt of tasting so many weeks before.

She moaned at the touch of his lips to hers. He was thin, too thin, but his lips were full against hers, his tongue eagerly, skillfully working its way inside of her open mouth. Pushing open the door with one hand, he lifted her easily in his arms and carried her off to his bedroom. Once there, he laid her down gently onto the coverlet, looking deeply into her gold-flecked eyes. "So beautiful," he murmured.

She flushed at the compliment, suddenly a bit shy. He knelt down next to her and kissed her again, soundly. Where before his tongue was slippery, sly, this time his kiss was like an onslaught. She reached out a hand, touching the man's face. She had touched him hundreds of times before, but as a nursemaid, not a lover. She took no more notice of his temperature, but of how soft his skin was beneath her fingertips, how soft his hair actually was. Eagerly she ran her fingers through it, coming to rest at the base of his neck. He groaned at her touch and ran his hands from her face down her sides, coming to rest on the curve of her hips. "Please, Hermione, let me ..." he pleaded. *Merlin, I want her*, he admitted finally to himself.

"Oh yes, Severus, please," she whispered into his ear, sliding her hands from the back of his neck to the front of his shirt, where she started undoing his buttons. When her palms grazed his sensitive nipples, he almost fell over. It had been a long time since anyone had touched him like that, with desire, with love? Tentatively, he returned the favor, gently removing Hermione's blouse before lowering his head to nuzzle at her shapely bosom. Her self-control gone, she mewled into his ear as she suckled his earlobe.

Lightly scraping his fingernails up and down her back, he removed her brassiere easily, replacing the fabric over one nipple with his mouth, sucking lightly, then gently scraping his teeth over the erect nub. His rough palm rubbed circles over the other nipple, leaving them both taut and wanting more. She fell back onto her elbows, panting, a feral look in her eye. Growling, he quickly removed her jeans and his own black trousers, finally standing in front of her in nothing but his black silk shorts.

Sitting up, Hermione reached out a hand toward them. "Please, allow me," she said. Gulping, Severus looked down and watched Hermione gently slide them to the floor, engulfing his erect penis with her warm, wet mouth.

His head sagged backward in utter delight. He couldn't remember the last time anyone had ever done this of their own accord. Her tongue encircled his weeping head, licking the salty fluid from the tip as she swallowed greedily, moaning her appreciation. Her hands wrapped behind him, squeezing and kneading his buttocks as she thrust him in and out of her mouth. "Not ... yet ..." he said, pulling back with a grunt of longing. Kneeling down in front of her, he gently parted her legs and proceeded to return the favor fully. Her eyes rolled back in her head as she threaded her fingers through his silky black hair, pulling him in closer to her. His arms wrapped underneath her legs, snaking up to massage her nipples. When he sensed that she was close, he gave them both a naughty pinch, causing her to cry out, but when he redoubled his efforts with his tongue, she moaned throatily and came for him.

While he would have liked to have done nothing but drink her juices, his penis twitched, reminding him that there were other needs to be satisfied as well. Climbing on top of the bed, he nudged her over into a more comfortable position. Kneeling between her legs, he leaned down, kissing her thoroughly. "Please, Severus," she whispered, and it was all she needed to say. Poising himself at her entry, he slid in in one swift motion. *She feels like home*, he thought strangely to himself. He felt her raise her legs, and soon they had found a rhythm all their own. Too soon, he came, and felt her sigh with happiness.

Curling up behind her, he listened to her heartbeat as she drifted off. "Thank you for my life, Hermione," he whispered as he, too, fell asleep. The future was, indeed, in his hands. He had made his choice.