

Owned

by Subversa

War is hell, and the aftermath is often the most hellish part of all. Having lost everyone she most loves, Hermione Granger is only a shell of the woman she had been. Devastated by loss and guilt, Hermione draws the attention of Severus Snape with a random utterance.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 11

War is hell, and the aftermath is often the most hellish part of all. Having lost everyone she most loves, Hermione Granger is only a shell of the woman she had been. Devastated by loss and guilt, Hermione draws the attention of Severus Snape with a random utterance.

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This story is very AU, canon compliant only through HBP, and darker than most Subversa stories. Please be warned.



Owned

Chapter 1

The lamps in the kitchen at number twelve, Grimmauld Place were lit against the early dark of late autumn as the board of trustees for the Order of the Phoenix Trust

gathered for its monthly meeting. A supper of fragrant spag bol simmered on the ancient stove, promise of the treat to come when business was done. The board members, consisting of the surviving members of the Order of the Phoenix, sat about the old wooden table, sipping drinks and chatting together, awaiting the arrival of those of their number who were running late. Nymphadora Tonks, her shocking pink hair spiked about her heart-shaped face, held forth on the end of her most recent relationship with a man introduced to her by her mum.

'... and then he let drop that he expected his wife to stop work!' she said with a comical grimace, drawing chuckles from many of her listeners. 'To stay at home, thank you very much, and keep house!'

George Weasley leant partway across the table. 'What did you tell him, Tonks?' he goaded.

Tonks snorted. 'I told him he could stick it...' She darted a quick look at Molly Weasley, who glowered at her. '...Where the sun doesn't shine!' she finished. The table at large burst into hearty laughter, despite Molly's disapproving glare.

When the hilarity had died down, Tonks spoke in a more introspective tone. 'Honestly, who wants to be owned in this day and age?'

Most of the heads at the table were nodding in agreement when a voice spoke up from the quiet end of the table.

'I do.'

Eyes swivelled immediately to the speaker, who sat alone, huddled in upon herself, the chairs to either side of her empty, as if awaiting the presence of persons whom everyone knew would not show up ... everyone, perhaps, but the girl who had spoken. Her hair was short and looked as if it had been chopped off by a primary school child with safety scissors. What was left of the uneven mess hung about her forehead and cheeks in bedraggled disarray. Her face was unhealthily thin, her complexion sallow, and dark shadows circled her eyes. She wore a shapeless, faded jumper, topped by a tatty brown Muggle overcoat. Everyone stared at her for several beats, as if trying to make up their minds how to react to her, and then Tonks burst into raucous laughter, turning the mood of the gathering again to amusement.

'Hermione!' Tonks gasped between chuckles. 'You *kill* me! As if you'd *ever*!'

George and Fred Weasley rose from their seats in one motion and took the chairs on either side of Hermione, George urging a Butterbeer on her, Fred putting a comforting arm about her shoulders, which he gave a friendly squeeze. Hermione did not shrug them off; to do so, it seemed, would require more energy than she possessed. She accepted the drink and the squeeze with an unsmiling nod, and then Kingsley Shacklebolt hurried in, drawing all attention to himself.

Now that the Minister had arrived, everyone was present, and the meeting could begin.

A solitary spectator sat slightly removed from the table in a darkened corner and contributed neither raillery nor conversation to the mix. One might have been forgiven for imagining the silent outsider to be a third-party observer of the proceedings, so little engagement in the business matters did the man exhibit.

Only at one point did the black eyes of Severus Snape show any sign of life: when, at meeting's end, they avidly followed the slump-shouldered figure of Hermione Granger, as she fled the kitchen for her room upstairs.

Hermione lay upon her bed fully dressed, staring with unseeing eyes at the ceiling. She hated being back at Grimmauld Place, hated the memories it evoked, but she always forced herself to remain overnight. If she tried to leave before breakfast was finished the morning after a meeting, Molly cried. And as dead as Hermione felt inside, Ron's mother still had the ability to wring a guilty response from her. After all, with her boyfriend and her best friend lost in the war...along with her parents, though they weren't strictly *dead*...Molly Weasley and her relatives were the only connexion Hermione possessed that resembled a family.

Hermione had gone to Australia when the war was over to find her parents and reverse their Memory Charm. But the town where she had installed them over a year before, during the horrible summer after Snape killed Dumbledore, bore no trace of Wendell and Monica Wilkins, the pseudonyms she had given them. The two had apparently decided to move away, leaving no forwarding address, and the help of the best private investigators Hermione could afford...both magical and Muggle...had turned up no sign of her parents.

She was an orphan.

Wrapping her arms tightly about her torso, Hermione rocked herself gently, finding some small comfort in the repetitive motion.

Alone. She was always alone now.

Hogwarts was besieged by giants and trolls and other horrible beasts, and the castle's defences were weakening. They had to find Voldemort so Harry could kill him. It was the Light's only hope of victory.

She made a pact with Harry and Ron, her brother and her lover. They stood in a circle, hand in hand, bent forward with their foreheads pressed together, breathing in each other's breath for the last time. They would run through the Dark Forest to find Voldemort's stronghold. If one of them fell, the others would not stop, but go on.

In the primeval dark of the Forest, Hermione was knocked flat by a Stunning Spell, and the boys left her where she fell, as they had promised they would do.

The rest she knew by report only. Harry and Ron had found the Dark Lord, and Ron had taken the Killing Curse meant for Harry, giving the Boy Who Lived a chance to engage his enemy in a duel. Both had fought for their very lives, and each had fallen to the other's curse...for neither could live while the other survived.

In the cold and barren room beneath the eaves of the Noble House of Black, tears ran unchecked from beneath Hermione's closed eyelids, mixing with the mucous from her nose, streaking her face and dripping into her hair.

Alone. She was always alone now.

Arthur Weasley opened the bottle of Ogden's Old Firewhisky and pouring a tot for himself, he gave it to Minerva McGonagall, who handed the bottle to Remus Lupin. From Lupin's hand, the bottle passed through the freckled hands of the Weasley boys, Bill, Percy, Fred and George, until it reached the Minister for Magic. Shacklebolt poured two fingers, muttering, 'Just one won't hurt,' and then, with a smile, he offered the bottle to the man to his right.

'It's a rare night when you join us for a drink, Severus,' the Minister said.

Snape tilted a measure of the smoking liquor into his glass and raised it in a slight salute. 'But it's quite cosy by the fire,' he observed. 'To your health, Minister.'

And everyone drank, quickly forgetting the highly unusual circumstance of Severus Snape remaining overnight at Grimmauld Place.

When dawn broke at last, Hermione rose from her bed and washed her face in the cold basin water before creeping down to the kitchen. She only had to manage another hour...two at the most...and when she had pretended to eat breakfast, Molly would permit her to depart. As she bid her goodbye, Molly would wear a brave face that would twist Hermione's gut. It tore at her heart to see Molly tearful and upset, but it hurt her more to see Molly not at all. Short of taking up residence at the Burrow, which Hermione could not even bear to visit because of the agonising memories it evoked, these monthly board meetings were her only chance to bask in the motherly affection of Ron's broken-hearted mum. And as messily emotional as it all was, Hermione could not deny herself this time en famille with the Weasleys and other Order members. It was her only concession to sentiment at all.

She sat in her customary chair, legs curled beneath her, arms wrapped about her torso, head down as she waited for time to pass. She could scarcely endure the company of her Order friends, for they were kind and loving to her when she knew she was undeserving of such generosity ... and yet here she came, month after month, to expose herself to them and to absorb as much of their caring as she could permit herself to do. She could neither enjoy the board meetings, nor could she stop attending them. It was undoubtedly just another example of how very fucked up she was in mind, body, and spirit.

She heard footsteps coming down the basement stairs, a firm, steady tread. Not Molly, then...a man. He walked to the stove, and Hermione heard the faint click of cup against saucer as he began to prepare his morning tea. She stared at an old burn mark on the table top, ignoring the rumble in her tummy. She seldom felt hunger, and in general, if she ignored her appetite, it went away.

Moments later, a long-fingered hand set a cup of tea before her, and Severus Snape slipped into the chair at the foot of the table...not right beside her, but closer than he had ever done before.

'Two sugars and a splash of milk,' he murmured, taking up his own tea and sipping.

Hermione lifted her eyes to stare at him. He wore his hair as he had done all the time she had known him, though at present it was freshly combed out of his face...as if he had just showered. His black robes were draped over a black suit, and overall he evinced a remarkable calm, the likes of which she had never known him to display.

'How do you know how I take my tea?' she asked.

'I am ... observant,' he replied, meeting her eyes with polite attention. 'See if it is to your taste.'

Hermione obeyed the suggestion without thinking, and the sweet, milky liquid filled her mouth with tea perfection. The first sip was so good that another quickly followed, and before she knew what she was about, she had drunk the entire cup.

Throughout the entire process, Severus Snape watched her as if her consumption of the warm liquid was of significant interest to him, and when she finished the last drop, he nodded approvingly. 'Perhaps we could have toast with our next cup,' he mused.

Hermione opened her lips to inform him that she never took food before noon...and precious little then, she had to admit...but what she said was, 'Is there strawberry jam?'

Her shoulders began to relax, as never happened anywhere but behind the locked door of her flat, and it seemed to be in simple response to the sight of Severus Snape performing the very homey function of toasting bread and pouring tea. He produced both strawberry and raspberry jam, and Hermione had a bit of each, managing to eat an entire piece of toast while drinking a second cup of tea. Her companion ate two pieces of dry toast, allowing Hermione to eat in peace, maintaining a comfortable silence between them.

When she pushed her plate away, Snape leant back in his chair and addressed her in an exceedingly mild tone.

'May I ask a question?' he said.

Hermione felt a flicker of unease. She had been lulled with tea and toast...had actually *ingested* nourishment!...and now she would be made to pay for it. Something ... unpleasant was coming.

'I would like know what you meant yesterday, when you said you wished to be ~~owned~~.'

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 11

War is hell, and the aftermath is often the most hellish part of all. Having lost everyone she most loves, Hermione Granger is only a shell of the woman she had been. Devastated by loss and guilt, Hermione draws the attention of Severus Snape with a random utterance.

A/N: Thank you for your amazing response to this story. You make the writing a pure joy. My love and thanks to Sshg316, Machshefa, and MagicAlly for their enrichment of my work. Any errors are my own.



Chapter 2

Hermione stood at the kitchen counter in her tiny, dismal flat. She stared down at the box just delivered to her door by the Royal Mail. Who would send her such a package? She chewed the inside of her cheek and pondered. The only person she could imagine sending something was Molly, but the return address was not Ottery St Catchpole. It was, in fact, Manchester. She'd never even *been* to Manchester.

A Dark Detection Spell rendered no results, so she slit the tape with a kitchen knife and dug through the packing materials to find two elegant pots of gourmet jam, one each of strawberry and raspberry.

She set the jars aside and dumped the contents of the box into her relatively clean and dry sink, the better to sift through. The only other item of note was an envelope emblazoned with the words *Jam and Preserves of the Month Club*. She ripped it open and found brochures of jam descriptions, wrapped in a form letter.

Congratulations! You have been gifted with a subscription to the Jam and Preserves of the Month Club, an unforgettable gourmet treat. If you're serious about your jam & preserves, you'll be seriously crazy about these incredible selections.

Get 2 different jars of hard-to-find jams & preserves from around the world

Jam and Preserves Lover's Newsletter with every shipment

Free shipping every month

Hermione allowed the paper to fall and grabbed the heavy jars, one in each hand, before subsiding into a chair. The cut glass of the fancy jam pots was complemented by the black labels engraved with gold script, embellished with mouth-watering photographs of the source berries. These were the sorts of things vendors who enjoyed her parents' custom at their dental offices had bestowed upon the Grangers at Christmas time. They were a delicious extravagance, but sinfully expensive...not the sort of thing the average person would splurge on for their breakfast toast.

She pushed the two jars to the centre of the table and regarded them balefully, her arms now wrapped about her torso.

It was Snape. It had to be Snape. No one else would bother with such an eloquent gift ... and the episode of a shared breakfast in the Grimmauld Place kitchen had been a singular experience. In the week since she had fled the kitchen without answering his question, she had thought about the encounter almost constantly. Never before in her life had another person...*man!* her subconscious shouted to be heard...shown such unswerving attention to her. She had found the attention flattering ... but even more than that, she had found it *comforting*. Affirming.

For the short time she had been alone with Severus Snape, drinking tea and eating toast, Hermione had been without pain or guilt or anxiety.

Merlin knew she didn't deserve such cessation of misery.

'Fuck this,' she muttered, and with a sweep of her wand, the jam pots disappeared into the depths of the box from which they had come.

Afternoon leached into evening, and the lampposts outside provided the only light in the cheerless space. Hermione stared at the faded paper on the sitting room wall, seeing instead herself, stumbling in terror through the Forbidden Forest.

It had been light by then, hours since she had been cursed, and she had woken with a pounding head and a lump the size of a hen's egg behind her left ear. The protruding, blood-stained rock beneath her had told its tale, and then she had been up and running, too frightened even to call out for Harry and Ron.

She had no idea how far or how long she had been running when she had come upon the grim cortege. Hagrid and Grawp had been in the lead, each of them tenderly cradling one shroud-wrapped figure.

"Arry!" Hagrid had howled in his grief, huge tears splashing onto the unmoving wizard in his arms. It had required no great feat of deduction for Hermione to surmise Grawp's burden. The dread of her heart...her worst nightmare come true!...and the world as she knew it had changed forever, the ground of all she had believed in crumbling beneath her feet.

Why should she be alive when Harry and Ron were gone? The trio had always believed they would come through the fire of Voldemort's defeat triumphantly alive...all three of them. Wrong! All so very, incontrovertibly *wrong*. If Harry and Ron were dead, she should be dead, as well.

Then she had been surrounded by friends...*former* friends...Housemates and school friends, all sobbing and exclaiming and questioning. Hermione had walked through them, homing in on the figures of Minerva McGonagall and the Weasleys ...

But her Order comrades had stood apart, holding one another and wailing their grief. Certainly they had been the ones closest to Harry...and many were amongst Ron's family, to boot...but Hermione had seen the accusing glances cast her way. She had known that deep inside, the people who mattered most knew of her guilt and her shame and wished her *dead*.

But no more than she had done...still did! She wished it every day, to have died with Harry and Ron, rather than to have lived on with such culpability and shame ... the lone survivor.

Now, the need for the loo interrupted her morose reminiscences. With necessities attended to, she trudged to her bed. The hours of the night dragged by whilst Hermione stared at her ceiling, trying desperately not to think.

Mid-December brought the next meeting of the Order of the Phoenix Trust, and Hermione slipped into the kitchen at Grimmauld Place in the wake of the Minister, her arrival scarcely occasioning comment in the hail of greetings to Shackbolt. The table was crowded, for everyone was in attendance at this meeting, so close to Christmas. Charlie Weasley was visiting from Romania, Percy from Toronto, and their sister, Ginny, was home, for the Harpies were on their winter break. Neville Longbottom was down from Hogwarts, where he served as apprentice to Pomona Sprout, and even Luna Lovegood had returned from her South American wanderings in search of the elusive Crumple-Horned Snorkack.

Snape was present, in his usual spot, slightly removed from the others. Hermione was aware of his eyes upon her, but she did not meet his gaze. She hunched in her chair, her head down, and listened.

The business of the meeting was quickly dealt with, and Hermione then endured loving greetings from Luna and Ginny. They tried hard, these former friends, to make Hermione believe that they did not hold her responsible for the deaths of Harry and Ron. She pretended that she believed, as well; it was far simpler than the tedious explanations and discussions she had borne with in the past, trying to make them see her blameworthiness.

Dinner was turkey and roast potatoes with sprouts, with mince pies and plum pudding for afters. Hermione took small portions and pushed them about on her plate, too anxious to eat. Being amongst all these happy, chattering people made her want to jump out of her skin, but she was drawn to be with them, in spite of the resultant discomfort she felt. And tonight was only the beginning of the misery. Tomorrow night was the Order Christmas party, when Grimmauld Place was open to receive visits from non-Order members, and Hermione was expected to attend.

At last the meal was over, and the Weasley brothers noisily undertook the washing up. Arthur invited those who wished to partake to join him in the study for a bit of liquid refreshment, and Lupin and Shackbolt rose, allowing McGonagall to precede them through the doorway.

'Coming, Severus?' Arthur asked.

Hermione allowed herself a glance at Snape.

'I thank you, Arthur, but I believe I will take the opportunity to browse in the library, this evening,' Snape responded smoothly, and his black eyes darted to Hermione, catching her out in the act of looking at him.

Although she immediately averted her face, a spark of pure energy flashed into her at the meeting of their eyes, and Hermione was confused. Her heart rate increased, as if she had been confronted with some sort of danger, and she was suffused with heat. She knew that her face was red, and she had no wish to advertise her discomfort.

So she remained where she was until the room was empty, declining all invitations to join the drinkers in the study or the wireless listeners in the sitting room. At last, she hurried along to her room and closed the door, feeling as if she had narrowly avoided some sort of natural disaster.

An hour later, she still languished in her room, sitting rigidly on the side of her bed, unable to lie down and unwilling to stand up. She clasped her hands together in her lap until she felt the pain of her own relentless grip in the tingling of her fingers. Impulse raged in her, impulse such as she had not known in longer than she could remember. Unhappiness, she was intimate with. Fear and flight, she had down to an art form. But longing? Hermione Granger never permitted herself something so frivolous as *that*.

Longing was for the innocent, the blameless, the untarnished.

Yet before another hour had passed, she was on her feet, out the door, ignoring the lure of the happy voices in the study and the music from the sitting room. No, nothing but the near solitude of the library would satisfy the compulsion she felt.

She turned the door latch and let herself into the old Black family library, terrified that Snape might be within...and equally terrified that he might *not*.

Her fears were promptly put to rest, for Severus Snape was in the library, sitting in a maroon leather wingchair. At his elbow was a round table bearing fancy glass goblets and a matching decanter of deep red wine. The burgundy was illuminated by the crackling fire in the hearth, which also cast a glow upon Snape's straight-backed figure. He was dressed in his usual garb, a marbled board-covered book in his hands. He looked up instantly at her entrance, and the ghost of a smile touched his thin lips.

'Hello, Hermione,' he said equably, gesturing to the chair across from his with the lift of a hand. 'Will you sit?'

Hermione's heart thundered in her chest, and her breath laboured madly, as if she had run a long distance directly into peril. Still, she forced herself to advance to the chair he had indicated, and she gripped the arched back of it, grateful for the solid bulk to steady her ... and separate her from him. She stared down at her hands.

'You sent the jam,' she blurted, and even her voice sounded as if she had been running ... but that wasn't at all what she had meant to say.

'You received it, then,' he said, and there was satisfaction in his tone.

'But why?' she demanded, forcing herself to look at him. 'Why would you do such a thing?'

For a moment his eyes narrowed, and he tilted his head slightly to one side, as if measuring his response.

'Perhaps,' he said quietly, 'I will answer your question, if you answer mine.'

She shifted her gaze to the bookshelf behind him, allowing her eyes to flick over the books while her mind spun. Was it that important to her? How could it be, when *nothing* had been important for so long? But she felt compelled to speak, and suddenly, nothing else would do but that she should attempt to explain to him.

'I ... I don't have ... anyone, anymore,' she said haltingly, staring hard at a spot just above his left shoulder and continuing to hold so tightly to the chair back that her fingers ached. 'Harry and Ron...my mum and dad...they're all ... gone.'

She felt burning begin in her throat, quickly growing so intense she was unsure if she could speak again. For a long moment, she struggled not to cry in front of Snape, who was not famed for his sympathetic nature. Then she realised the silence was on-going; he was not stepping in to fill the void with speech. Time passed, and discomfort grew into awkwardness, but still, he did not speak. As the clock ticked away upon the mantel, Hermione grew more and more uncomfortable, until at last she dragged her eyes back to his face.

The moment their eyes met, he said, 'It's not a full explanation, but it's enough to be getting on with.'

Hermione was frozen, her eyes all but held captive by Snape's steady black gaze. She felt herself calming, her pulse and breathing normalising. Gradually, she began to relax her grip upon the chair.

'I sent the jam because it gave me pleasure to watch you eat it,' he said at last, 'and because I had hoped you might be tempted to do so again.' A faint sneer touched his lips, an expression Hermione had learnt to dread in her Potions teacher ... but for some reason, she felt quite sure that the twisting of his lips was directed at himself, rather than at her. 'From your appearance, however, it seems I misjudged the matter. You are, in fact, *not* eating more...that was obvious at dinner.'

Hermione's shoulders slowly rose and fell, a shrug. She had nothing to say on the subject.

'Won't you sit?' he asked again.

Not allowing herself to analyse the request, she rounded the chair and sat. At the moment her bottom touched the cushion, Snape was on his feet, filling a goblet.

'I hope you'll have a glass of wine with me,' he commented, taking up the second goblet and pouring. He turned and offered the wine, which Hermione accepted automatically.

'To your health,' he said, watching her. But his lips did not touch the glass until Hermione drank, and he followed suit.

The wine was good. She had not drunk alcohol for pleasure in recent memory.

'I think you will find drinking a glass of wine before your dinner will sharpen your appetite,' Snape commented.

She darted a sharp look at him...was he trying to tell her what to do?...but he was seated again, his book in hand.

'If you're peckish later, there are plentiful dinner leftovers tucked away in the larder.'

She opened her lips to tell him she could look after herself, but he appeared to be absorbed in his book, no longer attending to her. So she picked up the unshelved volume on the table beside her and began to read.

War Orphans in Wizarding Britain, 1978 to 1998 was fascinating, a subject she had never before considered. Warmed by the fire, soothed by the wine, she relaxed into her chair, busily twirling a lock of hair about one finger as she lost herself in the words. A part of her consciousness objected to this flagrant dereliction of duty...for who would hate her while she immersed herself in the text?...but Hermione was able to disregard the protest and permit herself to indulge in an hour of quiet reading.

So engrossed was she that her first indication of disturbance was Snape's sudden rigidity. Her head rose from her book, and she wondered why he was glaring past her with such malevolence.

'Hermione?'

She turned, craning her neck to look around the wingback chair. Percy Weasley stood in the doorway looking simultaneously embarrassed and hopeful, and Hermione had the impression he had called her name more than once.

'Oh,' she said. 'Hi, Percy.'

'Will you come down the pub for a nightcap?' Percy asked. 'My brothers, Gin, and Luna are coming,' he added, as if to sweeten the pill. 'We'd really like it if you did.'

Hermione felt sick at the very thought. 'Thanks, Perce, but I was just on my way to bed,' she said. 'I thought I'd make an early night of it.'

Percy advanced a few steps into the library. 'Oh, do come,' he urged her. 'It's the holidays, isn't it? Live a little!' He added a shy smile at this point, as if he knew he sounded rather desperate.

Hermione faced forward again, pushing the book she had been reading off her lap onto a cushion as she rose to her feet. Why couldn't he go away? Had she somehow failed to communicate her desire to be left alone? But this particular old friend had been on assignment for the Ministry in Canada for the best part of two years; perhaps he had not been told not to bother with her.

She sighed and stood straighter, preparing to turn and face Percy. After all, no one was asking her to perform an extraordinary feat, were they? So why did it feel so *impossible*?

'Hermione?' Percy persisted, the nearness of his voice indicating he had come another step closer. 'We won't stay out too late, I promise.'

Hermione closed her eyes in resignation. She could never bear up well under such importunities. If her former friends wanted her along that badly, it was her duty to comply, regardless of the cost. She turned to say she would go, but before she could speak, another voice intervened.

'Tell me, Mr Weasley,' Snape said silkily, 'is harassment now a diplomatic skill taught to junior Ministry officials, or is it just something you have perfected on your own time?'

Hermione suppressed a gasp at the sneak attack. Why would Snape say such a thing? Did he imagine he was *helping* her? Was he trying to start a brawl? She slid a look at Percy, wondering what he would do.

Before the bespectacled Weasley could answer, Snape continued, 'Under what code of conduct does it say that a gentleman continues to annoy a lady after she has declined his invitation?'

At last, Percy managed a response, his mild tone an indication that he hoped to deescalate the hostilities. 'Listen, mate ...' he began soothingly.

Snape shot aggressively to his feet, and Hermione felt trapped between the combatants. He hissed, 'You are no mate of mine, sir, and from your continued bad behaviour, I would hazard a guess that you are no mate of Miss Granger's, either.'

Hermione cringed inside, horrified to be the subject of contention and terrified the situation would somehow deteriorate into physical violence.

'Please, *stop*,' she cried, and looking at neither Snape nor Percy, she pushed out of the room.

Bill and Fleur Weasley stood with Luna and Neville in the corridor, apparently waiting to see if Percy would succeed in his errand.

'Hermione?' Luna said nervously, reaching for her. 'Shall I come up to your room? We could have a nice chat ...'

But Hermione hurried past them all to the staircase, ignoring their questions as she fled upwards to the sanctuary of her room.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 11

War is hell, and the aftermath is often the most hellish part of all. Having lost everyone she most loves, Hermione Granger is only a shell of the woman she had been. Devastated by loss and guilt, Hermione draws the attention of Severus Snape with a random utterance.

A/N: Thanks are due to Shug, Magically, and Machshefa, who betaed and picked this chapter. Any errors are my own. Bless you for your comments! I anticipate them eagerly, to know what you think of what I've written. Be sure to let me know.



With the door closed and locked behind her, Hermione paced, the expressions on the faces of her former friends frozen in her mind. All she had wanted was to speak to Snape...to say something to him about the jam...but he had distracted her, and she had ended up sitting with him, drinking wine and reading.

Well, what if she *had* done? What did *they* care if she took some time off to read a book? But she had seen their faces...*all* their faces...as she had rushed past them to the stairs. They *knew* about her.

She paused, feeling confused. But they had *pleaded* with her, those former friends, hadn't they? Singly and in groups, they had come to her after Harry and Ron died, sharing their grief with her. When they had realised her level of self-blame, they had tried to reason with her. They had taken her to the wizarding counsellors who worked with the post-war trauma victims so numerous in the immediate aftermath of the war. They had bought her books, taken her to group meetings for survivors, and for a very short space of time, Molly and Arthur Weasley had attempted to have Hermione live with them at the Burrow. But every inch of the Weasleys' ramshackle home had bristled with memories of her dead best friends, and Hermione had begged to be permitted to leave.

Sagging back on the bed, she frowned and wrapped her arms about herself. Her former friends were kind people. They would forgive her, even if she didn't deserve it.

Snape, on the other hand, did not have a kind bone in his body. He was sour and sharp and dangerous, no matter how much of a hero he had been touted as at war's end. So why had he become the sticking point in her mind? Why would a memory of his recent behaviour derail her train of thought?

Why, even now, did she want nothing more than to be in the library with him, drinking wine and reading books?

Bill, Fleur, Neville, and Luna crowded into the library. 'What happened?' Bill asked Percy. 'We told you she's ... fragile, Perce.'

Percy Weasley looked angrily at Snape. 'Everything was fine until Snape stuck in that big nose of his,' he said defensively.

Snape resumed his seat and picked up his abandoned book, his narrow face unreadable.

Bill transferred his attention to Snape. 'What do you think happened, Severus?'

Snape turned a page of his book. 'Your brother happened,' he said tersely.

Percy made an exclamation of disgust and pushed out of the room. Bill and Fleur seemed to hold a silent conversation, and after a moment, Bill spoke again.

'Will you join us, Severus? Have a pint?'

Snape turned another page, giving no indication that he had heard Bill's invitation. After a few awkward moments, the young people filed from the room. As they started downstairs, where Tonks waited with the remaining Weasleys, they were treated to the sound of the door snapping shut behind them.

Time passed, and as it did, Hermione felt her urge to flee ebb away. In its place the new compulsion began to rise, growing in intensity until she rolled onto her stomach, literally clenching the bedclothes in her hands. She was no stranger to wretchedness, to every negative emotion, but *this* felt alien to her. It was like ... want.

Yearning.

I don't want. I don't yearn. But her protestations had little to no effect on the clamouring that charged about in her chest like a beast in a china shop, heedless of the destruction left in its wake.

She bolted to her feet, weary of struggling against the impulse.

I'll just go to the library and get the book I was reading she promised herself. Reading had calmed her earlier, had it not? How long had it been since she had been able to lose herself in a book?

Out of her room, the house was dark and quiet. She lit her wand-tip, moving down the staircase and into the library, thankful not to meet a curious Weasley on her way. On the cushion of her chair, she found the book she had been reading. The embers of the fire still burned in the hearth, and for a moment she considered sitting down to read. But anyone might come into this room, trapping her into one-on-one conversation, a trial to be avoided at any price. At least in her room she could lock the door and be safe from intruders.

Slowly, she began to retrace her steps: The second floor, where Arthur and Molly slept across the hall from Bill and Fleur; the third floor, where Charlie and Percy shared a room across from the twins; the fourth floor, where Hermione had her room across from Ginny and Luna.

She stopped and stood on the landing, her eyes following the staircase up to the fifth floor, where Snape had his room, across from no one. Did he suffer insomnia, as she did? There would be no harm in looking to see if there was a light beneath his door ...

She cast a spell to further muffle her nearly soundless footfalls and crept up to the fifth floor, the rampaging beast in her chest thundering about as if it were on the open plains. It was not necessary to leave the top stair to see the light beneath Snape's door, but she felt compelled to approach, pulled in his direction like a moth to flame.

She took one step, an almighty quiver shimmering through her like a frisson of pure magic, and then she was before his door.

The door to his room looked exactly like hers, aged, pitted wood with an ornate old doorknob. She stopped mere inches from it, the book slippery in her suddenly sweaty hand. He was obviously awake; she had only to knock, and perhaps he would ask her in. He was likely reclining upon his bed...the old double bed which had belonged to Sirius Black's parents...reading to make himself sleepy. They could read their books together, as they had done so companionably in the library. Or perhaps he would suggest that they go down to the kitchen for a cuppa.

She reached out, and her fingertips ran lightly over the rough wooden surface, nearing the doorknob ... and she stopped. On the other hand, perhaps he had fallen asleep while reading. She wouldn't want to wake him, when sleep had come to him after such a long wait. She could just peek in, and if he was sleeping, she could enter and put out his oil lamp...burning an unattended lamp increased the danger of fire, didn't it? She would be doing him a favour!

Her fingers grazed the brass knob, and another thought stampeded into her head as if unleashed by the careening beast in her chest. If he were sleeping, what would be the harm of creeping into the unoccupied side of the bed? She could rest for a few hours, *really* rest, and then slip away before dawn. Snape need never know she had ... slept with him.

'That's *insane*,' she whispered, testing the notion. But no, she didn't care if it *was* mad. She wanted ... something. She couldn't articulate what that thing was, but she wasn't fussed by her lack of clarity. She was quite convinced that it would come to her, if only she could have a wee bit more peace. And lately, peace had been found in the company...in the *person*...of Severus Snape.

She grasped the door knob, acknowledging to herself that she had never meant to knock...knocking was for secure people who had confidence in the legitimacy of their errand...it was not for her, not *now*.

She turned the knob.

The door was locked. She wanted to scream with frustration.

She rested her forehead on the age-roughened wood of the door as air expelled forcefully through her nostrils in disgust. He was in there, just on the other side of the door, and she couldn't access him.

Knock! her mind screamed, but she took a step back. 'I won't,' she hissed in answer to her argumentative self, and spinning around, she returned to her room.

She woke and sat bolt upright in bed. Light filtered about the edges of the heavy draperies at the window. It was morning; she had *slept* at Grimmauld Place, fully dressed, her trainers still on her feet. Her stomach rumbled, protesting the lack of nourishment recently provided. She set aside the book she had held clutched in one hand as she had slept and went to the door.

Crossing the hall into the bathroom, she washed her face, noting her wan complexion and hopelessly mussed hair. What did it matter how she looked? It wasn't as if she wanted to attract anyone's attention. *Except for Snape*, her mind whispered.

'It's not as if he cares,' she muttered to her reflection.

Silently, she trod downstairs past the sleeping Order of the Phoenix members who would soon rouse and fill the house with noise. She paused as the top of the basement stairs, acknowledging her hope: that she would see Snape in the kitchen and be permitted to spend time alone with him.

She saw him from the doorway, busy over the tea things, straight-backed and methodical. Hermione slipped noiselessly into a chair, but she might have known he would not be fooled.

'Good morning, Hermione,' Snape said without turning from his task.

Hermione huddled into her shapeless grey cardigan and stared mutely at the table top.

Snape crossed the floor and placed a tray upon the table. Hermione smelled the toast and her stomach growled audibly. To her embarrassment, Snape laughed.

'Well, your digestive system speaks to me, even if you do not,' he observed, placing a cup of tea and a plate of toast before her and seating himself directly across from her.

Was he laughing at her? She had come to expect better of him. She bit her lip, wanting to walk away, but she seemed to lack the wherewithal to do it.

'The bare minimum of basic human interaction requires you to return my greeting, Hermione,' he said, cutting his toast into neat diagonals. 'Allowances may be made for your state of mind, but there are limits to patience...even of the people who care for you.'

Hermione looked up, startled by his words, and found him studying her with sober black eyes.

'Good morning,' she muttered.

He nodded approvingly. 'Good girl,' he said. 'Now, drink your tea.'

The tea was, once again, perfect, and she drank it greedily, finding that she also fancied the toast on her plate, and she smeared it liberally with what appeared to be homemade brambleberry jam. Snape partook of his black tea and dry toast without talk, but every time Hermione sneaked a peek at him, she found him watching her, which was simultaneously gratifying and disturbing.

She finished the toast and pushed the plate to the side. Spotting a dab of jam on her finger, she raised it to her lips and sucked it off, savouring the sweetness. Then Snape's knife fell from his hand, hitting first the table and then the floor with a clatter. Hermione started, looking to him in some alarm, but he had grabbed the teapot and was pouring more tea into her cup, a strong line between his brows, as if it required all his concentration to stir in two sugars and add a splash of milk.

Hermione watched him apprehensively. He seemed to be acting rather strangely. Now, he lifted his teacup and regarded her from beneath frowning brows.

'Why didn't you knock?' he said tersely.

She felt as if someone had punched her in the breastbone. She didn't have to wonder what he was talking about; it had become clear to her very quickly that Snape would always ask the most difficult question imaginable.

'I ... I don't understand you,' she said evasively, careful not to look at him. Snape was, after all, a master Legilimens ...

'You came to my door at two in the morning,' he said, and there was no room for doubt in his tone. He was absolutely sure.

'You can't possibly know that,' she said weakly, pressing down on a crumb of toasted bread and pushing it across the table, feeling it dig into her fingertip.

'Do you imagine that anyone else in the house could have passed the barrier at the landing?' he asked patiently.

That piece of information surprised her into looking up.

'Yes,' he answered, though she had not posed the question.

She cocked her head, thinking about it for a moment. 'It couldn't be the recognition of a magical signature,' she mused. 'You never had access to my wand.'

The corner of his mouth quivered before he controlled it. 'No, it was physical recognition,' he admitted.

'But what...' she began.

'Your hair,' he said. 'You played with it whilst you read...there were strands on the chair.'

Hermione nodded appreciatively. 'Good one,' she said.

Snape shook his head, obviously amused. 'Thank you,' he said sardonically. 'Now, tell me. Why didn't you knock?'

I must learn never to look into his eyes she thought, trying to look away and finding herself unable to do so. He wasn't being invasive...was not attempting to enter her mind...but it was difficult to do anything other than blurt out the truth when they were staring into each other's eyes.

'I didn't want to knock.'

A faint frown touched his face. 'I would have let you in, you know,' he said.

Hermione shrugged. She couldn't begin to tell him her thought processes; it was nothing she would speak out loud ... nothing she would *admit*.

He relented, sitting back and picking up his teacup again. 'What are your plans for the day?' he asked. 'Will you organise the party preparations?'

Hermione averted her eyes, gathering the cardie more tightly around her. 'Molly does the party.'

'Then perhaps you'll accompany me when I pop round to Diagon Alley,' he said casually. 'There are a few articles of clothing I must acquire.'

Hermione closed her eyes, her hands fisting in the roughly woven wool. She had tried to go to Diagon Alley once since the end of the war. It had been disastrous...recognition, people stopping to speak to her, wanting her autograph, and the *knowing* ones, who gave her wide berth, who would not soil themselves with her. She had Disapparated, leaving Ginny and Molly in the middle of the street, then locked herself in her flat and refused to let the Weasley women in.

But maybe with Snape it would be different. No one would dare approach him; he had been universally disliked as a teacher. But no, she wasn't taking into account the post-war revision of Snape's history. He was a hero now. People would likely *swarm* him.

And there would be loads of people in the wizarding shopping district, for it was so close to Christmas ... and if she went with him, there would be expectations of her, because there always were. It made her weary just to think of it. And there was tonight to be got through...hordes of people she didn't want to see trooping through Grimmauld Place, wanting to see her, talk to her ... *judge* her.

She was unaware that she had begun to cry until Snape's handkerchief touched her cheek, and he was speaking to her in a low, soothing voice. He had moved to crouch beside her, and she turned her face to him, allowing him to tend to her tears, realising he had been speaking to her for some time. Had she ... gone away, again? It happened sometimes, when she was particularly distressed.

'I want to go with you,' she managed in a raspy whisper, 'but I just *can't*.'

'Never mind,' he said, and the words were spoken with such intensity that she blinked at him, blurring her eyes with fresh tears. 'It was foolish of me to ask. Forgive me.'

Resting her cheek for one moment against his handkerchief-wielding fingers, she saw that crowding in the doorway were the other inhabitants of the house, held at bay by the unyielding arm of Arthur Weasley, who barred the way.

'Are you well enough to go to your room now?' Snape asked, as if there were no onlookers chronicling every word they exchanged. 'Will you go up with Miss Lovegood?'

With Snape's hand at her elbow, Hermione stood. Arthur allowed Luna to pass, and Hermione did not demur when Luna put an arm about her waist. Hermione would have preferred to stay with Snape...to go with him, perhaps, to the library, and sit beside him on the loveseat and read a book...but his company was not on offer, and everyone was watching her. It was easier to go with Luna, walking past the Weasleys, who had formed a line against the wall to give the two girls room to pass.

Hermione felt as if she were under review by a panel of critics, and she kept her eyes on her feet as she passed them. At the end of the line were the twins, and George pressed something soft into her hand.

'No need to miss the fun,' he murmured.

Hermione registered the texture of the Extendable Ear, and she allowed the end to fall at the top of the basement stairs.

'She was not in need of your assistance, Molly, else I would have called you at once,' Snape said testily.

Luna was content to meander slowly up the next flight of stairs as Hermione let out the extra-long extension of the magical listening device.

Muffled voices, then Molly. '... paying an awful lot of attention to her, lately ...'

Snape, clear as a bell. 'Someone ought, don't you think? You lot have let her go on in this state for the best part of two years ...'

Molly's and Ginny's voices rose, indistinct but defensive, then Snape again, his tone sharp enough to shred steel.

'... a houseful of Ministry people, the press, and Merlin knows who else! Have you *looked* at the girl? She's like a bedraggled *ghost*. Have you even made sure she has something appropriate to wear? We'll all be judged by her state...'

Now Molly's tears, and Hermione couldn't bear to hear Molly cry. She allowed the Extendable Ear to fall from her hand and continued up the steps with Luna, feeling as if she'd been listening to a radio drama.

And several floors below, someone exited the house with a resounding slam.

Nothing to do with her. Nothing at all.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 11

War is hell, and the aftermath is often the most hellish part of all. Having lost everyone she most loves, Hermione Granger is only a shell of the woman she had been. Devastated by loss and guilt, Hermione draws the attention of Severus Snape with a random utterance.

A/N: Beta reading thanks to Shug and Machshefa. I've posted without my Brit picker's notes, but will make those corrections if necessary. Thanks for your patience!



Chapter Four

Hermione dozed on her bed, *War Orphans in Wizarding Britain, 1978 to 1998* open on her chest. Luna had tucked her up and sat with her until she was sleepy. Now she opened her eyes to the morning light flooding her little room, feeling blessedly *quiet*. Snape had stood up for her to the Weasleys...had protected her from their overwhelming solicitude...and the emotion within her was warm gratitude. It was odd, how the prickly, taciturn Snape could make her feel almost *normal*.

She sat up, noting her wristwatch. It was mid-morning; she had been sleeping for an hour, in the middle of the day! She seldom slept much, and never at Grimmauld Place, yet she had done it twice in the last twelve hours. It was disorienting, but in a good way.

She went across the hall and made use of the facilities, washing her face with a flannel to remove the residue of her earlier tears. She looked into the mirror and sighed. Snape had a point, really. How would she ever look well enough for the party? She had brought no make-up, for she owned none; her chopped-off hair was impossible, and the dress robes she had stuffed in her knapsack were from her last year at school, when she'd been battling with what her mum had persisted in calling baby-fat. She would look like a child in an adult's clothes.

Something drastic needed to be done, but the very idea of it made her weary. Perhaps she could simply sleep through it all ... sleep, her mortal enemy, suddenly beckoned to her with the arms of a lover. It would be fatally easy to sleep the day away ... and tonight, she could go again to Snape's door ... and *knock*.

She was so rapt in this thought that she did not hear the *pop!* of Apparition from within her room, and she literally walked into the two house-elves standing there. She knocked one particularly tiny elf off its feet, and with an exclamation of misgiving, she bent to help the creature up.

'I'm sorry,' she said, 'but you don't belong here, do you? You must be in the wrong place!'

The two house-elves were female, judging by their pristine pink pinafore-like tea-towels and matching headscarves, which were tied in pert bows on their heads. They dropped matching curtsies and the larger one spoke, her tennis ball-sized eyes fixed upon the floor.

'Higgy and Piggy is begging your pardon, Miss,' the spokes-elf began, 'but we is from The Sanctuary.'

Hermione stepped back. 'Is that some sort of ... hospital?' she asked nervously, reaching for her wand. She would *not* go peacefully ...

The little one Hermione had knocked over advanced and looked anxiously up into Hermione's face. 'Oh, no, Miss,' she squeaked in an impossibly high-pitched voice. 'The Sanctuary is being a luxury witch's spa. We is here to take you for the Ultimate Indulgence Spa Day!'

Little Piggy spoke with such reverence that Hermione felt the unfamiliar urge to giggle. Quashing the impulse, she shook her head. 'No, I'm sure you're in the wrong house,' she reiterated. 'You really ought to be more careful...what if I had been the type to hex first and ask questions later?'

Piggy squeaked in fear and jumped behind Higgy. 'There is no mistake, Miss,' Higgy said firmly, extending an engraved invitation.

Hermione took the heavy card, admiring the flowing script which proclaimed Miss Hermione Granger as the recipient of one Ultimate Indulgence Spa Day at The Sanctuary in Covent Garden, exclusively for witches. She had never been to a spa, but she had heard friends talk about it...she knew it was sinfully expensive.

'No, thank you,' she said, handing the card back to Higgy. 'I wouldn't care to.'

A strange interplay took place between the two elves, as Higgy looked pointedly over her shoulder at Piggy. Then tiny Piggy burst into loud sobs.

'Oh, p-p-please, M-miss,' Piggy begged. 'You is getting us in so m-much trouble! We *has* to bring you!'

Oh, for the love of Merlin! The creature was making such a racket it would bring everyone in the house to her room. She would go with the house-elves and decline the invitation at the spa. No one could punish Higgy and Piggy for not doing their jobs then.

'Very well,' she said. 'Let's go.'

'Higgy will just leave this here so people is knowing where Miss Hermione is gone,' Higgy announced. And dropping the invitation at the foot of Hermione's bed, Higgy took Hermione's hand, with Piggy on Hermione's other side, and the three Disappeared.

Hermione did what she could to prepare for the onslaught of strange faces in a strange place, but the room into which she arrived with Higgy and Piggy was warm, quiet, and empty, save for the three of them.

Her first impression was a blend of aromatic air, lightly humid warmth, peacefully trickling water, and blissful pink: Pink walls, soft pink rugs, a large padded table swathed in thick pink towels, an inviting pink squashy armchair, and an elaborate table of refreshments on a pink linen cloth. A small table betwixt the table and the chair bore intriguing bottles and pots of unguents, creams, and potions, all meant for her.

'Where is everyone ... else?' Hermione asked.

'No one else, Miss,' Higgy said, whilst Piggy led Hermione to the armchair and knelt to remove her socks and trainers in favour of velvet-soft slippers. 'This room is for Miss Hermione only, for the full day.'

Piggy began to slide the shapeless grey cardigan down Hermione's arms, and for a moment, Hermione considered resisting her. Then Higgy paused before the refreshments, and her hand hovered in the air. 'Champagne, tea, or juice, Miss?'

With a sigh of acquiescence, Hermione responded, 'Champagne,' and felt the cardie slip from her shoulders, like responsibility ... or misery.

The day was blissful, the first full day approximating peace she had known since before the war. At times it seemed there was music in her pink shell, and at other times she was sure that she was bathing in cathartic silence broken only by the trickling water and the murmurs of her attendants. She was bathed, massaged, left to doze; she had her legs waxed, her skin exfoliated, her nails on hands and feet tended and polished, and finally, her face made up. At last, seated comfortably in the armchair with a perfect cup of tea in her hands, she blinked when Higgy conjured a mirror before her and asked, 'Is Miss having an idea of what to do with her hair, or shall Higgy take care of it?'

Hermione sipped her tea and regarded herself with a curiously dispassionate eye. Her face was thin and pinched, but the house-elf had made her up skilfully, emphasising her large brown eyes and the shape of her lips. The usual bruised-looking shadows about her eyes had been relieved by a bit of sleep and careful use of cosmetics. In the light of her near-presentable face, her hair was a frightful mess. Months before, in a moment of angry despair, she had taken up her desk scissors, which were neither terribly clean nor strictly sharp, and she had whacked her hair off in large, uneven clumps. It had grown out a bit, but was shapeless and limp.

'Do as you like, Higgsy,' she said. 'I'll have another cup of tea...and take the mirror away, please.'

When she Apparated into her room at Grimmauld Place, Hermione caught sight of herself in the mirror. The house-elf at The Sanctuary had fashioned her hair into a boyish chop, lightened the tips, and scrunched it into stylishly ordered disorder. With her nicely-done makeup, there was an elfin quality to her appearance...perhaps she would not frighten the party guests, after all.

The lethargy which usually plagued her seemed to be in abeyance, banished by a day of complete serenity, bodily pampering, and tempting nibbles. It was as if, in some way, those pursuits had been restful, whereas another endless day of lying about in bed and dreading the evening to come would have been tiring.

Then she saw the dresses which were hanging on the front of the wardrobe, and she went forward to inspect them. One was Christmas red, traditional wizarding dress robes, not unlike those worn by Molly Weasley the year before at the Order holiday open house. Hermione knew by looking that the robes would be three sizes too large and would weigh heavily upon her shoulders.

The other dress filled her with quiet pleasure. It was made of a satiny ice blue fabric that shimmered and stretched beneath her fingers. The high neck and long sleeves would cover her fearfully thin clavicle and bony arms, while the clingy material would emphasise her slenderness and what womanly shape she possessed. She found that she *wanted* to wear it.

She shed her trainers, jumper, jeans, and socks, and allowed the dress to slide over her body. In her knapsack, she found her only party shoes, black evening sandals. Lips pursed in concentration, she took up her wand and Transfigured them to satin, then tweaked her spell until the colour exactly matched her dress. She slipped the shoes onto her freshly pedicured feet and walked out of her room without once bothering to check herself in the mirror.

From the second floor landing, Hermione saw Snape, pacing the carpet runner in the first floor corridor outside the sitting room. At the sight of him, her very breathing seemed to ease. She knew he would be present tonight...all of the Order would be present tonight...but just *seeing* him made her feel more confident. Then he looked up, as if he could feel her eyes upon him, and in the space of a moment, everything changed.

He stood tall and slender in impeccably tailored dress robes, his ravens-wing hair sweeping his shoulders, his Order of Merlin, First Class, glinting upon his breast. When his eyes found her upon the stairs, for the veriest moment, there was a softening of his expression, then his usual mask was in place once more. Hermione's heart beat faster, her hand suddenly slick upon the banister, and a strange sensation shuddered through her, leaving her with trembling legs. Mounting the steps two at a time, Snape reached her and steadied her with a firm grip upon her shoulders.

Hermione closed her eyes, feeling the shift of perception like the swing of a pendulum in her mind, and she swayed toward his solid bulk, absorbing the sensation of his tightening hands through the fabric of her dress. He was a man...a *man*...not simply a former teacher, an Order member ... not even just the source of inexplicable comfort. He was male...muscle, bone, and sinew...testosterone and temptation.

'Are you all right?'

Warm breath, fragrant of spearmint toothpaste, fanned across her cheek, and she forced herself to open her eyes. 'Yes,' she answered, striving to gather her scattered thoughts.

He loosened his hold and looked her over critically. 'You look quite well,' he said judiciously. A faint smile touched his thin lips. 'Rather thin and fragile, of course, but the new hairstyle gives you a gamine cachet.'

Hermione flushed with pleasure. 'You like it?'

He tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow and began to lead her down the steps. 'Indeed.'

At the sitting room doorway, he released her and urged her forward, leaving her to the mercy of the assembled Order members...still, she could ~~feel~~ him at her back. And when she had endured all of their raptures at her appearance, even going so far as to gently repulse Percy Weasley's ponderous attempts at gallantry, she turned from them to face Snape.

'I can do this,' she began.

'Yes, you can,' Snape responded firmly.

'... if you stay by me,' she finished.

He studied her face for a moment, then inclined his head in acquiescence. 'If you wish it,' he said.

Shacklebolt stepped up then and touched Hermione's shoulder. 'Shall we go down, Chief Trustee?' he inquired pleasantly.

'Of course, Minister,' she said, and reaching for Snape, she was relieved to have her hand placed again on his arm.

He was true to his word, remaining unobtrusively at her back as the guests were welcomed into the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix, long-since relieved of its Fidelius Charm. Hermione smiled and shook hands for an hour, allowing Kingsley, on her left, Arthur, on her right, and Snape, at her back, to answer questions and give explanations, whilst she endured the crush of humanity. When the bell ceased to ring, announcing new visitors, the receiving line dispersed to join the guests in the ground floor space which had once been a ballroom. Hermione hovered in the doorway, listening to the music from the wireless, seeing Tonks between Charlie and Remus, flirting with them both, Ginny and Luna with Neville, who was also entertaining Hannah Abbott, and exhaustion settled over her like a blanket.

'You were a trouper,' a voice whispered from behind her.

'I didn't disgrace the Order?' she murmured in response.

'By no means,' he assured her.

She turned and looked up into Snape's face, letting her eyes travel its angles and planes, fascinated with the sharp line of his jaw above the dark cravat he wore. She knew an instinct to curl up inside of him, to absorb the stolid safety of him. 'Come up with me,' she said.

'You may go up now, if you wish,' he said, as if he had not heard her invitation. 'Percy Weasley is coming this way,' he added.

Hermione did not want to leave him, but even less did she want to deal with Percy. Turning away, she hurried up the steps to her room. Safely inside, she kicked off her shoes and collapsed on her bed. She was asleep almost instantly.

When she awoke, all was in darkness, and for a moment, she was confused. Where was she? She felt uncommonly well, which was certainly not customary.

'*Lumos!*' she said, and in the light from the tip of her wand, she saw the stuff of her ice blue dress. Then the memory of the night...of Snape, of what she now knew about him...slammed into her consciousness, and her heart tripped into a galloping rhythm.

Disregarding her shoes, she crept out into the darkness of the sleeping house and climbed up the stairs. From the top step, she saw the light beneath Snape's door, and she surged through the ward keyed to her DNA by the strands of her hair he had collected. In three strides she was at the door, and her hand closed about the knob and turned.

It was locked.

Shite!

She drew back her hand to pound the door, wishing she had the physical strength to smash it to bits, but she could not force herself to let her fist fly.

Why didn't you knock? he had asked. *I would have let you in,* he had said.

Hermione sagged against the door, her cheek pressed to its rough surface, and tears trickled down. Why couldn't she knock? Why?

She could *feel* him on the other side of the door; she was sure he knew she was here. Why wouldn't he open the door, if he knew she was standing here, *needing* him? Why?

The comfort and confidence of the day gradually leached out of her, as if falling with her tears, and her usual misery resumed its rightful place. Slowly, she slid down Snape's door until she huddled on the floor in her fancy party dress. After a time, she heard his step, and she saw beneath the door as the shadow of his body paused there.

Then the light went out, and with it went the last of her hope. Now all was quiet, save for gasping Hermione, silently sobbing her desolation.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 11

War is hell, and the aftermath is often the most hellish part of all. Having lost everyone she most loves, Hermione Granger is only a shell of the woman she had been. Devastated by loss and guilt, Hermione draws the attention of Severus Snape with a random utterance.

A/N: Thanks to my team of Sshg316, Machshefa, and MagicAlly for their beta/psych/Brit-picking help. Thanks due this chapter to Savine Snape, who assisted with Severus' credentials. All errors are mine.



Banner by Savine Snape

Chapter Five

A thick, wet winter fog hid the buildings and obscured the streetlights on Grimmauld Place as Severus Snape stepped from an alley between two houses. An acute observer might have noted the snow upon the shoulders of his heavy cloak, for it had been snowing in Manchester when he left. In the general misery of the London fog, however, the snow melted in mere moments as he strode purposefully down the street to number twelve. He mounted the steps hurriedly, thinking only that the girl would be inside.

It was the night of the January meeting of the Order of the Phoenix Trust, and he had not seen her since the morning after the Order Christmas party.

The temperature on the basement stairs was stifling, a sure sign that Molly had arrived early and begun readying the place for them. With a grimace, he unwound his loden green scarf as he entered the kitchen. Even Shackbolt had already arrived, which meant that Severus had timed his entry precisely as he had wished. The latest arrival, after all, would have the opportunity to fill the empty seat of his choosing ...

But mere seconds were sufficient to tell him that he would not be staying for the meeting.

'Where is Miss Granger?' he said tersely, his words directed to Arthur Weasley.

Arthur stood, placing a quieting hand upon Molly's shoulder, but she spoke anyway. 'We thought she might be with you.'

From behind him came the closing of the front door, followed by another voice. 'Do you mind, Snape? You're blocking the doorway.'

Severus stepped back, allowing Percy Weasley to squeeze past him. The younger wizard's hair glistened with a sprinkling of damp, as if he had stood outside a while in the foggy night.

'Still with us, are you?' he muttered to Percy sourly.

'Perce is with us until summer,' Arthur said, seeing his son's irritated glare at Severus. 'He's on special assignment for the Canadian Department of International Magical

Cooperation.'

Percy turned rudely from Severus and addressed the table at large. 'There're no lights at her flat, but I couldn't get onto the stoop to knock on the door...there's some sort of strange ward I couldn't get around ...'

William Weasley stood. 'I'll give a go, shall I?' the curse breaker said, his wand hand flexing.

Molly spoke again. 'Severus,' she said tentatively, and he gave her his attention, his expression determinedly blank. 'I haven't seen her since the Christmas party...have you?'

He moved his head side to side once, a negative reply.

Molly's face crumpled. 'She's never missed a meeting, no matter how ... poorly she's been,' Molly lamented. 'And she doesn't like it when we come to her flat uninvited. Sometimes she won't answer the bell, even when she's expecting us ...'

'Mother, you couldn't get to her flat, aren't you listening?' Percy snapped irritably. 'Something has happened to her...someone has barred us from her door!' He turned to glare accusingly at Severus. 'We need to call in Magical Law Enforcement.'

Shacklebolt leaned forward, a frown on his face. 'Shall I call for the Aurors?' he said, reaching for his wand.

Dear God, the last thing she needs is to have a pack of Aurors descend upon her, Severus thought. This was going pear-shaped fast.

'I'll investigate, Minister,' Severus said, projecting smooth confidence. 'There is business to be conducted here and nothing in the bylaws to prevent the meeting from going forward without the Chief Trustee.' He replaced his scarf with crisp movements. 'You know how clever she is...she undoubtedly placed the ward to protect her privacy. If there is need, I shall send word.'

And without waiting for anyone's acquiescence, Severus turned and started up the steps, hearing Percy's angry protest, Arthur's calm reassurance, and at the last, Nymphadora's voice rising above them all.

'Am I the only one with *plans* for tonight? Let's get on with it!'

Then Severus was out the door again, into the foggy London night.

She lived in a Muggle area some distance from Grimmauld Place, and he elected to walk there. Sometimes, even now, he missed the endless corridors of Hogwarts and the hours he had spent patrolling them. Those prowls had given him wide scope for mulling things over, though frequently, they had also been filled with obsessive, if well-earned, self-recrimination. He couldn't prevent his mind now from beginning again to list all the mistakes he had made thus far in his quest to fix Hermione Granger.

With the utterance of one word, she had awoken him to her plight, and in an instant, he had known the overpowering impulse to save her.

Handling her had been a challenge from the start; it wasn't as if the gentling and healing of a bruised wildflower was a science. It was, at its core, an art form of the freestyle sort, with no direct path to its heart ... to *her* heart. And so many times already he had bungled it, driving her from him as a feral thing from a fool blundering through a wood.

She had run from him first the morning they had shared their initial breakfast, because he had questioned her about what she meant by wishing to be *owned*. What a dunderhead he'd been! He had sent the jam as an apology, as an inducement to lure her to nourish her starved body...as bait to the snare of his determination.

The next month, after supper, he'd announced his intention to retire to the library, hoping it would be enough to tempt her to seek him out. He'd placed the wine beside him, left the book for her to find, and waited, hoping. She'd been a brave girl to seek him out as she'd done...he'd been filled with pride for her as she'd gripped the back of the chair and asked him *why*.

Careful manoeuvring had inveigled her into the chair, and by the simple expedient of leaving her in peace, he had been privileged to watch as she relaxed and enjoyed sipping her wine and reading her book ... until Percy Weasley had breached the cocoon Severus had so carefully created for her.

Percy! What a *fuckwit*! Severus had seldom been as furious as he was when the idiot Weasley had invaded the library and had cocked-up the serene atmosphere. But it hadn't been Weasley, in the end, who had driven Hermione from the room, had it? No, *he'd* been the arse who'd challenged the Weasley twit, and the excess of testosterone-fuelled brangling had set the girl to flight as surely as if they'd partaken of fisticuffs.

He'd hoped to recover his position with her the next morning over the teacups, by offering to escort her to the shops...it was a shrewd bet that she had nothing decent to wear to the party...but once again, he'd fucked it up, pushing her too far too fast, and he'd had to mop her up with the entire household as an audience. At least he'd finagled a way to get her out of the house in a safe way and accomplished his goal of having her look the part of the Chief Trustee of the Order of the Phoenix Trust before the press and the Ministry higher-ups...but he'd frightened her off again the next morning. He might be a prize bungler, but he was *damned* if he'd leave it there.

By God, he would save *one* of them, or die trying.

Severus ducked into a doorway and waited a moment, listening for footsteps, but he heard none. The fog seemed to muffle sound, and it was virtually impossible to see more than a few feet in any direction. But years of caution had ingrained the habit of stealth, and being abroad on the open street filled him with a base level of constant uneasiness, compounded by his apprehension for the girl. What stupid thing had she done now? After a moment, he emerged into the persistent silence and continued on his way.

After the Christmas party, she had lain upon the floor outside his door until dawn. He had kept watch with her from within his room, willing her the strength to touch her knuckles to the door and request entrance. Then she had plodded back down the stairs, he had risen and dressed, exhausted but determined to persist in his venture.

When she had slipped wordlessly into a kitchen chair, he had turned with the tray of tea things to see her as she had been a month ago, rather than the almost-healthy girl from the night before. Newly trimmed hair still slick from the shower, she had washed away the careful hairstyle, scrubbed away the spa-day makeup, and sat with pasty skin and downcast eyes, awaiting him.

He had prepared a cup of tea for her, placing it before her as well as toast and the homemade brambleberry jam. Then he had sat back and waited for her to speak. She had drunk the tea but left the toast untouched. She had not looked at him, instead staring at the cup and saucer beneath her hands, as if she had been too angry to speak to him, but unable to resist the lure of a quiet hour with him. Minutes had passed, the kitchen clock ticking them away, the silence continuing.

Then she had stood, darting a quick glance at him to see his response. In that glance he had seen her desolation, her desperation, and her longing, and empathy had jittered through him. Keeping his face carefully noncommittal, he had risen to his feet as well. She had tensed, and he'd recognised the stance, knowing she was at war with herself...would she run or would she strike out at him?

Flight had won out over fight, and she had sidled to the door, as if fearful to turn her back to him. He had slipped his hand into his coat pocket, and she'd whirled then, her

wand raised defensively, her eyes glittering, as if she wished he would give her an excuse to use it.

As he penetrated deeper into the city, leaving behind the decaying grandeur of Grimmauld Street and its environs, he began to see other pedestrians and the occasional automobile. A couple passed him, arm in arm, their heads together, and he marvelled as always at the implied intimacy betwixt the man and woman. How were they able to share themselves so whole-heartedly, without holding back their true feelings and motivations? In his youth, he had attempted to be open and frank with a girl...after all, he had lacked the skills to hold himself back from her...and the revelation of his heart and dreams had brought nothing but desertion and unending heartache ...

Severus had ignored the girl's readiness to hex him where he stood and striven to present a calm, accepting face to her as he removed his hand from his pocket and extended his card to her.

'My address,' he had explained and was actually relieved when she accepted the card from his fingers.

She had studied the white rectangle for a moment, then had begun to read aloud.

'Severus Snape BSc, M.Res, War.D

Potions Master

Fellow of Ostances and Artepnius College

Albertus Magnus Chair, Bavarian University.'

Severus had twitched the card over, feeling irritated. Did she think he would parade his accomplishments before her like the pathetic Percy Weasley? Couldn't she do the simplest thing without challenging his instructions? 'On the *back*, Hermione,' he had said, with more gruffness than he had intended.

For the first time that morning, she had looked into his eyes, her own wide with interest. 'I didn't know all that about you,' she'd begun, but his feelings of discomfiture had persisted, so he'd talked over her.

'... and I would appreciate it if you would keep it private,' he had snapped. 'It's not common knowledge.'

She had blinked her big, tired eyes and asked, 'Your credentials or your address?'

It was just possible, he now thought, that she had been teasing him; at the time, he hadn't paused to consider the likelihood. 'My address,' he had exhaled.

And overcome with awkwardness, he had turned from her and begun to clear away his breakfast. He had struggled to rein in his galloping ineptitude, to behave as the mature one in this exchange, but his voice had still sounded fractious to his own ears as he had said, 'Why don't you finish your toast?'

She had stepped up beside him, her face turned up to his. He had not looked at her, pretending to be occupied with brushing crumbs from the table, but he had felt her curiosity like a burning upon his skin. In a move of rank cowardice, he had turned away from her with the tray clutched in his hands.

'But ... why did you give this to me?'

And having the conversation slide from *his* incompetence to *her* insecurities had placed him on solid ground again. Turning to her, he had said, 'I am available to you, should you have need of me, Hermione. You have only to *knock*.'

In the next instant, he had read her desire to throw the address in his face...had known her bitter rejection of his exaction...but she had simply spun away from him and slammed her way out of number twelve.

Now he stood before her house...a dilapidated building on a dingy street in a dodgy neighbourhood...of which she possessed the ground floor flat, complete with its own private entrance to the street. The stoop was naught but three crumbling steps up to the door, and a murmured charm showed him clearly the magical barrier she had created to keep away unwanted visitors...and for the first time since he had seen her on the Grimmauld Place stairs in her party finery, looking so lovely, he felt a surge of victory. She had used his spell!

He passed through the ward keyed to his DNA...when had she collected his hair?...feeling jubilant. She had *wanted* him to come...*only* him...the ward had repulsed the efforts of Percy Weasley to mount the steps. A fierce satisfaction filled his lungs with victorious breath as he puffed out his chest and straightened his shoulders ... and stared at the begrimed brass knocker, fashioned in the likeness of a gryphon, situated at his eye level.

In an instant, his elation leached away, leaving the far more familiar slick of self-doubt behind. She would know he was at her door, would have felt the sensation of him passing through her meticulously placed protective spell. She found peace in his company, did she not? In his undemanding presence, she soaked up his approbation like a long-dry sponge, the scales of her self-blame falling from her like the winter coat of a lioness in the spring. She would be pleased...happy, even...to see him.

And still, he stood uncertainly upon her door step, loath to take the knocker in his hand and *knock*.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 11

War is hell, and the aftermath is often the most hellish part of all. Having lost everyone she most loves, Hermione Granger is only a shell of the woman she had been. Devastated by loss and guilt, Hermione draws the attention of Severus Snape with a random utterance.

A/N: Loving thanks to Shug, Machshefa, and MagicAilly for their invaluable help. All errors are mine. This chapter is short but rather intense.



Banner by Savine Snape

Chapter 6

The previous month

Hermione stormed into her sitting room and slammed the door behind her, throwing the card in her hand from her with all the force she could muster. The crumpled white rectangle of card stock fluttered a few inches from her fingers and fell to the floor, a spectacularly unsatisfactory performance.

A weight pressed against her ankles, accompanied by a sound like her father's electric hedge trimmers.

'Hullo, Crooks,' she said, bending to scoop him into her arms.

The flat-faced tomcat pressed his head against her neck, the loud sound of his purring filling her ears with its calming influence.

'How about a tin of tuna, hmm?' she said, moving into her small kitchen area with the comforting warm weight of her familiar cradled to her chest. 'You've been a good boy whilst I've been gone.'

She tipped the promised tuna into a bowl for Crookshanks, and the righteous indignation burning through her leant energy she seldom experienced any more. She cleaned out the litter box, carried out a rather large load of rubbish to the bin outside, and proceeded to give the bathtub a good scrub by hand. Cleaning had been neglected for a bit...well, since she'd moved in two years ago, really...and even the strongest magic cleaning spell seemed to have no effect on the accumulated soap scum.

'Knock!' she muttered aloud, scrubbing viciously. '*You* can bloody well knock, Snape!'

She sprinkled additional cleaning powder and scowled. 'I am available to you, should you have *need* of me, Hermione,' she said, doing her best and most sarcastic imitation of Snape's baritone. 'Hah!' she added angrily, taking up her stiff-bristled scrub brush and beginning to rub again. 'Well I *don't* have need of you, Snape. And I bloody well *won't*. Greasy git.'

She stood and twisted on the taps full force to rinse the mixture of cleanser and dirt down the drain. As the water splashed and swirled, her last words rang through her mind and a flush of shame touched her cheeks. Greasy git? That was what the boys had called Snape when they thought he was nothing but a lying agent of Voldemort. Snape hadn't deserved the epithet then, and he certainly didn't deserve it now. He'd been nothing but decent to her...she would wager gold that his had been the gift of the spa day and the ice blue evening dress...and she had repaid his kindness with recalcitrance and a distinct lack of cooperation.

She sagged down onto the toilet seat, suddenly confused. Well, which was it? Was he Snape the villain or Snape the hero? The confusion clashed in her mind, creating the familiar morass of conflicting thoughts and emotions, and as quickly as it had come upon her, the pristine clarity brought on by the firestorm of rage burnt away. It left behind it a debilitating exhaustion.

Stumbling over her own feet, she made her way into her bedroom and collapsed upon her bed, falling almost at once into a troubled sleep, filled with dark, disturbing dreams.

Three days passed before she moved from her bed to do more than use the toilet. The flat was icy cold; she had neglected to put any money in the electric meter. Still, she ignored the cold; her only purpose for rising from the bed was to retrieve Snape's card. It was Christmas Eve, her third such since Harry and Ron's death, the fourth since last she had seen her poor, lost parents. Would Snape be alone? Would he be wishing for company?

Would he be expecting her?

She had to search around quite a bit to find the card; presumably, Crookshanks had batted it beneath the armchair beneath which she found it. Retrieving it, Hermione murmured *Lumos!* and stared down at Snape's spiky handwriting.

S. Snape, number eleven, Spinner's End, Manchester

She ran a fingertip over the black ink. He had invited her, hadn't he? He'd said he would let her in.

She stared unseeing at the wall. What if he *did* open the door, should she find the courage to knock? What then? What did she really want from him? Why was she so strongly compelled to seek him out?

A shiver wracked her body, driving her from the combined sitting room/kitchen into her bedroom again. She found thick socks, too-large trackie bottoms, and an old Weasley sweater to pull on over her pants and vest. Diving beneath the welter of blankets on her bed, she shivered and clutched Snape's card.

Snape cared for her company in some strange way, didn't he? Perhaps it was because she was quiet, unlike the chatterboxes haunting Grimmauld Place on meeting weekends. He must do, or he would never have taken to fixing their breakfast each morning at Grimmauld Place...he would never have keyed the ward on his door to her.

But if he wanted her company, why was it *on her* to knock? Couldn't he see how difficult it was for her to choose?

She let the card fall from her cold-numbed fingers and turned to her side, pulling the covers all the way over her head. She *wouldn't* go to him. She wouldn't go *anywhere*, not ever again.

And Snape could go straight to the devil.

Christmas passed and the new year began. As Hermione hibernated, the fresh foods in her refrigerator spoiled, and when driven by hunger, she spooned baked beans from a tin to eat with her crackers; later, she found herself living off packets of Hula Hoops she'd bought in bulk the year before from Sainsbury's, who delivered. They were a bit stale, but she wasn't eating for pleasure; her only aim was to silence the rumbling of her empty stomach so she could sleep. And sleep some more. Crookshanks' two kilo bag of Go-Cat was depleted, so Hermione raided her stash of tuna and turkey breast tins, rationing them out to him to make them last and burying her head under her pillow when he howled his displeasure.

She'd been in this place before, where she ignored the outside world, neglecting to wash, wearing the same clothes for days on end, sleeping, eating only when driven to

do so, but this bout was different. She was acting from anger...almost from pique. Having been unsuccessful in her attempts to attract and satisfactorily keep Snape's attention, she closed down. It was an automatic response for her now in stressed circumstances; she'd experienced it over and over again since the end of the war. But this time was different. There was a spark of awareness in the back of her mind...a crumb of something approaching malice. She knew that her silence and her absence would distress her Order colleagues...but the one she wanted to hurt was Snape. She would sit it out, and *show* him that she didn't need him. Then if he really cared whether she lived or died, he'd come to *her*.

And if that didn't work ... she might be forced to drastic action.

The week before the January Order meeting, she woke up one morning knowing that they would come looking for her if she didn't attend...and the ones likely to come to her flat were the ones she had no interest in seeing. She wanted Snape, not Molly or Arthur or Ginny ... or *Percy*.

Rising from her bed, she padded into the sitting room, finding her overnight case where she'd dropped it three weeks before. In a side pocket, trapped carefully in a folded scrap of parchment, three longish black hairs nestled. She'd crept up to the bathroom on Snape's floor before going down to breakfast her last morning at Grimmauld Place, and in the shower drain she'd found these.

Feeling more alert than she had done in days, she withdrew her wand. She would make certain that no one but Severus Snape came knocking at her door.

As the ensuing days dragged by, Hermione tormented herself with visions of Snape's indifference. What if he didn't notice her absence from the meeting? What if he permitted Percy to come looking for her? What if she had finally pushed his famous lack of patience to its limit?

What if he finally realised her true culpability?

The very thought drove her to the shelves behind the loo mirror where she stored the potions the Healers had given her. The green one was for depression, and it made her feel as if her head were stuffed with cotton wool. But *this* one...the purple one...was for sleep. She didn't like it...taking it made her sleep for fourteen hours and she woke up feeling stupid...but when she was asleep, she didn't *know* she was waiting ...

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 11

War is hell, and the aftermath is often the most hellish part of all. Having lost everyone she most loves, Hermione Granger is only a shell of the woman she had been. Devastated by loss and guilt, Hermione draws the attention of Severus Snape with a random utterance.

A/N: Beta reading thanks and unending love to Sshg316, Machshefa, and MagicAlly. Any errors are mine alone.

Thank you for all your lovely comments. Please accept my apologies for not answering them all with any regularity. Time is a factor, and when I have it, I try to spend it writing. I do want you to know, however, that I read every comment you make with great eagerness.

Some readers asked me what Snape's credentials stand for, and I meant to answer that before now. He has what amounts to an undergraduate degree (BSc), a master's degree obtained not by coursework but by research (MRes), and a doctorate, though in the wizarding world, that is equivalent to attaining the status of Warlock (War.D)...at least, in this universe, it is!



Banner by Savine Snape

Chapter Seven

She slept long, boundless hours, dead to the world, waking to pee, to nibble crackers, drink tap water from her cupped hand and stumble back to bed, where another quaff from the bottle of the purple potion sent her away again. She lost track of time, even forgetting on some level why she was pursuing this course of action. Had she at one time feared dependency on the potions the Healers gave? What a silly notion that had been; this twilight half-life was, in its way, so much easier than her previous, painful existence, feeling everything, enduring endless days of misery.

The attempted breach of her wards one shroud-dark night stirred her faintly from sleep; she rolled onto her back, her eyes half-opening, but she could not be bothered to rouse completely. The intruder went away, and she rolled to her side, consciousness passing conveniently away, as it so often did now.

The second such occurrence brought her awake and bolt upright in her bed. Snape! It was Snape. The sensation of his passage through the magical barrier at her door was not unlike the sensation of the ice blue evening gown sliding down her otherwise naked body, all the way to her feet. Snape was here, finally *here*. Dear God, now what? The flat was a mess, but it was no more than an approximation of her own condition. Why hadn't she thought this out better? True, waiting had been intolerable, but she had hoped...*known* her mind whispered...that he would come on the night of the Order meeting. She ought to have spent the day tidying the flat...and *herself*...for his arrival.

And then he was gone, slithered through the barrier she had set to allow none but him to enter, and she was bereft of him.

'No!' she cried, throwing the blankets from her and erupting from her bed, swaying on her unsteady legs when she tried to stand. Lack of nourishment had weakened her, but mad determination fuelled her enfeebled state, and she ran for the door.

Severus returned the stare of the grimy gryphon door knocker eyeball for eyeball. What if he knocked and she didn't let him in? Did he want that humiliation witnessed by any chance passer-by or casual curtain-twitcher? The fog might protect him from prying eyes, but he was far too vigilant to depend on it. He ought to have thought this out more thoroughly. He should be Disillusioned for this operation, and he ought to have cast a strong Silencing Spell to disguise his potentially unsuccessful entry attempts. He neither wanted nor needed some Muggle do-gooder calling a copper on the madman trying to break into a flat.

On the other hand, neither could he cast the Dillusionment Charm now. What if a nosey neighbour had already spied him...was watching him even now? It would be a flagrant violation of the Statute of Secrecy. No, it would be best for him to go into a dark alley, Disillusion himself, then come back and enter the flat, by hook or crook.

He turned from the door, feeling the shimmer of magic as he passed down the steps to the pavement, then he stepped into the street and began to cross, probing his memory for a likely nearby hiding place for safe spell casting.

'Snake!'

The screeching echo of his name fell into the fog-wet night, the cloud of mist dampening sound as effectively as it impeded sight. Still, it seemed preternaturally loud to his over-cautious ears.

'Well, the neighbours heard *that*,' he muttered sardonically.

He turned, seeing a wraith-like figure standing in the doorway to the girl's flat, and he felt a curious mixture of relief at her opening of the door and horror at her appearance. Allowing neither emotion to show, he swiftly mounted the steps and continued forward, guessing that she would fall back to permit him entrance. His confidence paid off, for she did just that, retreating in response to his advance, until he stood inside the cramped, malodorous space with her and snapped the door closed behind him against the inhospitable night.

He withdrew his wand for illumination, but the girl reached past him and flipped a switch on the wall, suddenly flooding the room with electric light. Each of them narrowed their eyes against the unforgiving white glare, and Severus had an opportunity to wonder if the interior of the flat was any more hospitable than the foggy night had been.

He was taken aback by what the light revealed to him. The two-room flat was a mess, the air redolent of dirty cat box and mouldering rubbish. But the truly frightful sight was the girl, nearly skeletal in appearance, a slight whiff of unwashed body making itself known even in this place of unpleasant odours. Her unwashed hair was matted to her head, and she wore mismatched, tatty clothing which hung upon her bony frame like over-large garments on a mannequin. She stared at him with enormous brown eyes set deep in purplish sockets, and overall his well-accustomed olfactory senses detected a medicinal smell...*valerian and kratom*, his brain supplied...that seemed to come from her very pores: She had been dosing herself with a strong sleep potion.

'Wh-why are you here?' the girl asked, her voice hoarse and cracked, as if from lack of use.

Severus drew himself to his full height, looking down his nose at her as he tugged off his leather gloves, one finger at a time.

'I am here for tea, of course.'

He raised an eyebrow, hoping for some sign of amusement from her, but she simply stared at him, equal parts trepidation and expectation leaking from her like wine from a pierced skin.

'I will put together the tea whilst you go make yourself ... presentable.' He flicked a glance from her dirty hair down to her mismatched socks. 'Begin with a shower and fresh clothing...have you anything clean to wear?'

She nodded once, having the grace to appear a bit ashamed of herself. Good.

'Then off with you,' he said, looking away from her into the kitchen area.

'I haven't got much on hand for tea ...' she began, but he stopped her with a lifted hand.

'I'm sure I'll manage,' he promised. 'Go now.'

She walked from him towards the small bathroom, and when the door closed behind her, he cast his Patronus. 'The girl is ill but unharmed. I will tend to her and send word if further assistance is required. For now, she needs quiet.' The silvery shape paced before him, nodding as if memorising his words. 'Go to Shackbolt at Grimmauld Place!' he commanded, and it was gone.

That done, he stalked determinedly to the electric refrigerator and pulled it open, his expectations low. The girl looked as if she hadn't eaten since he'd last seen her, though there were drifts of crisps packets littering the table top and spilling onto the floor...what the devil was a Hula Hoop?

The refrigerator contained a shrivelled apple, jars of condiments, and a carton of semi-skimmed milk. Without much hope, he opened the carton and wrinkled his nose in disgust...the milk had definitely gone off.

A mewling sound distracted him, and he saw the girl's fluffy ginger familiar sitting at his feet, looking at him with accusing yellow eyes.

'How was I supposed to know?' he demanded crossly. 'I came as soon as I suspected ...'

The cat stood and walked to a corner, where laid two empty bowls...had she not even put water out for him?...and an untidy jumble of empty tins which had once contained fish or fowl and had now been scoured clean of every morsel by the beast's undoubtedly sandpaper-rough tongue. Discarded nearby was a flattened Go-Cat bag.

'Poor old moggy,' he said, feeling a sharp twinge of sympathy. 'You've been having a rough time of it too, eh?'

The cat meowed loudly as if in agreement, butting its head against Severus' trouser leg and threading figure-eights between his ankles, talking all the while.

'Yes, yes, you too,' Severus assured the cat, stepping carefully over it to the cupboards and searching to make sure the girl at least had tea. He found a tin of tea leaves, a box of teabags, and a variety of coffee grinds for the coffee machine on a lower shelf. Did she *live* on caffeine?

In the next cupboard he found in solitary state, on their very own shelf, four unopened jars of gourmet jam.

'Bloody hell,' he muttered, and turning away he bellowed, 'Turn-Up!'

A house-elf popped into the flat, bright-eyed and eager in his smart white tea towel embroidered with the company logo, Terence's Turn-Ups: We turn up when you need us!

'Turn-Up is happy to serve sir!' the house-elf proclaimed enthusiastically.

Severus scowled at the inappropriately cheerful elf. 'Pipe down!' he snapped irritably. 'Make a list.'

The house-elf whipped out a tidy notepad and a pencil, both emblazoned with Terence's Turn-Ups, and scribbled down Severus' shopping list.

'And I need it yesterday,' he added at the end.

The elf looked pensive. 'Sir has a Time-Turner?' he asked nervously.

'Move it!' Severus bellowed, and the elf obediently Disapparated.

Then Severus turned back to the kitchen, his wand flicking madly as he sacked up rubbish, scoured surfaces, and laid out the tea service things. Turn-Up popped in with milk and bread, pumpkin juice and eggs, sausages and fresh herbs, bags of cat food and cat litter...and a handful of Muggle coins for the blasted meter. Severus paid him, wishing it were possible to tip the blasted creature for good service. But that wasn't the type of compensation that interested a house-elf.

'You've done a good job,' he bit out, the unfamiliar phrase awkward on his tongue.

Turn-Up turned up his enormous eyes, suddenly tearful. 'Sir is ... pleased?'

Severus nodded curtly and turned away, thankful to hear the pop of Disapparition behind him. He fed the electric meter, cranked up the heat, and busied himself with the comforting ritual of preparing tea.

Thus when the girl emerged from her shower wearing a clean jumper and jeans, he had tea and toast on the table, and holding her questioning gaze, he deliberately popped the lids off four jars of gourmet jam, one after the other.

Hermione averted her eyes and slipped into a chair at the table. He had certainly made himself at home...and who could have blamed him, really?...but she really hadn't meant for him to know she hadn't touched his jams.

'You went to the shops?' she asked hesitantly, noticing the toast and knowing she'd had no bread for weeks. Hadn't she heard him shouting something about turnips?

'I sent out for it,' he said vaguely, stirring up a cup of tea for her, including fresh milk.

She drank it down greedily, her taste buds caring nothing for the provenance of the sustenance provided. As she drank, Snape cut a piece of toast into four quarters and spread a tiny bit of jam on each one, using a different flavour for each square. He slid the plate before her and took her teacup to replenish it.

Hermione bit into the toast, and the sweetness of the wild strawberry jam burst on her tongue. She hummed with pleasure and caught the half-smile on Snape's lips before it was quickly gone.

From his place across the floor, Crookshanks crunched through a bowl of Go-Cat, and Hermione noted with a flash of embarrassment the shining surfaces in her kitchen. A glance into the alcove meant for a utility room showed even the cat box had been scoured and filled with new litter.

'Why did you come?' she asked again, a bit of her anguish creeping into her tone. 'And don't say you wanted tea! You might have had that anywhere!'

He lounged across the table from her, seeming more relaxed than he normally appeared at Grimmauld Place. Was it because there was little danger of random Weasley incursions here? He had removed not only his cloak but his coat, as well, and his shirtsleeves had been rolled up to his elbows, so that the faded grey of his Dark Mark showed against the very white skin of his left forearm. He watched her with slightly narrowed black eyes, and one side of his mouth curled up at her outburst.

'But we're skiving off the Order meeting,' he said, deadpan. 'Bout time, too. They were becoming tedious.'

She pushed her empty plate away from her, feeling pettish and quarrelsome now that her most immediate needs had been taken care of. The after-effects of the sleeping potion were hanging on, but her shower had made her more alert, and she was wary.

'Have you eaten enough?' Snape inquired mildly. 'Would you care for another piece of toast?'

Hermione shook her head stubbornly. 'No, I don't want anything else to eat. I want to know why you're really here.'

'Well you wouldn't come to me, would you? Even though I gave you my address.' He stood, sending the dishes from the table to the waiting washing-up water in the sink. Then he meticulously flicked a crumb from his black trousers. 'Now, how do you mean to entertain me?'

Hermione started, a panicked fluttering setting up in her chest. She'd struggled with the anxious feelings whilst she showered, both excited and alarmed that he had come to her. What sort of 'entertainment' did he expect?

But rather than looking at her, he strolled into her lounge area, which contained one armchair and a matching sofa, and he stopped before her television with its accompanying video recorder. She followed him somewhat hesitantly, keeping well out of his reach.

'It's a television...shows moving picture stories,' she offered.

He nodded, squatting on his haunches to better examine the VCR. 'I saw tellies growing up...my ... friends had one...but this is new. What is its function?'

Hermione bit her lip; she'd forgotten that Snape was a half-blood. 'It plays recorded material...you can choose which movie or programme you want to watch.'

She crept closer, fascinated by his interest. He didn't even seem like Snape when he was thus engaged. He could have been any disturbingly appealing, somewhat older man she'd brought home ... not that she'd ever done much of that.

He looked back over his shoulder at her. 'Is it operational? I only ask because it's covered in dust.' A grimy fingertip was offered as proof.

'Yes, it works. I just haven't much felt like watching anything.'

He flicked his fingers, magically clearing the dust from the electronics, and seated himself in the middle of the sofa, directly in front of the screen. 'Excellent,' he said. 'You may put something on for us to watch.'

Hermione felt a trifle put out. How like a man! Give him a telly, and he's ready to veg out on the sofa!

'Problem?' he asked, and Hermione met his gaze. 'Would you rather play wizard chess?' He sat up a bit straighter. 'Or if you prefer, I can go now.'

Hermione whirled from him and plucked a tape at random from her shelf of videos. So now he was threatening her. Well, he *couldn't* go now. She pushed the tape into the player and adjusted the volume. It would serve him right if she sat down in the armchair, but Crookshanks had appropriated it for his after-dinner kip. Besides, she was too drawn to Snape to disturb the cat and take that particular stand. As unsettled and irritated as she felt, she was nevertheless happy to have him, the comforting, living, breathing *bulk* of him taking up space in the middle of her sofa. So she sat down beside him, close enough that their upper arms touched.

He stiffened at the press of her arm against his, but she didn't care. Her entire body was bathed in well-being to be so close to him. She wanted to absorb the feeling into

her very cell structure, to hold it within herself for later access during all the times she would be miserable again ... when Snape *wasn't* here. But she didn't have long to bask in her contentment, for the soporific effect of the flickering images on the television screen produced their inevitable result. Soon her head fell back against the sofa cushion, and she dozed.

Severus pretended to watch the inane programme she had inserted into the player, monitoring her state from behind the curtain of his hair. When she nodded off, he waited five minutes to be sure she was asleep, then rose from the sofa. He had further investigation to complete whilst she was otherwise occupied.

She stirred, her eyelids lifting minutely. 'What?' she murmured.

'Just need the loo...I'll be right back,' he said soothingly, and waited until she was quiet again before moving into the bathroom.

His interest was all for her stash of potions or other drugs. He frowned at the open shelf of bath soap and shampoo before working out the shelving behind the mirror. He found nothing alarming; she had an anti-depressant, virtually untouched, from the look of it, but there was no danger of abuse or dependency there.

He moved purposefully into her bedroom, its stale air telling the tale of the welter of bedclothes in need of a good scrubbing. But it was the bottle of Dreamless Sleep on her bedside table, otherwise cluttered with used tissues and empty cups, which answered the question in his mind. He carried the offender into the bathroom and poured it down the drain, rinsing the phial with water from the tap so that no dregs of it remained. He then searched every possible hiding place, looking for an additional stash, but he found none, nor did she have Muggle pharmaceuticals beyond paracetamol.

He replaced this rather harmless bottle of tablets in her handbag and moved to the bathroom sink to cleanse his hands of the dust from his search. He had never, before tonight, had any indication from the girl that she was using substances improperly, and his search bore this out. She had only begun over-using the sleeping potion since last he had seen her, and eventually, he would know why. For now, it was enough that he had cleared out her stash, that she was well, if malnourished, and accepting of his presence and assistance.

Avoiding, as always, the sight of his reflection in the mirror, he returned to the sofa and resumed his position. She stirred sleepily and cracked her eyes open again. The smile she gave him then pierced him with its sweetness...its *welcome*.

'Hi,' she said.

His throat felt oddly constricted, and his voice sounded strained to his ears when he answered her. 'Hi, yourself.'

She uttered a small sigh and wrapped her arms about his arm, as if it were a teddy bear, and settling her cheek on his shoulder, drifted to sleep again. The cat chose that moment to express his appreciation for the filled food dish by jumping onto the sofa and stepping into Severus' lap, covering his white shirt and black trousers with a coat of ginger hairs.

'Is this really necessary?' he asked the creature, suddenly remembering that it was a half-Kneazle. The confounded thing probably *did* understand what he was saying to it.

Crookshanks...a bloody stupid name, if you asked Severus...did not comment on the relative necessity of the operation, rather giving an almighty stretch and yawn before planting his back end on Severus' lap, his front paws on Hermione's jeans-clad legs, and beginning to purr with a violence surely sufficient to register on the Muggle's Richter Scale. With one arm appropriated for sleep-snuggling and a dead weight across his legs, Severus recognised that he was undeniably trapped ... but he was not alarmed by it. Instead, a strange sense of success...of *satisfaction*...seeped into his consciousness, and using his free hand to thread through the cat's thick fur, he passed the hours of the night in watching over his new charges until he slept, too.

Crookshanks was the only witness to the shifting of human positions through the night, which had the girl pulled against the man's chest, their arms wrapped each about the other, as inky black hair blended with the girl's lighter brown. Crookshanks was forced then to adjust his own position, but he made no complaint: The food dish was full, and the girl was out of bed.

The needed Protector had arrived.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 11

War is hell, and the aftermath is often the most hellish part of all. Having lost everyone she most loves, Hermione Granger is only a shell of the woman she had been. Devastated by loss and guilt, Hermione draws the attention of Severus Snape with a random utterance.



Banner by Savine Snape

Chapter 8

Severus' first waking sensation was the weight against his body, and his first thought was that something had fallen on him. The soreness in his neck and back confirmed this hypothesis. Had there been a skirmish? Had he been cursed?

Tensing for action, he experimentally cracked his eyelids open, expecting to find himself outdoors, injured and alone, as he had dreaded all through the Dark Lord's wars. Instead, he saw sunlight filtering through ill-closed draperies in a cramped, dingy room. His back hurt because he had slept sitting upright...well, *somewhat* upright...and the weight upon him was comprised of a yellow-eyed cat across his legs and the girl curled up against him, her short-cropped hair smelling of shampoo, and her pores still giving off the faint aroma of valerian. *At least the kratom seems to have left her system*, he thought, thankful that the narcotic component of the potion was no longer a concern.

The girl looked serene in sleep, and he knew instinctively that she wasn't dreaming. Her dreams would not be pleasant ones, and the terrible burden she wore like voluntary shackles would poison her subconscious mind every waking and dreaming moment. Her only respite came in dreamless sleep ... and perhaps, at times, in his company. He could not account for that point, but he had seen supporting evidence of it, so he accepted it as fact.

The trick now would be to keep her engaged without triggering her flight instinct. It was a fine balancing act, a tightrope walk, where his failure to safely navigate the wire would mean a broken Hermione. *Unthinkable*. He had, after all, some experience as Head of Slytherin House in handling adolescent girls...and hadn't his own closest school-year friends been female?...but this young woman was no child. He had to handle her properly, with a mixture of acceptance and enticement...and *respect*...to keep her on her feet.

Now, she seemed functional, but when he had come into the flat the night before, there had been every indication of a person in free-fall, with no journey's end in sight. He had his work cut out for him.

He heaved an inward sigh.

Carefully, he began to disentangle himself from the clinging Hermione, and in the process, he became aware that he was being stared at by Crookshanks. The cat looked miffed, as if Severus had slept late and kept the creature waiting for something important...*probably hungry*, Severus' ever-present inner voice informed him.

'Get off if you want food,' he muttered, and Crookshanks sprang down to the floor and began to saunter toward the kitchen area, ginger tail held high.

The girl stirred when he lowered her to the sofa cushion, but he didn't stay to see if she would wake. He used the facilities, ignored his reflection as he washed his hands at the basin, and swept into the kitchen to prepare a meal to nourish. Deciphering the use of the coffee making machine was not beyond him, he was relieved to see, and in short order he was chopping up chives into precise, uniform bits. Chervil and parsley followed, and all of the herbs were whisked into fresh eggs. He left the mixture so that the flavours could merge, popping sausages into a pan and pouring pumpkin juice into the quaint small glasses etched with drawings of oranges.

The persistent crunching from the corner ceased, and Severus looked over to find Crookshanks scenting the air like a big cat on the prowl for prey, his morning bowl of Go-Cat forgotten.

'I feel sure sausages are not an approved part of the diet of a domestic house-Kneazle,' he informed the flat-faced feline.

'But they are approved for their owners,' Hermione said.

Severus turned to see her standing in the doorway, looking like someone only half-awake. 'Are you hungry?' he inquired.

Hermione nodded. 'I can't remember the last time I ate sausages.'

Severus smirked. 'Then when you've performed your ablutions...and attended to your hair...breakfast will be on the table.'

Hermione stood in the bathroom with a face flannel in her hands, washing the sleep from her eyes. She could only remember seeing the very beginning of the programme she had put in the VCR...had she immediately fallen asleep on him? But he had stayed, so he must not have minded very much. She studied herself with a frown between her brows. She'd grown terribly thin in the last month, to the point that she looked truly unwell.

But he was here now, wasn't he?

When she walked into the kitchen, Snape slid an omelette onto her plate, where already resided one fat, juicy sausage. He had brewed coffee this morning, and there was a steaming mug beside her plate, alongside her cup of juice. She looked up at him in amazement. 'No one has served me breakfast like this since I left Hogwarts!' she said, slipping into her seat and beginning to prepare her coffee.

'Better not let Molly hear you say that,' Snape said, sotto voce, and Hermione giggled, the sound alien to her ears.

He turned from the stove, a second plate in his hand, one expressive eyebrow arched. 'Don't underestimate her...she'd be fully capable of forcing a multi-course meal on you, if she thought it would make you eat.'

He sat down across from her, his white lawn shirt once again rolled to the elbows to facilitate his efforts in the kitchen. The shirt was creased, for he had slept in it, and there was a day's growth of stubble on his face, a look that did not flatter him. He busied himself with rolling the sleeves down and fastening his cuffs before he took up his fork. Hermione felt guilty. It was cold in the flat.

'I'm sorry,' she said, looking down at her plate. 'I ran out of coins for the meter, and I ... didn't feel like going out to get more.'

Snape made a dismissive gesture, as if it were no great matter, and then he gave his full attention to the food on his plate. Hermione followed suit, alternating bites of the fluffy herb omelette with sausage. The flavours were amazing, but she found she had no great capacity for food after weeks of starving herself. She managed half the sausage and one-third of the omelette before the food defeated her. She then sat back and watched Snape eat, sipping her coffee appreciatively. She loved tea, but some mornings, a *real* jolt of caffeine was needed.

When he stood to retrieve the coffee pot, she allowed him to refill her cup, then he sat down, his expression intent. Hermione shifted uncomfortably on her chair, averting her eyes from him as she stirred milk and sugar into her coffee. He, she noted, drank his coffee black. *I might have guessed that* she thought with faint amusement. But why did he have to get serious? Wasn't it pleasant just *being* together?

'I brought coins for the meter,' he commented, 'but the heat seems to use the power very quickly.'

'Yes, that's why I've not used it much lately,' she admitted, forgetting for a moment his wily ways and looking at him again.

He leant forward, holding her gaze. 'Hermione,' he said, 'you were Potter's sole heir. You inherited his fortune and all his property, save the house in Grimmauld Place, which was given over to the Order of the Phoenix Trust. And even so, you have the right to live there, even if you choose not to purchase your own home. You could have a house-elf preparing breakfast for you every morning of your life. Why do you choose to live this way?'

His gesture encompassed not only the cramped tenement, but the dodgy, deteriorating neighbourhood, as well.

At the mention of Harry, Hermione pushed away from the table, the urge to stand and run from him almost overwhelming.

'Don't!' she screeched, her hands clamped to the table's edge like a pair of vises. '*Don't* talk about them!'

For a moment, Snape looked startled, then his expression smoothed to his usual impassive coolness. 'I wasn't speaking of them...I was speaking of *you*.' He seemed to sit

taller, a minute stiffening of his spine and straightening of his shoulders, and when he spoke again, his tone was like finely-honed steel...a blade of truth, for he was speaking words whose veracity she could scarcely admit to herself, much less to him.

'You did everything you could do to force me to come to you here. Well, I'm here now, Hermione, and you're going to have to speak to me like an adult. I'm not going away and neither are you.'

Already her fingers sought her wand. Had he placed an Anti-Disapparition Jinx on the flat whilst she was sleeping? Could she hex him quickly enough to make it out the door before he could Stun her or place a Full Body Bind? Or perhaps she could get into her room and ward the door against him ... but did she know a ward Snape couldn't dismantle?

He watched her with narrowed eyes, his thin lips pressed into an uncompromising white line. She stared back at him mutinously, her right hand shoved up the sleeve of her jumper, clutching her vineyard wand. Her heart pounded in her chest, her body flooded with adrenaline. Damn him to hell! She wouldn't be the one to look away.

Then the air was full of ginger fur, and Crookshanks was on the tabletop. In an instant, he had nipped the last bite of sausage from her plate, but before he could make his getaway, Snape plucked him up and dropped him onto the floor.

'Have you no control over this animal?' he demanded of her.

'Don't you dare hurt him!' she cried, bending to stroke Crookshanks, who was unconcernedly chewing the bit of meat he had scavenged.

'I'm not the one who failed to feed him or tend to his litter box,' Snape said, exasperated.

Crookshanks moved from beneath Hermione's hand and began to clean himself. Looking up at the sneering wizard from her crouched position on the floor, Hermione said, 'You are a right bastard, Snape.'

He bent and took her elbow, propelling her into the sitting area and pushing her into the armchair. He sat down on the sofa, directly across from her. 'Yet you abjure the ministrations and kindnesses of your friends in favour of my bastardry, Hermione, so one can only surmise that you prefer it to sweetness and light.'

She stared at the clenched hands in her lap. God damn him! Why did he have to be so perceptive? Why did everything have to be dragged out under the bright light of day? Didn't he know that there were some thoughts...some *emotions*...best left to the dark recesses, where they might thrive like mushrooms beneath a rock?

She swallowed and forced herself to speak past the thump of shame she felt at his bald observations about her and the way of life she'd chosen. 'I don't prefer you because you act like an absolute sod around me,' she said. 'It's because you let me be...you've no *expectations* of me.'

He was silent for so long she wondered if he had left the room. Then she raised her eyes and saw he was still there, studying her with a focus so absolute she was impaled by it.

When her eyes met his, he spoke.

'You think I've no expectations of you? And that's why you seek my company?'

As ever, she was immobilised by the penetrating intensity of his black eyes. She could not speak, so she nodded once, acknowledging the accuracy of his statement.

'You couldn't be more wrong.' He leant forward, his elbows coming to rest upon his knees as his eyes came on level with hers. 'I have *great* expectations of you...greater, perhaps, than any I've held for someone in more years than I care to remember. You are Hermione Granger, the brightest witch of your age.' A faint smile touched his lips. 'I used to scoff when Lupin said that about you, but I've come to know it is nothing less than the truth. You are uncommonly clever, and the ability you demonstrated in the war increased my regard and respect for you.'

He fell silent, but did not look away from her, and Hermione squirmed beneath his unwavering, concentrated regard. His words made her uncomfortable. What kind of world was it in which Severus Snape could calmly relate his regard and respect for someone, particularly *her*? It was an unnatural phenomenon, like dogs and cats living together in harmony. Was it a some bizarre portent of the end of the world?

'Never believe that you can settle for anything less than your full potential around me...and never expect me to pretend you are anything other than who you are: a woman of character, kindness, and keen intelligence.'

Hermione jerked her head back, as if to throw off his words, but she was still unable to break away from his steady gaze. She couldn't be expected to sit and listen to such twaddle for much longer...she ought to set him straight, but the ability to form coherent arguments seemed to have momentarily deserted her. How could she have so misjudged Snape's thoughts and intentions? And now, how could she get him out of her flat?

Then he sat back against the sofa cushion, rotating his shoulders slightly, as if to release muscle tension. 'Well, I imagine you must have some things to attend to now,' he said. 'I know I do.'

He lifted a hand to rub at the back of his neck, and Hermione watched him with misgiving. Ten seconds before, she had been trying to think of a way to throw him out, and now that he was talking about leaving of his own accord, all she felt was desperation to keep him in place.

She didn't want him to go.

'Are you ... leaving?' she asked in a small voice.

Crookshanks, his fur-cleaning now complete, leapt onto Snape's legs as if he were sure of his welcome, and a plaintive 'mrow' from the half-Kneazle was added to Hermione's objection.

'Off, Hippogriff bait!' Snape said, sweeping Crookshanks aside, onto the sofa beside him, and easing the rebuff with an apparently unconscious stroke of ginger fur. Without looking at Hermione, he said, 'Actually, I have a project on this afternoon I was wondering if you'd be interested in assisting me with.'

Hermione watched the taciturn Snape stroking her familiar's fur, watched the cat arching into the man's touch, and wondered how to answer him. She didn't want him to leave her, but she also didn't want to commit herself to something before she had further information.

'There is a privately owned conservatory where I harvest my own potions ingredients...one can visit only by appointment, and I rarely see anyone other than the person who manages the place when I'm there.' He looked up from the purring ginger Kneazle-cushion. 'I could use the skill of a NEWT-level potioneer to gather ingredients. I can promise there will be no crowds of people. If I give you the directions, will you meet me there at two o'clock?'

Hermione thought about it. She would be going out of the flat, but there would not be a press of strangers about her...or even worse, of former friends...and she would be in Snape's company. She'd not gathered potions ingredients since her student days, but when she had done, she'd enjoyed it, and what's more, she'd been good at it. She felt a slow flush of possibility within.

'Yes, I can do that,' she agreed, and when Snape produced a pre-printed card with the conservatory name and direction on it, she accepted it like a woman squaring up to a challenge.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 11

War is hell, and the aftermath is often the most hellish part of all. Having lost everyone she most loves, Hermione Granger is only a shell of the woman she had been. Devastated by loss and guilt, Hermione draws the attention of Severus Snape with a random utterance.

A/N: Beta reading thanks and hugs to Lariope, Sshg316, and Machshefa, with Brit-picking thanks to Magically. Thanks and kisses to Mischievous T and Lady Rhian for alpha reading!

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Chapter 9

Severus was on the spot twenty minutes early, pacing back and forth on the white gravel path before the sign reading:

P Glen Conservatory

Purveyor of the Finest Potions Ingredients

By Appointment Only

The series of greenhouses, some interconnected, stretched over eight acres of land on the outer edge of a Muggle neighbourhood. Muggle passersby were stricken with the troubling notion that they had left their stoves on, and those who overcame the compulsion for long enough to glance at the conservatory saw non-descript outbuildings behind a fence marked 'No Trespassing'.

Would she come? It was the question to which he had no answer. Although some of her actions and responses since he had first taken true notice of her, two months before, had been precisely what he would have predicted, more often, she had chosen behaviours completely alien to him. It was a bit daunting to him...he who had spent years of his life playing a double game, wherein his ability to read people and their intentions was paramount...to have such difficulties reading Hermione Granger. Was it because he was male and she female that she seemed so strange to him? Or was there some elemental difference in their personalities...in their conscious, if not *rational* minds...that caused her to pursue courses of action that defied his ability to comprehend them?

He had not too long to puzzle over his questions, for at two o'clock on the dot she appeared at some distance from him, walking from the copse of trees he had suggested for an Apparition destination. As she approached, he had the opportunity to study her. The shorn hair, which she had worn at first straight and flat upon her head, had grown out enough in one month that it fluffed in a halo of curls, like those of a careless...if clean...schoolboy. She wore trainers, jeans, and a dark hooded jacket over a high-necked white jumper.

'Hi,' she said when she was within hailing distance, a hesitant smile curving her lips.

He nodded in greeting. 'Excellent,' he said briskly. 'You made it.'

Gesturing for her to precede him, they approached the unmarked door to the main building. There was an old-fashioned bell-pull situated on the wall beside the door at Severus' shoulder height, and he gave this a firm tug, setting a bell deep within the building to ringing.

'They keep it locked up?' Hermione said, glancing over her shoulder at him. 'Isn't that odd for a business?'

Severus shrugged. 'As I mentioned, it's privately owned. Visits are permitted only by appointment. We are expected for two o'clock.'

The door opened, and a small white-haired wizard was there, smiling broadly. 'Good afternoon!'

Severus reached past the girl to shake the man's hand. 'Good afternoon, Sodd. This is Miss Granger. She'll be assisting me this afternoon.' To Hermione he said, 'This is the conservatory manager, Twiggie B. Sodd, Master Herbologist.'

Mr Sodd took Hermione's hand between both of his. 'You're welcome, miss...come in from the cold!'

They followed the older wizard into the warm greenhouse, the girl murmuring to him, 'Please, call me Hermione.'

Sodd responded to her, 'Then you must call me Twiggie.' He turned then, gesturing inclusively with both arms, and said to her with self-deprecating pride, 'What do you think of my greenhouse?'

Mr Sodd and Snape began to discuss a grafting project, and Hermione had the leisure to study their contrasting figures. Snape was a head taller than the herbologist, who stood only a few inches taller than Hermione. The potioneer was sallow, eyes fierce beneath expressive brows, hooked nose jutting above thin lips set in determination, his back ramrod straight beneath his black cloak. Twiggie Sodd had rosy round cheeks beneath his shock of white hair, bright blue eyes above a bulbous, pear-shaped nose, and he conversed animatedly, his hands as mobile as his lips. The smaller wizard eschewed robes and wore much more practical Muggle gardening clothes, his many-pocketed trousers bulging with the tools of his trade. His arms were covered, wrist to elbow, in yellow pigskin pruning sleeves, and no-nonsense gardening gloves were tucked into his belt. He wore impressive mud splattered dragon-hide gaiters that reached past his knee; Hermione knew without a doubt that he did not spend much time behind a desk but was greatly involved in the daily doings of the conservatory.

As she watched, the two wizards moved off together, deep in conversation, leaving Hermione alone. She gazed longingly toward a section of the room currently receiving a light mist of precipitation, and when her former professor noticed her absence, he turned to speak to her.

'Look around, if you like,' he said. 'Just remember your lessons and mind yourself around the Colossal Colombian Pitcher Plant and the Venomous Tentacula.'

Hermione walked into the humid air of the greenhouse, unzipping her jacket and tying it about her waist as she went, soaking up the warmth and inhaling the scents of soil,

greenery, and natural compost. The rows of meticulously tended plant life were soothing to her, bringing back vivid *happy* memories of school, of Herbology, under the tutelage of Pomona Sprout. She smiled as she remembered her exasperation at vying with Neville for top place in that class, frustrated that his natural affinity could outpace book knowledge and bloody-minded determination. She had lost out on the top spot in Herbology, just as she had done to Harry in Defence, but her fondness for her friends had robbed the defeat of its sting. Indeed, she had frequently been content in the school greenhouses, up to her wrists in muck as she repotted developing seedlings, giving their trailing roots larger scope for growth.

She admired the organisation of the rows, with the cold-resistant plants closer to the walls, those needing warmth nearer the heat source, which she was eager to investigate. Did this grower use the super-heated water system favoured by Madam Sprout, or some other magical method? She wandered through the perennials, then the annuals, and admired the warm, dry area segregated for the succulents and cacti...then she passed into a section given over completely to flowers. The eye-pleasing palette of colours combined with the luscious scents to fill her heart with gladness. How happy would be the woman who spent her days tending these beautiful, if non-magical, flowering plants!

The designer of the flower room had grouped the plants by colour first, then type, so that she walked through a veritable colour wheel of blossoms. She passed from red gerbera daisies, through yellow tulips, to the blue agapanthus and deep purple pansies, drawn ever onward by the gorgeous hues. Snape came upon her when she had her face buried in a mass of silvery lavender roses, breathing deeply of their soul-soothing scent.

'I'll leave you to wandering, if you prefer,' he said, sounding gruff, 'but I had thought you might like to make yourself useful.'

Hermione turned to face him, seeing that his mouth and eyes did not match his tone...it pleased him to see her enjoying the flowers, and this knowledge gratified her. He seemed to know instinctively the things that would benefit her in some way, and she felt a rush of gratitude.

'What did you have in mind?' she asked, surprised by her own question and a bit embarrassed by how he might take it.

He placed a hand at the small of her back, directing her through a door at the end of the flower room and into a tube-like connecting passage to the next greenhouse. A shiver rippled up her spine at his touch, and she was suddenly acutely aware of his bulk at her back, conscious of his superior height and breadth, feeling the air separating their bodies like an electric charge.

He, however, seemed unaware of her hyper-consciousness and continued on as before.

'The magical plants that are classified as hazardous are in greenhouse three,' he said, pushing through a door with a large black numeral "3" painted on its surface.

'Just like at Hogwarts!' she said rather stupidly, striving to rein in her runaway senses.

'Precisely,' he answered and stopped just inside the door beside a wooden potting table covered with the detritus of repotting. On the wall opposite the table were sturdy shelves filled with gloves, goggles, earmuffs, trowels, and other standard gardening equipment, each sort upon its own labelled shelf. She drew a steadying breath, diverted and somewhat alarmed to see a shelf given over to flame-retardant overalls.

Were there *dragons* around here somewhere?

'Gear up,' Snape instructed, handing her a set of dragon-hide gloves.

Hermione noted that the gloves appeared well-used but not unclean, and she pulled them on, taking up a set of likely looking goggles as well, fitting the strap about the back of her head and allowing the safety glasses to rest upon her curls. She could not help but notice that Snape was taking his equipment from a box marked "Do Not Use."

'I suppose you have permission,' she remarked, her rule-loving heart somewhat offended by this cavalier disregard.

He looked down at her, an instant look of annoyance passing quickly to amusement, and pulled on a pair of black protective gloves that fit him so precisely they might have been made for him. 'Indeed I do,' he said with mock gravity. 'Sodd insists that I use his gear when I don't bring my own.'

He drew his wand and took hold of one of her hands. She parted her lips to ask a question, but before words could leave her mouth, the gloves on her hands warmed, then contracted, covering her fingers like a second...if dragon-hide...skin.

'These aren't mine!' she protested. 'You've altered their gloves!'

He shrugged and turned, tucking his wand away. 'The spell will expire in six hours or so,' he said indifferently.

He then led her down a row filled with pitcher plants, beginning with small, Muggle specimens and graduating in degrees to the Colossal Colombian Pitcher Plant, a magical variety large enough to trap...and digest, with its enzymes and acids...a full grown man. As they walked, Snape spoke to her, glancing periodically over his shoulder to be sure she was attending to him.

'You remember, I am sure, the characteristics of the Snargaluff,' he said, 'and the pods of the *Passiflora Passionata* plant have some similar attributes.'

He rounded the corner of the outer aisle, and she followed him, passing the Venomous Tentacula behind its fine mesh guard and stopping before a large flowering vine, adorned with beautiful flowers and bulging pods the size of ostrich eggs. The flowers had five bluish-white petals topped with a white and purple corona; between the petals and the protruding corona were thin, undulating appendages of palest lavender. Hermione drew a deep breath and took a step back.

Snape looked at her approvingly. 'Your instincts and learning are working in your favour,' he commented dryly. 'Immobilising the tendrils is imperative before extracting the scent globule hidden beneath the corona. Otherwise, the tendrils will pierce the skin like the blade of a knife, and the poison coating each appendage is excruciatingly painful.'

Although Snape was speaking to her, she never took her eyes from the treacherous plant. 'Is the venom ... fatal?'

'In large enough quantities, left untreated, it can lead to irreversible brain damage,' he said, 'not unlike the effects of the overuse of the Imperious Curse.'

The change in his tone drew her eyes to his face, but he was looking past her, as if his thoughts were suddenly far away. Did he have some special history with the devastating consequences of the Imperious Curse?

He stepped forward then. 'Now, observe closely.'

Hermione watched in fascination as he immobilised the quivering tendrils, then poked his forefinger through the corona and scooped out a shimmering magenta bead, which looked rather like a liquid paracetamol caplet filled with glitter. He produced a small square box from his pocket and handed it to her.

'Will you do the honours?' he asked.

Hermione lifted the fitted top from the wooden container, revealing a thick pad of cotton wool. Snape placed the globule in the padding.

'The box should hold eight,' he said. 'Would you care to collect them whilst I attend to gathering some other ingredients? I thought, when we're finished here, we could stop off nearby for a late tea.'

Hermione stared at the perfectly symmetrical casing filled with an exotic potions ingredient, cradled as it was in cotton batting, and several thoughts occurred to her at

once. What was this substance? For what potion did he need it? And why did he trust her to collect it for him, he who had such exacting standards?

What was he up to?

'Is there anything else I should know about the'...she looked down at the plaque on the pot..*Passiflora Incarnata SS Variation?*'

'The danger lies only in the tendrils,' he assured her. 'In the garden variety Maypop, which is the common name of the original flower, there are no magical properties and no poisonous tendrils. The ... sentence came with the grafting of another magical plant to this one.' He studied the exotic flower for a moment, then looked down into her face, and a twisted smile touched his lips. 'It is dangerous for mortal beauty to be examined by too strong a light,' he murmured, and when her brow puckered in confusion, he became all business once again. 'Is this an acceptable task?' he asked. 'Or would you prefer...'

She cut across him, determined to keep her assignment. 'I'll be fine. You can leave it with me.'

And with a slight inclination of his head, as if in thanks, he left her, striding from greenhouse three without a backward glance.

They left the conservatory two hours later, and Mr Sodd was on the spot to see them out. When Hermione confessed how her time...'I've not seen hide nor hair of you these past two hours, miss!'...had been spent, his bright blue eyes grew round.

'I might trust a third-year Apprentice to harvest from the*Passiflora* variation,' he mused, regarding her now not only with good-natured warmth but with new respect.

'Miss Granger was the top student in her year,' Snape replied smoothly, obviating the necessity of Hermione producing a reply. 'An exceptional scholar with the focus...and steady hands...of a true proficient.'

Hermione turned her face to him, her eyes wide with shock, her lips parted in an "O" of surprise. Snape responded with a tightening of his lips and a jerk of his head; she wasn't attending to their host.

Mr Sodd beamed. 'It is a true pleasure to have met you, my dear,' he assured Hermione. 'I hope you won't object if I bestow you with a small token of my esteem.' And from behind his back, like a Muggle magician, the Master Herbologist produced a bouquet of six perfect buds of the silvery lavender roses she had admired.

Hermione flushed with pleasure at the gesture, but she was beginning to feel a bit overwhelmed. Though she felt great inward satisfaction for successfully completing her assignment, physical exhaustion was taking hold of her. It had been a long time since she had been anywhere other than her flat or Grimmauld Place for an appreciable time.

'Thank you,' she said, accepting the stems, which had been carefully wrapped for freshness. Tears were threatening, and she could only be grateful when she felt a strong, if gentle, hand upon her shoulder.

'We'll be off now,' Snape said firmly. 'I'll see you next week, Sodd.'

And Snape turned her to the door, shepherding her out into the chill January dusk.

A/N: Snape uses a partial quote from Samuel Johnson in speaking to Hermione about the plant from which she harvested the ingredient. The full quote is:

It is dangerous for mortal beauty, or terrestrial virtue, to be examined by too strong a light. The torch of Truth shows much that we cannot, and all that we would not, see.

Author: Samuel Johnson (1709 - 1784)

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 11

War is hell, and the aftermath is often the most hellish part of all. Having lost everyone she most loves, Hermione Granger is only a shell of the woman she had been. Devastated by loss and guilt, Hermione draws the attention of Severus Snape with a random utterance.

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Owned

Chapter 10

Severus quickly Transfigured his cloak into a Muggle mac and guided Hermione through the deepening dusk, hoping the destination he had chosen was not too far for her to walk in her debilitated state. She had done well at the conservatory, well enough that he felt an almost proprietary pride in her accomplishment. For three hours or so, she had been almost entirely *outside* of herself. For a young woman who spent nearly all of her waking time locked inside her own head, this was progress indeed.

Additionally, she had performed the task...*assignment*...he had set for her flawlessly. Never mind that he had brought with him everything he would need to treat her wounds had she run afoul of the *Passiflora* variation...he had thought she could do it, and she had proved him right. Even old Twiggy Sodd had been impressed.

All for the better, that.

Now he guided her along the all but deserted streets of the Muggle town, navigating toward a pub he had frequented in his youth, when he and his friends had spent the summer days roaming free as only teenagers could do. He had not returned there in years, but he wanted to get food into her one more time before he sent her home to sleep, and a tired and happy Hermione should be easier to feed than a wary, cranky one had been.

They rounded the corner onto the High Street, and he murmured, 'Almost there, now,' receiving from his companion a mumbled assent. But when they halted at the bright storefront, he was appalled to see that the family local of his memory was now a trendy coffee shop.

'We're eating at Starbucks?' Hermione asked curiously.

Frustrated and a bit wrong-footed, Severus spun on the pavement and spotted a quiet pub across the street. He remembered, with a wry, inward smile, that he and his confederates had considered it to be a dull establishment catering to the older generation, and they had avoided it like the plague.

'Certainly not,' he replied, and with renewed purpose, he escorted her across the way.

When they were safely ensconced across from one another in a booth away from the bar, where the noisy patrons were watching a football match on the telly, he studied her rather tired face. Yet in spite of the lines of weariness beside her mouth, her colour was quite good, and her brown eyes were alight...perhaps even a shade manic.

'The outing seems to have agreed with you,' he commented neutrally.

She bent her head to sniff the lavender roses she had placed into a water glass for safekeeping. 'One stem of a rose of this quality would sell for £5 in a London shop,' she mused.

'£7, actually,' he corrected, 'but what's your point?'

She blinked. 'Why do you know exactly how much this flower costs?'

Oh, bugger.

'Sodd must have mentioned it in passing,' he said mildly.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, as if doubting his veracity. 'I only meant that this was a very costly gift for Master Sodd to have given me,' she said.

'Focussing on the monetary value attached to a gift is rather vulgar, wouldn't you say?' Severus said, letting his gaze slide to the telly for a moment to rob the comment of some of its sting. Why was the girl so bloody difficult?

'All right,' she said, straightening up in her seat. 'We'll change the subject, then. Tell me what potion you're brewing that requires all the ingredients we harvested today.'

Severus allowed her to reclaim his attention from the televised advert proclaiming something or other he dare not live without. The *Passiflora* variation globules were safely tucked away in an interior pocket of his coat, but the remainder of his haul had been magically sent to his home.

'Come now,' he said with a smirk, 'surely even with your rusty potions knowledge you realise that the ingredients we collected can't be for the same formula!'

She leant forward. 'And you didn't even pay for them!'

His eyes rolled up to the smoke-stained ceiling. Had he truly forgotten how annoying she could be?

'Believe me, Hermione, I will pay for them,' he said curtly. 'It will all go on my account with the conservatory.'

'Will they add the cost of my roses to your bill?' she asked, veering from accusation to concern.

He scowled at her, thoroughly irritated. *You can't tell her off* he reminded himself. She was far too fragile to receive the treatment she deserved for her nosey comments.

He drew in a deep breath and said, 'Sodd is not going to charge *me* for a gift he gave to *you*.' He was pleased at his calm tone.

She seemed satisfied with this, bending her head once again to inhale deeply of the roses. She closed her eyes, dark lashes sweeping down like ash upon her cheek, and her mouth curved, lips parting as if to take in all the scent on offer.

'Who had the cottage pie?'

The waiter placed the plate before Hermione, and she took up her fork and sampled a green pea.

'And grilled steak for the gentleman,' the waiter said, placing Severus' food before him.

Severus took up his knife, slicing a piece of meat whilst watching Hermione from behind his hair. She plunged her fork into the cheesy mash atop her pie, then abandoned it to take up her ciabatta and twist off a tiny piece, which she placed between her lips. She picked up her water glass and drank, then retrieved her fork and ate another pea.

If she was going to consume her dinner one pea at a time, they would be there all night.

'But what potions *are* you brewing...and why?' she blurted suddenly, her brown eyes fixed on his face with hectic intensity.

He swallowed his food, took up his napkin, and wiped his lips as he traded stares with her. The old temptation to slip into her mind was strong, but he withstood it, choosing another method to achieve his ends.

'I will make a bargain with you,' he said.

'What?' She pushed her plate aside and leant forward eagerly, the feverish energy burning through the patina of exhaustion that showed in her quiet moments.

'If you will consume your food, I will tell you about what I'm brewing.' He dropped his gaze then to his plate, spearing a grilled tomato and bringing it to his lips, letting her work it out minus his input.

The rattle of silverware as she pulled her plate before her again was the answer he had sought. Still, he did not look at her, but cut a bite of meat as if he had no thought but to satiate his hunger. He ate steadily, reasoning to himself that he would not care to eat the food cold, and he would gladly talk to her for as long as she would eat.

Her thin, frail figure haunted his dreams. Her body needed nourishment, and feeding her was a concrete object he could achieve ... by hook or crook.

Crook! He reached into his pocket and produced a fine mesh bag filled with a dried herb.

'No reason why you should be the sole recipient of something fragrant from today's outing,' he said, sliding the bag across the table to her. 'Crookshanks deserves a treat as well.'

Hermione lifted the bag to her nose. 'Catnip!' she crowed, smiling at him radiantly. 'He adores it!' She tucked the bag into the pocket of her jacket.

'I wanted to give it to you while I was thinking of it,' he said, 'but that doesn't mean you may stop eating.'

Hermione rolled her eyes toward the ceiling, much as he had done earlier, but she picked up her fork nevertheless and took another bite of her cottage pie.

'I brew potions for two reasons,' he informed her, his eyes tracking the movement of her hand from her plate to her mouth. 'One reason is for research. Through the years, I have had many ideas for new potions, variations on old potions, and improvement of brewing techniques for potions I can find no other fault with.'

She uttered a snort, whether of amusement or disdain he could not be sure, but he let it pass. A talking Hermione who was defending herself was *not* an eating one.

'Precisely,' he murmured, earning a crinkling at the corner of her eyes...a smile, in fact. 'So I have a long list of brilliant ideas that I've had little time to investigate, for one reason and another...herding school children, pandering to megalomaniacs, tidying up war-torn countries...you know the sort of thing I mean.'

Fork half-way to her mouth, she uttered a gurgle of laughter, and he found that he had to abandon the fork-watch for the pleasure of seeing her respond to him with genuine amusement.

How long had it been since he had made a woman laugh?

'How is it that I've never known how witty you are?' she demanded, her food forgotten. Again.

'You'll pardon me for pointing out that giggling is not eating,' he murmured, allowing himself to feel the flash of satisfaction engendered by her spontaneous mirth.

She sighed dramatically, picked up her fork, and with a theatrical flourish, placed a bite in her mouth.

He nodded his approbation.

'So now that I have the leisure to do so, I am working my way through my list of notions...and before you ask, yes, I prioritised them before I began. A few of my earlier ideas seemed ... less than brilliant upon review, some twenty years or so later.'

She nodded encouragingly, swallowed water, and promptly took another bite.

'The second reason I brew is for profit...by contract. Either someone else has a formula they need refined in one way or another, or they have an idea for which they hire me to produce a working potion.'

Hermione paused, her fork dangling from her fingers as she chewed and gazed over his head. 'Do you produce commercial products?' she asked.

He arched an eyebrow, looking from her fork to her plate, and she made a disgruntled sound before taking a bite of cheesy mash.

'I do not,' he said when she began to chew again. 'I have no interest in such work; it would require assembly line brewing, and there are plenty of those providers in the market.' He caught the waiter's eye and asked for two cups of tea, sticky toffee pudding, and something called a chocolate cup explosion.

Hermione stared at him. 'You have a sweet tooth!' she accused.

'Nonsense,' he responded. 'As I recall, *you* do.'

He enjoyed watching her playful indignation, wondering where the emotionally fragile Hermione of just the day before had gone. She was stretched too far, he realised; it was time to finish things up and get her home before she unravelled in public.

He had the puddings placed on the table between them, two spoons on each plate, and dutifully took a bite of each as Hermione enjoyed small portions. He allowed her to see him exhibiting signs of weariness and kept the conversation general as she drank her tea, allowing a slow winding down of the busy day.

When they were on the pavement again, he led her down a well-remembered side street, pleased to note that the windowless alley he remembered was still in place, two blank brick walls with space between, as if the Muggles had wished to provide the wizards with a safe place from which to Disapparate.

Hermione stifled a yawn as they paused in the darkness, then she startled him by placing a hand upon his chest. The familiarity surprised him, and he was aware of his heart rate increasing, his breath coming faster, and a bittersweet melancholy riding the long-unused synapses like a surfer on a wave.

'When will I see you again?' she asked, ignorant of the thunderclap of emotion consuming him.

He stepped back, suddenly confused, plunged into a past that was well behind him, which needed to remain docilely in the iron-clad chest wherein he stored it and all the cloying, drowning memories which comprised it.

'Severus?'

He forced himself to *see* Hermione, to hear Hermione's voice, and with a titanic force of will, he stepped closer to her, back into the present.*with Hermione.*

'Go now,' he said, infusing his voice with calming warmth, projecting the stability he wished to provide, showing her what he wanted her to see. 'I'll be in touch.'

She nodded, soothed by his manner, and popped out of sight.

Sagging for a moment against the brick wall, Severus ruthlessly banished the momentary insanity that had assailed him, and marshalling his determination, he

Disappeared.

Hermione arrived in the middle of her dark flat with a curious feeling of let-down. She put on the lights, pattering about dividing the roses into two water glasses Transfigured to vases, filling up the cat bowl with Go-Cat, then carrying one vase into the bedroom, to place flowers on her bedside table.

Crookshanks was curled up in the middle of her bed, and when she pulled the catnip from her pocket and put it a few feet away from him, he leapt upon it and began to rub his face against it and roll about on it with wild enthusiasm.

"You're just like a kitten!" she informed him, but he was far too engrossed to pay her any mind.

Smiling fondly, she went into the bathroom to tend to her teeth and wash her face, and then she went to the kitchen for a drink of water. She breathed deeply of her roses and moved them from the dining table to the coffee table and back again, experimenting to see where they looked best. When she padded into the bedroom again, Crookshanks was cleaning himself, looking as if he had never done anything so undignified as wallowing in catnip.

"You're such an old fraud," Hermione told him, sitting down and stroking his fur.

She yawned. It had been a lovely, productive afternoon, complete with impressing Master Sodd, harvesting ingredients from a very dangerous plant, hearing uncharacteristically high praise from Snape...how could she have forgotten to quiz him about that?...and dining out for the first time in recent memory. She was so exhausted, it would be easy to sleep tonight. She wouldn't even need ...

She frowned and searched through the clutter on her bedside table. She had thought there was a nearly full phial of the sleep potion remaining. Perhaps she had left it in the bathroom cabinet. She didn't remember putting it there, but sometimes she could be forgetful.

She rose from the bed, marching across the floor to the bathroom, unaware of Crookshanks, who sprang down from the bed and skittered beneath it, as if seeking cover from an air raid.

The bathroom cupboard was bare of Dreamless Sleep, and a quick tour of the rest of the flat bore out her working hypothesis: Snape had possessed the unmitigated nerve...the *gall*...to come into her home and remove her sleeping potion, as if it were his right to do so.

"You can't do that to me!" she cried furiously, and beneath her bed, Crookshanks laid his ears flat, as if to make himself a smaller target. "Snape, you bastard!"

And with mayhem on her mind and rage in her heart, she turned on the spot and was gone.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 11

War is hell, and the aftermath is often the most hellish part of all. Having lost everyone she most loves, Hermione Granger is only a shell of the woman she had been. Devastated by loss and guilt, Hermione draws the attention of Severus Snape with a random utterance.

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Owned

Chapter 11

Severus laid his head against the chair back, willing the tension to drain from his shoulders. His eyes were closed, and his nostrils flared as he inhaled the aroma of the cognac in the snifter held betwixt his fingers. Scent, that powerful agent of pleasure, of remembrance, and of restoration, soothed his frayed nerves, and he allowed himself to relax into the pleasurable haze. The memories triggered by the girl's touch on his chest in the alleyway had been banished, swept again into the oubliette beneath the cover of his indomitable will. No, the scenes playing behind his lids were of the girl herself, her face buried in the fragrance of the genetically enhanced lavender roses, drawn to them like a bee to honey...like a travel-parched pilgrim to water...like an invalid to healing.

A self-satisfied smirk touched his mouth, and he raised his head, touching his lips to the glass, allowing the Courvoisier to coat his tongue, relishing the full experience of aroma, taste, and pleasure. All things considered, it had been a successful weekend thus far, and his project...*not an obsession*, he informed the voice in his head...of reclaiming Hermione Granger from the dangers of her situation was progressing very nicely indeed.

The night might even call for the fat black Cuban cigar he had been saving for a special occasion ...

He had scarcely a moment to prepare himself, for the ripple of her passage through his wards brought him fully upright in his chair, and then she was there, standing in the middle of his sitting room, her eyes wild and her hair wilder, looking like the wrath of God.

Ah. She had noticed the absence of her sleeping draught, then.

With cool deliberation, he crossed one leg over the other and looked her up and down with a sneer. 'Is it *beyond* your capacity to *knock* on the door, Granger?' he said, permitting his exasperation to flavour his tone.

She glanced about the cramped space in confusion. 'I didn't think I could actually *do* it!' she snapped. 'What sort of fool doesn't ward his house against intruders?'

His brows arched, but he kept his tone level as he answered her. 'The sort of fool who gave you his address and told you you'd be welcome.'

His response, rather than satisfying her question, seemed to create only more confusion. 'You set your wards to let me Apparate directly into your house?' she demanded. He nodded once. 'That's ... that's just crazy!'

He injected a bit of boredom into his voice. 'I'd offer to take your coat, but I see you didn't wear one.'

The girl looked down at herself, seeing that she'd left home wearing her jeans and jumper; it appeared she had progressed only as far as removing her trainers before she began to search for her potion. Her chin came up then, her mobile mouth firming into a straight, angry line, and he watched her gather herself for the attack.

'Never mind that!' she cried. 'You took my potion, Snape! You came into my flat, and you rifled through my things, and you took it! How dare you?'

He took another sip of cognac, more for time to think than for the true desire to imbibe any more drink. How to keep her engaged without tipping the encounter into some penny-dreadful drama that would undo all the good they'd accomplished in the last day?

'You're right,' he agreed affably. 'I ought not to have done it.'

She gaped at him in amazement, as if trying to process his words.

He continued, 'Next time, I'll bring all the Weasleys...all the *Order*...and we'll stage an intervention instead.' He cocked his head, as if considering. 'It would be a tight fit, all those people in your flat, but you wouldn't care about that, would you? Not in the spirit of doing the thing up properly.'

She drew in a great draught of air, filling her lungs and replenishing her store of indignation, as well. 'Oh, ha ha!' she cried derisively. 'That's not what I meant, and you know it! I don't want them...I don't *need* them...and no, I don't need you, either!'

He placed the cognac on the table beside him and propped his elbows on the arms of his chair, allowing his hands to dangle, open and unthreatening. 'I see,' he said quietly. 'You just need the potion, then.'

She took a step towards him, her face flushed, her hands fisted at her sides. 'What if I do?' she shouted. 'I have the right to take it if I want!'

He allowed a small smile to touch his lips. 'Correct,' he admitted, 'but if that's so, Hermione, why are you here, telling *me* about it?'

And she stopped, the aggression and rage falling from her like a discarded disguise, the exigency of the lost potion visibly evaporating, leaving behind one confused, exhausted, overwrought girl.

Her flash-fire of fury dissipated, and with it went her purpose. She was wrong, of course; she did need him, though she still didn't understand *why*. Sudden, debilitating exhaustion overtook her, and standing in the middle of Snape's rather small sitting room, she dissolved in great, gasping sobs. She cried openly, with no attempt to hide or repress her distress. She ought to go home, but she was much too tired to Disapparate safely, so she stood forlornly on Snape's threadbare rug and wept.

Snape, for once, seemed at a loss. He stood, concern writ upon the harsh-featured face, and pulled a folded white handkerchief from his trouser pocket. For a moment, he allowed the scrap of fabric to dangle from his long fingers, then he took a hesitant step towards her and took her hand, pressing the handkerchief into it. Reflexively, she put the cloth to her face, though it seemed a bit silly to wipe up her cheeks when they were promptly wet again.

Snape did not bother to speak; it might have been difficult for him to be heard over the racket she was making, she had to admit. Instead, he placed a large hand hesitantly upon her shoulder and patted her awkwardly. Had she not already been firmly committed to the crying, she might have segued into laughter, for the enigmatic, self-assured former professor looked quite ridiculous in the face of her sudden tear storm.

The discomfited expression about his thin-lipped mouth was replaced by a rather grim determination, and she found herself gently propelled a few steps backwards, until she was pushed onto a sadly worn sofa. Then he crouched before her, his eyes on level with hers.

'I'm going to prepare something warm for you to drink whilst you compose yourself,' he said authoritatively, his voice implying there was no question of her compliance. 'Would you prefer tea or cocoa?'

'C-cocoa,' she hiccupped.

He rose and walked away from her. With an impatient wave of his hand, a hidden door materialised from a wall of bookshelves, revealing a dark stairway. He strode through the doorway and out of sight.

Hermione drew a shaky breath and looked curiously about her. So, this was Snape's house?

The room was tiny, though the impression might have been compounded by the preponderance of floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, each shelf brimming with black and brown leather-bound books ... books amongst which she might find a few she had yet to read, she thought.

The sitting room contained the armchair he had occupied, the sofa upon which she sat, and a table with a mended leg, holding one half-filled snifter and a book with a marker protruding from its pages. Everything was clean enough, but old and worn. One long window flanked the front door, which bore a variety of bolts and locks of the Muggle variety. The wall switch beside the front door indicated that the place had been wired for electricity, although the heat in the room came from a narrow, wood-burning hearth, and the light was provided by a ceiling-mounted candelabrum. Perhaps this had been his parents' home, she mused.

He returned, a quilt smelling of lavender in his hands, a serving tray floating obediently behind him. He crouched again, his black eyes searching her face as he laid the quilt over her. Apparently satisfied with what he saw, he placed a cup of cocoa in her hands. She bent her head and inhaled the wonderful steamy aroma...this was the real thing, made with milk and cocoa, rather than the pre-packaged Muggle mixture she used.

'Drink it,' he commanded, removing himself to his armchair with a cup of his own. 'There is more, should you have need.'

Hermione sipped, her eyes closing briefly in appreciation. The quilt was warm in the rather draughty old room, the fire cheerful, the light dim, lulling her into a near-stupor of comfort and wellbeing. She blinked at the man across from her, reflecting that all the scant times she had felt *safe* lately had been in his company. Why was that? Even though he had slapped down the notion she expressed that might account for it...that he had no expectations of her...she still found peace in his presence, and she was

powerfully drawn to him.

He allowed her to drink her chocolate in silence, and though her mind wandered in musing, she felt the weight of his unwavering regard, and she knew his black eyes were ever on her. She drained her cup and allowed her head to fall back on the sofa cushion. Several minutes passed, until he loomed over her, removing the mug from her slack fingers as if worried he might wake her.

'So,' she said, and his startled eyes met hers. 'How do you mean to entertain me?'

His thin lips curved in a self-mocking smile as he recognised his words from the night before. He straightened, placing the empty cup on the hovering tray, which had inched closer to him as he stood over her, rather like a puppy following its master.

'Well, I don't have *Dirty Dancing* to put you to sleep,' he said, giving her a rather comical curl of his lip, to indicate his opinion of the movie she had slapped in the video player, 'but in the absence of its soporific qualities, I can offer the wizarding equivalent: I can read to you from *Hogwarts: A History*.'

Hermione attempted a stern expression, endeavouring to channel Minerva McGonagall. 'Since I have no sleeping draught ...' she began, allowing him to complete the sentence in his mind.

His eyes gleamed appreciatively, and she caught a muffled chuckle from him before he settled again in his armchair and said soberly, 'Precisely so.'

Then he Summoned the heavy volume from the shelf, banishing the tray with a flick of his fingers, and he began to read, his baritone filling the room like slowly melting chocolate of the darkest variety.

'Thus in the year 1612, the first of the Great Goblin Rebellions began, ushering in a period of strife which was to last for the best part of a century ...'

Hermione snuggled deeper into the sweet-smelling quilt, one finger tracing its hand-stitched border as she luxuriated in the exquisite extravagance of being read to.

She woke slowly from a dream of fields of lavender roses, her eyes fluttering open, only to squint again against the shaft of sunlight piercing the imperfectly closed curtains covering the window. She didn't immediately realise she was out of place, for the pillow beneath her head might have been her own. But she needed the loo, and when she looked up at the ceiling, she couldn't think where the bathroom might be in this place. She struggled upright, and the reality of her location burst upon her, for sleeping in the armchair was Severus Snape, *Hogwarts: A History* open upon his lap.

Hermione felt a pang of guilt. This was the second night in a row the poor man had slept upright on her account; he couldn't have rested well. Yet his breathing was deep and even, and his repose was evident in his face, for the harsh lines which scored his forehead were smooth as he slept, his guard completely down for a precious few moments. She was entranced by his mouth...that weapon he had used so viciously upon his students...thin lips slightly parted; she could not fail to note how beautifully those lips were formed, as if the insult of his ugly, hooked nose could be remedied by the beauty of his mouth. His hair had fallen lankly away from his face, and she noted his squared, stubborn chin, and the angle of his jaw as it slanted from the lobe of his ear. This was the *man* she had become aware of the night of the Order Christmas party...not simply the man who had nicked her sleeping potion, but the one who had put himself out for her time and again.

This single, self-sufficient, disturbingly attractive man.

And as she studied him, his eyes opened to find hers fastened upon his face. The corners of those eyes crinkled the veriest bit, and he returned her regard with interest, as if it were only natural for him to wake up to the sight of her face. She smiled tentatively, thinking of how rumpled she must be, how tousled her brown curls, and even as her hand moved, as if to tidy them, his lips parted in a true smile, and he gave the slightest shake of his head. She looked fine...*lovely*, her mind whispered...to him exactly as she was, and he'd not have her change a thing.

So she allowed her hand to fall again and basked for the moment in the silent approbation of Severus Snape.