

# Friends, Teachers, Chocolate

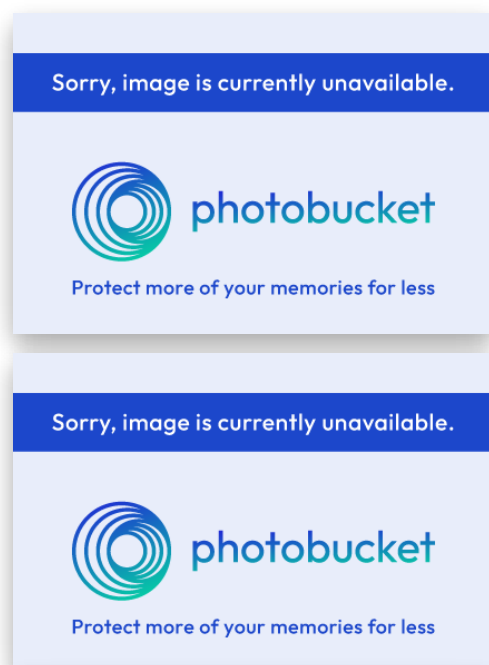
*by peskipiksi*

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## Chapter 1

*Chapter 1 of 6*

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## FRIENDS, TEACHERS, CHOCOLATE

### Chapter 1

Breakfast in the Great Hall was always a rowdy affair, what with post owls flying in all through the meal and dropping letters and packages onto the house tables. That, and the broadsheet-size *Daily Prophets* being opened all along the tables, resulted in several spilled coffee cups and milk jugs every morning.

The morning of 2nd September 1998, however, was even noisier than usual. At yesterday's start of term banquet, Professor McGonagall had given the news that Professor Snape would be returning to his job as Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. This pronouncement had been greeted with total silence and then an outbreak of subdued muttering. Correctly divining that the entire school had not forgiven Snape for Dumbledore's death and still believed him guilty, the Headmistress called sharply for silence. After a whispered conversation, during which the Defence master looked distinctly ill at ease, she had explained to the Hall all about Dumbledore's final year and the promise he had extracted from Snape.

It was this that was informing all conversations this morning. Ginny Weasley, who was about to start her NEWT year, couldn't help noticing that any friends of Draco Malfoy were being given a wide berth, even by the other Slytherins. On the other hand, a great many students from the other houses had already come over to offer Snape their congratulations.

A commotion in the Entrance Hall suddenly stopped all conversation. Filch could be heard roaring above the raised voices; 'I know who you are, Robards, and I tell you, you need to make a proper appointment. You can't just go barging in!' Filch's protestations carried no weight, however, as, at that moment, Gawain Robards, Dawlish, Savage and at least half a dozen other Aurors came storming into the room. They strode up the Hall, stopping at the High Table. Robards unrolled a scroll of parchment. 'Severus Snape, I am arresting you for the murder of Albus Dumbledore. You will be taken from this place to Azkaban prison, where you will be held without trial.'

Snape blanched. The Slytherin Quidditch team leapt up and roared something in unison that was lost in the general storm of protest, which had broken out all over the Hall. Professor McGonagall attempted to restore order with several red firecrackers from the end of her wand. She looked as if she was willing herself not to start yelling at the Ministry employees. 'Mr Robards, I assure you there is no need to arrest Professor Snape. These boys are telling the truth he is not guilty.'

Robards cut across her. 'I have a warrant here signed by the Minister for Magic. I've got to take him.'

Minerva leaned over and spoke so quietly her words were barely audible. 'Kingsley Shacklebolt was a member of the Order, as was Severus Snape.'

'As, if I understand correctly, was Albus Dumbledore,' said Robards coldly. 'The Minister considers himself very lucky to have escaped *Professor* Snape.'

With that, the Aurors surrounded Snape and marched him out of the Hall.

That effectively ended the school routine for the morning. While the Heads of House were desperately trying to organize the over-excited, chattering students and shepherd them back to their common rooms, Ginny slipped, unnoticed, up to the Owlery. She wished fervently that Harry were still at Hogwarts. He would know what to do. Ginny had arranged to meet him on the first Hogsmeade weekend, but that wasn't scheduled for a month. The teachers were of the opinion that the students ought to buckle down to some serious work before being allowed treats such as visits to Hogsmeade. In Harry's absence, Ginny's next thought was to write to Hermione. Hermione now worked at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and was best placed to find out just what the hell was going on.

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Hermione, on her morning coffee break, but still at her desk, read her best friend's letter with mounting anger and incredulity. She had always got on well with Kingsley Shacklebolt when the two of them used to meet at Order Headquarters in her fifth year and had been pleased to have him as her boss. He had taken over from Pius Thicknesse at the same time she had applied to train as a lawyer and had personally approved her application. Now, however, her good opinion of him was waning. He reminded her of Fudge, scared into irrationality by anything that threatened his authority, and of Scrimgeour, desperate to secure a conviction to ensure public approval.

Finishing Ginny's letter, Hermione abandoned the pile of paperwork on her desk, announced to the office that she was 'going to prevent a miscarriage of justice', and simply refused to take no for an answer when she demanded to see her superior.

'As you may have guessed, Minister,' she announced, feeling that it was best to keep this meeting formal, 'I am here about Professor Snape.'

Kingsley regarded her intently and repeated the words of the warrant. 'He will be held in Azkaban until further notice.' His deep, slow, sonorous voice seemed to make it more final, somehow.

Hermione dropped her formal manner. 'Please, Kingsley, don't do this. Ye gods, hasn't he been through enough?' She tried to recall herself. This was exactly the point, wasn't it? The Ministry didn't have a clue what Snape had been through. 'Minister, this is exactly what Fudge did with Sirius! And he was innocent too. Forgive me, but I'd have thought you'd have learnt from Fudge's mistakes. You can't send people to Azkaban without trial. Believe me; you're going to be responsible for another huge miscarriage of justice!'

'You know, there's not much I prefer about the Muggle world, but they've got their justice system right.' She grimaced, remembering several high profile cases her parents had told her were on the news recently. 'Bits of it, anyway.'

'What do you know of Muggle law, Miss Granger?'

'My uncle is a barrister. I know enough to know they've got the procedure for cases like this right.' (*We don't throw people in jail without trial for a start, she thought.*) 'They have a hearing before a crown court case a serious charge like murder,' she explained, seeing Kingsley's blank look. 'They examine the evidence to see if there's a case to even answer. Then, if there isn't, you don't waste time and money on a full trial (*and put a man who's just beginning to rebuild his life through hell, she added silently*).

Kingsley had become thoughtful and seemed to be considering it. *Filthy lucre*, thought Hermione, cynically. *Speak to politicians of human suffering and they don't care, but mention saving money and, suddenly, they're all ears.*

'All you'll need is a Pensieve and some Veritaserum.'

'Veritaserum we have, but no one has access to a Pensieve they're very rare.'

'I'll borrow the one at Hogwarts.'

'Dumbledore's? I'm not sure that's ethical using the victim's personal effects in his own murder trial.'

Hermione bit her tongue. Insulting the Minister for Magic would probably not be the best way to get Snape freed. 'Once you actually use the thing, you'll see that Dumbledore would have been quite happy to lend it to save Professor Snape from an undeservedly wretched future. Professor Snape's memories are central to this case, Minister.'

'Memories can be tampered with, and Veritaserum has antidotes.'

Resisting the urge to scream or stamp her feet, Hermione said, with forced calm, 'Every antidote to Veritaserum wears off after twenty-four hours. Just keep Snape under observation for twenty-four hours before the hearing.'

'I will not subject any of my employees to a day with the Dementors.'

'Fine! I'll do it!' The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them.

'You would be prepared to brave Azkaban for a man who used to be your teacher, and who, by all accounts, used to make your life utterly miserable. Why would you do that?'

Hermione hesitated. Why was she doing this? Why was she going to so much effort to help a man who didn't even like her? She knew she'd regret her offer as soon as she got within sight of the fortress. She could only think she was doing it for Harry. His attitude towards Snape had changed dramatically since he had seen Snape's memories of Lily. Hermione hadn't seen them herself, but had been moved to tears by Harry's retelling. She couldn't tell her boss that though that would be seen as attempting to prejudice the case.

Looking into the Minister's face, she saw, for the first time, the toll the job was taking on him. His smooth forehead had the beginnings of lines etched into it and his eyes had a strained look she had never seen there before. *He's terrified*, she realised. *He's freaked out by this case. The Snape he knew in the Order would never have killed Dumbledore; he doesn't know about Snape's past, so all he can do is believe the obvious: Snape's a Death Eater.*

*Unless I do something about it*, Hermione thought, *Snape is going to face this attitude for the rest of his life. And however mean he might have been to me at school, he doesn't deserve that.*

She couldn't tell her boss that, either.

'I saw what a lifetime in Azkaban did to Sirius, Minister,' she compromised. 'I just don't want to see that happen to another innocent man. Especially one as gifted as Professor Snape.'

'If you feel like that, how can I trust you not to aid and abet him, Miss Granger?'

'Because if I did, I'm pretty sure I would lose my job. And, despite what I said to Rufus Scrimgeour last year, I like this job. I told him I wanted to do some good in the world. Well, that's what I'm trying to do now.'

'We would have no time for a hearing within the month.' The Minister looked almost petulant, like a toddler on the verge of a tantrum. *He's determined to punish Snape*, Hermione thought. *My Department could rearrange its schedule if it wanted to.*

'No problem,' she said aloud. 'A month will give me time to prepare.' *I need to talk to Ron*, she thought. *And then buy up every single bar of chocolate Honeydukes can supply.*

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'You're going to do WHAT?' Ron was striding around the living room of Hermione's flat, incandescent with rage, his face almost the same colour as his hair.

Hermione took a deep breath and tried to keep her voice level. 'I've told you already, Ron. Asking me again isn't going to change the answer.'

Ron and Harry had invited themselves over to Hermione's the moment they had received Ginny's scribbled notes, and Ron was not impressed with Hermione's proposed solution to Professor Snape's predicament. Harry had not exactly helped matters by siding immediately with Hermione.

'A Muggle hearing I can't believe I didn't think of that. That's brilliant, Hermione; they'll never be able to convict him once they've seen those memories. Don't envy you though a day with Snape and the Dementors. Brave girl!'

Ron was in no mood for congratulations. 'Why you? Why can't someone else do it?'

'Because it was my idea. It was hard enough to persuade Kingsley to allow the hearing, let alone getting someone else to baby-sit Snape'

Ron grabbed a copy of The Daily Prophet from the coffee table and began tearing the front page into little strips. 'I can't believe you're going to spend the night with him.'

'I'm going to prison, Ron, not on a date.'

'You're still going to be spending the night with him!'

'Ron, by the time I get there, he'll have been in Azkaban for a month; he's not going to have the strength or the inclination to jump me, if that's what you're worried about.'

'Now you're just being disgusting,' Ron said haughtily. He threw the ruined newspaper to the floor and strode to the door. 'I'm warning you, Hermione, if you go ahead with this, we're finished!'

Hermione looked stricken. 'Ron, there's no one else who can help him!'

'So you care more about *Snape* than me?'

'No, Ron; it's not like that; it's work, there's nothing I can do!'

'Oh, well,' said Ron bitterly, 'you've always cared more about work than anything else, haven't you? Don't know why I'm surprised.' And he strode out of the flat, slamming the door behind him.

There was a ringing silence.

'He'll come round,' Harry said, confidently.

Hermione wasn't sure about that. She hoped Snape would appreciate what she had sacrificed for him.

Probably not.

## Chapter 2

*Chapter 2 of 6*

Twenty four hours is a long time in Azkaban.

### Chapter 2

Sure enough, Hermione found herself regretting her rash promise the moment she set out from the Ministry. Even Apparating was not easy with the huge, heavy rucksack she was carrying. Apart from a change of clothes and her toothbrush (this might be a rather unusual sleepover, but she was the daughter of two dentists and old habits die hard), Hermione had brought copious amounts of Honeydukes' best chocolate, large flasks of hot chocolate and several bottles of chocolate liqueur. She had spent a fortune on the stuff, and she was damn well going to claim it back on expenses.

Her spirits were further lowered by having to surrender her wand at the Azkaban gates. The Dementors were not happy at the prospect of one of their prisoners getting a fair trial, but let Hermione and her boss into Snape's cell. Hermione was trying to keep her breathing steady and her mind on the chocolate in her bag. She was feeling definitely sick by now.

Loitering in the darkness of the doorway, she stole a look at her former teacher. He looked dreadful. His hair was, if possible, even more greasy than usual. He had shadows under his eyes and his sallow skin had acquired a waxy pallor.

Trainees at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement were taught the rudiments of Legilimency in their first month. Hermione was, naturally, top of the class, but even she had found it a struggle. In Snape, though, she had an easy target. She caught him off guard, and he hadn't the strength to protect himself, although he realised quickly that he was being targeted and employed Occlumency within a few seconds. Those few seconds, however, were long enough for her to ascertain his mood and see that he was furious. OK. Anger she could cope with. Anger was good. Indeed, for Snape, it was normal. At least he hadn't succumbed to the depression that overwhelmed so many in Azkaban.

She started as she realised Kingsley Shacklebolt was speaking.

'Your trial will take place tomorrow morning, Snape. I have brought your guard.' He pulled Hermione into the room.

Snape stared from Kingsley to Hermione in horror. 'Ye gods! Are the Dementors not enough? Would you torture me, Shacklebolt?'

Hermione snorted softly to herself. Azkaban clearly hadn't affected Snape too badly.

Kingsley took Hermione aside. 'If you can't cope, let me know. We'll abandon the hearing and get you out of here immediately.' He clapped her on the shoulder and left, looking immensely glad to be going and leaving Hermione wondering just how she was to contact him without her wand. She came to the uncomfortable conclusion that she was trapped.

'Right,' Hermione said, trying to keep her tone businesslike. 'Since I'm going to be here for quite a while, I'll unpack.' She took out the heavy flasks of hot chocolate and set them on the desk. It was a particularly inventive piece of cruelty, she reflected, to put a desk in the Professor's room and then deny him ink, parchment and books. She took out the slabs of chocolate. 'That should help us get through this.'

'You have not been here five minutes, and you have already attacked my mind, Miss Granger,' Snape snapped. 'Do not expect me to feel well disposed towards you.'

Hermione refused to be intimidated. 'And I'm getting paid triple time to be here, Professor, so do not think you can get rid of me.' She sighed. She was going to be stuck in this tiny cell with Snape for the next twenty-four hours. She had better make at least some attempt to get on with him.

'Professor,' Hermione began.

'I hardly think that title is appropriate any longer,' he replied with a faint sneer.

'Yes, it is. I'm going to get you out of here, and then you can return to your new job your old job,' she faltered. Snape's employment history at Hogwarts had been rather confusing recently. 'Professor McGonagall's not very impressed with Kingsley Shacklebolt. She'll be delighted to have you back.'

'And is the school still standing without me?' he asked sardonically.

'They're managing. Harry's taking your classes.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'It was either him or Ron. They're Aurors now.' Hermione tried for a smile, but could only manage a weak twitch of the lips. How long could she last without a piece of chocolate?

'Hobson's choice,' he remarked wryly, and she was pleased to see her attempt at a smile returned. 'At least Potter will have some chance of planning classes without copying your notes, which is more than I can say for Weasley.'

Hermione took heart from his slight smile. 'I've brought you something,' she said, offering him a stack of Potions books from her bag. 'They wouldn't let me bring Defence Against the Dark Arts, of course, and I had to read these to check there's nothing on neutralising Veritaserum in there, but I hope they're OK.'

'Thank you.' Snape took the books, but his expression betrayed nothing.

Hermione took out her own books, all easy reading chick lit and romances. Normally she preferred the classics, but she didn't think *A Tale of Two Cities* or Agatha Christie's murder mysteries were a good idea under the circumstances. Last out of the bag came the bottles of liqueur.

Now she had stopped distracting herself with her unpacking, Hermione started feeling sick again. A swish of robes outside confirmed her suspicions. The Dementors were back from escorting the Minister off the premises and had stationed themselves outside Snape's door again. A wave of cold washed over her, and she hastily reached for a bar of chocolate, ripped it open and took a bite. Ye gods, she was going to end up the size of a house if she couldn't get through five minutes in here without a chocolate fix. She just hoped she'd brought enough.

The chocolate made her feel slightly better, but she still felt rather shaky. Lupin had always advised eating a whole bar at a time, but she definitely wouldn't have enough if she did that every time she felt a bit off. Against her better judgement, she opened the liqueur bottle and took a small sip. Then she offered the bottle to Snape. 'You look as if you could do with some, Professor.'

He took a tentative swig and grimaced. 'That is truly vile,' he said, his brow furrowing in distaste. 'What is it?'

'Chocolate Irish cream liqueur,' she replied, smiling at his look of disgust.

'Waste of good whiskey, waste of good cream,' he muttered. 'Could you not have brought Firewhisky?'

'I had difficulty enough getting this past the guards. I had to promise not to give you any. The Dementors don't like their prisoners drunk.'

'Don't worry; I'd rather take the memories.'

She raised an eyebrow in disbelief, and he dropped his gaze.

'Sorry,' Hermione said softly. 'That was below the belt and I didn't even say anything.'

He shrugged, but would not meet her eyes. 'I think about them all the time anyway. Lily, Albus, that night on the Astronomy Tower. It's just that the memories are so much stronger in here. The Dementors make them so much worse. I can't even use Occlumency against them. I could, for about the first week, but it's been getting more and more difficult.' His head was bowed, his eyes fixed on his hands, which were twisting in his lap.

Hermione stared at him. This was so unlike him it was starting to scare her. She had never heard him speak like this before. He had always been so confident, so self-assured. Was this what Azkaban did to people? She had seen Sirius depressed and bitter about his imprisonment, but in someone as self-possessed as Snape had always been, the transformation was unnerving. She searched desperately for something comforting to say.

'It's all right.' Hermione could have kicked herself. 'No, I'm sorry; that was a stupid thing to say. It'll never be all right, will it?' She got up and moved her uncomfortable wooden chair next to Snape's. 'What I meant to say is, I'm going to get you out of here, so at least you won't have to deal with the Dementors any more.'

Snape looked up at her. 'Why are you doing this, Miss Granger?'

'Hermione,' she insisted. 'Kingsley Shacklebolt asked me the same question.'

'And your answer was?'

'The answer I gave him was that I had seen what Azkaban did to Sirius.' She looked away, embarrassed. 'The answer I didn't give was that I wanted to learn more about you. I admire you, and I could not see the Ministry destroy you for a charge of which you are innocent.'

'You *admire* me?' Behind the sneer, Hermione could detect a hint of surprise, even disbelief. She smiled broadly at him.

'I should think the whole school admires you for what you've done these last twenty years!' She leaned forward, trying to engage him. 'And by tomorrow, the whole of the Ministry will too. I'll make sure of that. You've done nothing wrong. You put a sick, frightened old man out of his misery. That took courage, Professor. More courage than anything in the last twenty years, I should think.'

Snape shook his head. 'Courageous? Me?' He gave a short, mocking laugh. 'No, Potter was right. I *am* a coward.'

'What?'

'Potter called me a coward after I killed Dumbledore. And, much as I hate to agree with Potter, he is right.' He raised his eyes, and Hermione was shocked at the anguish and self-disgust in his face. 'I hid. During the final battle. I hid.'

'*What?* Hermione was aware she was sounding like a parrot, but she was so shocked she honestly couldn't think of anything else to say.

'After Flitwick attacked me and I leapt out of the window, I re-entered the castle under a Disillusionment Charm. I knew I had to give Potter the information that Dumbledore entrusted to me before...before he died. I hid in the Room of Requirement until the opportunity arose to lure Potter up to Dumbledore's office and slip the memories into the Pensieve. I was still under the Disillusionment Charm; I could not risk revealing myself to Potter and explaining the situation personally. I knew he would not trust me until after he had seen my memories.'

Snape had kept himself together while he told his story, but now, the self-hatred returned to his face and his voice shook slightly as he continued. 'But after that, I returned to the Room of Requirement. Instead of joining the battle after I had fulfilled Albus' wishes, I lost my nerve and hid myself away again.'

Hermione dropped to her knees in front of Snape's chair. His eyes were cast down again and he was refusing to meet her gaze. This was the only way she could make eye contact with him.

'You did the right thing. What if Harry had needed your help? If you had returned to the battle, you would have been fighting both sides. You might well have been killed, probably by one of our own side, and how would Harry have contacted you then?' She got up off the floor and went to fetch a block of chocolate from the desk. If she was going to have to comfort Snape, she needed to keep her own spirits up. Then she sat back on her chair and offered the chocolate to him. He took a piece and finally looked up at her.

'There is one thing I do not understand. Who told you about my past? You must know about the arrangement with Albus, or why would you defend me?'

'Harry told Ron and me immediately after he killed Voldemort. He feels awful about not trusting you all these years.'

'Of course, I should have guessed. I did wonder if it was Miss Weasley.'

'Ginny? What made you think that?'

Snape toyed with the chocolate, snapping it into precisely equal pieces, but he did not eat it. 'She was in the Room of Requirement. I told her everything. I feared she might do something unwise if I did not. I did ask her to keep it to herself, but I thought she blamed me for the death of her brother.'

Hermione gawped at him. 'Excuse me, Professor, but how did you work that one out?'

'I hid, Hermione! If I had returned to the fighting, I could have saved him. Fred Weasley was only twenty. Nymphadora Tonks was thirteen years younger than me. Colin

Creevey was underage, for Merlin's sake. And they all fought. They didn't skulk in a safe house and let someone else do the work.'

Hermione leant forward and grasped Snape's hands. 'This is Azkaban talking. You've been with the Dementors too long.' She took a deep breath, unsure quite how far to push their enforced intimacy. She decided to risk it; she couldn't keep calling him Professor, and she had already told him to call her Hermione. 'Severus.' He still wouldn't look at her, but he didn't object, which gave her confidence. 'Do you know who alerted me to your arrest? It was Ginny. She was trying to help you.'

'She has reason to hate me.'

'Severus! Listen to me. You gave Harry the memories that allowed him to defeat Voldemort. Your memories saved him. Ginny knows that. This was her way of thanking you.'

'I knew I was sending him to his death, yet I still did it. I hid myself away and left him to die.'

'Dumbledore had a trick up his sleeve, didn't he? That tied-by-blood thing. I don't believe he would have allowed you to send Harry to his death, even to defeat Voldemort.'

Hermione moved her chair right next to Severus' and tentatively put an arm around his shoulders. *He's not going to like this, she thought. He'll pull away in a minute and make some sarky comment, but I've got to try and help him before tomorrow.* His body language, his whole manner was screaming, "I deserve to be here". Of course he was terrified of being left with the Dementors for the rest of his life, but she had to get him to accept his innocence or the memories in the Pensieve would send out quite the wrong message to the court.

*Right now, Hermione thought furiously, I am ashamed of working for the Ministry. That a brave, selfless man should be reduced to this is unforgivable.* For the first time since setting foot in Azkaban, she was glad her wand had been confiscated. She would probably have set light to the furniture in her anger!

But, to her surprise, he didn't pull away. His shoulders stiffened slightly as she slipped her arm around him, but then he relaxed and she felt some of the tension drain out of him.

'Hot chocolate!' Hermione said cheerfully, to save him the embarrassment of speaking. 'It's freezing in here, and I need a chocolate fix.'

With a steaming mug of hot chocolate in her hands, Hermione began to feel better. Snape looked slightly happier once she had persuaded him to eat something himself and to look at the books she'd brought him; he hadn't made an acerbic comment since she first got here, and they were on first name terms. Perhaps she would be able to get through this after all.

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A.N. I know I will not be popular, making Snape hide from the fighting, but I wanted to work out *how* he could survive the war, rather than just say he had. I needed to throw him together with Ginny, and I had to give him something to feel guilty about!

I saw a TV interview with JKR in which she said Hermione went on to work for the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Harry and Ron became Aurors, and Harry taught the occasional Defence class at Hogwarts.

Hobson was a 19th century stable owner who, when you wanted to hire a horse, would rent you the one he decided or none at all. So it actually means no choice at all. The reason Snape uses it (rather than 'Morton's Fork, which means a choice between two equally bad options) is that he perceives Ron to be no use whatsoever, so the choice for substitute DADA teacher is Harry or no one. Morton's Fork would have given Ron too much credence!

The desk-but-no-books thing actually happened to Oscar Wilde in his first three months of imprisonment.

## Chapter 3

*Chapter 3 of 6*

Sometimes you need more than chocolate to help you survive the Dementors. (Torture is only flashbacks to Ch. 23 of DH; it is exactly as it appears in the book.)

### Chapter 3

Hermione's composure, unfortunately, did not last long. Kingsley Shacklebolt had obviously decreed that his employee and her charge were to be well fed, as they were supplied with square meals for lunch and dinner, which, Severus said, made a welcome change from the usual Azkaban diet of bread and water. The drawback to this hospitality was that the food was brought to their cell by the Dementors. It had evidently been prepared at the Ministry, but the couriers were not allowed inside the prison.

Hermione survived the lunchtime delivery by turning her back to the door and swigging hot chocolate while Severus took delivery of the food, but the serving of the evening meal was more problematic. Six Dementors entered the cell, two moving the desk to the centre of the room, and four carrying plates covered by silver domes, side dishes, and jugs of pumpkin juice. There was no need for so many of them, and Hermione had a sneaking suspicion that they were delighted to have an excuse to torment the Ministry trainee and the prisoner they were possibly to lose. Briefly, she wondered if the Dementors were fully back under Ministry control; then the capacity for rational thought left her.

Hermione shrank back against the wall as the Dementors swept around, spending as long as possible in the tiny cell. She reached desperately for the emergency bar of chocolate in her pocket and took a bite, but she couldn't swallow. Her throat was closing up; the room was dissolving in swirls of white fog; she was drowning in the cold. She felt her knees buckle; a voice yelled 'Hermione!', and she collapsed to the floor as she blacked out.

*'Take the prisoners down to the cellar, Greyback. All except the Mudblood.'*

*Bellatrix Lestrange was advancing on her; Ron was yelling, and Greyback was laughing at him.*

*'Reckon she'll let me have a bit of the girl when she's finished with her? I'd say I'll get a bite or two, wouldn't you, Ginger?'*

*Hermione was being dragged across the floor by her hair; then Bellatrix turned her wand on her...*

'Hermione.' The sound of her name brought her to, and she cowered, expecting to be hit by the Cruciatus curse. Strong arms closed around her, and she struggled weakly.

'Hush. It's all right, Hermione,' said a soft voice by her ear. 'Drink this. Drink it.'

A strong, sweet taste touched her lips. Chocolate liqueur. As her panic faded, and the paralysing cold left her limbs, she realised where she was. Snape was sitting on the narrow mattress in the corner of the cell, his back braced against the wall, and she was propped up against his chest as he tried to encourage her to drink. As her breathing returned to normal, Hermione leant back into Snape's arms, feeling too weak to move.

That had been horrible; she must have blocked the memory of Malfoy Manor from her mind, because that was the first time she'd ever relived it. She sniffed a bit, and Severus' arms closed around her again.

'Never mind Dumbledore,' he said furiously, smoothing her sweaty hair back off her face, 'I could murder Shacklebolt for putting you through this.'

'Was my idea,' she murmured. It was very nice, after her moment of panic, to be safe and comfortable in his arms. Her cheek was resting against his pectoral muscle it made quite a nice pillow, really. He was so skinny, she was surprised, pleasantly surprised that he *had* muscles. Must be all those years of carrying heavy cauldrons around the Potions Lab.

She wished she didn't have to get up. Perhaps she didn't; perhaps she could stay here all day. Well, not quite all day; she was sure she could think of something else to do with him, here, in this dark corner with the mattress...

*Don't be ridiculous*, she told herself severely; she didn't think of Snape like that. It was just that she hadn't been held like this in weeks, not since before Ron walked out on her, since she'd chosen Severus over Ron.

There was a bar of Honeydukes 70% cocoa chocolate on the mattress; she reached for it and took a quick bite. She normally wasn't keen on dark chocolate; she'd bought it for Severus who, she reckoned, would probably prefer it to the synthetic, milk-version she favoured. But now she was glad of it the more cocoa solids, the more Dementor-fighting alkaloids it contained. They were what gave you the high, she reflected. *They're also an aphrodisiac*, a little voice in her head remarked. Oh well, at least there was a chemical explanation for her irrational fantasies.

'You should eat the whole bar.' Severus was still smoothing the hair off her face, but now he seemed to be twirling ringlets of it around his fingers, almost absent-mindedly.

*No*, said the little voice in Hermione's head, *given what I've just been thinking, that would be a really bad idea*. Out loud, she gave what she hoped was an off-hand little laugh. 'I dread to think how many calories I've eaten today. I'm going to end up the size of Hagrid.'

Severus snorted softly. 'Women are obsessed with being thin as wraiths. You don't need to worry about that. You are...' He stopped abruptly and looked away, as if he'd said too much.

Hermione held her breath, feeling her cheeks grow hot. 'I'm what?' she asked, trying to keep her voice casual.

'You are worrying unnecessarily,' he finished curtly. 'Now, can you stand?'

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Around midnight Hermione found she simply couldn't concentrate on her books any more. The combination of alcohol and hot chocolate was making her sleepy, and the candles were burning too low to see the page properly. She yawned hugely.

'You should try to sleep,' Severus said, looking up from his own book. 'You take the mattress; I'll sit up here.'

Hermione smiled ruefully. 'It's more than my job's worth to go to sleep with you still awake.'

'You do not trust me?' There was a slight hint of disappointment, even hurt, in his tone that said: *Still?*

'The Ministry doesn't trust you, Severus, I'm sorry. Kingsley Shacklebolt has already accused me of trying to aid and abet you.'

'I would have expected nothing less. The power has gone to his head,' Severus said, trying to stifle a yawn.

'You need sleep too,' Hermione told him firmly. 'Tomorrow is going to be taxing enough as it is.' She looked up at him. His expression was unreadable in the shadows. 'I know how to manage this,' she said, 'but you're going to have to trust me and cooperate.'

She led him over to the mattress and indicated for him to lie on his side, facing away from the wall. Then she lay down with her back to him, so that his left arm was trapped underneath her. The mattress was narrow, and she had to slide right in beside him to avoid falling off the edge.

'I'm sorry it's a bit intimate, but it's the only way. You won't be able to get up now without waking me.' She blew out the candle and tried to get as comfortable as possible on the lumpy mattress. 'At least we might keep each other warm.'

As he lay there in the darkness beside her, feeling her comforting weight against his arm, inhaling the soft scent of her hair, he thought that this might well be the first night he had spent in here when he would be untroubled by nightmares.

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When Hermione woke up, dawn was breaking, and the first rays of weak sunlight were struggling through the barred window. She had shifted in her sleep and was now turned towards him. His left arm was still trapped under her, and he had thrown his right around her shoulder as he slept. Hermione considered. She couldn't get up without disturbing him and, after the month he'd had, he needed the sleep. She studied his face. He finally looked at peace in his sleep the shadows under his eyes had lessened, and the furrows of worry and misery that lined his forehead were smoothed out.

She was exhausted herself evidently the Dementors had had more effect on her than she'd thought. She felt warm and comfortable and, strangely, safe. She had spent all day trying to make him feel safe and confident, and now, even asleep, he seemed to be doing the same for her. She closed her eyes and snuggled into his unconscious embrace. There was nothing to get up for yet, anyway.

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*'I'm going to ask you again! Where did you get this sword? Where?'*

*'We found it,' Hermione sobbed. 'We found it PLEASE!' But before she could even finish the word, Bellatrix Lestrange had turned her wand on her again, and Hermione screamed as fire ripped through her.*

*'You are lying, filthy Mudblood! Tell the truth!'*

*Through her agony Hermione heard Ron's distant voice yelling 'HERMIONE! HERMIONE!', but she knew she would never see Ron again Bellatrix was going to kill her; she surely couldn't survive this pain. She could hear Lucius Malfoy and Fenrir Greyback laughing as she curled into a ball on the floor and screamed and screamed.*

Hermione woke, still in the grip of the nightmare, still screaming. Instinctively, Severus pulled her to him, more to stifle the noise than anything. 'Shh,' he whispered urgently.

'We don't want the Dementors in here.' But, as he felt her shaking and sobbing in his arms, he realised he wanted to comfort her. She was nineteen; she was putting herself through a dreadful ordeal for his sake, and she was terrified. Tentatively he stroked her back, feeling a mixture of acute embarrassment and unexpected tenderness. 'Hush,' he murmured softly. 'You're safe with me. It was just a dream. You're safe.'

She gave a small sob, choked and struggled for breath, beginning to panic again.

'Breathe, Hermione,' Severus instructed. 'Take deep breaths.'

She took a couple of shuddering breaths and finally lay still in his arms. Her head was resting on his chest, her cheek pressed against his skin through the open neck of his robes, and his hands were now stroking her hair, methodically, soothingly. She could smell his scent, even through the other, less appealing, scents of the prison. He smelled warm and musky, and Hermione, still half asleep, inhaled deeply, feeling calm and protected and... aroused. *I can't blame this on a chemical reaction to the chocolate*, she thought muzzily. *There can't be any left in my system, or I wouldn't have had the nightmare. I must be missing Ron.* But that wasn't true. She hadn't thought about Ron for the last month; the man who had occupied her thoughts (and her dreams) was the one lying beside her now.

For, despite her protests to Ron that it was work and she'd had no choice, Hermione now admitted to herself that she had known exactly what she was doing. She had chosen Severus over Ron, and she did not regret her choice at all.

His hair was falling across her face, tickling her, and she swept it back over his shoulder, her fingers brushing against his neck as she did so. Instantly, Severus' whole body tensed. Hermione drew back, afraid she had hurt him, scratched his skin by mistake maybe. She looked up into his face, expecting him to be angry with her, ready to apologise, but was shocked into silence by the look in his eyes. She hadn't hurt him, quite the opposite. They stared into each other's eyes for a long moment, not daring to move, hardly daring to breathe.

'We must get up,' Severus said, eventually. 'The Dementors cannot find us like this.'

Hermione scrambled awkwardly out of bed. 'I'm sorry,' she mumbled, suddenly unable to look at him. 'I don't know what happened. I never react like that to the Dementors. I usually just faint.'

'You are more vulnerable when asleep,' Severus said, his voice gentler than a moment ago. 'It is not unusual to suffer nightmares in Azkaban.'

She nodded and turned away, but he caught her wrist and pulled her back towards him, and she found herself being pressed up against his chest. Again.

'Hermione.' She waited, not trusting herself to speak. Severus looked as if he was fighting the same battle with himself, then: 'Thank you,' he muttered. 'For doing this. For defending me. I'm grateful.'

Hermione held his gaze for a second, then forced herself to turn away. She had to pack up her stuff... and she had to collect her thoughts. She couldn't do this now; she had to stop thinking about what had just happened or she'd never be able to be objective in the courtroom.

She had, unwittingly, crossed a line, one that, she suspected, could make their working relationship rather complicated. Oh, well, at least she only had to get through the hearing, and then she need never see him again. The thought did not comfort her at all.

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A/N Hermione's nightmares and all the speech in them are from DH Ch 23.

## Chapter 4

*Chapter 4 of 6*

The hearing.

### Chapter 4

The hearing, much to Hermione's disgust, was being held down in the same courtroom as Harry's had been three years ago, and, when she entered the room, she was incensed to see Severus was chained to the chair in the centre.

Thick leather straps were buckled across his chest; his wrists were manacled to the arms of the chair and his ankles to the legs. Hermione was reminded, horribly, of an old fashioned electric chair. If she had known they were going to do this, she would have insisted on accompanying Severus to the courtroom when they got to the Ministry instead of accepting Kingsley's offer of time to freshen up. She would even have forgone brushing her teeth if she could have prevented them treating him like this.

Of course, the Ministry still believed Severus to be a cold-blooded murderer and premier Death Eater. Well, in an hour's time they would be begging his forgiveness; Hermione would make sure of that.

Her instinct was to rush down the stone steps to his chair, but she couldn't. She was at work now, with all her superiors watching her. She was Professor Snape's lawyer, not the girl who had spent the last twenty-four hours with him, getting to know him, comforting him, sleeping in his arms. *Stop that*, she chided herself, feeling her cheeks growing warm at the memory. *Act professional!*

'The court will come to order.' Kingsley's deep, smooth voice echoed through the room. He placed the Pensieve on a small table beside the chair and indicated for the chosen judges Gawain Robards (of course), Mafalda Hopkirk from the Improper Use of Magic Office, and longstanding members of the Wizangamot, Grizelda Marchbanks and Tiberius Ogden, to gather round it.

Kingsley approached Severus, wand held out. Severus managed not to flinch, but Hermione could see it was a near thing. Abandoning her professional detachment, she left her seat and ran down the steps of the courtroom to the chained chair. Laying her hand on top of his (she wanted to hold it, just briefly, but the cuffs prevented that) she said, softly 'Let the memories go, Severus. This is what you've been holding onto them for. It's OK.'

The Minister placed his wand to Snape's temple and withdrew a strand of memory. He carried this carefully over to the Pensieve and deposited it onto the surface of the shallow bowl. Then he turned back to the chained chair. 'The prisoner will accompany us.' He flicked his wand and the leather straps unbuckled; the handcuffs and leg-irons opened. Severus stared up at Hermione. 'I can't. I have done nothing for an entire month but replay those memories in my mind. I cannot watch them again.' He lowered his voice to a whisper only she could hear. 'Last night was the first time for a month that I didn't have nightmares.'



She placed her hands on his shoulders. 'You have to. I'm afraid you don't have a choice. I'll be with you. I won't leave you, I promise.'

He looked as if he was going to faint, or be sick, but he nodded. She took his hand and led him over to the Pensieve.

The Minister, the Head of the Auror Office and Ogden went first, bowing over the bowl until their faces touched the surface of the memories, and their feet left the courtroom floor.

Hermione was glad of this, as the two women were much gentler with her and Severus than the men would have been as they encouraged them to do the same. She thanked her lucky stars Shacklebolt had managed to get Dolores Umbridge locked up in Azkaban, for obstructing the truth about Voldemort. Umbridge would have been delighted to be back in the courtroom, throwing her weight around like she did at Harry's hearing.

For the hundredth, the thousandth, time that month, Severus was forced to watch his childhood being played out before his eyes. Hermione watched him carefully. She didn't know how long he would be able to continue standing. He was weak from his month's incarceration, and this was nothing less than mental torture for him. When they got to the memories of his fifth year, she made a decision and conjured chairs for them both.

Kingsley leaned over and hissed, 'The prisoner will stand.'

Hermione's patience snapped. She was aware that any ill-judged outburst now could cost both her job and Snape's freedom, but she'd had enough. 'No. He won't,' she said firmly. 'He can't be expected to take this any more. I set myself up as his lawyer and, as such, it is my job to look after him. As I, too, am exhausted from a night in Azkaban, we will both have to sit. Or are you now treating your own employees as criminals?'

She'd touched a nerve. With an irritable gesture, the Minister turned away from them and ignored them.

They had, by now, come to the part Hermione had been dreading Snape's betrayal of the Potters, and his subsequent discovery of what that meant. As the desperate, inhuman wail rang through the air, he slumped forward in his chair, unable to bear listening to his own grief. Tears pricking her eyes, Hermione hesitated. Given what had happened earlier, she wasn't sure if she should help him. Her first instinct was to comfort him, as he had her, but would he pull away again? He was a proud and private man, and the entire court was watching them. Then his breath hitched, and the sound caught Hermione somewhere below her breastbone. Damn the court; she didn't care what they thought; this was all their fault anyway. She bent over Severus, putting her arm around his shoulders, and, almost imperceptibly, he leaned into her embrace. The court wouldn't have noticed, but she did, and her heart lightened. She did not release him until the scene ended and his breathing calmed.

She raised her head and glared at the others. Tears were pouring down Mafalda Hopkirk and Grizelda Marchbanks' cheeks, and Kingsley Shacklebolt was looking stunned. She met his eyes and, for a moment, she thought he was going to add Lily and James' deaths to the list of Severus' charges, but after a second he turned wordlessly from her and continued watching the scenes being played out in front of him.

When they got to Snape's memory of saving Dumbledore from the cursed ring, the subsequent conversation and his reluctant promise, the court took an awed intake of breath and started muttering amongst themselves. Hermione wasn't going to get her hopes up yet, but she was fairly sure the responses were in her favour.

Two minutes later they were all standing back in the courtroom. Severus was ushered back to the chair (with rather more respect than he had been hauled out of it), and the Veritaserum was produced.

Hermione couldn't see that it was necessary, not after what the court had just been shown. There was no way Severus had tampered with his memories there was no unnatural fog, no inexplicable darkness but four months working for the Ministry had taught Hermione that rules, unlike memories, could not be tampered with.

She reflected that she hadn't had much to do in the actual hearing. Her job had been to see that Severus' case was heard, and to give him moral support. At least he was accepting her help she hadn't been sure, after what had happened earlier, that he would. She smiled inwardly as she allowed herself to relive those moments: the scent of him, the feel of his skin beneath her cheek, of his hands on her hair...

The Minister for Magic cleared his throat, and Hermione realised, with a start, that she had daydreamed through the whole of Severus' statement. The court was ready to pronounce its verdict.

'There is no case to answer. Severus Snape is hereby cleared of all charges of murder and Death Eater activity. And,' said Kingsley Shacklebolt, who was still looking shocked at what he had just seen and extremely ashamed of his own conduct, 'I think we should award an Order of Merlin, First Class, for Services to the Order of the Phoenix.'

He held out his hand to Snape, who, Hermione was relieved to note, had more colour in his face now, and whose hand was perfectly steady.

'Having your victim ask you to kill him is a pretty good defence,' Kingsley remarked, shaking Severus' hand. Then, catching sight of Hermione's unimpressed face, he became suddenly serious. 'My sincere apologies, Professor, for everything that we... no, that I have put you through.' He turned to Hermione. 'You're quite the lawyer, Miss Granger. I shall be recommending a promotion for you with immediate effect.'

Hermione met his gaze, coolly. 'Thank you, Minister. Now, if the Ministry has quite finished persecuting innocent men, I am going to escort Professor Snape back to Hogwarts.'

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A/N: This photo inspired this story. It is a still of Richard Armitage as Lucas North (middle) and Stuart Wilson as Arkady Kachimov (right) in the BBC drama 'Spooks' (Series 7: 2008). To me (with a little bit of wishful thinking!) it is Snape being dragged into the courtroom by Ministry officials. The look in his eyes half fear, half furious defiance is perfect.

□

## Chapter 5

*Chapter 5 of 6*

Back at Hogwarts, Severus and Hermione try to rid themselves of the memory of Azkaban.

Chapter 5

How the hell had it happened?

Striding back through the Hogwarts grounds, Severus tried to focus on the fact that he was free absolved of all guilt. He had an Order of Merlin at last something he had wanted since it had been denied him by the escape of Sirius Black. He even tried to focus on the unpleasant fact that half the Ministry now knew about him and Lily, but his thoughts kept straying back to what had happened with Hermione that morning.

He couldn't seem to rid himself of the picture of her in his arms, himself stroking her hair, and her fingers brushing against his neck. He couldn't tell whether that had been inadvertent, but he was certain she had not been adverse to him this morning. Once the nightmare had released its grip, she had given every indication of enjoying of relishing, even his embrace.

He could have had her then, he realised with a shock; he could have taken advantage of her vulnerable state. If he'd been gentle, treated her with the strange, new tenderness he felt towards her, she would have responded to him, he knew. He had stopped her because he'd feared he would not be able to stop himself.

But he knew he would have despised himself if anything had happened. He would indeed have been taking advantage of her, and that went against all his instincts. Despite all the accusations flung at him over the years, Severus Snape was an honourable man. There had been times, at school, when he had considered slipping Lily Evans a love potion, especially in their fifth year when Potter had been sniffing around her, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He hadn't wanted Lily under an enchantment; he had wanted her to be in love with him, as he was with her. Similarly, he wanted Hermione to give herself freely to him, not because he had taken advantage of a situation they would both later regret.

Severus squared his shoulders and quickened his stride, trying to put some distance between himself and Hermione. That was the first time he had admitted it to himself he wanted her. He knew that, when they got up to the castle, he should just let her make her report to McGonagall and then send her home, but he had a feeling he wouldn't be able to do that.

Hermione, for her part, was feeling guilty. She should be back at work. There was no need for her to be here. Severus could very well report to Minerva himself, and he certainly didn't need escorting through the grounds. His acquittal seemed to have given him back his strength and his temper. He was striding ahead of her as if he didn't want anything more to do with her. But she couldn't face going back to work, where the sole topic of conversation would be the hearing, and she didn't want to go back to her empty flat. She didn't want to leave him.

'We should go and report to the Headmistress,' Hermione suggested. Anything she could do to postpone going home was welcome. They had reached the Entrance Hall; fortunately lessons were in progress and no one was around.

'I will not walk all the way up to the second floor looking like this.' He set off towards the dungeons. 'I am going straight to my rooms to rid myself of these filthy robes before I do anything else.'

Hermione blushed and tried to rid herself of the mental picture he had just conjured up. 'I should go back to work. I'll just see you to your rooms.'

'You are proposing to enter the Ministry in that state?'

She looked down at herself. She had forgotten that she'd been wearing the same clothes for twenty-four hours. 'I can ask Ginny for the password to the Prefects' bathroom.' As she said it, she hoped he wouldn't agree. It was nearly lunchtime, and traipsing up to Gryffindor Tower like this, dodging the gawping students, would be worse than going back to her empty flat.

They reached Severus' rooms just as the bell rang for the lunch break. Slughorn's Potions class began to spill out into the corridor, and Severus pulled Hermione into his rooms before they were spotted by the students. He slammed the door behind them, and she suddenly found herself pinned against it, one of his hands still gripping her wrist, the other above her head where he had pushed the door shut.

'Well, Miss Granger,' he said softly, 'it would appear you are now trapped in here for the next hour at least.'

She stared up at him, trying to keep her breathing under control.

*I shouldn't tease her, Severus thought. She's still confused about this morning. Hell, for that matter, so am I. But I'm serious; she can't be seen leaving my rooms, and if we Floo to McGonagall's office, she'll know we've just come from mine. She really is trapped here until lunch is over.* He had to control his own breathing at the implications of that thought.

He released her wrist, which he hadn't even noticed he was still holding. 'You should have a bath here, Hermione,' he said more gently. 'It might make you feel better.'

'So should you.' Hermione looked up at him, eyes sparkling. Even with her newfound post-Azkaban confidence, she didn't feel quite brazen enough to suggest he share hers, but she hoped he would take the hint.

He led her through his office, though a small living room, to the bathroom. Another door led off the bathroom, presumably to his bedroom. Hermione found her eyes drawn irresistibly to it, and had to tear her gaze (and her thoughts) away. The bathroom appeared to be modelled on the Prefects' facilities: a large sunken bath with the usual array of gold taps. Severus turned on several of the taps and steaming hot water began to fill the bath. When the bath was full, he turned to the airing cupboard to find extra towels.

Hermione was so cold and achy that she undressed and got in without a second thought, but she was quite sure he was sneaking glances at her in the mirror as she did so. She hoped so. She was damned if she was going to go back home without discovering if there was anything in what had happened this morning. She hadn't been able to stop thinking about it since they left the prison. Hagrid had claimed that being released from Azkaban was like being born again, and, despite her exhaustion, she had to agree with him. Her libido, which had lain dormant since Ron had left her, had returned in heaping measure.

And if Severus *had* been spying on her, there was hope that he wanted her as much as she wanted him.

Hermione closed her eyes and sighed luxuriously as the hot water enveloped her chilly skin and soothed her aching muscles. If she felt like this after one night in Azkaban, how must he be feeling after a month? Maybe she was expecting too much of him, she reflected, remembering her own words to Ron: *'He's not going to have the strength or the inclination...'*

'Is there room in here for two?'

Hermione opened her eyes to see that Severus had stripped off his robes and was climbing into the tub beside her. He had obviously taken her hint. *'Well,'* she corrected herself smugly, *'he's certainly got the inclination.'*

'I should think there's room in here for your entire Quidditch team.'

'What a revolting thought. I have no intention of sharing you, and especially not with those little thugs.'

Hermione felt her cheeks turn pink, and not just from the hot water. *I have no intention of sharing you.* That sounded promising. She took a deep breath, plucking up the courage to make the first move. 'Come here,' she instructed. 'Let me wash your hair for you. It certainly needs it.'

He glowered at her, and she smiled sweetly up at him through her lashes. 'I've always wanted to say that to you.'

He settled in front of her and closed his eyes. 'You know, for the first time in my life, Miss Granger, I agree with you. Especially if it means you'll continue to do that.'

She was rubbing shampoo into his hair, massaging his scalp, and he was clearly enjoying the experience immensely. When his hair was finally clean, she moved her hands down to his shoulders, her fingers working out the tension in his muscles. Severus relaxed against her, his head resting back on her shoulder.

Eventually, he tore himself away and ducked down under the water to rinse off the lather. When he emerged, his dark hair was slicked back across his shoulders and water cascaded down his shoulders and back. Hermione caught her breath and he turned to look at her.

'Your turn.'

'Not yet.' She pulled him round to sit back against her again. Gently, she swept the curtain of wet hair off his neck the same gesture that had caused all the trouble this morning, but now she was in a position to follow it up. She bent her head and kissed his jaw, just below his ear. He groaned and turned his head slightly, allowing her better access. She kissed her way down until she couldn't reach any further, then wriggled out from behind him and made to continue her way across his chest.

With a groan, Severus grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her round, sitting her in his lap. 'Definitely your turn.' *Before I lose control completely*, he thought. *I want the upper hand here. She has been entirely in control of the last twenty-four hours, but I'll be damned if I won't be in control in my own rooms, in my own bedroom.*

He pulled her down to sit between his legs, and she gave a little smirk of satisfaction as she felt him pressing against her back.

When he'd finished washing her hair, running her curls through his fingers, he slid his soapy hands downwards. But he didn't stop at her shoulders; his hands slipped lower, massaging the soapy lather over her breasts. He wouldn't have dared do it if she hadn't made the first move every time; she had invited him in here; she had touched him; she had kissed him.

Hermione arched her back in pleasure, pushing herself further into his hands. His fingers traced circles around her nipples, which stiffened as he brushed his thumbs against them.

When she could bear no more teasing, she spun round in his arms and kissed him, twining her fingers in his wet hair, pulling him towards her. His arms closed around her and pulled her even closer.

They broke apart and she just gazed at him, dizzy with arousal. He traced the line of her mouth with his finger, stopping to pull gently on her bottom lip and exaggerate its curve. He leaned forward and kissed her lower lip, drawing it between his own, and she arched into him again, wanting more. The bath was lukewarm by now, but Hermione didn't notice; her skin was burning wherever it touched his.

Severus shivered slightly. 'The water is getting cold,' he said. 'We should get out.' Taking her by the hand, he helped her out of the tub and led her across the tiled floor.

'Where are we going?' The minute the question was out of her mouth, Hermione despised herself for its naivety. She might be half his age, but she wasn't an ingénue, so why was she behaving like one? Nerves, she realised. This wasn't the Ministry or the courtroom she had no experience here.

He smiled at her embarrassment and inclined his head towards the bedroom door.

She let out an involuntary giggle. 'We're dripping wet! We'll soak the bed!'

'You have a point.' Severus reached for one of the huge, soft towels piled on the steps to the bath as Hermione reached for her wand.

She shot a jet of hot air at her hair, drying it in seconds, and looked at the towel in his hands. 'My way's quicker.'

'Ah,' Severus said silkily, running the towel across her shoulders and following it with his lips, 'but... my... way...' (He was punctuating each word with a kiss.) 'Is.' (Across her breasts... ) 'More.' (Down her stomach... ) 'Fun.'

The two per cent of Hermione's brain that was still capable of thinking wondered if she had heard right. Did Professor Snape just use the word "fun"? Then that two per cent joined the rest of her in surrendering to the pleasure as he knelt in front of her and began running the towel up her thighs.

His hands stopped millimetres short of where she wanted them to be, and she whimpered in frustrated desire.

His lip curled into a smirk (Hermione's stomach flipped funny how that gesture, which she had once detested, now seemed impossibly sexy), and taking her hand, he led her to the bedroom.

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Hermione lay in Severus' arms, her head resting in the hollow of his shoulder, her fingers idly tracing patterns across his chest. She took a deep breath. There was something she wanted to ask him, but she didn't want to break the mood. She decided just to ask; she had to know.

'Severus?'

'Hmm?'

'Can I ask you something?'

'No doubt you'll find you can.'

'Did you ask Harry not to tell anyone about your history?'

'Yes,' Severus said shortly, not looking at her.

'But why? If you had told people, told the Ministry, after Voldemort died, this would never have happened.'

Severus sighed. He had hoped he had put all this behind him. And this was certainly not the time or place to be discussing it. But he supposed he couldn't hide the truth from her.

'Hermione, Hermione.' He sounded faintly exasperated. 'If I were to explain about the pact with Albus, about my, for want of a better word, "double life", I would have had to reveal the reason I turned my back on Voldemort all those years ago. And if anyone but Dumbledore had known about that, what would they have thought of me? At best I would have been pitied, or mocked. I would have become a laughing-stock, my feelings sullied. At worst the public would have thought I had betrayed Lily deliberately.'

Hermione gasped. 'No one would think...'

He cut across her. 'They would believe I did it to remove James Potter from the equation, from the triangle, to clear my way to his widow.'

'Even now?'

'Even now. People do not forgive easily.' Severus gave himself a little mental shake. He didn't want to go into this now; he was not going to get maudlin. This was a new start for him.

But since she had mentioned it, there was something he felt he had to ask her. 'Would you rather none of this had happened?'

Hermione grinned. 'Well, of course, I'd rather not have spent hours with the Dementors, but I'm glad I got to know you better.' She started tracing patterns over his skin again.

'Well then, one good thing has emerged from this mess,' he said with satisfaction, watching the progress of her fingers.

Hermione decided the atmosphere needed lightening. 'Yes, you know how to deal with Dementors now.'

Severus bristled with mock indignation. 'I have always known how to deal with Dementors, Miss Granger.'

Hermione grinned at him. 'Are you sure, Professor? As far as I remember, Harry recommended using chocolate in that essay in our sixth year, and you gave him twelve and a half percent for it!'

He laughed a deep, rich, genuine laugh she thought she would never tire of hearing. 'Perhaps that was rather excessive. But I am trying to be serious. This isn't easy for me; I am not used to this sort of conversation. I want to thank you properly for coming to my rescue. I wasn't very articulate in my thanks before we went to the courtroom.' He looked down at her and began to twist her curls around his fingers again. 'It just shows what an effect you've had on me. I am *never* lost for words! But I think knowing that someone in the outside world trusted me, believed in me and was fighting for me...'

'Even if it *was* the last person you'd have wanted to see.'

'Even if it was the last person I *thought* I would enjoy spending time with knowing you were fighting my case for me when everyone else had abandoned me that stopped me losing my mind.'

'I haven't thanked *you* for looking after *me*. If work ever tries to make me go to Azkaban again, I think I'll probably have to resign. Only you stopped me going mad in there. I thought I'd be OK; I thought I could deal with the Dementors.'

'Just as you thought you could deal with a twelve-foot mountain troll in your first year?'

'Actually that was Harry and Ron. I was just covering up for them.'

Severus groaned. 'Why does every conversation we have lead back to Potter?'

Hermione laughed. 'OK, OK; I won't mention him again, I promise!' She turned in his arms so that she could look up at him properly. 'What do we do now?'

'We should go and see the Headmistress before she starts sending panicked owls to the Ministry, thinking they've locked me up for good.'

She slapped his shoulder lightly. 'I'm trying to be serious now. I meant what do we do about this? About us?'

Severus suddenly became very still. 'Is there an "us", Hermione?'

'I'd like there to be.' Hermione held her breath. *Please don't let him say this was a one off; I couldn't bear it. Please don't let him say he can't have a relationship, and least of all with me.* She tried to keep her tone casual as she voiced what she prayed he *wasn't* thinking. 'Mind you, I dread to think what the staff will make of it. And the students. After all, only eighteen months ago, I was *your* student.'

'Do they have to know? You're the one who knows all the secret tunnels in and out of the school, Miss Granger.'

Hermione gawped at him. 'I never thought I'd hear Professor Snape advocating sneaking out of the school! Anyway, I don't want to sneak around. If we *are* together, I want everyone to know.'

'There will be plenty of time for that. I ought to let the school get used to me being happy for once. I need to get used to it myself!'

She let out the breath she had been holding. He did want to be with her; he just didn't want them to be common room gossip-fodder. 'Professor Snape happy? Half the school will faint with shock!'

'Oh, don't worry; I won't let it affect my professional demeanour. I must maintain my status somehow. The little brats will be gossiping about me already. I shall have to put a stop to that!' He sobered immediately. 'While I was in Azkaban, I promised myself that, if ever I got out, I would make the most of my freedom.' He bent his head and kissed her. 'And, thanks to you, I have the rest of my life ahead of me.'

He was right, Hermione realised as she reached up to kiss him back. Twenty-four hours might seem like a lifetime in Azkaban, but they had the rest of their lives to finish what those twenty-four hours had started.

## Epilogue

Chapter 6 of 6

The Ministry issues an official apology in *The Evening Prophet*.

### Epilogue

Dinner in the Great Hall was always a rowdy affair, what with students bemoaning, in loud voices, the amount of homework they had been given, and post owls flying in all through the meal, dropping copies of the *Evening Prophet* onto the house tables.

The evening of 2nd October 1998, however, was even noisier than usual. The broadsheet size newspapers being opened at every table showed a huge photograph of a scowling Professor Snape with the single-word headline above it: **VINDICATED**.

Smaller pictures at the bottom of the page showed an exhausted, but beaming Hermione and a very sheepish-looking Kingsley Shacklebolt.

Ginny Weasley, a month into her NEWT year, glanced up at the High Table. Seated beside the Headmistress were Professor Snape and Hermione. Hermione was still

beaming and no longer looked exhausted. In fact, she seemed surrounded by a sort of satisfied glow, which couldn't be explained entirely by her triumph over the Ministry. Snape didn't look as pleased with himself as Hermione did, but at least he wasn't wearing his habitual scowl.

Professor McGonagall had persuaded Hermione to stay for dinner, which seemed to have turned into a celebration feast for Snape's release.

'If they see me with you now,' Hermione had reasoned with a thoroughly unconvinced Severus, 'they won't be so surprised when they see us together in the future.'

Now she leaned over to him. 'Read that,' she whispered, restraining herself from touching his hand as she passed him a copy of the paper.

## VINDICATED

Minister for Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt, today issued a full and unconditional apology to Severus Snape, Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, for the month he spent incarcerated without trial in Azkaban prison, after the teacher was found not guilty of the accusations levelled at him in a first-of-its-kind hearing yesterday.

Professor Snape stood accused of the murder of Albus Dumbledore, former Headmaster of Hogwarts, and of nearly two decades of Death Eater activity.

Miss Hermione Granger, trainee at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and one-time student of Professor Snape, single-handedly campaigned for him to receive a fair trial. In recognition of this, Miss Granger is to have her training fast-tracked by the Ministry and, upon graduation, will head the newly created Department for the Prevention of Miscarriages of Magical Justice.

During the hearing, under the guidance of Miss Granger, the court learned how the killing of the alleged victim was, in fact, euthanasia pre-planned between Professor Snape and the terminally ill Albus Dumbledore.

Professor Snape was also revealed as an undercover agent for the anti-Voldemort movement The Order of the Phoenix.

Several high-ranking members of the Wizangamot, including Tiberius Ogden and Grizelda Marchbanks, today called for Minister Shacklebolt's resignation, but both Miss Granger and Mr Snape have demurred at the suggestion.

'Mr Shacklebolt is a very competent Minister and an excellent employer,' said Miss Granger diplomatically. 'This is the last in a series of political errors inspired by You Know Who's reign of terror and, that reign now being over, my client is willing to put this regrettable incident to rest, rather than subject the magical community to further upheaval.'

Reading from a prepared statement this afternoon, the Minister said: 'I deeply regret the distress caused to Mr Snape. In my haste to secure justice for Albus Dumbledore, I over-reacted. I allowed fear to cloud my judgement, for which I sincerely apologise. I am prepared to step down, should the tide of public opinion flow in that direction.'

Professor Snape, who declined to comment, has accepted an Order of Merlin, First Class, in recognition of his services over the last 17 years to the protection of the wizarding world.

Hermione looked up from the paper to see Ginny grinning broadly at her from the Gryffindor table. She might have been Ron's sister, but Ginny had been thoroughly embarrassed by her brother's behaviour towards her best friend and was delighted to see Hermione looking so happy. Ginny was the first of many to come up and offer her congratulations to Snape on his release, to Hermione on her groundbreaking victory and forthcoming promotion.

Beside Hermione, Minerva McGonagall smiled to herself. Oh, they were being discreet, yes, but she had a fairly shrewd idea that something was going on. Kingsley Shacklebolt, in a fit of remorse, had sent her an owl with the verdict the moment Severus had been released – and yet it was a good three hours after that, clean, tidy and surrounded by the satisfied glow that Hermione still seemed to be wearing, that they had come to report back to her. Well, she wasn't going to push them; they had the right to tell people when they were ready. Hopefully, Severus would be a bit easier to work with this year, Minerva thought with another smile. She glanced down the table to where Severus and Hermione were still bent, heads together, over the *Evening Prophet* article. Professor Snape and Miss Granger? An odd choice – for both of them. They had thoroughly detested each other when Hermione was at school. Well, if it made them happy, who was she to judge? He deserved to be happy, and she needed someone more her intellectual equal than Ronald Weasley; the Headmistress had always thought that.

Even so, Minerva would have given fifty galleons to know what had gone on during those twenty-four hours in Azkaban.