Haunted

by ayerf

Unspeakable happenings at Hogwarts.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 2

Unspeakable happenings at Hogwarts.

Chapter 1

"Where are you going?"

Hermione jumped, sheathing her wand when she recognised Ron's voice. Surprising her tended to be dangerous these days, after her hellish year. Ron was lucky not to be hexed, lurking on the stairs outside Ginny's bedroom.

"Hermione?"

She gritted her teeth at the demanding whine of her name. Better answer him before he verbally mangled anything else... "To the Ministry."

Ron scowled. "The Department of Mysteries?"

"None of your business," Hermione snapped. He'd been there when she got the letter from the Head Unspeakable, and seemed determined to make up her mind for her on the matter of whether she was going to be an Unspeakable. Honestly, one kiss in the heat of battle, and he thought he was her keeper! She elbowed her way past him.

Ron followed her every footstep to the Burrow's fireplace, protesting all the way. "Don't go! You won't be able to talk to me about your work, or to anyone else!"

'Since when can I talk to you about things like that? Anything to do with schoolwork leaves your eyes glazed over' Hermione counted to ten until the urge to say as much passed. "I'll be able to talk to people with Unspeakable clearance, Ron. That's restricting, I'll grant you, but hardly no one."

"Not me or any of our friends! Why not join me and Harry as Aurors?"

"I never wanted to be an Auror."

Ron waved an impatient, dismissive hand. "Yeah, I know, you wanted to take Spew further. Why not do that? I'm sure Kingsley could get you into that Department if you asked him."

"Maybe I will, one day. But I need to know more before I stand any chance of changing things."

"What about your NEWTs, then?"

She almost tripped. That was a bit rich coming from *Ron* of all people!

"Repairs at Hogwarts are still going on, and like you, I have special dispensation to skip NEWTs if I want to, or to take them whenever I want without needing to go back."

And she already knew she would pass them as the job offer from the Unspeakables mentioned that they already knew what her results were, and that they were expecting her. Today. Before she had even taken those exams.

Hermione reached for a handful of Floo powder. Ron's hand closed around her wrist when she went to throw it into the fireplace.

"Let go of me," she said, fighting to remain calm. She'd never liked to be manhandled, and after being at Bellatrix's tender mercies it had become a phobia of sorts.

"No, not until you listen to me! I'm your boyfriend!"

She saw red. The next thing she knew, her wand was digging into the side of his neck. "Let go," she snarled. "You are only my friend and not even that if you don't stop trying to control me."

Ron snatched his hand away as if he'd been burned. "Control? Hermione, I'm not...I only...I didn't...I *love*..."

"No, you don't. Oh, you do love me, but only as I love you. Friends, Ron. Nothing more." She lowered her wand, shoulders slumping. "I might have loved you as something more once, but you killed that when you left."

"When I... But that was the Horcrux! You know I didn't..."

"I wore it too, you idiot. It brought out the worst in us but didn't create anything that wasn't already there. I'm sorry if that kiss during the battle made you believe there was anything more between us."

"I'm sorry too," Ron snapped. "Just... go away. Be an Unspeakable if that's what you want, I don't care."

He stormed off. Hermione watched him go, torn between anger and loss. With any luck he'd accept the truth when he calmed down, and they could be friends again when his wounded pride had recovered.

She stepped into the fireplace and tossed in the Floo powder.

"The Ministry of Magic!" she cried above the roar of cool green flames.

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An Unspeakable was waiting for her just inside the door to the Department of Mysteries. He looked up sharply, tucking his pocket watch back into his robes. "You're late," he rasped, his voice not unlike what a crow would sound like if one could talk.

Hermione blinked, checking the time on the watch strapped to her wrist. Had Ron delayed her that much? But no, she'd allowed plenty of time. "Sir? I'm here for my interview at ten." Hopefully that would point out the fact that she was five minutes early without causing offence.

"Really? I saw you for that last week."

Last *week?* In her experience, Time-Turners could not go that far back. Besides, all of them had been smashed in the battle here two...

The Unspeakable dangled a familiar hour-glass pendant in front of her. "You'll need this."

Of course... they must have kept most of their Time-Turners behind the scenes. It was stupid to think that she'd seen all there was to see here during that misadventure after her OWL exams.

"To get to my interview? But..."

"Never mind that, there is a limit to how far a Time-Turner can go back, you know. Delay much longer and we'll have to assign you another partner, and the amount of paperwork involved in that makes me very unhappy."

Hermione took the Time-Turner. It felt heavier than the one she'd used during her third year. "Sir..."

"I know I'm the Head Unspeakable, but call me Croaker, girl. Everyone else does."

Hermione wondered if it was a nickname or if his voice just happened to suit his name. Come to think of it, his nose was a bit beaklike too, if not as extreme as Snape's.

Snape... It still bothered her after the month since that last battle that they hadn't found his body. She should have remembered sooner, then they could have treated him in death with the respect he had deserved in life. Granted, she *had* remembered before anyone else, but only after someone had time to steal it.

"Granger?"

"Oh, sorry, s...Croaker. I was wondering if the weight of Time-Turners has anything to do with how far they can go back."

He nodded. "The heavier they are, the further back they can go. Only up to a point, mind too heavy and they won't take you anywhere."

"And this one?"

"Up to forty-two days. Don't try to turn it back any further beyond that limit, or it'll decapitate you when it gets too heavy. Those chains don't break, you know." He fingered the deceptively fragile thread of metal.

"You mean if I go back, say, a month, and tried to turn it back another month when I was back then?"

Croaker slid a finger across his neck. "Although funny you say a month back... because that's when you're going. Now that unpleasant business with Voldy-thing is over, I want you to retrieve your assigned partner."

"Severus Snape?" Hermione guessed, half-hoping, half-dreading. That Snape should have a chance to survive was great, but much as she respected him for all that he had done, she didn't like the sound of Snape as her partner. He would never respect her the insufferable know-it-all as an equal.

"Excellent, you already know each other!"

"He taught me," she said shortly. The less she remembered of it, the better. Not the knowledge gained from the actual lessons, of course, but his treatment of Gryffindors in general and her and Harry in particular. 'I see no difference' still stung her fragile self-image. "I didn't know he was an Unspeakable."

"He's been one longer than you've been alive. Sort of, anyway. We kept him as a sleeper agent, and he's eminently compatible with you."

"Compatible?" Hermione squeaked. That couldn't be what it sounded like, could it?

"Our Arithmantic matching is never wrong. Oh, don't worry, I mean platonically. As your partner. But if you ever wanted more, you'd be equally well matched for that, too." He winked at her. "It's how I met my wife."

"Does Snape know this?" Considering she felt like she might faint, her voice was amazingly steady.

"Certainly, it's a well known perk of being an Unspeakable. A free matchmaking service, as there's no silly rules preventing romantic entanglements between colleagues."

Hermione dropped her burning face into her hands, praying that the floor would swallow her. She'd been nervous about this interview, despite the guaranteed job. She should have been more concerned about being mortified to death.

She forced herself to look back up. "Snape does not like me. I don't like him much either, come to that. He was a horrible teacher! He called me names!"

"The lady doth protest too much," Croaker crowed, grinning at her. "That was his way of pulling your hair, no doubt. His misguided way of showing he likes you. The Arithmancy never fails, it's true love if you let yourself..."

"I don't! Stop it!" He was joking. He had to be. Playing with the new girl.

He tapped the side of his nose. "Don't worry, I won't say a word. You'd better be off to save your man."

"He's not my...Oh, forget it!" She turned to leave. It would be best to go back at Hogwarts. In theory she should appear close to wherever she'd been at the time, but it was best not to risk Splinching or whatever might happen across this distance.

She almost ran into Croaker as he rushed down the corridor. Towards her. She looked behind her through the open door. He was still there. A double by Time-Turner usage? Polyjuice?

The Croaker in the corridor pulled out his own hour-glass pendant in answer to her question. "Before you go, you'll need this too." He offered her a vial of crystal clear liquid. "Phoenix tears." He ran off.

That was true... it was all very well going back to get Snape, but he'd definitely need something to heal him after Nagini tore his throat open.

And she'd better pay Harry a visit before she made use of the Time-Turner. She'd have to be in the Shrieking Shack at the same time as Voldemort. A Disillusionment Charm wouldn't fool him; she could only hope that an Invisibility Cloak would. Especially as that cloak was one of the Deathly Hallows... except Dumbledore had been able to see through it. Was that a quirk of being master of the Elder Wand, or could he detect people by their magic?

'Breathe, Hermione. You can't die yet, you have to be interviewed by Croaker first.' Or so she hoped. In theory the laws of time travel would not allow a paradox to occur, but in practice? Those who meddled with time tended to die. For all she knew it was someone Polyjuiced as her that made it to her interview. There were no guarantees, not with this.

She really should just walk away from this madness while she still could.

Except if there was any chance she could save Snape, she had to take it. There was no love lost between them, but maybe he'd be different when he didn't have to act like he hated Gryffindors in general and Mudbloods particularly. That and no one deserved to die like he had. Or hadn't, if she had anything to do with it.

'Damn.' She had to go back. *'I'd better get my affairs in order before I go. I wish I'd managed to find Mum and Dad, but at least this way they won't even know I exist if I die.'*

"Oh, Granger, you'll need this too." Yet another Croaker had appeared from the direction of the lifts. He thrust another vial into her hands before he ran off again.

Blood Replenishing Potion. She flinched, remembering the pool of blood that had been all that was left of Snape. Still, hopefully it was a good sign that Croaker was providing all of this. That it meant she wouldn't get herself killed. That Snape would live...

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As soon as Harry had disappeared back into the tunnel after Ron and her past self, Hermione threw off the Invisibility Cloak and dropped to her knees beside Snape. She heaved him onto his back, yanked the stopper out of the vial of phoenix tears and tipped half of them directly onto the gaping wound in Snape's throat. The rest she poured into his mouth, praying he was still alive enough to swallow. That her past self and her friends hadn't dawdled too long.

She heaved a sigh of relief when his throat moved and he began to cough and splutter. He still looked more dead than alive, even his thin lips white, but at least Nagini's bite had almost vanished, closing right before her eyes. He blinked, the spark of life returning to his dark eyes.

Hermione waited until he had stopped choking before she gave him the Blood Replenishing Potion. While phoenix tears in his airways would be quickly absorbed, the contents of the potion would not help him there.

Snape gulped down the potion when she put the vial to his lips, his pallor quickly returning to what passed for normal with him if she was that pale, she'd be in dire need of the same potion she'd just given him.

He reached out and grasped the dangling Time-Turner around her neck and inspected it closely. The expanding nature of the chain kept it from causing a friction burn on the back of her neck, but it still tugged uncomfortably.

"Croaker sent you." He glanced up at her for a moment as she nodded, before glaring back at the Time-Turner. "Damn him. Damn him to hell!" he spat, tossing the Time-Turner back at her.

Hermione opened her mouth and closed it again. She had no idea what to call him. He wasn't her professor any more. Mr Snape sounded odd, and 'Severus' would be both awkward and presumptuous. It wasn't long since he'd taught her, after all. "Snape." She settled on. "What..."

"What's wrong? I'll tell you what's wrong, Miss Granger. If you're here because Croaker sent you back, that means you must be my new partner." A sneer contorted his face, his words dripping with contempt. "I have no desire for a partner, least of all a know-it-all Gryffindor!"

"Then by all means let Croaker know that so we can be reassigned. I'm not exactly thrilled about this either!"

"Not on your life." Snape rose to his feet, grimacing at the blood soaking his clothes. He raised his wand, clearly about to Vanish it.

She leapt up, shuddering at the sticky blood that made her trousers cling to her lower legs. "Don't! That bloodstain must be left, it's there in the future."

Snape curled his lip, pointedly Vanishing only the blood clinging to him, leaving the pool on the floorboards untouched. She flicked her wand at herself to deal with her own, praying she'd visualised the spell right or she'd Vanish her clothing too. She stifled a sigh of relief, thankfully not suddenly starkers in front of Snape.

"As I was saying, much as I neither need nor want you as my partner, it cancels out the life debt I would otherwise owe you. Our *bond*..." He grimaced almost as though the word pained him. "...negates such things, as it is part of the duty of such a role to protect each other. After the Potters, I have had quite enough of life debts."

"I imagine you have," Hermione muttered, trying not to be too miffed at his obvious displeasure with being saddled with her as his partner. After all, she was no happier about it.

"That and this is most likely Croaker's revenge for when I refused a partner during my time as a sleeper agent. He cared for the paperwork that caused as much as I cared for James Potter."

Hermione frowned. That did sound plausible, except Croaker had explicitly said that she was meant to be with Snape, be it platonically or otherwise. How did that fit in with it being a personal grudge against Snape?

"All the same," Snape murmured. "For you to be assigned as my partner, we must be... compatible." He looked her up and down, a strange expression on his face. Like Ron's when...

'Oh. Oh my...'

When he was aware for the first time that she was a *girl* a pretty one at that and surprised by that fact.

Hermione blushed and tried to resist the urge to squirm, uncomfortable. But, oddly, she was not repulsed. Croaker hadn't been joking about romantic potential, then. Or he was and played it on everyone, including Snape...

Snape cleared his throat. "For you to have come back, the Dark Lord must be dead. Or soon will be, in this timeframe. Potter... is he..."

Hermione picked up Harry's cloak, glad that it hadn't landed in the blood. She looked up sharply at Snape. Was that regret in his voice?

Of course. He thought his memories had sent Harry to his death.

"Harry's fine. Or will be. Volde..."

Snape flinched and made urgent shushing motions.

Right, the Taboo was still in place. That and saying it around Death Eaters seemed to pain them.

"Sorry. You-Know-Who did kill Harry, but either the fact that he really killed his Horcrux instead, or the fact that Harry was the master of the Elder Wand at the time... well. Harry came back to life in time to finish off You-Know-Who for good."

"Brat's like a cockroach," Snape muttered, shaking his head in disgust. Yet she could see the relief in his eyes. He might not like Harry much, but he hadn't wanted him dead. "A Horcrux... I thought as much. Dumbledore refused to tell me exactly what it was, but I had my suspicions."

Distant footsteps in the tunnel made them both turn towards it, wands at the ready.

"We can't be seen!" Hermione hissed. Even if it was friend, not foe, the risk was too great. She darted to Snape's side and threw the Invisibility Cloak over them both.

Snape slipped an arm around her. She stiffened in shock at the willing touch and the proximity of his warm body. "We should leave," he breathed in her ear, sending a shiver down her spine. With that, he twisted them both into Side-Along Apparition.

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They emerged in the Ministry of Magic, right inside the Department of Mysteries. Snape must have special clearance to do that, perhaps due to the current regime... or was it because he was an Unspeakable? She'd have to find out, as that would be a useful perk.

No one was in sight. Hermione swept off the cloak, bundling it up under one arm, nudging Snape's hand in the process. He abruptly let go of her as if burned, muttering an apology. She wasn't the only one to feel discomfited, then... Although it took him long enough to realise he was still holding her after Apparating. Maybe it felt oddly natural to him, too, for all that it was uncomfortable in its unfamiliarity. The fact that he'd been her despised teacher a year ago didn't help, but that only explained the oddness. It did not explain why it felt so *right*.

Unless Croaker really was telling the truth, and they were perfectly matched partners. She'd need to see the Arithmancy behind it before she'd believe the nonsense about it being romantically compatible too, though.

'But was it nonsense?' She eyed Snape as he summoned his doe Patronus and sent it for Croaker. Ignoring his *charming* personality for a moment, he did possess many of the qualities she'd ideally want in a man: intelligence to match or even surpass her own, academic interests, a quick wit, and a sarcastic sense of humour. With any luck he also loved books as much as she did and was not as obsessive about Quidditch as Ron. His lean body was...

"Miss Granger," Snape drawled. "Perhaps while we wait you can tell me more of what happened while I was presumed dead. If you have quite finished *admiring* me."

Hermione mentally slapped herself. She had *not* just checked out *Snape*, had she? No, worse, he'd caught her doing it. Her face burning, she opened her mouth to apologise, and paused, glaring at him.

"Just returning the favour," she snapped. "If you can't keep your eyes to yourself, why should I?"

The anger faded as soon as the words were out of her mouth. She blushed harder, mortified. Had she really just said *that* to Snape? At best he'd treat her to the sharp side of his tongue, at worst... She cringed. If he wanted to hex her, she doubted she'd best him in a duel.

But Snape blanched and looked away. "I... apologise," he choked out. "I behaved most inappropriately. I may not be *in loco parentis* of you anymore, but I was once. Not that long ago."

"It's not your fault. I think we can blame Croaker. He put the idea in my head, and I bet he put it in yours too."

Snape nodded. He raised his eyes to meet hers, still troubled. "Damn him. It's still no excuse. I am responsible for my actions, unless that idiot laced those phoenix tears you gave me with a love potion. Which I would have noticed, and I don't even like you, let alone love you."

Hermione bristled. He didn't have to be rude about it! "I don't like you either!"

'How mature of me. And rude, too. My only excuse is that his manners must be rubbing off on me.'

"Good. Remember that and this partnership will be tolerable. Don't let Croaker fool you into thinking there's anything more between us."

"So stubborn!" Croaker chuckled from a doorway behind Snape. "In denial, both of you."

Snape snarled and turned to face Croaker, his wand in hand. "You are the deluded one around here, you old fool."

"Why don't we agree to disagree?" Hermione edged between them. She was relieved when Snape pocketed his wand rather than jab it into her back. For all that he claimed to dislike her, he didn't seem to want to risk hurting her. Something to do with the bond of partnership between them, maybe?

Croaker sighed. "Very well. I'll drop it, if only to keep the peace. You'll see in the end. They always do."

"Stick to business," Snape snapped. "Dumbledore was a meddler too, but even he knew better than to meddle with my private life."

Snape had a private life? Between his work as a teacher and as a spy, and his lingering obsessive love for Harry's mother, how had he found the time? He'd recognised the Time-Turner around her neck as an Unspeakable model. Perhaps he had his own?

"You know what happened to Dumbledore," Snape stated ominously.

"That he ordered you to kill him, yes. Everyone knows that. Or will know that. Harry Potter has a big mouth. Rest assured I will never order you to kill me, so I'd say I'm safe enough."

Hermione glanced nervously up at Snape. He did not look quite as unhinged as he had that night in her third year when Sirius Black escaped the Dementors with her and Harry's help, but... She hurriedly changed the subject. "Isn't it time I had my interview?"

"Interview?" Croaker blinked. "Oh, eventually. Snape hasn't had his yet either. Come to that, I'm not sure I ever had mine."

"But you said..." Hermione cut herself off. Whenever this Croaker came from, he hadn't interviewed her yet. She'd hate to inadvertently cause a paradox. Especially as, come to think of it, Croaker said he'd interviewed her a week ago still three weeks into the future.

"Then why are you here, if not to interview Miss Granger?"

"Why, to give the pair of you your first mission. And do drop the 'Miss', Snape, no need for such formality between partners." Croaker pulled out a scroll of parchment and handed it to Hermione. "Just a suspected haunting. Nothing too strenuous for two of my best Unspeakables."

Hermione stared at Croaker. She exchanged a bemused glance with Snape. "We're not. You said it yourself, this is our first case. I've not even had any training yet."

"Hmm? Of course you are the best! Or will be, anyway. Technically rescuing your partner was your first mission, and look how well that turned out!" Croaker stepped close enough to pat both of them on the shoulder. "You have a bright future ahead together."

"But... I..." Hermione spluttered.

"Don't worry, Snape will look after you. He's been trained."

"That was almost twenty years ago!" Snape exploded, forcefully shrugging Croaker's hand off him. "I was a sleeper agent, I've not had any missions yet beyond contributing intelligence."

"You'll both be fine..."

"Croaker. There are no guarantees. I will not let you risk us in this way, least of all someone untrained like Granger. Send someone else. I don't care about the paperwork involved, I'll do it myself."

"Kind of you to offer, Snape, but I'm afraid I'm the only one who can fill in the forms. And everyone else is on holiday. Including me, really, so best of luck to you both, and I'll send you a postcard." Croaker turned to leave. Snape grabbed hold of his arm before he could take a single step towards the door.

"Send. Someone. Else."

"Why not have someone qualified for this mission use a Time-Turner?" Hermione suggested, fighting back panic. She was *not* ready for this.

"Good heavens! We don't use Time-Turners when on leave. Speaking of leave, I'm off. Portkey to catch, you know. Cheerio!" Croaker twisted something on his neck presumably his Time-Turner and disappeared, leaving Snape holding onto thin air.

Hermione swallowed hard. "He's insane. They're all lunatics."

Snape clenched his fists, glowering at where Croaker had been standing. "For once, Granger, I'm forced to agree with you. But it's clear to me that there is no place for you on this mission. Go back to school and come back when you are qualified."

It was one thing to feel she wasn't prepared and quite another to hear it from someone else in such a contemptuous, insultingly patronising way*Bastard*. Hermione pointedly ignored him and broke open the seal, unrolling the case file.

'First use your Time-Turner to go forward in time thirty days. Always remember not to risk a paradox.'

Her eyes widened as she took in the location details scrawled on the parchment.

"Unfortunately I can't. There's no school to go back to." She briefly looked up at him from the parchment. "It's at Hogwarts a month in the future, delaying the repairs. Completely stopped them, in fact, after... Oh, no. Filch."

"Why can't they just ignore him? He blows everything out of proportion."

"Not this time. He's dead."

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AN: Many thanks to Kribu, Septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing. A ghost story for Dicky.

Disclaimer: JKR owns the Potterverse. I make nothing from playing in her world and with her characters.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 2

Unspeakable happenings at Hogwarts.

Chapter 2

On hearing of Filch's death, Snape's face had gone rigid, an uncaring mask. Only his eyes burned with feeling. Regret? Grief?

"Put that cloak over us both," he said, his voice clipped and cold. Hermione did as she was told and threw Harry's Invisibility Cloak over them, looking down to make sure it covered their feet.

Snape put an arm around her waist and twisted them into Side-Along Apparition again. They emerged from the dark squeeze a heartbeat later. Hermione looked around. They were just outside Hogwarts, the gates blasted open. Smoke drifted from the ruined castle, the silence broken only by falling rubble. For a moment Hermione wondered where Voldemort and his Death Eaters were, then remembered the hour he'd so *graciously* spared for Harry to give himself up. She nervously looked over in the direction of the Forbidden Forest.

Snape took advantage of her distraction. He reached inside the neck of her top, pulling out the Time-Turner from where it rested in her cleavage. He put the chain over his neck, ignoring her shocked gasp.

"How far into the future?" he asked coolly, as though he hadn't just groped her in the process of retrieving the Time-Turner.

"Keep your hands to yourself!" Hermione slapped his hands away and kept hers over the hourglass pendant, clutching it to her chest, her cheeks burning. "Don't we need to read the case file first? I haven't quite finished it myself yet, and you haven't read any of it."

"There is no point," he snapped. "They only send in the Unspeakables when they know nothing."

The case file was hardly very long, but there was still some useful information in there. Like the three weeks into the future that they were meant to go. Still, no use arguing when Snape was like this. She glared at him briefly before looking down to carefully adjust the Time-Turner. She remembered Croaker's warning; it wouldn't do to add too much time and lose their heads for it.

Hermione closed her eyes as she activated the Time-Turner. It was less disorientating if she couldn't see the change happen. When she opened them, Hogwarts looked a little less ruined, new stone walls in stark contrast with the old, but repairs were by no means complete. The gates barred their way, no longer blown off their hinges.

Snape turned to the gates. Hermione put her hand on his arm when he drew his wand. He looked down at her, eyes narrowed with irritation. "What?" he snapped.

"What was Filch to you?" She bit her lip as he glared at her. It was worth the risk of him biting her head off for nosiness if there was a chance he'd open up to her. If he didn't, how could this partnership possibly work?

She was about to mutter an apology when he looked away. "He was a friend of sorts. Or was until I killed Dumbledore. Back when I was a student, he would punish Potter and Black harshly. On my behalf, I suspect."

And later, when he was a professor, hadn't Harry said something about Filch helping Snape after Fluffy bit him?

Snape cleared his throat. "Much as I hate to admit it... that case file might have some useful information. And I do want to know what happened to Filch."

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him. Snape, admitting he was wrong? Hell must be freezing over. She dug out the scroll of parchment from her pocket and opened it up, eyeing Snape cautiously. "You know of course that we can't..."

"We cannot change what has already happened. I know. Filch is dead, poor sod. But I do want to know how he died. Did that mangy cat of his die too?"

She skimmed the document until she found the right bit. "No, says here that a watching portrait who witnessed it saw her run away right before it happened, yowling loud enough to wake the dead and fur standing on end. Filch just couldn't follow her fast enough. He was killed outside the Great Hall."

"What did that portrait see?" Snape asked, wand tracing some runes on the gates, presumably lowering the wards.

"Nothing. Well, nothing of the attacker, but it's suspected to be a ghost because before Filch died, his breath fogged the air. Hagrid's breath was visible as well."

Snape paused and turned his head to look at her, perplexed. "Hagrid?"

"He's the one that found Filch's body. Mrs Norris led him to it the next day. He removed the body, saying that there was a hostile atmosphere... although I imagine not in as many words, can't imagine Hagrid said that. He didn't want to leave Filch there."

Snape nodded and turned back to his work with the wards. "What was Filch doing there? I know he lives ~~lives~~ lived at Hogwarts, but he should have stayed somewhere else while repairs were going on. He wouldn't have been able to do anything to help without magic. Hagrid at least has his strength."

"Doesn't say. Impossible to ask him now. It happened at night, though, so maybe he was patrolling. Despite no students to catch..."

"Old habits die hard."

"I hope that doesn't mean you'll be taking points from Gryffindor," Hermione muttered under her breath.

"Don't tempt me." Snape chuckled. His hearing must be inhumanly good; she'd barely heard herself say that. "Technically I am still Headmaster, so any points deduction will be logged wherever I am. Anything else?" He pointed at the case file.

"Filch was stabbed. Impaled, even, as the wound went right through his body. But there was no sign of the weapon. Not that the investigating Aurors could search for long, as they were attacked as well, presumably by the same suspected ghost since the temperature dropped for them too."

"Attacked how?"

"Rubble was thrown at them and they were bodily flung into walls. They retreated before someone else could be killed." Hermione rolled up the scroll and sealed it, slipping it back into her pocket. "Hogwarts was declared unsafe, repairs halted, and everyone evacuated from the castle to allow the Unspeakables to investigate unimpeded."

"Unusually sensible for the Ministry. Any speculation that it could be someone else in an Invisibility Cloak?" He fingered the gauzy material covering them.

"Unlikely. The way the temperature dropped with the attacks and the reported malevolent atmosphere indicates spectral activity, or at least it does from what I've read about ghosts." She glared at Snape, ready for some sneering comment about her reliance on books. He didn't say anything, though. Maybe he thought that reading about them was better than nothing. "The Aurors also cast *Homenum revelio* when they were attacked and found nothing."

"Potter's Invisibility Cloak must block that. I've tried it when I knew he was around and up to no good."

"Harry's cloak is... special. It's one of the Deathly Hallows."

Snape snorted. "Why am I not surprised? Potter's head must be even more overinflated than ever."

"You know, if you just gave Harry a chance, you'd realise that he's not just his father's son. Do you really think I'd be friends with him if he was?"

"My apologies," he sneered, tone dripping with insincerity. "Due to Potter's big mouth, you no doubt know I loved his mother. But that doesn't mean I was blind to her faults. Potter only has the worst of her in him."

Hermione clenched her fists until her knuckles whitened, restraining the urge to slap him. Both for insulting Harry, and for the implied insult about her own taste in friends. "You don't know him, not like I do."

Snape didn't even bother to look at her. "As we are to work together, we shall have to agree to disagree for the time being. We do have a job to do."

"Fine," Hermione muttered. "That we do: deal with the ghost or ghosts, or whatever it is." She watched Snape in silence for a moment, attempting to memorise his intricate wand work, when a nasty thought occurred to her. "I thought ghosts couldn't hurt people..."

"Something the know-it-all doesn't know," Severus said gleefully. "Only the wards kept the ghosts from harming anyone if they were inclined to, and the wards fell when the Dark Lord attacked. They have not been recast yet, presumably because parts of the castle might be missed if each part of the castle as it is repaired is warded separately."

She blinked. "But aren't you lowering the wards?"

He shook his head, still intent on his work. "These must be emergency perimeter wards raised to keep whatever killed Filch inside until they fail. They won't keep us safe in there. And I'm not lowering them, just adjusting them so that they let us in."

Definitely not safe... whatever it was had killed poor Filch and driven away Aurors. "...I see why you tried to get Croaker to send someone who actually knows how to deal with hostile ghosts."

"If it is a ghost. There is much that is still unknown about our world. Hence the existence of Unspeakables to investigate it."

The temporary wards were now visible as a faintly glowing dome surrounding Hogwarts. The gates opened, and Snape turned to Hermione. "Stay under this cloak. It might keep you relatively safe, provided that ghosts or whatever it is cannot sense you by other means. And to prevent that..."

He pointed his wand at her feet. *"Silencio vestigia,"* he muttered. Then he rested the point of his wand over her heart, where it skipped a beat. *"Dissimulo odoratio, Dissimulo calor coporis."*

If her rough grasp of Latin was correct, those would silence her footsteps and hide her scent and body heat. Hermione made a mental note of the spells, which Snape must have verbalised for her benefit. If only she'd had them to use when on the run; they would have been invaluable.

She drew her wand to return the favour, assuming that the spells needed to be cast by someone else to be effective.

"Keep your wand to yourself," Snape pushed her wand so that the tip pointed away from him.

"But what about you?"

"I can take care of myself." Snape carefully shrugged out from under the cloak without revealing her.

Hermione scowled at him unseen, but had to admit Snape had a point. Or at least she hoped he knew what he was doing when it came to the situation that Croaker had dropped them in.

Snape took a step towards the gates. She grabbed his arm, looking down to make sure that she hadn't revealed her feet. "Wait! How are we meant to communicate?"

"We don't. Follow my lead, stay close and be silent. Am I correct in recalling that you can do non-verbal magic?"

"Yes..."

"Good. *Silencio!"* Touching him meant that he must have known approximately where she was.

Fuming in silence, Hermione followed Snape through the wards, which let them through with a tingle akin to static electricity. They started up the path to the castle. She could remove the Silencing Charm with a Finite, but it might also end the other spells Snape had placed on her.

That, and Snape might kill her if she did. If Filch's killer didn't get her first...

* * *

"Homenum revelio," Snape muttered once they set foot inside the entrance hall. Hermione watched him carefully for any reaction that might reveal he'd seen something. He shook his head fractionally, no doubt to make it look natural to anyone or anything that might be watching. Yet he looked tense, his posture stiff. Did he feel like he was being watched?

An unpleasant shiver ran down her spine. She looked down to check that she was still entirely covered by the cloak. Nothing poking out... so why did she feel those hostile eyes on her?

She opened her mouth to whisper as much to Snape, only to find his Silencing Charm still in effect.

"Headmaster, you must leave Hogwarts before it's too late!" A portrait peeked out nervously from his bloodstained frame. He must have been the one to witness the attack on Filch and the investigating Aurors.

Snape turned to the portrait. "Can you see anything? Anyone?" While he questioned it, Hermione looked around behind him to watch his back like a good partner was probably supposed to.

"Other than you, Headmaster? No one. *No one* at all, do you understand? They have the other portraits so spooked that they won't come out from behind their frames, and the ghosts..."

"What about the ghosts?"

"Gone! No sign of them, not even those bound here."

Snape took a step back, his body briefly pressing into hers before she stepped out of his way. If he tripped over her, his spells to keep her hidden would be for nothing. "That is unusual. I'm not surprised that Peeves would be inactive, as he does need the presence of students to be making mischief, but the rest of the ghosts? Did you search the whole castle for them?"

"Yes, we portraits all looked for them, back before... before the murder. And the attack after that... if this terror responsible can scare away Aurors, what chance does a portrait have? I can flee to another frame, but if all of them are destroyed? Only those with portraits elsewhere have a chance. You should flee while you still can."

"I'm afraid I have no choice. *Duty* calls." Snape stepped away from the portrait, which sighed and ducked back behind his frame. "Baron! Sir Nicholas! Friar! Grey Lady!" he bellowed. Hermione cringed and staggered back, covering her ears. Presumably as the Headmaster, the House ghosts should respond to his call.

They waited for a few minutes, Snape pacing back and forth, casting revealing charms every now and then. Hermione had her wand out too; it didn't feel safe with it sheathed, not with the feeling that she was still being watched by unfriendly eyes. Still none of the summoned ghosts appeared.

Snape suddenly stopped moving, his head tilting as though he was listening to something. He cupped a hand to his ear. "Listen," he hissed, almost too quietly for her to hear.

Then she heard it too. "Help me! Please, someone, anyone, help me! Help! Please!" A faint cry, becoming louder with every word until it was a scream.

Snape sprinted for the stairs, vaulting them to soar down to the bottom. He really could fly without a broomstick...

"Wait!" The Silencing Charm still held, leaving Hermione staring down at him in impotent fury for a moment before she ran down the stairs as fast as she could, hampered by the need to keep the cloak over her. Snape had disappeared long before she reached the bottom. She could still hear his footsteps, but they faded with every step, eventually lost in the confusing echoes bouncing off the walls of the labyrinth of corridors in the dungeon.

Hermione kicked at the closest wall, her frustration only growing when it made no satisfying sound. *'So much for staying close! I can't do it if you run off without me, Snape, and what if this is a ploy? What if you're walking running into a trap?'*

"Help me, please help me!" The scream for help was close now.

'Now who might be running into a trap?' Hermione sighed as she tried the door to the room the distress call seemed to be coming from. Locked, of course... A quick non-verbal *Alohomora* rectified that.

As soon as she stepped inside the door slammed behind her, knocking her fully into the pitch black room. The lock clicked ominously.

'Alohomora!' Hermione fumbled for the door handle as soon as she'd finished casting the spell. It came off in her hands, and a thick layer of ice coated the door. She jumped back before the cloak could freeze to it, instantly trying an *Incendio*, hoping that it wouldn't singe Harry's cloak.

The flames spluttered out. There wasn't even a damp sheen on the door from the heat before the flickering light extinguished. Without knowing what else was in the room, she couldn't risk anything more powerful, or she might burn herself alive.

'Trapped.' Hermione kept her wand raised and ready, but resisted the urge to cast *Lumos*. If she was stuck in here with something murderous, she still might have a chance if it didn't know exactly where she was.

'Better move from the doorway or I'll be found easily.'

Just in time. She could feel the chill intensify next to her for a moment, then the voice came from right where she had just been standing. "Help me, oh help me, someone help!" The voice changed, distorted by mockery, before it was lost in laughter.

'No... Oh, no. No! I know that laugh... that voice.' Hermione gasped for air, her mind back in Malfoy Manor, Bellatrix's infuriated screams mingling with her own and ringing once more in her ears, as it did in her nightmares. Her knees almost gave way as the echoes of the Cruciatus jolted through her nerves. *'Impossible... Molly killed her! She's dead, I saw her die.'*

"Come out, come out, wherever you are! I know someone is there! Come out and *play.*"

She forced her breathing to slow down. Panicking wouldn't help her, and her breath must be fogging the air. The ghost *Bellatrix* might be able to see it in the darkness where her own mortal eyes couldn't.

'Oh god... Bellatrix. The ghost. She must have killed Filch. And now I'm trapped inside with her...' Where was Snape when she needed him?

"I said come out!" Bellatrix screamed. Hermione flinched, her skin crawling at how perilously close her torturer sounded.

'Got to get out! But if she sees my breath or feels where I am...' Maybe there was another door, unblocked by ice, if she could only find it in the dark... but what if she walked right into Bellatrix's ghostly clutches?

"You bore me. A knife in the dark, Mudblood!"

In that one frozen moment, Hermione only had time for stunned realisation. *'Mudblood? But how does she know who...'*

Something tore straight through the Invisibility Cloak. Something sharp and so *cold*. Pain exploded between her ribs. Her wand slipped through nerveless fingers. She fell to her knees, then collapsed to the floor, jarring the knife blade. A silent scream choked out of her.

It hurt. It hurt to breathe. It hurt it hurt it *hurt*. She put her hands over the wound. Odd... not much blood. And the knife still felt cold despite the warmth of her blood staining it. Ice?

'Not good...' That she could still think was not a good thing. Not when her thoughts were scattered and vague, apart from the recurring *'Oh god it hurts so much stop it please...'*

She also knew that even though the knife or ice knife, whatever it was made of was keeping too much blood from escaping, she could still bleed to death internally.

She had to get away. To get help. Find Snape. But she couldn't move, and all she wanted was for the pain to stop...

Not like she could call for help anyway, thanks to Snape's spells. Ironic that his attempt at protecting her was going to kill her.

Something glowing pale appeared in front of her. She tried to focus her eyes, but it was no use. The glow faded.

"Die, Mudblood!" Even Bellatrix's screech sounded far off.

Was it death or unconsciousness taking her?

Crack. She clung to consciousness at the sudden unmistakeable sound of either a car backfiring or, more likely in Hogwarts, Apparition. The sound of hope. Snape?

Hands grabbed hold of her, jostling the ice blade with another burst of pain...

* * *

Severus staggered to a halt.

Nobody was in the Slytherin common room, where the cry for help had come from, real or fake. Clearly fake unless it was some unhappy invisible ghost reliving her demise. Or his, if it was once a man with the unfortunate tendency to scream like a girl.

He looked behind him, beyond the open door. No one...

"Granger?" No answer. *'Idiot!'* He'd left her behind. He couldn't blame her, either, as he was the one to act like the bat of the dungeons and fly downstairs. Granger no doubt did not have that ability. *'She hasn't completed her schooling yet. I am responsible for her safety, and what do I do?'*

He stiffened as a shiver ran down his spine. *Danger.*

"Homenum revelio." Still nothing, yet the unmistakeable instinct that he was in danger only grew stronger.

"I may be a Squib, Professor, but even I can tell you that spells like that don't work on ghosts." The shade of Filch materialised in front of him. "Point that thing somewhere else," he growled, swatting at Severus's wand, hand passing straight through the wooden shaft. "We were friends once, or something close to it. Not as if I could hurt you anyway, even if I wanted to. And I don't. Got a warning for you."

"What is it?" He lowered his wand, trying not to stare at the silver bloodstains on Filch, surrounding an open wound right through his chest.

"The Granger girl..."

Severus looked up sharply. "How do you know she was with me? You shouldn't have been able to see her," he snapped, the ever growing sense of danger adding to his impatience.

"If you'd just let me finish, the girl's about to suffer the same fate as me." He poked at his mortal wound.

Severus stood frozen as panicked realisation swept through him. That sense of danger wasn't his. It was hers. No doubt some sort of bond wrought by the Department of Mysteries when he accepted her as his partner.

'Concentrate!' He mentally slapped himself. "No! She's protected, spells..."

"Even a ghost with the barest touch of magic like me can see her as long as she's alive. Which won't be much longer."

"Where is she?"

Filch shook his head. "No time for that. I can see some sort of thread of light between you, if you can follow that you can find her."

He must mean the bond alerting Severus that she was in danger. He fingered his Dark Mark. It couldn't be much different than following the thread of Dark magic binding him to the Dark Lord... He closed his eyes, frowning in concentration, teeth clenched.

He emerged from the dark squeeze of Apparition in a cold, dimly lit room. The sight of Granger collapsed on the floor spurred him into action. She was still under Potter's cloak, but her feet were visible... and a spreading bloodstain on the cloak. Guessing where the rest of her was, he grabbed her, lifting her into his arms. She went limp. *'Please don't be dead.'*

An enraged screech drew his attention to the light source, a ghost preparing to throw something sharp at them. He Disapparated, Granger in tow, the only safe location within the castle in his mind: the Headmaster's quarters, which should still have his wards up. While that murderous ghost could get in, she couldn't hurt them there.

'Wasn't that Bellatrix's ghost I saw?'

He pushed any thoughts on the identity of the ghost aside as they emerged from Apparition. He could feel the wards part to allow them entrance; they were safe.

Granger's body jerked in his grip. *Alive.* He removed the cloak. She was clutching at the wound, blood welling up through her fingers. Her mouth was open in a silent scream; his Silencing Charm was still active.

"Finite," he muttered, allowing the end of a choked off scream to escape. While it might be easier to concentrate with no screams, her responses could be useful. Reassurance that she was still alive, for one.

The rate of blood escaping increased. He glanced at the bed. It would be murder to get all the blood out, even with magic. Instead he cast a Cushioning Charm and gently laid her down on the floor. She still flinched... and fell limp again. Unconscious. Or dead...

He felt for a pulse with a shaking hand. At least there was one, if weak and rapid. And now that he looked closely, he could see the rise and fall of her chest with shallow, gasping breaths. Blood started to trickle from her mouth.

"Granger... Granger?" He moved her slack fingers.

He cried out at the sight of the bloodstained blade protruding from her chest, just below her breasts. "Hermione, don't you *dare* die on me."

At the sound of her first name from his lips, her hand latched onto his arm, squeezing weakly for a moment before falling slack.

He Vanished the clothing obstructing the wound. It wasn't sealed by the blade, Apparition must have jarred it. Blood flowed out of the gash at an alarming rate. He murmured an apology at Hermione's choked cry of pain as another *Evanesco* took care of the weapon. While gentler than removing it manually, it still must have hurt. He'd have to work quickly or she'd bleed to death all the faster, her blood now spreading on the floor until he was kneeling in it.

"Stay with me," he half-begged, half-ordered her, before chanting the same incantation he used to heal the cuts inflicted by Sectumsempra.

Mercifully, the wound did not take as long to close as his specialised Cutting Curse, but he kept up the chant until the internal wound would be healed too, once the wound formed a scar rather than a scab. He reached out to gently roll her over, using one arm to keep her from landing in a pool of her own blood.

His lips tightened. As he had feared, there was a matching fresh scar on her back. The blade hadn't just stabbed her but impaled her. He Vanished the blood before he laid her back down, arranging her into the Muggle recovery position. He didn't know how her body would react to her ordeal, but he did not want to risk her choking on her own vomit.

Of course, she was not out of the woods yet. Not with the amount of blood he'd Vanished. She needed a Blood Replenishing Potion, and she needed one *now*.

Severus lurched to his feet and rushed over to the cupboard where he kept his personal supply of potions. A tap of his wand unwarded it, and he started to rummage around inside it. How had it managed to get this chaotic when he was careful to arrange them alphabetically last time he topped it up? *'Peeves. Damn him!'*

And damn himself, too. Tamper proof wards were beyond him, and come to that... damn Dumbledore, as it was his fault that Severus hadn't been able to trust a Curse-

Breaker to put up wards he couldn't manage himself in these chambers.

"Accio," he hissed, visualising the vial in his mind. There was a rattle from within the cupboard. Once the vial emerged, a ghostly hand caught it.

"Pity," an all-too-familiar voice sneered. "Empty. And the only one. I should know. I made sure of it."

The Dark Lord's ghost tossed aside the vial and turned to Severus, floating above the floor. Somehow he looked far less intimidating when his eyes were the same translucent grey as the rest of him.

He drifted over to Hermione. Severus snatched a blanket from his bed and covered her with it, suddenly all too aware that she was half naked. He straightened up and stood between her and the Dark Lord's ghost. While the wards would keep her from any harm from the ghost, he didn't want her exposed to that foul gaze.

"Another Mudblood, Severus?" The Dark Lord looked between Hermione and Severus, raising a hairless eyebrow. "Potter spoke truly, I see. You never did develop better taste in witches after all. All lies... you were never truly my servant."

"Not once you killed Lily Evans. You are no lord of mine,*Voldemort."* To his relief, there was no twinge from his Dark Mark at the name. The Dark L...Voldemort's power over him was truly gone.

"Still pining after that Mudblood? How pathetic. Even this Mudblood would be better she is half your age, a conquest to be proud of despite her tainted lineage."

Severus ignored him, turning back to Hermione and laying his fingers on her neck to check her pulse. Her skin was cool to the touch, alarmingly so, and her face pale, lips tinged blue. Her heart was still beating, but all the more rapid and faint.

Maybe the hospital wing's wards were still intact, including those preventing any tampering with the potions stored there. But if those wards fell with the rest of them and they probably had the ghosts could attack him. He needed to find some of the Blood Replenishing Potion in time to save Hermione, without worrying if he'd get back alive in the first place.

Time...

He pulled the chain of the Time-Turner out from under the blanket and tugged it over Hermione's head until he held the hourglass pendant in his hands. She was lucky that ice blade hadn't struck it, although considering it must have been dangling over her heart, a damaged Time-Turner would have been the least of her problems.

Severus put the chain over his neck and tweaked the Time-Turner's dial. Three hours should be ample time to either find a vial of the precious potion or to locate the ingredients and make some.

"What are you doing?" Voldemort said from behind him, suspicious. "No!"

Severus clicked the dial as if starting a stopwatch. The Time-Turner swept him away just as he felt the chill of Voldemort's ghostly grip on the back of his neck.

* * *

AN: Not perfect Latin by any means, courtesy of Google Translate. I guess it might fit with JKR's spells as her Latin wasn't perfect either.

Silencio vestigia (silence footsteps)

Dissimulo odoratio (hide scent)

Dissimulo calor coporis (hide body heat)

Many thanks to Kribu, Septentrion and JunoMagic for betaing.

Writing the next chapter will be delayed until I've written my contribution to this year's round of the SSHG exchange on LJ.