

Just to Be

by Amarti

Post-DH, EWE. Six years after the war, Hermione discovers a neglected and abused population with no place in a post-Voldemort world and the man who stayed behind to pick up the pieces. A story of reconciliation, redemption, and above all, love.

Prologue: The Forgotten

Chapter 1 of 6

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Disclaimer: I own nothing recognizable.

Hermione jumped at the sound of the door slamming behind her and aimed her wand in defence. For a few seconds, she held her wand and narrowed her eyes, before remembering where she was and relaxing.

Six years had passed since the end of the war, and she still jumped and armed herself at any sudden noise. Residual trauma, the healers had said. Post traumatic stress, the Muggle doctors had said. Whatever they wanted to call it, it lingered. True, it was not nearly as bad as it had been in the first year or so after the war, when she awoke with nightmares each night and practically had to drown herself in dreamless sleep potions to get any rest at all. Every day, every month, every year, it got better. She had long since given up hope that it would go away completely.

"Right this way," the director, Miss Glastonbury, said. Hermione nodded and followed. It was one of her first assignments since she had transferred to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. She was here to perform a basic review and audit of the Ministry Home for Children. The Wizarding orphanage. Where many of the war orphans had ended up.

"Of course since so much time has passed many of our original charges after the war have since been adopted or sent to live with family," Miss Glastonbury continued in a crisp voice not unlike Minerva McGonagall's but lacking the Scottish brogue. "And many have come of age or left for Hogwarts. But there are still some who return here in the summers, and we still do have some young ones who have been here since the war ended. And that's where I will be taking you now."

They walked down a narrow, dark set of stairs toward what looked like a large basement. Or a dungeon.

"They live down here?" Hermione asked.

Miss Glastonbury nodded.

"Full time?"

Miss Glastonbury nodded again. "We tried keeping them upstairs with the other children, the ones who have lost their parents in the years since the war, the 'transitory'

ones we call them because they are almost always adopted or sent to family right away. But these are our more...permanent residents. They don't remember their parents, thank God, and they have only known this place. They are scared around others. They... act out. So for their own safety and, in a way, comfort, and that of the other children, we thought it best to keep them down here. Together."

Hermione was too horrified to scribble this down on her clipboard. Not that she would need notes to remember it.

"How can you... I mean it just seems cruel. It's like a prison."

Miss Glastonbury stopped and turned to look down her pointed nose and through her cat-eye glasses at Hermione. "I assure you, Miss Granger, if I could find homes for them, I would. And if I could get them to interact with the outside world, I would. These children have problems. Anger problems. Nightmares. Uncontrolled magical outbursts. People have been hurt, Miss Granger, some of them very seriously." Hermione said nothing. "I resent your implication that we are in the business of cruelty here. We are not. I love every child in here like my own."

Miss Glastonbury's tone clearly indicated that she did not, in fact, love all the children in this home.

"Do they ever leave?"

"We try. They do not want to."

"What about their health? Education?"

"We have healers and tutors who come to them. Unfortunately, it's a bit of a revolving door. Most who come do not last very long. Many others only come for a short while under various agreements with the Ministry, usually community service as sentences for minor infractions."

"Criminals are teaching and taking care of them?" Hermione raised her eyebrows in incredulity. What other horrors will I discover here?

"We would never let anyone dangerous near the children, Miss Granger." Miss Glastonbury's voice became dangerously calm. Hermione nodded. "I have to take my volunteers where I can get them, since permanent staff have been difficult to retain. In fact, only in the past few years have I had a constant member of staff dedicated to this group."

"I'd like to interview whoever that is, if I may," Hermione said. "For the report."

"I may be able to arrange that. He may not agree."

"You cannot direct him?"

"This is not a man to be directed easily. He works quite independently. It was a condition of him coming here. I was not in a position to negotiate that."

"Interesting," Hermione mused. "Is there any evidence of war trauma among these children?"

Miss Glastonbury nodded gravely. "Some of the most severe I have seen."

"You, um, you said that they have no family. Were their entire families...?"

"No, just their parents."

"And they have no other relations?"

"None who are willing to take them in."

"And no one is willing to adopt them?"

"Not after they learn who these children are. I have come close, so close, so many times to finding them homes. I now believe it to be impossible."

"But... why?" Hermione could not understand how or why a group of children had been completely isolated after the war. All but swept under the rug and forgotten.

"Why?" Miss Glastonbury stopped before a large bookshelf and pulled a thick registry off the shelf. Opening it to the right page, she held it out to Hermione. "Read for yourself. This is as far as anyone really needs to look. This is as far as anyone has ever looked."

She read the parchment. It was a list of names. Rosier. Mulciber. Macnair. Avery. Lestrangle.

Oh my God. Comprehension dawned. She looked up and met Miss Glastonbury's eyes. The older woman's eyes were filled with sadness and resignation, as was her voice when she finally spoke.

"You see now, Miss Granger, why no Wizarding family, relatives or otherwise, is willing to let these children into their homes. These are the children of the Death Eaters."

Old Souls

Chapter 2 of 6

Hermione gets others involved

Nothing gets Hermione's juices flowing like a Cause...

"You just cannot imagine how horrible it was," Hermione said later that night in Grimmauld Place. Across from her chair, on the sofa, sat Harry and Ginny, their eyes gaping. She was bound by confidentiality to not speak of things she saw during open investigations and audits, but decided Harry should know about this. Of all the people in the Ministry, in the Wizarding world, the Chosen One might be able to do something about it.

Harry always insisted that Hermione come to Grimmauld Place whenever she was in London for work, for a cup of tea or a drink at least. It was a remnant from the war. Not knowing the whereabouts of his friends for long periods of time made him anxious, fearful that something had happened to him. Ron had joked about getting him a clock like his mother's, but Harry had just rolled his eyes and snapped at Ron that if it was wrong to be concerned with the whereabouts of his friends, he didn't want to be right.

Harry absently rubbed Ginny's stomach. She was seven months along with their first child, a boy. There was no question that he would be named for Harry's father. When he wasn't rubbing his wife's stomach, he was resting his hand on top of it protectively. Another remnant of the war, Hermione thought. Protective of everyone he loves.

The three friends, in their early twenties, had lived through horrors that most people could even dream of after a lifetime, let alone by their eighteenth birthdays. Friends at this age should be drinking cocktails and gossiping about friends and forging careers. Not cleaning up the mess of a war. Not struggling to recover from its effects.

"Their eyes..." Hermione went on. "They were so... hollow. So old. You know what I mean? These children have old eyes. There is no curiosity. No wonder. No love. Not even fear or anger. Just..."

"Devoid," Ginny whispered. Hermione nodded.

"And all of their parents are dead?" Harry whispered. The subject hit close to home, as Hermione had hoped it would. She hoped that if anyone could look past the parents to the plight of the children, it would be him.

Hermione nodded. "Or serving life sentences in Azkaban. Or Kissed." Harry shuddered. "Most of them do have living relatives, Muggle or magical, but none of them want to take them in. They're afraid of being associated with them, seen as supporting Voldemort, even after all this time. Most of them went so far as to change their own names. I looked it up in the records office after I got back. The children in that orphanage are the last in Wizarding Britain to have those surnames."

"I just can't believe..." Harry's voice trailed off as he contemplated the hand on his wife's stomach, feeling his son kicking beneath. "I just can't believe that the Ministry, the post-war Ministry, would do this to innocent children."

"You're surprised?" Ginny said. "I'm not. Some of the faces may have changed, but the bureaucracy hasn't. There are prejudices, grudges, things that just don't go away overnight. This is the same Ministry that let the Dementors guard Azkaban. The same Ministry that locked away Sirius for thirteen years without a trial. The same Ministry that gave that Umbridge woman free reign at Hogwarts. Kingsley's done a lot, but he can't change everything, and many of the same officials from before the war are still there. Hell, Harry, you see it almost every day. Complain about it almost every day, too," she said with a wink.

Harry sighed. "Orphans...war orphans...have enough to deal with as it is. Every day of their lives they experience loss and pain. They don't need mistreatment and cruelty on top of it. I mean, from what you've described, Hermione, they might as well have thrown the children in Azkaban with their parents."

Hermione nodded. She had thought the same thing during her visit.

"Nobody cares," she said sadly, staring into her glass of wine as if it held all the answers. "That's the problem. Nobody thinks about it. Everyone was so generous in their outpouring of support for the war orphans, of finding them homes, but they all conveniently forgot that the Death Eaters had families too, or at least some of them did. And you know that I have no love for them, and I'm glad that they are either dead or rotting in Azkaban. But..."

"Their children are not their parents," Harry said, finishing her sentence. "Yet they're being punished for it."

"I don't doubt that they grew up hearing the propaganda of their parents. But that doesn't mean they still agree with it. Or that they ever did to begin with. I mean, do either of you remember things you heard when you were three? And agree with it still? I know I don't!"

"If the war taught us nothing else, it's that people can change their long-held beliefs when given the right influence and motivation," Ginny said. Harry took her hand and squeezed it. They all knew who she was referring to.

"Speaking of whom," Hermione said. "I think he's working there with them. Snape." Their heads snapped up towards hers. "I mean, after he recovered from the attack and finally got out of St. Mungo's he just sort of dropped off the face of the earth and no one's seen him nor hair of him for over five years. There's only one permanent staff member who takes care of these kids, or who teaches them at least. A teacher. And he demanded complete autonomy and independence. And confidentiality. The director also told me that he is not a man who negotiates. Now, who does that remind you of?"

"But why would he do it?" Harry asked. "He hated their parents as much as we did. More so, probably. And he's probably responsible for the deaths or imprisonment of half of them."

"I think that's why he would do it, if it is him," Hermione said. "I mean, think about it. He hated your father. Hated him. Probably still does hate him. And yes he loved your mother, but I don't think that's the only reason he spent all those years protecting you. I think he felt guilty for the role he played. I don't think he ever stopped feeling responsible for orphaning you. We all know the guilt ate away at him for years, decades. I think that made him feel responsible for your safety. And you're right...he betrayed, killed, and passed on information leading to the capture of these children's parents. I could see him feeling the same responsibility to them that he felt to you. He would have been in a position to know if these people had children. Maybe he even met them. He definitely taught the older ones, and almost all of them were in his House. And didn't Sirius even say that, once upon a time, most of these people were his friends? Didn't your mother even say that to him, once? Maybe he feels responsible for orphaning his former friends' children."

Harry nodded slowly. "I hadn't thought about it that way, that he would feel responsible for those left behind. I always thought it was love and guilt for what his actions did to my mother, not what he did to me."

"Well, really, they are the same thing. And he'd be a monster not to feel bad about orphaning children," Ginny said.

Silence thundered. Each and every one of them was responsible for the death of several Death Eaters. For that they felt no guilt. But they had never considered that they might be depriving innocent children of their parents, vile and sick and evil as they were. The realization hit them all hard.

Their eyes met but they said nothing. They all knew they hadn't thought about that, they all felt horrible guilt, and there was no point in talking about it.

"You want to do something about it," Harry said finally, draining his cup of tea. He never drank alcohol and only kept a wine in the house for guests.

Hermione nodded. "I do. I can write a useless report that will be filed away in some drawer and never read, but I want to do more. I want to bring...attention to this problem. I want to change this. I mean it's not like we can force families to take these children in, but we could attempt to raise awareness. Get them some services they desperately need...counseling, healing, more teachers. The Ministry has not hired anyone since Maybe-Snape to teach these children. They rely on wizards serving community service for things like violating the Statute of Secrecy or misusing Muggle artefacts. There is no continuity, no stability. The place and the children remain, but everything else remains the same. That cannot be healthy. These children are traumatised by the war and they know, I'm sure, the legacy of their parents. They need more services than anyone else in that orphanage, but they get the least."

"Voldemort grew up in those conditions," Harry said softly. "What you're describing sounds a lot like what I saw in Dumbledore's memories of Voldemort's childhood."

Another long silence passed between the three friends.

"I don't know what happened to the ones who left. The ones who are of age or the ones who ran away before they came of age. I plan to look at Hogwarts' enrollment records; as an auditor I can do that without raising any suspicion. And I can look into what happened to those who have since graduated. Just to see if there's anyone the Ministry should keep its eye on. And to have an idea of what we're dealing with."

"I want to see it," Harry said. "Are you going back?"

Hermione nodded. "Tomorrow. I want to look at the medical records and try to interview the teacher. I'm almost positive it's Snape, which means he probably won't let me within ten feet of him. But I'll at least try to get him to talk to me. Especially if I tell him we want to help."

"I'll meet you there, then," Harry said. "Under the cloak. If I'm spotted there it might attract attention. And I don't think this is the right time for it."

Hermione nodded. Harry's fame had increased ten-fold after the war. Mobbed and hounded everywhere he went. Picture in the paper if he was spotted anywhere outside the Ministry or his home. That was the only reason he and Ginny had decided to settle in Grimmauld Place, despite the painful memories associated with it. It was still unplotable and protected by the Fidelius charm and anti-apparition enchantments, so it provided the Potters with enough privacy to live their lives and start their family.

"I'm glad you're coming," Hermione said. "I really think you'll be able to bring some much-needed attention, and funding, to this problem. You're a good friend."

"This has nothing to do with being a good friend or a bad friend or a celebrity or an Auror or anything else. These are war orphans, they're being treated abysmally, and I know that you're not the type to exaggerate or lie. I believe you when you say these children live in a prison. When I was their age, I lived in similar conditions, though not nearly as bad. So forget thanking me. I'm not doing it as a favour to you. I'm doing it because it's the right thing to do."

Ginny squeezed his elbow with a smile. She was proud of her husband. Lesser men would have let the fame go to their heads. Not Harry. Few men had his moral compass.

"Will you ask Ron to come?" Ginny said. "You'd be almost guaranteed of success if you had the whole Golden Trio doing this. Solidarity and whatnot. And it might turn the heads of some of the Ministry bigwigs."

"Yeah, I'm supposed to see him tonight anyway. I'll definitely ask him, but I won't bet on him coming," Hermione said. "You know that, of all of us, he believed in the harshest punishments for the Death Eaters and believed the only good Death Eater was a dead Death Eater. I think he blames them all for Fred's death. I can't see him letting go of that. But yes, I will ask."

Ginny nodded, agreeing with Hermione's assessment of the situation.

"I'd best be going. I'll talk to Ron. And I'll see you tomorrow." Giving each one a hug and kiss on the cheek, she left.

"Hermione!" Ron cried happily as he opened the door. He pulled her into a big bear hug and kissed her on the cheek. She laughed and reciprocated. He released her and gestured for her to enter. Ever since George had married Angelina Johnson last year, Ron alone had occupied the flat above Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes in Diagon Alley.

Their relationship had ended amicably five years earlier. Being in the same House, the intensity of the war, the isolation of their search for Horcruxes, and the experience of the final battle in particular had given them feelings of desperation and closeness that they had both mistaken for love. After things had died down and they both began to wrestle with their demons, they determined that not only were they no longer the same people they were before the war, they were not as compatible as they had hoped. Despite this, they remained great friends. It was a great source of comfort to Hermione that the Golden Trio was still together.

Ron invited her in and offered her a glass of wine, but she declined (having had two glasses at Harry's) and instead took him up on his offer of tea. They chatted for a bit about his work at his brother's shop and her visit with Harry and Ginny. At last she got to the heart of the matter and related to him her visit to the orphanage, her desire to help, and Harry's agreement to work with her and visit the next day. She extended the invitation.

"Hermione... I don't know..." he said finally. "I get what you're saying, I really do. And I think it's great, and I hope you succeed. But I don't think I can be a part of this." His blue eyes looked glassy and sincerely regretful. "I really am sorry."

Hermione nodded and patted his arm. The war had matured Ron in ways she never thought had been possible. He could still be his old self (funny, gregarious, an idiot) but he now had the capacity for introspection that had surprised even him. The old, pre-war Ron would have railed about her plan, asking why these children of murderers, rapists, and terrorists should be given the time of day, and that they were no better than their parents. The post-war Ron knew better. He had the wisdom to differentiate between the father and the son. He also knew himself well enough to know that he could not participate.

"I understand, really. There's no pressure. I just wanted to extend the invitation." She smiled.

"I don't want you to think that I'm, you know, blaming these kids for anything."

"I know you're not."

"It's just... knowing what happened, seeing those names, seeing their parents in their faces... I honestly don't know if I'll be able to handle that well. And the last thing, the last thing, I want to do is discover halfway through that I can't do it anymore and leave the two of you to pick up the pieces."

Hermione knew what he was referring to and decided to say nothing on the subject. Ron had never forgiven himself for storming out on them in the tent that night.

"Well, even if you did, it would be understandable. I don't know if we'll be able to do anything at all, or if we'll even be able to see this through, but we want to try."

He nodded. "Keep me updated on what happens, though. If there's anything I can do, you know, off on the sidelines..."

"You'll be the first one I call," she said. "I promise."

Hermione had spent enough time with her best friend to recognise the emotion in his emerald eyes even when his face remained stoic. Today it was hard to read his expression, because there were so many emotions thrown in there together: fear, guilt, anger, anguish, helplessness, and determination were all there. Perhaps others she did could not identify. It wasn't easy in this light.

The children were huddled together in a corner, speaking in whispers. There were about fifteen of them, ranging in age from about five or six to about eleven, just old enough to begin at Hogwarts next term. The eyes, the same dead eyes Hermione had seen the day before, stared at them. Their hair was unkempt, their skin pallid, their clothes ratty. The clothes were surely donations, but likely rejects from other charity drives that had been sent here rather than thrown away. There were no windows and no natural light, just an enchanted low glow from the ceiling that looked almost like a black light. Had any of these children ever been outside?

Strangers were not welcome down here. Even though the cast of teachers, healers, and caregivers changed frequently, they had never got used to seeing new faces. They clearly were shaken, scared, and didn't trust them.

They were all in one big common room with a few tables and a couch that was losing its stuffing in one corner. Harry and Hermione had not gone far beyond the door before the children had stood up from their seats and ran to the opposite corner of the room, as far away from the new strangers as they could get.

They had the look of children who expected abuse. Hermione knew that Miss Glastonbury had lied about not letting anyone dangerous or violent near the children. Some of the "volunteers" had likely lost loved ones to the Death Eaters, and Hermione was willing to bet that more than a few took this as an opportunity for revenge.

"Do you think we should..." Harry began.

Hermione shook her head. "I think it would only scare them."

"I want to say... something, anything... let them know we won't hurt them."

"I don't think they'll believe us."

Harry nodded. "We should go, then." They turned and quietly left through the same door they came in, casting one last look at the children, who were looking visibly relieved that the strange visitors were now leaving. They took care to close the door gently and quietly, so as not to alarm them. They only turned around once the door latched, and they turned around to find themselves standing face-to-face with an imposing, tall, dark figure.

The murderous glare was one they had seen many times before, yet it looked even more intense than they remembered.

Hermione had been right, as usual. Severus Snape was indeed working with the orphans.

"What the hell are you two doing here?" he spat, arms crossed, glaring down at them. Though they were fully-grown adults, neither one could come close to Snape in height. They had forgotten just how tall he was. He was seething. "Who let you in here? Who are you working for? Is this some sort of spectacle to you? Some sort of exhibition?"

"No!" Hermione protested. "I don't know if you've been told, but I'm here conducting an audit, and..."

"And you thought you'd bring your friend with you to see the entertainment? A star tour of the Ministry's wonderful institution?"

"Not in so many words, but yes. I was here yesterday, and appalled by what I saw, and he wanted to see it too."

"Bring anyone else, did you? The press decide to follow you down here to expose them?"

"I'm here to see if I can help!" Harry protested. It struck him at this moment that they could have had this exact same discussion seven years ago, at Hogwarts, during a DADA lesson. The dynamic seemingly had not changed. Snape was on the offensive, accusing, and he and Hermione were on the defensive, protesting their innocence.

Curious how the more things change, the more they stay the same.

For a long time, nobody spoke. Finally, Hermione decided to break the silence. "Maybe we could... sit down somewhere and talk?" Snape snarled at her, and it looked like he was deciding whether to hex them right there or take them outside first and then hex them. Instead, he chose option three and led them through a door down the corridor, which turned out to be his office.

He moved behind the desk, steepled his fingers, and stared at them with his cold, black eyes, saying nothing. After all these years, and all this time away from Hogwarts, it still worked. Harry and Hermione both sat up straighter and waited for him to speak.

He looked... similar yet different. He no longer wore black from head to toe, but a white shirt, charcoal trousers, and a grey jumper. It looked rather... smart. A few wisps of grey hair here and there, and two jagged snakebite scars on his neck, but nothing drastic. His hair was shorter than they had ever seen it. It was soft and maybe one or two inches long and cut in a way that framed his face, rather than the oily black curtains that they had been so used to. At this length the hair flared out a bit and had, well, volume and shape. His skin was a healthier, albeit paler, shade, no longer yellowish. He probably spent most of his time in here. But those eyes, those cold, piercing eyes, had not changed a bit.

Hermione was struck by the fact that even though he was six years older, he looked nearly ten years younger.

He had been unconscious for hours in the Boat House before anyone had come to retrieve his body. Once discovered, everyone had been shocked to discover that he had lost less blood than they had feared (the snake's fangs, once examined, had apparently dulled and not pierced all the way through to his veins, though it had been a very close call) and that the poison had not killed him but rather caused him to slip into a coma. For a full year he lay in a vegetative state in St. Mungo's, blissfully unaware of the publicity and hero worship that followed. They almost wondered if he stayed unconscious purposefully so as to avoid it. Nevertheless, he had awakened on the war's first anniversary, surprisingly healthy, and then vanished into obscurity.

Finally, he spoke, slowly and dangerously as when he had been their professor. "You have breached my security, gawked at war orphans, and scared the shite out of them. Tell me right now why I should not hex you, Obliviate you, and then throw you outside on the curb this very instant."

AN: Story is also posted through chapter 13 at FFN under the same username/story title.

Severus has been rocking the same hairstyle since he was, what, nine? It was time for a change.

Mature!Ron will be a character in this fic, as will the whole trio.

I preferred Severus's death scene in the movie to that of the book so that will be used in this fic, even though the rest will be book canon. I did this for two reasons: 1) I thought that they took an already-epic scene and improved upon it, and 2) I thought he was more likely to survive a rescue attempt if he was attacked on school grounds, rather than in Hogsmeade, which is, what, a mile or two away?

Coming up next: Our Heroes have a chat. Will they see eye-to-eye?

A Modest Proposal

Chapter 3 of 6

Our heroes have a chat.

Severus had heard the alarm from his office and rushed in as soon as he could. There were strangers in the common room. Strangers that had not been vetted by him, who he had not met, who he had not approved.

The security protocol was his design. He had insisted on screening every new "volunteer" that Glastonbury sent down here ever since he had walked in and witnessed a sobbing, irate, grown man kicking a little girl in the stomach, punishment for being the daughter of Evan Rosier as he screamed, "My sister! My sister is dead because of your father!"

Granzela Glastonbury. The woman did Dolores bloody Umbridge proud.

Though he was famous (infamous) for manhandling students and verbally abusing them, he never, ever had raised his hand to a child. And never would do so. Ever. He knew what it was to be a powerless child, at the mercy of a grown man who could do anything. That would not happen on his watch.

He would meet them and interview them, discuss their background and experiences during the war. His real purpose, of course, was to perform Legilimency on the prospects to ascertain their real feelings and motivations. If he was satisfied that the person did not have a vendetta against his charges, he would Obliviate them and send them to the common room. If he discovered that the person posed a danger, he would lead them outside and Obliviate them there. Either way, he did not want it known that he was here. That was the last thing he wanted.

The new protocol had been in place only a few months, and Severus could have kicked himself for not realising the problem sooner. The children never said anything. He was worried they were beginning to think they deserved this treatment from others, and he would have none of that.

They did not deserve that. They would get that through their heads, or he would die trying.

And now, two unvetted persons had entered the common room, setting off the alarm. The children had panicked and placed a palm on the green brick in the wall, the one that raised a second alarm. He rushed out and into the hallway to discover the trespassers, the ones who threatened these children.

Potter. Harry fucking Potter. And the know-it-all Hermione Granger. His only consolation was that Weasley had not joined them. Two he could handle. All three might give him a stroke.

Seeing them both had been... jarring. Especially Potter. Especially since the last time he really, truly had seen Potter was on the floor of the Boat House. Crying (fucking crying!) in front of him. Giving him his memories of his most intimate secrets. (Well, almost all of them.) Believing he was about to die. He knew Potter had come to see him in hospital. Out of guilt, no doubt, and probably with a wish to talk. To talk about her. Potter had attempted contact a few times since, and always, always, he had refused. Seeing him here now, in the flesh, without warning (without fucking warning! He was going to kill Glastonbury) and scaring the children half to death... he could have hexed Potter right there if he wasn't sure it would result in him getting sacked.

No, helping the kids was more important to him than hexing Potter. But only just.

Granger... of course she would be here, tagging along, helping Potter with whatever cockamamie scheme he had come up with. Because that's what she did. She hadn't aged a day, and here she was in all her naïve, idealistic glory. He supposed it was good that not everyone had been completely shattered by the war.

Now they sat before him, and he discovered with delight that he could still intimidate them. They may be adults and war heroes, same as him, but in his eyes, they were still annoying children who broke the rules.

"You have breached my security, gawked at war orphans, and scared the shit out of them. Tell me right now why I should not Obliviate you and throw you outside on the curb this very instance."

Granger spoke up. Of course. "I'm here conducting an audit of the orphanage..."

"You said that," Severus interrupted.

"And when I was here yesterday, I was appalled at what I saw," she continued as if he hadn't spoken at all. That had always annoyed him. "Seeing children, war orphans, treated so abysmally... I was horrified. I told Harry about it, and he agreed we might be able to do something about it."

"I see you have not outgrown your precious saviour complex, Potter. It's a small comfort to know that so little has changed in the last few years."

Potter rolled his eyes. "Call it what you want, Severus, I'm here because it's the right thing to do."

Severus's eyes widened then narrowed at Potter's use of his given name. Potter seemed to notice this because he added, "You're not my professor anymore, we're all adults here, and after all we've been through, we should be on familiar terms with one another."

"We have not been through anything together, Potter," Severus replied, his emphasis on the use of Potter's last name. He hoped that Potter wouldn't bring up the memories, the ones he had given him when he thought he was dying. The memories that Potter had oh so politely decided to place in his Gringott's vault along with a note for Severus stating that he could count on his discretion and if he wanted the memories back, all he had to do was owl the bank and they would transfer the vial of memories (all of them, he promised) into his own vault. And an open invitation to have tea. Tea. With Potter. Out of the question.

"I disagree, Severus," Potter replied pointedly. And stopped there. Even Potter wasn't stupid enough to bring all that up. Thank Merlin for that.

"We're not here to step on anyone's toes," Granger interjected diplomatically. He snorted at that. "And we didn't mean to scare the children. We were not informed of any sort of protocol or anything like that, and we had no idea that we would scare them. I saw them for a minute yesterday while they were eating, through the window, and didn't realise that going inside would scare them. That was my fault, and I apologise. Believe me when I say that we are all on the same side here."

"The Golden Trio on the side of the Death Eaters' offspring? Not bloody likely," Severus muttered.

"Two war orphans who are on the side of other war orphans," Potter retorted. "Who know that life is hard enough when you've lost your parents, especially like that, without being reduced to prisoner status. Regardless of who their parents were."

Severus decided to reply to the only part of Potter's statement that he suspected wasn't true. "You, Granger? I thought your parents were happily hidden down in Australia." He had read the extensive interviews the three had given to *The Quibbler* after the war. Everyone had.

Granger nodded. "They are. And they are unaware that they have a daughter. This isn't widely known, but I Obliviated all their memories of me and everything about their lives in England. Everything. I created new names and identities and memories for them and sent them to Australia for their protection. I..." her voice became shaky. If Granger broke down in his office, he was going to have a fit. Luckily for her, her voice recovered. "I cannot reverse the charms on them. I tried, and I failed. I am as good as orphaned. I have no family to speak to, no one left I'm related to. My parents are now Wendell and Monica Wilkins, not Wendell and Monica Granger, and I'm the last one left in my family. So yes, I too was orphaned by this war. By necessity."

She stared at him challengingly. Challenging him to tell her that she did not know what this was like. While Severus was usually happy to take up such a challenge, he decided that today it was probably best to let this one go.

"So what half-baked plan have the two of you come up with? I hope you've refined that skill in the last few years." He looked at them pointedly, and their eyes widened. They clearly had not suspected that he would invite them to share their proposal with so little resistance.

They had not expected him to invite them to share their proposal with so little resistance. For Snape, this was... nothing.

Harry and Hermione looked at each other for a moment and silently agreed that it would probably sound better coming from Hermione. That Snape had not hexed Harry the moment he laid eyes on him was a small miracle. Clearing her throat, Hermione began to speak.

"From what little I have seen here, the children are in desperate need of services. Real services. It seems that the only continuity they have had here is you and Miss

Glastonbury, who seems to avoid this section as much as possible. So really, it's been all you."

"And you no doubt believe that, in and of itself, is child abuse," Snape said defensively.

"No. No. That's not what I was going to say at all." He really hadn't changed. "I think what you have been doing for them is wonderful. It's a necessary but thankless job. But it's an impossible job for only one person. Even if you've been doing everything you can, and I do believe you have been doing everything you can. But you need help. You need constant counselors in here, real ones, who are well trained in treating war trauma. You need constant healers who understand the very real mental and physical problems these children have and who can see them over and over again and really, truly evaluate their progress. I went to view their medical records earlier today with Harry..."

"You should not have been allowed to look at those!" Snape said, venom in his voice, eyes blazing. "Those are confidential."

"As an auditor for the Ministry, I have access to them, as does Harry. Don't worry, I won't share anything from them with anyone else. But I noticed that many of them have violent outbursts of magic, have self-inflicted injuries, have mental problems. Learning disabilities. What Muggles would call post-traumatic stress disorder. They are malnourished, many of them. Broken bones. Bruises. I could go on and on. I'm sure this isn't anything you don't know already. And then think about their socialization. These children are terrified, terrified, of anyone unfamiliar. And with good reason, I suspect, as they seem to have all suffered from physical abuse. No doubt from some of Miss Glastonbury's 'volunteers', who I suspect she hasn't vetted as well as she claims." She raised her eyebrows at Snape, who tensed and nodded.

"That's what I thought," she went on. "Miss Glastonbury isn't the first person to lie to an auditor, and she won't be the last. Look at all these problems, Severus." He flinched again at the use of his given name, but she ignored it. "You cannot possibly solve all these problems on your own. You have been taking care of their educational, psychological, social, and medical needs for five years. You have to be exhausted. And honestly, you aren't enough for them."

"I am everything they have," he said coldly.

"She's not criticising you; you're doing brilliantly under the circumstances," Harry interjected, trying to keep the peace. He knew what happened when Snape felt insulted and had no wish to relive that experience, even now. "But we think we can help. What you need is more resources. And funding. And better management in this place. We think we can help you with that."

"All I'm really able to do right now is write a report that no one will read," Hermione said. "I don't think that helps anyone. But Harry... whatever he touches turns to gold. There was a tremendous outpouring of money to the orphanage right after the war, and that's dried up in the last few years as everyone has perceived that they have either grown up or found homes. Really all anyone donates to anymore is the Hogwarts tuition fund, correct?" Snape nodded. "So we all know that these children have greater needs than that. So we think if Harry brings attention to the orphanage, points out that there are still children living here full-time, year round, he can get people to raise money for it pretty easily."

"That will not happen when people learn who the orphans are," Snape replied.

"We thought not, too, so that's why we would focus on the orphanage itself. Harry, being one, is the perfect poster child for it. We think we can keep quiet just who is here. I mean, we don't like it, but we think it's better for the children if people don't know who they are, exactly."

"And I also have a lot of influence with many of the higher-ups in the Ministry," Harry said. "I make no promises, but I can talk to Kingsley and see what we can do about the management here. I'd actually like to recommend you for the job; Kingsley will probably go for it, especially if he hears what's actually going on here. We suspect he's just been getting updates from Miss Glastonbury and not looking into it further, what with all the other problems the Ministry faces. We don't think he's deliberately ignored or allowed what happens here, but that he has had so many other concerns...Death Eater trials, property reallocation, social and medical services for survivors, rebuilding Hogwarts...that he has been delegating more than he probably should."

"Anyway," he continued. "I think if we talk to him, we can perhaps get some new management here. Perhaps. I don't want to make promises I can't keep. And if you aren't interested, I'd love to hear of any recommendations or nominations you do have. If you agree, that is," he added quickly.

Snape leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms, and stared at them both for a long time, considering.

The orphanage desperately needed people and money for the permanent residents here. They did need more constant counselors. They did need more constant healers. They did need better facilities. And Severus would not even admit this to himself, but... he did need help.

This job was more full-time than being Head of House at Hogwarts, and that had been the epitome of a full-time job. Head of House was a twelve-hour day on average. He worked eighteen or twenty hours per day here. Not that this was especially taxing on him; he was never much of a sleeper and had functioned on less than five hours of sleep per night for decades. But it was what he was not able to accomplish in the twenty hours per day that he worked that was so disheartening. Every time one of his current or former charges cut her wrists or dropped out of Hogwarts or was arrested for petty crimes weighed heavily on him. He took each such incident as a personal failure. Every one who did not make it was his fault. Because he should have done better.

Because he killed their parents. Directly or indirectly, he killed them.

These two... sitting here in front of him. They made it all sound so easy. They were both so sure of their capabilities. So confident of their influence. They made it sound like within a fortnight they could have round-the-clock staffing, better furniture, and gobs of money to pay for it all.

How foolish these two were. Still.

Just then Granger spoke up again. "I know we're making it all sound so easy," she said. "I don't mean to trivialise the challenges or make it sound like we can make the problems all go away with a snap of our fingers. And we know that even if we, against all odds, can even get half of this accomplished, it's still an uphill battle because we're working against years of trauma and neglect by the Wizarding world. We're well aware of this."

Severus's jaw dropped only slightly before snapping shut again. Okay, so the two had more insight and self-awareness than they had as teenagers. They had developed somewhat as normal adults. He would give them that.

"Anyway," Potter said with a smile, rubbing his hands together. "We know this is a lot to take in, and you probably need to think about it. Just let us know if and when you decide anything. We would like to have you on board going forward, but we understand if you want to keep your anonymity. We know you've worked hard for it, and we don't expect you to give it up on our account. But we'll of course give you advance notice of everything we do as we do it, and you can..."

"Wait a moment," Severus said, sitting up and leaning over the desk. He spoke slowly and deliberately. "You intend to do this one way or the other? I am not a man who misunderstands things, but for your sake I sorely hope that I have misunderstood your intentions."

"Well...", Granger said.

"It's not like that...", Potter mumbled.

"You clearly do not understand the way this place works, Potter, Granger. I wish I could say I am surprised at your lack of thoroughness, but I am not surprised at your complete lack of appreciation for a situation and your naïve notion that you can just swoop in and save the day. Albus Dumbledore may have felt comfortable leaving the lives of others in your reckless hands, but I assure you that I do not."

"These are real children with real problems...problems that not even the two of you can begin to understand. Throwing money at this problem will not make it go away. It

would help, it would help a great deal, but all it would do is give me but a few the tools I need to begin to address these problems. The issues these children face, both now and after they leave, will not disappear, and there are few people equipped to deal with it, and those that are want nothing to do with them. That. Will. Not. Change. Not overnight, not with a giant cheque from the Ministry, and certainly not with by the glow of the Golden Trio. I see only two of you have signed on for this, anyway. Clearly there is already dissent in your ranks.

"You need their trust for this to work, and I can tell you right this very moment, you never will. The only reason they trusted me is because of this," he reached down to the sleeve of his shirt and rolled it up to reveal his dark mark, now faded away into a silvery-white scar. "They all remember their parents having this mark, and it tells them that I am on their side. They do not understand or remember the full significance of it. They only know that other adults they trusted had this mark, and therefore I must be one of them. Unless the two of you are willing to take this mark, I do not believe that there is any way these children will trust you. If they do not trust you, you cannot help them.

"Finally," Severus continued in his best professor voice. "You do not understand that the only thing standing between them and the Wizarding world is me. If I were not here, it would be the revolving door of 'volunteers' that Glastonbury brings in. Do you know how she gets those volunteers? She brings in people who have been sentenced to community service, no doubt, but she also sells 'slots' to those with a grudge against the Death Eaters and who want to take out their revenge on their children. Yes, they have been subject to abuse. Physical abuse. Lots of it. The woman who runs this organization pimps out these children as punching bags or worse. Children. Little children. This will take time, lots of time.

"I have lost so many of them these last five years to crime or substance abuse or worse. Others seem to have just vanished into thin air. And you two waltz in here with your golden reputations and influence and believe you can just fix this overnight. You think you can do this whether I participate or not and whether I consent or not. You need my consent for this to happen. You will not get within one hundred feet of this building without my consent. I don't care how many people in this world worship you as living gods, I am not one of them. I know your shortcomings and your failings and the two biggest ones you share are staring me in the face: an inability to plan and the foolish notion that your mere presence in a situation will save the day.

"I am tempted to simply Obliviate the two of you, but as I am feeling generous today, I will merely tell you to leave and abandon this ridiculous idea. Go home and pat yourselves on the back that you have decided to work for the greater good and that you do not dismiss an entire population of children just because of who your parents are. You can hold onto that and tell yourselves you are good people. But you will not pursue this plan with me, and you will certainly not pursue it without me."

He locked his cold, hard, emotionless eyes on them and spoke very slowly and angrily, the tone of voice he used when he wanted to make students cry. "Now get out of my sight."

"Well," Harry said as they reached the door of the orphanage leading to the street outside, "that could have gone a lot worse."

Hermione just looked at him, eyebrows raised as if to say, "You've got to be kidding me."

"Really, he could have Obliviated us and thrown our arses out on the pavement. We could have forgot about all of this," he went on, trying to convince himself that they hadn't just been handed their arses by their former professor.

Hermione exhaled and leaned against the wall. She wasn't going to kid herself. They had tried and failed. Badly. She did not fail often, but when she did, she knew it. Then again, she was also nothing if not tenacious. She had been rejected by house-elves for years before she finally got laws passed to improve their conditions. She had won over Harry and Ron as friends that first year. She had helped find and destroy the Horcruxes under impossible physical and emotional conditions.

Snape's answer might be no... for now. That didn't mean that he might not change his mind.

"Well, we'll just have to give him some time to digest it and come back," she said finally.

"You're barking," Harry said, sounding more like pre-war Ron than himself. "You want to come back to him? We're lucky we made it out with our memories intact. I think I'm lucky I walked out with my bollocks intact, to be perfectly honest. When he first saw me, I was sure I was going to be at the business end of a hex."

"Do you want to help them or not, Harry?" Hermione said, cutting off his babbling. "It won't be easy, but then when have we ever taken the easy way out of anything? We see a need, we have the ability to at least try to help the situation, and we can do it. We just need to get Snape on our side."

"Did you listen to what happened in there?" Harry asked incredulously. "He doesn't want our help. And he's right, we can't do this without him on board. Blimey, I had forgotten just how scary he was. It's just been me and those memories for so long, the softer side of Snape took over, and I'd forgotten just how angry he can get."

"He wasn't angry, I think he was just defensive," Hermione said thoughtfully. "Think about it, how many people other than us have likely come in there and offered to help those children? I'd bet my wand that we're the first. Oh, we went about it all wrong!" She slapped her palm to her forehead. "Stupid." Harry looked at her quizzically. "Don't you see? He's a Slytherin. They don't just do nice things for each other...no one offers anything without expecting anything back. It's an anathema to their worldview. He fully expects there to be some sort of catch, and when we didn't explain what it was, he threw us out. He didn't believe us when we said we wanted to help. He's certain we want something from him."

"Shouldn't he know us better than that?" Harry asked. "I mean, it's not like we're strangers. He knows this is the sort of thing we would do."

"I don't think it's about that," she said sadly. "I think he mistrusts everybody, and with good reason. And now he feels responsible for those kids, so he's even less trusting than he was to begin with."

Harry nodded, understanding. "I think you're right. We needed to be less..."

"Gryffindor about it."

"Exactly. Well, lesson learnt. What do you reckon we ought to do now?"

"Like I said, give him some time to digest it, a week or two, and then come back and speak to him again. I mean, he can't get more angry after more time... can he?"

Now it was Harry's turn to give her the "Tell me you're kidding" look.

AN: Severus is a fun but difficult character to write for. I'm having a lot of fun.

Title taken from Jonathan Swift's satirical essay of the same name.

Coming Up: We meet a few of the Death Eater orphans, and Harry and Hermione get a rude awakening as to the full extent of the problem.

Broken China Dolls

Chapter 4 of 6

Harry and Hermione get an eyeful-and earful-of what they've signed up for.

AN: This chapter is probably the darkest in the whole story and is the reason it is rated M. It includes non-graphic references to physical abuse, torture, and rape.

For those of you wondering what happens to the children old enough to go to Hogwarts, you're about to find out.

Ermengarde Rosier woke up screaming, screaming, screaming. Cold sweat covered her body. She sat bolt upright in bed.

Her brother Leopold was immediately at her side, pulling her close to his chest and hugging her tight.

"It's okay," he whispered into her ear, stroking her dirty blond hair, rocking her gently back and forth. "It's okay. I'm here. I've got you."

She sobbed quietly into her older brother's chest. She had had another vision of her parents arrested in front of them and being forcibly removed from their home. Visions of them in Azkaban, where they had been brought to say good-bye. The Dementors looming overhead so that they could not even reminisce about happier times together. They said the Dementors were gone from Azkaban now, but they were not gone from her mind.

Her mother's eyes, full of tears, as she kissed her daughter's hand and told her to listen to her brother. Her father, stoic, not saying a word, merely pulling her tight to his chest and planting a kiss on her forehead. They had done the same to Leopold. And to their older sister Brigita.

Mummy had said not to worry, that they were going to be given a kiss goodnight and they would fall into a very deep sleep. She had said they would be relaxed and happy, and that she and her brother and sister would be going to live with all the other children and make all sorts of friends, so many friends that she would not even miss them.

She had been four years old at the time, her brother six, her sister nine. They were nine and eleven and fourteen now. Soon Leopold would be off to Hogwarts, and she would be stuck here, alone. He had said he wanted to stay here, with Ermengarde, until it was time for her to go to Hogwarts. Insisted that he would not leave his sister behind. But Mr. Snape had said that he needed to go, that the best way he could take care of his sister would be to get a good education so he could support her when he grew up. Ermengarde sobbed harder at the thought. Everyone wanted to take her brother away. Did they not know that he was all she had? Did they not know what happened to the children who left the orphanage for Hogwarts? They never came back.

Like Brigita.

It was enough to give anyone nightmares.

Two weeks after her last visit, Hermione found herself back in the underground corridor that led to the common room where the Death Eater Orphans lived. Miss Glastonbury had smiled sweetly, unlocked the door, and told her to take as much time as she needed down there. Purposefully, and quickly, she rounded a corner that would take her both to Snape's office and the common room.

And found herself flat on the ground seconds later.

She had walked into what felt like a barrier that bounced her back with great force, as if she had been bounced by a large, invisible balloon. Her wand was out in an instant. She waved it around her to see who was with her; this was, after all, a dark and deserted corridor. Who knew what could be lurking down here...

Hermione lowered her wand when she saw a dark figure towering over her. Wearing grey again. No black. That was new. So many changes about him...the hair, the clothes. She wondered if his miraculous recovery after his near-death experience and decided to turn over a new leaf in life. One that involved looking less like a vampire.

Snape's satisfied smirk at her condition told her otherwise.

"No one enters this area without my permission, Granger," Snape said mockingly. "I thought I told you that last time."

"I was on my way to see you," she protested, getting up. "Was this really necessary?"

"Given that two unfamiliar, unauthorised persons managed to get into the common room a fortnight ago, yes, it was. I suppose I should thank you and Potter for exposing an unfortunate oversight in my security down here." He didn't.

"Does Miss Glastonbury know about this?" she asked. His glare answered that for her:*No, she doesn't, and if you know what's good for you, you won't mention it.* "Would you mind bringing down the barrier, please? I want to talk to you."

"If it's about your philanthropic endeavor, you can turn around and go right back where you came from."

"I just want to talk. And Harry isn't with me." She tried to smile. "If you don't like what I have to say, you can throw me out again. I promise I'll go quietly."

"Leave, Granger, I'm very busy."

"Please!" she cried. "Just hear what I have to say. We won't do anything without your leave. I just want you to listen to me."

"I thought you said you were going to go quietly?"

"After you've listened to me!"

His eyes narrowed as he contemplated her through the barrier. "I suppose you will not leave until I have let you have your say?"

She shook her head fiercely.

When she looked back on this later, she wouldn't be able to say what exactly it was that made him do what he was about to do.

"You will stay in my sight the entire time, and not go anywhere near the common room?"

She nodded.

"And the moment I tell you to leave, you will leave?"

She nodded again.

"And you understand that if you are ever lying to me, about anything, I shall know and respond appropriately?"

Another nod.

Snape contemplated her for a moment, then sighed and waved his wand. With a jerk of his head, he invited her in. She hesitantly walked past the spot where the barrier had been (it had knocked her back a good five feet) and followed him into his office.

He sat behind the desk, crossed his arms, and looked at her with great irritation.

"I am a very busy man, Granger, so I hope you will cut to the heart of the matter quickly."

She nodded. "I think we got off on the wrong foot the other day. We came on strong and unannounced and I can't even imagine what you must have thought of us. Well, that's a lie. I can." Her attempt at levity fell with a thud as his face remained expressionless and he just stared at her.

"Right. Well, Harry and I talked about it quite a bit afterward, and we agree, we don't understand the full extent of this problem. We just know that there is one. Our desire to help is genuine, but I think we were putting the cart before the horse here. So I'd like to ask you your permission to make appointments with you to learn about the issues these children face. Everything will be kept completely confidential. And anytime you want me to leave, I will. I have no ulterior motive here; we just want to help. I just want to help."

She thought about elaborating, then felt a faint buzzing in her head as if *aMuffliato* had been cast. She knew what it was immediately. Legilimency. He was silently performing Legilimency on her, to gauge her true intentions, no doubt. Clever. She thought about occluding him, then decided that it was probably the wrong response, that he would immediately suspect her of hiding something and toss her out before she had a chance to gain his trust. Hermione was good at Occlumency, but probably not good enough to hide it from a master Occlumens. She also knew that he did not know that she possessed the skill.

She decided instead to trust that he would not violate her mind and just skim the surface to gather her motivation and leave it at that. She hoped he wouldn't make her regret the decision. She decided to just focus on her first visit, her conversations with Miss Glastonbury, and her discussions with Harry.

For a long time, neither person spoke or broke eye contact. Finally, seemingly satisfied with what he saw, she felt the buzz disappear. Blinking and looking away, she felt a slight headache. She debated whether she should tell him about it, and therefore call him out on the Legilimency, and decided she could live with the headache.

"You think you know what this project would entail," Snape said slowly. "But you really have no idea the depth of the undertaking or the severity of the problems."

"You're right," Hermione agreed. "I was hoping you could rectify that. Help me and Harry understand."

"Not Potter. He is incapable. Too hotheaded and self-centered to be involved in something like this."

"That's unfair," she said. "You haven't seen or spoken to Harry since he was a teenager. You have projected James Potter onto him." She spoke quickly, knowing she was playing with fire here. "I know him better than just about anyone. You may be good at reading people, but when it comes to Harry you just lose your gift. The war changed him, changed all of us, but if nothing else it made him more cautious, more insightful, and more deliberate in his actions. He doesn't do anything now without really weighing the pros and cons and considering all potential consequences. Not only that, he's married now with a baby on the way. He knows he has big responsibilities on the horizon, and he has taken that into account as well."

He scoffed. "Potter may be grown up, but when you were here I saw the same arrogance that was always there in his youth."

"It's not arrogance...it's the truth. Harry is famous. He has been famous his entire life for surviving after his parents were murdered right in front of him, something that would cause most children to live with hysterics for the rest of their lives. He is probably the most famous person in Wizarding Britain. I think even Muggles are familiar with him. When he picks a cause, people pay attention. He didn't ask for it; he never did."

"This is going to sound ridiculous to you, and you probably don't believe me, but all he has ever wanted is a quiet life and a family. He knows he can have the latter but will never have the former, no matter what else he does for the rest of his life. Ever. He has made peace with that and decided that, so long as this is going to happen, it might as well be on his terms and for the causes he thinks are important."

Snape raised an eyebrow questioningly. "And all those interviews? The so-called 'authorised biographies'?"

Hermione sighed. It was always difficult to explain this to people, and he was the least likely to believe her. "It was clear right after the war that there were going to be books and articles about us whether we liked it or not. If we had declined interviews, declined the books, the likes of Rita Skeeter would have interviewed those 'closest' to us and come up with her own version of events. All three of us have been subject to that before and decided that if we couldn't stop it, we could at least get the true version of what happened out there. Better for it to be something that we approved of than what that Skeeter woman would invent in her head and passed off as the truth, you know? Besides... people should know the truth. And only three of us were there when many things happened. Call it arrogance, call it a desire for fame, call it whatever you want. We have been given many impossible choices and have always tried to take the least painful one. In this case, we thought, and still do think, that this was the least painful option."

Snape said nothing, betrayed no expression, but Hermione could swear that she saw him give the tiniest nod of understanding. Unlike them, he had refused all requests for interviews after his recovery, and the result had been Rita Skeeter's book *Snape: Scoundrel or Saint?* While he was still revered within the Wizarding world as a hero (to most), the book had done some damage to his reputation. Hermione wondered whether he even cared.

Satisfied that she may not have entirely failed this time, she decided to play her trump card. She knew Snape liked to be *needed* to be, in control of the situation, and decided to give it to him. "So there it is; my cards are out on the table here. Harry and I want to help you. Ron... Ron doesn't think he's ready to revisit what this would mean, so he is staying out of it for now at least. So whatever happens would pass just between you, me, and Harry. Only when you give permission would we ever do anything. For now, think of it as information-gathering. All on your terms and at times which are convenient for you and with as little disruption as possible to the children. We're doing this for them, after all."

Sensing that this would probably be a good time to stop talking, she folded her hands in her lap and sat back against the chair. After much deliberation following her last disastrous attempt, she decided that a suddenly Slytherin approach would raise a red flag for Snape and would likely do more harm than good. He already suspected something, clearly; a change in tactic would only confirm that suspicion. Better to play the role she knew best anyway, but be less bull-headed, more submissive. She hoped that it had worked.

She had made her case. She hoped he liked what he heard. He leaned back in his chair and tilted his head up, eyes on the ceiling, contemplating what he had been told.

"Potter will be involved regardless?"

"I'm afraid so. I don't hold the same pull that he does with the right people. People will be more generous with their time and money if he is involved."

Another long few minutes of silence passed before Snape broke it with a slow, deliberate voice, still not looking at her. His expression was still unreadable, and he seemed to choose his words very carefully. "I think perhaps a little education on the subject would be beneficial for you both. Friday next at eight o'clock in the evening, you and Potter will meet me here, and you will both learn the scope of the problem."

Hermione was ecstatic but kept her face and voice calm. "Thank you... Severus? Severus. We will be here. Thank you very much for trusting us. I promise you will not regret it."

He said nothing, rather sat up and turned to the paperwork at his desk. Hermione took this as a sign that the meeting was over. She thought of something, anything, to say to him, but decided that silence was probably best, and left the office without another word. She heard the door slam behind her and felt the slightest push against her back as she passed through where the barrier had been.

Friday night found both Harry and Hermione in the corridor around the corner from Snape's office. Not wanting to experience the pushback again, or find out what extra might happen if the wards specifically detected Harry, they stood and waited. Unsure of whether Snape would realise their presence without walking into the barrier, Harry decided to send a patronus to him informing him that they were around the corner and ready. Moments later, they heard him call for them to enter and they walked around the corner...into the barrier, falling back five feet into the ground.

Hearing Severus's cruel chuckle, Harry scrambled to his feet and offered his hand to Hermione, pulling her up. Snape was standing there, laughing, then gestured for them to follow him. Scowling, Harry and Hermione followed him.

"We're going to have to do something about your appearance," he announced without preamble. "Both of you."

They nodded. They figured he may have to fix a temporary dark mark to their arms in order to gain the children's trust.

"You are both constantly in the *Prophet* every time you leave the house, and I promise you that where we will journey tonight, neither of you wants to be recognised. So, if your abysmal transfiguration skills are not so wanting, kindly transfigure yourselves now before we leave."

The two friends shared a quick glance. Snape had not mentioned anything about going anywhere else. Then again, Hermione had not asked. With a sigh, she pointed her wand to Harry's face. The scar disappeared from his forehead. Green eyes turned blue. Black hair turned brown, and a small goatee grew on his face. His glasses (still round, after all these years) turned into thin, rectangular lenses with silver frames. Finally, with an evil grin, she added a few streaks of grey to his hair and crow's feet to the corners of his eyes. Satisfied, she gave him a nod.

Harry responded in kind. His transfiguration skills had always lacked behind Hermione's in school, but his Auror training had more than bridged the gap, and their skills were now comparable. Hermione's hair was cropped short, straight, and blonde. Her eyes were green, her nose a little shorter and more pointed, her lips a little fuller. Harry changed the shape of her eyebrows and made her skin tone slightly more tan. He detached her earlobes and added a small beauty mark (she would consider it a mole) to her left cheek. With a nod, he finished. Both turned to look at Snape expectantly.

Evidently, he was not aware of their improved skills and betrayed a small expression on his face. Was he impressed? Shocked? Satisfied? Hard to tell. At least he wasn't disappointed. But almost immediately his face turned back into the expressionless, dispassionate mask and he only said, "I suppose that will do. If you are recognised, it is your own fault." Without another word, he turned on his heel and walked briskly out, Harry and Hermione scrambling to follow him.

Snape stopped at the landing just outside the front doors. The guard snored loudly at his desk.

"Apparate to Knockturn Alley, just outside Borgin and Burke's," Snape said softly. "We will walk from there." He walked out the door and they heard the crack of Disapparation. With a sigh, they followed, clasped hands, and Apparated together the same way they had for months during the last year of the war.

Snape was waiting for them impatiently in front of Borgin and Burke's, as if they had made him wait a long time. He then turned left and walked quickly down the street.

"Where are we going?" Harry asked him, nervous. Both he and Hermione had their wands out, as was their habit.

"You will see and kindly put away your wands as if you are rushing headfirst into battle," Snape drawled, not breaking his step or turning his head as he spoke. "Potter, surely even you know that if you act like an Auror while undercover it defeats the purpose of that cover. Granger, don't be so jittery. You both know there are far more dangerous places in this world than Knockturn Alley after dark, and you would do well to act accordingly. You are famous war heroes; act like it."

The alley was silent and the only noise they heard was the echo of their footsteps against the buildings. Harry and Hermione replaced their wands in their sleeves, ready at a moment's notice.

"Old habits," Harry mumbled.

They walked a couple of blocks before Snape turned sharply right and stood before what looked like a shack that was half falling-down. Taking his wand out, he tapped it against the door that was falling off its hinges in a deliberate pattern, like one did to enter Diagon Alley. Suddenly the shack transformed into a large, brightly-lit building with red lights in the windows and an age line around the door. Music wafted out into the street. The door was now large and sturdy and decidedly intact.

"Do take care not to blush too much," Snape said and entered the building, Harry and Hermione following close behind.

"Mr. Snape!" cried a fat woman with curly black hair and too much lipstick from behind a counter as soon as they entered. "It is always so nice to see you!" She sounded like she had a slight accent. Maybe Russian. She took Snape's hands in hers as they exchanged kisses on the cheek. "And you have brought friends, I see!"

"Guests visiting from France," he said, jerking his head over his shoulder slightly. "Don't speak a word of English, but wish to have a nice time. Perhaps I may... show them around?"

"But of course!" The old woman gushed. "You know where everyone is. Or if you would just like to watch. And for your friends, no cover charge. Enjoy yourselves." Snape gave her a small bow and swiftly gestured for Harry and Hermione to come with him.

Neither of them were prudes or novices when it came to sex, but they found themselves grasping hands and moving closer together as they walked forward. Snape walked quickly up a staircase and turned down a corridor. Harry and Hermione followed, apprehensive, wondering what in Merlin's name they were doing here. Hermione felt her body tense up as they walked through the building, past the scantily-clad women eyeing them up and down and whispering to each other. Had anyone told her this morning that she would spend the evening with Harry and her former Potions professor in a secret brothel in Knockturn Alley, one where he was apparently known and liked... well, she would have bet against it.

Following Snape down the corridor, they stopped just behind him and he beckoned them to come forward and stand in the doorway. On the bed sat a skinny, sad prostitute. She wore thigh-high boots, a pink mini-skirt that was no wider than a headband, and a black leather bustier. Her make-up was hastily applied and she wore too much of it. Her bleached hair was cracked and dry. She looked forlorn. But as soon as she saw who was in the doorway, her eyes lit up.

"Mr. Snape!" she cried, getting up and running for the door.

Oh, no no no, Hermione thought. Please, he didn't take us here to watch him shag a hooker. Please, please, let that not be what's going on.

He knows I'm married! Harry thought desperately. *If Ginny knew he was here...*

They were both relieved and a little surprised to see a moment later that the prostitute threw herself into Snape's arms and he held her in a tender, almost fatherly, manner. After a moment she pulled him inside, and he indicated to Harry and Hermione that they should follow. He closed the door quickly behind them, locked and warded it. He turned back to the prostitute, who had been grinning a moment ago, and was now sobbing on the bed.

Snape sat next to her, put his arm around her. Hermione and Harry were gobsmacked. Snape, comforting a crying prostitute, holding her protectively? They knew he had a great capacity for goodness and love and loyalty, but compassion? Understanding? This was new.

Through her sobs and hiccups they could make out a few words. "Tried to leave... so sorry... disappointed you... couldn't find work anywhere else..." Snape soothed her and held her tight, whispered something in her ear.

For a long time they stood in this tableau; Snape and the prostitute on the bed holding each other, Harry and Hermione standing back against the door, holding hands, bewilderment on their faces.

Finally, the prostitute dried her eyes, took a deep breath, and nodded. Snape gave her a small smile and gestured to his two companions. "May I introduce Miss Valentina Rookwood."

Harry and Hermione's minds went into overdrive simultaneously. *Rookwood. Rookwood? Rookwood!* Comprehension dawned on them at the same time. Rookwood had been one of Voldemort's most faithful servants. He had been killed in the final battle at Hogwarts. He had had a daughter not old enough to attend Hogwarts. Her. Valentina. This was another Death Eater Orphan. But, Hermione thought, if she was just underage for Hogwarts six years ago, there's no way she could be of age... *oh.*

Snape wasn't performing Legilimency, as far as she could tell, but apparently he didn't have to in order to know what had been running through their minds. He just nodded. "Won't be but a moment, if you would kindly wait outside." With a wave of his wand he unwarded the door and they left quickly. It slammed behind them as they walked out and caught their breath. Hermione exhaled sharply and fell back against the wall, Harry leaning his hand on the wall next to her to steady himself, facing her.

"He's not... is he?"

Hermione shook her head vigorously. "He wouldn't. Would he? I mean, with us right here in the corridor...?"

"Yeah, I mean, why bring us if all he wants to do is..."

"Right."

They shared a look.

"She can't be more than..." he said.

"Sixteen." Hermione finished. "She cannot be older than sixteen."

"She's one of them," Harry said. "Only she must have dropped out of Hogwarts or run away from the orphanage."

"Or both."

"Did you hear her say something about... something about how she couldn't find work anywhere else?"

Hermione nodded. "It sounds like she's been at this for awhile. Severus obviously has visited her before, or been here before. You don't suppose there are others?" She looked at him worriedly. He shook his head slowly, not to say no, but to say he hoped not.

A couple of prostitutes approached them, rubbing Harry suggestively on the arm, but he vehemently shook his head and took Hermione's arm, leading her toward the stairway. The prostitutes gave up and walked away. A few minutes later, Snape appeared before them.

"Do not trouble yourself about Miss Rookwood; I have paid her enough that she will likely be allowed to go off duty for the rest of the evening. Unfortunately, we are not yet done here."

"Severus!" Harry said sharply, drawing his wand. "Why did you throw us out of the room? What were you doing in there with her?"

Rage flashed in Snape's eyes as he took Harry by the shoulder and pushed him into the wall, wand drawn.

"Do not *ever* make such insinuations again!" he hissed. "I may be a monster in every other way, but I would never lay a hand on a child, particularly one who has been forced into sexual slavery. If you must know, the presence of you and your friend was causing her considerable distress and so I thought it best if you waited outside." He released Harry and pulled away, glaring at Hermione. "And you?"

Hermione shook her head. Snape was right; he was a right bastard who had done many evil things in his life, but he was right...he would never do that, least of all with the two of them there to bear witness.

"If there are no other *accusations*," he said, glaring at Harry, "we will continue."

He led them up another staircase and down another corridor. He stopped, this time behind a door that was closed. Casting a nonverbal *Muffliato*, he pointed his wand at the door and opened it very slowly, only a crack. Putting his finger to his lips, he moved away from the door and gestured for them to come peek through the crack. Hermione shook her head, no, but Snape's look intensified and she complied. Harry stood close behind her, since he was tall enough to look over her head.

The scene was horrible. There was no sex going on in the room, just violence. A large man was beating a young woman who could not have been much older than Miss Rookwood. He was slapping her and kicking her and spitting on her. He screamed insults at her. "Death Eater whore!" he screamed. "A fucking Death Eater whore. You love violence, don't you? You love pain, don't you?" He kicked her again. "Say you like it, whore!"

The woman...girl, really...simply nodded and slurred, "Yes, yes, I love it!" But everyone could see she was sobbing. The man jerked her up, hurled her onto the bed, and ripped off her clothes. He slapped her, and then began to...oh God, no. Hermione couldn't watch this. Didn't want to listen. Did not want to stand here while a teenage girl was raped for sickles. She closed her eyes and buried her face in Harry's chest, her hands clinging to his shoulders. His arms were around her protectively, shielding her from the sight.

"Don't look," Harry whispered. "Don't look." He looked over her shoulder at Snape, horrified. "Severus...what the fuck is this?"

"This is Brigita Rosier. This," Snape said quietly. "Is what we just spared Miss Rookwood."

"Well I'm going to put a stop to this." He made a move to enter the room.

Severus grabbed Harry by the arm and violently jerked him back into the hallway, causing Hermione to fall out of his arms and grasp the wall for support. "Idiot! Do you have any idea what will happen to her if we do intervene? The guard downstairs, the large, burly, violent, male one you didn't see, will be up here immediately. He will beat you and beat her. And then let that lovely customer beat her some more."

"But I can't just stand here and..."

"Not save the day? I know it must be hard for you, Potter, but you wanted to learn what you would be dealing with, this is it." Without another word, he shut the door, pushed Harry in front of him, and grabbed Hermione. He spoke again once they had reached the end of the corridor, taking refuge in a dark corner. "Brigita Rosier is only fourteen years old. She should be in her fourth year of Hogwarts right now, and instead she spends her days and nights here. She has a sister and a brother back at the orphanage who do not need to know about this. I can show you more. Much more. I can take you upstairs and show you Clarissa Runcorn...they pay extra for bondage with her. Tie her wrists so tight they bleed while they fuck her. Or Lucinda Gibbon, who they advertise as being so tight she squeaks, so she attracts customers who will pay extra to fuck a twelve year old girl. Or Zenobia Yaxley, who performs on the stage downstairs whatever vulgar act the audience demands of her, including penetration

with foreign objects by paying customers. She learned the hard way what happens when she refuses a request." He paused for effect then sneered, grabbing Hermione by the shoulders and shaking her. "Have you seen enough?"

Hermione had seen plenty. She pushed through both Snape and Harry and bolted down the corridor, down both staircases, and out the front door. She ran too fast to register what the fat Russian Madam called out to her as she slammed the door. She only knew she had to get outside. Outside. Fresh air. Forget the smell of sex and alcohol and perfume and blood and fear and anger that had overwhelmed her inside.

She reached the alley, ducked around the side of the building, and began to vomit, choking on sobs at the same time. She retched until she had emptied the contents of her stomach and was just conjuring up bile. She was shaking and sobbing so hard that she couldn't focus enough to cast cleaning charms.

It had all come flooding back...Malfoy Manor. Bellatrix Lestrange torturing her. Offering her to Fenrir Greyback. Greyback would not just bite her, oh no. He would save that for later. There were other... animalistic tendencies in which he would indulge first. His reputation had been notorious. Hermione remembered the feeling of his breath on her skin, how he had stroked his filthy hand through her hair, how he had whispered in her ear that he could not wait to know how she tasted. She knew just how close she had come to being in the same position as that poor girl upstairs. She had not thought of it in years; what little Occlumency skills she possessed had banished it from her thoughts, forced her to feel nothing. But seeing that upstairs... it was too much.

Suddenly the puddle of sick before her vanished and she felt a familiar hand rub her back in a soothing manner. Harry. He helped her up and pulled her into his arms, where she sobbed some more. He tightened his arms around her as he had so many times before.

"Severus," he hissed over her shoulder. "What the fuck was that all about? You know, you could have just told us."

"I could have, but the impact would have been lost. And what is the matter with you anyway, Granger? So delicate? You've been through a war. Surely you've seen worse than that."

Hermione shook her head against Harry's chest, and through shuddering breaths replied, "No. Not like that. Never like that." Almost, but not quite.

"Now you understand, then," Snape said gravely. "This is what has happened to nearly every girl who has been in my charge for the past five years who has reached sexual maturity. What every Death Eater Daughter has become. A whore. Only it's not sex...it's violence. The customers pay extra for it. It's advertised, for Merlin's sake. I could not stop them. I could not stop this. The girls, they don't seek it out. But they leave the orphanage, usually underage because they have also left Hogwarts, usually by the end of their third year due to the harassment and fights and sexual taunts that inevitably follow, and they try to find work. Employers see their surnames and throw them out. They come here out of desperation. And the saddest thing..." Snape paused and took a breath. Burying emotion. "The saddest thing is that not long after they arrive here, they begin to believe they deserve it. That this is all they are good for." He stopped talking, crossed his arms, and looked away.

Harry and Hermione were still holding each other. Hermione had since calmed down and composed herself, but was still breathing heavily.

"If you cannot handle this," Snape said, "you have no business with me or the children in this orphanage. You have no business trying to help them. If you cannot handle what it is to live in their hell, you had best leave it alone."

He started to storm away. Harry glanced down at Hermione. "Alright?" He whispered. She nodded. "So am I," he said. They nodded at each other, understanding. He let go of her and they stood side-by-side, facing Snape's retreating back.

"Severus," Hermione called. He stopped and turned around. "If your plan was to scare us away, it failed. Now, more than ever, we want to help. Not just those in the orphanage full-time now, not just those who are at Hogwarts, but all of them." Her voice was confident now, assured.

He considered her. "It's more than just this, Granger," he said. "The boys typically drop out earlier than the girls, they join street gangs or commit petty crimes to support themselves. Most spend at least a little time in Azkaban. Dementors are still there, despite what the Ministry is willing to admit publicly. Guards give them trouble. They have to stay in solitary confinement for their own protection, since other inmates are usually keen to take their revenge, too. Sometimes they see their parents, after they've been Kissed.

"Most of them don't make it past their third year of Hogwarts, those of either gender. Horace doesn't deign to reach out to his students who are from less desirable families, and the Sorting Hat seems to categorically refuse to put them into other houses. Fellow Slytherins resent them for the damage done to the House's reputation. I won't even begin to tell you what the students in other Houses do. Suffice it to say, they are usually well-versed in the ways of sex and violence by the time they leave school, courtesy of those in other Houses as well as their own.

"I tell them to keep their heads down and their mouths shut, to be on the defensive, to be alert, but trouble seems to find them no matter what. Minerva, give her credit, tries to stop things when she knows about them, but they often suffer in silence and leave rather than go to an authority figure, because frankly they do not trust any of them.

"Now I just gave you a taste of all of this, Granger, and you made yourself sick. Potter looks like he's been petrified. Now I ask you both this question and expect an honest answer: Do you honestly, truly, believe you can handle this?"

Hermione knew this would be difficult. Painful. Potentially harmful to her career. Might cost her friends. Would ruin her reputation in decent Wizarding society. And yet despite knowing all of this, Hermione had never been more sure of anything in her life.

"Absolutely," she replied. She turned to her friend. "Harry?"

Harry nodded. "I did not do what I did in the war to create a world where it was acceptable for wizards to do this to innocent children. I'm in. All the way."

Snape looked at them with a resigned look in his face. Clearly he had hoped they would leave after this, leave him and the orphans alone. Instead, he shook his head and said, "Very well." His voice dripped with resignation and desperation. Perhaps he was already stretched to his limit.

As he led them back to the apparition point outside Borgin and Burke's, they could hear him mutter, "Bloody fucking Gryffindors."

Coming up: Harry makes Severus an offer he can't refuse... even though he really, really wants to.

Any guesses as to what it might be?

Philanthropic Gestures

Harry makes Severus an offer he can't refuse.

Harry Potter couldn't sleep. Not that night. Not after all he had seen. And he had seen things in the war. But this... wow.

He snuggled up close against Ginny's back, breathing in the scent of her hair. It still smelled like flowers after all these years. He inhaled deeply again, taking it all in. He snaked his arm across her ever-growing belly (seven weeks to go, bloody hell) and rubbed it slowly. His son was sleeping, and Harry didn't want to wake him, so he just let his hand rest gently on his wife's belly. Kissed her temple. Sighed.

No, he did not want his son growing up in a world that allowed things like this to happen to innocent children. That was not what he fought and nearly died for in the war. This wasn't the world he and his friends worked to build. But for fate and some dumb luck Harry had wound up on the right side of history. The victors. The oppressors. He was well aware of how easily, so very easily, he and his family could have ended up like those children. How close they had come, in the end. How close they had come to being imprisoned. Beaten. Raped. Used. Forgotten. It wasn't right that these children were subjected to it. And it would stop if he had anything to say about it.

The House-Elf Bill of Rights had felt like such a victory. No longer would they have to do things like iron their hands or beat themselves in the face with hammers if they disobeyed their masters. Hermione had congratulated herself for that, feeling like she had the moral high ground.

And then she learned how she worked for a society that oppressed children and robbed them of their humanity, and she felt her heart sink.

She lay in the first floor guest room at Grimmauld Place. She hadn't wanted to go home after that. Didn't think she could Apparate without splinching herself. Harry had agreed wholeheartedly. They had transfigured themselves back into, well, themselves, reiterated their determination. Then told Ginny everything. She was horrified at what they had seen, but not that they had gone. This was Ginny Weasley Potter, only daughter in a home with six older brothers, all of whom had been in the Order of the Phoenix. Married to the Boy Who Lived. It took a lot to shock her. Plus, she trusted Harry implicitly and with good reason.

Hermione sighed. She didn't know what Snape thought he was playing at. He had dared them to watch, dared them to commit to this in the face of unimaginable brutality.

She shook her head. Didn't he know, after all these years, to never dare a Gryffindor?

She and Harry had become more determined than ever to help, now that they had seen just a sliver of the reality. They would go back for more. They had refused to leave until Snape agreed to a meeting the following week. They would learn more, talk more. He promised to be honest with them in exchange for their promise to be discreet. Few people knew of his work and he wanted to keep it that way. Hermione would come in under the guise of her audit. Harry under the cloak.

Hermione couldn't help but smile to herself. Of all the things she had undertaken, she felt least sure about this one. Yes, she had even felt more secure that she and her two best friends, only teenagers, would be able to hunt down and destroy all the Horcruxes, break into Gringotts, and kill Voldemort. That had felt more sure than this. But that only made her want it more. And she couldn't help but smile.

Ron slept fitfully. After what Harry and Hermione had told him, he knew he couldn't help them. Not yet. The children of the people who killed Fred... and Remus... and Sirius... and Tonks... and Lavender... no.

He wouldn't admit to himself that he thought they deserved it, but didn't want to take the risk that he would share that thought anyway.

He knew it was the right decision, sitting this one out.

So why did he feel so rotten?

Fuck.

Severus sat in his office, staring into the fire off to one side, glass of Firewhisky in his hand, bottle of Firewhisky on his desk. Well, half a bottle now. Maybe a bit less than half. He would not sleep tonight. He was not sure he could. He was not sure he wanted to.

Typical Gryffindors had followed him into that horrible place, where he went every Saturday night to check on the girls. It broke his heart every time he was there. For every girl he could give money to so they could retire for the evening. For every girl already engaged when he arrived. He regretted that he could not get them out of that place. He had nowhere to put them. No way to support them. Hogwarts would not take them. Neither would the Ministry, not even in one of its glorified job-creation programs. The Ministry wouldn't let them back into the orphanage. And so they stayed.

He had sold his parents' home on Spinner's End years ago to help support these kids. To buy them their robes for school. To bail them out of Azkaban. To buy a teenaged prostitute a night of freedom. He had enough at his disposal to continue doing it for awhile; he slept in his office (what Glastonbury didn't know wouldn't hurt her) and had no other real expenses. But even if he could continue, it would never be enough.

The whole bloody thing made him feel powerless, and Severus Snape did not like to feel powerless. He felt like Sisyphus...push the boulder up the hill, watch it roll down, repeat forever. Every time he thought that he had saved, really saved, one of them, it would be the same story over again. Drugs. Prostitution. An unwanted pregnancy he had to brew a potion for. Crime. Violence.

And now those fucking Gryffindors wanted to be involved. Had called his bluff. Followed him in. Stomached (well, not Granger) what they saw. It had not scared them off but rather made them more determined than they had been before. Fuck. The whole bloody thing had blown up in his face.

A part of him, the part he never wanted to listen to, told him that this might not be such a bad thing. He was only one man and could not hope to save them all by himself. In fact, he had not been able to save anyone by himself. With the two celebrities (oh, bloody hell) involved, they might be able to do something. At least they wouldn't make things worse.

Or would they, said the voice in the back of his mind, the voice he couldn't help but listen to. *They would draw negative publicity. They could further damage the children. Expose them to scrutiny that you would otherwise be able to shield them from for just a few more precious years.*

Good point, Severus thought.

Shield them in a dungeon, pointed out the voice. *Keep them locked away deep underground. Because it worked so well for you all those years, didn't it? Made you into a real model citizen, didn't it?*

Can't argue with that, Severus conceded.

Severus shook his head. Here he was at three o'clock in the morning drunk off Firewhisky and listening to his brain war with himself with him agreeing and disagreeing. This was absurd. And for whatever reason...the hour, the Firewhisky, the events that had transpired...he decided to let Granger and Potter win. He would let the Gryffindors in. But if they so much as stepped one toe out of line, it was over. He would Obliviate them and send them away and set up wards not even Minister Kingsley Shacklebolt

himself could break through.

"The biggest hurdle," Severus lectured in his best professor voice, "is that these children learn very early on in life that they have no future. The moment they step onto the Hogwarts Express, they are targeted. It's already an overwhelming experience for them, having been kept away in here for most of their lives, and the other children are... merciless."

Granger and Potter nodded. "And it doesn't get much better afterward, does it?" Potter asked. "You mentioned that most of them don't make it past their third year."

Severus nodded. "Correct. It is abysmal. They are beaten, ridiculed, bullied... Potter, it makes what your father and his gang used to do to me look like camaraderie." Potter stiffened at this. Good. "Their Head of House turns a blind eye, Minerva doesn't know about it, and the other professors really cannot be bothered to intervene. The prejudice runs deep."

"What about Madam Pomfrey?" asked Potter. Severus shifted uncomfortably at the sound of her name. "Doesn't she help them when they are injured? Surely she notices and does something about it?"

Severus shook his head. "They trust no one. Not even her; she is an authority figure, and they learn very quickly that such figures are untrustworthy. Whatever injuries they receive, they tend to themselves."

"It's too bad they have no authority figure they can trust. Have you thought about going back?" Granger asked. "If you were Head of House again..."

"Granger, use that much-lauded brain of yours, will you? Yes, I could protect them. I do not believe I could stop everything from happening, but I know I could stop the worst of it, or at least ensure that the guilty parties are adequately punished. I know this because I did it after the first war, for the children of those Death Eaters." He sighed. "Unfortunately, this time around, Hogwarts will not have me back. And in truth, I do not wish to go back. I think I am more needed here."

"But if you could be back at Hogwarts, you could get them through their years there. Could at least help them graduate. Here, you do what you can, turn them loose in school, and..."

"And make myself available for the youngest ones, who literally have no one else. The Ministry has designated Glastonbury the emergency contact at Hogwarts for them. I am in no position to know what happens. I am entitled to no explanation. I had two choices: I could help those at Hogwarts, or help the ones here. I triaged the situation as best I could and made the closest thing I could to the right decision. Doing this allows me to stay here with these children, these defenceless children, and I will not abandon them. I will not let Glastonbury loose on these children."

Granger glared at him. Severus glared back. "It's not ideal, Granger, I admit that. But it is the very best I could do. Look me in the eye, and tell me that you think I am doing anything less."

That shut her up.

"It seems," Potter said thoughtfully. "That their names are the biggest handicap. If they simply had different names, they might stand a chance."

"Minors cannot petition for name changes without a guardian, and if minors are wards of the Ministry, the Ministry cannot so petition," Granger replied, no doubt reciting something from some Wizarding legal text she had back at her office. Know-it-all.

"If Glastonbury is their legal guardian for purpose of Hogwarts, why couldn't Severus be one for purposes of petitioning on their behalf in a court to change their names?" Potter replied.

"I am not their legal guardian, Potter. I am more of what you might call a Muggle social worker. I monitor their progress, but consider me, if you will, a point of contact. A legal guardian, on the other hand, has authority to make all sorts of decisions for a child. I have no such authority."

Granger bit her lip in thought. "Maybe we could get you that authority."

Severus gave her his best *please-don't-tell-me-you're-actually-that-stupid* look in reply.

"I mean you could get a place, we could find you a place, and then you could continue all the things you do now. But in a real house. With windows and lights and everything. And you could continue to do this, but not under the guise of the Ministry. On your own terms."

"Ah, so Granger you would have me, what, adopt the fifteen children currently here full-time as well as the other fifteen or so who have since run away or dropped out? You would have me support that many children on my own? You would have me be called, what, Papa Snape, and I could preside over this large, happy family? My God, Granger, sometimes I wonder if I was wrong about you."

"That I'm an insufferable know-it-all?" She asked with a bored voice.

"That you were actually an intelligent person," Severus retorted. He did not realise that she interpreted it as a compliment. That she and Potter shared a look after he said it. He missed all that.

"Well I think we can all agree that institutionalising them has been one giant disaster," Granger said. "And no one else in the Wizarding population is willing to adopt them."

"Not even you two? For all your talk of saving them I hear nothing of you planning to adopt them yourselves."

Granger sighed exasperatedly as if she were talking to Weasley instead of him. "I can't adopt anyone, Severus, I'm a single woman. It's not allowed. Only married couples."

"Without children," Potter added. "Married couples with children are excluded, at least for now. Unless the children to be adopted are relations."

"So there you go...I can't adopt either, I'm a single man," Severus retorted. "What a fantastic waste of time that idea was."

"Hermione could get the law changed," Potter said. "She got a bunch of house-elf rights laws passed right after Hogwarts. That's a population no one cares about but her. If she could push that through, she can push this through."

Granger snorted. "Right, I'll just march right up to the Wizengamot and tell them how this law needs to change, and they'll just step up and do it." She rolled her eyes. "Harry, you remember how long it took to get that law passed. Years. Years of lobbying. Many of the wizards on the Wizengamot had house-elves, weren't prejudiced against them in any way, but were also afraid to change the status quo. In this case, you'd have the same problem only bigger...many of them lost family to the Death Eaters; they will be afraid to change an old law, and on top of it yes, they are all going to be biased against them. And with good reason, too."

"Fine!" Potter said exasperatedly. "I guess the only solution is for you to marry Severus here and adopt them together!"

He and Granger laughed hard at this suggestion. Severus did not.

"Right, problem solved!" Granger said through her laughter, wiping away a tear.

"If you two are quite through being idiots for the morning," Severus drawled, exaggerating the irritation and hiding the amusement in his voice. Potter and Granger stopped laughing and looked up him. After all these years, he could still command them with that voice. "I think adoptions are out of the question."

"Moving away from that, though not completely, is it possible for someone to just be a legal guardian?" Potter asked. He turned to Granger, who shrugged her shoulders.

"I've never heard of it, but that doesn't necessarily mean it's not possible. They still might have to live here; it would just give an outside person the right to make their legal decisions, rather than the Ministry."

"Would it change anything about their situation?" He turned to Severus now to ask this question.

Severus thought for a moment before responding. "If I had the legal right to make certain decisions for them, I could get them out of here."

"Would that have any impact?"

"It might. I could at least get them away from the Ministry. I could get their surnames legally changed, try to do that quietly without attracting the attention of the Prophet. Anything less than that would completely defeat the purpose. Then they would need to get away from London."

"Sort of like a witness relocation program?" Granger said. Both men looked at her quizzically. "I read about it, in Muggle America if a person turns witness against a dangerous criminal they will often change their names, change their appearance, and move them to a different part of the country to keep them safe from retribution."

"Well, whatever you want to call it, that might give these kids a fighting chance, wouldn't it?" Potter asked eagerly.

"I can look into it. I've got some books back in my office. No one will notice I've taken them."

Severus smirked. Typical Granger.

"And just where," Severus said, "would you suggest we do this? I don't have space for fifteen minors. Or the funds to do this."

"Ah, but that's where I come in," Potter said happily. "If we have a fundraiser, as a guardian you would be entitled to receive many of the funds. Families who currently have money from prior fundraisers received funds proportional to the number of children they took in. Most only took in one or two or maybe a sibling group of three, according to Hermione, anyway. And we can find you space to do this. Hire people to come out to help you. I mean, getting out of this dungeon alone will make them feel more human, won't it?"

Severus knew the truth of that statement more than Potter would ever know. Which was why he had retreated to the dungeons almost as soon as he had been free of them. Again.

"And, while I haven't spoken with them yet, with your leave I think I can think of a few other volunteers, proper volunteers, who would be willing to help. Who know where we're coming from and understand the situation."

"What...your little 'dueling club'?" Severus asked with a sneer.

"Dumbledore's Army is what it was called, and yes, some of them. Many of them lost their families in the war. It's possible a few could be willing."

"You know, I think this is an awful lot for us to digest," Granger said suddenly. "Severus, why don't I go do some research and Harry will do some as well and we'll come back next week?"

Severus nodded. "Next week then, same time." Granger and Potter offered their hands but Severus only stared back at them. Such familiarity from these two. Was it impossible for them to keep it professional?

"We were too bloody optimistic again, weren't we?" Harry asked as they stepped toward the front door leading out to the street.

Hermione nodded. "Quite. Thought we'd best quit while we were ahead. Leave before he had a chance to get angry about something, force him to consider it."

"Well played, Miss Granger."

"Not bad yourself, Mr. Potter. I think we might have even made some headway. He didn't immediately throw out the idea of becoming legal guardian to them. When it comes to Snape, I take it as acquiescence."

"You may be right; he didn't even find a way to insult me. And he always finds a way to tie in an insult to me."

"Besides, I really do need to research. In the Muggle world, it was actually quite common for centuries in Britain, for one person (usually a wealthy man) to have wards and heirs who weren't his blood relatives. Perhaps the Wizarding world has a similar process we could look into."

"I've got it!" Hermione slammed down the heavy leather tome happily on Snape's desk. He jumped with shock.

She and Harry looked down at him, beaming, while he looked up, scowling. Clearly he was not thrilled about their little pop-in. Especially more than two weeks since they had last met with him.

"Do I need to fix my security charms again?" He asked sharply. He had relented and modified his security measures to let her and Harry through the barrier. Reluctantly, Hermione was sure. He seemed to enjoy knocking them flat on their arses every opportunity he could get.

"Not at all. Here, look at this," Hermione flipped through to the right page and turned it around so Snape could read it. "Unmarried, single people can become legal guardians for orphans under Wizarding law. No adoption is necessary, merely control over legal affairs. They can live here or with you. You can petition on their behalf for just about anything. And there is no limit on how many you can do this for."

"Brilliant, Hermione is, eh, Severus?" Harry asked proudly.

Snape just stared back at them, blankly. Expressionless. Hermione knew from experience that this could be very good or very bad.

After a long time he gestured for them to sit down and he spoke. "To my chagrin, you have both shown a remarkable willingness to help some very needy children, and I cannot help but give you both my esteem for that."

"You both, no doubt, know that I am a man who does not make promises lightly, and I only do so if I am confident that I can fulfill them. These children have very specific needs. They do need what you are offering. But at this point I am hesitant to accept because of a few obstacles you have not addressed."

"If I do this, I will be leaving this job. If I fail, the children will be back here and without me. I cannot risk that."

"You have not proposed a place to house these children or how to fund their cost of living."

"Both of you have jobs. Reputable caretakers, counselors, healers... they refuse to come here. How do you propose addressing those needs?"

He stopped and looked at them. Well, at least he hadn't yelled at them or insulted them. He hadn't exactly said no. Progress.

Hermione smiled politely while Harry's eyes lit up in inspiration.

"You remember Grimmauld Place?" Harry asked. Snape's eyes flickered. "Of course you do. Well, I live there currently with my wife. We're due to have a baby in a few weeks. We've been staying there because it's unplottable and still protected by the Fidelius Charm. Most of the secret keepers are... well, anyway, it's very secure. Yes, it's in the middle of London, but it is very difficult to find. Ginny and I think it's too big for us, and I've never loved living there, but only because of my memories. There's nothing inherently wrong with it. We managed to finally get rid of Mrs. Black's portrait... and if you put two children in each bedroom..." He trailed off, waiting for Snape to interrupt him and tell him how idiotic his plan was. When it didn't happen, he continued. "Anyway, I believe in this cause, and I would be happy to donate the house to it."

Severus couldn't believe his ears. Potter was offering him his house? His large, spacious London house? For the children of the people who tried to kill him.

Potter could be too fucking noble sometimes.

"You are going to move out and give up your house... just like that?" Severus repeated slowly.

Potter nodded with a fucking grin on his face. "You're welcome to come over and check it out before you decide. Anytime, really. We'd love to have you over. And Hermione will be there, of course. Practically lives there anyway." Potter cleared his throat. Severus wondered why he had singled out Granger as an enticement for him to come over.

"If you do want to have a look at the house, there are a few other people I'd like to speak with and bring over to meet with you, but only if you're amenable to it," Granger said. "To help you, that is. Neville Longbottom, for one. Now I know," she added quickly, seeing the look on Severus's face. "I know that you don't think much of him. But don't forget, he too lost parents in the last war. What happened to his parents is no different, really, than what happened to the children whose parents were Killed. I know him; he will probably want to help. He's got a fairly full schedule at Hogwarts, but as he's not a Head of House, he can probably give some of his afternoons or weekends. He's become a very good teacher; he could shoulder some of that responsibility from you, free you up for other things."

"And Luna Lovegood," said Potter. "I know she's a bit... well, you know, but she is also tremendously insightful and has a knack for getting at the heart of the matter. I think she could get some of the kids to talk, or at least figure out what they need. She lost her mother very young, and her father never made it out alive from the war. She also knows what it feels like to be ostracised by her peers and what it's like to spend years in isolation at Hogwarts. If you can't get a proper counselor in there, she's definitely the next best thing. Plus, she's a Ravenclaw."

One less Gryffindor, thank God.

"We haven't spoken with them yet," Granger added quickly. "But we know them both well enough to know that they would likely jump at the chance to help you. And we know what you need."

They looked at him with such earnest hope in their eyes.

"Haven't the two of you played world saviour enough in your little lives?" Severus spat. "Is it not enough that you have the admiration of the entire Wizarding world, you now have to turn these children into a pet project?"

"This is not some pet project!" Granger snapped. "We understand this is a commitment. Commitment is something the two of us happen to understand better than most."

"Trudging through the woods and sleeping in a tent, with no contact with the outside world whatsoever, to destroy Horcruxes when we didn't know where they were, how to destroy them, or even what all of them were, until we had found and destroyed them all," said Potter.

"Working for ten years to liberate house-elves in the face of everyone, even my best friends, saying it could never be done."

"Skipping out on your last year of school," added Severus.

"To defeat Voldemort and ensure that future generations could attend their seventh year of school, regardless of blood status or family name," Potter snapped. "We gave up a lot to do that. And we're both willing to give up a lot to do this."

"No matter how long it takes," added Granger. "Severus, we know you don't like us. We're Gryffindors and were thorns in your side for seven years. We set you on fire, stole from you, stunned you into a wall, insulted you to your face and behind your back... among other things. That's fine. You don't have to like us. But put aside your own animosity toward us and think of them," she gestured behind her to the corridor that led to the common room.

Severus slammed his fist on his desk and stood up to tower over them. "Are you suggesting that I am not considering their needs first, Granger?"

She stood up stiffly, trying to meet his eye but still having to tilt her head up to do it. "I am suggesting that perhaps you are considering rejecting the best offer these children will receive in a long time because of some old grudges and misconceptions from a very long time ago."

Silence turned into a staring contest. Finally, Granger conceded and said, "Come on, Harry. Severus, our offer remains open. Contact us when you have made your decision."

Without another word, she grabbed Potter by the arm and led him outside.

"Infuriating man!" Hermione cried as soon as they were back at Grimmauld Place. "Can't let go of his stupid grudges for the sake of some very needy children. Can't accept after all these years that you are not your father." She stopped her foot and made an exasperated noise.

"Maybe he just needs some more time to come around to it," Harry suggested.

"I don't doubt that he does, and he should think about it anyway, but does he have to be so intransigent for these reasons? After everything that has happened, after all the time that has passed?"

"Maybe it was a bit much, me offering Grimmauld Place like that," Harry pondered.

"Yeah, what was that all about? I didn't know that you were planning to do that."

Harry shrugged. "Dunno. He brought up some good points about housing and such. I really don't like living here. It would be big enough for his needs, and..."

"And?"

"I owe it to him, for one. I owe him much more than a house, that is. Because of him I was able to survive, find the sword, destroy the Horcruxes. Because of him I lived and was able to have a family, something he really hasn't ever had himself. I know, it was impulsive and not thought-out, and I haven't even spoken to Ginny about it, and it probably put him off. At best he probably thinks I'm 'nauseatingly naïve and imbecilic' or something like that, and at worst he probably suspects me of having ulterior motives."

"Why he could still think that of you is so far beyond me I can't even understand," Hermione said with exasperation.

"We've never exactly given him a reason to trust us," Harry pointed out. "Or to like us. Even though we were all on the same side, we were pretty much enemies."

Hermione nodded. "Yeah, I mean, imagine Draco Malfoy showing up and offering you free reign over Malfoy Manor. Would you jump at the chance?"

"Thank you," Harry said sarcastically.

"For what?"

"Comparing me to Malfoy."

"Oh come off it, you know what I meant."

Harry patted her shoulder and gave it a squeeze. Suddenly they heard a tap on the window behind them and they both spun around, drawing their wands. Seeing it was an owl, they sheathed their weapons and Harry went over to the window to take the scroll from the owl. He unrolled it, smiled, and handed it to Hermione.

It was unsigned, but there was no question it was from him. She recognised the spiky handwriting from the margins of an old potions text, and the message was short and to the point, like the man who wrote it.

I accept.

AN: A little on the lighter side, yes?

Hermione began her house-elf crusade in their fourth year, when she was about fourteen or fifteen. She's now about twenty-four or twenty-five in this fic, so that's where the ten years came from.

Sisyphus is a character from Greek mythology condemned to roll a boulder up a hill for eternity. Every time he managed to do so, it would slide back down the hill and he would have to start over.

Coming up: Severus visits Grimmauld Place, but does he trust what he finds there?

Acceptance

Chapter 6 of 6

Severus checks out Grimmauld Place.

It was positively unnerving to Severus that, try as he might, he couldn't seem to truly intimidate or scare Granger and Potter anymore. Whenever he tried, they at best looked mildly offended and at worst looked amused.

But after denial comes anger, and after anger comes depression, and after depression comes bargaining, and after bargaining comes acceptance.

Severus really, really hadn't wanted to accept. Did not want to be beholden to anyone, ever, especially Potter. He hated himself for accepting it. Told himself it wasn't really for him, not a gift to him, but for the children, and they really needed it.

For the greater good, Albus would have said.

Severus couldn't help but think of another expression that typically came to mind whenever he thought of Albus Dumbledore.

The road to Hell is paved with good intentions.

Gryffindors. Cannot help but try to save the world. Even if it means ruining it in the process.

With briefest hesitation he had tied the scroll to the owl and sent it on its way. This wouldn't be the first time he made a deal with the devil to satisfy a higher calling. Perhaps it would finally be the last.

Ginny had been thrilled at the prospect of leaving Grimmauld Place; as soon as Harry had got the words out of his mouth, Ginny's hand was on his and she was pulling him out of the door to go house hunting.

"Severus is coming over to look at the house, though," he had protested to Ginny.

"Oh... right. Even better. I support what you're doing, but I don't think I'm quite ready to face him yet. Especially given how hard I worked against him that last year of the war. And, well, I really want out of this house. Come on."

Harry laughed. "I guess I can ask Hermione to show him around." A quick exchange of letters confirmed that Hermione would be happy to show Snape around the house and answer any questions.

"If we miss him," Ginny said as they left that night, "give him our best."

"You know he'll be glad to hear it," Hermione said sarcastically. With a couple of kisses and hugs, the Potters left.

Hermione answered the door at Severus's knock and caught the briefest glimpse of surprise in his eyes when he saw her. "Granger," he said brusquely.

"Severus." She stood back and opened the door wider. He crossed the threshold quickly. "And please call me Hermione."

He did not respond to her but merely stopped short just inside the doorway, taking in the view. It had been close to ten years since he had last been in here, Hermione reckoned. He tilted his head all around, taking in all the changes that had occurred since then.

"It looks very different in here," he said at last.

She nodded. "Ginny thought it would be more livable if it were redecorated...lighter walls, wider corridors, brighter colours, electric lights, no mounted heads of decapitated house-elves, you get the idea."

"Indeed," he mused. "I might have to transfigure the walls darker and the lights dimmer, for a little while at least. Light... well, they're not used to it."

Hermione nodded, sadly. She wanted to ask more, but decided against it. "Shall I lead you around? I know you've been here many times before, but Harry and Ginny did make quite a few changes and you might want to be sure it'll suit your purposes."

Snape nodded absently and walked slowly throughout the house. There were just as many bedrooms as there had been in the past (nine) and just as many bathrooms (four). The attic was still pretty useless but, as Hermione pointed out, could easily be transfigured into something if necessary...living space, a classroom, an infirmary, whatever. Same with the cellar.

"Granger, you might have gone into home sales," Snape finally said wryly. "You are doing your best to sell this place to me."

"I just... I think it has real potential."

"It does," he said simply, then raised an eyebrow to her. "Potter really doesn't want it anymore?"

Hermione shook her head and began to recite the story she and Harry had agreed upon. The both knew it would be a bad idea to tell him the real reason Harry had offered the house. He would reject both it and them if he knew. She just hoped that she could lie well enough to fool him, fully prepared to Occlude him if necessary.

"Their family is growing, Harry has some unpleasant memories here, Ginny doesn't really like it. They could sell it, but they don't really want anyone knowing about the location and they certainly don't need the money. And, well, I think he would feel like he was betraying Sirius if he sold it to a stranger."

Snape flinched at the sound of Sirius Black's name but quickly recovered and nodded in acknowledgement. Hermione couldn't tell if he bought what she was saying, but decided to continue speaking. "With regards to the deed, Harry is happy to transfer it over to you, but for the sake of your anonymity he's willing to keep it in his name. He won't turn you or anyone else out, of course. Just say the word and the papers will be transferred into your name."

"It would be best," Snape interrupted, "if Potter were to keep it in his own name. For now, at least. I wish to draw as little official attention to this endeavour as possible."

Walking back down to the entryway, he withdrew his wand and cast a series of complex wand movements and nonverbal spells.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Making sure that there are no enchantments or spells in this house that I should be aware of. I seem to remember there being quite a lot. And Potter..."

"Harry didn't booby-trap the house for you, Severus, he does live here himself."

"Constant vigilance," he muttered. Satisfied with what his spells seemed to reveal, he returned his wand.

"So... you'll take it?" Hermione asked brightly.

"Pushy, aren't you, Granger?"

"Hermione. And what sort of estate agent would I be if I didn't push for the sale?" She gave a sarcastic smile.

A second later, the sound of a loud crack of Apparition behind her made her scream, turn around, and point her wand.

Kreacher stood there shaking his head and muttering insults to himself as he gave a bow and walked away.

"Don't move, Granger," Snape whispered theatrically. "It can smell fear." Hermione rolled her eyes and sheathed her wand again, making a sound of frustration. "Does he come with the house?"

"Unfortunately."

Snape looked at her thoughtfully. "You seem a bit jumpy, Granger."

"Hermione. And I'm not jumpy. I'm alert."

He rolled his eyes. "Whatever ridiculous euphemism you wish to use."

She gave him a sharp look and echoed his words from a few moments earlier. "Constant vigilance."

He gave her a smirk. "Potter said that you live here too?"

Hermione nodded. "Part time, whenever I'm in London. I stay in the corner bedroom up on the first floor."

"I would have thought that you lot would have outgrown this unhealthy codependency."

"It's not codependency!" Hermione snapped, offended. "That's trivialising it. We're all very close. Harry and I have no other family, so we sort of adopted each other very early on. And we've stayed close."

"Very close," he said, his voice insinuating something.

"Oh come off it," Hermione said, ignoring his implication that she was fairly certain was designed only to bait her. "Close relationships between friends are perfectly healthy." She thought about adding, "And you might try it sometime," but wisely decided against it. She knew that he had tried and had failed to form a closer relationship with his closest friend and why he most likely would never try again.

"I presume Weasley stays here too?" Snape asked nonchalantly.

Hermione shook her head. "Not often. He lives in Diagon Alley but spends a lot of time with his family. His mother's been very shaken ever since his brother... well, he helps take care of her, so no, he doesn't come here often." She thought she saw a flicker of surprise and then relief in Snape's eye, but it was so quick she was sure she had imagined it. George was the twin he felt responsible for, not Fred, and yes, she knew he knew the difference.

"Anyway," she continued. "You needn't worry about us; I'll vacate the room with plenty of time for you."

His brow furrowed. "I did not wish to evict you. Potter offered the space, not you."

She waved him off. "It will be put to much better use."

He looked away from her for a moment and seemed to be considering something. Finally, in a very measured voice, he said, "It might be advisable for you to keep your room here. As you have seen, I sometimes need to be away in the evenings, and it is not advisable to leave the children completely alone if possible."

She blinked. He would trust her with these children? He had no reason to. A normal person would, but not him. Her confusion must have registered on her face for he continued, "You did offer to help. And I do not intend to leave them with you right away. Even I have to grudgingly admit that you were right...they do need more socialization, and it would probably be advisable if you were one of the people they got to know and trust."

Hermione held her breath. He had never paid her a compliment before. Ever. Not when she had written flawless essays, not when she had crafted perfect potions, not when she had been made a prefect, not ever. It felt unnatural. And just a teensy bit nice.

"I appreciate you trusting me," she said finally. She knew that trust was not something he handed out easily. She only wondered what she had done to deserve it.

Snape merely nodded.

Severus wasn't sure what made him ask her to stay, to not move out of the house when he and the children would move in. It wasn't fear; he knew he could handle the children by himself, he had done so for years. He also knew he could leave the children alone for a few hours at a time; he did it regularly and always left a Patronus to alert him if there was anything immediately requiring his attention.

He wasn't entirely sure he ever would leave her alone with them when he left, at least not right away. But it couldn't hurt to prepare for the distant future, even if he did not believe it would reach that point.

He really didn't want to ask her for help on top of accepting Potter's offer of the house. But, while he would never, ever, admit it to her, Potter, or anyone else, he truly needed help. Sixteen years as Head of Slytherin and one year as Headmaster combined were less stressful than five years of being the caretaker for some very traumatised, abused, and neglected children.

It had become virtually impossible for him to believe that anyone, including Potter and Granger, could be sympathetic toward their plight. But it seemed like--just as it had been back at Hogwarts--whatever he threw at them failed to stick and they remained insufferably naïve and idealistic. Well, maybe not as bad as they had been before the war. There was more realism there, more practicality. The slightest (only the slightest) bit of wisdom that comes only to those who have lived through the darkest of times.

So he had probed, considered, tested, relented, and finally accepted. If I am going to continue to do this, I might as well do it right from this point onward. Get others involved. Teach the children not to fear others. Retain healthy suspicion, but not paranoia. Most of them were Slytherins, or would be. Slytherins do not live in fear. Slytherins prepare.

He would never trust Potter, not completely. True, Potter had clearly resisted the urge to make public the content of the memories that he foolishly shown him. And Potter had not hounded him for friendship or discourse in the years since the war beyond the few letters he had sent in that first year, respected his privacy, and not tried to seek him out. Potter had even given him the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. Potter had been remarkably generous, Severus had to admit. That still did not mean Severus liked him. Or completely trusted him.

Granger... that was a different story. Sure, she was still just as insufferable as she had been in her youth. And he had legitimately worried that this was merely another ill-conceived crusade, as her House-Elf Liberation Front or whatever it had been called had been. But he had grudgingly been impressed with her ability to successfully change laws and attitudes with regard to the creatures. It had likely involved lots of negotiations and discussions. Granger was never one for negotiating, not in the past, anyway. She had been ever the bull-headed Gryffindor, convinced that she alone could change the world.

But she had been honest with him. Few others ever had. She had not Occluded him when he had scanned her thoughts. She had thought this through. Done her homework. As always.

Deep down, Severus had always known it would only be a matter of time before he could no longer do this effectively on his own. With the "graduates" of the orphanage getting into more trouble every day, it took more energy out of him to try to attend to everyone, and there simply were not enough hours in the day to do it all. He knew it was terribly Gryffindorish of him, trying to save all these children all on his own, shouldering the burden completely. But he was still a Slytherin, the Slytherins' Slytherin, and had at least had the self-awareness to know what a fool's errand it had become.

The sound of Granger's voice snapped him out of his thoughts. Apparently she had been talking for some time.

"...so they most likely think they will need at least a month to clear out, but then again we suspect it will likely take about that long for you to be appointed guardian anyway," she was saying. "But then again, you will also likely need time to change the place as necessary to suit your needs."

She looked at him expectantly, apparently waiting for a response from him.

"I am sure that there will be plenty of time to sort everything," he said finally. "What will take the most time, and be most important, is preparing them for the move."

Granger nodded. "It will be a big change for them, won't it?"

He nodded. "Many of them are unprepared for life outside the dungeon of the orphanage. Many who leave are not seen or heard from again, at least not by them. It will be difficult to move them here without a few panic attacks."

He mustered all his self-control to force his face to stay calm and expressionless. No need to betray his fear for them, or for himself, to Granger. No need for weakness in front of her or anyone else.

"I had planned to keep the groups of siblings together and then otherwise split them up two to a room by gender," Severus said, changing the subject. He took a seat on a settee in the sitting room and pulled out a piece of parchment on which he had written a list of names.

"That's probably not a bad idea," Granger said, taking the seat next to him. "How many sibling groups are there?"

"Four. Two Rosiers, Leopold and Ermengarde; three Averys, Ambrose, Cadence, and Vanessa; two Lestranges..."

"Bellatrix had children?" Granger asked, horrified.

"No, these were Rabastan's children. Libra and Pavo."

"Oh." Granger visibly relaxed, and with good reason. The idea of Bella having offspring... he was grateful hers had been a marriage of convenience.

"And two Travers, Ramona and Raleigh. That's nine of them. Then there are Thaddeus Mulciber, the two Carrow cousins-slash-siblings..."

"You mean Amicus and Aleto..."

Severus grimaced. "Yes."

"Disgusting."

"But not surprising?"

"I suppose not."

Granger visibly shuddered as Severus continued to make his way through the list.

"Ariadne and Antioch Carrow; Sergei Dolohov, Margaret Macnair, and Henry Jugson."

"So you have four boys and two girls, three rooms. That works out nicely."

"So we need seven bedrooms total, one large enough to hold three," Severus said.

"It might be a bit crowded but I think we can make it work." Granger said. "There are nine bedrooms here; we're bound to figure something out."

They walked quietly through the house again. The first floor held the master bedroom that Severus would eventually take as well as the library. Hermione's room was also on the first floor, along with the bathroom. She offered to move to another room in case some of the orphans needed closer proximity to him, and he shook his head, simply saying that it was not necessary. The second floor had four bedrooms and a bathroom, where the Travers, Rosier, and Lestrangle siblings would go as well as Nott and Antioch Carrow in one room. The third floor, which had three bedrooms, including the largest one, would hold the three Rowles, Ariadne Carrow and Margaret Macnair in another room, and Dolohov and Avey in another room. He decided to withhold judgment on the best use for the attic. Since the space was not immediately needed, he thought it might be better to see what needs might present themselves after the move.

Hermione was certain that she saw a flicker of emotion in his eyes when he mentioned how difficult it would be for the children to leave what had been home for most of their lives. That was as close to open as he probably got around everyone. He either trusted her, or it weighed that heavily on his mind.

Who was she kidding, it was the latter. It would consume the mind of even the strongest person, and Snape was probably one of the strongest people she had ever met.

"Well," she said finally. "We'll just have to do what we can to make the transition easier. I had thought... well, Muggles have lots of books on the subject. About abused and neglected children, how to bring them back, how to relax them and get them to trust. I mean, let's face it, the Wizarding world is not exactly..."

"Progressive when it comes to mental health," Snape finished for her. She knew he, like her, was thinking of Neville's parents. And Gilderoy Lockhart. Wasting away their lives in a locked room, trapped in their own minds, their ailments low on the priorities list.

"Anyway, I could easily procure some, if you thought it might be helpful," she said hesitantly, then added quickly, "Not, of course, that I think you haven't done a brilliant job already, and you could probably write a book on it yourself, and probably you know all there is to know anyway, maybe you've already read the very books I've talked about, I just thought..."

"Granger, slow down, breathe. I think it is perhaps not a bad idea. I would welcome any resources you can think of."

Hermione relaxed and gave him a small smile. Why had she been babbling? She only babbled when she was nervous. Was she nervous? Why on earth would she be nervous? Remembering herself, she replied, "Right, well, I'll make sure I get them to you."

"It would probably be advisable to start consulting them soon," he said.

She knew what he was really asking. "I will try to get them to you by the end of the week."

Snape nodded. Hermione supposed that this passed as a thank-you for him.

"Severus..." Hermione said slowly, debating whether or not she should finish the sentence. When he looked at her quizzically, she decided the die was cast and that she might as well. "I'm really glad you're the one who's been helping them. I think they're all very lucky that they have someone who cares about them."

He blinked, met her eyes for a moment, then looked away. "I have an obligation," was all he said.

Hermione knew that she had been right, at least initially...that Snape had felt responsible for the deaths of their parents and, like Harry, had felt obligated to care for them. Still... Snape had never held Harry in the middle of the night and consoled him the way he had with Miss Rookwood. Had never set up protective charms to keep people away from him the way he had at the orphanage. No, it could not merely be obligation that kept him going. Obligation allowed him to separate his mind from his heart, and he had done so for years with Harry. He had trained his mind on protecting him while reserving his heart for Lily. Here, it was plain as day to her, and to Harry, that he truly cared about these children.

Knowing better than to call him out on it, Hermione merely said, "Well, you are the kind of man who takes his obligations very seriously, and so much the better for them." She tried to convey what she truly meant in her tone rather than her words.

He looked at her again. Their eyes met, for only a moment. Hermione was struck by just how... deep they were. She could read something in them, something faint and fleeting. They seemed to say, *You get it*.

They heard the sound of a key in the door, and Hermione released the breath she hadn't realised she'd been holding.

"I see you're both still here!" Harry said with a smile on his face. He had his arm around Ginny, who smiled politely but Hermione could tell she was tense. This was, after all, the first time she and Snape had been in the same room at the same time since his year as Headmaster.

"Find anything interesting?" Hermione asked, accepting a hug from each of them.

"Maybe," Ginny said. "Good evening Professor Snape," she said in a suddenly stilted voice.

"Mrs. Potter." Snape stood and spoke stiffly.

"I hope you're well." Ginny's face was a mask of politeness that she reserved only for situations where she felt very awkward.

"Very well. I hope you are too," Snape replied, every word clearly forced.

"Won't you stay for dinner?" Ginny asked in an unnaturally high voice and rather more quickly than normal. She was doing a terrible job of feigning enthusiasm.

The rest of the exchange passed quite rapidly and far too formally.

"No, I cannot stay."

"Pity. Some other time then."

"Perhaps. Good evening, Potter, Granger, Mrs. Potter." Without another word he was out the door.

"Whew," Ginny said, shrugging and leaning into Harry after the door slammed shut.

"Won't you stay for dinner?" 'Pity, some other time, then'? Who are you and what have you done with my wife?" Harry teased.

Even though he had reluctantly accepted the gift of the house and the help from the Gryffindors, something still nagged at Severus. Namely, the voice in the back of his head, the one that kept telling him, *They will want something from you for this. And you will not be able to give it. And they will take it all away.*

Yes, it was possible that they truly did want to help these children for purely altruistic reasons. And true, it was an offer he had to accept on their behalf. He was in no position to turn it away or negotiate, a position he positively hated to be in. But he still could not put off the possibility that they had something up their sleeves.

Namely, what did they expect from him in return for their generosity? And when payment came due, would he be able to give them what they wanted?

What if he couldn't?

No one would ever do anything for you unless there was a percentage in it for them, the voice admonished.

In Severus's experience, gifts like this never came without strings attached. As his father had been fond of saying, "There is no free lunch."

He had surreptitiously attempted to perform Legilimency on Granger again, but this time he could tell she was Occluding him in some way. Potter... there was no way he could get into Potter's head without him realising it immediately. Potter's mind did things to Severus. Made him feel emotions that he otherwise kept locked tightly in a box in the back of his mind. And wouldn't that cock up the whole thing, for Potter to be aware of Severus's prying and revoke his generous offer?

They said now that they only wanted to help. If he didn't know better, he would have called it gratuitous. People just don't do gratuitous, Severus thought. Not for them, and especially not for me. It didn't add up. He would get to the bottom of this.

Others had demanded much more from him after offering much less.

I've definitely taken some liberties with the layout of Grimmauld Place (namely, I'm fairly certain I doubled the number of bedrooms).

Coming up: Hermione oversteps a boundary.