

# Reading the Stories That Scars Tell

*by Good\_Witch*

How did Snape survive Nagini's attack, how did he and Hermione get together, and how did Prince Manor get involved?

This was written for the 2011 SSHG Exchange, in response to aleysiasnape's prompt: Severus and Hermione are trapped somewhere in Prince Manor while exploring.

## 1

*Chapter 1 of 12*

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*Reading the Stories That Scars Tell*

Chapter 1- May 2, 1998

Pain.

Desperation.

The searing agony of failure.

*No...I'm sorry...not yet...Harry...Albus...it's too late...we're lost...my fault...I'm sorry...*

Blood. So much blood.

Mine.

*Harry!*

He's there, slipping out from under the Invisibility Cloak. The flash of hope is almost as painful as the torn flesh at my throat and the venom seeping through me. I grip his robes with the last of my failing strength.

"Take...it....Take...it...."

The silvery-blue glow surrounding me glints off the flask Granger thrusts into his hand, and relief fills up the space left by my memories pouring out of me. If I had more time

"Master and Mistress are back! And they have Young Master with them!"

Harry relaxed and nodded, then said, his voice steely with determination, "Madam Pomfrey, please, bring him here. I don't know that we could trust anyone elsewhere to

give him the care he deserves. They may not believe the truth."

McGonagall and Pomfrey exchanged a grave look but they both nodded. "We must hurry, then. I'll do my best, Mr. Potter."

The two women bustled off to the nearest working Floo, and Harry shoved to his feet. "I'm going up now. I want to make sure I'm there when they bring him in. I owe him that."

Ron and Hermione followed in silence.

Up in the hospital wing, the trio hovered near an empty bed, restless with anticipation. They all jumped in surprise to see a quartet of house-elves popping into existence, surrounding the floating form of Severus Snape. Before they could react to the unusual sight, McGonagall and Pomfrey Apparated nearby, the mediwitch immediately ordering the elves to place Snape on the bed. Gently, they deposited the ashen, unconscious, bloodied man on the crisp sheets, then disappeared with a *crack*.

Pomfrey was already waving her wand, muttering diagnostic incantations, and the others rushed to surround the bed, staring with worried eyes at the barely discernible rise and fall of Snape's chest.

McGonagall spoke, but her voice was pitched low in an effort to not disturb the patient or the healer. "Draco said Severus must have instructed the house-elves to treat him, and he showed us the vials of Dittany and antivenin, as well as Blood Replenisher. We're still not sure how he got there, but there's a good chance, as he's managed to survive thus far, that he'll recover in time."

Harry wilted in relief, heaving a deep sigh. Hermione gripped his arm in comfort as she said, "Is there anything we can do?"

Pomfrey murmured, "Be a good girl and fetch me the bathing flannels and the antiseptic wash. There's a dear."

Hermione Summoned the items and stepped closer to Pomfrey, eager to be of assistance. The older witch Summoned more potions and cast more spells, narrating, "These are to induce a coma state, so his body can focus on healing. It will take a while before the venom is completely out of his system. We'll have to repeatedly cleanse his blood, filtering out the venom, and the process is hard on the body. It's best to not have to be aware of it. We can also look to repairing the bite wound and decreasing the extent of the scar. It's not a curse-scar, so it should respond to treatment at least to some degree."

Everyone flicked a glance at Harry at the mention of a curse-scar. Hermione said, "So, if Harry's scar is no longer cursed, then could you erase it?"

Harry blinked at them, his hand instinctively rising to touch the lightning-shape on his forehead. Slowly, he said, "I appreciate the sentiment, but I'd rather leave it there. As a reminder that good triumphed over evil. All scars have a story to tell, and that's one that I don't want anyone to forget."

They all nodded, then Pomfrey began cutting away Snape's clothing, carefully pulling the mangled, sodden cloth from his lacerated neck. She Vanished the cut pieces with a flick of her wand, leaving Snape bare from the waist up. His torso was as pale as his chalk-white face, marred only by the tint of dried blood. A thin black ribbon was tied around his right wrist, but as it didn't impede progress, it was left there. Pomfrey scanned him for more injuries, then said, "Hand me the flannel, well-soaked in the antiseptic."

Hermione did so, and they watched in horrified fascination as she meticulously cleaned the wound, pausing to knit flesh with whispered spells. It must have been painful, because Snape started to stir, rolling his head along the pillow.

"I don't understand; those potions and spells should have him completely out by now! He's fighting it..."

Harry tensed. "Something's wrong. Can you rouse him? What if we need to know something and he's the only one who knows it?"

Pomfrey scowled at Harry, then glanced at McGonagall. "Poppy, please, if he's fighting, he must have a good reason. His will to live is stronger than anyone I've ever seen."

Huffing, against her professional judgment, Pomfrey snapped, "*Ennervate!*"

Snape stirred more fitfully, his shallow breathing suddenly deepening and becoming more ragged. His eyes rolled wildly under his eyelids, and his fingers clenched. Grimacing, he struggled to open his eyes and speak, but the damage to his throat was such that his normal baritone was gone, leaving only a rasp as he tried to form words.

Hermione tried to offer comfort by gripping his hand, and Harry leant closer, hovering over him. Snape's eyes were bleary as he tried to focus on Harry, lifting his head. His gaze stuttered over to Hermione, and he tightened his grip on her hand, making her gasp. The whisper was barely audible in the strained silence, but he forced out, "Dark... Lord... what...?"

Hermione instantly said, "He's dead! The war is over. You're safe, Professor."

Snape's grimace smoothed and his eyes rolled back as his head thunked on the pillow again. With renewed effort, he whispered, "How can... certain...?"

Harry grinned in relieved joy and leant closer, one hand pushing his shaggy fringe out of the way and showing the pale scar on his forehead, no longer red and fresh with the curse that put it there. "See? The curse is gone...Voldemort's soul is gone!"

At the mention of the Dark Lord's name, Snape twitched, his brow furrowing further as he jerked his left arm up. Hermione maintained her hold on his hand and then supported his flagging strength when she realized he was trying to see his Dark Mark. Her voice trembled with emotion as she said, "It's gone too. Look! It's *over*. All of it."

Snape's eyes narrowed as he looked at the pale ghost of a scar on his inner forearm. The blackened brand or the red puckered burn he had sported for nearly two decades had faded and smoothed, leaving an alabaster image of the *Morsmordre* as testimony of his youthful folly.

Harry added, "You're safe here, Professor. Madam Pomfrey will get you fixed up, and we'll make sure no one bothers you or interferes with your recovery. I've already told the truth about you working as a double agent...everyone knows how much you've suffered to help us win this war."

Snape's head fell back onto the pillow again, his eyes closing as he released a shuddering breath. His fierce grip on Hermione's supporting hand slackened, his eyelids fluttering as he rasped, "At... last..." and a bead of moisture trickled down to his temple as his head lolled to one side.

Hermione sucked in a frightened breath at the sudden change, but when his chest rose slowly again, she exhaled shakily, squeaking, "What happened?"

Pomfrey nodded as she continued her work. "He finally succumbed to the potions and spells. He should be in that coma now...which is good, because we're about to start the rough stuff. I'm amazed he managed to fight them off for as long as he did."

Hermione stared down at Snape's still form. "How long will he be out?"

Pomfrey snorted and said, "As long as I need him to be. Now, I need to concentrate; this is finicky stuff here. You all should run along. I daresay you can find other things that need attending."

McGonagall cleared her throat and cut a sardonic glance at the other woman. "Indeed, Poppy. Are you certain you can manage?"

Hermione saw Harry's indecision in his face and said, "I'll stay. You all go on. Ron, you should be with your family. Harry, you need to go with Professor McGonagall and

stave off those who would try to hurt Professor Snape. I'm sure Kingsley will listen to you both. Madam Pomfrey, I'd be happy to help if I can, but if I'd get in your way, I can wait over there."

Pomfrey glanced up at Hermione's earnest face and said, "You may stay. Just don't distract me. All right now, the rest of you...OUT."

McGonagall herded the boys out of the hospital wing, leaving Pomfrey and Hermione at Snape's bedside. Hermione whispered, "Am I in the way here?"

Pomfrey shook her head and Summoned a rolling table with instruments on it. Hermione Summoned a chair from against the wall and sank into it, never releasing Snape's hand. She leant forward, resting her chin on her other hand as she watched the mediwitch, repeatedly looking at Snape's lean torso, noting how his ribs stood out in stark relief.

Pomfrey hung a length of tubing on a rolling stand, then fitted a needle into one end. With quick, deft movements, she inserted the needle into the inside of Snape's right arm, watching the blood flowing sluggishly through the tube. As it reached the stand, she cast a complicated spell, using incantations and patterns Hermione had never seen before. The tubing and the stand glowed, and as the blood crept beyond it, toward the other end of the tube, Pomfrey fitted another needle into the opposite end, then inserted it into the inside of Snape's left arm, making Hermione lean back hastily.

Before Hermione could even gather the courage to ask what she was doing, Pomfrey murmured, "The spell will cleanse the venom from his blood. It will have to continue through it for a long time to completely filter all of the venom. The needles sting, of course, but the unfortunate effect of cleansing the blood this way is that it burns as it re-enters the body. If he weren't kept sedated like this, he would be screaming nearly as much as if he had been hit by the Cruciatus Curse."

Hermione gasped, her damp eyes wide in horror and sympathy. Instinctively, she stroked his hand in hers.

Pomfrey went back to work on the raw mince that was his wounded neck, and Hermione watched, wishing she could do more to help. After a few minutes of her gaze wandering over his bare torso again, she blinked and said, "Would it be all right if I were to finish cleaning him?"

Pomfrey grunted an affirmative, her eyes still trained on mending Snape's flesh. Hermione Summoned the bathing flannel and antiseptic wash...now tinted red...and cast a mild warming charm on them, not wanting to cause him any more discomfort. Gently, she washed away the blood staining his pale skin, noticing other scars marring the smoothness of his taut belly and chest.

*I can't believe he survived! How did he do it? How awful it must have been for him for all these years. And being forced to kill Dumbledore like that...oh, Headmaster, how could you do that to poor Professor Snape?*

Hot tears splashed down onto Snape's belly, and Hermione wiped them away with the flannel. Soon, the bloodstains were gone, but she continued absently swiping the cloth down his torso, smoothing the thin line of dark hair that began between his pectoral muscles and trailed down to circle his navel and disappear beneath the waist of his trousers.

Hours passed before Pomfrey straightened, her back audibly cracking as she heaved a gusty sigh. Hermione blinked rapidly, startled from her sobering reflections.

"There. I've done as much as I can now. We'll just have to let his own body do some work healing before I can try any more."

Hermione raked her gaze over his face and body, feeling a spark of hope. "He's regained some colour...that's good, isn't it?"

Pomfrey offered a weary smile. "Yes, dear, it's good. Once we could get some more blood in him, he was bound to pink up."

Hermione exhaled slowly, letting herself relax. "Is there anything else we can do for him?"

Pomfrey shook her head even as she massaged her stiff neck. "Not yet. He'll be like this for weeks, until the venom is gone. Then we can work on strengthening him again. You should get some rest too."

Hermione glanced around at the other beds and said, "I'll just lie down on one of these, if that's all right. I don't want him to be left by himself. Not after all these years of being so terribly alone. You look like you need a good meal and some sleep, yourself."

Pomfrey quirked a rueful smile and said, "I feel like it too. Fine, suit yourself, young lady. But he's as fine as he can be given the situation."

With that, she started to drape a light blanket over him, but Hermione protested. "Oh, don't! His clothes are still filthy. Shouldn't we finish cleaning him up before soiling more bedding?"

Pomfrey's shoulders fell in exhaustion. "Can't it wait? It won't hurt him."

Hermione pursed her lips in indignation. "I'll do it! He deserves that much."

Pomfrey sighed again, rubbing her eyes. "Aye, he deserves much more, but I'm at the end of my tether."

Hermione glared at the other woman, but she relented when she saw how much Pomfrey's hands were trembling with fatigue. "All right. I'll take care of him. Where might I find some pyjama bottoms to change him into...I mean, I doubt a hospital gown would work since you need access to his neck and shoulder."

Pomfrey wilted in gratitude, flicking her wand to send a loose pair of drawstring trousers sailing into Hermione's outstretched hand. "The privacy screen is in the back, and the sheets and blankets are under the beds. Do you think you can manage changing the soiled bedding without disturbing the blood-filtration? You can just put the bloody things over in that hamper."

Hermione firmed her courage and nodded sharply. "I can levitate him easily enough, I'm sure. Go get some sleep. You're worn out."

Pomfrey held Hermione's resolute gaze for a moment before inclining her head in a gesture of agreement and thanks. Then, she turned and shuffled into her office and through to her quarters. Hermione immediately turned her attention to the screen at the back of the room and sent it skittering around the bed. Then, she gathered the fresh bedding and dragged a second bed over near Snape's.

She briskly readied the fresh sheets and pyjamas, expression determined, but she faltered when she pointed her wand at her former teacher to strip him of his bloodied trousers. *I hope that coma really is deep. No doubt he would hate me being the one to do this to him. But it needs to be done! I'm sure he'll be much more comfortable once he's in clean clothes that aren't so restrictive.*

Taking a deep breath and setting her teeth, Hermione cast a levitation spell on Snape, floating him above the mattress much like the house-elves had done to bring him there. Quickly gathering the stained sheets, she ripped them off the bed and flung them toward the hamper. Just as quickly, she fitted the fresh linens to the mattress, flicking apprehensive glances at Snape's face the whole time.

His features were slack in his drugged sleep, and his lank black hair dangled below his head, clumped with dried blood. *I should wash that out too. That can't be hygienic.* With a deft flick of her wand, Snape's boots were set near the hamper, followed by his socks. Then, carefully, she aimed her wand at the placket of his trousers, making the buttons pop open. Swallowing hard, she directed them to peel down his long legs, her face burning in embarrassed curiosity about what sort of underpants he wore.

The blood had soaked through his trousers to stain what had previously been plain white boxer shorts and Hermione paused, pulse racing as she debated what to do about that. *I...I can't strip him like that. It's...it's indecent! He would loathe me if he knew. Maybe they'll come clean?*



Pomfrey pulled a face and said, "Hard to say. He's not being held under now. But that doesn't mean he isn't still sleeping of his own accord."

Harry snorted and said, "He's been asleep almost two months! If I had been asleep that long, I'd be right ready to wake up."

Pomfrey drew breath to respond, but Hermione broke in, saying, "It's not the same sort of sleep, Harry. The coma was more like a state of suspension. He won't even realize how long he's been out. To him, it will feel like just yesterday."

Pomfrey chuckled and drawled, "*Somebody's* been doing some studying."

Ron quipped, "You reckon?" and ducked from Hermione's half-hearted swat.

Hermione, feeling like she had to defend herself, said, "I wanted to know whether or not he could know that he was here, safe, or if he could know that he wasn't alone. I didn't know if he could feel us taking care of him, or me holding his hand, so I did some research..."

She was interrupted by Snape's gravelly rasp as he said, "I can feel your hand now, Miss Granger..."

Everyone's attention snapped to Snape, and Hermione's hand squeezed his in anxious surprise. Snape's eyes were rolling again beneath his eyelids as he struggled to open his eyes. Scowling, he muttered, "Eyes... dry."

Pomfrey hastily cast a charm on him and his eyes flew open wide, only to slam shut with another scowl at the light. Squinting, he peered around at the group surrounding him.

McGonagall, her voice taut with emotion, said, "Severus, thank the gods you're back. You're safe."

Harry added, "What do you remember?"

Hermione cast a chiding look at Harry and stroked Snape's hand as she said, "How do you feel? Are you in pain? How can we help?"

Pomfrey was drawing diagnostic runes in the air above him and he eyed them warily for a moment. He lifted both hands and looked...first at the scar of the Dark Mark, and then at the thin ribbon still around his wrist. Then, his measuring gaze flicked up to Hermione...she was still holding his left hand...as he reached up to feel his neck. His brows rose in surprise as he felt the scar tissue, realizing he was whole.

Pomfrey said, "I tried my best to pretty it up for you, Severus, but I couldn't put it completely back to normal. Perhaps the staff at St. Mungo's could do better, but *someone* wouldn't let you go there."

Kingsley piped up, "Rightly so, Poppy. You saw what a circus it was once word got out Severus was alive." Meeting Snape's startled eyes, he flashed a reassuring smile and continued, "It's all right now, of course. Harry helped see to that."

Snape's eyes widened more and he stared at Harry, who was fighting a smug grin as he said, "No worries, Professor. I made sure you were exonerated. The truth is out. You're a hero, sir."

At that, Snape rolled his eyes and snorted in derision, letting his hands fall back to his sides. Before he could comment, Pomfrey said, "There's quite a bit to catch you up on, Severus, but we don't want to overwhelm you. Your vitals seem to be within acceptable range, but if you're in pain or distressed, we can treat you."

Snape frowned, considering, then croaked, "I don't hurt much, but I feel... weak. And my stomach seems to think my throat's been cut."

Everyone gasped, completely unprepared for his sly humour. Then McGonagall let loose a bark of laughter, making Snape's lips quirk in satisfaction. "If you're that hungry, I'm sure the house-elves will be glad to bring up some broth and tea. What do you think, Poppy, is he ready for solid food this early?"

Snape peered up at Pomfrey where she hovered just above his head, his expression plaintive. She gazed at him with narrowed eyes and said, "Some thin porridge might be all right. Your system isn't ready to handle much digestion after so long. If you're very good, I might even allow you some ice cream."

Snape snorted, but the look he and the healer exchanged was warm. "Then would someone place the order before I die of hunger? And I'd like to learn what...and how *much*...I've missed, while I eat, if anyone would be so kind as to regale me."

Kingsley buffeted Snape's foot under the blanket and drawled, "It's quite apparent that you're none the worse for wear, Severus. So, I'll leave you to your convalescence. You're clearly in good hands." He paused, then added, "Welcome back."

Snape nodded and said, "It's good to *be* back, especially when you consider the alternative." His right hand crept back up to his neck, and Hermione squeezed his left hand again.

McGonagall had summoned a house-elf and ordered the simple meal. As Kingsley was taking his leave, a house-elf appeared with a laden tray, placing it on a rolling table beside the bed. Pomfrey raised the head of the bed, and Snape grimaced as he shifted to a more comfortable position, sitting up and sheepishly grabbing at the blanket so it wouldn't slip down his bare chest. Harry rolled the table over so it slid across Snape's lap, but when he gestured for Snape to start eating, Snape just stared uneasily at the remaining group, the blanket securely clamped in his armpits.

Pomfrey bit back a smile and said, "All right, you lot. He doesn't need to be watched while he eats...that's unnerving. One of you may stay to fill him in on the details, but the rest of you need to clear out."

Hermione immediately said, "I'll stay. I can tell you all about the treatments Madam Pomfrey used. I read up on them."

Snape slid an appraising look over Hermione's eager face, his lip curling in mild amusement at Ron's snort when Hermione mentioned her research. His gaze lit upon her hand still twined with his, and his brow furrowed. *What is that about?* Slowly, he inclined his head and murmured, "Very well then."

Pomfrey stepped out from behind the bed and started shooing the others toward the doors. "Go on. Off with you. He needs to rebuild his strength. You may come back tomorrow. Hermione, see that he doesn't overexert himself, and if you need me, I'll be in my office."

Hermione bobbed her head and said, "Of course, Madam Pomfrey. I promise."

The others exited, leaving Hermione alone with Snape, the aromas of rich chicken broth, sweetened thin porridge, and steeping tea filling the air. Once they were gone, Snape let his head fall back against the pillow, closing his eyes and taking a steadying breath. Hermione was instantly solicitous, stroking his hand as she voiced a soothing croon.

"Sir, are you all right?"

Snape kept his eyes closed for a long moment, barely noticing her attempts at comfort while he was in the throes of trying to assimilate the fact that the future he had never really thought to have was actually here. Then, his stomach cramped again and he opened his eyes, focusing on the food before him. "I'm fine, Miss Granger."

He lifted his right hand to pick up the spoon, catching sight of the ribbon around his wrist, and a shaky huff of incredulous relief burst from him. He shook his head, a weak smile quirking his lips.

Hermione saw where he was looking and his odd reaction, and murmured, "Sir? What is that? We didn't know what it was, but we didn't want to disturb it since it wasn't in the way."

Snape dipped his spoon into the broth and rasped, "My salvation."

Instantly intrigued, Hermione leant closer and said, "Your salvation? What does that mean? Oh, sir, how *did* you manage to survive? We thought you were..." She couldn't finish.

Snape carefully swallowed a spoonful of broth, sighing at the warmth spreading through his body from it, then said, "Miss Granger, I'll make you a deal: You tell me what happened on your end while I eat, and then I'll return the favour and answer your questions. Fair enough?"

Hermione nodded vigorously, squeezing his hand in excitement. His gaze snapped to their clasped hands again and he said, "I don't think I'll fall off the planet without you holding on, Miss Granger."

Hermione gasped, feeling her cheeks colour in embarrassment, and released him, backing away. "I'm sorry, Professor. I've just got used to it while you've been ill."

Snape flexed his fingers, feeling the temperature difference between where her skin had touched his and where it had remained bare. Diverting his attention to the food again, he said, "Speaking of that, tell me how long I've been, as you say, *ill*."

Hermione dragged her customary chair over and perched beside him, propping her chin on one hand. "Well, you were brought here on May 2nd, and it's now June 24th." She paused as Snape's eyes flew open wide and he nearly choked on the porridge. Hurriedly pouring him a glass of water, she said, "Here! Please don't hurt yourself!"

Snape sipped at the water, owl-eyed. When he had regained his composure, he whispered, "That long? Why?"

Hermione patted his left wrist in comfort as she said, "It was the venom. Madam Pomfrey had to filter your blood...and put some in you! I don't know how you survived after that attack, sir. It was the most horrific thing I've ever seen."

Snape mumbled, "Indeed," and sipped some tea.

"I know...you'll tell me later. All right, well, we went back for your body but you were gone. We didn't know *what* to do! Then we got a note from Draco saying you were there, and Professor McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey went to find you. You were brought here by the Malfoy house-elves, and Madam Pomfrey repaired your wound while she kept you in a coma to treat your blood. Do you even remember waking here?"

Snape frowned. "I wasn't sure if it was real or a dream."

"Harry wouldn't let them take you to St. Mungo's because he was afraid people wouldn't understand the truth and wouldn't treat you well. Then he and Professor McGonagall convinced Kingsley to...well...hold your trial with him as your proxy. He used Pensieve memories in his testimony and the Ministry acquitted you of all charges."

Snape paused to swallow hard, sucking in another deep breath. "That is... unexpected."

Again, Hermione caressed his wrist in a soothing gesture, but she didn't notice his pensive glance at her hand once again on his. He continued to take small sips of broth and half-spoonfuls of porridge, letting her talk.

"Wait till you hear what else was unexpected: Draco and his mother are forcing his father to get rid of everything Dark and behave like a civilized human being!" She smirked at Snape's dubious eyebrow raise and said, "Draco's really come around. In fact, he wanted to be here now, but Madam Pomfrey overrode his request. I'm supposed to send him a message to let him know how you're doing and when he can visit you. He's been as concerned about you as we have." With that, Hermione's hand on Snape's left wrist slid around to twine with his fingers again.

Snape felt an odd sensation in his gut, but he knew it had nothing to do with eating for the first time in months. The fluttering was directly related to the warmth of Hermione's hand and smile as she looked at him. It sent a tiny shiver through him...unused to such regard as he was...which Hermione noticed.

Snapping to attention, she squeezed his hand and said, "Are you cold? I'm so sorry, Professor. Here, let me get you the top for those bottoms." She matched action to words and ducked below the bed to collect the pyjama top as she said, "With the needles stuck in both arms, making a loop of tubing, Madam Pomfrey decided it wasn't worth the continued cutting and repairing to get the shirt on you, especially since she wanted access to your neck as well."

Snape stared at her as she shook the shirt open, pushed the table away, and gestured for him to lean forward. Her manner was brisk and efficient as she draped the shirt behind him and held each sleeve open for him. Snape blinked, feeling an uncomfortable wave of heat rising to stain his cheeks. He cooperated, however, but when she twitched the blanket lower so he could settle the shirt and button it, Snape couldn't help but jerk the front panels closed, covering his bare chest. Hermione saw his embarrassment and felt the urge to reassure him, even as her face flushed too.

"Sorry, sir. I've had weeks to get used to taking care of you, but you've only had minutes."

Snape busied himself with the buttons, averting his face as he said, "Weeks...what?"

Hermione sat back and pushed the tray table over his lap again, casting a warming charm on his meal. "I've been helping Madam Pomfrey. I wanted to make sure no one disturbed you while you were in that coma, unable to defend yourself. After all you did to protect us, it was only right that someone protect *you* for a change. And I enjoyed learning about all the healing things she did to treat you. That shouldn't surprise *you*, Professor. After all, you were the one to call me an insufferable Know-It-All."

Snape froze, unprepared for such revelations. He carefully slid his gaze up to see Hermione grinning at him, her eyes dancing with mirth. She cocked an eyebrow at him and drawled, "Of course, considering *your* miraculous escape from what we thought was certain death, I daresay that's the pot calling the kettle black, sir."

Snape blinked rapidly as he took a sip of tea, trying to subdue the awkward feelings of shyness and gratitude that beset him. He simply uttered a noncommittal, "Hmm, indeed."

Letting his head sink back for a moment, Snape closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Hermione stroked his hand and murmured, "I'm sorry, sir. Are you tired? Am I bothering you? I can set the meal aside for later and lower the bed if you'd rather take a nap. I'm sure this is all rather overwhelming."

Snape swallowed, thinking, *Surviving was overwhelming enough, but waking up to be so comforted is more disconcerting than anything else. Especially since no one has touched me so much since Lily and I were children, holding hands during summer holidays. Lily, I'm so sorry for what happened. But it finally worked out right...Harry is safe, and the Dark Lord is gone. For good! I'm so glad to have been able to keep that promise...*

After a long moment of silence, Snape opened his eyes and looked at Hermione's anxious expression. "It is a bit much to take in all at once, Miss Granger, but we made a deal, and I intend to hold up my end of the bargain."

Hermione flashed a smile and her eyes lit up with interest. "Oh, yes, tell me how you did it!"

Snape paused to swallow another spoonful of porridge, then nodded pointedly at the ribbon around his wrist. "That, Miss Granger, is the Portkey that saved me." Hermione's brow furrowed in confusion, but she waited for him to continue. "I was afraid that I would be injured, and I kept many different potions in my robes at all times,



hoping I'd managed to cover all likely possibilities. Because the Dark Lord was using Malfoy Manor as his headquarters, I was there enough that I knew I could spin the tale sufficiently if I was hurt and the Dark Lord prevailed. I instructed the Malfoy house-elves in what to do if I should appear there, wounded. The Portkey was set to activate only once I was unconscious enough that even my magic went dormant. That way it wouldn't work if I was merely sleeping. You saw what happened, and you see the result. It was a tricky bit of enchantment, but it was my last resort."

Hermione goggled at him in amazement, wonder and pride shining in her eyes. "That's extremely impressive, Professor! Do you think you could teach me that?"

Snape snorted. "You really never stop learning, do you, Miss Granger?"

Hermione shrugged and said, "What's the use of living if you can't learn new things?" Then, she paused and her expression softened as she whispered, "I'm so glad you're alive, sir."

Her thumb stroked along his hand and he felt that fluttering in his gut again. Inclining his head, he eyed her caressing finger and muttered, "That makes two of us."

Hermione's smile widened as she leant closer and said, "Now that you're awake, you can concentrate on getting stronger...back to your old self."

Snape snorted and growled, "I'd rather not."

Jerking backward, Hermione tilted her head in confusion and said, "Rather not what?"

Snape heaved a weary sigh and said, "Get back to my old self. It wasn't very pleasant, you see."

Hermione sucked in a breath and her lips pursed in a moue of sympathy. Her other hand joined the first, wrapping around Snape's hand, and he glanced at it, disconcerted by the continued warmth that fluttered in his belly. Hermione whispered fervently, "Then you can take this opportunity and be a new you! Not many people get second chances like this."

In an uneasy rumble, Snape said, "Why am I telling you this? It wasn't part of the bargain."

Hermione squeezed his hand and said, "Oh, I don't mind! I've been waiting for nearly two months to get to hear your story, Professor. If there's anything I enjoy, it's learning the history behind something." She chuckled and drawled, "My repeated devouring of *Hogwarts: A History* should be testament enough. Although, I'd love to see a new, *true* edition printed. There were some glaring omissions..."

Snape swallowed more broth and said, "Why don't you do it? Haven't you ever heard that if you want something done right, you had better do it yourself? What are you going to do now that the Dark Lord is gone?"

Hermione's expression clouded, and she said, "I'm not sure. Harry and Ron are planning to start Auror training in September...provided they pass their N.E.W.T.s when we sit them in August...which they should. The Ministry and the school have put together a condensed course for anyone who wants to take it, since the last year here wasn't exactly suited to preparing for the exams, as I'm sure you well know. So, I *could* follow them into the Auror program, but I'm tired of having to defend against the Dark. They're welcome to it; I had enough of *that* during the war. As for me... I haven't really thought much about it, since I've been so focused *here* any time I'm not working on the N.E.W.T.s course."

Snape cleared his throat and said, "Apparently I owe you a debt of gratitude, Miss Granger..."

He was cut off by Hermione's protest. "Not a bit of it! I'm merely trying to pay down the enormous debt we all owe *you* for your continued sacrifices! If you insist that you must do something in return, then all I ask is that you concentrate on getting well and strong again, Professor." Then she bit her lower lip and her gaze shifted to one side. "Well, and maybe be willing to tell me your stories from all these years?"

Snape smirked. "Miss Granger, if you want an account of the war years, I am not the only one with stories. Only getting one point of view would leave things dreadfully biased."

Narrowing her eyes in thought, she murmured, "True..." Then, she perked up again, eyes alight with excitement. "That's what I'll do! I'll get as many accounts of the war against Voldemort..." she paused at Snape's flinch and scowl, "...Really, Professor, there's nothing to be afraid of anymore; it's just a name."

He glared at her, reminiscent of his classroom self, and hissed, "Surely you've *learned* about conditioning, Miss Granger. Do me the courtesy of allowing me *time* to extinguish the ingrained response!"

Hermione ducked her head, abashed. "Of course, sir. I'm sorry. How thoughtless of me."

Mollified, Snape drank some tea, then ended the awkward silence by saying, "At any rate, I daresay an accurate account of the wars...unless you decide it's really just one long war...would be quite illuminating for the Ministry and the public. Do you really think they'll let you publish a factual account?"

Hermione considered for a moment and said, "Well, now that Kingsley is Minister for Magic, I think they might be willing to show the public that what they *are* is decidedly *not* what they were under previous Ministers. Besides, with our reputations, I don't think they'd have much leverage over us. While 'fame isn't everything,' Professor, it *does* smooth the way quite often."

Snape's eyes narrowed at her jibe. Her twinkling eyes belied her serious tone as she threw his words to Harry from seven years before in his face like that. Disgruntled, he growled, "Good gods, do you remember *everything* verbatim with that Gryffindor brain of yours? You've got a mind like a steel trap."

Hermione laughed, pleased to have teased him again. "I remember what's important and then some."

Snape stayed silent, finishing his bowl of porridge as he fleetingly wondered whether he qualified as the "important" or the "then some." Unfortunately, now that his belly was no longer achingly empty, he felt fatigue creeping up on him. He rested his head on the pillow again, letting his eyelids droop closed for a beat. Hermione smiled and gently moved the table away, flicking her wand at the windows to draw the curtains against the midday light. Snape jerked to attention at the abrupt dimming.

"You're tired. I've just drawn the curtains, sir. Let me lower the bed and you can sleep. And now that you'll be sleeping normally, instead of in that dreadful coma, perchance you'll dream."

Snape shifted as the bed was lowered again, realizing that he *could* take the chance to dream again, now that he had a real future ahead of him. Still, he couldn't let Hermione go without retaliation for having dared tease him. "Miss Granger, *don't* mangle the Bard in my presence, if you please."

Hermione chuckled and settled the blanket over Snape, "Certainly, Professor. I'll be right here if you need anything. Sleep well."

She moved the next bed closer again and hopped up, lying on her side and watching Snape doze off. After several minutes, his breathing evened out. *Good, he's asleep. He deserves a chance to rest after all he's been through.* She lay there, thoughts racing with possibilities after all he had said, eyes unfocused but turned in his direction.

After a long while, Snape's breathing hitched, and his brow furrowed. His eyes were rolling under his eyelids again, and his head tossed from side to side. Hermione sat up instantly. *He must be dreaming!* She reached out and smoothed his hair back from his face, unsticking it from his lips while he fidgeted. *Should I wake him?* Wishing she knew what to do to soothe his dreams, she gently caressed his arm, grasping his hand like she had so many times before. His hand spasmed, imprisoning hers in his grip,



"Let's go." Snape set off down the corridor toward his old quarters, Hermione dutifully at his heels. When he was able to neutralize his previous wards on the first try, he smirked to himself. Finding out that he not only had to rebuild his physical strength but also recharge his magic had been a dreadful shock.

Apparently, once he was so near death that his Portkey had been able to activate, his magic had fallen dormant, as he had expected. What he had *not* expected, however, was that it wouldn't spring back to life with its former strength once he had rejoined the living. That was one detail kept quiet aside from a select few; Pomfrey, Hermione, McGonagall, and Kingsley knew, but no one else.

Hermione was horrified that the previously formidable wizard had been reduced in such a way, but she kept her emotions in check and simply went about business in a matter-of-fact manner, much to Snape's gratitude. Not only did they talk about events and people involved in the war for Hermione to include in her draft, and work on the subjects Hermione needed for her N.E.W.T.s, they also spent time rehabilitating Snape's magical and physical strength.

Hermione had been worried about Snape's sleep disturbances, but she noted that he didn't have much trouble when he fell into his inevitable daily nap in between their study or practice sessions. When Snape had first ventured the idea that he might be able to sleep better in his quarters, Hermione immediately took his side. She knew, from those excruciating months of camping, that *not* being somewhere you *knew*...that made you feel *safe*...could definitely have a detrimental effect on your quality of rest.

So, when she followed Snape into his old quarters, she recognized the way his shoulders relaxed and could understand his long sigh of relief. It was obvious that no one had been there for months, as a layer of dust lay over the surfaces, and spiders had made great sport in decorating the corners with webs. Snape headed straight for the brown wingback chair in front of the hearth and sank into it with an expression of supreme satisfaction. Leaning back, he propped his feet on the ottoman in front and closed his eyes while a smile played about his lips.

Hermione smiled fondly as she set her things on the dinette table across the room after a cursory dusting charm. *I wonder if he's going to fall asleep right here and now. All those stairs really took it out of him. This place needs a good cleaning, but I don't want to do anything that might disturb his rest.* She stood still for a long moment, watching him relax into the chair, waiting for him to open his eyes. When she saw his head starting to list to one side, she knew he was asleep and tiptoed to the matching chair facing his at the opposite end of a dark brown sofa, hoping not to wake him. Carefully opening her latest book for studying, she settled in to read until he woke.

Snape woke when his head drooped enough to one side that it fell, and his eyes snapped open, blinking at his disorientation. When he saw Hermione across from him, nose buried in a book, he relaxed again, feeling calmer immediately. His neck was already sore from that sleepy tilt, so he knew he shouldn't doze off sitting up again. But, he wasn't recharged enough to get back to work either. He slid his feet from the ottoman, drawing Hermione's attention.

She smiled at him and said, "Are you feeling better, sir?"

Snape rubbed his neck and rumbled, "I'm just going to lie down for a few minutes. Don't want to put a crick in my neck."

Hermione nodded. "I should think not. Shall I let you go to bed?"

Snape shoved to his feet, his legs unsteady under him, and shook his head, knowing he slept better when she was around...but not willing to admit that to anyone. "No, I'm just going to take a few minutes. The sofa is fine. As soon as I catch a wink or two, we'll continue with our work. You're fine, Hermione. Stay."

She nodded again and watched him sprawl along the sofa, his head toward her. Getting to know Snape over the last several weeks...learning about all the machinations he had been forced into, understanding the stressful, precarious position he had been in, playing the servant of two masters...she had developed a deep appreciation for his courage and determination. Seeing him forgoing his old mannerisms and taking his hard-won opportunity to be less objectionable and prickly, she had discovered that he had a wicked sense of humour to go with his razor-sharp intellect. Finally having someone with whom she could engage in scholarly discussions without having to slow her racing thoughts added to her eager anticipation of their time together. Really, she had decided that Severus Snape was an altogether satisfactory friend.

She enjoyed their time together so much, in fact, that she regularly spent more time with him than anyone else, including Harry and Ron, which led to perplexed head shaking on their parts. They did support her attempt at writing an accurate account of the war, however, so they gave her significantly less grief than they might have otherwise when it seemed she was always with Snape.

Once Snape was asleep again, stretched out with one arm flung over his head at one end of the sofa and one foot dangling over the other end, Hermione finished a chapter in her book and put it down, taking the chance to look more closely at his quarters. Slipping her shoes off, she wriggled her toes in the sheepskin rug between the hearth and the seating, smiling in delight. Quietly, she sidled around the room, peering at the tapestries on the stone walls, perusing the spines of the books lining the shelves, and peeking into the mahogany hutch to see a bottle of Firewhisky and tumblers. Carefully turning the knobs of the doors on either side of the room, she saw that one door led to what looked to be his private laboratory, while the two on the other side led to the bathroom and bedroom.

Ducking into the bathroom out of curiosity, she noted that there was a door leading from it into the bedroom as well as the door to the sitting room. The towels were musty, and the air smelled stale. Closing the doors, she cast cleaning and freshening charms, satisfied that they would be sufficient until the house-elves got in to give everything a good scrubbing.

Wondering if his bedroom was as fusty as the bathroom, Hermione stepped through, lighting the wall sconces with a nonverbal *Lumos*. The room was Spartan, with the usual Hogwarts four-poster bed, a nightstand, a chair in the corner, and a wardrobe. She crossed to the wardrobe and opened it, coughing a little at the stagnant air wafting out at her. Not wanting to pry too much, she quickly opened each drawer and door, poking her wand in to cast freshening charms without actually rifling through his things. After doing the same on the bedding and bed curtains...both dark browns, much like the sitting room furniture, except for the plain white sheets...she tiptoed back into the sitting room, taking up residence at the dinette table, where she spread out her notes again.

It was nearly an hour and a half later before Snape woke to the aroma of tea and toast. As soon as he opened his eyes, he started, having forgotten where he was. Almost immediately, however, he relaxed again and squirmed to look behind him to where Hermione had been sitting. He frowned when he saw that the chair was empty. Sitting up, he peered over the back of the sofa, a comforting warmth spreading over him when he saw Hermione sitting at his table, scribbling something with one hand while she held a half-eaten piece of toast in the other.

He indulged in a fond smile...she hadn't noticed him yet...then sobered his expression and said, "Did you bring enough for everybody, Miss Granger?"

Hermione jumped, whirling to gaze at him with wide eyes. "Oh! You startled me!" She saw his smug smirk and grimaced at him. "Just who is 'everybody'? Are you expecting guests?"

Snape stood, pleased that he no longer felt weak, and strode over to join Hermione. Snagging a chair, he spun it around and sank onto it backwards, folding his arms over the chairback. He picked up a slice of toast and snorted, then said, "As if I'd let anyone else but you down here."

Hermione ducked her head, smiling even as she blushed. Snape had taken a large bite of toast on the tails of his words, only to realize what he had said. Clearing his throat as he chewed, trying not to choke, he berated himself for not being more careful about what he admitted out loud.

Hermione tilted her head and twinkled up at him, saying, "Good heavens, was that a compliment? I'll just have to remember that one with my 'steel trap' of a mind."

Snape cut an acid glance at her, then turned his attention to fixing a cup of tea. "Couldn't wait until dinner?"

Hermione gently said, "It is dinner time, Professor. I just didn't want to wake you."

Snape stared at her, then spun to look at the time. "For Merlin's sake, I was asleep *that long*?" Scowling, he whipped back around and turned a baleful glare on the tea tray. "This is getting ridiculous."

Hermione took his teacup and finished making it to his liking, setting it in front of him with one hand while the other dropped to pat his knee where it was resting against the side of his chairback. "Nonsense. Your body knows what it needs to get strong again. All those stairs were a bit much at one time, and I'm glad you were able to have such a good rest now that you're in comfortable surroundings."

Snape tensed as the feel of her hand on his knee sent a tingle of warmth chasing through him. He almost wanted to lean into the caress, and that unnerved him. He bent his head and glowered at the table, disconcerted and irritated.

Hermione reached up and brushed his hair back, tucking it behind his ear as she coaxed, "Now, what would you like to have for dinner tonight? We can even have the house-elves in to clean the place while we eat." Snape's jaw twitched as he clenched his teeth, but he clamped down on his reaction, not wanting to frighten away her tenderness. "Why don't we have a little celebration now that you've been released from the hospital wing? I think that's worth celebrating, don't you?"

Snape slid his gaze to her cheerful smile, trying to ignore his wish that she would stroke his hair like that again. Slowly, hoping his voice wouldn't betray his pounding heart, he said, "Very well. What do you think would be worthy of this celebration? Something better than tea and toast, I hope."

Hermione laughed, and Snape's gloom lifted. Wrinkling her nose at him and grinning, she lifted, "Well, you've been a very good boy, so there should definitely be ice cream..."

Snape's lips twitched as he fought to suppress a smile. "Is *that* how you celebrate? In that case, sod dinner, bring up dessert!"

Her brows rose in appreciation of his flight of fancy, pleased that he hadn't rebuked her for teasing him. "Careful what you wish for, Professor. This dentists' daughter has developed *quite* the sweet tooth since I've been out of their house."

At that, Snape gave in and laughed, too. "Go ahead, Hermione, place a feast of fat things before me. How else am I to 'put meat on my bones,' as Poppy so eloquently puts it?"

Hermione's eyes narrowed in a solemn appraisal. "You *have* put some weight back on, but not nearly enough. You were thin enough as it was when you arrived, and it was terrible to see you nearly wasting away before my eyes during those long weeks of that horrid coma. Honestly, I could count your ribs!"

Snape blinked. His voice low, he said, "When were you inspecting my ribs?"

Hermione flushed and avoided his eyes, focusing instead on shredding the remainder of her slice of toast. "I told you: I was helping Madam Pomfrey take care of you."

Pulse increasing, Snape scooted closer to her and leant in as he said, "Tell me what that means. You're always so conveniently vague. I have a right to know what's been done to my own person."

Hermione swallowed and said, "Well, when she was working on your neck, after she had cut away your shirt and robes, I washed the blood off of you. It...it was everywhere. Your skin was so white, and you were so thin. I warmed the flannel though; I didn't want to make you uncomfortable."

Uncomfortable. Oh, she had a knack for making him uncomfortable, all right. The thought of her bathing him made him decidedly uncomfortable as jolts of nervous desire flashed through him. He could tell, from the way she suddenly bit her lower lip, that she wasn't telling the whole story.

His voice was low and compelling as he said, "What else?"

Hermione glanced up at him and her eyes widened. Unable to break away from his penetrating gaze, she murmured, "She had done all she could for the moment, mending your wound, and you were already in the coma, so she needed to rest. But, I just couldn't let her leave you like that: still bloody and dirty from the floor of the Shack. She was exhausted, so I told her I would take care of you."

Snape reached out and laid a hand over her nervous fingers, stopping her from tearing the toast. "Go on."

"Your trousers and boots were filthy, and your hair was sticky and clumped with dried blood. I used a levitation spell to lift you and change the sheets, then peeled your boots and trousers off." Snape's eyes widened, and his hand gripped hers a bit tighter, but he didn't speak. "I'm sorry, Professor. I was just trying to make you clean and comfortable. Y-your p-pants were stained with blood that had soaked through, so I tried cleansing charms."

At that point, she wrenched her gaze from his, her cheeks scarlet. "When I had got them as clean as I could with spells, I rinsed the blood from your hair, lowered you back onto the bed, and covered you with a clean blanket. Then I pulled the other bed over...you know the one...and stayed there holding your hand while you were unconscious." She looked down at the table. "I only wanted to help you. Truly. Please don't be angry with me for taking liberties."

Snape stroked his thumb over her tense knuckles and reached up with his other hand to lift her chin. His expression was solemn but there was no anger or reprimand in his eyes as she reluctantly met his gaze. Holding her chin with gentle fingers, he murmured, "How could I be angry with you, Hermione, after all you've done for me?"

The silence grew charged with emotion, and Hermione's breathing sped up. New, unexpected feelings assailed her, making goose bumps race over her flesh. The candid appreciation and intensity in his eyes made her dizzy with the startling inklings that came crashing down on her. Of course she had taken care of him. It was only right, as an expression of gratitude. But, ever since he had regained consciousness, he had managed to command her attention like no one else ever had. Nearly every thought circled back to him, and she was almost overwhelmed by the warmth that spread from his hands touching her. *He* was voluntarily touching *her*...not the usual other way around.

Glad that he wasn't upset, she offered him a shaky smile, and he blinked, releasing her chin and looking at his hand covering hers, clearly abashed. Hermione twisted her hand to twine her fingers with his, making him glance back up at her, startled. Blushing, she squeezed his hand and whispered, "Shall I summon a house-elf to place the order? I feel like celebrating; don't you?"

Snape stared at her in cautious wonder, his gut fluttering again. One corner of his mouth lifted in a lopsided smile, and he said simply, "Quite."

Hermione bit her lower lip as she disengaged from his grip and rose, and she missed his faint gasp as he watched her mouth. She grabbed a spare bit of parchment and began making a list. Flicking a teasing glance at him, she said, "What flavour of ice cream do you want, since you've been such a good boy?"

Snape narrowed his eyes at her and smirked. "I think I've been good enough that I deserve more than just one flavour. I want black cherry *and* double fudge. And feel free to request whatever you like," he added magnanimously.

Hermione goggled at him, shaking her head as she grinned. "All right; you never do things by halves, do you?"

Snape gave an elaborate shrug, rising to spin his chair the right way around. He sat back down, lacing his fingers behind his head and stretching his legs out to lean back as he said, "I've always believed that if you're going to do something, then do it 100%. Speaking of, you should add whipped cream, chopped almonds, and hot fudge sauce to that list."

Hermione grimaced and said, "Wow, that's a bit much even *forme*."

Snape cocked an eyebrow and said, "You can add a banana if that would make you feel better. Bananas are good for me, right?"

Hermione burst out laughing, making Snape grin. She added to the list, then drawled, "Yes, fruit is good for you..."

A few more scribbles and she summoned a house-elf, handing over the parchment and requesting that they clean Snape's quarters that very evening. The elf bowed deeply and assured them a team would be there shortly.

Hermione sat back and said, "I did a few freshening charms while you were asleep. Your bathroom and wardrobe were rather musty. It'll be much better when they've finished with everything."

Snape caught her eye and said, "Snooping around in my things, Hermione?"

She flushed and retorted, "No! I barely opened drawers to cast the charms!"

Baiting her, he said, "It's not like you'd be surprised by what's in my underwear drawer...apparently you've already seen them *in vivo*."

Hermione's eyes snapped open wide and she blushed even more, glaring at him as he regarded her with a wicked smirk. Sternly, she said, "Perhaps I should cancel that order, as *someone's* not being a very good boy *now*."

He shrugged again, affecting a long-suffering tone as he said, "Do what you must; I'll just starve, I guess."

At that, she rolled her eyes and voiced an inarticulate noise of frustration as she shot up from the table, glaring at him when he grinned again. "You really are the living end!"

He smoothly countered, "Indeed, with much thanks to you for helping me stay alive."

She blinked at him, speechless, then flopped back into her chair, snorting. "I give up! You win; I surrender!"

He leant forward, propped his elbows on the table, and murmured, "Really? Then I am indeed a lucky man."

His eyes gleamed with mischief, and Hermione's breath caught. Her voice was shaky as she said, "You...you're incorrigible!"

Snape chuckled darkly and said, "I am also *encourageable*..."

Their charged repartee was interrupted by a team of house-elves appearing, some laden with cleaning supplies and others with their celebratory dinner.

Hermione jumped to her feet and began clearing the table for the trays, and Snape sank back into his chair, heart racing with the exhilaration of discovering what stories Hermione's endearing blushes told.

The trays had bowls of black cherry, double fudge, and mint chocolate chip ice cream, peeled bananas, fresh strawberries and raspberries, purple grapes, diced pineapple, wedges of cantaloupe, whipped cream, hot fudge sauce, chopped almonds, tiny marshmallows, and rainbow sprinkles.

The house-elves went to work in the bedroom and bathroom first, leaving Snape and Hermione to eat without being surrounded by others doing domestic chores. Hermione picked up a bowl and spoon, turned to ask Snape what he wanted, saw the wicked smirk still gracing his lips, and huffed. Fixing him with a glare, she said, "You know what? You can get your *own* dinner."

Snape's smirk widened in amusement at her pique, but he leant forward to examine the selection while Hermione served up a scoop of mint chocolate chip ice cream and a bowl of mixed fruit. Snape scooped out a large portion of both black cherry and double fudge ice cream on top of a banana, sprinkled chopped almonds over everything, drowned it all with dollops of whipped cream, then doused the entire concoction with hot fudge sauce. Hermione stared at it with an expression of revulsion and amazement.

Digging into the concoction with his spoon, Snape nodded at Hermione's dish and said, "So much for your sweet tooth. Fruit and one flavour of ice cream does not decadence make."

Hermione's brows rose and she pursed her lips at the challenge before smirking and moving the bowl of fudge sauce closer to her. She picked up a strawberry, dipped it in the sauce, and lifted it to her mouth as she drawled, "Mmm, everything's better covered in chocolate," before snaking her tongue out to the dripping sauce and wrapping her lips around the fruit.

Snape nearly choked on his freezing mouthful at the sensual sight of Hermione devouring the sweet, mind nearly overwhelmed by the ideas running rampant about what *else...* or *who else...* would be better covered in chocolate. The rush of heat to his face was easily attributed to his coughing fit, for which he was grateful. Hermione's arch satisfaction at his trouble was tempered by her genuine enjoyment of each bit of fruit dipped in the sauce.

Snape wisely chose to remain quiet and eat, just watching her, loath to press his luck with the flirting for fear of crossing the (completely invisible) line, offending her and ruining any chance he might have of building on this new fancy later. After devouring his first monstrous bowl, he followed her example and served up some of the berries to dip in the chocolate. However, he put his foot down, disgustedly refusing her urges to combine pineapple and cantaloupe with the fudge sauce.

As they started to get full, they took more time to be creative with their combinations, dipping bits of fruit in the chocolate and decorating them with varied mixtures of whipped cream, chopped almonds, tiny marshmallows, and sprinkles before entreating each other to try their creations. When Snape noticed that the ice cream was melting, he successfully cast charms to freeze it again without even a second thought or a hitch, for which he was pleased and Hermione was congratulatory. It made them even more festive, and Snape enjoyed himself enough that he found himself laughing along with Hermione at the silly jokes and funny faces she made in their celebratory giddiness.

When the house-elves came in, timidly asking whether they could clean the sitting room, Snape heaved a sigh and said, "Yes, I believe we're done with these treats also. We'll be working at this table, but that shouldn't interfere with your tasks, should it?"

"No, sir. We is to be cleaning very quick and quiet, and the tray is to go back to the kitchens."

Hermione stacked the used bowls on the tray and let them take the dishes while she took out her notes again. Snape stopped the elf before it could disappear and said, "Can you make sure my hearth is connected to the Floo again? It was disconnected when we checked earlier."

"Yes, sir! We can be fixing that right away, sir!" And with snap, the elf cast the spell, bathing the fireplace in a shower of gold sparks before trilling, "All ready, sir!" and popping out of existence.

After they worked some more on her list of people to either interview or to ask about in said interviews...based on Snape's tales of what he had either witnessed or heard about during his years as a double agent...Hermione put that project away so they could practice building Snape's magic again.

Because his nap had been so long, followed by their extended, entertaining dinner, it was late by the time they finished their tasks, and Hermione stifled a yawn. "Sorry, Professor."

Snape inclined his head and said, "It is I who should apologize, Hermione. *You* didn't have a nap like I did. Of course you're tired at this hour."

Hermione rubbed her eyes and sat back into the sofa cushions as she stretched. "Well, nap or not, I hope you manage to sleep better tonight, now that you're here."

Snape flashed a faint smile, knowing that it wasn't *his* location that had so much effect on his quality of sleep, but rather *her* location...near him or not. "We'll see. If you

Snape sneered at her and said, "We indulged in a variety of sweets, but it was a special occasion, so it won't be a regular occurrence."

Hermione pursed her lips and wrinkled her nose at him, splaying one hand on his chest as she said, "Oh, very subtle, Ron. I know exactly why you stayed behind."

Ron shrugged and grinned, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her against his body. Leaning down, he murmured, "I've missed you, Hermione," before kissing her.

Hermione snaked her arms around his neck and responded in kind, letting him guide them stumblingly through the room, behind a partition, where they fell onto the bare bed. They were snogging enthusiastically, hands roaming, when Ron backed away and panted, "I want you so much."

Hermione could feel how hard he was for her, and she was dizzy with need. They had become lovers soon after the war had ended, sometimes staying the night in her bed and other times in his at Number 12. Harry acknowledged the new relationship as matter-of-factly as he could, glad his best friends had finally found some happiness together. Still, he didn't want the details.

But the past few weeks, since Snape had come out of his coma, Hermione had been at Number 12 less and less, and Ron missed being able to sleep next to her after they made love. They struggled out of their clothes, breathless with excitement. Hermione didn't even care that the mattress was bare as Ron pressed her onto it, covering her with his body.

They were sprawled there, dozing in the afterglow, when Hermione was startled awake by a knock at her door. Ron hadn't noticed, but when she squirmed to untangle their limbs, he stirred and frowned blearily at her. "What's wrong?"

Hermione hastily donned her clothes and patted her tangled hair in vain as she hissed, "Someone's at my door. Just... stay out of sight!"

He hissed back, "Why?" as she darted around the partition toward the door, where the knocking repeated.

Fighting her embarrassed blush and shallow breathing, Hermione swallowed and set her shoulders as she opened the door, only to jerk back in surprise. "Sir!"

Snape stood in the corridor, one hand bracing himself against her doorjamb. His hair was mussed from his fitful sleep, and he was wearing drawstring pyjama bottoms like he had worn in the hospital wing, but instead of a matching shirt, he wore a grey t-shirt. "I could see your lights were on, so I thought you might still be awake."

Shooting a nervous glance over her shoulder at the partition, Hermione closed the door until her body blocked the space between it and the jamb and said, "Is everything all right?"

Snape frowned and rubbed his face, then said, "Did I wake you?"

Hermione cleared her throat and said, "No! No, I wasn't asleep yet. Sir, are you feeling okay?"

Snape sighed and muttered, "Bad dreams. Again. Couldn't go back to sleep."

Hermione sucked in a sympathetic breath and reached out to caress his arm. "Oh, no. I'm sorry. Shall I go fetch Madam Pomfrey?"

Snape grimaced and shook his head. "No. I just... would you sit with me for a bit?"

Hermione's mouth fell open and she froze. Behind her, she heard movement and she flicked an agonized glance back to see Ron, mercifully dressed but scowling fiercely, stomping into his shoes as he made his way toward her.

Snape straightened, frowning as he said, "Is someone there?"

Hermione looked back at him, owl-eyed, completely at a loss about what to do. Ron pulled the door from her grip and glared at Snape. "Yeah, someone's here. But I'll be going now. Not to worry, Professor."

Snape backed away, stunned to see Ron, dishevelled and angry. Realization washed over him, and his eyes widened. In a breathless rasp, he said, "I beg your pardon. I didn't realize you had guests."

Ron stepped into the corridor and said, "Oh, no, not *guests*, just *guest*. Just *me*. But that can be fixed. Goodbye, Hermione. Professor."

Hermione watched, aghast, as Ron stormed down the corridor. "Ron, wait!" He didn't look back, so she jogged after him, saying, "Ron, please!"

Snape took a deep breath, trying to ignore the pain searing through his chest at the knowledge that Hermione had just shagged the Weasley boy on the other side of the wall from Snape's own bedroom. Unable to watch their scene play out any more, he quickly retreated to his quarters, trying not to hear their argument at the end of the corridor.

Sinking into his armchair, he leant forward and propped his elbows on his knees, running his hands through his hair and lacing his fingers behind his neck. He was sitting like that, unable to even think coherently, when his door flew open and Hermione burst into the room, her eyes red-rimmed and glassy and her face blotchy. Snape stared up at her as she rushed across the room toward him. He braced himself for an attack, expecting her to slap him for barging into her business like that.

Hermione stopped in front of him, wringing her hands and sniffing as she said, "Are you sure you're all right, sir? I can Floo up to Madam Pomfrey right away if you need something."

Snape blinked at her, speechless. Hermione's lips were trembling, but it was obvious she was trying to regain control of her emotions. Snape stood, wrapping his hands around hers to still their movements, and murmured, "Hermione, I'm fine. Please, sit." He guided her to sink down onto the sofa with him, both angled toward each other. "You're the one who is distraught. If anyone needs anything from Poppy, it's you."

Hermione gave a huge sniff, swallowing hard, then said, "Professor, I don't know what you're talking about..."

Snape scowled and snapped, "Hermione!" She met his stern gaze. "That's enough. You're not my student, or apprentice, or anything else to be at my beck and call. I should never have intruded like that. Your personal life is your business, not mine. I'm sorry I caused such an issue between you and your boyfriend..."

He trailed off as he watched Hermione's stoic façade crumble, and she dissolved into tears. Her words were garbled, but Snape still understood her as she said, "He was so hateful...I thought...I thought he understood...that I care about you too...he's not my only friend...and he has no right to...to say hurtful things about people I care about!"

Snape's throat tightened and he said, "If you care about me, then allow me to be your friend, Hermione."

She looked at him through her tears and saw him holding his arms open, clearly offering comfort. She nodded and fell forward into his embrace, allowing him to soothe her. After a few minutes, she calmed down. When she backed away, she grimaced at the wet stains on his t-shirt. "Sorry, sir."

Snape huffed and rolled his eyes, throwing his hands up in exasperation. Hermione eyed him warily even as she cast a quick cleansing spell at his shirt. Once his chest was dry again, he crossed his arms again and pinned her with an aggrieved look.

"What?" Hermione started wringing her hands again.

"Hermione, do you call any of your friends 'sir'?"

She blinked. "N-no..."

Snape smirked at her and spread his hands again. "I beg to differ. You call me 'sir' all the time."



Neville took the opportunity to ask Luna if he could take her home before it got too late, and she agreed, smiling serenely as he cupped her elbow to guide her out. Draco had just opened a Butterbeer, so he wasn't ready to leave yet, and he turned to the trio and Snape.

"So, you two start training on Monday, but what are you going to do, Hermione?"

Hermione grimaced and said, "I'm still knee deep in working on my book. Severus and I have made a list of people I'd like to try to interview, so I should really start working on that."

Snape added, "That's actually something I wanted to talk to you about, Draco. I know your mother and father could be useful in getting us appointments with some of these people, since they likely won't reply to Hermione."

Draco's brows rose, but he smiled. "Of course, whatever I can do to help, just say the word. If you'd like me to escort you to talk to any of them, let me know."

Hermione nodded in gratitude. "That's very kind of you. I'll keep that in mind."

Ron cut in, saying, "Term starts here on Monday too, and you can't stay here once school is in session. So will you finally move back home, Hermione?"

Hermione tensed, and Harry held his breath, looking quickly between his two friends. Snape held his breath, too, but for a different reason. Heaving a sigh, Hermione carefully said, "I don't know what I'm going to do yet, Ron. I know I can't stay here, and I've looked in the *Prophet* for places to rent, but nothing's come up so far. I do not, however, expect to move back to Number 12. If I have to, I can stay at the Leaky Cauldron for a while. I'll figure something out."

The silence after her statement was rife with tension. Draco stepped in and said, "If you can't find something suitable, Hermione, we have plenty of room at the Manor, as well as guest cottages. You're always welcome there."

Hermione flashed a tight smile at Draco. "Thank you. I'll let you know."

Draco inclined his head graciously and tried to change the subject. "Where will you be going, Severus?"

Snape cleared his throat and said, "Back to Spinner's End, I suppose. I would have gone long before now, but Poppy kept me here for treatment."

Draco nodded politely, then glanced at Ron's thunderous expression. Sensing that nothing would lighten the mood now, he drained his Butterbeer and said, "Well, it is late. I must be going. Severus, may I use your Floo?"

Snape shot to his feet at the same time Draco did, saying, "Of course. Follow me." He turned to the trio and said, "Congratulations on your achievements, all of you. Well done. Oh, and if you'd like to use my Floo as well, you're welcome to do so. I expect to be up for a while yet." *At least until everyone has left, and I can speak to Hermione alone...*

Snape and Draco left the three friends, glad to escape Ron's hostile glare. Hermione whirled on Ron and snapped, "Stop acting like a spoilt child! Everything was so lovely and you had to ruin it!"

Harry said, "Now, Hermione, that's going a bit too far..."

Hermione hissed, "It is not! Is it any wonder I don't want to live in the same place as you, Ron? What with the way you're acting? Honestly, get over it already!"

Ron's jaw twitched as he clenched his teeth. Growling through stiff lips, he said, "Fine. If that's the way you feel, then I'll get out of here. Wouldn't want to be in *the same place* as you."

He sprang to his feet, glaring at Harry. Harry reluctantly stood, followed by Hermione. "I guess we'll be going then. The food was great, Hermione. Listen, do you think Snape was serious about letting us use his Floo?" Beside him, Ron huffed in disbelief. Harry cut an irritated glance at him and said, "Shut up, Ron. You're the one who wants to leave so damn bad, and that's the fastest way. Just act like you've got some manners for a minute or so, all right?"

Ron's eyes narrowed angrily, but he kept his mouth shut. Hermione sighed as she led them out her door and down to Snape's, which was still open. Snape was saying, "Give my regards to your parents," to Draco as he stepped into the green flames and spun out of sight. He turned to see the trio entering, and his brows rose in surprise. "Oh, hello."

Harry's voice was weary as he said, "Can we use your Floo right now?"

Snape gestured to the hearth and said, "By all means; go right ahead."

Harry and Hermione said, "Thank you," in unison, and Harry hurried to the fireplace, flicking an acid glance at Ron to follow him. He tossed Floo powder into the grate, mumbled their destination, then waved his hand and said, "You go first," to Ron.

Ron nodded stiffly and stomped into the flames without another word. When he was gone, everyone exhaled in relief. Hermione darted forward to hug Harry, murmuring, "I'm sorry it ended like this Harry. I'll talk to you soon."

He returned the embrace and said, "Let me know what you figure out, all right? And you know you're welcome at home any time, even if it's just for a short visit."

Hermione smiled and said, "I know. Thank you. Good night!"

Harry tossed more powder into the hearth and said, as he nodded to Snape, "Good night. Thanks again."

Snape inclined his head and said, "Good night," as Harry whirled out of sight. Hermione heaved a huge sigh and sank onto the sofa, cradling her face in her hands. Snape sat beside her and said, "Come on, you should get some rest."

She allowed him to tug her to her feet and guide her back to her quarters, where he summoned a house-elf to take away all the remains of the party refreshments. Hermione plopped onto her tattered sofa and said, "Thanks."

Snape snorted mildly and said, "It's nothing." He perched beside her, watching her leaning back with her eyes closed. After a few beats of silence, he started to stand and said, "Why don't I let you go to bed."

Hermione's eyes flew open and she grabbed at his hand, pulling him back down to sit by her. "Stay! I'm sorry. I just... don't know what to do about him. And it's so hard on Harry, being stuck in the middle like that."

Snape shrugged. "I don't know what to tell you."

Hermione grimaced and said, "I know. I just didn't want the night to end on that sour note." She turned to him with a tired smile. "I'm glad you're here."

Snape smiled faintly, then his expression clouded as he regarded her thoughtfully. Hermione recognized that face and said, "What? What are you thinking?"

Snape swallowed, trying to calm the fluttering in this gut. "It's nothing. Just a silly thought."

Hermione squeezed his hand and said, "I could use something silly right about now. Go on, tell me."

Snape licked his lips and took a deep breath. Settling his shoulders, he said, "Well, it's just that we've got so much more to work on with the interviews, and we have to be



Snape shrugged. "I haven't looked. We have the Floo; we could always go to the Leaky Cauldron."

Hermione instantly sobered. "Are you sure you want to be in public? I know it's been a few months since the truth came out, and the *Prophet* wrote about your exoneration, but that may just make people gawk even more."

Snape's lips quirked in a faint smile. His voice was low as he said, "Still trying to protect me, Hermione?"

Hermione blushed and ducked her head as she said, "I just don't want to see you upset. You don't deserve that."

Feeling daring now that they were on his turf, Snape leant closer and lifted her chin with one gentle finger, capturing her gaze with his. "I don't deserve such fierce protection from you either. But it does please me. *You* please me."

Hermione stared at him, owl-eyed, for a beat, then offered him a pink-cheeked, tentative smile. "I'm glad."

Snape's expression slowly changed to a genuine smile, and Hermione's smile widened in response. Before removing his finger from her chin, he traced it along her jaw line in a faint caress. At the sound of Hermione's sharp gasp, he dropped that hand to grip hers and murmured, "Let me take you to dinner. You've taken such good care of me; it's high time I showed some appreciation."

Hermione glanced down at their work-rumpled attire. They were both in Muggle clothes: she wore a light jumper and jeans, and he was in black trousers and a white button-down shirt...he preferred collared shirts, since between them and his long hair, his scarred neck was better hidden...with the sleeves rolled up. "Dressed like this?"

Snape's heart leapt at the fact that she didn't reject his offer out of hand. Grinning, he said, "Nothing fancy. We can just find a pub and get some fish and chips...for take-away if you insist."

Hermione bit her lip, and Snape's grip tightened on hers spastically. Tired, hungry, and unsure what to make of the tingles racing through her from his touch on her face and hand and his consuming expression, she whispered, "All right. Let's go find the local. If we're to live here, we may as well get to know what's around the village."

Snape crowed in triumph in his head, shooting to his feet and pulling her along with him. She blinked up at him, startled by his instant response. He maintained his grip on her hand and led her to the front door. "If we need to, we can ask someone, but we could just head out for a walk. Take a chance on a little adventure."

Hermione gazed up at his mischievous excitement and laughed. "Look at you! You're like a little kid!"

Snape pulled her closer and murmured, "You make me feel young, Hermione."

His confession was followed by a long moment of silence, in which a flush crept up Hermione's throat to suffuse her cheeks. Snape's playful smirk faded into a sober, intense expression, his eyes managing to turn even blacker. Feeling his heartbeat thundering in his chest, he finally sucked in a steadying breath and tilted his head toward the door.

"Shall we?"

Hermione's head was swimming, and she wondered just how much was really being asked with that innocuous question. Unsure what she wanted to say in response, she merely ducked her head and strode to the front door. Snape followed, letting his elation show for a fleeting moment with a brief grin.

They strolled around the village, but not quite leisurely, as they were hungry. When they found a pub, they gratefully sank into a worn wooden booth, inhaling the aromas of grease and ale.

Hermione was staring at the chalkboard menu, frowning. Snape cocked an eyebrow at her and said, "What's wrong?"

Wrinkling her nose, she said, "I can't decide which I want more. Everything sounds good, and I'm so hungry I could eat a hippogriff."

Snape snorted and said, "Well, I'll be ordering the curry and rice, and you're welcome to share it if you like."

She licked her lips in appreciation, making Snape's breath catch, and said, "Oooh, that would be lovely. I'll get the fish and chips and you can have some of that too if you want."

Snape inclined his head in acknowledgement and crossed to the bar to order, with Hermione a step behind him, hovering at his shoulder.

"Welcome to the Dog and Duck. What'll you have?"

Snape said, "A pint of stout, please. The lady will have the fish and chips, and I'll take your curry and rice. Hermione, what would you like to drink?"

Hermione bit her lip to stop herself from asking for a Butterbeer, then said, "I'll try a pint of lager."

The barmaid nodded and moved away to get their drinks. Hermione took the opportunity to gaze about at the rest of the pub, and Snape watched her with a faint smile on his face. When she noticed his expression, she couldn't help but grin in enjoyment. Laughter coloured her voice as she said, "Something tells me we'll be seeing a lot of this place."

Snape chuckled. "What? Afraid of cooking after all?"

She pulled a face and said, "It's not that! It's just... this is fun, and one tends to want to repeat fun experiences."

Her haughty tone was belied by her blush, but Snape held his tongue, unwilling to tease her too much, lest she no longer have fun and decide ~~to~~ repeat their outing.

Soon enough, their food joined their pints on the bar before them, and Snape fished a wad of notes from his pocket as he nodded to Hermione to take her meal back to the table.

The meal was quite tasty, and Snape made so bold as to repeat his offer of his curry and rice, but only if she ate it off the fork he offered to her. He realized that watching her lips close around the utensil each time she accepted his gesture sent more and more tingles of heat racing through him, and he had to remind himself to eat his own dinner too, instead of simply feeding her.

He had been stealthily sneaking chips off her plate with each bite he offered, but after several times, she saw his hand retreating with its prize, and she squawked around her mouthful as she clapped her hand down on his, capturing it. Snape affected an innocent expression, and Hermione swallowed quickly so she could say, "I said we could share! Why are you being so sneaky?"

Snape's innocent look disappeared, replaced by a wicked grin. "Old habits die hard."

Hermione snorted and released his hand. Deliberately, she picked up a piece of fish and held it in front of Snape's face. "Nonsense. You're starting fresh, remember? Now, turnabout is fair play. Try it."

At her pointed nod toward the fish, he affected obedience and took a bite, holding her gaze while he reached forward and snagged another chip. She was watching him, waiting for him to comment on the fish, so her surprised expression when he lifted the chip to his mouth and said, "They're both good," was comical.

Oh, for mercy's sake, Severus!" She pinned her with a glare, but the sight of him laughing was too much to resist for long, and she eventually crumbled into giggles. "Honestly, if you want anything from me, you don't have to be so sneaky, you can just ask."

He abruptly stopped laughing, once again gazing at her intently. She was taken aback by his quick change, especially when he murmured, "I'll keep that in mind."

The following charged silence was broken by a peal of laughter from a knot of patrons nearby. Snape drained his drink and Hermione pulled her money out of her pocket to offer her half to Snape, but froze at the trenchant glare he shot her way. Flustered, Hermione mumbled, "I can pay for my own dinner."

Snape growled, "I said I wanted to take you to dinner. That implies that I pay for said dinner. You agreed. End of discussion."

She narrowed her eyes and grimaced at him for his high-handed manner. "But I am quite capable of paying for my own meal!"

Snape heaved a put-upon sigh and rolled his eyes. Covering her hand with his, he said, "Hermione, you said that if I want something I can just ask. I'm asking you to please allow me to show my appreciation for all you've done for me by letting me pay for your bloody dinner!"

Cutting a sulky glance at him, she huffed and said, "If you're going to put it that way, then fine. I just want it known that I did not agree to come with you because I expected a free meal."

Snape smirked and drawled, "The thought never even crossed my mind. Nor should you think that I feel you owe me anything now. That's not what this is about. I've had enough of living a life ruled by obligation."

At that, Hermione softened and said, "I believe you."

She put her money away, and they stood, but Snape kept his hold on Hermione's hand to lead her out of the pub for the walk back to Spinner's End. There was a decided chill in the night air, and they found themselves walking close together, seeking body heat on the trek home. Snape reluctantly released Hermione's hand to roll his sleeves down. When his hand dropped back to his side, and Hermione twined her fingers with his again voluntarily, his gut clenched in triumph.

They hurried into the house, glad for the warmth inside, and Hermione turned to gaze up at Snape. "Thank you for dinner; I had a lovely time."

Snape smiled faintly and murmured, "It was my pleasure, indeed."

There was a pregnant pause, then Hermione blinked rapidly and ducked her head. "Well, I could really use a shower and bed. Do you need in there before I take it over?"

Snape exhaled at the break of tension between them and murmured, "No, thank you. I'm fine. I just have a few things to take care of before I follow your excellent example and turn in, myself."

Hermione smirked and crossed to the staircase. "I won't be very long."

Snape nodded and watched her, unable to look away from the sway of her arse as she climbed the stairs.

Later, Snape was in his room putting things away, his shirt already discarded into the hamper and his pyjamas waiting in a folded pile on his bed, when Hermione knocked on the jamb, peering in through the open door. Snape spun to see her in a fluffy robe with her hair twisted in a towel. Her eyes travelled from his face, down his chest, to where his line of dark hair disappeared beneath the waist of his trousers. Snape smirked at her wide eyes and snatched his pyjamas as he crossed to the doorway.

She jerked her gaze back up to his face, blushing, as she faintly said, "Bathroom's free. All yours."

Snape leant against the doorjamb, very close to Hermione where she remained rooted to the spot, and murmured, "Thank you. Sleep well, Hermione. I hope you'll find my home welcoming and comfortable."

Hermione licked her lips and sucked in a breath, trying to regain her composure with him standing half-clothed so near her. "It is...I mean...I do. I'll see you in the morning. Good night, Severus."

He nodded as she stepped back, and he crossed to the bathroom while she retreated to his old room. Snape tossed a light, "Good night" over his shoulder before shutting the bathroom door, leaving Hermione to sag against her doorjamb, heaving a sigh and swallowing against the trembling in her belly that underscored the jolts of heat streaking through her. Closing her door firmly, she finished getting ready for bed, noting her flushed cheeks in her vanity mirror.

*Easy, girl. No need to rush things...*

Back in the bathroom, Snape was in the shower, glad Hermione had already finished hers, so hopefully she wouldn't notice how long he was taking. The look on her face when she had raked him with her gaze had sent tingles of desire racing through him, and he had disappeared into the bathroom quickly in an attempt to keep her from noticing his burgeoning erection.

Thus it was that he stood under the water, one hand propped against the wall, holding himself up while the other stroked his cock feverishly, his muscles rippling at the sensations, and his breathing ragged. Replaying the feel of her embrace, the sight of her dilated pupils from minutes ago, he crested his peak and convulsed in orgasm, his legs shaking and sending him to lean against the tiles. Gulping in the steamy air, trying to steady himself, he watched his come swirling down the drain, feeling a delicious lethargy stealing over him.

He quickly finished his shower and made it back to his room, casting a hungry glance at Hermione's closed door on the way. Lying in bed, knowing she was so close, just in the other room, he smiled as he fell asleep.

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September 15, 1998

Snape and Hermione stood at the bar in the Dog and Duck, waiting for Kelly, the barmaid, to deliver their apple pie and custard. When Kelly set the treat on the bar, Hermione thrust her money forward before Snape could do so. She wrinkled her nose at his glare and said, "It's my turn and you know it, so keep your scowls to yourself, if you please."

Kelly snorted at Hermione's statement, smirking at Snape. Blissfully unaware of Snape's former persona and reputation, Kelly added, "She's right, you know. You paid for Sunday dinner."

Snape rolled his eyes and huffed. "For mercy's sake, are you keeping track?"

Kelly flashed a cheeky grin and said, "Well, it's in my best interests to make note of such nice, regular customers, now innit? I asked Laura, and she said you lot aren't here on my nights off, so I'm just grateful that I get you all to myself...coming in here three to four nights a week for the past two weeks already."

Hermione grimaced at Snape and said, "I guess we haven't made much headway in that whole cooking idea, have we?"



Chapter 7- September 19, 1998

Saturday afternoon, Snape looked up from the worktable littered with notes and manuscript pages and said, "Hermione, if there's anything you need from the kitchen, I suggest you get it now, as I am about to bar you from it for the next few hours."

Hermione sat back, gazing at him in surprise and consternation. "Uh... no... I think I'm fine. Why am I banned from the kitchen?"

Snape stood regally and drawled, "Well, if I told you, it wouldn't be much of a surprise, now would it?"

Hermione snorted and cut a lopsided grin up at him. "All right then, if that's the way you want it. I'll stay out here until you tell me otherwise."

Snape smirked and bowed. "Excellent. I should be done around dinner time."

Hermione nodded and Snape disappeared into the kitchen, shutting the door behind him.

By the time an hour had passed, Hermione was pacing the around the worktable like a caged tiger, recognizing the scent of chocolate cake baking. Anticipation kept her from being able to concentrate any longer, so she retreated to her room to stay away from the tempting kitchen door.

After another hour, she sat up in her bed in response to Snape's knock on her door. "Come in!"

Snape opened the door and regarded her with a self-satisfied smirk. "Hermione, would you care to come down for dinner?"

Hermione bounced off her bed and to the door, but Snape didn't back away. They were very close again, and Hermione was beaming up at him in appreciation. Snape's hand swung out from behind his back and around Hermione, rising to tuck a flower in her hair as he said, "Happy birthday."

Hermione lifted her hand to his where it still held the flower and guided him to bring it in front of her. It was a gardenia, and she lit up with a delighted smile as she inhaled the lovely fragrance. "Oh, Severus, it's beautiful! Thank you."

He returned her smile, once again lifting the flower to tuck the stem behind her ear, brushing her hair back and trailing a gentle caress down her hair and shoulder before he said, "I do hope dinner is to your liking as well. Come along."

He took her hand and led her down the stairs to the table set for two, with a bowl of glistening pasta beside another bowl of aromatic alfredo sauce. Smaller bowls of green salad sat above their plates, and a basket piled with garlic bread was off to one side. On the counter, she spied the evidence of the heavenly smells earlier; a chocolate cake with fudge frosting beckoned to her. Snape pulled her chair out and she sat, staring about with gleaming eyes.

"It's so lovely! And it smells so good...I can't wait to taste everything!"

Snape sank down in his chair and smirked. "I only hope it tastes as good as you think it smells. Here, the salad is fresh, and take a piece of bread."

They began eating, and Hermione kept exclaiming over everything, enjoying herself hugely. Snape regaled her with his attempts at making the meal, keeping her laughing. Finally, they were too full to eat any more, even though Hermione kept casting lecherous looks at the cake.

"We've a while yet before you need to meet everyone at the pub. You should have time to digest and sample your cake before we leave."

Hermione leant back in her chair and heaved a replete sigh. "I'm so full, but it was so *good*. It was a perfect birthday surprise. Thank you."

Snape offered a mock bow, a pleased smile quirking his lips. "You're quite welcome. I'm glad you enjoyed it."

He stood and collected their plates to take to the sink. Hermione jumped up and gathered their bowls to follow him. He spun and nearly ran into her. She reached past him to deposit the bowls in the sink, peering up at him with a smile. Letting her fingers trail down his arm to twine with his, she said softly, "I did. Very much."

He froze as she stretched up and placed a kiss on his cheek. As she backed away, he ducked forward and returned the salute, pressing a kiss to her cheek for a long moment, then nuzzling her ear with his nose before pulling back. She stared at him, eyes wide, and his demeanor was shy and awkward as he murmured, "A special birthday kiss for a special birthday girl."

Hermione's heart was thundering in her chest, and she could feel the heightened awareness of her skin where his lips and nose had touched her. Heat rushed through her, reddening her face and prickling her flesh. Her eyes flickered between his dark gaze and his lips, until she finally stepped back, mumbling, "Excuse me... I'll be just a moment."

Disengaging her fingers from his, she whirled and sped out of the kitchen and to the bathroom upstairs where she leant against the locked door and panted, staring at her overwhelmed reflection in the mirror. She used the facilities and spent a long moment just gazing at herself after dousing her face with cold water, rebuilding her composure.

In the kitchen, Snape put away the leftovers, chest tight with recognition of what he had seen in her dilated eyes. He knew she was likely confused at the welter of emotions clamouring to be released; he had seen it. By the time she came back down, he had brewed a pot of mint tea and was sitting at the table with as unassuming an air as he could muster.

They were quiet as they sipped the tea, then Snape said, "Would you like a piece of cake now?"

Hermione perked up and said, "Please. I'll *find* room for that bit of decadence!"

He brought the cake to the table and flicked his wand at it, conjuring nineteen lit candles. "Make a wish."

Hermione flicked a shy, pink-cheeked glance at him, then took a deep breath and blew out all the candles. She sat back with a satisfied grin. Snape snorted and served her a generous portion, taking a similar slice for himself. Hermione pulled the candles from her slice and sucked the frosting off the ends, humming with pleasure at the rich flavour.

Snape cocked an eyebrow at the performance, and she simpered at him, lilting, "Do you want yours?" as she nodded toward the candles stuck in his cake.

Snape spread his hands in a gesture of concession and she giggled as she snatched the candles and licked the frosting off them too. Snape just watched her mouth with an intense expression. She tucked in, sighing in delight at the first mouthful and gazing at Snape with a blissful look.

"It's divine, Severus. Well done!"

They devoured the cake, even considering another slice before regretfully covering it for safekeeping. Hermione retreated to her room to get ready for the outing, and Snape tidied up the worktable a bit. When he heard her coming down the stairs again, he looked up and sucked in a sharp breath.

Hermione had decided to treat herself for her birthday and had bought a new dress for the occasion. It wasn't overly dressy, but it was pretty. Combined with a soft cardigan to stave off the night's chill, sleek heels, and the gardenia in her hair, she looked utterly feminine and desirable.

Snape couldn't help but smile up at her, appreciation glowing in his eyes. Revelling in her desirability, Hermione bobbed a curtsey and said, "My birthday present to myself."

Snape offered his arm and said, "I like it."

Beaming up at him as they left the house, she retorted, "So do I," and laughed.

They arrived only a few minutes before Draco slunk in, eyes wide and wary until he saw them, at which point he wilted in relief and smiled. Crossing to them, he bowed to Hermione and kissed her hand, saying, "Happy birthday, Hermione. You look lovely."

"Why, thank you, Draco. I'm glad you could join us."

A beat later, Harry led Ron, Neville, and George into the pub, making a beeline toward Hermione to envelop her in a fierce hug. "Happy birthday! I've missed you. How are you?"

Harry pulled back to grin at Hermione and she laughed. "I'm great, thank you. How's training going?"

Harry stepped back and turned to the others, looking at Ron as he said, "Well, we've survived so far, but I'm fairly certain they're waiting to unleash the worse stuff, right, Ron?"

Ron was staring at Hermione with a wistful, hungry expression, but he muttered, "Yeah, it's all right. Happy birthday, Hermione. You look really nice."

Hermione blushed and said, "Thank you. I'm glad training is going well."

Ron started to move forward, but he stopped short, so George jumped into the awkward moment and ducked in to give Hermione a quick hug. "Thanks for the invite, Hermione. And happy birthday."

Hermione hugged George extra hard, knowing he would understand the unspoken acknowledgement of Fred's absence. "I'm so glad you came. It means a lot to me."

When they separated, Neville was right behind George, grinning at Hermione. "My turn now?"

Hermione laughed and pulled him into a tight embrace. "It's so good to see you, Neville. Thanks for coming."

Neville planted a kiss on her cheek and backed away as he said, "Happy birthday, Hermione."

Snape cleared his throat and said, "Why don't we clear the area and have a seat over at the tables. I'll get the first round. What'll you have?"

Hermione beamed at him and said, "You know my usual, Severus. Come on, you lot. Let's have a seat over here."

The others murmured their drink choices as they passed Snape, and George joined Snape at the bar. "You don't have enough hands; I'll help."

Snape nodded his thanks as Kelly crossed to them. "Evening, Severus. The usual?"

Snape tilted his head at the group with Hermione at the table and said, "We'll take ours, but we've got more for the first round."

Nodding briskly, Kelly served up each pint as ordered, setting them on the bar before Snape and George. While she was busy, George leant closer to Snape and said, "She's a pretty bird. Know if she's taken?"

Snape smirked. "Not that I've seen. Good luck if you try. But remember, you're in a Muggle pub, so *no magic*."

George snapped a mock-salute and said, "Right-o," as he tried to catch Kelly's eye before following Snape to the table with his hands full of drinks.

Hermione had dragged a couple of tables together so they could all sit around them, and she was avidly listening to Harry regaling the group with a tale of Auror training. Snape placed her pint on the table in front of her and she broke her attention away long enough to flash a radiant smile of thanks at him.

Ron took his drink from George and immediately took a long swallow, clearly unhappy. The rest of the boys exchanged knowing looks, determined to keep him under control and make sure he didn't ruin Hermione's birthday.

Snape sat a little further back from the table, observing the younger crowd, appreciating how much Hermione was enjoying herself.

When glasses were about half-full, George shot up and said, "It's my round. Back in a tick."

Draco saw Snape smirking at George's retreating form and turned to see why. He snorted when he saw George obviously trying to chat up the barmaid. Leaning closer to Snape, he drawled, "Does he need any help?"

Snape cocked an eyebrow and murmured, "With which: carrying the drinks back or having any success with Kelly?"

Draco sniggered. "If he looks like he's having trouble, I'll go grab the pints."

Snape nodded, turning his attention back to Hermione. When George returned...making two trips with the drinks...Hermione shrugged and drained her first pint, unwittingly giving George the opportunity to take the empty glasses to the bar to press his flirt.

Ron started to loosen up after his first pint, and he responded cordially to the others' attempts to draw him out. Upon seeing him behaving well again, Hermione nearly bounced in triumph. After the first hour, everyone was smiling and sharing stories, relaxing and having a good time. Snape, however, refrained from taking the spotlight, only responding to any inquiries or chuckling at particularly funny anecdotes.

Draco took the next round, smoothly asking George to help him get the drinks, earning a sage nod from Snape as they strode off. Hermione's cheeks were flushed and her eyes were bright with merriment. She had nearly finished her second pint already, and her gestures had already become more expansive and her speech slower. Snape watched to see how steady she was on her feet when she took a quick trip to the toilets, and noticed that she was a little wobbly, especially on those heels.

The third round was at the table when she returned, and she drank up, cheerily announcing, "This is my best birthday ever!"

Everyone toasted to that, joining her on her path to inebriation. Snape purposefully slowed down, wanting someone to be alert, just in case. What if one of them forgot that they were in a Muggle pub and let something slip? He didn't want Ministry authorities spoiling Hermione's occasion.

It was nearly closing, and when Kelly announced time, Neville shoved to his feet with a faint sway, intent on getting last rounds at the bar. Snape declined the offer, and Hermione blinked a few times before ordering a water instead. The rest of the boys switched to halves, and Neville joined the rest of the patrons in the scrum at the bar, with George at his shoulder again.

Finally, the pub was closing, and Kelly walked around gathering glasses and shooing everyone out. Hermione beamed at Kelly as she led her party outside, slightly unsteady as she walked. She hugged everyone in turn, lilting, "I'm so glad you came," before planting a loud kiss on each of her friends' cheeks.



Ron seemed inclined to hold on longer, but George deftly tugged Hermione out of Ron's embrace, preventing him from causing a scene. Snape presented his arm to Hermione, and she gratefully gripped it, swaying into him as he led her on the route to Spinner's End, leaving the boys to find discreet spots from which to Disapparate.

The village was quiet on their way home, but Hermione kept giggling every time she wavered on her heels, hugging Snape's arm tighter and attempting her steps with deliberate care. Thus, the walk home took longer than usual, and it was after midnight by the time Snape ushered her into the house.

Snape locked the front door and turned to see Hermione perched on the first step, smirking at him. Raising his brows, he said, "And just why are you smirking?"

Hermione crooked a finger at him, beckoning him closer. He obliged and stepped in front of her. "All it took was... four-inch heels and a stair step, but for once... I'm finally taller than you!"

Snape snorted and she dissolved into giggles again, gripping his shoulder and the banister. "Does it make so much difference?"

Hermione tilted her head and appraised him thoughtfully. Pursing her lips, she murmured, "I can see your neck more... from this angle. Usually your hair and collar hide it. Does it hurt?"

Snape sucked in a breath when she followed her query with a gentle hand brushing his hair back, tucking it behind his ear to bare his throat more. His voice was hardly more than a whisper as he said, "No."

Hermione tugged on his shirt collar and said, "What's it feel like?"

"What do you mean?"

Inquisitive fingers trailed over the scar tissue, and Snape swallowed hard, closing his eyes at the streaks of arousal washing over him in response. Hermione leant forward, getting a closer look at his neck, and she started to overbalance. Snape instantly reached up and steadied her, his hands at her waist.

One of her hands was on his shoulder while the other was exploring his scar, and his grip moved them even closer as Hermione studied him. Snape was nearly trembling with the effort to keep himself from crushing her to him and snogging her beyond reason.

Hermione's pensive voice drew his attention from his fight for control. "It's strange... both smooth and rough. Not rough exactly, more ridged... lumpy..."

Voice strained, Snape said, "Does it disgust you?"

Hermione's gaze snapped back to his, her eyes wide with indignation. "Of course not! Scars have... stories to tell, and yours is one of... bravery... and sacrifice... and... is proof of why you deserve respect... and admiration."

Snape's lips twitched. "I'm glad you admire me, Hermione."

She smiled, making his chest tighten. "I do! You've made me... so happy today. This really's been... the best birthday ever. Thank you."

Snape locked eyes with her, his expression intense and consuming. In a rough purr, he said, "I enjoy making you happy."

Hermione's pupils dilated, and her smile faded into an almost dazed expression. The silence grew very loud as they stared at each other, both inching toward the other until their lips met in a tentative kiss.

Hermione nearly wavered on her feet again as her knees went weak, but Snape's grip at her waist held her up even as her arms slid over his shoulders. The first hesitant brush of lips was followed by Snape stepping closer, pressing her to him as he captured her mouth in a more forceful kiss, coaxing her tongue to meet his for a sensual dance of discovery.

Snape's cock sprang to life with a vehement bounce, straining against her body where she leant against him. Hermione's head was swimming, jolts of heat racing through her limbs and twining with slow tendrils of arousal that blossomed and crept toward her centre.

After several long moments of snogging, Hermione slid her hand into Snape's hair and pulled his head to one side, baring his scarred neck. Dragging her lips from his, she drew a trail of nibbles and licks back and down to his neck, tracing the contours of the scar tissue with her tongue, bathing it with her warm breath. Snape's eyes fluttered closed and he exhaled a harsh breath, one hand caressing her back and cupping her arse as he ground against her.

An approving hum vibrated Hermione's lips against his neck, and he twisted, one hand tangling in her hair to guide her mouth to his. His guttural groan was muffled by Hermione's tongue duelling with his for dominance.

They stood there, wrapped around each other, kissing, for a long while. Finally, when Hermione shifted her weight, she miscalculated and twisted her ankle on one heel, making her lurch and grab Snape even as she backed away with a startled cry. Scowling, she kicked off her shoes, sinking four inches onto the stair and no longer standing taller than Snape. Grimacing at the awkward pain in her overextended ankle, she blinked blearily at Snape, trying to gather her scattered wits.

"Ow. I think I... had too much to drink. I should... go to bed. I need the loo."

Snape backed away, taking deep breaths to regain his composure. "Let me help you upstairs. We don't want you hurting yourself further."

Hermione allowed him to grip her elbow, supporting her to climb the stairs. At the top, she cast a haphazard Summoning spell over her shoulder at her shoes, making Snape duck out of their way as they sailed past his head toward her room.

Hermione wrinkled her nose sheepishly and muttered, "Sorry," before covering her mouth as she yawned.

Snape let go of her elbow so she could enter the bathroom and retreated to his doorway. When she shut the bathroom door, he wilted against the doorjamb, heaving a huge sigh and clapping a hand over his scar. After a few beats, he gathered his strength and stepped into his room, but he left the door open so he could hear Hermione if she called for help.

He took off his shirt and tossed it into the hamper, then reached for his waistband. His erection was still straining against his trouser placket...boxers weren't exactly confining. Dropping onto the edge of his bed, he cradled his head in his hands, his elbows propped on his knees, as he struggled with his roaring desire for a woman nearly half his age.

*She's clearly drunk, and although she was snogging you quite enthusiastically, that could merely be the alcohol acting, not her. If you tried to push things now, it could be a disaster. Do you want to ruin your chance to build something worthwhile for a quick shag while she's pissed? If you don't cock things up, she'll be around for a right long while, so you'll have your chance to pursue things more later. Take it easy, ol' chap. Once she's in bed, just have a wank and get some sleep yourself.*

He heard the bathroom door open and snapped his head up to look at his doorway. Hermione appeared, leaning against the doorjamb, her cardigan gone, baring her shoulders in the thin-strapped dress. Her eyes were red from the alcohol and droopy with sleep, her hair was mussed from Snape's fevered caresses, and her lips were swollen from their fierce snogging. Snape's cock jumped in eagerness, but he remained where he was.

Hermione's speech was slow as she said, "Bathroom's free. I'm gonna... go to bed. Tired. Too much t'drink. G'night..."

Snape nodded. "Good night, Hermione. Get some rest."

He allowed himself to doze for a bit before stirring and cleaning up. Finally sure that he could take the chance of being seen without a raging erection tenting his pants, he made a quick trip to the bathroom and got ready for bed, wondering what the morning would bring.

Snape rolled his eyes and huffed. "First it was ice cream for dinner, now it's chocolate cake for breakfast?"

Hermione pulled a face at him and said, "I'm an adult; I can have whatever I like for breakfast." She paused for a beat, then grimaced and said, "Except for alcohol. I don't think I'll ever drink again."

Snape crossed to the counter and cut a slice of cake for her as he said, "Nonsense. You'll have a pint at the pub when we have dinner there like usual. You've just learnt a very valuable lesson about moderation and how to take care of yourself properly when you do indulge."

Hermione snorted and lamented, "I remember having such a good time, then things start getting a little fuzzy from there. Ron behaved himself, didn't he? Am I remembering that right?"

Snape served her the cake and sat. "He did." In a carefully neutral voice, he said, "How 'fuzzy' is your memory of last night?"

Hermione frowned in concentration. "I remember things, but I'm not sure what was real and what was in my dreams."

"What do you think you dreamt?"

Hermione's eyes went wide and she flicked a sheepish glance at him, her cheeks colouring. She chewed her lower lip and mumbled, "Um, just... things."

*Could she have dreamt about us? Does she think what happened was a dream?*

Snape sipped his tea and said, "I see." Unsure what to do, he pushed to his feet and said, "I'll leave you to your breakfast now that you feel better."

Hermione watched him stalk out, her voice stuck in her throat, struggling with the attraction that had plagued her dreams and left her aching with desire until she took matters into her own hands. In the silence of the house, she heard the water running in the pipes, indicating that Snape was showering.

*I don't want to ruin our friendship, especially with me living here like this. If things went badly, it'd be dreadfully awkward. I'd quite likely have to move out. I don't want to do that.*

Snape was in his room when she availed herself of the bathroom, and when she came downstairs to begin their daily work on the book, Snape was in his usual seat at the worktable, acting as if he hadn't a care in the world. Hermione took his lead and they spent the day in a studiously professional manner.

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Their behaviour continued in that fashion for days until they got an owl from Draco telling them that he had arranged for them to meet a former Death Eater...as well as the Malfoys themselves...at the Manor, so Hermione could interview them about Voldemort in a couple of weeks.

At that point, Hermione turned worried eyes full of naked emotion to Snape's and said, "I don't know if I'm ready."

Snape covered her hand with his and murmured, "You'll be fine. I'll be with you. So will Draco. You can do this. The wizarding world needs to know the truth."

Hermione chewed her lower lip and Snape's thumb caressed her hand. She looked at their hands and twisted hers to lace her fingers with his. Squeezing, she took a deep breath and met Snape's sober gaze. "I'll do my best."

Snape smiled fondly and said, "As always."

She offered a shaky smile back, and they returned to their work, focusing on her questions for the Malfoys and the Death Eater. Snape even encouraged her to practice asking him the questions, so she could get used to the words rolling off her tongue. By the time the date came around, things would be old hat to her.

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October 8, 1998

Hermione dressed in her birthday outfit, taking confidence from it, then added a more wizarding outer robe for her trip to Malfoy Manor. Snape followed her lead and wore his usual trousers and shirt but topped it with robes much like his former teaching robes. They were to Floo over and meet Draco before the other guest arrived.

Snape could see Hermione's nervousness, so he gripped her hands and crooned, "Relax. You'll be brilliant."

Hermione exhaled a shaky breath and smiled in gratitude. "All right, let's go."

Draco greeted them cordially when they whirled out of the Floo, dressed in finely tailored midnight blue robes that made his platinum hair and icy-grey eyes gleam. They were in a large library, with a plush sitting arrangement around the hearth. Hermione looked around with eager eyes.

Grinning, Draco said, "You're welcome to have a look. I thought this would be the most comfortable setting. Less formal than a dining room, with fewer distractions." He watched both Hermione and Snape eyeing the loaded shelves and drawled, "Or perhaps not..."

Hermione shook herself and flushed. "Do forgive me. I'll sate my curiosity some other time. How are you, Draco?"

He stepped forward with a slight bow, kissing her hand in greeting. "I'm quite well. And you?"

"I'm fine. A bit nervous about this interview, but Severus is keeping me calm." She cast a grateful look at the taller man, and he nodded acknowledgment.

"Hermione, if I remember correctly, there are several genealogy books in this library that may be useful for your historical search."

Draco nodded. "Grandfather and Father have been good about keeping copies of all pureblood families' bloodlines, naturally." His tone expressed his distaste, evidence of the turnaround he had made since the war.

"Those would be exceedingly helpful, if you don't mind me borrowing them. I'd be quite careful with them"

Draco chuckled and teased, "I know I can trust a bookworm like you with anything in this library. Come along, and we can start collecting them if you like."

They opened an old-fashioned card catalogue, and Draco pointed his wand at it saying *Accio* bloodline subjects."

Several drawers opened and cards flew toward him, dropping into a neat stack on the side table between an armchair and a sofa. Snape picked a few up and started Summoning the individual books from the shelves, followed by Draco. Hermione caught them and stacked them carefully, barely having time to see the titles before the next one came flying toward her.

They had almost finished when Narcissa swept in on Lucius's arm. Hermione felt a cold sweat prickling her scalp, but she acquitted herself tolerably well in the face of those who had captured and tortured her the previous March. The other guest arrived promptly, and Draco led the introductions.

Snape sat by Hermione on one sofa, his hand discreetly touching the side of her leg to offer silent support under such scrutiny. Draco demonstrated how much he had grown up since the war in the way he controlled the evening, even adroitly suppressing his father's pompousness or chiding the Death Eater for being offensive. Snape stayed silent unless addressed, preferring to let Hermione do the interviewing and Draco play host. However, that didn't stop him from pinning the others with his baleful glare when necessary.

Her lips trembled, and more tears leaked out from under her closed lids. Snape murmured, "What about them?"

Hermione cut an accusing look at him and snarled, "Surely you heard about it! When Greyback and the Snatchers caught us and took us there to hand us over to Voldemort?" Snape jerked involuntarily at the name, but she forged on, spitting the words like poison. "That batshit abomination of a witch locked everyone else in the cellar and kept me in that drawing room to *torture* me! Sh-she *cut* me and *Crucioed* me!"

Snape's eyes opened so wide in shock that a thin ring of white was visible around the black. Hermione's brow furrowed in anguish as she said, "Then Dobby dropped the chandelier on us to get Bellatrix, but she got away. I was under it. Ron dragged me out from it and we escaped to Shell Cottage, but not before she managed to throw her knife and kill Dobby. He died in Harry's arms...right in front of us...on the beach. I was covered with cuts from the crystals, and I was bleeding..."

"Ye gods..." Snape's horrified whisper seemed to flip a switch and Hermione dissolved into sobs again. This time, however, she turned to him for comfort, burrowing against him while he rubbed her back in sympathetic silence.

When she quieted again, she remained curled across his lap, and he kept caressing her soothingly. Eventually, she murmured, "Didn't you hear? I assumed that would've been big news for the Death Eaters."

Snape heaved a sigh and said, "I didn't hear the details, only that you all had been captured and had escaped...thank the gods for small mercies."

Hermione squirmed and sat back up, turning to face Snape. He lifted a hand to brush her tangled curls away from her face and she leant into it, closing her eyes. Snape's heart thudded and he raised his other hand to wipe away her remaining tears, smoothing over her cheeks. She clasped his hand in hers, dropping it to her lap. Snape slid his other hand from her cheek and wrapped it around hers.

There was a long pause as they stared at their twined fingers. Then Snape whispered, "You must have healed well. I don't see any scars."

She met his eyes and smiled faintly as she muttered, "Dittany." Snape flashed an answering smile, then Hermione said, "The crystal cuts were all pretty superficial scratches. The knife wound was worse. It's not completely gone; at least, it's not particularly visible, but I can still feel it."

At Snape's frown of inquiry, she lifted her chin, baring her throat, and brought his fingertips to graze over the thin groove that was nearly invisible. He leant forward, seeking the visual confirmation of what he could feel. It was several inches long, from the centre of the column of her throat back toward her jaw.

His fingers trailed from one end to the other, then smoothed over her throat and back behind her ear as he bent forward and pressed a gentle kiss to the scar. He heard her gasp, but she didn't back away. Heartened by that, he continued dropping light kisses along the groove, then nuzzled her ear with his nose before breathing, "Would you like me to stay with you until you fall asleep again? Help keep the nightmares at bay?"

Hermione exhaled the breath she hadn't realized she had been holding. In a shaky whisper, she said, "You don't have to do that."

Snape pulled back and met her eyes with a fond smirk. "I don't mind. You've done the same for me countless times."

Hermione frowned and tilted her head in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

Snape ducked his head and offered a sheepish grimace. "Uh...I have a confession to make."

Brows rising, Hermione said, "A confession?"

Snape sucked in a deep breath and let it sough out, one hand rubbing the scar on his own neck. "I had my own reasons to offer you a room in the dungeons, and even to offer this room here." He paused, and Hermione stared at him expectantly. "You know how you thought it was being in the dungeon that helped me sleep? Well, it wasn't that. It was *you*. I always slept better during my naps when you were around than I did at night on my own, until I had you nearby. It made all the difference. You were there to comfort me when I woke in the middle of my living nightmare after Nagini attacked me, and every day I remember after that. Just knowing you were on the other side of the wall or just down the hall... you helped keep my dreams sweet, Hermione."

She was owl-eyed, completely taken aback. "You never said anything..."

Snape looked away and muttered, "I didn't want to scare you away."

The silence stretched on, and Snape was afraid to meet her eyes again for fear of what he might see there. Hermione studied him, realizing just how much they had come to rely on and care for each other in such a short time. She thought about what he had said, and understood how being close to each other could help fight off the demons of their past that tried to plague them. In a soft voice, she said, "Actually, I would prefer it if you stayed."

Snape's wide-eyed gaze snapped to hers, and his chest tightened at her shy smile. Wanting to crow in excitement, he instead cleared his throat and said, "I'll just let you get settled, and I'll be right there at your vanity."

Hermione gripped his arm and drew his attention, waiting until they had locked eyes to say, "That won't be necessary. You're welcome to lie here and be comfortable. I don't mind."

Snape's throat went dry, and he swallowed hard. Pulse speeding up, he rasped, "Good to know."

Hermione flashed a smile and ducked her head as she squirmed back under her covers, knowing full well that a blush was spreading over her face. Snape edged off the bed until she was settled, then carefully eased back down beside her, on top of the covers. A deft flick of his wand extinguished the lights, and he lay flat on his back, his ankles crossed, with one hand behind his head. Hermione rolled onto her side to face him in the darkness.

"Thank you."

It was a faint whisper, but Snape heard her. He was startled to feel her hand sliding down his arm to twine her fingers with his. "I'll make sure you're sleeping, and then I'll leave you in peace."

Hermione voiced an acknowledging noise, then silence blanketed them.

Snape lay there in the dark listening to Hermione's breathing. After a while, it evened into slow, deep breaths, and her fingers went slack. He stayed for at least another half hour after that, just to make sure she was asleep, then ever-so-slowly extricated himself from her lax grip and moved off the bed. Weariness was tugging at his eyelids, and he yawned as he shuffled back to his own room and burrowed under his covers. It wasn't long before he was asleep, too.

Hermione woke again in the purplish pre-dawn. Snape was gone, and she frowned, remembered anxiety sending icy prickles over her skin. Her nightmare had come back, albeit in more disjointed, murky pieces than before. Her throat was tight, and her eyes burned with fresh tears wanting to be shed. Sucking in shallow, shaky breaths, she slid out of bed and hastened out to Snape's room, pausing on the threshold and looking at his sleeping figure.

Struggling to breathe deeply and calm herself, Hermione closed her eyes and rested her forehead against the doorjamb for a long moment. The twitchiness inside her wouldn't go away, so she tiptoed closer and stood beside the bed, wringing her hands as she whispered, "Severus?"

Snape didn't stir until the third time she said his name. He rolled onto his back and peered groggily up at her. "Hermione?"

In a small voice, she said, "Can I sleep in here with you?"



With a gentle squeeze of his arm, she stood and left him with his painful memories. She didn't see his startled eyes following her as she retreated to her room.

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Snape knew what she was trying to do and was grateful for it. Considering how much he had grown to care for her, he was quite willing to go along with her silly plans, as long as it provided ample opportunity for her to delight him with her laughter and radiant smiles. The kitchen was a mess of dirty dishes as well as both successful and botched attempts at making caramels and other sweets. They were almost ill with how much they had gorged on sugary concoctions instead of proper food, so Snape led her to the basement to brew her a stomach-settling solution.

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Snape smiled at her enthusiasm even as he shook his head at it. Turning his attention back to the section on his family, he made note of the location of the house and crossed to the worktable to write a letter inquiring about the property. *I wonder if it still exists, and if so, whether anyone lives there...*

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November 13, 1998

Snape drained his pint and cleared his throat. "Hermione, are you busy tomorrow?"

Tilting her head in inquiry, she said, "No more than usual. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I finally got the details on Prince Manor, and I know you said you'd go with me..."

Hermione's face lit up with enthusiasm. "Of course! Oh, tell me all about it."

Snape flicked a glance around and said, "Not here."

She nodded and finished her meal. "Let's go."

They waved goodbye to Kelly and stepped out into the snowy night. Plumes of vapour streamed from their noses as they crunched through the latest layer of snow on the walkways. Snape murmured, "It's been abandoned, apparently. No one lives there now, nor has anyone lived there for years. It's very secluded, with quite a few Muggle-repellent enchantments woven into the grounds. Considering how long it's been vacant, I have no idea what sort of condition it's in. It could be a ruin of rubble or much like the Shrieking Shack by now. So, it could be dangerous. Are you sure you want to take the risk?"

Hermione turned to frown at him in thought. "Yes, but we should take precautions. If it could be that dangerous, perhaps it's time you taught me how to make that Portkey that saved you. And we should definitely tell people where we're going and when we expect to be back, just in case."

Snape's brows rose in startled consideration of her comments. "I hadn't thought of it that way. I can teach you how to do the Portkey, but it may not work right away. It's a very tricky piece of work."

Hermione shrugged and squeezed his arm. "So we go when we're ready. I daresay it's not going anywhere."

Snape snorted and said, "Indeed," as they reached the house and gratefully got out of the cold.

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November 19, 1998

"There! That's exactly how it looked and acted when I completed the previous Portkey. So, I daresay it's ready. It took less time this time around...probably because I'd managed it before. You caught on quite quickly. Well done." Snape flashed a proud smile at Hermione.

"Thank you. If I had no idea whether it could work, I don't know that I could have got this far so quickly. I'm sure that having seen your success helped me. Besides, you *can* be an excellent teacher, you know." She twinkled at him and chuckled at his snort of derision. "At any rate, when shall we go? I want to let Harry know, just in case. It might come in handy to have an Auror-in-training to come to the rescue if necessary."

Snape nodded and said, "I'd like to let Minerva and Draco know as well. It'd be just my luck that the day we get into trouble is the day Harry gets knocked out cold in a training exercise and we'd be on our own."

Hermione laughed and caressed his knee. "Point taken, but I'm sure we can take care of ourselves pretty well. And would it be such a bad thing to be 'on our own'?"

Snape snapped a keen glance at her, noting the blush creeping up her throat and over her cheeks. It was the most overt thing she had said about their relationship thus far. Lips spreading in a wicked smirk, he murmured, "It hasn't been bad so far."

Hermione ducked her head to hide her pleased grin. Clearing her throat, she said, "Why don't we try this Saturday, so Harry will be free."

Snape nodded. "I'll contact Minerva and Draco right away."

They parted ways on their separate tasks, and the plan was set for heading out in two days' time.

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## 10

### *Chapter 10 of 12*

How did Snape survive Nagini's attack, how did he and Hermione get together, and how did Prince Manor get involved?  
This was written for the 2011 SSHG Exchange, in response to aleysiasnape's prompt: Severus and Hermione are trapped somewhere in Prince Manor while exploring.

Chapter 10- November 21, 1998

Saturday morning, right after breakfast, Snape and Hermione joined hands and waited for the Portkey to Prince Manor that Snape had commissioned from the Ministry office to take effect. Wands at the ready, personal Portkeys tied around their wrists, they lurched at the behind-the-navel pull of the Portkey and stumbled only a little as they alit on pristine snow in front of a large dilapidated building.

Snape immediately scanned the surroundings, senses on alert, before returning his attention to the manor house. All of the windows were devoid of glass, it having been broken and disintegrating over many years. Many of the windows sported remnants of shutters or bits of the planks used to board them up. Some of the roof had caved in, and there were shingles missing. The skeletal arms of barren vines and other plants had encroached on the walls and front walk, glistening in their casings of ice. In all, it was an exceedingly decrepit building, as dry and brittle as the brown leaves and pine needles swirled by the chill wind.

Hermione pressed closer to Snape, seeking warmth. Expression wary and mournful, she murmured, "Shall we try to go in?"



Snape sucked in a deep breath and said, "I suppose. We may as well try to get out of the elements and see if the inside is as bad off as the outside."

Together, they strode through the snow to the front door. It was closed, and Snape cast several diagnostic spells in search of dangerous enchantments. At Hermione's inquiring look, he said, "I read more about my mother's family. Apparently, the affinity for Dark magic started a very long time ago. It wouldn't be unusual to find the ancestral home seeded with hexes or curses."

"Oh. I see." Hermione cast a wary glance at the rest of the façade, as if she could spy a jinx in the peeling paint.

After a moment, Snape voiced a cry of astonishment. "Just as I thought! No wonder this place has fallen into ruin. In order to open the door, one has to be of the Prince bloodline."

Hermione tilted her head and said, "Really? What would happen if I tried to open the door?"

Snape's eyes narrowed in thought. "You could try, if you want to. I'm fairly certain whatever happens won't be lethal or permanent."

Hermione jerked in surprise. "Wow. Okay. Well, here goes nothing..."

She reached for the door handle, and Snape tensed, poised to respond if things went badly. As soon as she touched it, she snatched her hand back and shrieked, cradling it against her chest. Snape grabbed her hand and peered at the angry red welt across her palm and the blisters on her fingertips. "Hold still."

He cast healing charms and counterhexes, restoring her hand to its former state. "That hurt! It was a combination Stinging Hex and Burning Curse. I daresay that's a pretty effective security system."

Snape lifted her newly healed hand and pressed gentle kisses to it. "I'm sorry you were hurt. Here, let's get inside out of the wind."

Gingerly, he touched the handle, exhaling in relief when he wasn't hurt. He felt the tingle of magic spreading from his hand and knew the house was recognizing him as one of its own. Hermione tucked her hand through the crook of his elbow and followed him into the creaky house lit only by the wintry sunlight filtering in through the windows.

The house wasn't empty. The furnishings were still present, if in terrible condition. It was obvious that things had been covered with sheets, as some were still shrouded, while others were bare, the sheets blown into piles against the walls. Old portraits, covered with layers of grime and with peeling paint, still hung rakishly on the walls.

Snape led Hermione carefully through the multitude of rooms, repeatedly casting spells to search for danger. She kept levitating the covers off the furniture, taking peeks at what would have previously been considered exquisitely wrought pieces, but were now weathered and worn from decades of neglect. Fortunately, the floors had maintained structural integrity, but when they made their way to the main staircase, they eyed it with trepidation.

"Be ready to Apparate if things start to crumble."

Hermione nodded and said, "Been there; done that. That's the only way we escaped from Mr. Lovegood's."

Snape nodded and took the first tentative step, tensed to react as he listened to the groan of the boards under his foot. Slowly, they climbed to the next level, where the corridor was in slightly better condition, having less direct exposure to open windows. They entered room after room, looking in wardrobes and drawers and under sheets covering furniture. When they found a room lined with bookshelves, they stayed to peer at the aged, brittle books.

"Severus, look. This is another Prince family book, but it's more like a family journal than anything else."

Snape joined her to flip through the pages, seeing descriptions of family members and tales of family events penned in different hands throughout. "This should prove very interesting reading. I'll take this with us when we go home."

Hermione watched him shrink the book and tuck it in his pocket. Then he gestured for her to continue to the next room. They eventually made it to the top level, a smaller section only above the main section of the house, serving as a large garret. It was much dustier up there, as it had been a storage place even when the house was occupied, and the shadows seemed much darker inside it.

Hermione was near a small window, peering out at the snowy landscape and into the trees surrounding the property, when Snape lifted a sheet off a tall cheval mirror near the back of the room. At Snape's startled cry, she spun in time to see him throwing his arms up to defend against the dazzling flash of light that burst from the mirror, the sheet slipping off and pooling on the floor. Concerned, she rushed over. Snape was blinking rapidly, temporarily blinded by the brilliance, and when Hermione stepped beside him, she saw their reflection in the mirror for a brief moment before another glare of light exploded from it, bathing them in the glow and nearly incapacitating them with the painful brightness. As if that weren't worrisome enough, at the same time, all around them, they heard the slamming of the door and shutters, plunging the room into even deeper darkness once the blaze of light faded.

Hermione clung to Snape, waiting until she could see again, noting the difference in air pressure now that all exits were blocked. "Severus, are you all right?"

His voice was black with impatience and frustration as he growled, "As soon as I can see again, I'll be fine. Are you hurt?"

"No, just blinded. But it's getting better. What happened?"

Snape was silent until he regained his vision, then he peered around the dark room, seeing light only through the cracks in the shutters and the door. "*Lumos*." His wand lit up and he prowled around the room, testing them. "The windows and doors are sealed. We can see light, but I can't pass anything through the cracks." He paused and said, "Hang on a tick." Frowning in concentration, he tried to Disapparate, but was stuck fast. "Trying to Apparate feels much like it does when you try at Hogwarts, which is to say, you get absolutely nowhere." He sighed and continued, "We're trapped for now. I'm not sure what that mirror was all about either."

Hermione fought down a frisson of fear at his word "trapped." Lighting her wand as well, she joined him and said, "Did you see anything before the light flashed?"

Snape scowled and crossed back to the mirror, warily eyeing his reflection. Hermione sidled up next to him, and the edge of the mirror glowed briefly again. "Obviously, something magical has happened, but I've never seen anything like that before, so I have no idea what enchantment it could be. Of course, that's not as important as getting out of here."

Hermione nodded and tried Disapparating anyway, spurred on by rising panic. She felt the block and desisted, meeting Snape's knowing look. They hurried to the door, trying any spells they could think of to get through the door, including destructive and vanishing spells, but everything just dissipated against whatever field was keeping them locked in. Hermione shivered and said, "The only good thing is that it's keeping the wind out. But it'll be getting dark in a few hours, and I know it's not going to warm up."

Snape stepped closer and wrapped her in an embrace. "We'll be home in time for dinner, I'm sure."

"I hope so, considering we never did stop to get any lunch. I *am* going to conjure some fire to give us light and some heat in the meantime, though." Backing out of his arms, she transfigured some glass jars and conjured her bluebell flames, placing them around the attic room. The dancing light cast everything in an eerie glow. Hermione then transfigured a drinking glass and said, "Of course, now that I can't immediately pop out of here to get a drink, I'm suddenly thirsty."

Snape snorted and watched her cast *Aguamenti*, pouring water into her glass from her wand. When she had drained the glass, she filled it again and offered it to him. He shrugged and did the same, then ruefully realized that he had just set himself up for needing the toilet sooner.

Hermione sagged onto a decrepit armchair, sending up a cloud of dust, and said, "If only we could send a message to someone for help. If only there was a Floo hearth in

here..."

Snape snapped his gaze to hers, eyes wide with excitement. "Wait! We can send a message. How do you think Albus and I communicated when we needed secrecy and security: a Patronus."

Hermione sat up straight. "That's right! You even sent your Patronus to lead Harry to the sword of Gryffindor! He said it never spoke, and I wondered why, after hearing Kingsley's and Arthur's speak when they sent messages."

Snape smirked. "I seriously doubt Harry would have followed my Patronus anywhere if it had spoken with my voice, Hermione. I had to stay silent so he wouldn't know it was mine."

Hermione flashed a wry smile. "Point taken. At any rate, let's get this done. I'll send mine to Harry, and you can send yours to Minerva."

They stood shoulder to shoulder in the middle of the cluttered room and said in unison, *Expecto Patronum*."

Neither was prepared for the shock of seeing two wholly different creatures springing forth from their wands. In their astonishment, they faltered, and the glowing forms flickered out.

Cold trickles of fear washed over Snape, and he swallowed hard. Casting a stunned glance at Hermione, he saw she was just as taken aback as he was. Her whisper was shaky as she said, "What just happened?"

Snape cleared his throat and said, "I'm not sure. Perhaps we should try again."

Hermione stared up at him and murmured, "Go ahead."

Snape took a deep breath and closed his eyes, concentrating on stifling the fear and finding the joy within himself to conjure a Patronus. On the tail of his incantation, he opened his eyes to marvel at...not a doe any longer, but an eagle...circling the attic.

"Severus, it's... beautiful."

Snape watched it soaring around them and felt his chest fill with a surge of fierce pride and a longing for the freedom of flight. Rapt, he simply stared until it lit upon a sheet-covered piece of furniture. Exhaling a long note of satisfaction, he allowed the Patronus to fade. Turning glowing eyes to Hermione, he said, "Your turn."

Hermione blinked. Gathering her scattered wits, she took a deep breath and breathed, "*Expecto Patronum*." Her eyes were wide as she waited for her otter to gambol from the end of her wand. She gasped when an owl arrowed upward, gliding around the room. The misty white glow of the Patronus owl reminded her of Harry's beloved Hedwig, and she couldn't help but smile in tremulous awe at the distinct change from her previous Patronus. It landed and settled its wings, turning to pin her with its sombre gaze. Hermione shook herself and let it fade, then spun to look at Snape.

"What's wrong?"

Hermione murmured, "My Patronus was an otter before. Yours was a doe. Why are they different now? Is it related to whatever is keeping us stuck here?"

Snape closed his eyes and immersed himself in the sensation that had suffused him at the sight of his eagle. "No. They're ours. I can feel it."

The silence was very loud as they considered the changes they had just experienced. After a few minutes, Hermione said, "I guess we should try to send a message, then."

Snape settled his shoulders and said, "Right. Very well then."

Again, they stood and cast the spells, watching the very different birds soaring out of their wands and flying around their heads. Hermione said, "How do we give them our message?"

Snape, mesmerized by the graceful flight of his Patronus, said, "You train your wand on it and say *Vox Patronum*, then you recite the message and say *Finite Vox*. Once you're done, you direct it on where to go and let it fly...in our case, literally."

Hermione looked at his delighted grin and smiled. "All right. Let's go."

When they focused on the birds to record their messages, each Patronus calmed and settled until they were told to go. Then, they spread their wings and shot upwards, winging toward the shuttered windows...only to careen to the sides when they encountered the enchantment keeping them trapped. Snape and Hermione watched them circle the room, trying each window and the door, flying at different angles, and skimming the walls before disappearing in a frustrated flutter of wings.

Snape met Hermione's worried gaze with his grim one. Irritated, he flicked a cursory dusting charm at the armchair and gestured for Hermione to sit. She did so, her hands worrying in her lap as she chewed her lip.

In an attempt at a silver lining, Hermione said, "Well, I'm sure they'll come looking for us at some point. As long as this place doesn't collapse around us in the meantime, we'll be all right."

Snape huffed in frustration, raking a hand through his hair. "We've nothing to eat; you'll likely be hungry before long."

Hermione shrugged. "It can't be worse than when we were camping."

Another heavy silence fell. Snape began pacing, and Hermione watched him, her expression sympathetic. After several minutes, Snape kicked a piece of detritus on the floor and let loose an inarticulate roar of fury. Hermione jerked back in her seat, startled. Snape noticed and scowled. "I apologize. I don't mean to take out my frustration on you."

Hermione nodded and watched him retreat to the mirror, his expression sheepish. Attempting to keep things calm, she said, "Well, what shall we do to occupy our time while we're here? You've got that book, don't you?"

Snape jerked his head in an affirmative while he trailed his hands over the mirror frame, seeking any information he could find on what in bloody blazes was going on. After a long moment, Hermione rose and crossed to him, once again joining him in the reflection and inciting a brief glow. Snape snarled, "It's *clearly* got something to do with you. It's done that twice now since the first blaze!"

Hermione stepped away and crossed her arms as she said, "Then get out of the way and let me go again so we can see if that's true!"

Snape glared at her but complied, joining her to one side. Huffing, she stepped in front of the mirror and stared at her annoyed reflection. Nothing happened. Snape swore under his breath and charged forward again. As soon as they were both in the mirror's reflection, the glow happened again.

Hermione whirled on him in triumph and said, "There! See? It's not about *me*; it's about *us*." With an arch parting glance, she spun again and frowned at their reflection in thought as she said, "But *what about us*?"

Snape shot a baleful glare at the mirror and stomped off to flop onto the tattered armchair where he sank down and crossed his arms in a sulk. Hermione cast an



Hermione lifted her other hand and moulded it to his cheek, offering him a gentle smile. "Severus, who said anything was against my will?"

Snape's eyes flew open wide and his gut trembled with hope and desire and fear. Hermione guided him forward and kissed him, sliding her hand into his hair to hold him in place for a very thorough snog.

When they parted, their foreheads pressed together as they panted, Hermione whispered, "Let's go to the mirror. Maybe it needs to see us again, now."

She pulled him to his feet and led him over to stand in front of the mirror. It glowed again, but nothing else happened. Tugging him closer, she leant back against him and wrapped his arms around her waist, demonstrating their connection for the enchantments. Still, nothing happened, but she did feel the hard heat of his erection pressing into her back.

Snape murmured, "What do you think it needs?"

Hermione shrugged faintly. "Maybe it needs to *hear* some sort of statement?"

Snape met her gaze in the mirror and held her tighter as he took the plunge. "Hermione, you've been there since the moment I opened my eyes in the wake of my living nightmare. You've helped me rebuild my life, my sanity, my magic. If ever there was an event significant enough to change the joy I draw upon to cast my Patronus, it was literally coming back to life in your grasp. There's no one I would rather be with. I was willing to wait until it naturally came to that point, for fear of driving you away, but... even though these enchantments have forced my hand, they don't change the fact that... I love you."

Hermione's heart raced, like to burst with happiness. Lips spreading in a shaky smile, she said, "I thought as much. I was afraid to rush things, too. But I've loved you for months now, Severus."

The triumph in his eyes made her laugh in relief. She started to turn in his embrace, but paused to peer around at the mirror and the attic, trying to see if there were any discernible changes in their prison. Snape held her close and bent to nuzzle her ear. "It may not have been enough for the enchantments, but that was more than enough to satisfy me."

Twisting to face him, she snaked her arms up around his neck and pulled his head down, her lips ghosting over his as she purred, "I, on the other hand, may need *more* to be *satisfied*."

At his incredulous groan, she pounced on him with a fierce kiss, aggressive and demanding and melting his restraint in a wave of heat. Hermione's hands slid down his chest and around his waist. Gripping his arse, she pressed against him, smirking at his sharp gasp. Backing away, she flashed a wicked grin and flicked her wand. "Accio jars." The jars with the bluebell flames floated over and settled in a ring around them. Her grin disappeared when she bit her lower lip and whispered, "Accio cushions."

Snape's hands and jaw clenched as comprehension dawned. Hermione stepped away and let the cushion drop between them. Deftly, she expanded it until it was long enough for Snape's tall frame. Hermione was glad for the warmth of the flames now that they were so much closer to them. She beckoned for Snape to step back into place on the cushion, then pulled him down to kneel with her. Sinking back to sit, Hermione pulled off her winter boots, nodding for Snape to do the same. Snape stared at her, afraid it was all too good to be true, but at her raised eyebrow, he followed suit.

Boots tossed aside, Hermione shoved to her feet again and urged Snape back up. Holding his gaze, she shrugged out of her thick coat, laying it neatly at the end of the cushion. When Snape didn't immediately copy her actions, she smiled and reached up to remove his winter cloak for him. They came together in a feverish kiss, hands roaming. Hermione broke away to pull him down onto their knees, giving her better access to pepper his face and throat with nibbles and licks. Grazing her teeth across his scarred neck, bathing it with hot breath, she slid her hands beneath his shirt, making him moan.

Snape couldn't believe his luck. Their previous passionate snogs and gropes were one thing, but to know that she felt the same as he did... that was the most euphoric part. Hermione's nails trailed along his back, raising goose flesh in their wake. His cock jumped violently, straining against his trousers. Hermione started unbuttoning his shirt, following the path down his chest with her tongue. When it was open, she lunged back up to kiss him, shoving the shirt off his shoulders and pressing her chest to his.

Wrenching free of the shirt, Snape curled forward and gripped Hermione's arse, pulling her up to straddle his lap and bringing her lips up to the same level as his. Hermione voiced her approval in a low purr and started rocking on his lap, grinding against his erection. Snape hissed and his hands spasmed, squeezing her arse as he fought the surge of sensation.

Hermione leant back, yanking her jumper over her head in one swift motion, making her hair tumble down over her face in a riot of dishevelled curls. Snape groaned, drinking in the sight of her straddling his lap, tousled and flushed, clad in her bra and jeans. Shaking her hair out of her face, wiping away the strands that clung to her swollen lips, she beamed at Snape, eyes alight with wonder and lust.

Voice husky, she said, "Severus, touch me."

Snape lifted reverent hands to caress her throat and breasts, curling forward to drop feathery kisses on the flesh above the lacy edge of her bra. Hermione's head lolled back and her hands rose to tangle in his hair. After a long moment, she released him and reached back to unhook her bra, rolling her shoulders to let the straps fall. Snape's hands were cupping her breasts, holding the fabric in place, but when the straps loosened, he backed away to meet her eyes, his apprehension evident in his eyes and in his voice as he queried, "Hermione?"

She smiled fondly and whispered, "Severus, please."

Snape sucked in a shuddery breath and lowered his hands, letting the bra fall away from her peaked nipples. Flinging it to one side, he sat forward, sliding her down his lap to lay her on the cushion, hovering over her. Hermione's eyes closed in bliss as he trailed kisses over her skin, pausing to suckle each nipple before continuing on his quest to leave no bit of flesh untouched by his lips. When his chin bumped against the waist of her jeans, she voiced a quavery moan of encouragement. Dipping the tip of his tongue in to tickle her navel, he tugged at the button and zipper of her jeans, then sat up to help her wriggle out of them.

Hermione felt like every nerve of her body was sensitized, sending jolts of heat through her core in response to his touch. She had never wanted anyone as much as she wanted him at that moment. Snape slid his hands up her legs from ankle to hip, leaning down to nibble at the hipbone jutting up above her knickers. Hermione squealed and bucked, and Snape dipped lower to nuzzle her mound, noting how damp the cloth was and how heady the aroma of her arousal was to his sensitive nose.

Her gasp at the sensation made him grin, and he backed away to hook his fingers under the fabric and peel her knickers down her legs, baring her to his adoring gaze. As soon as Hermione was naked, she sat up and grabbed Snape, spinning and shoving him onto his back. A startled cry was forced from him at the impact, but it quickly changed to a ragged groan when Hermione immediately attacked his trousers, tearing at the button placket in her haste to strip him.

She scrambled backward in her unceremonious attempt to peel his trousers off, smirking at the memory of stripping him via magic in the hospital wing over six months ago. Crawling back between his spread legs, she grinned at the further similarity when she saw that his white boxers were translucent where his precome had soaked the cloth strained over the head of his cock, showing the pink of his flesh through the fabric. Flicking a glance at Snape to confirm that he didn't protest her manhandling, she carefully edged the elastic of the boxers out past his erection, tugging them down to rest just above his bollocks.

Snape was gripping the cushion, his whole body tensed and overwhelmed at the feel of her hands baring him so eagerly. His cock bounced, finally free of its confines, and he bucked when she trailed gentle fingertips along his shaft. Blinking dazedly at her, he was taken aback by the almost predatory gleam in her eyes as she guided his boxers down his legs, leaving him as naked as she was.

Hermione crawled alongside him, pausing to drop light kisses along his chest. Propping herself on one elbow, she reached down to stroke him, smearing his precome over the heated flesh and eliciting a strangled groan. Leaning down to his ear, she breathed, "Do you want me as much as you love me?"

It took several long minutes before the silvery stag reappeared, stomping silently and tossing its head, its message undelivered. McGonagall's patient expression instantly changed to one of alert worry. "That's not good. Something must be blocking it from being able to get to them. Well, gentlemen, I daresay we should mount a rescue effort

Leaning forward with an earnest yet conspiratorial air, he said, "I'm assuming you received their invitation for a holiday gathering two weeks from today..." At her nod, he continued, "From the cryptic comments Severus has let slip when I've spoken to him, I think it's a fair guess that he's going to propose to Hermione at the party."

Hermione beamed at him and cautiously stepped up to the front door, which was once again shut. Slowly, she extended her right hand toward the handle, then sucked in a breath and held it while she touched the handle with her fingertips. Nothing happened. Emboldened, she gripped the handle and actually opened the door, turning to grin in

triumph at a thoroughly perplexed Snape.

Hurrying to join her, Snape stared hard at her touching the door handle and said, "You're not hurt?"

Hermione lifted her hand, palm out, and showed the perfectly normal flesh of her fingertips, unmarred by blisters. "I wondered if I'd rate now."

"Rate? What are you talking about?"

Dropping her right hand and lifting her left hand instead, she brandished her fourth finger at him, the wintry sunlight glinting off the stone of her engagement ring. "Now that the enchantments witnessed our... um... consummation, *and* I'm wearing your ring as a symbol of our commitment, I thought I might finally rank as a 'Prince' family member and wouldn't be subject to the hexes here."

Snape's brows rose and his eyes went wide, digesting her logic. After a few beats of silence, he smiled, his eyes full of pride and affection. "You most certainly 'rate,' my love. Now, can we please get out of here and go someplace warm? I'd like to leave this relic behind me and focus on my future, if you don't mind."

His teasing scowl made her laugh, and she hugged him, looking up and saying, "Since your future is my future, I'm more than happy to focus on it. Take me home, Severus. We've got to finish those books...there are more stories to be told."

She trailed her fingers over the scar at his throat, face alight with love. Snape leant into the caress, then ducked down to kiss her. Resting his forehead against hers, he murmured, "I rather like *our* story best."

"Indeed." They spun on the spot to Disapparate, and Hermione's delighted trill of laughter echoed in the chill air even after they were gone.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\* The End ~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*