

Forgotten

by hexgirl

Miss Granger,

I have something which belongs to you. If you wish to claim it, my home address is 49 Spinner's End, Swinton. 8.30p.m on Tuesday would suit me best.

Severus Snape

Chapter 1: Accio Hermione Granger

Chapter 1 of 7

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A/N I had some help with this story. As such, I'm indebted to the support, beta reading skills, and previewing patience of Sevvv, Nagandsev, Memory and Snapesgirl21.

Chapter 1:

Accio Hermione Granger

Hermione Granger perched on the edge of a faded leather armchair and surveyed Snape's living room with a combination of approval and dismay. The former reaction was for the veritable library which served as his living space, and the latter was for the dismal atmosphere which the cramped and uninviting room conveyed. The absence of colour, she noted, was not confined to his wardrobe. The room lacked anything more personal than his extensive book collection; it was functional, austere and gave away no clues regarding any hidden personality quirks: no ornamental frog collection, or evidence of an interest in entomology, leapt from shelf or mantelpiece. His private living space was alarmingly predictable, if more impoverished, than she had imagined, though what her expectations had been on receiving her summons from him, she could not exactly say.

Two days previously, Hermione had been engaging in her usual early morning routine it never varied, and even days off and weekends found her at her kitchen table at 7 a.m., sipping tea and waiting for a disgruntled Tawny Owl to deliver the *Daily Prophet* and whatever junk passed for the morning post. However, the reassuring tedium was interrupted that particular morning by the delivery, amidst the rubbish, of a large white envelope. Her name and address were written out in a small, cramped and disturbingly familiar handwriting. The note was short, curt, and to the point:

Miss Granger,

I have something which belongs to you. If you wish to claim it, my home address is 49 Spinner's End, Swinton. 8.30p.m on Tuesday would suit me best.

Severus Snape.

Hermione was exceedingly curious by the note and its contents, and even more so by its sender. She was aware that Professor Snape had survived a horrific attack by Voldemort's snake, Nagini, in the Shrieking Shack; she knew that he now worked in some advisory capacity to the Auror office and, along with the rest of Wizarding Britain, had been aware for some time which way his true loyalties had inclined during the war. This particular revelation had been something of a shock to the Wizarding world at large, particularly to Harry, but Hermione had felt only a vague niggling sense of relief, deliverance, and vindication that the man who had taught her a hard lesson in Potions and humility for six years was not, after all, the villain of the piece. She did not, however, understand what he could possibly have in his possession which belonged to her. The thought crossed her mind that it was some forgotten bequeathment by Dumbledore, but she dismissed her only speculative idea as unlikely.

He had gained a little weight in the six years since she had last seen him: a photograph in the *Daily Prophet*, taken as he was leaving St Mungo's. The photograph had been on the front page and was accompanied by the ludicrously tactless headline:

"Dumbledore's Man Survives Snake Attack."

Snape did not offer her tea or any hospitality more refreshing than his usual aura of quiet irritation. He pointed to a chair as soon as she entered his living room, and sat down wordlessly across from her as if it had been she who had intruded uninvited upon his harmony.

'How have you been, Professor?' she asked, for the sake of breaking the silence and reminding herself that she had a voice.

'You are not here for a progress report,' he replied.

'No,' Hermione sighed, 'I was just being polite.'

He raised his eyebrow a touch. 'I'm well, Miss Granger,' he said. 'How have you been?' His tone conveyed even less interest than his expression, but she ignored the implied indifference and told him that she, too, was well, if a little busy at the Ministry lately, due to the post-war high demand for new laws to eliminate discrimination.

'If I could have guessed that any of my students would have gone on to pioneer The Department for Equality and Wizarding Rights, I would have staked my last Galleon on it being you,' he replied.

Hermione was irritated by the old familiar sensation of needing to please him. It felt like a newly awakened memory: "Missing Presumed Dead". But apparently the only trigger required to prod it back into existence was his mocking stare. Beneath the sneer, she thought she detected a faint trace of approval, unable or unwilling to reveal itself to the irritating overachiever she knew he perceived her to be. His approbation had always been so hard won that every slight nod or murmur of assent was like a ringing endorsement. She had never quite been able to shake off her own regard for him either. There had been times, during those long months of searching for pieces of Voldemort's soul with Harry and Ron, when she had doubted her own sanity. How was it possible that the man, who had forgone any right to respect or admiration that night on the Astronomy Tower, had remained, in her own mind, an uncertainty? The issue of Snape's allegiance and credibility should no longer have been in doubt, yet still she had questioned it. She had never shared her misgivings with Harry and Ron; it was too great a leap to expect them to make, and she knew how much they enjoyed feeling piously right-all-along about him. It had been no great revelation to Hermione, therefore, when Harry exposed the truth about Severus Snape on the evening of Voldemort's demise.

'You said you had something which belongs to me?' Her abrupt return to the reason for their unlikely tête-à-tête invoked a look of slight discomfort from Snape.

'Indeed,' he replied, shifting his gaze from its scrutiny of her to rest on the contents of the side-table, which stood to the left of his chair. A well-thumbed thick black book and a glass tumbler empty but for the sticky residue of whatever its contents had been bore the brunt of his absent-minded attention.

It was moments before he spoke. 'But before we get to that, there is something else.'

'Something else?' Hermione noticed, with interest, how very unlike his old self he seemed out of his severe black teaching robes. She could never have envisaged him in anything else, but here he was, wearing a pair of dark trousers and a rather crumpled black shirt. The faded suit-jacket, she decided, was hardly necessary indoors, and she wondered if he had put it on for the sole purpose of receiving a guest.

By way of explanation, he leaned forward suddenly, and raised a hand to the collar of his shirt, pulling down the edge to reveal a long, misshapen scar, circling his throat like a deadly choker.

'Your injury?' she asked, unable to tear her gaze away from the sight of Snape's mutilated neck.

'My survival.'

Hermione lowered her eyes to her carefully folded hands, resting in her lap. 'What has that to do with me?'

She heard him clear his throat. 'You were present, I believe?'

'I witnessed the attack, yes.'

'Then you must have been surprised by the outcome?'

'It was... a brutal attack,' she said softly. 'Survival seemed... improbable.'

'Impossible.'

'Obviously not. You are here.' It felt as though he was a member of the Wizengamot and she was on trial for a crime he believed her to have committed.

'You are a bright girl, Miss Granger... allegedly,' he replied, and she swallowed the urge to remind him that she was over twenty-one. 'You are surely aware that such an attack should be fatal? There are no Healing spells and no potions in existence to counteract such a ferocious attack. Nagini's poison was more potent than your average deadly cobra; *he* saw to that.'

He paused apparently to study her face, so that Hermione felt compelled to continue her diligent scrutiny of her hands until he resumed. 'A single possibility exists which could heal and reverse the damage inflicted.'

Hermione glanced up at him and was discomfited by his continuing observation of her. She turned her gaze to the small table by his side instead and tried to make out the title of the book he was evidently re-reading.

'Do you know what it is?' he asked. Hermione knew that he was well aware of her weakness for answering questions she knew the answer to. It was all she could do to resist raising her hand first. She wished, for once, that denial was in her power.

'Phoenix Tears,' she said. 'Given willingly by the creature and administered without delay. If not, the tears must be collected beforehand in a crystal vial and must be immediately bound by a Stasis charm. The Stasis charm can only be performed by the witch or wizard to whom the Phoenix shows the greatest loyalty.'

'Word perfect, as always. I doubt Newt Scamander himself could have recalled the details so precisely.'

Hermione scowled at his inference that her intellect was nothing more than an ability to remember details from a text-book at will, but she had no intention of giving him the satisfaction of pointing it out.

He looked amused by his own jibe as he continued, 'And the chances of the only Phoenix in Britain flying to the rescue of the wizard who had recently killed its Master?'

Hermione shifted uncomfortably and looked away as Snape continued.

'My survival, therefore, is due to the swift administration of stasis-kept Phoenix Tears. Do you have any idea who that person might be, Miss Granger?'

'How should I know?'

'You were there fully conscious, I believe. Whereas my attention was shall we say focused elsewhere. I have studied my memories of that moment in the Pensieve. There were only you, Weasley and Boy Wonder in that Shrieking Shack.' He leaned forward in his chair, and the room suddenly seemed dominated by him. She caught his old familiar scent, and considered the possibility that the man actually sweated potions ingredients; he always had a faint aroma of some herb or other. This time she thought she detected powdered moonstone and wondered if he had been brewing Draught of Peace.

'Did you happen to have a vial of Phoenix Tears about your person that day?' he asked, his voice too smooth to conceal anything but danger.

The silence that followed was broken only by the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece, until finally, Hermione met his eye and snorted. 'The rarest of all commodities? Priceless even on the black market? How would I happen to have an item that is even harder to come by than unicorn blood?'

Snape's expression faltered. He looked furious at her determined reply, but Hermione did not miss an inconceivable glimmer of admiration, which quickly disappeared.

'A good question. I am not interested in your supplier; however, I wish to hear your account of the event.'

'I'm sorry, Professor, I can't help you.'

Snape scowled. 'You no doubt have some personal reason for denying that you saved my life. Perhaps you regret your Gryffindor theatricals. Well, you should have thought of that before. Saving a life is a serious matter. Whether you like it or not, I now owe you a life-debt!'

'Nonsense! You owe me nothing. You are mistaken.' Hermione took a deep gulp as if she were breathing in courage from the air around her. 'Perhaps your injuries weren't as bad as you thought. You were unconscious when we left you, just unconscious. Someone must have found you and...'

'Someone did find me: Madam Pomfrey who had me sent to St Mungo's where I spent only one day recovering. The Healer-in-Charge was under no illusions that my unprecedented recovery could only have been possible if Phoenix Tears were applied. I take it you know that Potter allowed his own memory of the event to be used for medical analysis? There can be no doubt that I should have been dead. You are committed, then, in your denial?'

Hermione stood up quickly and walked towards the door. 'You asked me here under false pretext, Professor. I'm sorry I can be of no use to you. I wish you success in finding whoever it is you owe a debt to. That person is not me. Do you have something of mine you wish to return or was that just a ruse to get me here?'

Snape remained seated, but watched her agitated leave-taking with a thoughtful expression. 'Oh, yes, I have something which belongs to you, Miss Granger. However, I think I'll hang on to it a little longer until your memory improves.'

'You have no right to deny me what is mine!' Hermione hissed. 'Whatever you have, I'd like it back please!'

'Do not speak to me of rights and what is due,' he replied softly. 'I can assure you that the thing I have was willingly given and will be returned when it is earned. If you have a sudden flash of inspiration, you know where to find me; until then, good day to you you can see yourself out.'

He picked up the book, which lay at his side, opened it at the marked page, and began to study it closely, ignoring his furious, confused, and frustrated house-guest. Hermione felt an overwhelming urge to take out her wand and hex the book out of his hands with a well-aimed Incendio, but instead, she took out her wrath on the door as she slammed it shut and left him to his dark repressive little house.

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The meeting with Professor Snape resulted in broken crockery. Once Hermione had reached her own home, her first thought was to make herself a soothing cup of tea. But as she recalled Snape's parting words, the tea pot, which was mid-Accio, plummeted from its airborne path and landed with a graceless clatter on top of the tea tray and its contents. Beyond Reparo, she Vanished the broken shards and made do with Harry's visiting mug instead. On top of the loss of her favourite cup was a further string of agitation-related incidents. She blamed her inability to perform a controlled Incendio on the sudden and unwanted memory of Professor Snape's angry accusations. The simmering hearth rug required a hasty Obrius Charm to save it from the blaze. The final straw was a careless Aguamenti, courtesy of the unexpected image of Snape's scowling face, which left a puddle of water around Crookshanks' drinking bowl. The ginger fur ball knew when the time was right to go hunting, and Hermione didn't see him again until later that evening.

A pile of parchments from the office required some consideration, but Hermione could barely focus her attention on anything other than the most irritating man in Wizarding Britain. Severus Snape's smug expression, as he refused to return her possessions, invaded her thoughts when she tried to read up on a recent proposal by a rather over-enthusiastic Junior Minister. The new employee wanted to introduce a Charm to disfigure the noses of Ministry employees if they used language of a prejudicial nature. Hermione would normally have found such a ludicrous proposal amusing, but after reading the sentence "resulting in a pulsating purple protuberance" for the fifth or sixth time, without snorting at a word of it, she pushed her Ministry work aside and gave up on her attempts. Cocoa, Crookshanks, and bed were all she could manage that evening.

Hermione made her way up the stairs with a newly returned Crookshanks at her heels and her second favourite mug filled with warm milky froth in her hand. Crookshanks lay at her feet, purring the sleep of contentment while his mistress lay awake, staring at a tiny chink of moonlight, seeping in through a gap in the curtains. She thought of her disconcerting meeting with Snape and of how he still had the power to belittle her, despite the passing of years. Her success and his decline seemed to have made no impact on their relationship. She may rise to become Minister of Magic and he remain a reclusive at the beck and call of the Ministry for his knowledge of dark things and unpleasant events, yet even in that unlikely scenario, she knew she would always feel the need to try harder in his presence.

Thoughts of Snape took her back to a time she hadn't dwelt upon for six years. A particular morning sprang to mind back when she, Harry and Ron had been hiding out at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. Details became vivid again as the darkness, and Hermione's tired brain, facilitated the onslaught of memory.

In the kitchen of Sirius Black's old house, she recalled the brightly burning fire in the hearth. She remembered entering the room and noticing the cauldron on the table centre, still smoking; the smell had erupted from its contents and promised to make reparation of the empty hole in her stomach, which growled appreciatively at the sight. She recalled Harry and Ron who were sitting at the table. Harry had been poring over an open copy of the Daily Prophet, and Ron was sitting back comfortably in his chair as he sipped his tea. Both had looked up as she entered the room. Ron's startled expression as he regarded her was as clear in her thoughts as it had been on the day itself. 'Blimey!' he remarked, 'you look like Hagrid on a bad day.'

'Thanks for that, Ronald,' she replied waspishly. 'I fell asleep in Regulus' old room... I have no idea why.'

'You alright?' he asked. Evidently, the event of falling asleep on Regulus Black's bed was quite the cause for concern.

'Yes. Yes, I'm fine.' She had been unable to explain that she felt like some fairytale heroine newly awakened from an unnatural sleep.

'There's some soup left, Hermione,' said Harry, who had glanced up from his Daily Prophet and exchanged glances with Ron. Hermione helped herself to a bowl of hot broth and looked around for Kreacher to thank before settling down to her meal.

'He's probably in his cupboard, polishing his locket,' said Ron, noticing her perusal of the room.

Hermione listened to Ron and Harry as they collated the information from their latest reconnaissance mission to the Ministry. She wasn't sure why she was keeping her new, strange piece of information to herself; she only knew that she didn't want to share the fact that, upon waking, she had found next to her bed a small crystal vial with the words "Phoenix Tears" written on the label in handwriting too tiny to decipher. Beside the vial was a piece of parchment upon which was a single sentence, written in her own hand:

Keep Phineas Black's portrait close

The familiarity of her own handwriting and an overwhelming, yet unaccountable, feeling of trust in the treasures had prevented her from declaring a breach of security to Harry and Ron. Hermione had the strongest sensation that there was something benevolent behind the gifts of a potent ingredient and what had appeared to be an essential piece of advice.

Hermione was brought back to this evening's dilemma by Crookshanks, who had stretched out comfortably before settling himself back into a furry, formless tangerine cushion, oblivious to the witch who lay brooding beside him, as far away from sleep as he was from anxiety.

'Severus Snape thinks he owes me a life-debt,' she whispered out loud to her sleeping companion.

'What if he does?'

Hermione was not given to keeping secrets; she preferred openness to concealment, sincerity to discretion. There were few things that she kept exclusively to herself: a birthmark in the shape of a cauldron (or a bowler hat depending on your angle) on her left knee, a propensity for talking out loud to Lavinia, her stuffed rabbit, and the fact that on 2nd May 1998, she had saved Severus Snape's life as he lay dying in the Shrieking Shack. At least, she had assumed not a soul knew about that. However, it seemed that Snape himself was perfectly aware of that detail. He had even guessed at how she had done it, and he certainly didn't seem pleased at the prospect of owing Hermione a big grateful hug. On the contrary, all evidence seemed to suggest that if she admitted her part in his survival, his thanks would very likely be expressed with all the diffidence of a well-aimed Blasting Curse.

She had never even considered the possibility of Snape owing her a life-debt. He had saved Harry's life plenty of times when they were students at Hogwarts, and she was sure that Snape did not now consider Harry to be in his debt. Perhaps he saw it as reparation for his own sins, but Hermione wondered if there was more to life-debt lore than just saving a life and being owed one in return. There had to be other factors to be considered. It was clear that Snape had no intention of returning whatever of hers it was that he held in custody; he was dangling it before her eyes like a surprise birthday gift, forbidden to be opened until she said 'please'. But, he didn't want her to beg for the prize: he wanted an admission...an admission she was even more afraid to make now than she had been for the past six years.

Hermione Granger dealt with her problems with reason and sense. She wanted her unforeseen gift very much; it gnawed ferociously at her curiosity, and if she had to reveal her secret to Snape in order to get it, then she was prepared to do so. But, she had no intention of confronting him without being fully armed this time.

Knowledge is what she required; she must research the laws pertaining to life-debt magic before she dared to face him a second time. She needed to be in a position to reassure him that he was not, once again, enslaved to a principle.

Reassured by her new strategy of visiting the extensive Ministry library the next day, Hermione finally fell asleep as the first rays of sunlight seeped through her curtains and brought relief to the darkness within.

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Chapter 2: Accio Severus Snape

Chapter 2 of 7

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I have something which belongs to you. If you wish to claim it, my home address is 49 Spinner's End, Swinton. 8.30p.m on Tuesday would suit me best.

Severus Snape

Chapter 2:

Accio Severus Snape

It had been ten days since Hermione had answered her summons from Professor Snape. Ten days since she had sat in his shabby living room, burning with curiosity and squirming with apprehension. She couldn't recall a single successful meeting with her old Potions teacher. As a child, every encounter, whether it was in the classroom, the corridor or the school-grounds, had resulted in either a deflation of her ego or an increase in her dread. Their relationship seemed built on mutual frustration; neither seemed able to derive pleasure from the other, and his presence was too intimidating to demand anything but spurned endeavours to please and a wish to appear dependable.

He had always seen behind any attempts to trick or manoeuvre from his students, yet ten days ago she had lied to him. She had known it would take a great deal more than her own dubious aptitude for espionage to pull the wool over the eyes of a talented deceiver, so it was no surprise that he had not believed her. The lie had left her lips and hovered between them like smoke from a cigarette: pungent and heady. Its only purpose, a short-term benefit for one and a toxic irritant to the other.

Tonight she meant to retract her statement. She would tell him the truth and endure the consequences, whatever they may be. And although she was about to tell him that she was the reason for his survival, she knew the news would not be greeted with the joy usually expected after such a declaration. She feared his anger, but more than that, she dreaded that his resentment would give him an excuse to once again withhold the mysterious object he had promised to return to her, if she complied.

She stood before her bedroom mirror and waited for the sound of a rap on her front door to signal Snape's arrival. Her hair was neat and tidy for once, though she made a small adjustment by tucking a rebellious strand back into the clasp which was struggling, as always, to maintain control. That done, she studied her face: too pale, too resonant of the eager student he had known. She wanted to show him Hermione the adult, Hermione the success, Hermione the achiever. She wanted him to glimpse the force behind the woman who had shown contempt for Ministry objections to her relentless campaign.

Hermione had disregarded early protest and hostility towards her plans for creating a sector for equal opportunities. Her determination and single-minded belief had finally come to fruition, and last year, she had been given the task of setting up the *Department for Equality and Wizarding Rights*. It had been a formidable undertaking; it had taken all her ingenuity, time, and patience to make a success of the department. She had set up meetings with senior ministers, created a task force to tackle unforeseen problems, and dedicated her time to research and investigation. She was proud of her accomplishments, confident in her ability to face the trickiest of situations, and discuss and debate the most contentious of subjects with Wizarding Britain's finest. Why then, did facing Severus Snape seem like such a daunting prospect? For once, she was determined that *he* should be the one to feel the discomfort of uncertainty and the fever of apprehension.

Her house. Her rules.

Hermione did not intend to allow his mordant quips and his ominous presence to once more turn her into a school-robe-wearing pubescent teenager. She leaned forward into the mirror so that her face was only inches away from its twin as she inexpertly applied her rose-pink lipstick. Once her lips had been painted into something resembling a bow, she leaned back to assess the full effect. It was no good; no amount of pouting or tilting her head at various angles would turn her into the model of sophistication she had hoped for. Instead, the result was rather like looking at a painted doll in an old toy shop window, anxiously waiting for someone to come along and buy her. She pulled out a tissue from a square white box on her dressing table and wiped her mouth until the artificial pout was nothing more than a smudge on a hankie. She glanced dolefully at the clothes she had chosen to wear; a quick check behind her at the clock on her bedside cabinet confirmed that she didn't have time to change. The black ankle-length skirt and cream blouse would have to do, even if she did feel more like a Muggle waitress than a Ministry high flier.

She took two steps backwards until her thighs felt the edge of the bed where she sat down to continue her self-critical scrutiny in comfort. It didn't matter how many different expressions she tried: a welcoming smile, an impassive stare, an austere frown; she still looked like the girl who Severus Snape was about to disparage for being a bare-faced liar and an intellectual charlatan. The deep steadying breaths helped a little, and telling her pale image to get a grip, at least, made her smile. He was a man, just a man. Perhaps the most exasperating man she had ever met, but a human being with flaws and weaknesses nevertheless. Yet, all she could recall was the foreboding teacher of her childhood, the critic who never gave the girl who needed approval her due, the wizard who gambled his life and freedom for a just and worthy cause. Hermione slipped into her comfortable work shoes and knew that she could never be his equal, let alone his superior.

She might have known he would be punctual to the minute. To arrive early would show too much eagerness while turning up late would seem apathetic. Severus Snape was neither. And even though she had been expecting it for the last ten minutes, his knock still startled her enough to cause a physically discernible jolt. She hurried across the landing and down the stairs to open the door and face her guest.

Snape strode into her hallway as if he had just been invited by the butler into the entrance hall of a grand stately home. He didn't even glance at his surroundings as he stood in her small living room, waiting for her to ask him to sit. Hermione suddenly felt embarrassed for her neatly organised modern living space. His presence in her Ministry-provided cocoon seemed to turn the Muggle technology she owned into frivolous pieces of frippery. The television seemed like a child's plaything when he stood before it, dressed in a dark travelling cloak which he did not remove. She had a terrible urge to throw a tablecloth over the box in the corner to hide her bit of nonsense. He watched her intently, yet to utter so much as a single word in greeting, and it was not until she pointed to a chair and asked if he would like tea that he said anything at all, though that was only to ungraciously decline.

'Your note said you had something important to tell me,' he said. 'I hope you are not wasting my time. The only thing I require from you is the truth. Are you finally ready to admit it?'

She ignored his direct question and tried persistent hospitality in an attempt to assert her authority as host. 'Are you sure you don't want tea, Professor? Or, perhaps, something stronger?'

'I am not here to socialise, Miss Granger, and you are surely aware that my current job description renders that particular epithet redundant.'

'Sir?'

'I am NOT a professor.'

Hermione did not reply. There was no useable alternative to calling him Professor Snape. *Mister* sounded somehow demeaning, and she certainly couldn't call him *Severus*, though the idea of it almost made her giggle. The wizard, who was no longer to be referred to as Professor, maintained his unnerving scrutiny of her face and finally took a seat. Hermione sat across from him and breathed deeply.

'I should have been honest with you from the start,' she said. 'With everyone.'

'Indeed you should.'

'But my reasons were... complicated. You complicated them even further by what you said the other day. I hadn't considered the fact that there might be... an obligation.'

'What was it they used to call you? The brightest witch of your age, I believe.' His sneered inference that she had no right to such a title did nothing to steady her nerves, but she continued regardless.

'Before I go on, I must ask if you intend to honour *your* promise?' she questioned him boldly.

Snape raised a sceptical eyebrow.

'You have something which belongs to me. You said you would return it if I tell you what you want to know.'

'If I am satisfied, it shall be returned,' he replied.

'You have it with you?'

'No more questions, Miss Granger. I am here for answers.'

Hermione sighed. His reassurances were as Slytherin as his old school robes. He would give nothing away until *he* was satisfied first. She knew she had no option but to tell him everything.

'First of all, I need to reassure you of something: you don't owe me a life-debt. I researched the subject very thoroughly in the Ministry library, and I can assure you, on that score at least, that there is no obligation.'

Snape's black eyes glinted though there was nothing else to indicate his anger. 'Then you persist in your denial? You claim you did not administer the Phoenix Tears? That my survival is not due to your actions?'

'No, Profess...sir, that's not what I'm saying. Let me tell you what happened, and then you can judge for yourself.' Hermione found a fixed point on the wall behind his chair, a focal on which to steady herself; she could not meet his eye and speak on the subject she had shared with no one else for six years. The photograph of her parents, silent and unmoving, helped to relieve some of her anxiety.

'I did have a vial of Phoenix Tears. I can't tell you how I came by them because I don't know. It sounds ridiculous, I know, but I... well, I found them.' She glanced at Snape, expecting to see a cynical look, but was heartened to continue when he looked only tolerant of her declaration. 'Our first hiding place, when we were on the run, was at Grimmauld place. We were there for a few months before we were discovered, and it was while we were there that I found them. I simply woke up one morning and found the vial on my bedside table.'

'And you didn't think to question the source of this generous gift?' Snape demanded to know. 'You didn't consider that your brilliantly safe hidey hole had been violated?'

'Of course I did. But that's the strangest part of all. *I knew* it was well-intentioned. I knew there was nothing but a sincere wish to help us attached to the object.'

Snape was looking at her thoughtfully now. There was no reprisal or derisive condemnation in his look; he seemed to be reflecting on her words very carefully.

'How could you possibly be so sure? You were in hiding from the Dark Lord and all his *spineless* followers.' He spat the words out with as much contempt as she had ever heard him use. 'What gives you the justification to take nothing more than a hope and a prayer into consideration?'

'It was more than that...far more. I can't explain the feeling of absolute certainty of trust I had in the thing. It was as if it were a gift for us; I had such a strong sense of faith in the benign intention of whoever left it for us. Perhaps, it had arrived via Kreacher, though I admit it seems unlikely. I can't explain it to you, and I wouldn't have been able to explain it to Harry and Ron, so I didn't. I kept it by me always and never mentioned it. I still haven't, to this day. I knew it was for Harry to be used in his moment of dire need if it should ever come to that.'

'Your inexplicable strong sense of faith could have been the result of dark magic. Did you consider *that*?' he hissed.

'It didn't feel dark.'

'It never does! Foolish girl!'

Snape stood and paced the room before returning to where Hermione remained seated. He glared at her, eyes narrowed, and the room seemed to darken. 'If *it* was a benign gift from some mysterious benefactor, what then, possessed you to fritter it away on a Death Eater and a murderer?'

Hermione glared back at him. 'You are *not* any of those things,' she said in an attempt to defend his statement.

'But *you* were not to know that!' he retorted.

She sat rigid in her chair and folded her hands. 'I didn't believe you were loyal to Voldemort even then.'

Snape snorted. 'How *convenient* is the benefit of hindsight.'

'That's not it. You don't have to believe me, but it's true. I knew you hadn't betrayed us as sure as I knew the Phoenix Tears could be trusted.' She looked at him imploringly. 'I'd felt certain of it for some time something else I kept to myself. I knew that Ron and Harry wouldn't be quite as willing to believe it. So, you see, sir that's why you don't owe me a life-debt. There isn't a great deal of written information on life-debt lore, but I did find out one thing: it is only evoked if the person you saved is an enemy.'

He sat down again, and this time his expression seemed confused, almost troubled. He seemed unwilling or unable to answer, ignoring Crookshanks as he sidled past Snape's legs and curled up in front of the fire.

The silence was beginning to grow uncomfortable after five minutes of unrelenting quiet. 'I suppose you already knew that?' said Hermione, prompting him back from his reverie.

He looked up at her and seemed to recollect where he was and who he was with. 'It doesn't *to* be in the precarious position I have spent my best years in without knowing basic Wizarding laws,' he replied with evident bitterness.

'They are hardly *basic*,' she replied, prickled by his slight on her knowledge of their world. 'I asked several people in my department what they knew of life-debt lore; most knew very little, and of those who had any knowledge at all, they could only remember a couple of facts which were barely more than old-wives tales. And as I said, very little is documented.'

'Then your department is staffed by dunderheads,' he replied irritably.

Hermione opened her mouth to protest at his undeserved dig at her staff, but she stopped herself from calling him insensitive and disrespectful by remembering that fostering a quarrel was neither the way to soothe his spirits nor the way to reach her goal. It took some effort to ignore his insult, but she managed to appear unruffled as she answered him.

'The point isn't who knows what; the point is that you *are not* in my debt. When I administered the Phoenix Tears which I believed...*hoped* would save your life, I *knew* you were no traitor. I knew that you were with us, not against us.'

Snape's expression grew thoughtful and perplexed again. 'That's not possible,' he said softly.

'I know,' she replied. They both watched Crookshanks as his ears twitched peacefully in blissful ignorance of the quiet tension within the room. 'Perhaps you would like that drink now, sir?'

Snape nodded.

'I have wine. Will that be alright?'

He nodded again.

Hermione stood wordlessly; she was glad of the chance to leave the room and recover her composure. When she returned, Snape had left his seat once more and was scrutinising the photograph of her parents. He turned as she entered and walked towards her.

'These are your parents?' he asked. He accepted the glass of wine held out for him and once more took his seat.

'Yes. They live in Australia.'

He sipped from the glass and watched her for a moment before continuing. 'Let us presume, for the sake of argument, that what you say is true. That you questioned my loyalty.'

'It is true,' she interrupted.

Snape held up a hand to stop her. 'We will come to that. However, even if that is the case, did it never occur to you that you were not in a position to squander those Phoenix Tears as if they were a vat of dittany?'

'I had dittany too. You were way past dittany, sir. Nothing else would have worked. I wasn't even sure if I was too late for the Phoenix Tears.'

'My point entirely.'

'Sir?'

He drained the glass and set it down on a small table beside him. 'I had accepted my fate. I was prepared. And even if I had not, they were meant for Potter. He was the weapon, the only weapon with a blade sharp enough to kill Voldemort. And you would gamble his survival on a whim?'

Hermione swallowed her threatening tears. 'It wasn't a whim. It wasn't like that. They were for Harry, of course they were, but I had a split second decision to make.'

'There was NO decision to make!'

Wretched, snivelling tears fell. 'I couldn't watch you die.'

'Then you should have left. Potter did!'

'I couldn't! I couldn't stand it,' she sobbed.

'It was war. In war there are casualties.' He spoke as if he had wanted to be one of the fallen. The sudden realisation was like a painful blow.

Hermione looked up at him. 'You didn't want to survive,' she gulped.

Snape did not answer immediately.

'My usefulness was at an end,' he said with fearsome pragmatism. 'But though my part was over, yours was not. I expected better of you, Granger. You were the brains of the outfit. Potter couldn't walk to the end of the street without you to tell him not to step out in front of the cars.'

'What does it matter now? He survived; he didn't need the tears. I gave them to you and here you are. What is the use of going over it again? You are angry with me because you wanted to die?'

'No. Because I put more faith in you than you deserved.'

Hermione stared at Snape in confusion and could not at first fathom his meaning. How had he put his faith in her? She had never even returned to school after her sixth year. Yet, he seemed to be professing an involvement she had no knowledge of. Then, an idea suddenly occurred to her; it took a few moments for it to grow and develop, but when it did and the realisation struck, it was as if she had known all along. Like some forgotten detail, suppressed until now. But once she considered it, it was so obvious she couldn't understand why she hadn't always known.

'You gave them to me?' she gasped.

Snape smiled.

He reached into the inside of his travelling cloak and pulled out his wand. 'I believe I promised you safe return of these,' he said. His outstretched arm pointed his wand in her direction. '*Finite Obliviate!*'

The sensation was startling like smoke was forcing its way into every recess of her mind. She attempted to move, but she could only sit and grip the arms of her chair while the memories flooded her brain.

'Do not try to stand,' she dimly heard Snape say. 'Allow the memories to return and inhabit your mind. Then, I suggest you take some time to experience them. Do not try to suppress them, or they will be too difficult to retrieve.' His voice was beginning to fade as she became consumed with her lost memories. 'You should not experience many side-effects.' His voice seemed distant and dream-like. 'Perhaps a slight headache... some temporary disorientation.'

There was a pause. 'You asked for them, do not blame me if you don't like what is there. I'll see myself out.'

Her eyes were closed, and the sound of the door slamming shut behind him was barely a dull thud.

The memories were invading her mind so thoroughly that it was impossible to suppress them as Snape had advised against. She leaned her head back onto the rest of the chair and allowed her returned memories to take her back to August 1997.

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Chapter 3: Homenum Revelio (Hermione's Memories, Part One—August 1997):

Chapter 3 of 7

Miss Granger,

I have something which belongs to you. If you wish to claim it, my home address is 49 Spinner's End, Swinton. 8.30p.m on Tuesday would suit me best.

Severus Snape

Chapter 3:

Homenum Revelio

(Hermione's Memories, Part One August 1997)

Hermione became aware. Eyes still closed, she felt the harsh chill of the room force the hairs on her arms to stand rigid. She knew she was no longer alone, despite the absence of sound: no footstep, soft as velvet on carpet; no breaths, shallow and stifled to avoid detection. Yet, she knew she was being watched.

Her mind began to work at an unnatural pace, offering her outlandish plans of action, possible scenarios, and plausible explanations. It could be Kreacher, the house-elf, a disgruntled sentinel defending the breach of his dead master's bedroom. But Kreacher avoided the "Mudblood" with the determination of one who avoids a rabid dog. It

could be Harry and Ron returned from their latest Ministry expedition; yet, they would have knocked, shouted out her name they would never just intrude, even if it was unheard of to find her alone in one of the upstairs rooms.

The worst scenario then?

A Death Eater.

Panic altered her breathing, though she concentrated hard on appearing to remain asleep. She was well aware of the agonising pointlessness of her attempts: the action of trying to inhale and exhale with perfect unconscious symmetry is the surest way to erratic respiration. She tried to console herself: Death Eaters could not access Grimmauld Place; they had been hanging about outside the building, staring up towards windows they could not see for weeks now. The only beings with access to this haven were members of the Order.

Except...!

Oh, dear God, the exception! The Death Eater with access. The Death Eater debased enough to blast Moody's protection spell into oblivion Hermione made a silent plea to any deity with heart enough to listen that the sound of her heart, hammering out an entreaty for her to run, could only be heard in her own finely-tuned ears. Its beat was so insistent, so overpowering, that she wondered how the Muggles in the adjoining houses could not hear its rhythmical pound.

She caught his scent on one of her carefully controlled inhales.

Unmistakeable.

He had always smelled the same: aconite oil, leaf of fluxweed, hellebore, cauldron smoke, and walls made of glistening stone that reeked of dank repression. She tried to wish the heady aroma away, blame it on her fear a mistaken confusion of the senses but as she inhaled slowly, the scent of him grew. It drifted towards her nostrils and slightly parted lips. It entered her mouth and nose, announcing his presence, daring her to end her pretence, sneering at her fear, enticing her to act.

She opened her eyes.

In a mad, whimsical moment, she was driven by the comforting notion of being trapped in some intense and terrifying nightmare unsurprising, as she had drifted off to sleep on Regulus Black's ancient and crumbling bed. The room was dark and oppressive, even by daylight and with the assistance of curtains thrown back to embrace the light. It might as well be a grim winter's night for all the impression an ineffective, overcast August evening had upon the forsaken room. Everything about it spoke of decay. A thick layer of dust had settled quite comfortably some years ago, its grey veil casting a net over every surface, obscuring colour, texture, and detail.

On first entering the room, Hermione had let her finger trail idly along the surface of a wooden bureau and watched with fascination as she created a rich mahogany path amidst the fine powder of neglect. She had been sure that Regulus Black's old room would reveal something some clue they had missed the first time they had searched it a vital piece of information that would be pivotal in the search for the hidden Horcruxes. But her search yielded nothing new, and she had dropped down onto the edge of the bed, defeated and exhausted. It had been weeks since her sleep had been untainted by images of fear, and she could barely remember what it was to drift awake gently from an unencumbered slumber. These days, it was more usual to wake up with a jolt of realisation that the ghoulish dream she had just had would not wither and die as her consciousness returned. Her fears were natural, her dreams a reflection of the actual, not a distortion of the imagination.

The three of them had spent every night since their arrival at number twelve, Grimmauld Place camping together in sleeping bags on the floor or sofa of the drawing room. But there was something about the visual of an actual bed pillows, covers, carved wooden bedposts that made Hermione want to rest her head on an ancient pillow, just to test its softness. A thorough cleansing charm was required before she would contemplate placing skin and hair on the heavy green tapestry throw. Once that was done, lying down suddenly seemed irresistible, like Dorothy in the field of poppies, she thought as her head touched the pillow and her knees curled comfortably and childlike beneath her. She wore no ruby slippers, but like the girl from Kansas City, she drifted off as if bound by a magical enchantment until something had compelled her to wake. Time has little significance for the sleeper, and once awake, she could not tell whether it had been two minutes or two hours since she had first lay down on the bed.

Her eyes were open now.

Not a dream.

Not a nightmare or a hallucination induced by the Wicked Witch of the West. The darkness of the room yielded an even darker form: a man with robes which fell about him like the wings of a raven. As her startled eyes grew accustomed to the dark, she could make out more detail. His black, lank hair was longer than she remembered; it hung about his face, obscuring most of it, but the great beak of a nose was unmistakeable even in the dark and from a distance of six feet. He held his wand in his hand, but he was not ready for attack or defence: his stance was that of a man who does not regard his opponent as a threat, though it was hardly relaxed.

She didn't know where the sudden urge to giggle came from perhaps it was nerves: the mind's attempt to reassure the terror rising in her gut. She didn't laugh, however, because the realisation that she was lying alone on Regulus Black's bed, wand out of reach, whilst being scrutinised with apparent fascination by a Death Eater a loyal disciple of Lord Voldemort, a murderer, a betrayer, a man who hated her was enough to stifle any inappropriate giggle. The wizard towering above her was no benevolent fraud from Oz; he was as real as the thick-weave bed cover clutched in her fist. By the moonlight seeping through a chink in the curtains, she saw that his expression was as shocked as her own.

He held his wand higher, then flicked vaguely towards the centre of the room. The gas lamps on the wall erupted, and small orbs of light flickered from their centre, bathing the room in an orange glow. His movement finally forced her into action. She was on her feet in moment a desperate attempt to throw herself past him and make her great escape. But Snape was quicker. She managed to stand and put one foot in front of another before he stopped her desperate progress with another flick of his wand. She didn't know the spell it wasn't Petrificus Totalus, though it did prevent her legs from moving. Her arms, head, and upper body, however, remained unaffected, so that she was rooted to the spot, comically swaying like a terrified Jack-in-a-box.

She took the unexpected opportunity of having upper arm movement to reach for her wand, shoved carelessly down the back of her jeans.

'*Expelliarmus*,' muttered Dumbledore's killer, so casually she wanted to protest at his disregard, rather than the fact that he now had her wand, neatly caught as it flew from her own grasp into his. He strode around the bed towards her, unconcealed hostility etched upon his harsh face.

Hermione wasn't afraid to die. She was afraid to die so ineffectually, without having had the chance to help Harry, or before telling Ron that she liked him as more than just a friend. She had hoped to go down fighting casting curses and saving innocents not like this, not to be chanced upon by Severus-fucking-Snape while she slept. That was no way to go. Though, if she was to be honest with herself, she would have to admit that her strengths lay somewhere other than curse hurling: she was no soldier. If tears fell down her cheeks as he stared down at her, they were of disappointment, not fear, though she hoped he would have the decency to make it quick. Perhaps there was a shred of humanity in there, a wish to spare his former student humiliation and prolonged pain before her end. She didn't particularly want his wrath, his contempt, and his ridicule or worse before he delivered the final curse.

'Miss Granger,' he said. It was more of an expression of surprise than a sneer. 'You are here alone?' She refused to answer and avoided his gaze ferociously.

'I'll ask again. Are you alone?' He made his point ominously by pressing the point of his wand into her cheek. She jerked her head away and glared at his shoulder with all the disgust she could muster.

'If I am forced to ask a third time, it will be the last. After that, the measures I take to find out will be less... civilised. Are you here alone, Miss Granger?'

She spat out her affirmation, damned if she would give away Harry and Ron. The least she could do was to deceive him into believing them elsewhere, not, as the truth happened to be, due back at any moment. She couldn't bear for it all to end here in this obsolete bedroom as a result of her surrender to fatigue.

'And Potter?'

'I have no idea.'

'Liar,' he said in a tone that was almost seductive. 'Tell me where Potter is.'

She laughed contemptuously. 'In your fucking dreams!' she replied. It felt good to show him she had no fear, no need of his approval, no wish for his approbation that she couldn't be intimidated any longer by the greasy-haired, over-grown bat made of pure evil. Spitting out her defiance in his face so coarsely felt like the ultimate in rebellion, and her fear was momentarily abated when she saw him react to her words with a palpable recoil.

'You really think you stand a chance,' he said, 'against the most powerful living wizard and all his followers?' His lip rose with contempt. 'You have failed at the first hurdle. Alone. Unprotected. Wandless.' He tapped her wand carelessly against his thigh as he spoke. 'Did you learn nothing from your Defence Against the Dark Arts classes?'

'I learned to trust no one. I learned that from Professor Moody,' she replied. 'I should have taken him more seriously.'

'You learned it from Barty Crouch Junior,' he said. 'Where. Is. Potter?'

'I wouldn't tell you if even I knew!'

Snape took a step closer to her. 'Look at me.'

Hermione had been avoiding looking at him, knowing what he was capable of should she allow him even a momentary glance into her eyes. She looked diligently at the floor and shook her head. The carpet was worn and threadbare in places years of pacing from its previous occupier had evidently taken its toll. She noticed a dark stain deeply ingrained in the thinning pile and wondered how long it must have been there and what could possibly have been spilled to elude magical cleaning. She felt slightly comforted by the mundane thoughts that helped suppress her terror. Nothing really mattered anymore; she would soon be dead and for her, at least, the nightmare would be over. She only hoped no, prayed that he would end it here because the alternative was too fearful to contemplate: she doubted her bravery would withstand an audience with Lord Voldemort.

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Chapter 4: Incarcerous (Hermione's Memories, Part Two – August 1997):

Chapter 4 of 7

Miss Granger,

I have something which belongs to you. If you wish to claim it, my home address is 49 Spinner's End, Swinton. 8.30p.m on Tuesday would suit me best.

Severus Snape

Chapter 4:

Incarcerous

(Hermione's Memories, Part Two August 1997)

Hermione felt his fingers grasp her chin and force her head upwards. His contact made her recoil. He had never touched her before, not even a casual tap on the shoulder as he loomed over her cauldron or an inconsequential brush of an arm as he swooped past her in a corridor. To her recollection, Severus Snape touched no one. His fingers were long and yellowing from years of manipulating magical plants and reptile innards. His smell was overpowering as she shut her eyes tightly in a bid to keep him out.

'The spell to force them open is quite unpleasant, Miss Granger. Are you sure you want me to perform it?'

He waited for her compliance. 'One way or another I will find out what I need to know,' he said when she remained steadfast.

'Not with *my* consent!'

His reaction to her insolence surprised her. She had expected a brutal reprisal, a spell to compel her eyes to open so that he could force his way into her mind and take whatever he wanted. He let go of her chin with an exasperated sigh, and she saw him screw his own eyes tightly shut when she dared to open hers. His unexpected gesture of quiet impatience confused her, but at least he wasn't hurling Unforgivables or Disapparating her to his master's lair.

She felt a small advantage and pressed it.

'You have my wand; I'm hardly a threat without it. May I be released from your holding spell? It's rather uncomfortable.'

Snape opened his eyes and contemplated her for a moment. 'Your *comfort* is not my priority. I prefer you immobile for now. Perhaps I will consider your release in return for cooperation.' His eyes shone with malice, and Hermione tore her gaze away from their intensity. 'Potter! Miss Granger, where is he?'

She gave him another denial and somehow managed to withstand his loathsome proximity as he circled her slowly. At her shoulder now she felt his breath upon her neck. He lowered his mouth to her ear, words soft and low with menace and the promise of some unnamed horror yet to be inflicted. 'How much pain do you think you can endure?'

The peeling wallpaper on the wall opposite held her attention. It was a diminished green, she realised, patterned with faded silver fleur-de-lys. The image of the room's former occupant popped into her head an arrogant, self-important young Death Eater admiring his Dark Mark in front of an ornate mirror which hung on a wall plastered in shades of Slytherin but Snape's ominous threats shook her beyond any diversion the image could induce.

She stared at the wall, thought of Regulus, and tried to shut out the silky voice in her ear reminding her of her inadequacies and sneering at her predicament. If he really meant to use the Cruciatus Curse on her, she wished he would just get on with it instead of feeding her fear with seductive promises of a pain beyond anything the human body could tolerate.

Her response remained only to stare ahead and say nothing. As long as he was prowling around her, taunting her with images of every wretched victim he had seen writhing at the Dark Lord's feet, as long as he was just revelling in her torment, she was safe.

Suddenly, he seemed to tire of her fortitude. Perhaps he had some other form of persecution in mind as he stood in front of her and released the holding spell with a languid flick of his wand.

As soon as she felt the freedom return to her limbs, she put her half-baked, desperately pointless plan into action and hurled herself towards him. She was exultant when her sudden movement knocked him off balance so that the two of them toppled clumsily onto the bed. Her aim was to make a frantic attempt to reclaim her wand, her only chance now that the momentary element of surprise had presented itself. She was not about to squander this miniscule window of opportunity on considering the reprisals of failure.

The manoeuvre from upright to flailing and entwined was so awkward that her head collided painfully with an angular wooden bedpost as they fell. She was too intent on stretching for her wand, held tightly in his grasp, to consider the highly irregular and abhorrent circumstance of being in such an intimate position with her former Potions teacher. She ignored both the objectionable proximity to Snape and the throb in her bleeding head, but as she lay across him desperately reaching for her wand, she knew that her chance, fleeting and vain, was gone. He held the object she desired so intensely high above his head, playing with her as if she were a dog begging for her master to throw a stick.

With her opportunity gone, Hermione's mind turned to attack. She dug her knee hard into his thigh and tried desperately to strike him wherever she was able to make contact. She aimed for his head but managed only a trivial, glancing strike. He seemed to second-guess her every move, and though he snarled with pain when her knee struck home, his free hand grasped a handful of her hair and wrenched her head backwards.

Impulse drove her to fight back, and momentarily she felt the flesh of his cheek beneath her hand as she grasped at him, claw-like, dragging her nails maliciously into his fallow skin. It felt empowering to cause him physical harm, but the feeling was short-lived; he was stronger than she expected, and it took barely a moment for him to regain mastery of the situation. He grabbed her offending wrist and in a moment had flipped her onto her back, ignoring her squeals of indignation. Her body writhed with futility as he straddled her hips and pinned her wrists above her head. She felt her wand in his hand, digging into her wrist, tantalisingly close, but under his control, not hers.

She let out a groan of surrender.

'Enough!' he snapped as she struggled beneath his weight. 'Gryffindor theatricals will not win you House points here.' He slammed her wrists hard into the mattress to make his point. She caught the faint whiff of coffee on his breath; it mingled with the smell of potions ingredients infused in his robes and the masculine aroma of heat and sweat, which she had never detected before in all the years she had known him. The reminder that he was a human being who perspired and drank coffee only served to increase her loathing at least, if he was a monster, he had an excuse.

He lifted his head and locked his arms rigidly straight, as if he were deliberately creating as much distance as their intimate position would allow.

'You have no delicacy. No finesse and no cunning,' he said. 'How can you hope to prevail?'

Hermione thought she was losing her mind when she detected an accompanying look of regret as he admonished her. But it had disappeared so quickly that she knew it must have been nothing more than an earnest wish, on her part, to see some humanity lurking behind his eyes. 'I did, however, expect a degree or two more integrity from the girl who would set free every house-elf in Dumbledore's employ.'

Snape's casual mention of the man he had so recently and callously finished off infuriated her. How dare he speak the name of Albus Dumbledore with such nonchalance! His former mentor had employed him, trusted him, and believed in him. Did Severus Snape have nothing in his heart but a cold, hard chunk of rock? He seemed impossible to rattle. She had tricked him, attacked him, and shown him her contempt, yet still he remained stoic; barely a flicker of emotion had revealed itself. This would not do. Her sanity needed to see him capable of reacting like a man. She wanted to see remorse, fear, anger, anything but his dispassion *that* unnerved her more than his resentment.

'Traitor!'

His eyes darkened, his cheeks paled, and he grasped her wrists ever more tightly. 'Yes,' he agreed, but no monstrous pride at his foul deeds could be read in those two black, gleaming eyes.

There was a time when Hermione's dreams consisted of nothing darker than images of owls delivering messages of failure and disappointment from her professors. Since her fourth, fifth, and sixth years, Ron had visited her dreams pleasant, uncomplicated images of shared pubescent innocence and the sweet anxiety of longing until recently, when despondency in the form of every dark and foul creature imaginable invaded her resting mind. Never in the depths of her untamed and turbulent dreams, however, could she have cultivated a scenario involving Professor Snape straddling her whilst she shouted profanities into his face, and him letting her do it.

In one swift movement, he shifted his hold on her now two wrists were caught in his one, leaving his other arm free to cast Incarcerous. Snake-like ropes slithered from the end of his wand and slinked around her wrists, binding them together. He pulled her arms down in front of her and rose from his position, finally severing their intimacy. He pulled her up into a sitting position and stood before her once again.

'Perhaps you find *that* more to your liking, Miss Granger,' he said. 'Forgive me if I feel it wise to take such ungracious precautions, but there seems to be an issue of trust.'

The two regarded each other for several long moments, until Hermione once more broke the silence with her attempt to break his cool exterior and show him how far beyond his school-room intimidation tactics she was.

She watched his face as she put her question to him. 'Was he pleased with you?'

A dangerous gleam was his only response.

She tried again. 'Were you rewarded?' Hermione would not have believed him capable of withstanding her blatant derision and utter provocation with such resilience if it were not for the evidence before her eyes. He turned and walked towards the far end of the room where the old bureau stood, placing some distance and his back between them, but still he did not reply.

'Did you get a round of applause when you returned with the triumphant news?' She didn't know where this insane bravado was coming from, but it felt as if she no longer had anything to lose but chances; and she might as well take them. He allowed the angry rant. She spoke of his cowardice, his guilt, his immorality. She watched his rigid form from across the room and saw his knuckles tighten as they clutched the edge of the desk, but he did not retort with either a violent spell or an angry outburst. He didn't appear to want her to stop.

Finally, he seemed to recollect himself. He straightened from his position, turned to face her, and returned to where she still remained seated and bound, heated from her recent tirade. She saw fervour in his eyes as he approached, though as a result of what she could not say; it could have been disdain, it could have been anger, yet it seemed to be dismay.

She felt the warm flow of blood, running freely from the wound on her forehead, and vowed not to flinch when Snape calmly pointed his wand at her.

She wondered if dying would hurt, or if it would be nothing more fearsome than falling asleep. She suddenly hoped there would be something afterwards, though she had

never really been much of a believer in the afterlife. Now, though, it seemed imperative that this life, these seventeen short years, were not it. She was determined to look him in the eye, to face her killer with courage and determination and defiance. His eyes became focused with concentration. Hermione knew that intent was important when casting any spell, but when wielding Dark Magic, it was everything. She searched his face for the hatred and abhorrence she knew to expect as he reached for the emotion needed to cast the curse. She doubted it would be a struggle for him; he had never liked her – always her harshest critic. Her eyes met his, and in them she saw anger and bitterness, but not hatred – at least, not for her.

'*Tergeo!*' he said, and the blood disappeared. '*Epismendo!*'

She felt a slight discomfort as the edges of her open wound found each other, joined, melded, and healed.

Why in all that was holy would he repair her injury if he intended to kill her? Was his intention to present her to Lord Voldemort after all? Another notch, another trophy, another reason to remain at the right hand of his master? His face was bleeding where she had sunk her nails into his cheek. He didn't bother to attend to his own injury, however; his only acknowledgement was to wipe the back of his hand across his face, smearing rather than removing the blood which was already beginning to coagulate. He seemed in no hurry to whisk her away to the Dark Lord. Perhaps he hoped to make her talk before he did so. Turning up with the Chosen One's best friend apparently wasn't enough; he wanted to present her broken and dispirited, having betrayed her friends. She let her eyes fall onto the faint patch of crimson, stark against the pale skin on his hand. The sight of his blood reminded her of his fragility – he was no infallible creature, impervious to damage; he could be harmed. The thought stilled the coward in her from making the easy choice and saving herself. Suddenly, she felt herself capable of heroism, and she knew that she would die rather than give her friends away. Her courage did not prevent her from wondering what lengths Snape would take to acquire the information. He was clearly capable of the basest of human endeavours. Would he use the Imperius curse on her? The Cruciatus?

Worse?

She shuddered, but resolved to keep her fear from him. She would show him what it meant to be a Gryffindor. It came as quite a surprise, therefore, when he asked if she was cold. Not even a lingering, balmy evening could penetrate the festering, mould-riddled room that was chill enough, even at the pinnacle of summer, for visible curls of breath to make misty trails with every outward sigh. If this was an attempt at mockery, the master of scorn was lacking his usual finesse – the question seemed genuine.

Hermione shook her head for the sake of defiance, but was relieved when he pointed his wand at a large open fireplace which she doubted had seen so much as a smoulder in years. The spoken word, *Incendio*, was not required, but the grate was soon alive with the red and gold of warming flames, dancing in the hearth like newly freed sprites.

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Chapter 5: Legilimens (Hermione's Memories, Part Three – August 1997)

Chapter 5 of 7

Miss Granger,

I have something which belongs to you. If you wish to claim it, my home address is 49 Spinner's End, Swinton. 8.30p.m on Tuesday would suit me best.

Severus Snape

Chapter 5:

Legilimens

(Hermione's Memories, Part Three August 1997)

Snape walked over to the fireplace and stood before it, his back facing her. He cast off his cloak, threw it over the arm of a threadbare brocade chair, and leaned on the mantelpiece with outstretched arms. Head bowed in contemplation, black strands fell heedlessly before his eyes.

Hermione was beginning to panic; the boys would be home soon. If Snape didn't rouse himself and get on with whatever it was he intended, they would be walking into a trap. Her alarm forced her to speak without strategy. She called out to him as he stared into the flames, threatening him with false assurances that members of the Order would shortly be arriving for a meeting. He turned his head around to face her, and she saw concern flicker across his face with the reflection of the flames.

He seemed to be considering his next course of action for a moment; then, without speaking, he moved from his fireside position and began a slow walk around the perimeter of the room, wand aloft, weaving intricate patterns into the air and muttering incantations as he did so. Hermione recognised Muffliato, Repello Magus, and several other protective charms she had never come across, which would make them impossible to detect.

Her rash foolishness appalled her – instead of prompting him to leave, she had merely forced him to fortify their den, so that the two of them, holed up in Regulus Black's bedroom, were now impenetrable to outsiders.

'Thank you for the warning, Miss Granger,' he said once the task was complete. 'I don't think we'll be troubled by the upstanding members of the Order now.'

Her frustration was complete, and she let out her exasperation by screaming more abuse at his impassive form. She entreated him to act, goaded him to take her to the creature he served so loyally, but his only reactions were an involuntary muscle spasm in his temple and the rise and fall of his Adam's apple as he swallowed. He took a sharp intake of breath, however, when she called him a monster and berated herself for being foolish enough to trust him.

'To me, you are worse than V...' '

Her blatant lack of respect did the trick.

Before she could finish the name that she had planned to spit in his face, he pounced forward, clapping his hand tightly over her mouth. He prevented the utterance with one hand while the other grasped the back of her head.

'DON'T speak his name!' he snarled. 'Foolish girl! You believe that fear of the name increases fear of the thing itself?'

He snorted his contempt, but his hand remained firmly clasped over her mouth. 'Yes, I see you do. Dumbledore's rhetoric will be of no help to you when you are begging for mercy at the Dark Lord's feet! He has placed a curse upon his name. All who utter it will find themselves in the company of Death Eaters. To say his name out loud is a death sentence!'

He glanced over his shoulder as if he was afraid that their security had been breached. Hermione saw his apprehension and wondered why a loyal servant of the Dark was afraid to be joined by his cohorts.

'DO you understand?' His eyes gleamed with fury.

On receiving her emphatic, wide-eyed nod, he slowly loosened his grasp over her mouth and withdrew his hand. Seemingly satisfied that she did not intend to Summon an army of Death Eaters by her insolence, he took a step backwards; his expression returned to its former impassivity. She had noticed, however, how worn he looked when he allowed his face to rest from detachment, like a man who has lived a hundred years and experienced not one day of peace among them. If it were not for the fact that she knew him to be a cold, heartless killer and a treacherous deceiver, she would have felt something like pity for a man who concealed such a wealth of burden.

'Rest assured,' he said, 'my intention is not to harm you.'

Hermione could hardly believe his words, though he seemed perfectly genuine. He wandered back to the fireplace again and picked up the porcelain figurine of a unicorn. He appeared to be examining the object closely, though in reality, she doubted if he registered the delicate curves and smoothly carved surface he caressed so absently. He seemed lost in some reverie, oblivious to the reality of the rancid room and his bound prisoner watching him from its far end. It was some time before he recollected himself and replaced the fragile ornament, which had stood the test of time, hiding its brightness beneath a layer of grime.

He turned to face his hostage and peered at her as if he had just remembered that he still had his former student held captive. Hermione's heart thundered in her chest with all the melodrama of the caged linnets she was when he walked slowly towards her, stopped when he reached her, folded his arms, and looked along his large hooked nose.

'I have learned to despise weakness,' he said. 'Only fools allow themselves petty indulgences: the pursuits of pleasure, the betrayal of emotions, the inconsequential needs they imagine make life worth living.' He paused as if waiting for her to respond with an observation of her own. She only stared at him in confusion. He sighed as he continued, 'How can a glass of Firewhisky improve clarity of thought? How can cheering for your favourite Quidditch team lead to enlightenment? Or the touch of a woman result in fulfilment?'

Hermione was fascinated by his uncharacteristically candid monologue. She could not imagine why he would bother to explain his innermost views on dispassion and abstinence to her. He seemed lost, fearful, anxiety ridden: a man who has dwelled too much on life's abominations and put together his own manifesto accordingly.

He continued his sermon to a quietly enthralled audience of one. 'I have never allowed myself the frivolous pursuits that others assume is their right. My purpose has been clear to me for many years; it has given me more strength and fortitude than any Dark Magic could provide.'

His eyes maintained an intimate scrutiny of her face as he spoke. 'I do not touch alcohol unless to do so serves a purpose. I do not share friendships or confidences. I do not seek pleasure for pleasure's sake; all I do is for a reason. I barely eat unless to do so gains me an advantage.'

Hermione was beginning to think that his homily was intended for himself alone. She felt like an intruder, unwanted and surplus to requirement; yet he directed his speech towards her as if he wanted her to hear his morbidly puritanical view of the world. She considered the possibility that he was having some kind of mental breakdown, talking to himself like some deranged St. Mungo's inmate. He seemed more than adequately in control of his thoughts and emotions, however, perhaps more so than ever. It felt as though she were the witness to some momentous breakthrough; the thought that he had never spoken to another soul about such things before both appalled and beguiled her.

He threw her an almost wistful look before turning on his heels and pacing the length of the room. When he returned, he continued in the same vein.

'Perhaps it would not be such an adverse notion to allow myself one indulgence. I have denied myself every recreation and amusement known to man for most of my adult life.'

He looked at her again as if hoping for agreement or sympathy. 'I find that I am, after all, susceptible to human follies. It would surprise you to think that I am not the unfeeling creature you or rather, *all* believe me to be. Why shouldn't I allow myself to be guided by human weakness for once? Why shouldn't I be allowed to have what others merely take for granted? Would anyone deny me that?'

Hermione strived to find context to his words. He seemed to be asking permission to be released from his self-imposed shackles, though why he had chosen such an unswerving, joyless existence, she could not begin to understand. Was his devotion to darkness so fundamental to all that he was? It was as if he wanted some greater being to allow him time off for good behaviour. He had been a devoted servant; couldn't he please be allowed to play a while?

She wondered what possible 'indulgence' he had in mind. It was doubtful that he wanted to help himself to the drinks cabinet. A new sense of dread began to seep into her consciousness as she considered all possibilities. He was a man used to self-discipline, and now a man who wanted to set aside his sacred dedication to renunciation in order to taste what sobriety had denied him. His options were few: only a putrefying bedroom and Hermione Granger were before him. Dread made way for a fresh wave of panic as she felt her newfound courage fail her. The bravado of only minutes ago seemed like childish folly, not real guts and nerve. A rising sensation of nausea added to her fear. She felt her stupidity as surely as if he were berating her for showing off in the classroom. She was weak, vulnerable, at the mercy of a man who was at best unhinged and more than likely gripped by desperation and bitterness. She had been so careless, so foolish: the girl who prided herself on forethought and ingenuity trapped, helpless and out of resources.

If helplessness was all she had left, then Hermione supposed that her only remaining option was to use it to its full potential: she would do nothing. She would not scream or even speak. She would show no outward signs of emotion. She would be nothing more than an empty vessel to him, a lifeless puppet without animation, or spirit, or zeal. In the absence of any outward signs of feeling or responsiveness, how could he find appeal? She would present no challenge, no macabre excitement for his base desires. If she could feign indifference, then perhaps she could feel it. She had once read that it was possible, under certain, abhorrent conditions, for people torture victims, prisoners in solitary confinement to retreat within their own minds, a form of escape from whatever unspeakable horrors their bodies were being subjected to. The human brain is a vast and extraordinary organ, capable of remarkable feats in order to preserve itself from harm, Hermione told herself in a valiant attempt at self-deception.

Hermione was prepared for anything from Snape brutality, humiliation, violation but when he took a step forward, tentatively crouched down on his knees before her, and almost apologetically took hold of her wrists, she found it a challenge to maintain the blank, emotionless façade she had promised herself.

He looked into her eyes and she could not look away; *his* were alive with emotion. She saw anguish, deep and heartfelt. There was an intensity of agony held within those fearsome black depths which she could never have guessed to exist. For as long as she could remember, there had only ever been irritation, anger, or malice conveyed in his look; failing that they were expressionless: two voids of fathomless nothing, concealing, or so it now seemed, a formidable capacity to feel.

The revelation almost made her gasp. He may as well have discarded his robes and stood before her naked and exposed: allowing her to see beyond his wax-like indifference was tantamount to baring his soul. His fervent expression kept her anchored, unable to tear herself away from the sight of so much wretchedness.

'Allow me this indulgence,' he said as his eyes perforated hers.

Before she had time to blink or look away, he was inside her mind. Hermione's panic rose. She had never attempted Occlumency before, though she had read about it and urged Harry to practice. It was more difficult than she had imagined; she found she couldn't muster the will to throw him out as she felt him enter her thoughts, uninvited yet unobtrusive. This was not how Harry had depicted Legilimency. He had described a severe and frightening lack of control over thoughts, memories and privacy. Harry had

found it exhausting and debilitating, yet Hermione was experiencing it as nothing more intrusive than a polite knock on the door. Was it possible that Snape had been purposely forceful with Harry, yet was now being deliberately gentle?

It was as if he was standing in the hallway of her house, waiting to be shown around. But he didn't request access to her mind; instead, he took her into his. Her thoughts were invaded by unfamiliar images, and she knew instinctively that he was allowing her to see a particular memory it was as if she were remembering some past event that she had never been a participant in; the sensation was disorientating, but not as terrible as she had feared.

The Headmaster's office filled her thoughts. In it, she saw Snape again. Not the Snape kneeling in front of her: this was a phantom, a remembered Snape from sometime in his fairly recent past. With sudden realisation, she saw that he was standing over Professor Dumbledore who appeared to be injured and unconscious. Her first thought was that Snape was the instigator of the Headmaster's condition, but closer scrutiny revealed that Snape was actually attempting to heal the injured man. She watched as Snape pointed his wand at the withered blackened stump that was once Dumbledore's hand, muttering incantations as he did so. She saw Dumbledore's eyes flicker open in response to a potion Snape forced him to drink. Snape looked at the Headmaster with a furious expression as the old man stirred furious and fearful.

'Why did you put on that ring?' he said. 'It carries a curse, surely you realised that. Why even touch it?'

Hermione saw Dumbledore's expression resigned and apologetic. *'I ... was a fool. Sorely tempted ... '*

'Tempted by what?' Snape seemed incredulous. 'It is a miracle you managed to return here!' he continued when Dumbledore made no answer. *'That ring contained a curse of extraordinary power, to contain it is all we can hope for; I have trapped the curse in one*

hand for the time being '

Hermione watched as Dumbledore examined his hand. He praised Snape's efforts, then asked how long he had left to live as if he were enquiring if there were any tea left in the pot. And when Snape gave his estimate of a year, the Headmaster looked only mildly interested.

'I am fortunate, extremely fortunate, that I have you, Severus.'

Snape barely seemed to register the compliment. *'If you had only summoned me a little earlier, I might have been able to do more.'* Snape's eyes glinted with anger. *'Buy you more time!'*

The next part of the memory would change Hermione forever.

They spoke of Lord Voldemort's plans to use Draco Malfoy as the Headmaster's assassin: the assassin expected to fail. She could hardly believe that she was being allowed to witness Snape and Dumbledore's macabre discussion. The two wizards spoke of Snape's role as mentor to Draco, Dumbledore calmly ordering him to assist the young, ill-fated Slytherin in his futile endeavours, to offer him guidance and mentorship. With sudden clarity of reason, Hermione understood that Snape and Draco were merely pawns: helpless, condemned prey barely able to make the decision of whether to have milk in their tea unless a tyrannical master gave them a nod. She never imagined it possible to feel compassion for Draco, the over-privileged, obnoxious coward who had made her flesh crawl with contempt so often. Yet she did, and the sensation was like opening one's eyes after a deep sleep to the harsh, unwelcome light of day.

She watched like some sneaking school-girl when Dumbledore informed Snape that he must be the one to cast the Killing curse, not Draco. She observed Snape's reaction: his attempt to remain emotionless, his sardonic reply, his revulsion at the task set before him, and finally, his reluctant acquiescence. A wave of nausea struck as Dumbledore gave his reasons for saving Draco from the repellent burden.

'That boy's soul is not yet damaged. I would not have it ripped out on my account.'

'And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?'

Hermione's own was crying out in protest as she witnessed the abhorrent sight of Dumbledore's serene countenance and Snape's stricken one. Yet still the Headmaster calmly insisted confessed that he would prefer a quick death to anything Bellatrix Lestrange or Fenrir Greyback would likely inflict. And she felt hot tears moisten her cool cheeks as she witnessed Snape's stoic nod of acceptance and Dumbledore's quiet thanks.

The harsh radiance of daylight to sleepy eyes now became the full heat and brilliance of a heady midday sun.

The image of the Headmaster's office was gone, and Hermione realised that she had been shown out. Her memories were her own again, and she was fully conscious of her surroundings: the warmth of the fire, the glow of the wall lamps, the feel of bulky bedclothes beneath her legs, and the coarse rope still binding together her wrists. She saw the material, solid, kneeling figure of Snape in front of her, caught his scent, less pungent with prolonged exposure. He broke their intense eye contact and rose slowly to his feet.

Hermione watched the retreating figure of the man she had just witnessed debating the sanctity of his soul. He was staring into the firelight again, drawn to it like a magpie to rubies. She struggled to keep her emotions in check. In truth, she didn't know how to react or how to feel. All hatred was gone now, but her anger towards him had been a positive force; it had fuelled her determination to fight and stay strong. Her initial shock on discovering him to be an agent of the Dark had been stunned disappointment, but that quickly turned to a disgust so deeply felt that sometimes it felt like an inducement to dissent. The place in her gut where she kept her revulsion must now be replaced by something else. She observed the rigidity of his stance and tried to remember if she had ever seen him relaxed. How could he, with such a burden pressing so heavily upon him?

She wanted to cry, shout out her repulsion, question his resilience, reassure him of her loyalty: she would be the guardian of his secret, protector of his good name. No one would dare to speak ill of Severus Snape in her presence. Emotions were battling for release, and she was thankful for her still-bound hands, rooted legs, and the lump in her throat: without them, she may have resorted to forcing an unwanted embrace on him.

The mirror above the writing bureau showed her Snape's resolute profile; the sagging velvet curtains closed against the world; the marble-top wash stand beside the bed; and her own pale, tormented face, hair a riotous mess, most of which had escaped from its clasp after the trials of sleep, shock, and exertion. Hermione barely recognised her own reflection, yet it was Snape who gave her the most trouble. She looked at him through a tarnished, imperfect mirror and saw him clearly for the first time. She saw no murderer or traitor now, she saw a loyal spy who had carried out Dumbledore's wishes despite the infamy it would bring and the hatred it would inspire. Rarely lost for the right thing to say, she had no idea how to convey all she felt to the man who caught her scrutiny through the mirror and turned around to view her.

'I'm sorry,' she said.

'I don't need your compassion,' he replied, crossing the room. *'It is not necessary,'* he added as a concession to her mortified expression. He Vanished the ropes that bound her with a stiff wave of his wand and walked over to a chair so frayed it had lost any claims to grandeur it once had. He dragged it a few feet closer to the bed and sat down stiffly, allowing her to rub life back into her aching wrists before speaking.

'I have been appointed as new Headmaster of Hogwarts,' he said softly. *'Somehow, I don't think my return will be heralded by my former colleagues.'*

Still, Hermione could not answer him. She considered his terrible predicament. He would return to Hogwarts as Dumbledore's executioner, hated and despised as Voldemort's favourite. The other teachers and most of the students would show him their contempt instead of respect and awe at his unswerving loyalty and devotion to duty. Her heart was ripping apart as if it had suffered a mortal wound. She looked at him, her face pale and anguished, her mind racing to find an appropriate response. He had leaned forward in his chair, and his outstretched arm offered her the wand she had recently fought for like a cornered tiger.

'He had no right to ask that of you,' she said.

Snape seemed to understand that she referred to Dumbledore, not his recent promotion by Voldemort.

'He had every right, as he well knew.'

'Does anyone know?'

'Apart from you?' He shook his head.

'Not even Professor McGonagall?'

His look gave her to understand that he had already given her a clear answer.

'How do you ... manage?' she asked, knowing how inadequate her question was.

'Manage?'

'Without ... without someone to share ... I mean without a release.'

'What would you call this?'

'A poor substitute.'

'Better than nothing.'

Hermione stared at the threadbare carpet again and wondered why he had talked himself *no allowed* himself this 'indulgence', this decision to reveal the truth about himself to her. If it was for comfort and support, she was failing spectacularly. No words of wisdom or expressions of comradeship were winging their way from her sympathetic heart to his troubled one.

Was this honour nothing more than fortuitous placement? Had he happened upon her at the right time, under the right circumstances? Would anyone have done or was she singled out as one who would react with the good sense and strong heart of a chosen one?

'Professor, may I ask why you came here? Was it to find Harry? Do you have something for him?' she asked eagerly.

'I did not expect to find anyone here,' he admitted. 'However, I was concerned, once I discovered you to be here alone, that Potter had been captured. You were sleeping, Miss Granger.'

It was as if he were berating her for letting them out of her sight for a moment, and the realisation that it gave him unease gave her more pleasure than all of her seven years of 'Outstandings' and acquired House points.

She told him something of the mission they were on at the Ministry and noted the sneer that glinted in his eyes, but avoided his mouth, when she mentioned Harry's invisibility cloak.

Snape made some vague excuse for his own presence at Grimmauld Place, but Hermione was certain he was concealing the truth. She wondered if he, too, was looking for a hidden Horcrux; perhaps Dumbledore had not put all his eggs in one basket after all. She dared not probe, however; if she was wrong, Harry would never forgive her for revealing their secret.

Hermione sighed. She stood up, threading her wand through her fingers as she walked a few steps away from the bed and Snape's chair. She turned to look at him and almost faltered in the face of her own inadequacy: she was about to make assurances she knew he was likely to scoff at.

'Sir,' she said, 'I don't know why you've shown me this, but I promise that I will explain everything to Harry and Ron. I'll make them understand; I'll make them see that you had to do it, that you are not loyal to ... *him*. I will not let them speak ill of you. Harry must see the truth; he must see that you had no choice, that you never betrayed the Order, that ...'

Hermione had walked towards him during her speech; she had knelt at his feet in the hope of conveying the sincerity in her expression.

The look in his own eyes caused her to stop; they did not show the contempt she expected. Regret and resignation replaced derision. She realised that Snape did not intend for her to share this information with anyone, least of all with someone with a connection to Lord Voldemort. Her eyes mirrored his as the reality of his intention became clear.

'You mean to Oblivate me,' she said.

~*~*~

Author's note:

I'm sure everyone will recognise that the italicised dialogue is straight from chapter thirty-three of Deathly Hallows: The Prince's Tale.

Chapter 6: Oblivate (Hermione's Memories, Part Four – August 1997)

Chapter 6 of 7

Miss Granger,

I have something which belongs to you. If you wish to claim it, my home address is 49 Spinner's End, Swinton. 8.30p.m on Tuesday would suit me best.

Severus Snape

Chapter 6:

Obliviate (Hermione's Memories, Part Four August 1997)

Hermione knew it was useless to plead, yet she did it anyway, encouraged by the sickening stab of fear in her chest when she imagined herself despising him again with such venomous conviction.

'You must know that I have no choice,' he replied.

'Then why tell me at all?'

'I believe I made that perfectly clear.'

He had called it weakness, but she realised how desperate he must have been to look into someone's eyes and perceive no fear and no repulsion. How he must have longed to see recognition and appreciation for his unrelenting loyalty, reflecting back at him.

'But I'll go back to hating you,' she said, her voice a forlorn whisper. 'I can't do that.'

'You will know no difference.'

'I don't want to. It's not fair.' Her voice cracked with emotion, and she knew she was on the verge of tears, but she was determined to keep her traitorous snivelling to herself; her own self-pity could be of no help to him. 'Let me, just me know. I swear I won't tell a soul.'

'And should you fall foul of Death Eaters and be put to the Cruciatus? Or perhaps you'll be lucky and be given Veritaserum first. Though I doubt it,' he added darkly.

Hermione let out a long frustrated sigh. 'There must be a way round this,' she said, crossing the room and marching back again in agitation.

'No! There is not.' He seemed to consider the matter as something beyond debate and serious consideration, but he allowed himself an indulgent smile when he added, 'unless you would consider being locked in a Hogwarts' magically protected cell for the duration of the war. I assure you *that* can be arranged.'

Hermione scowled at him. He may have just revealed himself to be a consummate disciple of the light, but he was still an insensitive bastard.

'And leave Harry and Ron to their own devices?' she replied.

'Yes, perhaps you are right. Potter and Weasley on a quest for glory with their brainpower languishing in a dungeon is the surest way to ensure the Dark Lord's triumph.'

Once more she felt a glow of pride to be considered an essential component in the struggle for victory over evil by the man who had never given an accolade to a Gryffindor and who held 'know-it-alls' in the highest contempt.

'I'm not prepared to just accept that there simply IS no solution,' replied Hermione. 'There must be a way around this.'

Snape sighed. 'What exactly do you think is possible here, Miss Granger? There is no spell or potion known to wizard-kind capable of withstanding a stint with the Dark Lord. Short of locking you up and throwing away the key, I fail to see what you think can be achieved by simply wishing for a resolution.'

'But surely there must be a way of... oh, I don't know, taking away the details but allowing my feelings to remain.'

'Consider the implications of that, were it even possible. You will have feelings of loyalty towards someone of whom all evidence shows to be corrupt and unworthy. Your peace of mind will be gone; you will feel nothing but disgust at your own seemingly disfigured view of reality. It will be distracting, unsettling.'

Snape sat back in his chair, and Hermione felt his eyes upon her as she continued her troubled marching around the perimeter of the room. The only sounds were the distant drone of Muggle traffic and the faint sound of Snape's long pale fingers, tapping out a rhythm on the edge of the chair's worn arm. Hermione stopped for a moment and looked at him. She noticed that his presence in the decaying old high-back gave it an air of its former stateliness. He seemed to occupy it as though seated upon a sumptuously grand fauteuil worthy of only the purest of bloods.

She considered his objection. 'Unsettling, yes. Distracting, no. It is quite possible that I will recognise the magical aspect of my incongruous feelings and ...'

'... wonder if you have been somehow duped by the enemy?'

'Well it's worth the risk,' she said. 'I'm prepared to put up with whatever the side-effects happen to be. It's better than the alternative.'

Snape watched her closely, and she wondered if he was looking for signs of insanity at her resolute stance. Finally, he spoke and there was a note of wonder in his voice when he said, 'Your determination ... surprises me, and there is precious little that does that these days.'

Hermione coloured beneath his confessed incredulity; she felt it necessary to at least offer up some kind of plausible explanation for her stoic unwillingness to have all traces of sympathetic feelings towards him wiped. He clearly had very few experiences of anyone showing him consideration, let alone appreciation.

'Professor, believe it or not, I have always tried to defend you to Harry and Ron. In fact, hoping that you were not what you seemed, that you were on our side, was a great comfort to me.' She was not brave enough to look directly at him as she spoke, instead she busied herself by walking towards the wash stand where she conjured a tall tumbler and filled it with water from the tip of her wand. She took a small sip before continuing. 'I despaired when that hope was taken away, when we thought you had turned against us ... but now, now I am so ...' she put down her glass and returned to him, flopping down on to the bed again, '... relieved to find that my faith in you was not the result of some deluded wish, on my part, to have someone to believe in. It gives me heart and determination to know that my instincts had been right all along. You can laugh, if you like, but I actually need to trust you.'

Snape did not laugh; he watched her closely then shook his head as if to convince himself that she was quite serious. He turned away from her daunting sincerity and made a spectacle of watching the fire crackle in the hearth.

'But it is NOT possible, nevertheless,' he said. He seemed to be on the verge of saying something more before changing his mind and maintaining his finger tapping and flame watching.

Hermione persisted with her assertion that there must exist somewhere in the magical world a remedy for their situation. 'If there is one thing I have learned during my long magical education, it is that for every problem there is a solution, and usually, it can be found in a book.'

An unexpected noise prevented Snape from making his answer. He turned his head suddenly at the sound of the front door latch turning.

'Harry and Ron,' said Hermione, in answer to his quizzical look.

Snape cocked an eyebrow. 'No Shacklebolt? No Lupin? What a surprise.'

Hermione shrugged and gave a wry smile. 'I was hoping to scare you off.'

'A dismal effort,' he scoffed.

They listened to the voices, muffled through walls and ceiling, then the clear sound of

Ron could be heard shouting out to Hermione, a slight edge of unease could be detected in his voice.

'I'll go down and reassure them,' she said. 'They'll come looking for me if I ignore them. I won't be long. You *will* be here when I get back?'

'I have a rousing welcome speech to prepare for the start of term and a petulant Dark Lord to appease, do you really think I have time to loiter around in Regulus Black's bedroom, waiting for you to exchange pleasantries with Potter and Weasley?'

'Fine!' said Hermione tetchily. 'I'll wait here until they come looking for me then shall I?'

'I really couldn't care less; I will be long gone by that time and you will have no memory of our little meeting.'

'Would it kill you to let me have half an hour to find a solution to this?' she replied, desperation sounding in her plea. 'Just indulge me. Please. I'll shout down to them, I'll make something up, then we won't be disturbed and ...'

'... And what?' he made a show of looking around the room. 'The Memory Charm Section of Regulus Black's extensive library seems woefully lacking. How do you propose we proceed with our half an hour research project without the resource of one single book?'

Hermione very much enjoyed the look on his face when she reached for her small beaded bag and demonstrated her proficiency with an Extension charm. She took out several large tomes, delving deep into the tiny bag to retrieve them. She piled eight volumes up into a pile on the carpet between their feet.

'Well?' she said watching him stare at the pile then pick up a book and peruse the spine as if he could hardly believe it existed.

'Half an hour then,' he said with resignation. 'Now go and tell Weasley and The Saviour that you have a headache.'

~*~*~

On her return, Hermione was met by the sight of Professor Snape standing by the window with an open book in his hand. He snapped the book shut as she walked into the room, closing the door behind her.

'Where did you get this?' he demanded, holding out the object for her to see the black, faded, leather-bound volume. She walked over to him and peered at the book then blushed, a guilty expression etched across her face.

'Secrets of the Darkest Arts.' Snape repeated the title slowly. 'A book considered too dangerous to be kept in the Restricted Section of the Hogwarts library, yet here it is in your possession. Well?' he said, in his irritated Potions Professor voice.

'I got it from Professor Dumbledore's office before we left Hogwarts,' she said.

'That is not possible; this book had enchantments protecting it. I know that it was so guarded that it could not even be touched without causing considerable pain to anyone who attempted it. By what means could you possibly have obtained it?'

'I just used a Summoning charm,' she replied sheepishly.

Snape's eyes narrowed in disbelief. '*Accio dark arts book?*' he said.

Hermione nodded. He looked as if he was about to reprimand her for keeping the truth from him, but before he had the chance to speak, she quickly interjected. 'I didn't expect it to work, and when it did, well I just wondered if Professor Dumbledore had allowed it to be taken by someone who might need it.'

'Dumbledore's protection ended when he did,' he answered.

'Oh!' she replied, feeling rather crestfallen that the former Headmaster had not somehow known she would have the wit and audacity to take it and had aided her theft.

Hermione picked up another book from the pile; she looked at the title and began to flick through the pages randomly.

'Did it occur to you that the book was removed from the library and given the fullest protection for a reason?' Snape continued, unwilling to drop the subject. 'That book in the wrong hands could be perilous.'

'Of course I know that,' she replied, looking up from her study. 'But I thought it best to be as prepared as possible. You once said that fighting the Dark Arts is like fighting a many-headed monster. You said that every time a head was severed a new and more terrifying one would replace it; that we have to be flexible and inventive. I don't really know how to be flexible and inventive, but if fighting the Dark Arts is as arduous as that, then I DO want to understand it at least, or some of it. Knowledge is power. I thought we needed all the help we can get. Our resources are ... limited, virtually non-existent. I don't really know how to help Harry, I'm just doing the best I can in my own way.' She sighed.

'At least I taught you *something*,' he said.

Hermione smiled. 'Yes, sir, you did. It's yours now ... the book I mean, since you are to be Headmaster. Take it back.'

He ignored her gesture and reached inside his robes as if he were about to retrieve his wand. Instead, he produced a small vial barely as big as Hermione's smallest finger; he held it out for her to take. 'For your survival kit,' he said.

Hermione took the small crystal bottle from his outstretched hand and as their flesh once again briefly touched, she gave a fleeting thought to the strange evening which had compelled herself and Professor Snape to have more physical contact in the space of an hour than in the whole of the previous six years she had known him. He withdrew his hand quickly and she wondered, as she glanced at the vial, if he had been having similar thoughts. The idea that they were both contemplating each other's physicality was at once disconcerting and oddly thrilling. She subdued the unwanted thought quickly, however, and scrutinised the tiny writing on the label.

'Phoenix Tears?' she said aloud. 'Aren't these incredibly rare?'

'A little parting gift from Dumbledore,' he replied, walking over to the window. 'Or more specifically, from Fawkes. Dumbledore's little guilt reliever. This is supposed to be my safety net.'

Hermione handed the bottle back to Snape. 'I can't take them, sir. These are for you; what if ... ?'

'I have no need of them,' he replied, ignoring her gesture. 'There may come a time when Potter is critically injured it is *for him* that we all sacrifice so much. Take them.'

'Professor, I can't. These were shed for you. I'm pretty sure that their potency won't be as strong for someone else anyway. Please keep them.'

'They will be most effective for whoever they were intended for, yes. You will still find them more useful than anything else you could possibly have acquired ... *stolen* for your journey.'

Hermione shook her head and walked towards him. She held out the precious commodity for him again. 'Please, sir.'

'I *said* take them,' he insisted.

Hermione sighed and turned towards a tall set of once darkly polished mahogany drawers, now as neglected as the rest of the room. She set down the crystal container on its dusty surface with care. 'I'm leaving it here,' she said stubbornly. 'Once you Oblivate me, I won't know why I have it in my possession anyway. Won't *that* be distracting and unsettling?'

Snape looked furious and about to argue further, but perhaps he considered such an action to be a waste of his time when his only answer was to move a thick velvet drape a touch and stare out of the window.

'Yaxley and Rosier are on duty,' he said softly.

'They can't get in.'

'Yet!' He turned to face her. 'You can't count on this place being a safe haven forever.'

The Dark Lord is calculating on Potter to turn up here. He won't stop the vigil.'

'We are careful,' she replied. 'We only ever Apparate onto the front step using the Invisibility Cloak.'

'One day you will make a mistake.'

'It's possible, yes. I think we are prepared though.'

Snape left his sentry position by the window and returned to Hermione's pile of books where he picked up the top copy and looked pensively at Hermione's tiny beaded bag. 'What other provisions have you managed to stuff inside there?' he asked; but the contempt in his tone was neutralised by the realisation, by Hermione, that he was sincerely interested and impressed by her ingenuity. She smiled, pleased to be given free reign to boast.

'I have a tent, in case we need to flee suddenly and have nowhere to go. I have books, as you see, first aid equipment, Polyjuice potion, anything I could think of to help us survive.'

Snape nodded his approval. 'When I am ensconced in the Headmaster's office, I will have the opportunity to watch over you to some extent. Once you are no longer in this house, however, you are on your own.'

Hermione threw him a quizzical look. *How* can you watch over us?'

He flicked indolently through the pages of Spellman's Syllabary. 'Try using those famed wits of yours and work it out,' he replied.

She frowned as she went through all possible forms of wizarding communication: the Floo network was her first guess; Sirius had contacted Harry using the highly unsafe and Ministry regulated Floo network, but she doubted that Snape would take such a risk. Using a Patronus was not an option; she had never even seen Professor Snape cast a Patronus and had no clue what form it took. Then she remembered that the hallway of Grimmauld Place was lined with portraits and that portraits could leave their painted confines in order to visit another frame if they had one. The only portrait in Grimmauld place with a connection to Hogwarts was the one of Sirius's ancestor, Phineas Nigellus Black, former Slytherin Headmaster, whose other portrait hung in the Headmaster's office.

Hermione beamed at him as she answered, and he looked so very nearly impressed that she half imagined, for the first time ever, that he was about to award Gryffindor some points. He merely acknowledged her insight with a nod of the head, however.

'You would be wise to keep Professor Black with you,' said Snape. 'Just in case. At least I will have some idea of your progress.'

Hermione considered his advice and nodded. 'Take him with us if we leave this place, you mean? I could do that, yes, but as you will shortly be erasing this conversation from my memory, how am I supposed to remember?'

'I'm sure you have a parchment and quill somewhere amongst your survival kit,' he replied sardonically.

Hermione conceded his point and Summoned the items at once; she scribbled a hasty direction to herself which she then placed on the bedside cabinet, wondering how she would react to the unremembered self-instruction whenever next she came to read it.

~*~*~*~*

The witch and the wizard took a book apiece and sat themselves at each end of the bed in peaceful contemplation. To an unfamiliar onlooker, it was almost as if they were so used to each other's company that the act had become an undemanding, effortless pleasure. The picture of harmonious domesticity was merely an illusion, however; in reality, one scanned the pages with a desperate meditation, intent on finding a spell to help them, while the other flicked through the pages with languid indifference, going through the motions of searching without any expectation of success.

The next few minutes were spent in silence, but for the sound of the ticking clock, the fire, hissing and smouldering in the grate, and the occasional sounds which emitted from Hermione: paper beneath fingers and discontented sighs.

'There is a potion to simulate love, a potion to bring luck, and a potion to change your appearance; how can there not be one for our situation?' Hermione said clutching her book as it almost fell from her lap while she leaned forward to choose another one.

'As a matter of fact,' Snape replied, 'a potion does exist to maintain feelings ... any feelings required.'

Hermione looked up at him with all the eagerness of a child being handed a lollipop. She begged for more information on the potion: its properties, the required ingredients, the brewing conditions necessary. Snape answered her with a great deal more patience than she recalled him ever managing in the potions classroom when her constant need for answers was met with snide remarks and entreaties for her to continue in silence. She asked him how a potion that purported to anchor any emotion required could possibly work.

Snape explained that it must be drunk while focusing intently on that which the drinker wished to enhance or maintain.

Hermione recalled her own unfortunate past experiences of ingesting potions she was unfamiliar with. Her second year mistakes had given her a familiarity with the feline state she would much rather forget. She had learned the hard way that magical potions could be as precarious as they were wondrous, and she had promised herself a more conscientious approach since knowing first hand what it was to own a tail and whiskers. Her pulse still raced with anticipation, however, as the possibility of finding the answer to this seemingly impossible dilemma, almost presented itself. 'I don't pretend to understand why such a potion would be needed,' she replied. 'But if it was possible to acquire, I would take it.'

'You may be boldly prepared to take it, but your sacrifice is not required. I presume that your survival kit doesn't stretch to a copper based cauldron, a plethora of specifically prepared potions ingredients and a waxing moon?'

'Not exactly, no,' she admitted throwing another useless book onto the growing pile with an exasperated sigh. 'Perhaps a potion isn't exactly practical for our present circumstances. I'd still like to know what such a brew is used for though.'

'Its purpose is manifold, though rarely used any more. Married couples afraid of growing out of love have used it.'

'How utterly ridiculous and rather pathetic,' Hermione scoffed. 'And other emotions?'

Snape paused to close his own book. 'There is a more destructive use. Those who wish to seek a cold and bitter revenge, but who are too feeble to rely on their own ability to hold on to the heat of newly acquired hatred.'

Hermione shuddered and felt the chill of the room caressing her bare arms as she considered the possibilities of its dark usage.

Snape stood silently from his position and walked to the chair, dragging it back towards the hearth; he indicated that she join him by the warmth of the fire, tilting his head towards the twin to his own.

'It could also been used against someone,' he continued, as she joined him. 'Lucius Malfoy used it on his wife when they were first wed, before his affairs and betrayals began. Her love and loyalty towards him is probably a mere artifice.'

Hermione blanched. 'He told you he used a potion to deceive his wife?'

Snape snorted. 'I brewed it for him.'

He must have noticed her struggle when he sneered at her 'precious Gryffindor sensibilities'.

'Not so noble after all, am I, Miss Granger? Surely even the star of Gryffindor understands that there exists nothing as primitive as black and white, only shades of grey, some murkier than others.' His penetrating glare was as disquieting as his scathing doubt. 'Perhaps you think your efforts wasted on me now.'

Hermione realised that she had wanted to view him as some valiant champion, a fearless yardstick to be whitewashed and held aloft as a standard of integrity and self-sacrifice. His candid admission reminded her that Severus Snape may be on their side, he may have forfeited his reputation and his prestige in order to do the right thing, but she still had no idea of the source of his motivation. What had prompted him to make the move from the devout Dark Lord follower, he had undoubtedly once been, to a man who was prepared to sacrifice all he had and all he was to destroy his former master? Perhaps his reasons were not as virtuous as she would like and perhaps they were a good deal more so, but as she glanced quietly at his worn, tired eyes which no longer bothered to show impatience or indifference, she realised that at that moment, it really didn't matter.

'No, sir,' she said resolutely.

There was a strange glint in his eye that she took to be a suppression of emotion when she daringly asked him why he risked so much for a cause he had once shunned. It was a while before he answered, so long in fact, that she didn't think he was going to.

'For the reason that Dumbledore valued the most,' was his cryptic reply. He seemed to dwell on the thought for a while before remembering his purpose and companion. 'And in case you have forgotten, you have fourteen minutes left of your allotted half hour. I suggest you focus your efforts. Unless you are ready to hand in the towel?'

She pondered over Snape's reply and wondered what it was that Dumbledore valued so highly. She knew he valued courage, friendship, altruism, perhaps even cleverness and ingenuity; but what did he regard above all else? Surely it wasn't possible that her cruel and unyielding Potion's professor could be speaking of love? He was not a man to be easily imagined in a romantic situation. The idea of him giving flowers or affectionate compliments to a doting witch was barely imaginable. Yet tonight, he had proven himself capable of so much more than she had believed possible; perhaps it wasn't such an outlandish notion after all. He was no longer the wizard who had deceived them all; he wasn't even merely a ruthless teacher with a partiality for Slytherins. He was complex and surprising, baffling and unfathomable. She no longer knew what to expect from him. Severus Snape as an amorous gallant, however, was quite the test of a very well-defined imagination. Hermione attempted to rid her mind of thoughts of Snape in love as she assured him that she was not ready to give up just yet. She gave him a bold glance that dared him to object when she picked up the book they had both been avoiding.

She almost expected Secrets of the Darkest Arts to let out a chill wail of disapproval when she picked up the foreboding volume and opened it at page one. She hadn't missed Snape's frown as her fingers had reached for the repulsive book, but he continued to read the book he had just chosen from the pile: An Anthology of Eighteenth Century Charms, in silence.

If the eleventh hour describes the moment right before the allotted time runs out, Hermione finally found the spell she had known all along must exist at the twenty-ninth minute.

'I think I have it,' she said, sitting upright in her chair and beaming at Snape as he was about to call time. 'This is what we are looking for. The Impetus Perpetuus charm.'

He sighed heavily as if an unpleasant event had been cancelled then unexpectedly rescheduled. 'The Impetus Perpetuus charm,' he repeated softly. 'You are prepared to engage in dark magic, Miss Granger? Should Slytherin be bemoaning the loss of a would-be daughter?'

'I'm quite sure that Slytherin doesn't have exclusive rights to the practice of dark magic,' replied Hermione, aware that he was goading her into some sanctimonious statement for the sole purpose of sneering at her. 'And anyway, it doesn't seem at all ... dark. Although the pictures are rather odd,' she added, turning the book onto its side as if to get a better look.

'Really?' said Snape. 'Then I have to question your understanding of the term 'dark magic'. As you are possibly the only Hogwarts student to have read the entire suggested book list on the curriculum, I must say that I'm a little disappointed. WHAT, Miss Granger, distinguishes a dark spell from others?'

Hermione marvelled at the way he could even turn her achievements into something worthy of condemnation. Any other teacher would have lavished her with praise for her reading prowess, but Snape could only doubt her comprehension.

'Intent!' answered Hermione with confidence. 'Intent is the thing that distinguishes dark spells.'

'So, you are saying that a Canary Transfiguration hex could be construed as dark, if the intention was to harm? There are many spells which can be used to inflict damage or injury, not all are considered dark.'

'But surely there are degrees of darkness to any magic? The Imperius Curse is not as terrible as the Killing Curse for example.'

'Of course.'

'Then perhaps there is no such thing as dark magic, only dark intentions. In which case, even the Killing Curse is not always bad. Not if the intention is benign, because there is no risk of the soul being corrupted.'

'There are many ways to corrupt the soul, Miss Granger. Believe me.'

Hermione didn't answer at once; she concentrated on the book in her lap and tried to shove the thought of Professor Snape's statement to the furthest recess of her mind for now. She didn't want to focus on the fact that Professor Snape felt himself to be an aficionado in the field of soul corruption.

'Well anyway, our intention is not dark, therefore, whatever magic we perform from this ... book, cannot be considered to be so,' she replied.

Snape gave a short laugh. 'Very well, why don't you read out the components of the spell and we shall see if your naive grasp of the nature of depravity and ethics remain.'

'It seems straight forward enough,' she said. 'Rather like the Unbreakable Vow.' She began to read aloud, 'Both parties must face each other in order to unite and make the declaration.' She stopped and tried to read further along the text to herself for preparation purposes.

'Do read on, Miss Granger. I'm not sure you'll be as pleased with your findings when you discover the extent of the involvement of both parties.'

His words were ominous, but she continued reading as bid. 'Each party must make the declaration of feeling once, during the discarding phase and again, during the joining. What on earth do you suppose that means?' she asked, pausing in order to make sense of the words.

Snape looked at her impatiently. 'You mentioned odd pictures?'

'Yes.'

'How are they ... odd?'

'Well the figures are drawn naked,' she replied, keeping her eyes firmly on the text. 'Which I presume is some Dark Arts writer's attempt to shock, but really ... ' She closed the book in order to examine the author's name on the spine. '... Owle Bullock must have found medieval witches and wizards to be pretty impressionable if he imagined that ...'

'Miss Granger!' Snape interrupted. 'Continue reading.'

'Right. So, I said the bit about discarding and then the bit about joining. Although I still can't imagine what is meant by 'discarding' ...'

'The discarding of clothes, Miss Granger. Surely two and two make four, even in the Gryffindor common room?'

'Oh! I see.' She poured over the ancient passage in order to hide the blush that had been incited at the thought of Professor Snape referring to the act of undressing. Perhaps there really was a reason why the Impetus Perpetuus charm was considered to be dark magic; the spell was clearly not as straight forward as she had hoped. Could it be possible that she was about to read out a spell which required the casters to be naked? Her own naivety was the real revelation. Why should she be surprised that a book which cheerfully suggested murder as a means to immortality would contain a spell requiring nudity? To refer to such things in his presence was uncomfortable enough, but the contemplation of actually performing the spell was so disturbing that it made eye contact and regular breathing an impossibility.

She stared hard at the page and thought of the people living their uncomplicated, effortless lives outside, oblivious to a world where Dark Lords reigned, and menace and risk was as real as the number 47 bus was to them. She thought of her loved ones and everyone she cared about: the Weasleys who risked their lives and home daily for a seemingly futile hope. Mad-Eye Moody had already sacrificed his life. She thought of Remus Lupin who had jeopardised his own safety to spy amongst the most depraved of werewolf-kind for any scrap of information which could further their cause. And of Snape himself, the images he had shown her that evening; his sacrifices were beyond anything she knew she was capable of. Then what was she capable of? Living amongst werewolves? Existing to serve a dark and terrible master's bidding? Standing before the entire Hogwarts' staff and students as a traitor, feeling their hatred radiate more intensely than the heat from the fire they now sat before? Or hiding in a warm, safe house with her two best friends and a house-elf to serve her three square meals a day? Her sacrifices to the war effort seemed tragically pitiable in comparison.

The Impetus Perpetuus charm would make her his confidante for as long as the war remained. She wouldn't remember why she valued and respected him once he Obliviated her, but at least he would have an ally, someone to feel annoyance on his behalf when he was being disparaged and maligned by everyone else. Hermione realised that she wanted to be Snape's oblivious defender as much as she was determined to help Harry in his search for Horcruxes.

Once that idea had settled itself into the region of her mind she kept for inconceivable thoughts, the concept began to grow and encompass other thoughts, yet more unimaginable than that first tiny seed. The notion of actually carrying out such a spell was less outrageous now. She had only ever seen her professor in teaching robes before; for all she knew, he could have some hideous deformity hidden beneath all that immense swirl of black fabric. Only moments ago the idea of Professor Snape and herself doing anything as sordid as disrobing was unthinkable. She had been mortified to have even heard him utter the words 'discarding of clothes'. Yet when she considered it, it really should be deemed as nothing more than a simple sacrifice.

When she viewed it as something to be accomplished for a noble cause, something so inferior to anything he had done for the sake of a higher purpose, then it seemed like such an insignificant thing to waste a blush on at all. Was it really such a repulsive act to stand naked before another being and say some words? If it would create the desired effect, if it would prevent her waking up in the morning with a burning hatred in her gut for her professor, if it would mean there was another human being in the world who did not despise him, then really it was such an inconsequential thing to do. She wouldn't even remember it by tomorrow.

She looked up at him unflinchingly. 'Well, it's the only manageable option we have,' she said. 'The potion can't be done, but at least this spell is possible.'

'I beg your pardon?' Snape looked at her with eyes that glinted strangely.

'If this charm will work, then I think we should perform it.'

Snape contemplated her in silence. 'You haven't read all the instructions yet,' he said softly. 'Continue reading.'

Hermione read aloud. 'During the joining phase, verbal utterances must be spoken simultaneously and coincide with contact. Er ... what does it mean by 'contact'? Wands? Maybe holding hands?' she asked, afraid that she already knew the answer to her question, and unsure that she wanted to hear it said out loud.

Snape sighed heavily. 'For such a hand-waving over-achiever, you can be monumentally dense, Miss Granger. What do you imagine is meant by 'join' and 'contact' when two people are facing each other bereft of clothes? As a hint, I can tell you that hands and wands are the last things to be involved.'

Hermione's shame was now complete; if it hadn't been for the orange glow of the fire, her cheeks would have been the only furnace in the room.

'Well, it isn't worded very well,' she muttered in her own defence. She didn't dare to meet his eye, but she could guess his expression there would be a smirk lurking behind a look of tired impatience and displeasure. The impatience would be for her Gryffindor stubbornness and the smirk for her naive innocence. What a silly child she must appear to be to him. So lacking in sophistication or experience in worldly matters that she couldn't even comprehend what was now so obvious: that she had been about to willingly offer herself up for a spell which required so much more than slipping out of their robes and muttering an incantation. No wonder he had so little patience with her.

'Time is up, Miss Granger. You have had your half hour. I did tell you that there was no spell suitable for this situation.' He closed the book and placed it on her pile. He took out his wand as he stood from the chair, then he retrieved his travelling cloak and placed it over his arm, ready to depart. 'I need you to lie on the bed as you were when you first became aware of me. Face the wall and close your eyes. Let's get this over with, I have work to do and I have wasted enough time on this unanticipated tête-à-tête.'

'Wait!' said Hermione. 'Have we totally dismissed the Impetus Perpetuus charm?'

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Snape's eyes widened and Hermione noticed him take a sharp intake of breath as he turned to face her.

'You are perhaps still under some childlike misapprehension concerning this spell,' he said. 'I thought I had made it clear, but I see that you need it explaining more fully.'

He looked down at her with disdain. 'Copulation is required. Is that clear enough for you, Miss Granger?'

Hermione folded her hands in her lap and returned his gaze bravely. 'I got it the first time, thank you, Professor Snape. My point relates to continuing with the spell regardless of that fact.'

Hermione didn't know which was more disconcerting - his ominous silence or her own declaration, rash, shameless and reeking with Gryffindor zeal. The only indication

that her words had not turned him to carved marble was the quiet rhythmical sound of his breath coinciding with the rise and fall of his chest. She considered her options; the first was to loudly clear her throat, remark upon the weather and pretend she hadn't spoken. The second required her to brazen it out. Yet her courage was failing as fast as her conviction, and she began to doubt her own ability to really go through with it. His expression gave little away. For all she could tell from his blank gaze, he may be about to hex her, ravish her, or Apparate himself to safety without speaking a word. It seemed as if hours had passed before Snape finally reacted.

'You wish to continue with the spell despite understanding what is required to complete it?'

'Well, it's not as if we have to sacrifice a kitten,' she replied.

'That would be preferable.'

Hermione lowered her head, no longer able to meet his eye.

When he spoke again he sounded angrier than she had ever heard him before, yet he barely raised his voice. 'Do you have any idea what it is you are suggesting? My credibility is non-existent. My crimes are lengthy, and you imagine I would want to add rape of a student to that extensive list? I see that you assume there is no pit of depravity into which I will not sink. If this is your opinion of me, I can't say that I care to assist in the means to stabilise your feelings they are warped, twisted and without merit. I was mistaken in confiding in you.'

Once again, Hermione was glad of the dim light and the camouflaging flicker of the flames in the hearth. The fire in her cheeks went unseen. Desperate to make him realise that he had been right to trust her, she reminded him of the surreal nature of their circumstances. And though her heart thudded like the wretched rap of a fist on a locked door, she stated her case as calmly as she could. She told him that the spell would not be a depraved act; it was a virtuous one, for an honourable cause. She pointed out that she was no longer his student. He called that a technicality. She was sure, she said, that he understood that rape was a state which required no consent. He sneered and told her that under the circumstances it would not feel like consent.

She called him a coward.

He flinched as if the word had a serrated edge with the power to splice an artery. She apologised and wondered how she could have banded that word about with such cavalier disregard. Tonight he had shown himself to be a man built upon the very foundations of heroism. He had risen above such a mundane epithet and redefined it to mean something else, something more fitting, something that incorporated the sheer and stark loneliness of self-sacrifice and single-minded devotion to duty. To be called a coward by those who had every reason to believe him to be so was unfortunate, from someone who knew better was unforgiveable. She told him as much, and he held up a hand to stop her outpouring of regret.

She knew she had lost; the evidence shone in the glittering surface of his dark eyes, though earlier she thought she had imagined a glimmer of a longing to say yes to her childish, thoughtless, foolhardy proposal. He turned his wand towards the fire in the grate and diminished the flames to a flicker, then a fizzle then a fade to nothing.

'It is time,' he said, and he pointed his wand at the bed and repeated his command for her to lie down as she was two hours ago when she had first opened her eyes and seen the hateful form of the man she had just asked to bed her.

Hermione finally admitted defeat and obeyed his command. Like a medieval queen walking to her bloody fate, she rounded the ostentatious bed of the martyr and on reaching her destination sat down and laid her head upon the recently Scoured pillow to await the fall of the axe. She closed her eyes and brought to the forefront of her mind the images he had shown her: the vision of the headmaster's office, Dumbledore's plea for Snape to be his benign executioner. Perhaps she could cheat the spell. If she focused hard enough on the memory he had sought to give her on short loan, maybe she could keep it despite the power of his Obliviate. Seconds became minutes and still he had not moved. She could hear his breaths coming from the bedside behind her and she imagined him standing there rigid, his wand pointing at her skull, his face an unreadable mask.

She caught his scent: asphodel and sopophorous beans the robes of the potions master, reeking of years of contamination that a few months of idleness could not quite banish.

Her eyes flew open as she heard his movement at last unexpected and unaccountable though the sensation of a body settling down beside her was. His scent was stronger now with his proximity feet still booted, still draped from shoulder to toe in layers of fabric as dark and unyielding as a storm at sea. No sound but his breaths, no movement but her own chest, rising and falling with the rapidity of anticipation, fear, and excitement.

She understood at once: the delayed execution of the feared spell, feared by him even more than her. He could not bring himself to cast it. Yet.

Hermione rolled slowly over to face him. He lay on his back as still as a corpse, his hooked nose in sharp profile against the wall beyond, his thin lips slightly parted. He stared ahead as if rapt by something above which demanded his full attention. She grasped the wand in her hand tightly and waved it towards the flickering gas lights on the wall, extinguishing their yellow glow with a whispered word.

She spoke to the darkness. 'You won't know it's me now. I could be anyone.'

'For the purposes of Perpetuus,' he said, 'being ourselves is essential. We do not have the release of imagination to get us through this.'

Hermione caught the sound of his apprehension; it unnerved her more than his wrath. She had always depended upon his stoicism, it was more of a comfort to her than any kind word or encouraging smile could ever be. She wondered what it was he feared: the unleashing of his own carnal nature on his student, or the inability to stir it. Her own arousal did not matter. She was a mere reciprocal, a receiver, a vessel to be filled, whether or not she focused on the giver or some other, infinitely more preferable, partner. It would make no difference to her part in this spell if she was denied the luxury of imagining the boy downstairs in the kitchen instead of the dark wizard lying beside her. For him though what if she was not enough to force the blood in his veins to rush to his aid and prepare him for the sacrifice it seemed so difficult for him to make?

They lay side-by-side on the dark-green counterpane inches between them, they appeared like a couple of recently departed lovers, awaiting their entombment. His low breaths and her occasional sigh, the only telltale signs that life had not yet left the witch and the wizard.

Hermione waited. She was seventeen and her experience of love was not extensive; her familiarity with its physical expression even less so.

Professor Snape was a grown man, she could barely imagine the wealth of experience he must have at his command he was more than double her age. As her hateful potions teacher she had certainly never considered him in the role of a lover. There was nothing romantic about Severus Snape. Logic told her that there must have been women, maybe even just one woman. Yet though reason argued that it must be true, her imagination would not allow it. Whatever the truth of the matter must be, whatever his sexual history was, the fact remained that the man whose breaths lay heavy on the cool night air must know enough to take the lead in this ill-conceived endeavour. His inaction begged to differ. He lay quietly beside her and it was almost as if he waited for her.

She lifted her head and raised herself into a sitting position, all the easier for the removal of the first layer of clothing. Her t-shirt got no further than her midriff before an angry voice called out for her to stop.

'Then how are we supposed to... proceed?' she asked, embarrassed by her own inability to articulate the obvious and humiliated by his refusal to see her unclothed. Was it pity that incited his unwillingness or disgust?

He did not answer her until she had returned her head to the pillow.

'Removal of garments is not obligatory,' he replied.

A year ago, a month ago, a day ago, two hours ago time was no longer of any consequence not in any time but this could the idea of Professor Snape as a contender for

sharing her first foray into the unknown world of sex a possibility. Even if he had been a less menacing figure throughout her childhood, the physical aspect of the man would have repulsed her naively anodyne sensibilities. Yet now she was glad to be deflowered by the stuff of nightmares, not only because of the colossal misapprehension she and the rest of magical society had been under, but also because (and she was unsure of whether or not she should feel shame for it) the aroma of potions fumes and dungeon walls no longer appalled her; it comforted her, it quickened her pulse and moistened her palms.

She wanted him to respond to her.

Removal of garments may not be obligatory, she mused as the words died on his lips, but it would be better than lying here shivering with anticipation.

Her self-confidence had never been tested quite so resolutely before. Hermione needed affirmation that his reluctance to see her unclothed was not as a result of a feeling of revulsion towards her. She required something a word, a gesture, a sign that would banish her increasing insecurity.

The sneer, it seemed, was obligatory when she suggested that they both think of something positive to say.

'Well the weather is clement for the time of year,' he replied.

'Something positive about each other,' Hermione insisted. 'And you would call rain, clement for August?'

'It is preferable to relentless heat, so indeed I would.'

'Well in any case, comments about the weather are considered small talk not a means to bolster a very fragile ego which was rather my point.'

'Very well,' he said, maintaining his watch of the ceiling. After some moments thought he spoke. 'You are not unintelligent when you manage to restrain your instinct to show off.'

Hermione ignored the slight and smiled. 'Thank you. Praise indeed from you. But that is something Professor McGonagall might say it's not very ... seductive.' Was she actually censuring Professor Snape for finding her insufficiently beguiling?

'You are wrong; nothing is more seductive than a keen mind and an eagerness for knowledge.'

'Not everyone agrees with that,' she replied. Hermione tried to imagine Ron expressing an admiration for knowledge and wisdom. She had always felt that her own acumen was regarded by Ron as an amusing quirk rather than a quality to be marvelled at or even classed as alluring. It felt more gratifying than she could have imagined for the only thing she was proud of to be recognised and elevated to the status of sexy by a man who was the hardest to please of all.

'Anyone who isn't a half-wit would acknowledge the value of a powerful intellect. Perhaps you spend too much time with imbeciles, Miss Granger.'

'Hardly fair, sir. If you are referring to Harry and Ron, you once again underestimate their worth.'

'I would infinitely prefer it if they were neither referred to nor considered at this moment. Merlin knows that Potter and his antics have rarely given me a moment's respite since he was admitted to Hogwarts. I believe your proposal was that we each find something positive to say?'

'Yes, I did, didn't I?' she rolled back onto her side and propped her head up with her arm, studying his profile carefully and feeling braver with each passing moment, intoxicated by his loaded compliment and the power she felt at her successful initiation of this dreamlike situation. The thought crossed her mind that she was indeed still sleeping, in some strange, magically-induced slumber.

'Before I do, can I ask you something, professor?'

'Ever the quest for answers, Granger.'

'It's more of a favour. I want you to promise something.'

'I'm rather suspicious when people ask me to make promises. I'm sure you can understand why?'

'Yes, of course. But I just want you to promise that you will return my memories. When it's all over, whatever the outcome, will you give them back?'

'I don't envisage a scenario in which I am allowed either my freedom or my life.'

'You expect to die?' said Hermione.

'You and I are fighting on the front line,' he replied. 'The Dark Lord's chances of prevailing are... high. I don't imagine any of us want to contemplate that future, but it is a possibility. If he fails I see only Azkaban in my future.'

Hermione had barely considered anything as practical as possible outcomes. The three of them had been living in the immediacy of fear and trepidation for months now, and it was too disquieting to think of what may happen in the worst-case scenario. Living from moment to moment with adrenalin always at the ready for fight or flight had become their habit. But Professor Snape had obviously been planning for this for a great deal longer. He had prepared himself for what must come and he was under no illusions that the conclusion for him would be bleak whichever way he turned.

'I don't want to think about that. I can't focus on what Harry, Ron and I must do if I think that our chances are so slim. And if our prospects are so remote, if we may not make it and if you or I don't survive then a promise like this doesn't even matter does it? Just tell me that you will return my memories if we survive and you have your freedom. Give me your word.'

Snape nodded. 'If that is what you require, then you have it.'

'Thank you.'

'Well this has taken a turn for the morbid. I believe you were about to pay me a compliment,' he said, turning his head slightly towards her. 'I seem to be providing you with a challenge.'

'Not in the slightest.' Hermione smiled and considered the assets of the man beside her. His shortcomings were far more evident. He was neither blessed with physical beauty nor an engaging character. Everything about Severus Snape seemed designed to give offence and provocation. Yet as she made a study of his worth and focused beyond the short-tempered, harsh, unforgiving man she had grown to respect, she realised that if one cared to look, Severus Snape had much to value, and perhaps, as she was starting to realise, venerate. Even his notoriously unattractive features seemed less repugnant now it was acknowledged that they concealed a noble heart and a righteous purpose. His deformed nose was now refined, his bony stature was lean and slender. His formidable glare was an intense gaze, and his cruel and derisive attitude was merely a biting wit. His features, she decided, were full of character and appeal; a more handsome man would be too insipid, a more charming one too tame. Professor Snape's face was an acquired taste, but Hermione was beginning to feel it worth the effort. Her musings could never be shared with her companion, however. She would never be able to admit that she found something disturbingly appealing in his physicality. But he was obviously anxious for some sort of compliment, nevertheless.

Hermione laughed at his self doubt.

'There are so many possibilities I'm finding it difficult to focus on just one.'

'You are a terrible liar, Granger.'

Hermione smiled. 'Okay then. I like your smell.'

'My ... smell!' He turned his head more fully, so that now they were eye to eye. 'And you found my eulogy to be lacking.'

'It's only a hint of one really, but you smell of all the potions and all the ingredients we have ever used it reminds me of Hogwarts, of discovering magic and the possibilities that can be achieved with a lot of perseverance and a little know-how. It reminds me of cauldrons and warmth and friendship. It speaks of happier times, of freedom and of hope and of optimism. The sensation is intoxicating, sir, and right now nothing could be more seductive than that.'

She didn't flinch when she felt the warmth of his fingers surround her hand as it lay on the bed-sheet between them. When he lifted her hand to his lips and gently grazed the flesh of her palm, Hermione knew that her young and tender heart could never now belong to her sweetly ignorant childhood friend.

Professor Snape's lips were softly sensual, and like the delicious feel of silk on bare skin they caressed her senses in that single moment when he kissed her hand. She silently obeyed his request for her to turn and face the wall. She closed her eyes and waited for his touch. She felt his body next to hers as he moved closer; his breath and his hair brushed her cheek as he searched for her ear. She heard the deep resonance of his murmur as he whispered, 'stay safe.'

Then she remembered nothing.

~*~*~*~

Author's note:

Thank you very much to everyone who has read and reviewed so far. The next chapter is back to 'present day' Hermione as she deals with her returned memories and her new feelings towards Professor Snape.

Chapter 7: Rennervate

Chapter 7 of 7

Hermione processes her returned memories, and Harry comes to call on her with news of an exciting new addition to the Auror team.

Chapter 7:

Rennervate

Hermione's hand trembled as she reached for her wand. Her Lumos spell banished the dark and bathed the room in a light which shone out a welcome return to the present. Everything was reassuringly in its place. The lingering sense of Regulus Black's oppressive bedroom withered under the presence of familiar objects and surroundings. Crookshanks still lay by the hearth, snoring gently on the peacock blue rug, oblivious to the fact that the world of his mistress had just been irredeemably turned upside down.

Once again, Hermione knew what it was to feel the effects of waking from a dream, only this time the details did not trickle away like sand through fingers. The evening she had passed with Professor Snape at Grimmauld Place was now as real to her as any other memory confined to its rightful place in a corner of her mind marked "depository". Yet this memory was like no other; this memory was both a traumatic awakening and an answer to an unformed question a page torn from a book found, returned and devoured. Now the story made sense, now the actions of the heroine were finally fathomable. There was a very good reason why she had spent the months leading up to the final battle ready to visit violence upon anyone who spoke disparagingly of Severus Snape. The relief was profound, but the weight of what had passed between them even more so. She had spent several remarkable hours with him, in which time she had played the part of bitter enemy, captive, confidante, sympathiser and participant in a very dubious spell.

The details of the spell were the only part of the memory which were unclear to her. She tried to focus fully on the final few minutes, but all she could recall was the two of them lying on the bed together and her own quivering willingness to complete the spell. She recalled quite clearly his instruction for her to face the wall; she could even relive the warmth of his breath and his surprisingly gentle touch, but as for the rest, it was either lost or ... She had to conclude that he had not returned the entire memory, either as a result of error or intention on his part. Perhaps he simply could not face her knowing the sordid details.

No wonder he had been so eager to leave her alone to experience her memory once he returned it. She doubted very much if she would ever be able to face him again. It was fortunate, then, that the chances of an unlucky encounter were practically nil. His Auror work with Harry and Ron rarely brought him into the office, and Hermione had never seen him at the Ministry, certainly not in the five years since she had been there.

By the time Harry arrived to check up on her three days later, Hermione was done with her languishing. Two days of brooding and analysing had barely helped her to come to terms with the disturbing revelation that she had initiated, and possibly performed, a piece of very dark magic with Severus Snape. And though she had not managed to resolve anything more than a fervent wish to avoid him, Hermione knew that she had spent enough time reliving the experience, and it was with relief that she opened her front door to find a concerned-looking Harry carrying a brown package which was revealed to contain a homemade fruit loaf, still warm from the oven.

She poured tea from a fat brown pot and promised herself respite from crudely constructed images of Professor Snape, herself and a dusty old bed in Grimmauld Place. Whatever the reality consisted of, her mind had exaggerated it tenfold perhaps he should have thought of *that* when he denied her access.

'You haven't been in work for two days.' Harry pulled the teacup towards him and took a small sip, peering at her through his black-rimmed glasses as he did so.

'I had a cold.'

'If you're worried about Ron ...'

'I said, I had a cold.'

Harry sighed. 'Because we've heard from him, so...'

Hermione set her own cup down with a clatter that spilled half of its contents into the saucer. 'You heard? Is he alright? Where is he?'

'He sent a Patronus to the office this morning. He's fine. I can't say any more, you know that.'

Well used to Auror missions, secrecy and espionage, Hermione nodded begrudgingly. 'He's okay though? Is that all he said?'

Harry nodded and glanced at Hermione before staring into his cup and continuing. 'I should've gone with him.'

"You can't go on every assignment together, Harry. You're not joined at the hip. And you do have a family to think about now... well, almost.' Hermione topped her cup from the pot. 'And at least he's with Dawlish. He *is* with Dawlish isn't he?'

'Yes. And Williamson.'

'Well then, he'll be fine.' Hermione's weak smile was not as reassuring as her sentiment. 'Molly's invited me round for dinner tonight. Are you and Ginny going?'

'Ginny is. I can't make it.' Harry took the offered knife and cut two thick slices of fruit loaf, passing one to Hermione and spreading his own with a generous helping of butter.

Hermione nodded. 'Good. That means Molly can fuss over her unborn grandson instead of worrying about Ron. How is Ginny?'

'She's really well. But she's having weird cravings for curry and bacon sandwiches.'

'Together?'

Harry grinned and nodded. 'Disgusting isn't it?'

She wrinkled her nose in agreement. 'So why aren't you going to Molly's?'

'I have a meeting with Severus.'

'Oh.' Hermione hoped her feigned nonchalance was more successful than it sounded to her own ears. 'The Avery case, I suppose?'

'Mmmm. We would be clueless about where to even start looking for him if it wasn't for Severus's inside information. He's been brilliant.'

Hermione wasn't sure why it was that Harry's post-war reverence towards the man he used to despise irritated her so deeply. Since the truth of Snape's loyalties and motivations were revealed, his place in Harry's mind had turned from reviled enemy to trusted ally. Hermione had seen this kind of behaviour before from Harry: Sirius had incited the same sudden shift of attitude when he had been exposed as an innocent man. The difference being, that Sirius had welcomed Harry's hero-worshipping, Snape did not. Hermione very much doubted if he relished being on first name terms with the boy he had lived to protect for the best part of seven years.

She listened as Harry rambled enthusiastically about Snape's invaluable input on the rogue Death Eater case and wondered if there would ever be a time when she could manage to meet her former professor's eye without blushing.

'I have some more good news,' said Harry. 'He's agreed to come and work with us. Properly, I mean officially.'

'What? Who?'

'Severus, of course. Who else have I been talking about for the last ten minutes?'

Hermione had noticed that lately there was something uncannily Snape-like about Harry's behaviour; his sense of humour had a distinctly sarcastic edge to it these days. He had even taken to sneering on the odd occasion, and as he answered her obtuse questions, she couldn't help wondering if he was actually attempting an acerbic drawl. On this occasion, however, her impatience made way for alarm.

'He's becoming an Auror!?' Hermione managed to fill her saucer with tea slop for the second time in five minutes.

'Officially, yes. He's practically been an Auror anyway for as long as me and Ron have. The only difference now is that he'll be coming to work at the Ministry, instead of us having to set up covert meetings in the back of beyond.'

'What about the training?'

'He's been in training all his life. An Auror needs to be good at defence, potions, have knowledge of the dark arts, an aptitude for espionage and stealth. He also needs to have a sound academic background. Come on, Hermione, can you think of anyone better?'

Hermione shrugged her reply and wondered why she was experiencing the same conflicting sensation of fear and thrilling anticipation as she had on the day she received her Hogwarts acceptance letter. Her horror then had been for the revelation that magic existed, and her thrill for the possibilities before her. A different kind of conflict consumed her now. The chances of them meeting by chance were now a distinct possibility, if not an inevitability. Harry noticed her face pale at the news.

'You don't look too happy about it,' he said.

'Ron won't be thrilled when he finds out,' she said deflecting his accusatory stance away from herself. 'He never really managed to get over his dislike of Snape like you did. To him, it didn't matter that he turned out to be on our side; he didn't like him before and he doesn't like him now.'

Harry looked a little uncomfortable, but maintained his enthusiasm nevertheless. 'He'll get used to it. And even Ron has to admit that if anyone has what it takes to make a bloody good Auror, Severus does.'

'Ron won't see it like that.'

'What about you?'

'What *about* me? It doesn't matter what I think; it doesn't affect me.'

'I know that, but I wondered how you felt about it anyway. You never comment whenever his name comes up; in fact, most of the time you change the subject if you can.'

Hermione wondered when Harry had become so insightful; he never used to have a clue about what was going on in other people's heads. Maybe it was his Auror training or the fact that he no longer had to worry about being on the tail end of the Killing Curse. Perhaps being free from Dark Lord mal intent allowed a person the freedom to care. Whatever the reason for Harry's perceptiveness, Hermione did not welcome it; she was not ready to share all she knew and felt about Snape just yet. She barely understood it herself. She shifted uncomfortably in her chair as she broke off a piece of Ginny's fruit loaf.

'I never really disliked him as much as you and Ron did,' she said.

'That's not what I asked.'

'What can I say? He turned out to be the best of us. He didn't deserve our hatred, but he doesn't want to be idolised either. He's complicated. I don't really know how I feel, but I don't think I would ever feel comfortable around him. I won't be seeking him out for a catch up.'

'His bark is worse than his bite. He takes a bit of getting used to, but he's alright really. I mean, he's never going to be easy going. But no one could call him unfeeling. I mean, look how long it took him to get over my mum.'

'Over her? I didn't think he was over her. What makes you think that?'

'Well, I suppose she'll always have a special place in his heart, but he's been with Jessica for six years now, so I suppose you could say he's moved on.'

'Jessica? Who the hell is Jessica? You've never mentioned a Jessica before.'

'Haven't I?' He shrugged dismissively. 'Well, why would I? He doesn't mention her much, and I'm hardly likely to pry am I? Sometimes he says we can meet at Spinner's End when there's a need to, and sometimes we have to arrange somewhere else because "Jessica's home".'

'Well, how is that an indication that he's moved on?' Hermione demanded in a voice more strident than she intended.

'You sound as if you want him to still be a brooding mess. Isn't it a good thing? I'm sure my mum wouldn't want to think of him ruining his life over her memory. And it shows he's moved on because he's obviously living with her.'

'Why? Why is it obvious? She could be his sister, or his housekeeper, or his research assistant, or his... great aunt. What makes you assume they are a couple?' Hermione's heart was racing with indignation, both for Harry's revelation and her disturbing reaction to it.

Harry stared at her strangely following her outburst. 'I dunno. Maybe something about the way he says her name.'

'And you never thought to ask?'

'Hermione, he's still Snape! He doesn't invite chit-chat or an intrusion into his private life. He's still got that way of looking at you as if you're something the cat brought in. What do you want me to do, invite him and his girlfriend round for dinner? I'd like to see Gin's face.'

Hermione shuddered at Harry's flippant use of the word, "girlfriend". Snape didn't have girlfriends; he sat at home reading clever books and bemoaning the loss of his childhood friend. He brewed potions and scowled. He devoted whatever spare time he had to catching dark wizards and regretting the past. He returned home each evening to an empty house with an aching heart, not to an affectionate woman who filled the chasm left by Lily.

Not that Hermione cared either way.

'Well, I still think you're jumping to conclusions as you know nothing about her but her name and that she is at Spinner's End... sometimes.'

'Why do you care?' asked Harry, giving her another suspicious look.

Hermione affected a blasé laugh. 'I don't. I'm just warning you against assuming. You don't want to let something like that slip once he starts coming into the office. You know what it's like when people talk and gossip gets out of hand. If you mention it to someone at work and it gets around that Snape is living with a woman and it turns out not to be true... well, imagine his reaction.'

'Hermione, you seriously think I haven't got better things to do at work than gossip about Severus's supposed love life? I hadn't even given it a second thought until you started grilling me about it. Why on earth are you so interested? And it's a strange coincidence that you are acting weirdly over him at the same time that he suddenly shows an interest in you. What's going on?'

'An interest in me? What do you mean?'

'I saw him earlier today to tell him about Ron's Patronus message this morning. I happened to say that you'd be glad to know he was okay, but that you were off sick. He seemed... well... I suppose I'd call it concerned. He was trying to be his usual sarcastic self, but I know him better now. He said, "As one of the golden trio is indisposed and who-knows-where, I'd have thought you would show a bit more concern when the other one is absent from work". I told him that you'd only been off for a couple of days and that you could take care of yourself, and he said, "Well, as long as *you* can live the all-consuming guilt if it turns out that she suffered alone." I asked him why he was so concerned about you, and he said that *he* wasn't, he just thought *I* should be.'

Somehow, it didn't matter to Hermione that it wasn't Harry's idea to see that she wasn't lying unconscious on her kitchen floor or unable to get out of bed. Snape had asked after her; he had shown concern. Whether it was from a perspective of self-interest or a genuine trepidation over her response to the Finite Obliviate was unclear, but at least he wasn't indifferent. Was he worried that she would respond by turning up at his home and demanding an explanation?

Or did he genuinely care?