

To Be or Not to Be

by _Levicorpus_

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Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 4

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To be or not to be: that is the question

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The last image Severus Snape had seen was the intent gaze of Lily Evans' piercing green eyes. And then he was gone, slipping out of his body and dissolving into a new vista...wind-ravaged green hills. The green was so bright, he could have been living in his true love's irises. Breathing deeply, he realized that the rip of the wind didn't affect him. He, his long hair, his robes, glided over the landscape unruffled, until he saw a flash of bright red hair disappear behind a rock. He felt himself shrinking with each bounding step he took, and again he was just a boy, playing tag with the beautiful girl he so longed to kiss.

Laughter overtook him as his silent, weightless footfalls progressed down the ridge. Her hair, gradually loosing from braids and dropping daisies as she went, beckoned him onward with the promise of its perfect, silken length. With the sensation of sexual longing overtaking him and making him weak, he felt himself grow again, into a teen with unrestrained lust, and then to a man, restraining a burning yet patient passion. With his evolution into his younger self, she turned and fell slowly into the embrace of the field, and he slowly sank on top of her, feeling the curves and hollows of her body only as memories as he watched her kiss his forehead.

"Severus," Lily sighed, "you're here."

"Darling," he murmured, running his hand through her hair and filling in the lack of sensation with his electric fantasies.

She rolled to lie beside him and took his hand in hers. He turned to look at her face and watched it age to look just as it did on the day she died. Her clothes changed as well, and she wore a soft emerald sweater over a long, dark blue skirt. He felt his chest pressed to the ground with sadness as he aged to the day he died. This, he realized, was death. He now was seventeen years older than her and laden with grief. His body reacted to his years of pain, but could not feel the physical warmth of the reassuring clasp of her hand.

They stayed on the grass an eternity...longer. Heaven had arrived...blissful and unassuming like a blanket draped over him while he slept. Here he was again on the grass with his love, his mission complete, his legacy firmly established. He was home. There was no chance now of going back to the world of the living, the cold, harsh world he'd left. He turned to steal another kiss, but there, lying next to him, was not Lily but Dumbledore.

"Sir," he said, startled, and sprang to his feet. The grassy landscape swiftly folded into a box and enclosed them in the Headmaster's office.

"Severus, please have a seat," the old man requested as he stepped around the desk and into his high-backed chair. Severus marveled at the perfect recreation of the office. The portraits above sighed and snoozed, Fawkes sat, mid cycle, regal in his cage, and Dumbledore regarded him over his glasses knowingly. Severus sat, noticing an odd, encompassing stillness as he waited on Dumbledore's next word.

"How are you?" he asked.

"Fine," Severus said. It was with speaking that he realized the source of the odd stillness...he wasn't breathing. He didn't need to and also couldn't. He tried to remember where breath originated: *in my chest? The roof of my mouth? The back of my throat? My lips?* These all were abstractions, of course...he didn't have lips or hands or legs. These all were images on the form he was encased in, but none of the images belonged to him anymore. Had he gained anything in death?

"That's for you to figure out, Severus," Dumbledore responded. "Of course, what it is you gain is highly dependent on what you decide to do."

"Do?" Severus asked, marveling again at the emptiness of speech without a body. The words reverberated in an empty tingle like particularly lucid thoughts.

"Well, yes. It seems you're to be given a choice. Death or half-life."

"You mean...I qualify to become a ghost?"

"Yes," Dumbledore said. "The council was unanimous in its decision. Oddly enough, you've been elected for a trial run. Of course, we aren't sure that you'll be able to return to this juncture, but the offer is still being made."

"I get to try being a ghost? I thought the point of this decision was that it was finite. Death or life."

"You'd be given a decade as a ghost before being allowed to reenter death. It seems your contributions to the world of the living are too great to be stopped by something as trivial as death. We feel you deserve to see the world's appreciation of your work."

"How am I supposed to choose if I can't weigh my options?" Severus asked.

"What do you need to know?"

"What could I expect from death? I mean...what is it like?"

"Ah," Dumbledore sighed, "there's the rub."

Severus rolled his eyes. He was unable to bring himself physical comfort through his usual controlled fidgeting. He looked up at the sleeping portraits, thinking that very few wizards chose not to face death. Severus certainly had never truly feared death. And now as he toed the line, knowing that at any minute he could be absorbed into the afterworld, he elected to pick the poison he knew rather than succumb to the temptation of the drug he hadn't tried.

"I'll take a decade," Severus said.

"Then I'll be seeing you momentarily," Dumbledore told him.

Resurfacing on the grounds of Hogwarts was like slowly passing through a membrane. Color was stripped off his form slowly and precisely. He molted physical certainty and instead was one giant thought. He moved like one...he simply willed himself towards this boulder or over that dell and surely he was gliding. He was comprised entirely of emotion. Having a body had allowed him to tuck away feeling in his bones and muscles. Apart from one, he felt an intense ache as he looked at the body-strewn grasses of his only home. The ache never subsided. At times he throbbed and at other times he was simply slowed by the pain. Without creaking joints or the sharp delicacy of skin, pain was wholly emotional...wholly ephemeral and inescapable. So this was half-life: pain.

Shy of revealing himself, he resolved to spend a season in the Shrieking Shack. He never slept, obviously, so he spent nights hovering by an upstairs window, watching the lights of Hogsmeade dim and extinguish. Students came inside to play Wizard Chess and have sex and drink, and Severus watched enviously as their hands clasped chess pieces and each other's bodies. What he would give to run his fingers over a potions flask or the dusty top of a book! He tried to remember balling up dust between his fingers, but memories of bodily sensations left him as quickly as a gust of wind could propel him across a room. At first, he'd been too nervous to practice flying, but it soon became a 2 am ritual to escape from a window or door and rise, unencumbered, over the air currents. He learned to love flight. He embraced, figuratively of course, the few benefits of his new existence, and, swathed in the cool night breezes, he contemplated who he would first reveal himself to.

One evening in what he judged to be October, Severus ventured out of the Shack and onto the Hogwarts grounds. Work had stopped on the castle's restoration project. The witches and wizards who'd volunteered to reassemble the shrapnel had retired to the glowing canvas tents at the edges of the grounds, so Severus struck out across the lake in search of another ghost with whom he could discuss entering civilization. Though he'd been something of a recluse in life, he was determined to become a fixture in Hogwarts life as soon as he could learn the ropes. For this task, he hoped to encounter Sir Nicholas. Instead, he reached the opposite shore of the lake and noticed a rigid figure overlooking the water. As he got closer, he realized he was making eye contact with a stalwart Hermione Granger.

He floated a few yards away, unwilling to come closer. She beckoned to him to come closer. He wanted to vanish...or dive under the water...but he froze. Something about becoming a ghost had left him incredibly self-conscious.

"It's okay," she asserted. "Come talk to me."

He edged closer.

"Come on, now," she said. "Who are you?"

Obviously he hadn't come close enough. He looked down and realized his robes billowed around him as though he was suspended in water. His hair floated a bit as well.

"Professor Snape?" she asked. "Is that you?"

He nodded, realizing he hadn't tried speaking. He came closer still until he was about a foot away from her. He stared into her face, analyzing every muscle twitch for fear. Fear had been an emotion he had loved to inspire in life, but in half-death he was worried about the seclusion it would afford him. No. It was better to be friendly and unthreatening.

"Can you speak?" she asked, nervously smoothing her robes over her hips.

He tried speaking in bodily terms...tried to breathe in and push his vocal chords. But since he possessed neither lungs nor a body to contain them, all that resulted was silence.

"I guess you'd like to know what happened?" she said, seeming to take pity on him. He nodded. "Voldemort is dead. We won the war." Silence. Would he have normally responded here? What would he have said?

"That's right," she continued. "Harry killed him...we destroyed the Elder Wand. Everything is...peaceful. For now, at least." She noticed her own nervous tone and halted, staring across the water.

"But you're not," he said. Said? How? He replayed the involuntary action and realized that strong and intent thought was what culminated in words.

"You can speak," she marveled. "Professor, how did this happen?"

"How did what happen, Granger?" he asked, now recalling his mannerisms from life and adopted them as easily as putting on a coat.

"You never struck me as the kind of wizard who would choose to become a ghost."

"I was given the opportunity to spend a decade as a ghost," he explained. Her eyes darted with thought as her eyebrows furrowed. "It puzzles me as well." There was a pause. "What are you doing out here, then?" he asked.

"Thinking," she said.

"About?"

She held up her left hand. A silver ring gleamed on her finger.

"Ah hah," he said.

"It's not just that Ronald proposed," she said. "I just keep thinking...what if this all isn't over? What if he's coming back?"

"That's no way to live," Snape said.

"You're right," she said. "I feel so insensitive worrying in front of a ghost." A thought occurred to her: "Am I the only one who's seen you?"

"Yes," he said. "I was trying to find another ghost, but you've gone and ruined that."

She smiled wanly. She looked exhausted in the moonlight...older, but somehow more beautiful. Her hair was frizzy and mussed, her skin looked unwashed and gleamed with residual sweat. Her callused fingers fondled the deep neckline of her robes and she bit her lower lip repeatedly. He was unnerved by her constant movement, and it suddenly felt imperative to still her.

"Calm down, Granger," he said. "You're making me sick with all that fidgeting."

She grinned and let her hands drop to her sides. The weight of seriousness fell off of her. He, too, relaxed.

"I have to be getting back," she said, gesturing towards the camp. "But can I meet you again? Tomorrow night?"

"Alright," he said.

"I'm glad to see you, Severus," she said.

He tilted his head in thanks for the thought and sank under the surface of the lake.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 4

Severus's ghostly travails continue...

Whether 'tis Nobler in the mind to suffer the

Slings and Arrows of outrageous Fortune

Severus listened. Hermione met him at the banks of the lake, and looking occasionally behind her at the progress made on the castle, Severus absorbed her words. The sound waves of her thoughts moved through him, of course, unimpeded by flesh. But they clung, somehow, to whatever ephemeral sense of being he still possessed. She talked about the Weasley boy, his bravado and ineptitude and possession of her heart. Severus wondered if she remembered how they'd interacted in life: how they'd been not much more than strangers. How he'd ridiculed her in Potions class and put her through the paces more than he ought. She must have been extremely lonely if he was the receptacle for these thoughts.

"Did you ever want to get married?" she asked, tossing a pebble into the lake.

"It was never really a thought," he confessed. "It was never possible, so I didn't consider it."

"It seems so unnecessary," she said. "What is the point?"

"Commitment," he told her. "The only person who doesn't want to get married is the kind of person who doesn't want to commit."

"Well, look at Tonks and Remus," she said. "They were married and that didn't stop them from dying. God, Professor, you should see Teddy. It's just awful to look at him."

"Maybe I shouldn't," he said.

"When are you going to come see the others? I'm sure Harry has a lot to ask you..."

"No," Severus said firmly. "There is no way after what I showed him."

"It was brave of you," she said.

"I thought I was dying."

"You were...you did."

"Yes," he said. "But not really. I wouldn't have chosen this if it had occurred to me that I'd have to deal with Potter and all of the aftermath. Maybe I should go somewhere else...Ireland, perhaps. That seems like the right place for a ghost."

"You're here for a reason," she said. "You're haunting Hogwarts because you have to, not because you chose it."

"Now, that's just an assumption. Who says haunting has so much significance?" Severus asked. "It seems pretty damn random to me. I closed my eyes and showed up here. I died here...maybe I just need to go somewhere else."

"I wish you wouldn't," she mumbled.

"Why?" he asked.

"For starters I believe in fate." She tried skipping a stone again, assuming a logical tone. "I really think there is a reason you are here. And I'm interested in seeing what that is."

"Oh, you'll see it, will you?" he said. "This confidante arrangement is going to continue, then?"

"You're the only one I have to talk to," she admitted. She looked even more exhausted than the first night they'd met. Her skin was incredibly pale. She wasn't sleeping. She barely moved her jaw when she spoke...she too was an imprint: an imprint of the pert, nubile school girl he'd known before he died. Womanhood settled on her like a disease. He was starting to feel as though kindling her soul was his key to feeling less hopeless.

"Come with me back to the tents, Professor," she pleaded.

"Severus, please. Merlin."

"Sev...Severus," she stuttered, then let out a faint giggle.

"Say it again," he said, "Severus."

"Severus." She made eye contact. It was sleepy yet hungry. "Severus. Severus. Severus." She said it slowly; she said it quickly; she let the syllables melt over her lips. "Severus."

"Hermione," he replied.

"Severus, come back with me. Can't you make yourself invisible? Have you tried that yet?"

The idea wasn't half bad. He focused, looking down at the wispy, Patronus-like edges of his robes. He, in a feeling that resembled deliberate swallowing, became invisible. He swallowed his image. He tried to speak.

"Okay," he said. "I might as well try."

She smiled. His sight was a little less clear, but he was able to hover behind her as she trudged through the field. He wondered how her knees felt, if her joints ached. His own pain wasn't too acute at present, but he expected it would return as soon as she fell asleep. How had he developed this symbiosis? And with Granger of all people? He refused to believe it was fate...just a random coincidence like the rest of this mess.

"You still there?" she asked.

"Severus," he urged.

"You still there, Severus?"

"Yes, Hermione."

They neared the tents and he again began to worry. In a feeling like a cough, he was momentarily visible before he was able to again swallow himself. She didn't notice. They passed through the threshold to her tent. It was dark and strewn with snoozing forms. How he missed sleep. Could he sleep as a ghost? He'd maintained such vigilance since his re-birth that he hadn't even tried. This wasn't the moment to let his guard down...perhaps in the Shrieking Shack some night. He moved to hover over a bed that turned out to belong to Neville Longbottom and watched as Weasley leaped out of bed to greet Hermione.

"Out walking around again?" he asked, rubbing her arms roughly.

"Yes," she confirmed, shrugging him off and climbing into bed after taking off her shoes.

"Your skin is bloody freezing," he noticed.

"Is it?" she asked quietly. She massaged her ankles and closed her eyes. Severus watched the entrancing bend of her fingers as she pushed an errant flyaway behind her ear.

"Mione," Weasley implored, "what are you doing out there every night?" *More importantly*, Severus thought, *what am I doing here?*

"I've told you, Ronald," she said, "I'm just thinking." She nervously looked in Severus's direction, wondering if he was still there.

"If this is about the proposal..."

"It isn't, Ron, it really isn't!"

"I told you we could take our time. We don't even *need* to get married for a while. A year even!"

"Ronald," she begged, exhausted.

"No, I want to talk about this," he whisper-yelled, advancing toward her. Longbottom grunted loudly in his sleep. Severus moved to see that he was still asleep. He seemed to be, though his eyelids began to twitch suspiciously.

"Ron!" she yelped, wrestling her forearm out of his grasp. Several sleeping forms flipped over, but Longbottom sat bolt upright in bed. The sudden move took Severus by such surprise that his invisibility slipped through his grasp. He and Longbottom locked eyes, and the young man bellowed at the top of his lungs. Weasley dropped Hermione's arm and stared, dumbfounded, as she motioned that he should leave. Severus nodded and glided, full speed, through Weasley and out the other side of the canvas.

Once alone, he wondered with a grin how terrifying it must have been for Longbottom to behold him as a ghost. After years of incessant mocking and intimidation, Severus

had built himself a form that would inspire fear at first sight. But what was this existence good for? And furthermore, why had he been selected for it? He couldn't brew potions, he couldn't partake in any physical pleasure, and he'd be damned before he joined Professor Binns in post-mortem instruction.

He allowed the wind to seduce him high above the Forbidden Forest. He twirled to float on his back and looked up at the spires of clouds bathed in moonlight. On closing his eyes, he wondered briefly at life...considering the outrageous fortune of birth and all the pain and heartache that went with it. He heard a stampede of centaurs beneath him and momentarily considered the fascinating extent of the strange form he'd adopted: robes that billowed incessantly, hair that floated around his scalp, silvery buttons that adorned his wrists and chest. It seemed the uniform he'd adopted for most of his adult life had translated directly into death. But as a few glimpses into the surface of the lake had shown him, he looked wizened and equally as exhausted as his lakeside companion.

An overwhelming longing for the trappings of life comingled with his ghostly agony, and he almost doubled over midair. Luckily, he still had his memories. He mentally re-created the string of lewd encounters he'd had over the years in the heart of Knockturn Alley...intoxicated trysts with all and sundry young, callused whores, each higher-priced than the last. He'd drowned himself in flesh, and been proud of his aptitude in finding, almost exclusively, red-haired prostitutes to quench his loneliness. His fantasies delivered him to morning, when he resolved to swallow his physical imprint and descend, invisible, upon the camp.

Severus spotted Hermione in the line for breakfast. Molly Weasley had charmed several ladles to dole out porridge. He watched Hermione from a distance, making sure to be out of range of anyone who might walk through him. She looked exhausted. Her limbs seemed barely up to the task of putting brown sugar in her bowl. He watched her spoon heap after heap and wondered what a night's rest would do for her...what a miracle it would be to see her wan face alight with laughter.

Once, in life, he'd emerged from the Restricted Section of the library, holding a book on deadly fungi, and seen her reading. Something about the sight, something he couldn't place, had made his heart leap into his throat. He'd pulled back into a row of books, and pretended to glass the titles with his unfocused eyes. He'd watched her slender fingers caress her earlobe. He'd balled his fist in his pocket, feeling a thin film of sweat form on his cheeks as she stuck a hand under her thigh, removing it from the chair. And in a motion so fluid he couldn't pinpoint when it had begun, she'd begun to giggle at something she'd read. With that he'd stormed out of the library, wondering whether she had looked up to watch him go. They had bothered him...these thoughts...so in her next Potions class, he'd bullied her to the point of tears before turning his attention to Potter's inexplicably found prowess in brewing sixth year potions.

He would have given anything now to see her smile, see her cheekbones rise, see her skin tauten. Without meaning to, he floated closer, and he watched, consumed with longing, as she pulled her hair into a bun atop the crown of her head. She sat, decidedly alone, on the outskirts of the assembly of picnic benches that constituted a sort of outdoor mess hall. Once he'd spotted Weasley chatting furtively with Potter, he floated behind her.

"That's quite a bit of sugar," he said in a low whisper, right into her ear. She turned slowly as if to validate who'd spoken.

"What are you doing here, Severus?" she asked.

"I have to reveal myself at some point," he said.

"I'm not sure I'm ready for Ronald to see you."

"Why is that?" he asked, his tone bordering on flirtatious. "What do you have to hide?"

"Nothing..." She stopped speaking when Ronald bounded towards her.

"You sleep at all, 'Mione?" he asked.

"No," she said. "You?"

"Like a log," he said. He gestured toward the ruins. "You up for a day of it?"

"Not really," she told him. "Maybe I'll try to nap."

"Oh, come on," he groaned. "You're so tired all the time."

"Perhaps I am," she conceded.

"That was pretty weird last night...that ghost."

"Ronald, for the thousandth time, I didn't see a ghost."

"Neville saw it! He looked right at it! Look, Harry and I have been talking about it. It all adds up. Snape had unfinished business...I mean, he was clearly the most miserable son of a..."

"Ronald," she reiterated firmly, "you're making things up. Even if there were a ghost in our tent for all of two seconds, so what? How do you know it wasn't The Bloody Baron? You know what? I'm not even going to dignify all this conjecture with logic. You and Neville can think what you will, but it's rude to spit at Professor Snape's gravestone. I'd have thought you'd have known better." And with that she got up from the table and walked, seemingly alone, toward the lake. But she wasn't alone. Her feet pressed into the dewy grass, and her companion cast a shadowy chill over all he passed.

After several minutes of silence, he could tell that she was beginning to wonder if he was still there. He resolved to make conversation.

"I had terrible insomnia when I was alive," he admitted. "Have you tried tea?"

"I've tried tea; I've tried breathing; I've tried warm milk; I've tried it all." She scratched her scalp, irritated. "Nothing works."

"Few things work better than a warm body beside you."

"Severus!" she said, scandalized. "You always struck me as a loner."

"Perhaps," he said, "but I did have my fair share of lovers."

She smiled, surprised and a little bewildered. His pain momentarily alleviated, he became visible again as they passed the shadow of the castle and rounded a corner out of sight of the encampment. He knew he would have to reenter society soon, but for now he existed almost solely in her imagination. He followed her over hill and dell, watched her walk and flex and speak. He appreciated her words and took on her thoughts and concerns as his own. He saw her hair framed in the sunlight and remembered warmth as he gazed at the way she rubbed her hands together to stave off the winter chill. And when she smiled, for the briefest of moments, he was alive again.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 4

Hermione visits Hogsmeade.

Or to take Arms against a Sea of troubles,

And by opposing end them

Hermione stepped into her tent and was glad to see Ronald already asleep. She didn't want to explain the mud on the hem of her robes, the hoarseness of her voice, or her inability to make eye contact. She'd spent the entire day with the ghost of her old Potions professor, and was beginning to suspect that something highly abnormal was developing between them. Yes, he was a ghost, but the more time she spent with him, the more she longed for his corporeal self. She imagined the sound of his footfalls in the grass, the drag of his robes over stone, the depth of his voice resonating through flesh. He'd been a commanding man in life, and seeing him as an imprint was as depressing as it was beguiling.

That day he'd led her to the lake so they could discuss the dynamics of the camp and the logistics of rebuilding the castle while the staff taught classes around the periphery of the Hogwarts grounds. As she was describing Professor Slughorn's inferior approach to Potions, she was struck with a clear memory of a moment in life when they...she and Severus...had touched. It was after class. She was returning a book he'd reluctantly lent her, and their fingers had slid over one another's in exchanging the tome.

He'd dismissed her cordially without making eye contact, and she'd replayed the moment, stricken with shame, for weeks. It was her fourth year...she'd just been discovering her body. She'd lain awake in bed, replaying in the dark the process of touching him and then feeling instantly drenched with shameful desire. She'd replayed it while running her palms down her abdomen. She'd replayed the way the pad of her thumb had run over the book's leather cover as his forefinger slid over hers. She caressed her inner thighs as she changed the course of the memory into carefully constructed fantasy. He licked his bottom lip...a habit she had proof of after watching him raptly in class in the preceding weeks...and hungrily met her gaze. In the fantasy, he'd bent her over the desk, pressing his pelvis against her, and uttered the words she'd written herself, but somehow felt were more his than anything else: "I hope you know how bad you've been. You must be punished."

She'd then imagined being spanked again and again by the book until its title gleamed in a welt on her reddened flesh. She could imagine three things: first the spanking, then the insistent hold of his hand on the back of her neck (replicated by her own hand as she writhed in bed), and finally his musky scent, consuming her nostrils like a nose bleed. Shoving her face into her pillow, she'd experienced her first (and third and ninth and twentieth) orgasm to the tune of her professor's commanding presence. She'd been stricken with embarrassment in class, but also busied herself with finding details of his behavior to augment the fantasy that would carry her swiftly into womanhood.

And now, lying under the canvas ceiling, she felt the insistent heaviness of desire. Her hips twitched but she refused to succumb. Night after night of this torture had transpired, and she was no closer to sleep now than she had been on the first night she'd encountered Severus at the lake. It was strange...while he, of course, was his own man on his own path, he also was an artifact of her youth and subsequent awakening. He was the one man for whom she was never good enough. And now, as he became the receptacle for her fretting, flitting thoughts, she was finally beginning to mend the wounds of curiosity she'd sustained after years under his power.

She opened her eyes in the dark, allowing it to coat her irises. She mouthed his name: Severus, Severus, Severus. With a few deep breaths, a gentle twitch to arch her back, and the press of her cheek to her inner arm, she again was in her dormitory bed, pressing gingerly and silently against her bed frame to slide across her sheets. Severus, Severus, Sev...

"Hermione?" Ron asked, shaking her. "Hermione, you're having a bad dream. It's okay. Wake up. It's just a bad dream."

"Thanks, Ron," she said. If only he were right.

Sleep came and dragged her down. In her sleep she seized and twitched, never at rest. Morning crept in through the canvas, and she wrinkled her nose at the light. She threw on her loose, dirty robes and shuffled out to breakfast, wondering if she would see him again. She made herself a mug of tea...black...and sipped at it while watching the others file in. First Harry, who stretched and grinned at her. Ginny followed, hugging him from behind and placing a kiss on his cheek. Arthur and Molly Weasley prepared breakfast. The Malfoys emerged bat-like from their tent, bemoaning the cold.

Though she knew she had orchestrated Voldemort's downfall, though she knew Hogwarts was hers to rebuild, she still felt astonishingly exhausted. It should have been exhilarating...resurrecting the Wizarding World. But instead of counting the living, she was much more interested in dwelling on the dead. Months into the reconstruction of the castle, they still found faceless bodies, horribly disfigured corpses, children's limbs wedged between boulders. It was sick. Today she would escape again.

Without a sign of Snape, she struck out towards Hogsmeade. The town was silent this early in the morning. Chairs were on the tables in the Three Broomsticks; Honeydukes lacked its usual sparkle. It was as though here, too, the magic had been drained. She cast her eyes down empty alleyways...here she'd kissed Viktor Krum, there she'd caught Ronald in a good light. Love, too, had faded from Hogsmeade. Or maybe it had faded from the whole world. Why love if evil simply waited to tear your family to shreds?

Several mornings ago, overwhelmed with work, Molly had dropped baby Teddy into Hermione's arms. One moment he wasn't there, and the next he was. Born into a moment of horror and uncertainty, the baby had barely discovered the world before his parents were yanked out of it. He grabbed her finger somberly, his eyes shifting to grey as they met hers. They stared for a moment before the baby began to giggle and a warm amber color bloomed in his irises. She ran the backs of her fingers across his cheek, sharing a grin with him.

She shook away the image of the baby as she surmounted the hill and arrived at the Hogsmeade Cemetery. She walked through several rows before arriving at the headstone she sought. She knelt and silently conjured red-tipped white roses at the grave. With her hand she wiped the engraved letters clean.

SEVERUS SNAPE

She wondered if he'd seen it yet. She wondered if it had been in his will to be buried here in such a humble place. She supposed it would have been wrong to bury him at Godric's Hollow, despite his longing for the place. She wondered when and if he would reveal himself to the others. She wondered if she was simply imagining him. How would she ever know?

As the sun crested the Hogsmeade shops and began to warm her face, she lay down between dewy shadows and imagined the press of his body, the touch of his large, dry hands to her forehead. Her chin quivered with her lip and tears threatened to fall. What was life but mourning?

"Those are beautiful," said a voice. She sat up abruptly and saw Severus's slowly appearing imprint.

"Oh," she replied.

"I didn't know you came here," he told her, averting his gaze as she wiped her eyes.

"Sometimes."

"Ah," he said. "Do you know anyone else buried here?"

She shook her head, standing and brushing herself off.

"Did you sleep last night?"

"Barely," she replied, smiling a little.

"You need to sleep. You look terrible."

"Terrible?"

"No, just a little pale."

"Now that's the pot calling the kettle black." They shared a chuckle.

She sat up and they walked in silence through the humble graveyard. The morning light settled coolly over the thatched roofs of the smaller homes at the top of the hill. One could feel the chill swept off the lake by the morning breeze. Severus sighed and Hermione caught the urge. They didn't look at each other.

"Do you suppose Slughorn would let us into the Potions room?" Severus queried, "I have an excellent recipe for a sleeping draught."

"I'm sure we could break in," she said, again adopting the air of mischief that was often at the ready in his presence.

"Lead the way," he said.

She did. Trotting down the Hogsmeade main street and waving to a groggy Madam Rosmerta as she went, Hermione wondered with excitement what his alterations would be. She missed academia. Despite her pending acceptance to the academy of Magical Law enforcement, she saw the career path as a way to kill time until Hogwarts was rebuilt. She longed for the classroom and always had.

After a quick Alohomora charm and a lot of herb grinding, Hermione began the potion. Under Severus's watchful eye they worked among the fragrant fumes to bring the potion to its climax.

"Stir clockwise, girl, clockwise," Severus barked, hovering so close behind her the hairs on the back of her neck stood up. She dropped the spoon.

"Pick it up," he commanded. "Keep at it. Yes."

She then sprinkled in the lavender she'd crushed, closing her eyes just momentarily, involuntarily imagining her youthful fantasies.

"Keep focused, now," he said. "Just a few more ingredients."

She added a sprinkle of toasted moth wing, his secret ingredient, and the potion turned a calm lilac. She turned and grinned after shutting off the heat to allow the potion to cool.

"Perfect, girl," he said, looking past her to the steaming potion. "Well done."

She snorted.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Oh, it's just...I don't remember you ever praising me." She sat on the desk. He edged closer.

"Well, you were so damn annoying." He glanced at her thigh, still sheathed in her robe. She ran her hand over it and their gazes met. Hunger. He moved his own ghostly hand over her thigh, and goosebumps rose on her skin. She let her head fall back with a sigh of pleasure and painful longing.

"Girl," he growled again, "don't you realize..." At that instant a key was thrust into the door. Severus disappeared and in a moment Horace Slughorn was staring at a frizzy-haired and flushed Hermione.

"Oh," he said awkwardly, "I didn't..."

"I'm just brewing a sleeping draught, Sir."

"Right-o," he said. "I'll just..." And with that, he stepped back out. Severus remained invisible, but the two of them burst into relieved laughter.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 4

Winter settles on the Hogwarts grounds

To die, to sleep

No more; and by a sleep, to say we end

The heart-ache, and the thousand Natural shocks

That Flesh is heir to?

At dusk it was too cold to sit outside. Winter began to descend on the Hogwarts grounds, and sunset took on a bleak, blue-hued chill as each night threatened snow. Ron, Harry, and Neville sat indoors by a roaring fire, drinking and laughing. Ron, hoping to abate the images of war that plagued him in moments of silence, sipped on his third firewhisky. Even still, in a long blink he found himself overwhelmed with images of Lavender Brown's bloody, ravaged corpse. He shook his head and drank deeply.

"Ron," Harry said warningly, "take it easy."

Ron winced.

"Did you get a chance to talk to Hermione?" Neville asked.

"To Hermione?" Ron repeated groggily.

"Yeah...about...you know."

"She says she didn't see a ghost. She's hell-bent there wasn't one."

"Fishy," Harry said. "Very fishy."

"I know what I saw," Neville asserted. "That was Snape. I'm sure of it."

"So, what?" Harry asked. "Why was he there?"

"Beats me," Neville admitted. "It must be some kind of mission. There's got to be a reason behind it. People don't just become ghosts for no reason."

"Do you really think Hermione didn't see him?" Harry asked, leaning back in the tattered armchair they'd recovered from the remains of the Hufflepuff common room. A silence passed, punctured only by the sound of Harry nervously picking at the stuffing that burst out of the chair's seat.

"Why would she lie?" Ron grunted. At that moment a sleepy Hermione shuffled into the room, clutching an oversized sweater.

"What are you boys doing?" she asked, smiling a little.

"You look..." Ron began.

"...rested," Harry finished, smiling at her.

"I had a nice nap," Hermione replied. She stood behind Ron and laid the Weasley sweater over him. He patted her hand in thanks, then took hold of it and pulled her into his lap. She looped an arm around his shoulders and planted a kiss on his cheek. He looked at her puzzled, but quickly shrugged it off.

"Amazing what some sleep will do," Ron observed.

"Mhm," she agreed. "Now what are you boys talking about in here?"

"Um..." Harry said, panicked. "You know, just Quidditch."

"Odds for the World Cup," Neville added.

Hermione tilted her head in disbelief. "You're talking about your ghost theory again," she said flatly.

"Well isn't it odd?" Neville asked. "I could have sworn you looked right at it, Hermione."

"I don't know, Neville," she said.

"Well it makes sense, doesn't it?" Harry asked. "For it to be Snape, I mean. It all adds up."

"How's that?" Hermione asked.

"Well he never got the recognition he deserved." Harry insisted, "Who would want to die like that?"

Neville nodded and continued, "Besides, he just seems like the ghost type."

"Is there a 'ghost type'?" Hermione asked, laughing a little. Ron squeezed her and whispered something into her neck. She shot him a smile and then looked back at the others. "Well I've heard enough of these theories for one night."

"But Hermione," Harry protested, watching her stand. "Aren't you the least bit curious?"

"Harry," she said, "aren't you a little tired of solving mysteries?" With that she led Ron by the hand out of the tent and into the cold.

"It's bloody freezing out here, Hermione."

"So, what?" she asked.

"Are you drunk?"

"No, but you are," she said, Eskimo kissing him saucily. Once they reached the outskirts of the forest, she leaned against a tree, eyeing him intently.

"Kiss me," she commanded.

"Here?" he asked, bewildered. "Hermione, I've never seen you like this...you can't just..."

"Run around like a scarlet woman, I know, I know," she yanked him closer. "Let's abandon the Molly Weasley dictums for a moment."

He kissed her, pressing against her and taking. His hand broke off some bark as he pushed closer. She let him crush her, seeming to enjoy the breath being knocked out of her lungs. He grabbed her hair in a fistful, exposing her neck so that he could suck on it forcefully. He didn't notice the tears that swiftly streaked her cheeks. Nor did he notice that behind him floated the ghost of his old Potions teacher. Hermione met the ghost's gaze with apologetic eyes and watched the spirit turn and disappear over the encampment. She closed her eyes and furrowed her brows, allowing Ron to aggressively possess her mouth, relishing the punishment.

Earlier that day, the inhabitants of the camp held a general meeting. The professors sat along one end of the table, Order members along another. Hermione sat in a cluster of former Hogwarts students, chatting with Ginny about the amazing sleeping draught she'd used the night before. Professor McGonagall called the meeting to order and all chitchat ceased. They waited with bated breath for her address of their greatest concern...the growing cold and its impact on the work of reassembling the castle. After a routine update on the progress they'd made...the Hufflepuff dormitory was almost completely assembled, as was the Kitchen and some of the dungeons...she delivered her decision on the project's status.

"It has been decided," she announced, "that those who are interested in staying on to help with the resurrection of the castle will be consolidated into a small team. The rest of you are encouraged to return to your homes for the remainder of Winter and to return in the Spring once this taskforce has decided on a course of action for rebuilding the rest of the castle. If you are interested in joining this taskforce, kindly speak with me after we've adjourned. And now on to Molly Weasley with some more announcements."

"Blimey," Ron whispered, looping his arm around Hermione, "has it really been this long?"

She shrugged, pretending to listen to Molly's speech about proper use of the newly installed fireplaces. But really, she was considering how she would break the news of her ultimate decision to Ron. She longed to stay at the castle and join the taskforce, but felt she had probably been discounted as an option due to her engagement. Harry and Ron had spoken at length about moving into Grimmauld Place, and she knew they were eager to begin careers. Hermione, on the other hand, longed to stay at Hogwarts. Not simply because she was determined to finish her N.E.W.T.s, but because she, as yet, wasn't ready to abandon her blossoming friendship with her old Potions professor.

She watched Professor McGonagall make her way through the crowd toward her end of the table. Hoping she was coming to speak with her, Hermione stood. But McGonagall simply gave her a curt smile and breezed past, to where Neville, Harry, and Ron had clustered. Hermione edged closer to listen to what she had to say.

"Boys," she said, "the Minister is waiting outside. He would like a word."

They exchanged a few astonished glances, shrugged, and then went outside. She rolled her eyes and then approached Professor McGonagall.

"Professor," she said, "may I have a word?"

"Of course, dear," she replied, opening the tent flap and stepping outside. "Now, what is it?"

"I'm hoping to stay here."

"Here?" she asked, surprised. "My dear, whatever for?"

"I think...I think I would like to join the taskforce."

"But, my dear, you're on the verge of becoming a newlywed!"

Hermione suppressed a groan. "I would really like to see this project through. Hogwarts means so much..."

"Say no more," she said. "I'm glad to have you on board."

"Thank you, Professor!"

"Minerva, please," McGonagall replied. Hermione smiled. The older witch went inside as the three boys approached. Ron picked Hermione up and spun her around, kissing her hard.

"What, Ron? What's going on?" she asked after he'd set her down.

"We've been hired! Kingsley wants Harry, Neville and I to hunt down the remaining Death Eaters."

"Harry, Neville, and me," she corrected.

"Right, right," he said. "But isn't this great!"

"Yes, Ron, wonderful," she replied, preoccupied.

"Oh, don't worry," he said. "You won't be alone for too long. It'll just be a few months."

"Of course," she said. "Right." Now was her moment to tell him. "Ron, I think I'll actually be staying here with the taskforce."

"Well, that's great news!" he said, picking her up again. "Everything is wonderful, isn't it?"

Almost, she thought.

About half the group resolved to start packing immediately, and as people dispersed to their respective tents, Hermione walked away from the camp and toward the edge of the Forbidden Forest. She hoped Severus would arrive, as he usually did when she needed him. But she spent a quarter hour in the mist, wondering what would happen when Ron came back from the hunt. At least she'd won some thinking time.

"Hermione," said a voice from behind her. There was Severus, advancing towards her from the forest.

"Severus," she replied. She was trembling. The moment they locked eyes one of her knees gave way and she grabbed a tree for balance.

"If only I could catch you," he said. She panted with desire. Why couldn't they have begun this involvement a few months ago? A few years ago?

He came closer, running a ghostly finger down her arm, causing her to shiver from the cold. "You look tense."

She breathed deeply in response.

"It's cold," he said, watching the air falling in misty bursts from her lips. "You should go inside."

"I don't want to," she told him.

"What do you want?" he asked.

She wanted to press against him. She wanted to rip open the buttons that shielded his chest and run her hands over his naked torso. She wanted to bite at his neck, suck on his lower lip, tousle his hair. She wanted to discover what made him gasp, what made him moan, what made him groan her name. She wanted him to love her, and hold her, and whisper in her ear. But he couldn't...never could. She said nothing.

"Look," he said. "Go warm up inside. And I'll be out here when you're ready to see me."