

Broken Dreams

by onecelestialbeing

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Chapter 1

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A/N: A very special thank you to my beta StGulik for putting up with me and my many errors!

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"Severus, have you heard from Miss Granger?" McGonagall asked, nervously pacing back and forth in his office.

"No. Since when did I become her keeper?" Snape replied without missing a beat, looking as if he was disinclined to converse with the Gryffindor Head of House. "Perhaps she's preoccupied with those halfwit friends of hers."

"Severus! She's your Potions apprentice, and the girl's mother died. Besides, I've owled Mr. Weasley and Mr. Potter, and they've both said that they haven't seen her since the funeral."

The dour headmaster turned around in a whirl of black robes. "She's Slughorn's apprentice, and what would you like me to do, Minerva?" he asked, sounding irritated. "Maybe the girl just needs some time to herself...understandably so."

"That might be the case, but at the very least, Miss Granger responds whenever I owl her. Her last few messages weren't very coherent and that is strange for her. I sent Fionna with a letter over two hours ago, and she still hasn't returned."

"Why not send one of the Golden Trio to check up on her? Or the young Miss Weasley? Aren't they chums?"

"Now you listen, Severus Snape!" McGonagall snapped, the feather on her pointy black hat wavering with her each movement. "You may be headmaster, but remember, I've known you since you came up to my knee," she continued, puffed up with indignation. "It won't kill you to take a few minutes out of your hectic schedule to make sure everything is all right with the lass."

"I still don't understand why I need go," Snape coolly replied, peering down his hooked nose at the elderly witch.

"Because you're the headmaster!" McGonagall exasperatedly told him, meeting his irritated look with one of her own over her spectacles.

Sneering at the older woman, Snape barely cast her a second glance as he grabbed his traveling cloak and walked out of the office.

Nighttime had nearly fallen when the headmaster found himself standing in front of the Granger residence. He paused for a moment, immediately feeling a slight spark of magic as he made his way up the stone pathway. Snape found himself slightly impressed at the advanced wards that had been placed on the house. Of course, he had no problems breaking through them.

Wand drawn, he walked into the house, unsure what to expect. Hearing what sounded like a low cooing, Snape cautiously walked through the dimly lit yet immaculate, brightly furnished living room. A light was on around the bend, and he edged towards it, wand out in front of him.

For the first time in a long time, Snape was thoroughly flummoxed at the sight before him.

Hermione Granger was perched over the kitchen island, her wand at her elbow and McGonagall's white owl standing in the middle. The witch was daintily feeding it what appeared to be crumbled-up bread. She was barefoot, clad in tatty sweatpants and a rumpled grey vest top, her curls limp and messily hanging around her head, giving the impression of a broken halo.

"Oh, hello, Professor," she greeted offhandedly, barely casting a second glance at him, as if she were used to seeing an irate man in her kitchen, fully dressed in teacher's robes.

"Miss Granger," he slowly began, crossing his arms and coming to a standstill at her side. His onyx eyes continued roving around the kitchen, taking in the sight of the rubbish bin that was in dire need of emptying and a sink overflowing with ceramic mugs and small plates, dried crumbs still strewn about on most of them. "Would you care to explain this?"

Hermione's dull amber eyes stayed focused on the bright white owl. Pushing more crumbs toward the bird, she seemed enthralled with its eating habits. "Professor McGonagall's owl is quite lovely, isn't she? She has such a lovely temperament... for an owl."

"That's not what I meant!" he growled exasperatedly, shoving his wand back into his inner pocket in one fluid movement. "But I am curious to know why you're feeding it instead of writing back to Minerva as she's expecting!"

Only part of his sentence seemed to make Hermione focus a bit more. Looking up, she dazedly stared at Snape as if she was mulling over each word before deciding how to answer. "I'm feeding her because, clearly, she was hungry. I miss my cat, Crookshanks. Do you remember him?"

"Yes, the feline from hell. For the love of Circe, girl, what's happened to you?"

"What do you mean, Professor?"

"Miss Granger, I... Will you stop feeding the damn bird?" Snatching up the parchment with McGonagall's note, Snape hastily scribbled a reply before bellowing, "Out!" The owl turned her head, casting the man a reproachful look before spreading her wings and flying out the back kitchen window.

Hermione sent a forlorn glance towards the disappearing bird, looking as if someone had just taken away her favorite toy. "Was that necessary?"

"Miss Granger, do I look like some sort of nanny? McGonagall sent me to find out why the hell you haven't replied to her letters, or why your two golden boys haven't even heard from you."

"Ron and Harry claim they haven't heard from me? That's odd because I've barely gotten a letter from them. Even a Howler would shock me at this point."

One black eyebrow raised ever so slightly, Snape became almost curious enough to ask if they were on the outs with one another.

"They came for my mum's funeral, but even before then they'd been too busy for me. I suppose Auror training doesn't afford them a lot of free time," Hermione continued, leaning forward on the counter and supporting her weight on both elbows. "Besides, I like being alone. There's no one to bother me, or take the mickey out of me for wanting to read all day."

"I told Minerva that you were most likely taking some much-needed personal time, but she insisted..."

"Of course, sitting here alone day in and day out, my mind tends to wander," Hermione droned on, unaware that she just cut Snape off mid-sentence. "I was so worried for my mother's safety that I stayed away. I'd only just given her back her memories when I found out she was sick; can you believe it? And then the last few bloody weeks I have with her...she dies."

By then Snape had silently edged to the kitchen doorway. In disbelief, he listened to the usually articulate young woman prattle on, sounding as if she had gone round the bend. Overly emotional people always made him uncomfortable; the sensation now multiplied because he had no way to escape.

"It's ironic, isn't it?" Hermione continued, distractedly brushing crumb remnants into her hand and crossing the room to dump them in the overflowing bin. "When I came back to Hogwarts, I wondered why you always hid in your office...although, if I might be frank, you never were that sociable to begin with. But after having neighbors and everyone else traipsing in and out of this house, I thought I would go mad. They can't look me straight in the eye or talk to me without that pitying tone, and it's positively infuriating. As if I'm some milksop maiden that's going to break down every time I hear my mum's name."

Still quietly standing, Snape wondered if the babbling witch was going to need subduing. Brevity had never been Hermione's strong point, but she truly sounded like a raving lunatic, even if he was secretly in agreement with many of her sentiments.

"Miss Granger, enough," Snape cut in, forcing himself to move all of two inches away from his safe spot in the doorway. "First, don't interrupt me. Second, you're going to be sick if you carry on like this, and believe me, I will not attempt to play Healer."

"What difference does it make?" Hermione all but shrieked, her reddened eyes now brimming over with tears. "And why did you send the owl away? I could have used the company!"

Snape's feet barely made a sound on the linoleum as he closed the distance between them in three strides. "You're a walking contradiction. Didn't you just say that you wanted to be left alone?"

"An owl is different. You were horrid to send her away!"

"Either control yourself," he tightly cut in, "or I'm going to pour a Calming Draught down your throat."

"I don't care!" she screamed, not even attempting to wipe the mess of tears from her face. "Once it wears off, I'm going to be right back to square one, missing my mum and blaming myself. It's my fault! I wasn't there for her when she needed me because I was too damn scared, and now I'll never see her again!" Standing in the middle of the kitchen, clutching onto her body with both arms and looking completely bereft, Hermione proceeded to cry great, ugly sobs that shook her petite frame.

Snape yanked out his wand and conjured a small vial. Firmly grasping her trembling chin, he tipped the contents into her open mouth. Keeping one hand over her face, he made sure that she swallowed the potion before stepping back.

Almost immediately her tears ceased, and Hermione drew in a shaky breath as lethargy soon replaced the wild look in her eyes. Snape had no regrets about giving her twice the normal dosage, but noticed that her legs were on the verge of collapse beneath her wavering frame. Unflinchingly catching the young witch round the cuff of both arms, he nearly dragged her out of the kitchen and into the front room. Dazed by the effects of the strong potion, she fell gracelessly onto the sofa. Her head tipped back on the cushions, her chest heaving slightly and messy tendrils of brown curls covering her much of her face. The wizard was unable to move his eyes from her torso, noticing that her rib cage was protruding.

"What the devil have you been doing to yourself?" Snape asked, nostrils flaring as he towered over the sofa.

Hermione's amber eyes rolled around a bit before looking up to focus on his face. "Hmph?"

Hissing in annoyance, Snape barely uttered "*Legilimens*."

Hermione's thoughts came rushing like water through his head. He watched as she aimlessly prowled her house day to day, only going out briefly to purchase the barest of groceries or to collect the post. She had barely consumed more than a few cups of tea and toast and had spoken to no one. When she wasn't half-heartedly reading, she spent time in what he guessed was her bedroom, crying.

Once he came back to the present, Snape saw Hermione's watery brown eyes still focused on his. She had stopped whimpering, but the tears continued to run down her cheeks.

Awkwardly sitting down next to Hermione, making sure to leave an ample amount of space between them, Snape withdrew a handkerchief from his inner pocket and handed it to her. When she made no moves to take it from him, he scoffed impatiently and leaned over to roughly wipe the moisture off her cheeks and nose. Hermione's head then lolled to the opposite side, her breathing growing steady. Pushing himself up on one knee, Snape peered down into Hermione's face and found that she had fallen asleep.

About time, he thought. A show-off, spouting-everything-she-learned-from-an-endless-supply-of-books Hermione was one thing to deal with, but one that blubbered and was unable to form a coherent thought? To say that it made Snape become unnerved was an understatement.

The house was eerily quiet with Hermione in a deep, potion-induced sleep. Looking around the front room, Snape saw picture frames scattered throughout the area. Having grown up in a Muggle household, he remembered that the images didn't move. However, having been in the Wizarding world for so long with animated images, he still found the non-moving ones odd. There were a slew of her baby pictures, leading up to school age and beyond. He assumed the older man and woman in many of the photographs were her parents, as he noticed a strong family resemblance.

Hermione's body suddenly tipped sideways on the sofa, falling onto Snape with her head smacking flush against his shoulder. He grumbled to himself, uncomfortable being in such an intimate position with his former student and what he considered barely pubescent Hogwarts Potions Apprentice. The young witch was just over half his age, on top of which, he could nearly look down her shirt and see the swell of her breasts if he was so inclined.

Snape knew he would have to touch her to move her, and the idea was discomforting. Keeping absolutely still, he heaved a sigh, wondering how he had gotten himself into this situation and soundly cursing McGonagall when he remembered that she'd sent him.

After the war had ended, Professor Slughorn made it known that he wished to go back into retirement, going on to anyone who would listen that he was too old for the excitement. Snape had no wish to reclaim his post as Potions Master, yet hit a snag: there was no one else available to take his place.

After he explained this to Slughorn, the elderly professor promised to stay on for another year to train an apprentice if needed. There hadn't been much deliberation...Snape could count on one hand just how many people were eligible to take the position. Of course, Hermione had been one of them, and McGonagall suggested that they owl her, asking her if she would consider apprenticing.

His face had instantly wrinkled up in distaste when he thought about the bushy-haired know-it-all, yet he had to concede that the girl had matured slightly from the loud-mouthed child who once graced his classroom.

Snape knew that Hermione would most likely prove easy to train, as she always felt the need to over-achieve in whatever task had been handed to her. She wouldn't be able to go to Slughorn if needed, as countless times Snape had caught the man stealing a kip in his office whenever he was supposed to be grading homework and exams. Snape felt confident that even under the lackadaisical man's tutelage Hermione would succeed, and he had no wish to leave his own office every five minutes to offer succor.

Snape would have never admitted it, but choosing Hermione as the Potions Apprentice had been a wise choice. She brewed everything with minimal trouble, opting on her own to try her hand at more advanced potions. The few times she had sought out the headmaster's advice, he'd given it, grateful that the girl turned away after finding out what she needed instead of leaving him with bleeding and protesting eardrums.

Slughorn, of course, had taken the credit for Hermione's immediate grasp of things, but that was to be expected.

But one afternoon, Hermione had made an error in the laboratory that nearly cost her a burnt and withered arm. Snape had been on his way past the laboratory when he noticed the young witch reading a letter with tears steadily pouring down her face. The headmaster had had no intentions of prying into her personal affairs, and was not at all curious why she was crying. His sole reason for coming into the room had been a steaming, rattling cauldron. Hermione had been standing close to it, and although her hair had been pulled back, her sleeve was dangerously close to the volatile contents.

Able to recognize the potion by its pungent scent, Snape knew that she had added too much knotgrass. Hermione had been completely oblivious to the viscous liquid. It was now murky and glowing green, which meant that it was on the verge of exploding.

He took three steps and knocked the unaware girl out of the way, simultaneously pointing his wand at the cauldron, vanishing its contents and putting out the flame beneath it. Then Snape lit into Hermione. She had stood completely still as the headmaster soundly berated her for her foolishness, demanding to know where her head was.

She had showed Snape the letter she had been reading, and he learned that her mother was in a Muggle hospital near her home, sick and not expected to live long. Still seething, he stalked over to the Potions office, robes trailing behind him, and wasn't shocked when he found a lightly-snoring Slughorn with his feet propped up on his cluttered desk.

Snape called out to the man in a booming baritone, taking snide pleasure when he became startled and nearly fell out of his chair. He proceeded to explain that Slughorn would have to make do without his apprentice for an indeterminable amount of time, offering nothing further to the elderly professor who'd begun to question him incessantly.

Escorting the now-silent Hermione to his office, Snape had sent for McGonagall. The elderly witch came to his office, and for the second time in five minutes, the headmaster reiterated Hermione's unfortunate predicament.

McGonagall immediately offered Hermione her awkward brand of consolation. Hasty arrangements were made for the young witch, and she left that afternoon. Since that day, neither Snape nor McGonagall had spoken to her.

McGonagall had gone on worrying about Hermione's lengthy absence, expressing her concerns to Snape at every given chance. The last straw had been when the Transfiguration professor sent her personal owl, Fionna, to the young woman, with a brief note asking how things were. When she'd gotten nary a response, she sought out Snape, nagging at him until he relented and walked out of his office.

Hermione sighed deeply in her sleep, causing Snape to turn his head and look at her. If he had to choose, without a doubt he preferred this silent witch compared to the sobbing, inconsolable one.

At least she's able to sleep, he thought to himself, closing his eyes and resting his head against the back of the sofa.

There were but so many phials of Dreamless Sleep that he could take before becoming immune to the effects. Snape was unable to remember the last time he'd slept properly and continuously throughout the night. Even before the war, images of the people that had been tortured and killed at the hands of the Dark Lord before his eyes continued to haunt him. Whenever he attempted to rest, all he could see was their frightened, pleading eyes, their terrified voices echoing in his mind. He had been forced to kill many himself, always doing so quickly and without looking at them, knowing that he would never get the image out of his head.

Snape was anything but daft; he knew the names he'd been called behind his back by his peers and even students. If the little miscreants knew the reason for his perpetually dark mood, they would most likely soil themselves.

Since he had begun teaching, the students he encountered on a daily basis were always whinging about the most trivial things...a sought-after young witch or wizard not returning their affections, or their parents not sending enough money to spend on excursions to Hogsmeade. Snape would have given his eyeteeth to have had the mundane worries of his students when he was their age. However, even as a small child, he'd had to suffer at the hands of an abusive father and an aloof mother. The occurrences had become further spaced apart once he'd gone away to school, but then he'd been tormented by his own peers.

Once he was an adult and began leading a double life, Snape wondered if he was destined to ever find a moment's peace. Admittedly, things had died down once the war ended. The truth had come out about his role as a spy, yet he abhorred the unwelcome attention as the loathed epithet of 'war hero'. As Headmaster at Hogwarts, he was able to ensconce himself in his office at will, but his solitude nearly always became short-lived, as he was continuously being summoned by one of his colleagues.

Snape had just reached a hand up to rub against his temple when Hermione shifted her head against him. Her curls brushed against his chin, and he was able to catch the remnants of a floral shampoo that she'd most likely used a few days ago.

Damn.

The girl began nuzzling her face into his shoulder, softly exhaling before going completely still.

Snape thought it ironic...the young witch that he had always spoken to with a biting tongue was now curled up against him in the throes of slumber.

The silence in the room was deafening although Snape realized it was the first time in a while that he'd been in a place that was completely at a standstill. The only sound in the room was the ticking of a clock in the vicinity mingled with Hermione's light breathing.

Figuring that he might as well take advantage of the quiet room, Snape attempted to clear his mind and put his head back, trying to ignore Hermione's head against his shoulder. Crossing both arms across his chest, he closed his eyes and fell into a light sleep.

A sudden outcry made Hermione jump out of her sleep. Turning her head, she felt her nose brush against soft wool with a smoky, herbal scent embedded in the fibers. Dazedly sitting up, she began to rub the sleep from her eyes. Her throat felt dry and her head heavy, and her clothes were clinging uncomfortably to sweat-dampened skin.

Hermione felt a bit more lucid, and the events of that afternoon came rushing back, making her amber eyes grow wide as they settled over Snape, who was fast asleep with his head thrown back on her couch. He was still clad in his voluminous teaching robes and ever-present, tightly-buttoned black suit.

Although he was asleep, it was still a bit daunting to sit so closely to the exceptionally cantankerous and introverted man. Hermione couldn't help but notice that the deeply etched lines of stress that had forever marred his face seemed to have slightly disappeared. If not for his austere appearance, Snape would have appeared almost serene while sleeping.

Gingerly rising from the sofa, Hermione walked to the kitchen and retrieved her wand from the counter. Returning to the front room, she found that Snape hadn't budged...the proverbial picture of intransigence with his limbs held tightly, even if the angle of his head looked highly uncomfortable. Using her wand to Summon a pillow, Hermione charmed it into place at the end of the sofa. She then utilized two more spells to remove Snape's flowing black teaching robes and place him horizontally on the couch, his head coming down on the pillow.

Hermione then curled up in an armchair across from the sofa, her eyes still trained on Snape. It was almost surreal that he was in her house, sprawled across her front room sofa. His dark appearance against the light furnishings made her think of yin meeting yang. She had never been this close to the professor without him looking at her with displeasure or uttering an acerbic comment. Hermione nearly felt as she was in the presence of a living, breathing, and cantankerous deity. Still, she was unable to muster up the energy to move from her spot, subconsciously worried that if she did he would be gone.

Snape inhaled deeply, turning his head slightly to feel his face brush against something soft. Whatever he was lying on smelled sweet and floral, a scent he was wholly unused to.

Keeping his eyes closed, he remembered he was in Hermione Granger's house and that she was most likely sitting across from him. He could feel her brown eyes nearly boring a hole into his skull.

"Have you nothing more sporting to do with yourself than to watch me sleep?" he rasped without turning his head.

Hermione gasped sharply, realizing that she'd been caught.

Snape opened his eyes when he realized that he was much too comfortable. He was lying down on the couch and had fallen asleep for who knew how long. The little do-gooder had even managed to shove what was most likely the pillow from her bed beneath his head. Groaning as he pushed himself up, Snape moved his hair back away from his eyes with one pale, fine-boned hand, speculatively eyeing the lackluster young woman curled up in a chair across from him. "I should thank you for not waking me up with the dulcet tones that you were previously fond of utilizing."

"I'm sorry about that," Hermione apologized. She noticed Snape looking at her pillow, his eyes then moving to his teaching robes that had been neatly draped across the loveseat. "You looked uncomfortable..." Her voice trailed off, and she felt her ire rise when she noticed a sneer crossing Snape's face, one that he made no attempt to conceal.

"No need for an explanation, Miss Granger. I'm used to your incessant meddling."

If his bluntness shocked her, Hermione didn't show it. Snape had to admit that he was somewhat impressed with her moxie, but then again, whenever he had attempted to cut her down with words she took them in stride. Countless times he had made students cry just by looking at them; Hermione never batted so much as an eyelash at his vinegary remarks.

"Now that you appear lucid and more reasonable, you should know that I was not pleased to be ejected from my office by McGonagall. She was worried that something happened to you when you never returned her owl."

Hermione felt abashed, realizing that she'd been lingering in her own abyss of self-pity, thus becoming oblivious to the outside world. "I-I didn't mean to worry anyone," she stammered, her forehead furrowing.

"Be that as it may, you've managed to do a fine job of doing so," Snape dryly continued. "You're not some fledgling witch, any more than I'm a bleeding nursemaid. But

Minerva insisted that I come, and it's just as well...you're a god-awful sight."

Hermione finally bore some semblance of a reaction. "I apologize, Professor, but perhaps you are unaware that I just lost my mother," she snapped. "So I hope you'll forgive me if tarding myself up is not a priority."

"You simple girl, at least humour me and act like you're astute," Snape snarled in a tone that reminded Hermione of her days of irritating him with her never ending questions. "Surely you cannot believe that I mean your hair and face."

Hermione's eyes flashed angrily at Snape, who glowered right back at her.

"Where is your bedroom?" he demanded, standing up and wordlessly beckoning for her to do the same.

"Upstairs."

"Walk."

Trudging slowly as if her feet were weighed down, Hermione could barely hear Snape's footfalls behind her. Once she turned into her bedroom, he grabbed her by the cuff of her arm and hustled her in front of the full-length ornate oak mirror standing in the corner.

"Your rib cage is showing, and there are dark circles beneath your eyes," he pointed out derisively. "I know you haven't been eating properly, and believe me, you cannot afford to lose any weight."

Hermione stared straight ahead at her messy appearance, slightly unnerved at Snape's reflection behind hers. She had to concede: he was correct in his observations. She had grown thinner, and the pyjamas that once fit her comfortably were now loose around her frame.

"You have ten minutes to shower, wash your hair, and change. Then I want to see you back downstairs," he continued. "And Miss Granger? Do try and change into something... more appropriate."

"What's wrong with what I have on?" she bristled, hackles raised as she whirled around to glare at the scowling professor.

"Your shirt is loose at the neckline and nearly transparent. Utilize your powers of deduction." The dour man then turned on his heel and stalked out of her bedroom.

Hermione nearly shouted indignantly behind Snape, wanting to know who he thought he was. However, her past experiences with the man warned her to refrain from any more hysterical outbursts. Before today, she would have thought it rich for him to tell her to wash her hair. Yet when she had woken up from her nap, her hand brushed against his head and found that he had soft, wispy hair that wasn't greasy in the least.

Still smarting from Snape's vituperation, Hermione dragged herself into the bathroom. *You really are a sight*, she chided, once again catching her reflection in the mirror. Ridding herself of her rumpled and stale clothing, Hermione stepped into the shower. The hot water proved to be invigorating, and she sighed as it cascaded over her body.

Once she was done bathing, Hermione wrapped a fluffy white towel around her body and walked to her room. She changed into fresh underwear and sweatpants, and was now perched on the edge of her partially made bed, tackling her hair with a comb.

"Damn," she swore underneath her breath. Her unending days of tossing about in bed and not running so much as her fingers through her hair had left an unsightly amount of snarl and tangles. Still cursing to herself, Hermione knew that not even a potion would undo the little knots scattered throughout.

Suddenly a loud rapping came from the bedroom door, followed by the professor's irritated sounding voice.

"What in bloody hell?" she swore, nearly jumping out of her skin, scrambling off the bed and wrenching the door open. He had frightened Hermione so badly she nearly forgot that her upper body was only covered by her bra.

"Miss Granger, I don't have all day. Now I told you to come downstairs in exactly ten minutes."

"And you said to change my clothes and tend my hair, which I'm doing! So unless you have a better way of me getting this comb through it..."

Her words were cut short when Snape lazily withdrew his wand and flicking it at her head. Her curls looked the same but the knots had seemingly all fallen out. He then breezed past her, walking over to her dresser and yanking open the top drawer, pulling out the first thing his hand touched.

"Put this on and come downstairs," he snapped, barely looking at her as he chucked a long-sleeved, dark pink pullover into her hands.

Her face still turned up, Hermione watched as Snape walked away without another word. Not wanting to be chastised again, she hurriedly pulled the shirt over her head and stood up. In her rush to get downstairs Hermione forgot her slippers and padded on bare feet to the front room. She frowned slightly when she saw the empty space and continued around the corner.

Snape was sitting at the dining room table and hadn't bothered to look up when Hermione cautiously crept over. He had picked up a newspaper from the stack she kept at the back door and now had his head buried in it, pointedly ignoring her. Before him on the table was a large spread consisting of a hearty-looking stew, fresh-baked bread with butter, a jug of pumpkin juice, and three different types of pudding.

"Where did...?" she began, only for Snape to interrupt her.

"House-elves," he answered in a clipped tone, flipping to the next page of the newspaper.

Hermione was a bit disbelieving that house-elves from Hogwarts had visited her house, but reasoned that Snape was headmaster and able to Summon them at will.

"Miss Granger, I didn't have them bring dinner for you to stand dithering about whilst gawking."

Dutifully pulling back a chair, Hermione sat down at the table. Furtively eyeing Snape, who was still hidden behind his newspaper, she pulled the bowl of stew in front of her.

Hermione hadn't purposely avoided eating; she had just been unable to work up much of an appetite. Usually a cup of strongly-brewed tea had been enough to keep her going, and if she was a little hungry, a handful of crackers sufficed. But she had to admit that the stew was delicious and began eagerly spooning it into her mouth. After her insides felt marginally warmer, Hermione picked up some bread. Spreading a copious amount of butter on it, she devoured one piece and soon worked on another.

Snape gave a sudden scoff, breaking the awkward silence, although his head barely twitched to turn in Hermione's direction. "Your sense of self-preservation is abysmal."

Hermione raised an eyebrow, rushing to chew and swallow the mouthful of bread and stew. "How do you mean?"

"It means just what it sounds like, silly girl," he replied evenly, the pages of the newspaper shuffling as he turned another page. "Countless times you've dashed off with those dunderheaded friends of yours, intent on saving the world. Yet I get here and find you withering away because you're simple enough to not even remember to eat."

"Professor, I know that witty repartee is part of your charm, but, honestly, do you think you could give me a break, just this once?" Hermione broke in.

"Despite being a Gryffindor, I remember you being able to control your emotions better than you're doing now," Snape drawled. "Subjectively speaking at least, to me you've always worn your heart on your sleeve, always the sentimental one."

"My mum died!" Hermione all but shrieked, tossing her spoon into her bowl, brown droplets splashing out over the edge and landing on the table. "And all you can do is go on insulting me. Do you really hate me that much?"

Snape wanted to laugh bitterly; hate had been the furthest thing from his mind, especially after he'd walked in on the young witch only clad in a bra and sweatpants. Despite the age difference and her being his former student, Severus was still a man, one who hadn't been with a woman in longer than he cared to remember.

Looking past Hermione's frail upper body, he'd been unable to ignore her smooth, flat stomach, leading up to a set of breasts that were neither too big nor too small. Snape actually felt a bit out of sorts when, to his dismay, realized that felt a stirring of arousal from looking at the young witch.

"I'm not above using the Imperius Curse to force you to eat, so I advise you to finish that," Snape offered, putting down the newspaper. His obsidian eyes turned to drill into flashing amber orbs. "If you're expecting me to mollycoddle you, then you're dafter than I realized. I'm here merely because my Potions apprentice has nearly gone off her rocker. It's my job as headmaster to ensure the welfare of the students as well as staff at Hogwarts."

Hermione fell silent but picked her spoon back up, knowing that Snape had no qualms about carrying out his threat.

"Although, rest assured, Miss Granger, despite your steadfast need for gracelessly spouting the first thing that comes to your mind, I harbor no feelings of hatred towards you."

With that he picked the newspaper back up, reading where he'd last left off.

"Professor... may I ask you a question?"

"What, already eager for me to retract my previous statement?"

"Do you know that you talk in your sleep?"

"Is that so?" Snape asked coolly, although he was inwardly annoyed at himself for doing so in front of Hermione, as well as her for pointing it out.

"Just a little," Hermione wistfully continued. What she omitted was the method that had rendered him silent. The effects of the Calming Draught that he'd poured down her throat had worn off, and Hermione hadn't been in a complete slumber. A most distressing sound issued from the man next to her had startled her. Looking at his face through sleep-hazed eyes, she realized that Severus had been talking in his sleep.

His words had been indistinguishable, but the look on his face plainly showed that he was most likely in the throes of a nightmare. Hermione considered waking Snape but didn't know if he was the type that woke easily or would behave like a troll being disrupted.

She experienced a tugging in her chest that left her off-kilter and, before she was able to stop herself, had lowered her hand to Snape's sleeve, slowly moving until it was grazing his fingers. Hermione didn't know what had possessed her to touch the man in his sleep, but it worked, as he'd immediately quieted down.

"Do you have nightmares about... you know?" she asked, skimming her spoon across the surface of the stew. When Snape kept his head behind the paper, refusing to respond, Hermione continued. "I thought I was the only one that had them; although, they've become less frequent as of late..."

"I advise you to tread lightly, witch," he warned. "My sleeping habits are of no concern to you."

"Well, it isn't as if you're the only one," Hermione went on, unable to help herself. "We've all had them before and after the war. Although, I've found that being alone makes them worse."

"Fine words coming from someone that's been hiding in her house for the past month."

"I wasn't hiding," Hermione retorted snappishly, her hand falling still, fingers tightly clutched around her spoon's handle.

Snape was grateful when she became riled up, as it distracted her from asking any more personal questions. "Close your mouth; you look like a fish. Better yet, here." He put down the paper long enough to shove one of the dessert platters in Hermione's direction.

Scowling at the professor, Hermione saw a flash of white in the corner of her eye. McGonagall's owl had returned, bearing a small note tied to its right leg. It stood dutifully in front of Snape, patiently allowing him to remove the scrap of parchment. Hermione tried to offer Fionna remnants of her bread, only for Snape to snap at her and the owl, causing it to fly hastily away.

He ignored the scowl that Hermione threw his way, his eyes scanning over the note.

"As if I'm some bleeding nanny," he muttered under his breath, tapping the parchment with his wand and lighting it.

Hermione slowly chewed on her dessert, watching as Snape vanished the fallen ashes away.

"What is it?" she asked after swallowing.

"Just McGonagall making more work for me," he growled. "Telling me to not rush back to the school. She thinks you might have it in your mind to off yourself, and apparently somehow it's my job to make sure that you don't."

Hermione was in the middle of bringing another bite to her mouth when she paused. "Why would she think that?" she asked aghast.

Snape looked plaintively at her for a while before answering.

"When I arrived here, I found you feeding an owl, looking and behaving as if you'd just escaped the mental ward of St. Mungo's. Are you really that shocked?"

Hermione roughly shoved the fork into her mouth. "I might have been a bit touched, but I'd never do something that drastic," she mumbled around her food. "But I don't think I'm ready to return to Hogwarts just yet."

"That much is evident," Snape intoned. "I believe Minerva means for me to stay here with you until you regain your senses."

"I don't think that will be necessary," Hermione hastily replied. It had been strange enough with the headmaster in her house; she was unable to fathom him staying for an even longer period of time.

"I agree," he answered curtly. "This is why I'm giving you until this Monday. The weekend should be enough for you to sort yourself out; otherwise, someone else will have to resume my post as your au pair."

"I think I can deal with that," she offered.

"You don't have a choice, Miss Granger."

Forcing herself to ignore the fact that she was being treated like a wayward child, Hermione finished the last bit of pudding. The dishes disappeared from the table with a pop and she folded her hands, placing them down on the empty space.

Furtively glancing across the table, she saw that Snape was still reading the newspaper and determinedly tuning out her presence. Opening her mouth to speak, she decided against it and began drumming her fingers on the tabletop, making a staccato rhythm against the wood grain.

"I merely need to be in the same house with you, not glued to your side," he drawled in a bored voice. "If you wish to leave, then go. I trust that you won't do anything foolish."

"All right," Hermione said, slowly pushing herself back in the chair and standing up. Making her way out of the dining room, she turned her head slightly to look over her shoulder, finding that Snape had his head still buried in the paper and was taking no notice of her.

Needing something to occupy her time, Hermione went upstairs to the linen closet. She still hadn't wrapped her head around the idea of the headmaster staying in her house for the weekend. Perfunctorily moving about, she took out clean sheets and towels and set up the guest bedroom. After the bed was neatly made, she placed the folded matching towel and washcloth on the dresser. She thought about going back downstairs to let Snape know that she'd readied everything for him but decided against it.

Going to her own bedroom, Hermione stretched across her bed, burying her head in her folded arms. Unsettling thoughts kept running through her head. What was she supposed to do with the professor in her house for the next two days? Was she supposed to entertain him? What was he going to sleep in? She didn't remember seeing him with anything other than his teaching robes. Hell, she'd never seen him wearing anything but the teaching robes over his simple black suits. She prayed that she wouldn't accidentally see something that he hadn't intended to show, say, if he was on his way out of the shower.

Hermione nearly giggled insanely at the thought of seeing the man undressed. From the age of eleven, he'd only come out in high-necked suits, with long sleeves that covered much of his hands. The only time she'd ever seen another part of his body was the time Fluffy had sunk his claws into Snape's leg, tearing away his trousers and leaving a deep, oozing gash behind. Even then, upon noticing Hermione's prying eyes, Snape looked as if he wanted to throw a hex her way and then Obliviate her afterwards.

Forcing herself to think rationally, Hermione scanned her bedroom until she came across a Potions textbook that she'd been studying. She had already devoured the required books for her apprenticeship. Despite Slughorn being a less than stellar professor, his book collection was quite large, and he had no qualms about lending them to Hermione. Although on more than one occasion, she had considered that the only reason the man lent her books was to stop her from firing questions at him and instead hastily exit his office.

Hermione stayed on her bed and had read all of three pages when she decided that it was rude of her to leave Snape downstairs alone. Despite knowing that he would look at her with nothing but disdain, Hermione snapped the book shut and tucked it beneath her arm.

Cautiously walking downstairs, she found him in the front room, perched in the armchair and engrossed in a tatty tome that made her wonder if he had conjured it with his wand or had it hidden in the folds of his black teaching robes.

"Do you mind if I sit in here with you?" she asked when he didn't look up.

"It's your home; do as you wish," he replied indifferently.

Folding herself into a corner of the sofa, Hermione propped her book up on one knee and reopened it to the page where she had left off. Nearly becoming lost in her book, Hermione wryly smiled to herself when she thought about the phrase "companionable silence." She and Snape were anything but companionable, and the silence was nearly deafening; the tension was so thick it was able to be sliced through with a knife.

Hermione sometimes listened to music while she read, and she found herself wishing that she had brought down her headphones *Then again...* she thought as she furtively peeked over her book to look at Snape. He was completely engrossed in his book; only the top of his head was visible as his face was hidden behind the tattered and worn black leather.

Hermione frowned slightly, trying to make out the title of the book but was unable to find anything, even on the binding. Knowing how the tempestuous man would respond if she so much as parted her lips to breathe a question in his direction, Hermione resumed reading her own book.

After another hour of the uncomfortable silence, Hermione stood up and announced that she was off to bed. Severus closed his book and stood up, glaring across at her.

"Well... I guess I should show you to your room..." she trailed off, suddenly feeling nervous.

His dour expression hadn't changed, and he stood with his arms firmly folded across his chest. Hermione had begun cautiously making her way towards the staircase, thrown off by the sounds of her footsteps alone, turning back slightly to see that Snape was in fact following her.

Hermione bypassed her room, since Snape had been in it twice and already knew where it was. She showed him the lavatory and then the guest bedroom. She was in the midst of telling him goodnight when he promptly shut the door in her face.

Exhaling softly, she made her way to her bedroom. She hadn't expected anything different from the professor and was surprised that she didn't feel insulted.

Digging out her CD player from her desk drawer, Hermione turned off the overhead light and crawled beneath the duvet. Balancing the electronic device on her stomach, she shoved the headphones into place and fell back on the pillows. Despite being in the dark, she was able to find the play button on the CD player, and the sounds of Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos* soon filled her ears.