

Caru Rhwymydd

by Meladara

In this one wild fall down the shifting staircases of Hogwarts, with the eyes of the student body watching, something sparks to life, and it will leave every understanding the world has ever had of him and of the girl who is Hermione Granger completely and utterly invalid.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 3

In this one wild fall down the shifting staircases of Hogwarts, with the eyes of the student body watching, something sparks to life, and it will leave every understanding the world has ever had of him and of the girl who is Hermione Granger completely and utterly invalid.

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He stalks down the staircases in his usual manner, all billows and snarls, the students leaping from his path. It does not cross his mind that she will not do the same. After all, to him, she appears as she always has...the know-it-all who is a thorn in his side, even now after the battles have ended. The fact that she was hexed all those months ago, that she currently has no short-term memory and is...even as she stands just feet away from him with wide eyes...losing her memories of the prior 24 hours doesn't even register on his radar. As far as Severus Snape is concerned, she is just like all the others: no one special, hexed or not. With this firm belief in place, he continues to barrel downward.

Only she doesn't react like the others. She doesn't leap away as he approaches, fear painted across her face. No. As he makes the hurried final step...a step which carries such momentum that it will surely lead to a collision...she looks at him with surprised happiness, and his mind dissolves into unexpected confusion. People don't react to him this way. She *certainly* doesn't react to him in this way...her face open, eyes bright and on display for all those who watch in horror.

And they do watch in utter horror as Hermione Granger, Gryffindor royalty, is pressed into the body of Severus Snape, hated spy and professor. The sight of it is indelibly etching itself into their minds, and in an instant, he knows word of the event will spread across the school like wildfire. But this thought is fleeting. Because as their bodies hit hard on the bottom three steps, and as he, in this singular moment, protectively cradles her body and shields it from injury, something else happens too. He does not...cannot...understand how or truly why it is so, but even then, he knows it. Somehow, against all odds, he is forever changed indeed. In this one wild fall down the shifting staircases of Hogwarts, with the eyes of the student body watching, something sparks to life, and it will leave every understanding the world has ever had of him and of the girl who is Hermione Granger completely and utterly invalid.

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He doesn't see her for several days after the fall. The fall that has forever left within him the feeling of her body pressing against his, and though the touch of her had served to numb him to the pain of the tumble, now it only serves to confuse him. Her bright laughter, which had burst from her as they lay on the landing in a tangled heap of arms and legs, continuously rings in his ears and repeatedly pierces something within him...something he still cannot acknowledge or understand. He is too shaken, too disconcerted. Doing his best to force every memory of the encounter from his mind as he teaches and attends the never-ending debriefings with Ministry officials, he tries to convince himself that she is nothing to him, just another war-weary student in the halls.

If her condition stirs something within him, if he is haunted by the memory of the kind eyes that sparkled from above him as they lay at the bottom of the stairs, he isn't ready to acknowledge the fact. Neither is he ready to acknowledge the regret that floods him each time he enters the Great Hall only to find she is dining away, somewhere else: in the smaller hall that has been set aside for the war veteran students...those who can no longer view the traditional Hogwarts dining hall as a place of joy but instead a place of loss and sorrow. Even his NEWT-level potions lesson, the only lesson from which he has ever been able to derive any enjoyment, is ruined for him solely because her face never appears there either. Unknowingly, he rues the day he decreed she could not attend his lessons. The memory of the hurt in her eyes haunts him as he sits behind his desk, watching the hapless of Hogwarts brew poorly made concoctions. All the while, the silent echoes of his harshly spoken tones grate at him, sicken him. *Until the hex is removed, Miss Granger, he remembers himself growling, and your memory is restored, do not dare step foot inside this classroom.* And she doesn't, despite her inability to recall his words. However, he finds that one evening not long after the fall, she is willing to set foot in his office.

It is late evening when his office door swings open without ceremony, and as she steps through the door, he is stunned by the complete audacity of the action. In an instant, her bright eyes fill the room with warmth, and he can't help but remember. The ache within his chest grows, and he wonders why it is that she, of all those in this school, has entered his domain. He doesn't want to be filled with wonder at the sight of her, but nonetheless, he is. What he wants is to be allowed to live out his lonely existence without interference. He can see that he will not be so lucky. No, he is never so lucky. Not tonight. Not ever.

As he sits frozen with his quill...the blood-hued ink of which gathers tenuously at the end of the nib, waiting for the slightest movement to jar it loose and send it to the parchment below...poised over a tall stack of parchment, he knows that it's hopeless. He is lost.

She looks at him, eye meeting eye, without fear, and he is struck by how much she has changed over the years. He realises now that she is no longer the frizzy-haired, school-obsessed child she once was. Beyond her beauty, which she owns with an undeniable grace that causes his heart to leap, he can see that she is a woman who has learned and lived through hardship most cannot even dream of and has come out stronger for it. She is a woman who, having lived through the impossible, is taking the loss of her memory in stride as best she can.

He is startled from his assessment of her when she suddenly quirks her head to the side, an amused smile growing under the weight of his gaze, and he barely notices when the quill falls to the desk and the ink splatters, soaking into the topmost essays. As a sigh escapes his throat, as his heart twists and aches within his chest reminding him once again of the fact that he is, as he ever was, an imperfect specimen of a man, she steps toward him.

"I knew you had to do it," she says quietly, earnestly. Her voice resonates within him, lending depth to the image of her in his mind's eye, confirming the understanding that she is no longer a schoolgirl. She has seen and learned too much to return to that state.

"I beg your pardon?" he asks, the frustrated turmoil within him uncharacteristically crackling through. It is a cruel fate that he is faced with her now, when she is still under the strange and altering hex. For though he knows the chance he would approach her is small, the fact that she is completely barred to him mocks him. He cannot pursue her while her mind is broken.

Her eyes dart around the room, looking over his bookshelves and collection of bottled oddities, as if she is trying to grasp some internal concept that is just beyond her mental abilities. He watches as she puzzles; the expression she displays is completely incongruous with who she once was, and again he feels within him something growing...some new need to help her, to find a way to free her from this reduced state.

She doesn't speak again for a time. She stands before his desk, completely still, and studies his room in confusion. It is as if he can see her mind spinning but making little progress. Then, finally, he jars her out of the state with the clearing of his throat, the sound of which causes her head to jerk back to him and her breath to catch. She takes in a deep breath and picks up speaking exactly where she had left off, as if she hadn't fallen silent at all.

"...what you did to the Headmaster. I always knew that you were on our side."

He isn't sure what to say. Is she here expecting some sort of praise or thanks? Surely, even in her hexed state, she knows that he will not offer her anything of the sort. Unable to think of any other way to handle the situation, unable to deal any further with the frightening emotions that are churning within him, he pulls his face into a sneer and he growls out, "Leave." As his eyes look from the girl to the door purposefully, his stomach sours, and he cannot help but hate himself.

Her head again quirks to the side in amusement, and her lips turn up as her hand reaches into her pocket. When she finally speaks, her voice maintains a serenity that seems...to him at least...profane in this dark space of his office. "It doesn't matter, I suppose. But I thought you should know."

She pauses for another moment and her eyes fix on his face, studying each detail as her expression again takes on the look of one who is solving a great puzzle. He almost flinches but manages to push down any reaction whatsoever, remaining stony and impassive before her.

At last she lets out a sigh and relaxes, her eyes turning soft again and leaving their scrutiny of him behind.

"Anyhow, this is for you," she continues as her hand draws something from her pocket. "I think you should have it."

Severus watches as her closed fist extends out over his desk, and she waits expectantly for him to offer his palm so she can deposit whatever it is into his hand. However, he does not move; the terror within him is too great. He doesn't trust that, should he touch her again, he will ever be able to let go.

With a quick shake of his head, the grim frown on his face never shifts, and she realises with obvious disappointment that he isn't going to offer his hand. Her face falls slightly as she deposits the contents onto the ink splattered parchments and then turns to leave.

Neither of them speaks as she goes, disappearing into the darkness that is evening in the dungeons.

His mind does not fully process what she has brought him for some time. He is too caught up in the strangeness of the encounter. This new understanding of what she means to him is simply too much. It is unsettling that her presence stirs within him something he cannot understand or control. When he finally feels his ability to think and breathe return, his eyes...which are still locked on the door, on the space in which she last inhabited...leave their study of the door and move down to the circle of small black stones on the parchment.

As his eyes take in the rounded edges, the shimmering surfaces, the runes carved into them, he feels the world slip from under him.

He has thought it before in these last few days, in moments of weakness, moments when he has somehow allowed himself to slip from the depths of denial and into the essence of the truths that lurk within him. As his fingers delicately pick up what he now can see is a bracelet, he knows: now, more than ever, he is lost.

It is cradled protectively in his palm, this precious artefact the like of which he has only seen one other time in his life, as he stands from his desk and makes his way to the door which will lead him away from this place and into the private sanctuary of his chambers. His thoughts are so deep that he doesn't even realise he has spoken aloud as the door closes behind him, the words tumbling from his lips and seeping into his office like a mist that cannot be held back.

"Of all the things quixotic fate has brought to me, never did I guess that love would be among them."

Written for the 2013 SSHG Prompfest to a prompt by Sixpence Jones. My sincerest thanks to my beta, Laralee; my britpicker, Anoesis; and to my cheerleading squad, which currently resides each weekend in the TPP Chatzy chatroom. The prompt will be posted at the end of the final chapter. I do so hope you enjoy!

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 3

In this one wild fall down the shifting staircases of Hogwarts, with the eyes of the student body watching, something sparks to life, and it will leave every understanding the world has ever had of him and of the girl who is Hermione Granger completely and utterly invalid.

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In the quiet that follows, where he again neither sees nor hears her, Severus finds he can make it through his days more easily if he tells himself that he was mistaken, that he does not care for her. It does not matter if he is lying to himself. He will do what he must to get through this betrayal of his heart. When she has gone from the school, as she will most assuredly leave, then he will go about living his life as he always has. Broken and alone.

He is lying to himself, he knows, but it isn't until he next encounters her that he realises exactly how much more powerful this denial has made his feelings.

He is on his way to the Great Hall for breakfast one morning when her voice stretches from around the corner and hits him in the gut. He cannot deny her power over him, cannot deny the veracity of his feelings when, at the first sound of her voice, his feet stop, his heart begins to pound in his chest, and his hand flies to touch the lodestone bracelet that, even now, rests hidden beneath his cuff.

The shrill tone of her voice is echoing off the halls in the early morning sunlight, piercing straight into his heart as broken glass into skin. She is berating someone, and as unfamiliar emotions flood him and his face pales...a seemingly impossible feat...he ducks into a nearby alcove and waits for her and her classmate to pass. If he listens with interest, it is only because there is nothing else for him to do while he calms himself and tries to gain control of the emotion she stirs within him.

"How can you be so thick, Ronald?" he hears her shriek. A muffled thump follows...he assumes it is the sound of her foot stamping on the ground...and then someone is sputtering. He is not surprised in the least when, in typical Weasley fashion, the boy's voice fills the hall with angry bellows.

"What do you mean? You think I'm thick just because I want you to be careful around him? He's a greasy git, and you need protection, Hermione."

"I do not," she cries, and he can tell she is exasperated beyond tolerance. "Just because I can't remember what I had for breakfast yesterday does not mean that I cannot function, Ronald Weasley. I fought in a war; I can certainly take care of myself in the halls of Hogwarts."

"But..."

"No. You listen to me. I will not stand by and listen to you bad mouth him, especially after everything that has happened. After all the times he has saved us... It is unthinkable that he would ever be a danger to me. And the fact that you truly believe this idiocy... It reminds me how dim and shallow you are. Don't you ever..."

He listens closely, ears straining as her voice suddenly stops, and the sound of fast-approaching steps fills the passageway. Then, the voice of Harry Potter is added to the mix.

"What is going on here?" he hears Harry Potter bark. The tone of his words immediately causes Severus' hackles to rise; they only fall when he realises that Potter's words are not directed at her. "Ron, have I not made it clear that you are to leave her alone? You know it upsets Hermione to be around you."

"Harry...", she pleads quietly as his mind and heart mock him for hiding like a coward in the shadows. He does not even register the movement of his fingers as they seek out to touch the lodestones that rest beneath his sleeve, so often has he done so in the past days. It is a constant reminder to him of what she could be, of what they could be; though he has no desire to admit it. Still, the stones comfort him, even if he is unable to bring himself to come to her aid. The weight and intensity of what he feels is simply too foreign, too strong, too new, too confusing. Not to mention that he sincerely doubts she would welcome his interference anyway.

"No, Hermione," Harry snaps in a growl that surprises him. He has heard tales of Potter's ferocity, has heard countless times of his defeat of Voldemort, but until this moment he has always believed them exaggerated.

"He just riles you, and if you had read your journal like you are supposed to do, instead of leaving it in the common room where I found it, you would know this."

"Not to mention, Ron, that *you* should know better than to rile her. What was the argument over this time: your lack of relationship or Snape? Because those seem to be the only two subjects that you seem capable of bringing up with her."

"I don't see what she thinks is so wonderful about Snape," he hears Ronald Weasley roar as shock and confusion mingle with the myriad of emotions that are currently crippling him.

They are arguing about me?

"And I don't get why I can't talk to her, Harry."

"That is exactly why you can't! If you can't respect the fact that the world is very confusing at times for Hermione, then you cannot talk to her. Now, leave."

Severus listens as the Weasley brat picks up his bag and storms past his hiding place, all the while puzzling over the students' exchange. In those deep shadows of the hidden alcove, he cannot fathom why Hermione Granger would champion him, why he would be so suddenly and thoroughly affected by her. He should be nothing to her, as she should be to him. It does not matter that they were once comrades in arms, that he was once her professor.

But he cannot deny that the difference is there. She does indeed matter to him, and it appears that he, too, is of some import to her ... even if it is only to a small degree. He shouldn't matter to her, he knows. The fact that she somehow manages to care even through her lack of short-term memory only encourages him to hope, against his better judgement. It has not escaped his notice that her defence of him is not something new, and though he cannot fathom why she does so, it gives him some semblance of peace.

The sound of her soft crying suddenly filters through his distracted mind, and he quickly sobers. Whatever comfort he has found in these last few moments drains away, lost to the realisation that she is hurting. Would that he could go to her now, but he cannot, will not.

"You okay, Hermione?" he hears Potter ask. The contrast in the boy's voice is striking. Where only moments before he had been fierce, he is now calm and soothing.

"I'm fine," she whispers. "I just wish he wouldn't be so difficult. I mean, sure, I don't remember what happened last week, but that doesn't mean my feelings aren't just as valid as anyone else's, even if you or Ron don't understand them. I acknowledge that they are odd and not everyone shares them with me, but I know when I'm right about someone, Harry, and I'm..."

"Yes, you are right, Hermione," Harry snipes, cutting her off. "Just try to steer clear of Ron. Okay? He will only upset you. And read your journal, for goodness sake! How are you supposed to know what is going on if you don't read your own notes?"

"Sorry about that. I did try, but Ron came and interrupted me. I must have left it behind when I stormed off. I won't do it again."

A snort comes from the boy, and he hears Potter quip quietly, "I wouldn't count on it, Hermione."

"Oh! Right..." Her voice falls flat, veritably smacking into the cold stone of the floor beneath her feet, and he can follow the train of her thought as clearly as if she had spoken it aloud. It wasn't as if she could remember not to leave the journal lying around. After all, she couldn't remember anything from one day to the next anyway.

"It's not so bad, you know. Yes, sometimes it gets to you, and yes, at times the world is confusing, but in the end, most days you seem happy."

"That just it, Harry. I don't want to seem happy. I want to be happy."

Severus nods in agreement and approval. He has never understood the point of appearing happy when one is actually not. After all, it has been the hallmark of his life that he is not a happy man, and the people he has encountered know it well. Even now, after the war, he has found it difficult to be truly happy. It is simply something he does not know how to do. He does wonder occasionally if he is even capable of happiness any longer, if his soul isn't too damaged and worn to possess even the merest scrap of it. Would he even recognise happiness if it were to find him?

"You are getting better," he hears Harry reassure her lamely. "In the last month you have been able to recall some reoccurring events in your life, and you aren't so easily confused by everyday happenings as you were before."

She sighs and then asks, her voice uncharacteristically weak and hopeless, "Harry, is there any hope that they will fix it? Fix me? Who is even working on it? Is anyone anymore, after all these months?" There is a despair that breaks through as she finishes, and Severus can hear her unspoken worry. What kind of life will she have if she is not released from the hex? Has she been forgotten? He knows instantly that this is her deepest fear, that she will never reach her potential, never be herself again. That she has already been forgotten in favour of more favourable and profitable pursuits. A fear, he guesses, that she discovers each day anew.

"They have the best curse breakers looking into it," Harry reassures her, but even as he does so Severus can tell there is something off in his voice. Without being able to see his face Severus knows he cannot be sure, but it almost sounds to him as if the boy is lying. Whatever the case, it is obvious to him that Harry Potter is holding something back, and that, in and of itself, is unacceptable.

As the pair of friends walk down the hall, away from his hiding place, he hears her ask brightly, as if a light has been turned on and she is no longer sad, "Have you seen Ginny?" The extreme spin of her mood surprises him for a moment, jarring him in such a way that he knows instantly it is a result of the hex. Before her friend can answer, she continues. "You and Ginny are still together, right?"

Harry chuckles softly, apparently used to the sudden shifts and turns of her hex-addled thought process. "You always ask me that. Yes, Gin and I are still together." Harry pauses for a moment and then continues speaking in a tone full of wry relief. "And just in case you were wondering, or were thinking of asking me again: No, I didn't eat your last dark Chocolate Frog. That was Ron, but that was so long ago that I doubt he remembers. Yes, Professor McGonagall is Headmistress, and yes, she has invited the both of us to call her by her first name in private. So don't get in a snit about it. What else? Oh! NEWTs are in seven months, and you are being allowed to take them because you already know all the material, memory loss or no. However, you negotiated the proviso that, should you ever fully regain your memory, you will be allowed time to study and re-sit them, should you feel the desire."

Severus chuckles as their voices grow more distant, shaking from him the unsettled emotions and concern. There is nothing he can do about them at this point in time, and the unspoken questions that Potter has just answered are so quintessentially Granger, he cannot help but find himself amused. From that point, it only takes a few moments before he feels the facade of professorial dignity falling over him. As he steps from the alcove and starts to make his way back toward his rooms, he does not even recall that he has completely forgotten to attend breakfast.

The sound of his boots echo loudly in the corridors leading down to his dungeon chambers; his robes billowing around him and his snarling glare firmly in place. As the few students he encounters along the way jump from his path, in order to avoid the harsh tongue lashing and extreme point deduction for which he is so well known, not one of them suspects that Severus Snape is filled with such determination that he will do whatever he must to cure Miss Hermione Granger, neither do they know that his fingers have once again sought out the cold surface of the magical stones encircling his wrist.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 3

In this one wild fall down the shifting staircases of Hogwarts, with the eyes of the student body watching, something sparks to life, and it will leave every understanding the world has ever had of him and of the girl who is Hermione Granger completely and utterly invalid.

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Sitting across from him in his office, she finds herself both puzzled and intrigued while outwardly she remains calm and unfazed. She is becoming accustomed to navigating through life with only partial understanding of the events happening around her, even if she does not realise this fact, even if each day she exists with an unsettling amount of fear surrounding her. That he has requested her presence and is, at this very moment, looking back at her with an expression that is most definitely not a sneer or scowl is highly confusing. She suspects that she is missing something, some forgotten event that would explain how she warrants such attention from him, but no matter how thoroughly she scans her mind, she can find nothing in those places where the memories should reside.

There is nothing there for her to fall back on, no explanation, no solid ground. Instead, she only finds what she believes to be her last memory. The familiar flashes of Snape as he moves through battle, a haze of smoke and fog surrounding him. She does not know how he came to be close enough to her, but suddenly he is beside her, shoving her aside as flashes of fear and light explode around them. She remembers the sensation of her fingers wrapping around smooth stones as her hands dig into the soft soil, the sudden pang of sorrow that floods her as a cold feeling of metallic energy envelopes her. There is also the intense feeling of regret as she falls to the hex and the world darkens. It is in this moment that she knows she has failed to perform in this, the most important test of her life. It is always there in her mind, these flashes of insight, disorganised and incongruent. These final remembrances where she failed to protect him as he protected her. Whether he knew it was her he was protecting, she cannot recall. Though she guesses he did not. After all, it wasn't likely that he would have distinguished her from any other student fighting alongside him.

She was and is no one to him, just a student, a bother, a thorn in his side. A fact which stings even as her tortured mind plays his fall for her once again, this time leaving the all-too-familiar guilt to well up within her. He deserved so much better. Even now, after the war, he has not been given his full due, and that fact rankles her. Yes, she is broken. Yes, she has forgotten so much, but this is one thing that stays with her from day-to-day. The sheer injustice that he is a forgotten man. Unliked. Unloved.

But then, she reminds herself, he is not entirely unloved. How could he be with her reliving this moment with each and every breath, those all-too-important last moments before things go blank, before the oblivion. She is drawn to him, though she can't understand why. It is an inexplicable truth that she simply accepts as part of the reality that is the aftermath of who she is. She wants with every part of her being to make things right for him, to be his true friend, to give him the recognition he has so assuredly earned, and to perhaps find a way to show him that, even for him, there is happiness to be found.

Hermione startles as her mind comes back to the present, and she realises that she has once again allowed her mind to wander and fall off the edge, into the chaos that is her inner thought process. Professor Snape neither desires her friendship nor her championing of him, and he especially could never want her love. How could he? She is just Hermione Granger, the broken and confused.

As her eyes focus again, she sees Professor Snape sitting behind his desk silently watching with unexpected patience. She feels the inevitable confusion start to mount once again; the familiar weight of frustration seeps forward. Confusion and frustration, these, she suspects, are a constant presence in her life now.

The professor nods and draws his hands together, steeping them on the desktop. He is waiting for something, but what, she doesn't know. Is she supposed to speak, she wonders. Unsure of where to look, her eyes fix on the gleam of black that is at his wrist. As she fidgets in her seat and wonders at the idea of Professor Snape wearing a piece of jewelry, her mouth opens to speak. However, she is disappointed when all she can manage is a lame and mumbled, "You wanted to see me, sir."

His eyes are hard as they look at her. This task set before him will bring him no joy. Neither does he find any amusement in the fact that she is wearing the nervous and confused expression that is so often upon her face. There are times when he can, to a small degree, enjoy her discomfiture. It brings out in her something that softens and warms his heart. But in this matter today, her discomfiture is not desired. He has no desire to scare her. He will do what he is called to. In the case of Hermione, there is no one else who will do it. As always, the dirty work is left to him, and if she hates him for it, then so be it.

That is his purpose in calling her here. A purpose that has kept him awake many a night and has led him to question nearly every member of staff, as well as many Order members. This purpose, this quest to find the answers and cure her, to see her back to her whole state, has been all-consuming. He realises that a good portion of his motivation to cure her is selfish; he would not be a true Slytherin if he could not see the advantage to him in her being cured, but it is more than that. More than his burning desire to know why she chose him to wear her lodestones. It is more than the despair that has filled him since he went from expert to expert in search of answers on what had been done, what could be done to clear her mind and return her memory, only to be stonewalled. More than the searing anger he felt when he found that the search for a cure had been put aside in favour of other more profitable tasks ... profitable to the Ministry, not to her. No. It appeared to him that she had been all but abandoned, and for all his searching, the only possible solution he had found he feared would leave her completely bare and so profoundly shaken that she would never be able to face him again.

He had looked for weeks for another way, only to find nothing.

Nothing.

Before he speaks, a sigh escapes him, and Hermione suddenly realises that he is as hesitant as she to start this conversation, whatever the subject might be. Then, as she hears him begin, his words falling across her ears in a tone so soft and gentle that his voice is only distantly reminiscent of the acidic one from so long ago, all thought escapes her, and she is transfixed.

"Miss Granger, you were hexed one hundred and seventy-two days ago. During this time, you have spent nineteen days unconscious, five weeks under the daily observation of the staff at St Mungo's, and then, when the staff deemed that nothing further could be done for you, it was decided that you would return to Hogwarts. They foolishly hoped that your short-term memory recall would return with time and familiar surroundings. All the while the search for the counter-hex was supposed to continue. There is some indication that research was done in the early months following your return to Hogwarts. However, with time and due to a combination of factors, it would seem that the research was called off or pushed aside long before the start of the school year. Furthermore, it has come to my attention that no one has taken the time to inform you of this fact, and though it is truly not my place to do so, and though you will not remember this tomorrow ... not to mention the fact that I do not know if it will make any difference in the long run ... I feel it is something you have the right to know."

She can feel the tears welling suddenly in her eyes as all hope drains away, leaving her with an emptiness so great her breath sticks in her chest. She has been forgotten, abandoned. The betrayal burns deeps and then bursts from her in a single jarring sob. Anything would be preferable to this. They were supposed to protect her, to keep searching, to keep the experts on task. She knows the knowledge of it has always been there, percolating beneath the surface of her mind, the fact that she lacks information on the progress for a cure. Now, she knows why. It was as if somehow she knew, even though she couldn't remember, that to the world she was just another war victim, just another face among many. When it came down to it all, she couldn't even blame Harry. He was struggling enough on his own, and to be thrust with the responsibility of caring for her was simply too much to ask. But what of the others, Professor McGonagall, the Weasleys?

A sick feeling floods her as she struggles to understand and quantify her situation. With whom can she place the blame? Is there blame to even be had? Perhaps she truly is just another victim, and this is her lot in life.

Her face is full of surprised and open grief. She has hidden nothing from him, and he knows that in a way he has broken her. He has taken away the trust she has in those around her, and her ability to trust others is an integral part of who she is. But he cannot bear that she has been misused in such a way by those who should know better. It is better that she understand, even if it is only temporary.

"Sir... I don't... How could...?" she gasps out, her voice so utterly broken and hollow that it tears at his heart and leaves him with a foreign desire to pull her into his arms.

"They aren't going to find the cure, Hermione. They aren't even trying," he states quietly, not even realising that he has lapsed into a familiarity that they have never shared. "Perhaps they care, those closest to you, but I have not been able to find anything that indicates they have any intent of ever working toward repairing your mind or removing the hex. Have you any idea that you are a currently a ward of the Ministry, under the temporary jurisdiction of Hogwarts? Furthermore, if nothing is done for you, do you realise that you run the risk of remaining so for the rest of your life? This is despite the fact that you reached your majority more than two years ago. The Ministry does not care that you can function at a near-normal level, nor does it matter to them that you are remarkably intelligent. At best, in your current condition, you will be assigned to the care of another for the rest of your life, and at worst, you could be institutionalised. And because of my status..." His voice quavers for a moment, and he finds that he is unable to put into words for her the intricacies of his place within their broken society. It hurts him to know that, because of who he is, she could continue to suffer without a cure. "I have not been allowed the honour of seeing what research has been done. The fools at the Ministry and St Mungo's have seen fit to keep from me that knowledge, no matter how I request it or what favours I call in. Do you not see? I cannot further the research that has been done because I myself am a security risk." His final words escape him in a bitterly spat breath, and once again, Severus Snape feels the weight of his inability to protect those he cares for. He was destined to be inadequate in every way, and it seems that no amount of effort will ever change that fact.

"You were trying to help me?" she asks between sobs, missing entirely the scorn and self-hatred that tinge his words.

"When I became aware..." Unsure whether he wants to delve into how he became aware of her condition and her subsequent affect on him, he falls silent. A part of him yearns to tell her. A wild hope that she feels as he does. But he knows better than to hope for such things. With his eyes locked on hers, he instead ploughs forward, on to his final point; altogether steering clear of the tale on how his interest in her began. "Miss Granger, I have read every book on memory charms and hexes that I can get my hands on, and though I have extensive knowledge of the Dark Arts, I have been able to find little to nothing in regards to a cure. No cure you would desire to be wrought upon your mind, to be sure."

She processes his words through a haze. Each one trickling through a mire of emotion so confusing in its vastness that it is some time before she registers that he has offered her a small bit of hope. He has offered her a lifeline, and she will grasp it for all it is worth if she can.

"Little to nothing?" she asks, her voice tentative as she wonder what possible treatment could be undesirable. "Sir, surely you realise that whatever you have found,

however small or repulsive in nature, it has to be better than the eternal nothingness that is my life now."

She didn't know how she knew it, but she could tell that there was something more to what he had said. Perhaps it was simply that he had been her teacher for too long and that she had studied his character with interest these past few years, but she was able to tell when he was holding something back from her. The fact that he isn't just any ordinary wizard...he is the one who inhabits every thought, every regret, every guilt, and every desire...flames to life within her in a wild surge of hope before she manages to push it from her mind. After all, she knows him to be an honourable man, and though she lacks understanding of why he is doing this, it is not outside of her estimation of his character for him to help those in need. As far as she is concerned, he would do this for anyone. It doesn't even register in her mind that she is probably the only one alive who thinks he would do so.

Banking on what she knows of him, despite the fact that he has just shattered her faith in those she most relies on, she looks at him earnestly and pleads, "Please tell me."

She believes in his capacity for true good so deeply that she must harshly remind herself that, though he is doing it for her, it does not mean he is doing *for* her. It is too easy to build castles, and that is something she cannot afford to do. Not when the next day they will be swept away under the waves of the incoming tide of hex-induced memory loss. This constant fear and understanding that she will, time and time again, be brought back to the beginning stops her from acknowledging the tenderness in his voice and keeps her from seeing the hesitancy and sadness in his demeanour.

Silence fills the room as they both wait for the moment to come, the one where he will tell her what might be done, and she will decide. But for a time, it is simpler to just sit with their eyes locked on the other, lost to their own thoughts, lost to the heat mindlessly building in their chests. If mutual interest is spurring to life, it's too early for them to acknowledge it. After all, that their breaths are both growing shallow does not matter. That there is clear affection and perhaps even a stir of magic between them is insignificant. Neither of them can afford to spare a thought for it now. To believe that, just maybe, their feelings are not unrequited is untouchable...is out of the question...when there is so much at stake.

Then he is speaking again. His black eyes hold her fixedly in place, and his words begin to filter through the muck that makes up her thought process. "If you are so willing, I should like to try to perform a deep Legilimency procedure on you. From what I have read...and the accounts of it are sketchy at best...deep Legilimency holds the best possibility of providing you some improvement. Save, of course, the complete removal of the hex, which I fear is unlikely ever to be achieved. It will not be a cure in any way. I suspect that, even should it prove to be a resounding success, you will always be cursed to forget many of the smaller details of your life. However, I do have some small hope that, through this procedure, your ability to imprint upon things will improve. If I can help you remember new people, places, and events, even to a small degree, then you should be able to petition for your release as a Ministry ward. After all, it is not a crime to be forgetful. You must simply demonstrate that you have the capability to recall the continuity within your life. I cannot be sure if I can succeed, and it is likely that the minutiae of daily life will always slip from you, but then, with care and time there are other ways to deal with those issues."

Her mouth falls open as she listens only to snap back shut as she considers his offer and the many questions that have burst to life within her. As she claws her way through the non-essentials, she latches on to the one important fact: he can offer her something. He is *here*, and he is willing to do *something*, however small. It is so much more than has been done before, and it warms her heart. Without a thought or care to the fact that in allowing him to rifle through her mind she will be opening to him the truth of her feelings or to the danger that is surely inherent in such a procedure, a large and toothy grin starts to spread across her face. Without missing another beat, the room is filled with a quiet but emphatic, "Yes!"