

Handbook for the Recently Deceased

by Clairvoyant

Snape awakens in the Shrieking Shack to find his world upended. A story written for MoreThanMolly, the LJ community celebrating the awesomeness of überfangirls MollysSister and MoreThanSirius.

Chapter 1: Is This Hell Fresh or Has It Expired?

Chapter 1 of 12

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Chapter 1: Is This Hell Fresh or Has It Expired?

Death. La Mort. The Big Sleep. Take a dirt nap. Push up daisies. Kick the bucket. Bite the dust.

Severus Snape gave a bit of thought to the subject of death and all its euphemisms. He always expected to die at some point during the war. He wished for death to be quick and painless, to shuffle off this mortal coil in a quick, timely fashion. It would be his reward, his one consolation for a lifetime of servitude to the wizarding world's most manipulative masters, one evil and one... well, not-so-evil, but heinous, nonetheless.

He was despised in equal measure by Death Eaters and members of the Order. There was no telling which side—evil or good, Dark or Light—would take credit for snuffing out Severus Snape. Or which specific enemy—supposed friend or true foe—would hold the instrument of his demise. And what would that instrument be exactly? A wand, simple, yet powerful, would make the most sense. But nay, the final blow to the über-vigilant double agent wasn't delivered through the business end of a wooden stick.

In the end, Severus Snape was killed by a fucking snake. Voldemort's big fucking snake with her big fucking bite radius, tearing out almost half of the pale column of Snape's neck and taking with her the tender flesh of his skin, sinew, and several vital blood vessels.

A wand was the obvious weapon of choice for most magical people, but not for Voldemort. A dramatic villain, he forced others to do his dirty work because if he shouted "Avada Kedavra" one more time, what little soul he possessed—one seventh of his original, issued-at-birth soul—would shrivel up and blow away. Besides, using his pet snake Nagini as a weapon was akin to what Muggles called multitasking; with one big bite, one less person blocked Voldemort's path to world domination, and Nagini indulged in a little nosh, too.

It was ironic the perspicacious Potions master had arrived at his final meeting with the Dark Lord without any of the accoutrements a spy-cum-Potions master would be expected to carry on his person. No dittany, no Blood-Replenishing Potion, and no antivenin. No Plan B. His actions, or lack thereof, were an open invitation to death: "Drop in any time. There's football on the telly and beer in the icebox. I can open a can of those little cocktail wieners, if you like." Snape couldn't be arsed to save his own pathetic, miserable life because he didn't want to. He had nothing to live for anymore.

The last thing he remembered was drowning in Potter's beautiful, green eyes Lily's eyes as he steeped in a rapidly cooling pool of his own sticky, congealed blood. In the moments before he lost consciousness, Snape had released a carefully engineered stream of silvery, ephemeral memories calculated to lead the Chosen One to make the right decision. But, oh, how he had wanted to blurt out, "You must die in order to defeat the Dark Lord, you idiot boy."

With the delivery of those memories, all his obligations had been satisfied. His life debt to that opportunistic wanker James Potter had been paid in full. Likewise, he had honoured the memory of his childhood friend by watching over her obstinate, insolent whelp, saving his sorry arse on more than one occasion. He had kept his promise to Dumbledore, protecting the students of Hogwarts from the sadistic Carrows and other assorted Death Eaters. There was nothing left to tether him to the wretched, unhappy life he had endured for so long.

Snape was more than ready to move forward to the next phase of his existence. He waited for some distinct sign to announce his arrival to the afterlife. An antiseptic white tunnel bathed in a beckoning, blinding light. A spirit floating above his own body, staring at the macerated, blood-drained remains as the floor beneath changed colors, the cheerful, bright red oxidizing to a gloomy black.

Yet there was no sign, no harbinger. Nothing. It reminded Snape of Christmas mornings spent with Tobias.

Severus: "Did Father Christmas visit us last night? What did he bring me?"

Tobias: "You'll have to guess. But first, you must close your eyes."

Severus: "Okay. They're closed."

Tobias: "Good. Now tell me, what do you see?"

Severus: "Nothing."

Tobias: "Right on the nose, boy."

It was time for Severus Snape to take fate by the bollocks. Tightly squeezed eyelids shot open. A glance to the right. A dizzying head swivel to the left. He bolted upright, feeling nauseated, rubbing his eyes before scanning his surroundings again.

"Oh, bloody fucking hell! I'm in the Shrieking Shack? Am I even dead?"

Shaky hands performed a cursory self-assessment. Two arms. Two legs. One torso. One head. One set of naughty bits. One neck... yes, one neck. One dry and intact, albeit cold neck. He looked at the floor surrounding him. No pool of blood.

"Maybe I'm not dead. Could someone have healed me while I was unconscious? A house-elf perhaps. Or maybe that over-achieving Girl Guide Granger."

He stood in one swift, graceful movement, but crumpled to the ground in a black heap, his numb, faltering legs unable to support him. After rubbing them vigorously to encourage circulation, his next attempt was successful. He smoothed his hands over his robes, removing numerous wrinkles and a thick layer of twenty-year-old dust which had taken hold of the luxurious gabardine wool fibers of his outer garment. Time to analyse the situation.

"The Dark Lord thinks I'm dead, and so does Potter. I should cut my losses and hightail it out of here. Out of England, for that matter. I hear Fiji is nice year-round. A quick trip to Gringotts for funds and Spinner's End for personal effects, then South Pacific, here I come."

He sighed and shook his head in self-chastisement. "I spent the last seven years of my life ensuring the Boy Who Lived endured, despite his constant attempts to thwart me. I should ascertain if he needs any assistance to fulfil his destiny, becoming the sacrificial lamb of the wizarding world. A few more minutes at Hogwarts won't kill me as long as I remain discreet and Disillusioned."

He spoke the incantation as he touched his wand to the top of his head. Something was amiss. He didn't feel the familiar sensation of cold liquid dripping down his back and could still see his body. He performed the spell again with perfect elocution of voice and wand gesture, but the results were the same. He tried again and again, but nothing changed. If that Einstein* bloke was right and insanity was doing the same thing over and over again but expecting a different result, then Snape was riding Ozzy's crazy train to the Janus Thickey Ward at St. Mungo's.

On his fifth attempt, he swore that he felt an icy, cold prickle imbue his entire body. He could still see his body, but he was certain the Disillusionment Spell had taken effect. He stalked from room to room in the Shack, searching for a mirror to verify his handiwork. The hunt ended in the main floor sitting room where an ornate, mahogany-trimmed mirror hung over the black marble fireplace. Snape held his breath as his eyes travelled from the dusty mantle, with its collection of tchotchkes, to the tarnished, black-veined mirror. He exhaled and blinked a few times to guarantee that the sight before his eyes was not due to age or poor lighting.

Nothing. No ugly mug staring back at him. No penetrating black eyes boring holes into his skeletal visage. Now he was a wizard on an adrenaline-fuelled mission: obtain a status report on Potter and the battle raging at Hogwarts. Long, lean legs carried his lithe frame from the lounge to the front entrance. He turned the knob and swung open the door with such force that the resultant breeze blew back curtains of greasy hair, almost stripping the oil from it in the process. He didn't notice the strong, icy wind that nearly pulled the door from its hinges. He stepped from the ramshackle, old house in the Scottish highlands into... a frigid, desolate white desert.

What the fuck? Did someone cast a weather charm to add to the merriment of the battle? Or was the doorknob a Portkey?

It looked like a scene inside a quality-control-rejected snow globe, one comprised entirely of whirling, twirling, glittery flakes, yet devoid of a quaint cottage, city scape, or funny snowman. The gale-force winds kicked up, and his robes and hair whipped about him, further obscuring his vision. This new development called for a change in plan.

"I'm going back inside. Potter and the Order are on their own until this settles down."

Snape turned around to find the Shrieking Shack had disappeared from view. Not just hidden behind the cloud of dense, swirling snow, but missing, as though someone had Disillusioned it in the very moment he stepped out from the doorway. He searched for the invisible house, groping the stinging, ice-filled air like a blind man searching for a clear pathway to navigate through an unfamiliar home.

Nothing. It was as though he had been transported to Antarctica, the most godforsaken, isolated region on the face of the earth.

Or maybe I am dead, and this is the ninth level of hell.

He wandered the freezing, blank landscape for what seemed like hours, searching for... He didn't know. There was a distinct lack of flora and fauna, no landmarks whatsoever. The terrain was flat, an endless blanket of deep, compacted snow crunching beneath his thick-soled boots. Despite the hostile environment and its blizzard conditions, Snape felt dry and only mildly cold, the same level of discomfort he had felt when he was back in the Shrieking Shack. He didn't understand why he was impervious to the elements or why he wasn't tired, having covered many kilometres without ever retracing his steps. His exhaustion was more mental than physical. He couldn't comprehend how he could be in Hogsmeade, Scotland one second, then Bum-Fuck, Antarctica the next.

He plopped to the ground to ponder his curious situation. Before his arse could settle into the well-packed snow, he heard a high-pitched howl rising above the gusty wind. Well-honed, twitchy spy reflexes went into fight-or-flight mode. Snape leapt to his feet and searched the vast white horizon for the source of the noise. He spotted a tall, ape-like creature covered with long, dark hair, bounding toward him with fierce determination.

Not willing to wait for a formal introduction, Snape turned tail and fled. He aimed his wand over his shoulder, targeting the creature now fifty meters away and closing the gap. He shouted a variety of hexes that were guaranteed to level a human, but nothing stopped the stampeding ape-man. It didn't help that the wand seemed to be

shooting blanks. No sparks or streams of light issued from it, despite Snape's malicious intent. Running out of options, he considered stabbing the creature with his wand. It was so close that Snape could feel its foetid breath tickling the back of his neck.

But fate grabbed the world's unluckiest wizard by the bollocks and pulled him to safety. Still running at top speed, Snape crashed headlong through the front door of the Shrieking Shack, which had just reappeared where moments ago stood the empty juncture of null and void. He scrambled to his feet and turned around just in time to see the snarling, hairy monster disintegrate into countless grainy particles and blow away in an anticlimactic, windy swirl.

The raging blizzard outside the house melted away, transforming to reveal the charming village of Hogsmeade with its familiar cobblestone streets and thatched cottages, a sight which Snape welcomed with a tight smile and a lung-deflating sigh. Relief faded into annoyance; he slammed the door shut, bidding a final farewell to the mysterious creature and its strange, permafrost habitat.

Slow and weary legs carried the sanity-challenged wizard to the sitting room where he collapsed gracelessly into a dust-imbued, flowery chintz wing chair situated by the hearth. His head fell back. Eyelids shuttered gritty, sticky, red-rimmed eyes, and he pinched the bridge of his nose with a vice-like grip. If the crease between his brows could talk, it would have screamed.

"A brandy might salvage this fucked up day," he mused. "A drink with medicinal benefits to numb my brain and warm my body."

Roar. The quiet of the Shrieking Shack was shattered by the sound of a fire bursting to life in the empty grate. *Trickle.* Then the sound of liquid pouring into a glass. Snape's eyes shot open upon hearing the unexpected noise. Given the day's weird occurrences, he didn't think twice about these gifts suddenly popping into existence. *If only I had known I would benefit from such largess, I would have asked for a loose woman.*

He grabbed the snifter and swirled the translucent reddish-brown liquid before plunging his monumental nose into the tulip-shaped glass, inhaling the rising fumes of the intense, fruity liquor. He quaffed that brandy as though he were downing the antidote to a quick-acting poison. He stared at the fire, mesmerized by the crackling, undulating, red-orange flames and the bursts of colorful sparks that accompanied the occasional fiery pop.

"This has to be the strangest day of my life." He sighed and sipped the dregs of the liquor, savoring the rich flavor as it slid down his thoroughly intact throat. His eyelids drooped as he succumbed to the bone-weary exhaustion he had staved off for the last year or more. "I just wish I had some plausible explanation for all this," he pondered.

Thud. His eyes snapped to attention as the sound of silence was disturbed yet again. This time, the noise came from a book dropping from quite some distance onto the side table next to Snape's chair. He grabbed the book and shot a cursory glance at the title before tossing it back on the table. His face dropped to his hands in despair; he would have smothered himself with his own hands if he thought it would do him any good.

"Oh, fuck. Once again fate buggers me. I am dead, and it seems my afterlife is just as miserable as my life was."

The discarded text, *Handbook for the Recently Deceased*, sat innocently on the side table, but it mocked him, nevertheless.

*There is no evidence to suggest Professor Einstein made that statement. Current consensus attributes the quote to author Rita Mae Brown in her book *Sudden Death*, but she may have just paraphrased the quote found in Narcotic Anonymous "Basic Text" of November 1981.

A/N: This story has been a pleasure to write, despite the number of years it took to complete. It has been over four years in the making, its progress, or lack thereof, hampered by real life and other writing obligations hello, sshg_exchange! I plan to post new chapters weekly as long as the stars align and life allows.

According to an African proverb, it takes a village to raise a child, and this story, my brainchild, so to speak, is no exception. The team of alpha- and beta-readers may have changed over the years, but that doesn't diminish my fondness of and undying gratitude to all these lovelies: astopperindeath, BrenaMarie, kittylefish, nagandsev, Proulxes, pyjamapants. Thank you, thank you, thank you!

The title of this story and some of its plot elements come from the 1988 film, *Beetlejuice*.

Next up: Snape learns to love the afterlife and some old friends pay him a visit.

Chapter 2: Home Improvement or This Is not My Beautiful House

Chapter 2 of 12

Snape comes to enjoy the afterlife, but his well-deserved peace and quiet is about to be irrevocably disrupted.

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Chapter 2: Home Improvement or This Is not My Beautiful House.

Once he accepted death, Snape found the afterlife to be rather enjoyable, despite the metaphysical rules he was forced to follow. The mysterious *Handbook for the Recently Deceased* provided rudimentary information on the spirit world, yet it was confusing and poorly written. Both vague and technical in nature without any detailed explanations, it reminded Snape of that ages-old Divination textbook *Unfogging the Future*. The instructions for reading tea leaves were a prime example of that textbook's frustrating absurdity, exacting with the requirements for the tea, water, and pot used in the steeping process, but no specific analysis of the dregs, leaving it wide open to the subjective interpretation of the reader.

From the inadequate guidebook to the afterlife, Snape learned that if a ghost remained on earth, he or she was confined to the site of his or her death, and the duration of house arrest would be ninety-nine years. If a ghost breached the physical limits of the containment, he or she would encounter dangerous, constantly shifting spatial and temporal anomalies.

It also failed to mention the loss of his magic. No more charms, jinxes, hexes, curses, or the like. He still kept his wand close at hand for... what? Comfort perhaps? Simply out of habit? In short time, he became inured to his deficiency. He didn't miss it all that much, though, because ghosts possessed special powers all their own. Walking through walls, passing through floors and ceilings, ghosts could manipulate matter in ways the living both magical and Muggle could never accomplish.

The book didn't explain why Snape was blessed with the ability to move objects for instance, holding a book and turning the pages an action more attributable to poltergeists than ghosts. Sir Nicholas would be jealous of that because while he liked to read over Dumbledore's shoulder, he had forever complained about how slow the old wizard was to turn the pages.

Snape realized death had other benefits that far outweighed the negatives. No need to waste time on necessities like eating and sleeping. Ghosts didn't require sustenance like the living, and technically death itself was a form of sleep, a cessation of voluntary bodily functions. But he did like to indulge in an evening brandy by the fire, more out of ritual than actual pleasure, although alcohol had the same intoxicating effect on spirits as it had on flesh-and-bone human beings. And the afterlife had a service comparable to Hogwarts' own Room of Requirement; sensing a legitimate need existed, appropriate assistance was delivered. This explained the sudden appearance of the roaring fire and fine brandy during his first evening in the Shrieking Shack.

Another positive feature was the cessation of his glandular secretions no malodorous sweat or sebaceous oil to muck up his personal hygiene. Never again would he worry about little niceties such as taking showers or brushing his teeth. That was fortunate because the Shrieking Shack didn't have the luxury of running water.

But what the Shack did have was a very large library, shelves filled from floor to rafter with books of varied subjects both Muggle and magical. Snape didn't understand why Dumbledore, on the one hand, had thought to stock Lupin's halfway house with reading material, yet had ignored modern conveniences like indoor plumbing. Surely the werewolf would have preferred to freshen up after his transformations rather than read mid-twentieth-century chick-lit. *Valley of the Dolls*, indeed.

But hands down, the best part of being dead for Snape at least was the solitude. No dunderheads threatening to create cauldron-sized holes in the dungeon ceilings. No little orphan Harry reminding Snape of his childhood nemesis. No insufferable know-it-all regurgitating textbook knowledge calculated to impress all but the most discerning of educators. No Death Eater-wannabe godson wavering on his racist beliefs. No predictable-as-clockwork, megalomaniacal sociopath bossing him around. No evil, manipulative do-gooder guilting him to commit heinous acts all in the name of the "Greater Good." Just Snape enjoying the delightful company of himself alone.

Day in, day out, the routine was the same. He would ensconce himself in the library, reading from sunrise to sunset, time mattering no longer now that he had all the time in the world, so to speak. Then, he would retire to the sitting room to enjoy his evening before a roaring fire. Finally, he would rest a bit in one of the bedrooms because sleep had been a luxury rarely afforded him as a double agent. He didn't require it, but wanted it, nevertheless. To be alone with his thoughts and to consider... nothing.

He lost track of time, being unable to journey outside to procure the latest edition of the *Daily Prophet*. He knew nothing of current events or the outcome of the war, nor did he care at this point because he was dead.

The afterlife was good for Severus Snape until the day he learned his peace and quiet would be no more, irrevocably changing his eternal existence forever.

Snape spent that afternoon in the library, enjoying the mostly delightful company of the Bennett sisters of Meryton; he found Jane and Elizabeth tolerable, Lydia and Kitty insufferable, and Mary was his favorite. But a familiar Scottish brogue caused his ears to prick up, transporting him back to modern day Hogsmeade and the Shrieking Shack.

At first, he thought his ears were playing tricks on him. It happened often enough, confusing random, errant noises for voices. Birds twittering, leaves rustling, gusty winds hissing through minuscule gaps in the decrepit, old house. But there was no mistaking the distinctive purr of Minerva McGonagall.

Snape peered out the front window, careful not to ruffle the curtains lest he give away his presence. On the porch stood proof his ears had not deceived him. It was indeed his former colleague accompanied by the short in stature, yet long on charm, Filius Flitwick.

Minerva cleared her throat, leveled her wand at the doorknob and spoke in a loud, clear voice, *Alohomora*. The door to the Shack opened with aching slowness, its rusty, arthritic hinges protesting with a prolonged groan.

"That's it? Too easy." Her moue seemed to indicate disappointment that her first foray into crime breaking and entering wasn't more challenging.

"A bit anti-climactic, eh?" Filius chuckled. "All it took to lift the enchantment was the magic of the Headmistress."

Minerva's in charge now. Ergo, the Dark Lord has been vanquished, Snape thought, indulging in a brief, self-congratulatory smile before turning his attention back to the scene outside.

She grasped the knob and began to pull the door shut when she paused. "Shall we have a look around?" Her voice hinted at eagerness, but her strained smile seemed hesitant.

"Of course, Minerva. Curiosity doesn't kill cats in reality." Filius smiled as he directed her inside with a courteous sweep of his arm. "Ladies first."

She glared at him as she strode past, then waited for him in the foyer. She remained almost frozen in place, turning in a tight circle, trying in vain to fully view the entire first floor without moving from that one spot.

"We don't have to do this, you know," Filius reassured her.

Her sigh was heavy, imbued with the same remorse reflected in her glistening eyes.

"No, Filius, I don't have to be here, but I want to, nonetheless. I owe him that much, at least." She lit her wand with a silent Lumos as she climbed the staircase to the second floor, the little wizard following mere steps behind.

Snape trailed them, but kept a safe distance. His spy instincts impelled him to shadow Minerva as she sniffed around the Shack like a niffer searching for shiny gold objects.

She took her time, traveling from room to room, scanning each one with methodical precision. First, she looked at the walls, then the furniture and knickknacks. Finally, she devoted most of her time to the inspection of the floors, concentrating on the willy-nilly footprints decorating the dusty boards.

Filius ventured off on his own, paying no more than a cursory glance to each room. "How strange. I can't find the bathroom. I don't think there's running water in this house." He called out, "Minerva? Minerva, where are you?"

"I'm... I'm in the master bedroom," she stammered, her voice rough and fractured.

Flitwick found her crouched on the floor next to a man-sized silhouette, a ragged outline painted darkest red.

She squeezed her eyes tight to hold back the tears that threatened to drown her vision. "We shouldn't be here."

Snape nodded in agreement. *My sentiments exactly. I didn't ask for a visit from the Welcome Wagon.*

Filius draped his arm around her shoulders. "Right. We can leave whenever you are ready."

Minerva stood up, transforming from weepy witch to stern schoolmarm in the time it took to wipe her sodden face with a freshly conjured handkerchief. "That's not it, Filius. I meant this place shouldn't be desecrated in the name of urban development."

What is she babbling on about? What "urban development"?

"I agree, but it wasn't our decision to make, Minerva. In the end, the almighty galleon prevailed. The Board of Governors called it a 'win-win situation'. New housing outside the village proper will provide space for more businesses to open in Hogsmeade. And because the school owns this property, we'll benefit from the rental income."

Rental income?

"But it's so disrespectful to Severus. Why did they opt to renovate this place rather than raze it?"

Renovate the Shrieking Shack?

"To honor his memory, I hazard to guess. And rentals in this unit will be highly subsidized because of the circumstances surrounding the Shack. Some lucky tenants will catch a real financial break."

Minerva's whole body shuddered. "It's all so unseemly. If they want to honor his memory, why not commission a memorial, or a plaque, at least?"

Honor me? He laughed to himself. *Oh, the irony. My true loyalties must have come to light.*

Filius shook his head. "This is the Hogwarts Board of Governors we're talking about. They may be wealthy, but a more tight-fisted bunch I've never met."

A long silence fell between them. Minerva returned to staring at the Snape-shaped stain on the floor.

Filius pulled at her hand, wrenching her from the past and the myriad of emotions she was undoubtedly experiencing. "Let's go back to the castle, shall we? Some tea will do us both good."

They descended the stairs with Snape close behind. Short of the front door, they paused for one last look around, memorizing every detail of the creepy, cobwebby, haunted house décor.

"Is there anything worth salvaging here?" Filius wondered.

Minerva was quick to answer. "The books of course. I'll make arrangements with the contractor to move them to Hogwarts. He can decide if there's anything else of value to keep."

As they departed from the Shrieking Shack, closing the door behind them, they also closed an important chapter in wizarding history. The site of Severus Snape's last stand would never be the same again.

He watched his former colleagues as they retreated with thoughtless ease. He envied their freedom of movement, the one useful liberty he lacked in his afterlife utopia. He sank down onto the sitting room sofa, defeated, head dropping into his waiting hands.

"The wizarding world can't even let me rest in peace. Tomorrow this place will come crashing down around my ears. And my books, my one and only diversion no, my salvation are to be taken away? The afterlife is a bitch, just like her sister life."

He was motionless for Merlin only knew how long. Soon, though, an idea took root in his head, changing his self-pity to self-righteous indignation.

"So they think they can trash my home and steal my books? Over my dead body!" He sprang from the couch and made a beeline for the library. "Tonight, I research. Tomorrow, I go a-haunting."

He hunkered down in the ugly, floral wing chair and plotted his preemptive strike of spectral taunting. He assumed that his ghostly manifestation would operate in much the same manner as his previous embodiment, garnering respect through the judicious application of intimidation. His afterlife of peace and quiet depended upon his ghostly abilities to generate such extreme terror as to force the workmen to drop everything and search for a change of undergarments. His ultimate goal was to chase away the living from the Shrieking Shack and put a stop to that ridiculous plan to remodel it into a multi-unit apartment building.

At this moment, it was imperative he learn all he could about effective haunting. His one and only source of information on life after death was the disappointing *Handbook for the Recently Deceased*. He found but one terse passage on the subject.

'Haunting should be kept simple. A prolonged wail can be very effective, but remember to modulate the moans between low rumbles and high-pitched screams. Avoid hiding behind white sheets, as this is considered cliché and won't scare even the most gullible of people. The repetitive opening and closing of windows with a concomitant gust of wind is a classic technique...'

"What useless tripe. For all it imparts concerning the pertinent details of the afterlife, a better title would have been *Pamphlet for the Recently Deceased*, or perhaps even *Muddling Through on One's Own: Vague Suggestions for the Recently Deceased*."

Snape stared into the flickering flames dancing in the hearth. For a split second, he considered tossing that infernal book onto the fire, but rational thought overruled his impulsive knee-jerk annoyance.

"Perhaps one day it will reveal some long forgotten minute detail that might be the difference between death and... well, not death. But for the time being, I must depend upon myself alone to provide satisfactory haunting."

A/N: I have no additional tidbits juicy or otherwise to impart here. If you enjoyed reading this, then my work has been a success. If you really, really enjoyed reading this, then tell me about it in a review, gentle reader.

Next up: Snape discovers that haunting is a talent which doesn't come naturally to all ghosts.

Chapter 3: Haunting Is Harder Than It Looks

Chapter 3 of 12

Snape tries his hand at haunting with less than stellar results. An old acquaintance gives him some valuable advice.
And our heroine finally arrives!

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money.

Chapter 3: Haunting Is Harder Than It Looks

Severus Snape sighed. One of those chest-collapsing, my-problems-are-more-important-than-yours sighs. Sulky, sulk, sulk. He hadn't invented self-pity, but he had perfected it, made it an art form.

This evening, he wallowed in self-pity as he drank brandy and stared at the fire. This once joyful night-time ritual had become somewhat lackluster now that he sat on the bare floor instead of the ugly floral wing chair. Except for the hideous wallpaper that mocked his aesthetic sensibilities, the sitting room laid empty. Every stick of furniture, every painting, every knickknack, and every book so sad, that had been removed from the house earlier that day. The kitchen was bare, stripped of cupboards and counter-tops, and several non-load-bearing walls had been torn down as well in preparation for the remodeling set to begin tomorrow.

His attempts to scare the workmen from the Shrieking Shack had failed utterly. The men were too absorbed in their task to notice books and tools moving on their own. Snape's otherworldly moans fell upon ears deafened by the harsh sounds of whirring saws and knocking hammers. He had lost the battle, but he wasn't about to concede the war.

"I'll be damned if I'm forced to spend eternity here living with Merlin only knows who. I simply must step up my haunting efforts. Didn't that blasted book mention...?" He pulled the *Handbook for the Recently Deceased* from his pocket and flipped through it, searching for the only dog-eared page marked for easy reference. Once located, he skimmed the page, looking for the obscure passage he had read weeks ago. The heading, 'If You Need Help,' couldn't have been more hidden if it were a Horcrux.

He scrambled to his feet and read the instructions aloud. "Draw a door with an accompanying knob." Using a charred, half-burnt log, he outlined a door with the obligatory handle, leaving a sooty smear on the burgundy and gold fleur-de-lis flopped wallpaper. "Please," he drawled as he rolled his eyes, "what idiot would draw a door *without* any means to open it?" He stepped back to admire his artwork, then read the next step. "Knock three times to open the door." He applied three sharp raps to the faux door, then waited for... The book didn't mention what to expect.

Soon, an intense white light poured from the perimeter of the 'door,' and the wall shook violently. Before he knew it, he was peering into a generic waiting room decorated in earth tones and shag carpeting made popular in the early 1970s. Sitting at the reception window was a smiling, familiar face dotted with freckles and framed with ginger hair coloring that blended well with the décor.

If Fred Weasley weren't wearing a name tag, Snape could have easily mistaken him for his twin brother George. "Hello, Professor Snape."

"Mr. Weasley, what are you doing here?" he questioned in a voice equal parts confusion and command.

"I work here at the Afterlife Help Center," Fred replied without a hint of irony.

"But that means you're..." He was dumbfounded, unable to accept that this young man, his former student, no longer walked amongst the living. What had happened to him?

"Dead. I'm trying to make the best of it, though. Keeping busy." He managed a shaky, yet reassuring smile. "Anyway, Professor Snape, you're early for your appointment."

Snape raised an authoritative, yet inquisitive eyebrow. "Mr. Weasley, I don't have an appointment."

"I know that, sir," Fred said matter-of-factly. "But you've only been dead three months and already in need of assistance?"

Snape nodded, hoping his scowling countenance would neutralize the embarrassing flush traveling across his cheeks.

"You're going to use up all your help vouchers. During your time on earth, you are only allowed three visitations here with your caseworker and one on-site call."

"Well, since I'm already here, can the caseworker see me now?" Snape asked in an over-the-top, solicitous voice. He thought if sweet-talk worked for Lucius Malfoy, then why couldn't it work for him, too.

Fred nodded knowingly. "Have a seat, Professor. I'll see if he's available." The young man rose up like steam over a cauldron and glided away, his steps echoing long after he disappeared from view.

Snape settled into a boxy orange Naugahyde chair; he found it surprisingly comfortable. A disorganized pile of magazines, varied in subject matter and age, sat upon the glass and chrome coffee table. He perused an issue of *Witch Weekly* heralding Gilderoy Lockhart as the year's winner of the "Most Charming Smile" award.

"This must be out of date," he snorted. "He hasn't had anything to smile about since early 1993."

He was engrossed in an article comparing and contrasting the trifles of England and Ireland when a lilting tenor voice interrupted his concentration.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Snape. Please follow me."

Before him stood a handsome young man with wavy, dark hair and warm gray eyes accented by feathery laugh lines at the outer corners. He wore a three piece suit made of sumptuous dark blue velvet and a plum satin shirt opened at the neck to reveal a gaudy chain of heavy gold links.

With narrowed eyes, Snape scrutinized the young man from his follicles to his footwear, shiny in both instances. The man appeared too young, too inexperienced to give advice on anything other than pimple creams or how to score with teenaged girls. "No offense, but are you my caseworker?"

The young man laughed, or rather barked; it reminded Snape of a gentleman from his past. "None taken. I get that reaction all the time. I've worked in the Center for twenty years, ten of them as a caseworker. I'm highly qualified, despite my deceptively youthful appearance. We'll talk in my office. I think you'll be more comfortable there."

The two men walked through a sterile hallway, its white painted walls and shiny linoleum floors illuminated a sickly green pallor by the flickering fluorescent lights above. Every door they passed looked ordinary, except for one that caught Snape's attention. This door had a window, and through it, Snape saw endless darkness punctuated by an occasional floating spirit. But these were not the blithe spirits that witty playwright Mr. Coward had in mind.

These were mirthless, tormented spirits wasting away, falling apart; their skin and sinew held onto their bones by the thinnest of fibers. The anguished expressions on their faces spoke of unbearable emotional and physical pain. Snape looked away, unable to watch this macabre dance any longer; his own heart no matter how small and black it was ached to see such suffering.

"That's the Lost Souls Room," the caseworker explained. "It's for displaced ghosts, the exorcised who have no final destination. Not exactly hell, but it isn't heaven either. You don't want to end up there. Let's keep moving."

They passed more nondescript doors until they reached his office, behind yet another unremarkable door. Once adjusted to the dim lighting, Snape scanned shadowy walls of shelving lined with dusty glass specimen jars, each one filled with slimy bits of flora and fauna in colorful, disgusting liquid media. A large, imposing desk stood sentry before the fireplace, cold and empty.

He felt the blood what little he had left drain from his face, and his shaky legs threatened to give out. The caseworker grabbed Snape by the arm and led him to a chair, an uncomfortable one, but sturdy and stable, nevertheless.

"I see by your reaction you recognize your old office. It's a decorating trick; the office changes to suit the needs of each individual client. I apologize if it caused you any

discomfort. I'll just change it back."

He waved his arm in a wide arc, and Snape's dungeon office dissolved into a warm, yet bland setting with tan walls, maple furniture, cream-colored club chairs, beige shag carpeting, and chrome lamps. "I'm rather fond of Swedish modern. Are you familiar with Ikea, Mr. Snape?"

"Never heard of it, Mr...." The caseworker hadn't yet introduced himself. Snape scanned the office, searching for clues at his identity. On the tidy desktop, he spied a rather thick manilla folder bearing his own name and sitting directly behind an engraved brass name plate displayed prominently at the forefront of the desk. "Mr. Black."

"You don't recognize me, do you?"

"Your face is not ringing a bell with me," Snape replied with a tinge of impatience.

"I'll always look eighteen years old, but had I lived, I would be just this side of forty, like yourself. I was behind you but one year at Hogwarts."

The metaphoric light bulb above Snape's head lit up. He was relieved to learn his caseworker was an ally of sorts, but well-honed spy instincts prevented his complete relaxation. "Regulus Black."

He nodded and held out his hand in a polite gesture. Snape didn't hesitate to shake it. "Pleased to make your acquaintance again, Mr. Snape. Do you prefer I address you in this formal manner?"

"My given name is fine, since it's what you had used previously."

"Very well, Severus, and you may call me Regulus."

With the pleasantries out of the way, Snape steered the conversation into business mode. "I have many questions and concerns that this book..." He paused to retrieve the *Handbook for the Recently Deceased* from the pocket of his robe, then lobbed the tome onto Regulus' desk with such spine-breaking disregard that Madame Pince and librarians all over the world would have shuddered in horror. "I wouldn't even consider this tripe to qualify as a book. To call it that would be disrespectful to real literature."

Regulus nodded knowingly. "I'll give you that. It's poorly written and in dire need of updating. Ask your questions, and I'll answer to the best of my ability."

"I assumed upon my death I would be denied entry to heaven. Yet why am I still here on earth?"

"That's easy to answer. You have unfinished business."

Only one question volleyed, and Snape could feel his impending headache taking root right between his eyes.

"Potter triumphed over the Dark Lord. I did what was expected of me. I spent the better part of my adult life playing guardian angel to that ungrateful child, watching over Potter, protecting him so that he could live to fulfill his destiny."

"Apparently, a higher power has decided you've missed something. You are the only one who can solve that mystery."

"Indeed," he replied, hiding his disappointment behind a mask of indifference. "What is the purpose of confining a ghost to the site of their death?"

"It's a means of controlling spirit migration. If ghosts were allowed to roam freely and choose their residences, then beautiful, warm weather destinations, like the South Pacific for example, would be the most haunted places on the planet, deterring the living from vacationing and... well, living there. Makes for bad economics. However, ghosts with work visas are welcome in the Caribbean to aid in the voodoo industry. Once you fulfill your purpose on earth, or spend ninety-nine years in the Shrieking Shack, you will be free to move wherever you like."

Snape suspected that wasn't the entire story and pressed for more details. "Am I to assume that you and Mr. Weasley died here at the Center?"

"Can't get anything by a sharp Slytherin, eh? I died in a seaside cave in Britain. Mr. Weasley died at Hogwarts. We chose careers in public service rather than confinement. That option is available to you as well, Severus. However, I don't think you have the necessary temperament to be a civil servant." From the mouths of babes actually, middle aged, yet youthful in appearance came the unmitigated truth.

Snape would be stuck in his personal Hogsmeade hell unless he could travel safely beyond its borders.

"Tell me about the spatial and temporal anomalies outside the Shrieking Shack."

"An impressive bit of technology, that. Can you believe it isn't wizard-made magic?"

Snape raised a blasé eyebrow to convey his astonishment or lack thereof at this revelation.

"Yes, courtesy of those ingenious closet monsters," Regulus answered his own query.

"Closet monsters?" Snape wondered if the young man was making this story up as he went along.

"Yes, it's mostly a Muggle affliction, so I'm not surprised you haven't run across one before. They are monsters who live in children's closets, coming out at night to scare the daylighters out of them. Except they actually don't live in the closets. They work in a factory utilizing technology that collects the children's screams and converts it to energy. The factory houses a vast collection of doors which allows them access into the closets. That particular technology was modified for spirit containment in the afterlife. If a ghost travels beyond the limits of their earthly confinement, he or she is transported at once to harsh, unfamiliar territory filled with dangerous pitfalls and murderous creatures. Each breach morphs those hinterlands into a different wilderness with different hazards to confront."

Upon hearing that discouraging information, Snape felt as though he'd leaped out of the cauldron and into the fire. He pinched the bridge of his nose so hard as to leave two red oval indentations upon his pale skin. "That was vague at best. My current situation at the Shrieking Shack is unbearable, but the alternative is inconceivable. Have you no further information to impart?"

"Sorry, Severus, but I'm a caseworker, not an engineer. For the record, not one spirit has been able to break the system, and many have died trying, becoming lost souls forever more. However, you are a highly intelligent and resourceful man; if anyone could do it, my Galleons would be on you. Tell me, what exactly do you find so distasteful about your, erm, living arrangements?" He absent-mindedly tapped his fingers on the case file in front of him.

Snape scowled at the annoying, youngish ghost. "As we speak, my *home* is undergoing renovation, a misguided attempt to gentrify Hogsmeade and raise funds for Hogwarts. This means I will be forced to share quarters with any Tom, Dick or..." He winced as he continued, "Harry. I would prefer to spend the first ninety-nine years of my eternity alone."

"What are you doing talking to me, then? Your time would be better spent trying to drive the workmen from your home. No construction means no tenants, no-one to disturb you. Some effective haunting should do the trick."

That irrepressible Snape sneer began to blossom on his lips. "Don't you think I've tried that already! It didn't work."

He could no longer tolerate the child-like face of Regulus Black smiling at him, so he looked away, staring instead at the intricate grain patterns of the light wood desk.

"From the account I read, your attempts to scare the men looked like a bad Benny Hill sketch, and that's not saying very much." Regulus slammed his fist against the

desktop, startling Snape from his self-pity stupor. "Stop fooling around, Severus. Don't play nice, play dirty. You're Slytherin; you should be good at that."

He fixed the young man with a glare so sharp it would have made seventh-year students cry. "Just how am I going to do that, Black? I don't have my magic anymore," he hissed, icy venom dripping from his words.

Regulus stood abruptly, toppling his chair in the process. He shouted, "You're a mean, angry, ugly man, Snape. Show them your fury. Don't be afraid."

Snape's famous self-control hadn't cracked yet; he held on to it by a thin, taut thread unraveling with each ticking second. He leapt from the chair and stalked around the desk to stand mere centimeters from the other man, towering over him, intimidating him with a steely glare and tooth-baring snarl.

"Are you calling me a coward, Black?"

The young man didn't flinch, or jump, or make any large-scale movements other than the smirk twitching at the corners of his mouth. This calm demeanor in the face of rage was the reason why Regulus Black was the caseworker of choice for the most ornery of ghosts. His arrogant smile marred the casual elegance of his haughty, handsome face, a prominent feature of the aristocratic Black family.

"Why, I don't have to. You already believe yourself to be one." He hadn't said the magic word, but he might as well have.

Snape grabbed the man by his wide lapels and jerked once. His eyes were widened in anger, his breath came in hard, short puffs, strong enough to ruffle Regulus' hair. Then, it happened without any warning. Snape could feel the heat pouring off his body like a blast furnace, but didn't comprehend why. Only Black could see the changes in the wrathful ghost.

Chalky white skin spoiled by a smattering of pockmarks upon his cheeks turned a moldy shade of green. Like poppies punctuating a grassy meadow, a bounty of juicy red boils cropped up in no particular pattern, tumescent almost to the point of bursting. Cracked gray lips strained across furry yellow teeth. Eyes blazed, an intense, dark red the color of stagnant blood engulfing the black centers. Wispy black smoke appeared when he exhaled, the sulfurous odor hinting at more than simple periodontal disease.

Snape appeared a technicolor disaster, compared to the monochromatic mess he was every other moment. His transformation was both instantaneous and hideous. He felt only heat, a drastic change from the cold that had permeated every cell of his body since his death. He expected fear to be rolling off Black like slime from a Flobberworm, but he sensed no tension whatsoever. The young man seemed to be quite relaxed in his clutches, wearing an incongruous smile.

"Erm, you really need to see yourself," Regulus spoke, breaking the dense, awkward silence. "There's a mirror in my top drawer made especially for imaging ghosts."

"I don't trust you," he growled. "It could be a trap. I suggest you get it."

Regulus reached into the desk, pulled out an ordinary-looking hand mirror and gave it to Snape, who was still clutching him with one hand. He took but a moment to examine the mirror, searching for hidden buttons and booby traps. Once satisfied it was merely a mirror, he glanced upon his reflection and found himself more pleasantly surprised than shocked; his smile made him appear even more grotesque, his crooked teeth like a dilapidated picket fence. He let loose his grip on the young man to preen a bit in the mirror.

"Do you think this look will adequately terrify?" he asked in earnest, still admiring himself in the looking glass.

Regulus chuckled as he smoothed the anger-induced wrinkles from his dandy suit. "More than satisfactory, Severus. You are quite fearsome when you're riled. Remember that feeling and call upon it for haunting. I think you can relax now."

Snape closed his eyes and inhaled a deep, cleansing breath of peace and serenity, and then he exhaled a long, hot breath of ire and hate, expelling all negative feelings... well, most of them. Another glance in the mirror revealed his former ugly, yet striking face had returned, none the worse for wear.

His Slytherin compatriot gave him a congratulatory pat on the back, causing Snape to flinch, not from Regulus' cold hands, but because he was unaccustomed to such congenial contact.

"You are ready. Now go forth and clean house." Regulus offered his hand once more and Snape reciprocated, although this time the handshake was more genuine and hearty.

"Thank you for your... assistance. I sincerely hope I won't require it again. I'll show myself out."

He nodded farewell, snatched the useless *Handbook for the Recently Deceased* from the desktop and departed. As he walked through the antiseptic corridor back to the reception area, he ignored the room of lost souls, passing it without so much as a curious glance. Into the waiting room, he passed Fred Weasley at the front desk and bid him goodbye with a perfunctory nod. He crossed the threshold of the Center into... He supposed it was the Shrieking Shack, but nothing looked familiar at all.

Snape scanned this new environment with experienced, wary former-spy eyes. It was quiet, no longer polluted by the sounds of crashing walls, knocking hammers, or buzzing saws. Logically, he knew he was in the Shrieking Shack, but the late-twentieth-century, creepy style had vanished. No more dark wood, heavy drapery, wall sconces, or fuzzy wallpaper. In its place were creamy white walls, recessed lighting, mini-blinds, and nubby, neutral Berber carpeting. He stalked from room to room, shocked that the construction had been completed during the brief time he spent at the Afterlife Help Center.

Damn temporal anomalies.

Every room kitchen, dining room, lounge, bedroom, study, bath looked the same, new and clean, but indistinct with no character or style whatsoever.

Perhaps I could contact Laura Ashley on behalf of the new resident. Granted she's dead, but even her interior decorating style would be a vast improvement over this vanilla custard fiasco.

In each room, miniaturized packing boxes were stacked with meticulous organization and marked with neat, even lettering. Before Snape could further ponder this as yet unknown person's decorating sense, he heard the jingling of keys and the turning of a lock. His instincts forced him to hide, despite his certainty that he would go unnoticed, so he pressed himself into a corner, taking comfort in the dark shadows that swallowed him. He observed the intruder nay, the house-mate he would be forced to endure for the foreseeable future, or until he could scare them away with his new, effective haunting skills.

The front door swung open with no warning, as the formerly squeaky door had been replaced with a cheap, yet decidedly more quiet, steel one. A feminine voice pierced the silence. "We're home. Give me one moment, and I'll let you out, boy." She sounded familiar to Snape's ears, but he would need to search deep within his memory to put a name to the voice.

He couldn't see her face because it was dusk, nary a sliver of light in the flat.

Stupid girl, he chastised her in his thoughts. *When you enter a darkened room, the first order of business is illumination. You cannot tell what danger lies in wait.*

He could see her form outlined in the darkness; he admired the curvy hips and full breasts beneath the clingy T-shirt and tight jeans. He noticed her head, twice the size of a normal human head, or maybe she sported very big hair. A sense of dread infused his ghostly body; it recalled to memory the persistent foreboding he had experienced during the Triwizard Tournament three years ago when he had correctly predicted the return of the Dark Lord.

She bent down to release her familiar from its cage; it took a few cautious, tentative steps, yet never strayed far from its mistress. When the woman spoke again, Snape's worst fears were realized.

"A place to call our own," she purred while scratching the beast behind its ears. "Welcome home, Crookshanks."

Well, doesn't that beat all. I'm stuck here with Hermione bloody Granger. The hell outside these walls might be the best option after all.

A/N: Thanks for your patience, gentle readers. It took three chapters, but Hermione Granger is in da house! Take one angry, bitter ghost, add a feisty, intelligent young woman, and you get... Let the games begin!

The Lost Souls Room is of course taken from *Beetlejuice*. Likewise, the closet monster concept comes from Pixar's *Monsters, Inc.*

If you like this story, tell me about it. Reviews feed the muse and give the author a protective layer of warm fuzzies, so invaluable during this frigid winter.

Next up: Snape perfects his haunting technique at Hermione's expense, of course, but she has her own obsessive agenda to attend to.

Chapter 4: Mi Casa Es Su Casa

Chapter 4 of 12

Snape begins his assault on Hermione. Will he successfully regain his solitude?

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money.

Chapter 4: Mi Casa Es Su Casa

Contrary to popular wizarding world belief, Severus Snape was not a cold, unfeeling bastard. At the moment, he felt a veritable cornucopia of emotions, including but not limited to anger, annoyance, disappointment, irritation, and loathing. All due to the arrival of Hermione Granger at the Shrieking Shack now completely renovated down to its bland new moniker, the Hogsmeade Arms Apartments. Indeed, death had rendered him cold, but it hadn't improved upon his personality.

It could have been worse, he thought, trying to be optimistic, a new emotion for him. *I could have been saddled with the accidental savior, Potter, instead of this overbearing harpy. He'll probably show up at some point, however. And with the red menace, Weasley, too. Though I'd rather they arrive together, one big, happy Golden Trio reunion. Then I can suffer just one industrial strength headache, perhaps with a side of nausea as well.* In the end, this newfound optimism was beaten down by the resident school-yard bully, pessimism.

As Hermione unpacked and settled into her flat, Snape lurked in the shadows, watching with intense interest. He studied her every move and everything she touched, filing away details in his vast memory banks, fodder for future haunting.

First, I will collect the data. Next, I will formulate a thoughtful and thorough plan to drive Miss Granger and all living creatures from my home. Finally, I will execute.

Only he could hear his low, evil cackle. Death had robbed him of almost all he held dear in life, but at least he still retained his sense of humor.

She was organized and methodical, as one would expect of the swotty, overachieving Miss Granger, tackling one room at a time, emptying one box at a time, stowing away her gear and personal effects. As she went about her task, she carried on a one-sided conversation with her familiar, who responded with a meaningful meow every now and then.

"I used my first Order of Merlin stipend to outfit the kitchen," she explained, pulling new Teflon®-coated cookware from a box and using her wand to neatly stack the pots and pans within the white laminate cupboards. "I went shopping at Marks and Sparks. Oh, and look at this."

She bent down and held her treasured purchase at arm's length, offering it to Crookshanks for inspection. He found nothing appealing in the wooden rack, or its tiny, colorful jars, but he sniffed at it with his usual indifference simply to appease his mistress.

"Well, of course you don't find it very exciting, but Molly assured me I should be capable of cooking all of Ron's favorite dishes with just the contents of this spice rack and a few fresh ingredients." Hermione danced in joyful anticipation of her culinary adventures.

Snape could have sworn the ginger hairball rolled its eyes.

Satisfactory brewing skills do not make you an expert in the kitchen, Miss Granger. But just in case, you might consider having a heartburn potion or bezoar on hand.

Snape followed Hermione into the bedroom next. She wielded her wand with graceful economy, guiding her clothing from trunk to wardrobe like a seasoned conductor directs an orchestra. Robes, dresses, skirts, trousers, jeans, and blouses clung to perfume-scented padded hangers, organized primarily by color, then season. A furious twirl of her wand sent small folded items—lingerie, socks, t-shirts, jumpers—to their respective dresser drawers. The contents of each drawer were then inspected for quality control; she was too meticulous in her charms to allow the socks to mingle with the knickers. She plucked out a lacy red bra and matching thong, waving them before her familiar's squashed face.

"These are a gift for Ron. Do you think he'll like them?"

The half-Kneazle stared unblinking at his mistress. "Meoow?"

"Well, of course they wouldn't fit him, but he'll get to see me wearing them. Not for long, though, if you know what I mean?" She waggled her eyebrows, but Crookshanks ignored her lascivious innuendo like he did most things.

I would have expected more subtlety from the erudite Miss Granger. But then again, she is attempting to seduce a Gryffindor, and Ronald Weasley isn't the sharpest tool in the shed.

Wasting no time, she stowed bed linens, towels, and grooming products in the bathroom cupboards. "I want to put everything away tonight and set this place to rights. But rest assured, Crookshanks, I do plan to decorate this flat. With a few judiciously applied Transfiguration spells, I will turn this boring bath into a luxurious spa. It will be like the prefects' bath at Hogwarts, but without the voyeuristic stained-glass mermaid."

She regarded the frosted glass-enclosed shower for a brief moment, then conjured a shower caddy to hold her vast collection of haircare products. "I paid a pretty Knut for

Sleekeazy's Salon Professionals. This line of products is very technique sensitive, but the stylist assured me I could achieve salon results at home. Just picture me with soft, manageable curls."

You should hope for nothing short of a miracle in those bottles or at least a money back guarantee

She spent most of her time that evening in the library-cum-lounge, returning hundreds of shrunken books to their original size and shelving them grouped by subject matter, of course in the floor-to-ceiling, built-in, hardwood bookcase. Her vast library almost rivaled the collection previously housed in the Shrieking Shack. There were paperback and hard covers, fiction and non-fiction, reference and pleasure, classic literature and mindless pablum.

I wonder if she's got Beyond the Valley of the Dolls? At least her books should provide a welcome diversion as long as I'm forced to endure her presence Snape ventured from the shadows to survey the titles, certain he would go unnoticed while Hermione remained so absorbed with her task.

Blessed silence settled around them, broken only by her whispered "Engorgio" and the muffled snores of her familiar, curled up, asleep on the hearth rug. Once every book was in its place and the boxes vanished, Hermione collapsed upon the reproduction Victorian sofa a dark-walnut-and-red-velvet monstrosity that had resided with the Weasleys in its former life. "Ugh, I never noticed just how dreadful this sofa is in style and comfort. This will be Transfiguration project number one tomorrow. I hope Molly takes no offense." She wiggled her bottom across the tufted cushions from one end to the other, eventually finding a comfortable bit of real estate on which to settle.

"*Accio Advanced Charms Theory*," she said with a yawn. The thick tome flew from her book bag into her eager hands. She spent a few moments indulging in the "new book" sensations, caressing the never-before-cracked cover and gilt-edged pages, inhaling the fresh-off-the-presses ink. Despite the lure of knowledge, Hermione struggled to keep her eyes open as she read the introduction. Her lids drooped; her head lolled backward, resting upon the arm of the sofa. Deep in slumber, she never noticed the fire bursting to life in the hearth, nor the snifter of brandy on the side table.

On Saturday evening, Hermione entertained her beau and erstwhile comrade, Ronald Weasley. She flitted about the tiny kitchen, bouncing as she prepared to début her new culinary skills. With her wand, she directed her assistants in their tasks knives a-chopping and spoons a-stirring but she added the spices to the curry by hand, not trusting the delicate seasoning to magic. Inhaling the spicy, fragrant steam floating above the skillet, she smiled and hummed with satisfaction.

While his girlfriend slaved over a hot hob, Ron lazed in the lounge, sprawled across the recently transfigured sofa. He held a sweaty bottle of butterbeer in one hand while the other one tossed Stilton-stuffed olives into his wide, gaping mouth, his accuracy spot on.

Recessed in the shadows, Snape was both amused and appalled by the young man's antics. *Where did he learn his table manners? He looks like a baby bird, waiting for mum to serve him warm, regurgitated worm.*

Hermione's heretofore undiscovered house-mate had been biding his time, observing the lady of the house as she went about her strict routine. Throughout the week, he had tested the waters with a bit of minor mischief, small household failures that by themselves were easily dismissed, but collectively were quite distracting. Tonight would commence his formal haunting.

Having depleted the appetizers in record time, Ron turned toward the kitchen and shouted, "Oi, Hermione. When's dinner going to be ready? I'm starving here."

The multitasking witch wiped her hands on the frilly gingham apron tied at her waist and placed a stasis charm on the chicken tikka masala and basmati rice before joining her guest.

"Budge over and make some room for me." Hermione glared at Ron as his boot-clad feet came to rest upon the coffee table. The boots were clean, rendered mud free when he passed over the threshold courtesy of a cleansing charm created by Hermione herself. She remained silent but snatched the bottle from his hand with a bit too much vigor, butterbeer sloshing his trousers in the most unfortunate of spots. She took a long swig, then gently returned the bottle to Ron as she sidled up next to him on the sofa.

"I like what you've done with the place, Hermione. Cozy, but kind of cramped, though, isn't it?" At the tender age of eighteen, Ron Weasley knew just the right thing to say in any situation, including critiques of interior decorating.

His remark effectively raised her hackles, and she snatched the bottle from him again, leaving an ever larger unfortunate stain in the same area as the first one. Before he could react to that grievous offense, she forged ahead in retort.

"Well, Ronald, I occupy one-quarter of the former Shrieking Shack." Her tone had a frosty edge. Any application of a cooling charm to the flat at that moment would have been gilding the lily. "If it's not to your liking, we could always go to your flat."

He recoiled at her suggestion. "No way, Hermione. You remember what George did the last time we spent the evening at my place? I had those itchy purple spots on my... you know... for days. We can't take that risk again." He squirmed a bit and, in doing so, snuggled closer to her, thighs touching. "Have you met your neighbors yet?" It was a swift subject change; the dizzying effects might have floored Hermione if she weren't already sitting.

"No. When Mr Filch was here yesterday, he said I'd likely be the only tenant in Hogsmeade Arms Apartments, Building One. Apparently, its former reputation as the most haunted house in Britain precedes it still. Even with a change of name, this will always be considered the Shrieking Shack."

"What was Filch doing here?"

"Attending to some maintenance issues. In the midst of my morning shower, the water turned ice cold, and that's not an exaggeration. My teeth were chattering, and I could see my breath. There's something odd with the electricity, too; my alarm clock goes off in the middle of the night, waking me from a sound sleep, and I always check the setting twice before I go to bed. And my books rearrange themselves as well, even after the self-organizing charms have been neutralized. It's all very odd."

Ron attempted to offer a logical explanation. "Maybe the house-elves are messing with you when they're tidying up and delivering your laundry. Payback for S.P.E.W.?"

She shook her head. "No, they aren't here long enough for any mischief. Besides, I spoke with the lot of them at the beginning of the week, and there are no hard feelings on either side."

"Hmm. Maybe there's a ghost here, playing tricks on you."

Maybe you aren't as gormless as you look, Weasley.

"Another one of Dumbledore's red herrings. Nobody really died...oh, I forgot."

Prolonged silence hung between them, threatening to suck the air from the room. Hermione needed a fortifying dose of butterbeer before she found her voice, barely above a whisper. "I hardly think Professor Snape would waste his time haunting the Shrieking Shack. He couldn't tolerate me when he was alive, so why hang around me in the afterlife?"

My point exactly, Miss Granger.

Ron's one-track mind kicked into gear, preventing another tension-filled pause. "Dinner smells fabulous, Hermione. Let's eat."

Indeed. Let the games begin. Snape followed the couple to the kitchen, lurking in the shadows outside.

Ron proved to be a deft hand at domestic charms, artfully setting the table as Hermione took care of the food. He was somewhat of a gentleman as well, pulling her chair out before sitting down himself. He went so far as to plate the food, serving Hermione first.

He's not as feckless as I thought. Molly must have driven some manners into his thick skull.

"Tuck in, Ron." Her teeth were poised for lip-gnawing action as she watched him bite the first tender morsel of fragrant, spicy chicken.

Ron smiled and bobbed his head in synchronous time with his chewing. "It's delicious," he managed to say between chews. If the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, then Hermione was cruising on the road to success. But it's also said the road to hell is paved with good intentions. For after Ron swallowed, it became clear his brain and body had differing opinions regarding her cooking. A bright red flush spread across his face and neck, clashing with his ginger hair and overpowering his freckles. Tiny beads of sweat merged to form larger ones and eventual rivers pouring down the sides of his face.

"Too hot," he rasped between wheezing breaths sounding like a death rattle. "Water."

He searched in vain, butterbeer the only beverage in sight. He grabbed the bottle, only to have Hermione snatch it from his grasp once again.

"No," she shouted. "You are supposed to drink..." Ron's speedy and ingenious actions stopped Hermione mid-warning.

"*Aguamenti*," he shouted hoarsely as he pointed his wand toward his mouth. Head thrown back and mouth agape, he swallowed the jet of water issued from his wand with relative ease, dribbling just a bit from the corners of his mouth.

Quick thinking, Weasley, however uncouth your actions were. Maybe a bezoar wasn't such a bad idea after all, Miss Granger.

Her compassionate face belied the patronizing tone of her voice. "Better?"

He coughed and sputtered, hand clutching at his throat. Unable to form meaningful words, his grimace spoke volumes.

"That's because you need milk, not water, to temper spicy foods. *Lactesco*." She handed him the butterbeer, which she had transfigured into milk.

Ron chugged the entire contents of the bottle without stopping for air. "Whew. That's more like it. Thanks, 'Mione." His ears remained bright red while his face and neck returned to their previously peachy tone, complete with freckles. He wiped his sweat-soaked brow with his shirt tail. It seemed table manners were optional at this point.

She smiled reassuringly and rested her hand upon his. "I'm just glad you're feeling better."

He cleared his throat and stared at their hands, rather than her eyes. "Yeah, well... I don't want to discourage you from cooking, love, but... I don't think you should make that again."

Her smile collapsed as she snatched her hand away. "I used your mum's recipe and followed it exactly."

"Well, something went wrong, didn't it? Maybe the spices? Let me see them please."

She huffed and rolled her eyes as she handed him the spice rack. "I examined it thoroughly when I bought it," she explained, her tone petulant.

Being tied to Molly Weasley's apron strings had given Ron a slight advantage over Hermione in the kitchen. He targeted three spices in particular: chilli powder, turmeric, and cumin, pulling them from the rack as he spoke. "I know the recipe calls for equal amounts of each one. But maybe you were a bit heavy handed with this one?" His voice was tremulous as he handed her the essentially empty jar, orange-red residue clinging to its sides.

Or maybe my hand just slipped...

Her narrowed eyes shot between her quailing boyfriend and the depleted jar of chilli powder she held in her lightly trembling hand. Her words were clipped and edged with anger.

"This jar was as full as the others when I placed dinner under a stasis charm. Why would I sabotage my own cooking?"

"You would never do that on purpose, love. Accidents happen all the time," he answered, grasping for a plausible explanation. "Dad told us stories of Mum's early kitchen mishaps..."

Need any assistance in removing your foot from your mouth, Weasley?

Her eyes widened; nostrils flared in time with her quick, shallow breathing. Her body remained mostly still, however; only the slight twitch in her wand hand told of her imminent loss of control.

Ron called upon untapped reserves of tact and courage in order to halt Hermione's transformation from benevolent domestic goddess to pugnacious, canary-conjuring witch. With a quick scan, he ascertained the location of her wand still sheathed in her back pocket then approached the brooding witch with caution, enfolding the seething woman in strong, yet gentle arms.

"I'm sorry if I insulted you. The spice thing... it's just weird, you know?"

Her rigid posture relaxed, and she melted in his arms, head resting upon his chest. "Strange, yes," she agreed, her voice small and soft. "I guess there's no way to explain it." It seemed neither party wanted to broach the ghost subject again, so it remained unspoken between them.

"Yeah." He exhaled a sigh of relief, but when he inhaled, his nose took on a life of its own, sniffing the warm vanilla-scented air permeating the kitchen. Any remaining trepidation vanished when he asked, "Did you make pudding, too?"

"Yes, bread pudding," she replied with hesitation. "Do you really want to risk it?"

"Yeah, I'm starving." His eager, beaming smile punctuated his answer.

She glanced at the oven timer. "It needs a bit more baking, then some time to cool down."

"I know what we can do in the meantime." Ron waggled his eyebrows at his blushing girlfriend before pulling her from the kitchen.

Enjoy the fumbling grope, Miss Granger. I'll just check on your pudding.

Upon his return to the sitting room, Snape found the couple nestled intimately on the sofa; he could not discern where one ended and the other began. Gangly arms and legs tangled, awkward hands sought purchase beneath clothing, curious lips explored every inch of exposed skin, tongues fought for dominance. The noise of sloppy, wet kisses and soft moans mingled in a symphony of innocent teenaged lust.

He shook his head and sneered. *She must truly be desperate to tolerate the inexperience of this overeager, bumbling paramour. I've seen enough, however. I wonder if a ghost can go blind? Regardless, I hope to be saved by the bell soon enough.*

The piercing blare of a smoke alarm startled the couple, causing them to roll from the sofa onto the floor. They dashed to the kitchen to see black smoke billowing from the oven. Ron stood ready for action as Hermione pulled the door open, then jumped aside. He shouted, "*Aguamenti*," for the second time that night, successfully dousing the flames within the gas oven.

They stood there, wide eyed, panting, neither able to speak, nor perhaps willing. After a few moments, she moved, donning oven mitts to pull the blackened dish from the oven. She noted the temperature dial had been raised to 260 degrees Celsius, well above the 170 degrees she had set earlier in the evening. With little ceremony, she dumped the burnt pudding, crock and all, into the sink; the ruined curry soon followed. She stared sullenly at the colorful culinary failure which mocked her domestic skills.

Ron approached her with hand extended, but pulled back at the last second. "Let me help you with that, 'Mione." He began to clear plates from the table, but her hand on his forearm halted his movement.

"Thanks, Ron, but I think I would rather clean up on my own, if that's okay."

He shrugged. "Yeah. I ought to be getting home, anyway. Gotta help George take inventory tomorrow. Can I Floo-call you tomorrow night?" She nodded weakly, her smile uncertain, eyes glistening. "Don't think too much on this, Hermione." He hugged the subdued witch and placed a tender kiss atop her curly head. "Goodnight," he called over his shoulder as he walked away.

She waited for the flaring green fire to wither to silence before slumping to the floor in a weeping heap.

The ghost in her kitchen took great pleasure in witnessing her failure.

Hermione and Ron didn't meet again until the following weekend, due to their very full schedules. The responsibilities associated with her Charms apprenticeship consumed almost every waking hour; not only did she spend her weekdays at Hogwarts studying under Professor Flitwick but she also spent a few evenings there as well, performing curfew-monitoring duties and researching in the library. Fortunately, she could grade essays in the comfort of home. For Ron, the demands of Auror training and his part-time position at the Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes shop left little time to socialize.

For tonight, Hermione had left nothing to chance regarding the food; she'd Floo-called Ron that morning and asked him to bring Chinese take-away from the little Muggle restaurant just outside Diagon Alley. Although the simple meals she had prepared during the week were uneventful, she'd spent an inordinate amount of time inspecting the ingredients beforehand, searching for breaches in package security and sniffing each spice to verify authenticity, and she'd never left the food unattended for any reason. She had gone so far as to place wards on the pantry that would indicate if any items had been tampered with.

Ron arrived at six o'clock, heralded by a bright green flare, one hand carrying a bag full of warm, fragrant food, the other one brushing fine gray ash from his hair and clothing; however, he neglected to Evanesco the Floo residue from the hearth rug. From beneath a shielding fringe of red hair, his eyes darted side to side, searching for his sometimes shrewish girlfriend.

Rather than a scathing glare or barrage of belittling words, silence greeted him. His eyes grew wide at the sight of Hermione knocking back a glass of Chardonnay in one long series of gulps. Or perhaps her appearance shocked him. She sat huddled in a corner of the sofa, shivering uncontrollably beneath a heavy patchwork quilt, wearing a shapeless gray sweat suit, her hair the bushy, untameable mass of her youth. This was not the look one would sport if one expected to get lucky.

Ron flew to her side, wrapping her in his warm, enthusiastic embrace, rubbing her back and patting her frizzy head. "Is everything okay? What happened?"

She sighed and shook her head. "Oh, it's nothing really, just silly, little annoyances."

She sat up and patted the cushion next to her. As Ron sat down beside her, she conjured a second wine glass and poured generous portions for both of them. She took dainty sips as she reviewed the litany of irritations she had experienced earlier in the day.

"Well, the books are still rearranging themselves every day, making it impossible for me to find what I need. And there are so many titles that I can't be expected to remember them all. So last night, I made a master list of all my books."

Ron interjected as she brought the glass to her lips. "That's brilliant, Hermione. Now a simple Summoning Charm is all you need to find any title. No more time wasted reorganizing the books."

She conjured a coaster upon which to place her glass. "That's how it should work in theory, but the list had mysteriously disappeared overnight. I lost half the morning recreating it. Only this time, I made multiple copies which I've placed all over the flat. Those books with their faulty self-organizing charms won't confound me again," she said triumphantly, taking another sip of wine in celebration of her brilliance.

Perhaps a copy in your vault at Gringotts would be the best course of action Snape thought, observing from the shadows as always. *Someday, I might have the urge to tidy up our flat, and those out-of-place parchments might be binned.*

She continued her tale between generous sips of wine. "Anyway, I spent the remainder of the day reading, revising, and researching for my essay on advanced Cheering Charms for the chronically depressed. I stopped a little over an hour ago so I would have ample time to prepare for our date. Moments after I stepped into the shower, the water turned icy *again* and the plumbing had behaved without incident all week long. And I had to wash my hair with a bar of soap because I ran out of my very expensive shampoo and conditioner. I could have sworn those bottles were at least half-full the other day. I found the tube of curl tamer empty as well. And these sweats were the only clean clothes I could find. Half my wardrobe seems to be missing. I can only account for the clothes I handed to the house-elves of the school laundry service." She gazed into the empty wine glass and pouted. "I so wanted to look pretty for you tonight. Instead, I look like a dowdy Medusa."

Ron pulled her into a comforting embrace and smoothed her wild tresses with a tentative touch. He seemed afraid to touch her hair. Would it attack if he came too close? Then he did the only rational thing a mostly sober, eager young man could do when confronted with an ardent, though less than visually appealing young lady. He closed his eyes and kissed her, hesitant at first. She gasped and stiffened; apparently, his advances caught her off guard. Wasn't that the whole point of this romantic charade? Eventually, they relaxed, becoming bolder in their exploration, her awful appearance a distant memory.

Fuck. Heavy petting isn't on the menu tonight, Weasley. You aren't supposed to be tongue spelunking Miss Granger's mouth. Her looks are meant to drive you from this flat, screaming in horror. Time for plan B.

Snape fled the scene in search of his unwitting accomplice. Within a minute, he returned to the shadows of the sitting room, petting the clueless half-Kneazle nestled in his arms. Into its ear, he whispered, "That incubus is attacking your mistress. He means to devour her, body and soul. It is up to you, Sir Hairball, to defend her honor. Now fly!" He hurled the furry orange beast at the amorous couple.

Despite his loud, protesting wail, Crookshanks managed a soft landing with claws extended on Ron's lap, thus ending the tender interlude on the sofa.

"Bloody hell," the young man exclaimed as he leapt to his feet, forcing Hermione's familiar into her arms. "That cat's nutters, 'Mione. And jealous." He looked down at his trousers to discover several sixteen, in fact discrete holes grouped around his groin, more battle scars obtained in his relentless pursuit of the Gryffindor princess. First, she tried to kill him with her cooking; then her pet attempted a crude vasectomy. How much more would he endure just to get into her knickers?

She soothed the clinging animal with gentle words and light strokes, smoothing its fur, which stood on end. "There, there, Crookshanks. Nothing will harm you when you're in my arms." Her narrowed eyes shot a withering glare at the injured wizard. "I don't know what you're on about, Ronald, but my cat is not jealous."

"Oh, yeah? Why did he attack me while I was kissing you?" His tone was equal parts smugness and curiosity.

"I don't know, Ronald," she replied in breathy exasperation, "but if you don't want to stay, can't you do better than blaming Crookshanks?"

He threw his hands up. "What are you talking about?"

"I can tell you don't want to be here tonight. Your touch and kisses were tentative at best. Just admit it, Ronald; you are put off by my looks, aren't you?" She turned her attention back to her familiar, thus avoiding the confrontation she had began.

He returned to the sofa, but kept a respectable distance from the witch in case her beast chose to attack again. "Hermione," he said oh so softly, his hand on her thigh. "You're brilliant. You know looks don't matter that much to me, anyway."

You've done it again. Eloquent as always, Weasley. I hope you can take your foot out of your mouth soon. You'll need both of them to escape the wrath of Miss Granger, Snape gloated to himself.

She jumped from the sofa, and the bewildered cat slid to the ground, hightailing it from the room shortly thereafter. "Thanks for dinner, but I'm not up for company anymore. I trust you can see yourself out." Her impatient foot tapped nonstop against the hardwood floor while her wand hand twitched at her side.

"Fine," he whinged. "Just make up your mind, Hermione. I'm getting tired of your mixed signals." He moved quickly to the fireplace, grabbing a messy handful of Floo powder from atop the mantle and throwing it in the hearth with a vengeance. "Goodnight," he muttered, not bothering to look back at her.

Hermione shed no tears this time when the green flare faded to nothing. Her solace that evening came from cheap Chardonnay and Chinese take-away, enjoyed directly from bottle and carton, respectively. She had no use for glassware or dishes, as she had nobody to impress.

The ghost in her lounge took great pleasure in witnessing her discomfiture.

The following Saturday, Snape enjoyed an evening of blissful solitude. In front of a roaring fire, he lay sprawled upon the sofa, feet resting upon the sacred coffee table. He held a book in one hand and a snifter of brandy in the other. Blessed silence reigned, broken only by the rustling turn of a page, the occasional crack or pop of the fire and the quiet, refined sip of fine brandy from an elegant, wide-mouth goblet. He knew this brief moment in paradise would come to an end all too soon when Miss Granger and Weasley returned from their romantic evening in Hogsmeade. But as far as weekends went, Snape considered this one a success so far, having spent the better part of the day alone while his flat-mate attended to her business.

Considering how her last two attempts at seduction had gone pear-shaped, Hermione planned all pre-sexual activities to take place outside the confines of her flat. First, she deposited a none-too-happy Crookshanks into the care of Harry Potter at Grimmauld Place. Next, she indulged in an afternoon of pampering at the salon, no Gorgonian hair for her tonight. Finally, The Date, a sunset stroll around the Black Lake to be followed by dinner at the New Hog's Head Inn. Aberforth Dumbledore's dodgy establishment had undergone a post-war makeover to become a charming French country bistro that put the goats (and their offensive odor) out to pasture, or at least behind the building.

She pulled out all the stops to ensure successful copulation would be achieved this evening. If everything went as planned, Hermione Granger would no longer rank amongst the wizarding world's most sought after virgins, or she would die trying.

Snape didn't want the girl to die literally; if that happened, he might be burdened with her forever in the afterlife. No, he simply wanted her so frustrated, sexually and in general, that she would move from the Shrieking Shack leaving her books behind, he hoped and Snape could once more bask in the glow of his solitude.

The jingle of keys brought his optimistic musings to a halt and signaled the start of the evening's entertainment. No, he didn't care to watch the awkward, ineffectual grappling of hormonal teenagers, but he gained immense enjoyment from throwing ice water metaphorically speaking, of course on amorous duos caught in the act. Pity, though, he could no longer assign detentions or remove House points. Snape moved to the shadows to observe.

They stumbled across the threshold, laughing, and no sooner had the door been shut than Hermione slammed Ron against the wall and latched onto him much like the Giant Squid would engage his playmates, willing and otherwise. Her hands fisted his hair, keeping his head in place as her tongue plunged into his mouth, all while she rubbed her legs and other body parts against him.

Ron encouraged this pleasurable assault to continue for less than a minute before taking her face in his hands and slowly disengaging her mouth from his.

"Slow down, love," he said, gasping for breath. "We have all night. No need to go *this* fast." His fingers caressed her professionally tamed curls, and his warm smile assured her of his continued interest. Or perhaps his erection pressing into her hip provided the only physical affirmation she needed.

A subtle blush bloomed upon her face, already reddened from wine and kisses. "I know that," she whispered, peering at him through thick spell-enhanced lashes. "It's just... I... I want you... now," she stammered.

"All right," he agreed cheerfully.

Hermione wasted no further time on foreplay in the foyer. She grabbed his hand and pulled him up the staircase and into her bedroom, Snape following at a reasonable distance. She had set the seductive scene earlier in the day, dressing the bed in gold satin sheets beneath a sumptuous burgundy velvet duvet, blatant abuse of Gryffindor décor. A Chianti-bottle candlestick, dripping with colorful wax and sporting a wicker base, stood upon the bedside cabinet and bathed the room in a soft, flickering glow.

The eager witch made quick work of removing her little black dress and fuck me pumps while the equally horny young wizard followed suit, removing his shirt and trousers without bothering to fully unbutton them first. In an instant, she wound herself around him again, smothering his face with incessant kisses and kneading every square inch of bare skin within her reach.

His gentle exploration contrasted hers in a more subdued manner, licking and nipping her neck and jawline, caressing her flanks from breast to... He froze when his hand met something wholly unexpected at her hip.

"What is that?" More shock than curiosity fueled the question. He gently disentangled himself from the clinging witch to see what he had touched. Once adjusted to the dim light, his eyes grew wide to see her fanny covered in a large expanse of unadorned white cotton knit. "Why are you wearing granny pants, Hermione?"

Because her lacy red knickers have taken up permanent residence in the spatial and temporal no man's land outside the Shrieking Shack. I happened upon them tossed carelessly upon the bed as I tidied up this morning. She needs to take better care of her possessions so they don't become misplaced or damaged.

"Oh, bugger," she muttered under her breath. She sighed, then went on to explain. "I couldn't find the new lingerie I wanted to wear, and I tried to transfigure a duplicate set at the last moment. I was so rushed, so distracted... I wasn't able to transfigure anything at all. I didn't mean for you to see them."

"That's all right, love," he said, his hands resting upon her shoulders. "You won't be wearing them for very much longer, anyway." His fingers traced down her arms, pulling with them the straps of her plain white cotton bra. He continued to undress her, unwrapping the gift he had waited for so long to receive. His eyes grew wide and his breath quickened upon seeing her naked for the very first time. His lingering gaze traveled from her well-coiffed head to her prettily painted toes and made a return visit to her breasts.

Hermione was simply beautiful. No pointless attempt to cover her nudity, no telltale blush of mortification. She fairly glowed in the warm candlelight, radiating innocence and grace, a symbol of the Light and all that was good in the wizarding world. However, she didn't behave like a paragon of virginity.

Snape grew impatient, simply waiting for the action to start. *Oh, for the love of Merlin. Take a picture. Don't just stand there gawking at her. She's not a work of art to be*

admired. She's flesh and blood and eagerly awaiting to lose her V card. Do something, fool.

She grabbed the waistband of Ron's pants and pulled them down in one swift movement, baring the young man's freckled arse to the candlelit darkness and the ghost hidden in the shadows. With the gentleness and subtlety of a Blast-Ended Skrewt in heat, she threw him to the bed and pounced on him.

Snape paid no heed to the couple engaged in foreplay, but the muffled moans, slurping noises, and protesting bed springs distracted him just a bit. His earnest haunting began small: the window flew open; crisp autumn wind rushed into the room, blowing out the candle and slamming the door shut.

These actions went wholly unnoticed by the living. Ron grunted, but he could have been responding more to Hermione's manual machinations than the odd environmental issues. The witch carried on as though events like this windows opening themselves occurred every day, which they did of course, especially in the middle of the night. She doubled her stimulating endeavors, and Ron's grunting grew louder. He was oblivious to the strange goings-on taking place around him. He no doubt enjoyed her efforts, yet he stilled her clever hands with his own.

"I don't want this to be over before we start, Hermione." The darkness of night couldn't hide the disappointment seen in her fallen face and slouching shoulders. "I think it's time I paid some attention to you."

With a graceful roll inventive fighting maneuvers were a necessity when living with five older brothers he pinned her body beneath his, straddling her hips and peppering her upper body with kisses, nips, and feather light touches. She answered with throaty moans and spirited writhing, an unexpected, high level of passion for such an inexperienced virgin.

Snape repeated the cycle with relentless frequency and plaster-cracking force; the window burst open as the door slammed shut and vice versa ad nauseam. The wind picked up to near gale force, sending Hermione's tchotchkes a menagerie of porcelain cats crashing to the floor.

Now Ron found this distracting. "Erm, Hermione, this is very odd." He made to pull away, but she held tight, gripping his arms with bruising force, her nails marking a trail of red half-moons upon his pale skin.

"I know what you mean, but we should just move past it." She had to shout just to be heard above the rushing air, so strong it whipped the bedclothes about the would-be lovers. "I'm ready, Ron. Take me now." She pulled him down, bestowing a hard, lip-crushing kiss upon him.

A loud, otherworldly wail rose above the din. The mournful cry of a spiteful spirit shattered the romantic mood. Perhaps Ron could have ignored magical, self-adjusting windows and doors opening and closing at will. Maybe he could have overlooked sudden changes of Scottish weather with concomitant micro-bursts of gusty wind but not occurring indoors. He could not, however, ignore the disembodied moan echoing throughout Hermione's bedroom. He scrambled to his feet and grabbed his discarded clothing from the floor.

"I'm sorry, Hermione, but I can't deal with this. I gotta go." He dressed, forgoing socks and pants in favor of a hasty retreat.

"What?" she asked, her voice high pitched, shrewish, yet spoken at normal volume.

All paranormal activity ceased as soon as the coitus was interrupted; the lovers hadn't been close to penetration in any definition of the word. Now the only sounds heard were the chirping of the cricket chorus and the zipping of a young man's trousers he couldn't be arsed to button his shirt or tie his shoelaces, but apparently he wanted to maintain some level of decency. As he made to leave the room, she leapt from the bed and lunged toward the doorway, blocking his exit.

"Let me go, Hermione," he pleaded in a tired voice. "I promise to call you tomorrow."

She wouldn't let him pass. She stood resolute, hands on her hips, mouth set in a tight line, yet her lips trembled a bit. "I planned to give you a very precious gift tonight. My virginity. That should mean something to you."

"I care for you, Hermione. I might even love you. But if I don't feel comfortable shagging you in my flat with George in the next room, what makes you think I want do it here with a pervy ghost looking over my shoulder? And you're so eager to lose it that you would willingly ignore the fact you're living with a ghost?"

Bringing attention to her low moral standards is rather endearing. But I take offense in being called a pervert. I had no intention of watching you fornicate.

Silence. Not absolute, for the cricket chorus returned to play an encore. The fierce face of the warrior princess never faltered as she stepped aside, offering him the chance to escape.

With not so much as a single word or a second look, he walked away. No fond farewell or sorrowful stare. When his footsteps faded and the flare of the Floo died away, all hell broke loose.

"You wretched, cock-blocking ghost," she bellowed, stomping through her bedroom, throwing open doors and drawers with hinge-bending force. She conducted a frantic, yet thorough search of all the places one might expect to find a spirit lurking in the wardrobe, under the bed, behind the drapes, even in her inaptly named hope chest but could not find the mischievous ghost. The bedroom lay in shambles, looking like a low-grade cyclone had touched down, which for all intents and purposes it had. She collapsed upon the toile-covered cedar chest. "Show yourself," she demanded between quick and shallow puffs of breath, "whoever you are."

Snape emerged from darkened shadows into a bright rhombus of moonlight. "I've been in plain sight all along," he replied in soft, dulcet tones. "You chose to ignore my presence."

"Snape!" His sibilant surname had never sounded as lovely before that moment, spat from the mouth of an enraged, naked woman.

Hermione clambered across the bed to retrieve her wand from atop the bedside cabinet. She whirled around to confront him, practically nose to nose, toe to toe, wand at the ready for... What? Would a well-aimed spell have any affect on a specter? Or would it pass through, leaving the target unharmed and unfouled?

"Well, the times have certainly changed. When the Dark Lord fell, did all pretense of polite society die with him? I've never heard you address me without an honorific before. Where are your manners, Miss Granger?"

She remained stoic, unwavering. "It seems I've misplaced them." But apparently, she had discovered sarcasm while on sabbatical from Hogwarts last year.

"Along with your clothes?" *Touché.*

She blinked but once almost imperceptible to the untrained eye, but not Snape's her quavering courage exposed. The absurdness of reality overwhelmed her at that moment. Was it the shock of coming face to face with the ghost of Snape? The embarrassment of being *au naturel* in his presence? Whatever the reason, she crumpled to the floor, her hands covering her face but making no attempt to cover the rest of her body.

"This is surreal, even for the wizarding world. I need a drink," she groaned.

The ghost in her bedroom took great pleasure in his triumph.

"Why don't you go and get dressed, then meet me in the lounge for that drink?"

Snape evaporated into a wispy haze, wafting through the hardwood to the main floor below, leaving behind a naked, bewildered witch, a rare experience even when he was alive. Perhaps his luck was improving after all.

A/N: Ta da! Snape's haunting efforts have finally been noticed! But questions remain... How successful was he? Will Hermione pack up and leave? Will you hazard a guess, gentle readers?

Next up: The sit down. It never goes the way one expects.

Chapter 5: All's Fair in Love and War

Chapter 5 of 12

Has Hermione's bleeding heart run dry? Can Snape promise to compromise even if it kills him? Can the warring factions achieve détente, or will Snape be left out in the cold... again? All these questions and more will be answered... or not.

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money.

Chapter 5: All's Fair in Love and War

Snape basked in the glow of success, quaffing his brandy while watching embers sputter and fade, bright remnants turning gray and ashen on the grate. The dead would triumph in the Battle of the Hogmeade Arms Apartments, Building One, Flat One.

His first face-to-face encounter with Miss Granger had gone rather well, in his opinion. Granted, his haunting hadn't sent her running naked into the night, screaming in bloody terror, but he just *knew* she would be packing her belongings and getting the hell out of Hogmeade come morning. Tonight, he desired a polite conversation, or threat if need be, a quick debriefing for his benefit. *Did you consider my haunting effective, Miss Granger? Were you scared or merely annoyed?* and then goodbye, constant irritation, and hello, peaceful solitude.

His celebration was short lived, however, as Hermione's Reducto shattered the snifter he held to his lips, dousing him in cheap liquor and glass. When had the ever-vigilant spy-cum-Potions master become so lackadaisical, giving his opponent a generous opportunity to attack? Or had the Gryffindor witch finally learned stealth and strategy during her time outside of the walls of Hogwarts?

"That was uncalled for," he drawled as he made a show of wiping glass shards from his robes, although the broken glass had, in reality, passed through him and now was embedded in the sofa.

"You cast the first stone, Professor," she said through clenched teeth.

She stomped across the room; in her wake, her spiked heels left tiny holes in the sensible Berber carpeting. The angry witch cast a silent Vanishing Spell with a dismissive swish and flick of her wand, removing the glass and liquid from the sofa before transforming it into two dissimilar chairs. Snape showed no expression as his cushy seat turned into a wobbly wooden chair resembling the one in his former office. Hermione lowered herself into an over-stuffed reclining chair, staring daggers at him while pulling at the hem of her tasteful, little black dress.

"You seem overdressed for this occasion, Miss Granger." He smirked and stretched out his long legs, comfortable in her discomfiture, convinced he would prevail. Bit by bit, he would chip away at her calm, forcing her to forfeit.

She snorted. "Oh, this old thing? I'm rather fond of it." She paused to smooth imaginary wrinkles from her dress, then continued. "And I don't have much choice in attire since half my clothes have gone missing," she hissed.

"I thought women appreciate when a man spruces up the place," he deadpanned. "But if you don't care for my efforts, I'll make no further attempt to be neat and orderly." Once again the smirk appeared, tugging smugly at the corners of his mouth.

That was the spark that ignited Hermione's fuse. Unable to extinguish the slow burning wrath, her cool control crumbled. She made an earnest attempt to calm down, breathing deeply, unclenching her white-knuckled, tight fists, but all for naught. Her high-pitched screech could be heard by dogs at the opposite end of the village.

"This is my home," she screamed, jumping up and rounding on Snape, her wand poking into his chest, or through it rather. "My name is on the lease. I pay the rent here. You... you are just a... a squatter who... What are you doing here? Why are you tormenting me?" She backed off, trembling, panting short, shallow breaths. Her wand had a mind of its own, vibrating and emitting a low hum, throwing off multicolored sparks even as she withdrew it from Snape's body.

"Don't flatter yourself, Miss Granger. I'm haunting you because you are the only person living here. When you leave, I shall not follow, nor *torment* you."

Her eyes grew wide, and her humming wand grew louder. "Leave? I'll do nothing of the sort. I'll lose my security deposit if I break the lease. Why don't you leave?"

"I will not," he proclaimed in his most authoritative voice. But will had nothing to do with his inability to leave the Shrieking Shack. He wouldn't let her know that, so he stood his ground, or rather sat his seat, showing no fear of the witch with the twitchy wand.

She advanced on him once more. "Well, neither will I. Why do you want to force me out, anyway?"

"I want to spend my afterlife alone in tranquility with no hand-waving, over-achieving know-it-all mucking up my well-deserved peace and quiet. Rest assured, if you remain here, you shall have no rest... or sexual congress, for that matter. I'll drive Weasley, or any other unfortunate, potential paramour, screaming from this house. The Shrieking Shack will live up to its name forever more." And the smirk returned, firmly planted upon his frigid face.

Once more, she backed away, her body trembling, but now, shaking with laughter. "I helped destroy one of the most powerful, evil wizards of all time. The ghost of Severus Snape does not intimidate me in the least."

Her mocking mirth disappeared moments later, replaced by stony silence and a fallen face. "Oh, Professor Snape," she cried, retreating to the neutrality of her cushy chair. "I'm so sorry. Please forgive me. I just realized that you're *stuck* here, physically unable to leave. Why else would you endure my presence when you so clearly despise me? I mean, you couldn't possibly get that much amusement from annoying me."

No, it's only a minor diversion, but I rather like your books. And the occasional glimpse of your tits is an added bonus. Snape didn't give voice to that lascivious thought, but a leer passed over his sharp features before it morphed into a subtle sneer.

"Bravo, Miss Granger. You're finally putting that vaunted intellect to good use. It only took you one second longer than the average Hufflepuff to realize my predicament."

She graced him with a beaming smile, apparently finding the compliment buried beneath his insult. "Thank you, sir. What is it that keeps you here? Why aren't you in... erm..."

"Hell?" he interjected. Better to beat her to the punch than belabor the point, or be forced to endure her incessant questions.

Hermione huffed the sigh of the exasperated, the snort expressed when one has experienced sarcasm overload. "I was going to say the great beyond, but I could see you in hell, too. It's a good fit for you, Professor, on any of the nine levels."

"Thank you, Miss Granger, for the vote of confidence," he replied in droll, yet dulcet tones. He raised a pale, elegant hand to suppress any further response from her. "Allow me to briefly explain my current situation. Please withhold your questions until I'm finished. An earth-bound spirit is confined to the site of his or her death for a duration of ninety-nine years as a means of controlling spirit migration. Outside this containment area are dangerous, constantly changing spatial and temporal anomalies which transport the ghost to a strange, desolate, unpredictable landscape, replete with peril and potential death... or rather a more permanent form of the latter. Now you may ask your questions, limited to five. I don't want to spend all eternity discussing the metaphysical intricacies of the afterlife with you, Miss Granger."

"*Accio* paper and Biro." A thick yellow legal pad and ball-point pen leapt from her book bag, passing through Snape, who didn't even flinch, before landing softly in her outstretched hands. She spent the next minute composing her questions, breaking mid-scribble just once to stare off into the distance while absent-mindedly chewing on the end of her pen. Finally, she looked at Snape, inhaling deeply as she smiled and announced, "I'm so excited. I've never had the opportunity to interview a ghost before."

"Yes. Proceed," he drawled, annoyed by her eagerness, but resisting the urge to roll his eyes or utter some scathing retort.

"Question number one," she started.

He rolled his eyes at that moment because he just couldn't restrain himself any longer. *Insufferable, swotty know-it-all, seething with anger and showering me with glass just minutes ago. Now she can't wait to pepper me with questions.*

"How did you learn about your imprisonment and the means by which you are held in check here?"

"A useless guide to the afterlife, a terminally upbeat caseworker, and personal experience."

"That's rather vague, Professor. Expound your answer please," she said politely, her voice struggling to maintain a flat tone, so as to sound more commanding than inquisitive.

"That's all I care to say on the matter. Press any more, and I'll count that as two questions." Despite his irritation, he maintained a cool, aloof demeanor.

"Fine," she huffed. "Question number *two* is prefaced with an observation. You would never consciously choose to become a ghost, the shadow of a soul lingering between life and death. Why do you remain here, earthbound, as you said?"

Why, indeed. Snape had spent very little time pondering that conundrum since he had become aware of his forced detention. He would remain a prisoner in the Shrieking Shack for ninety-nine years standard Gregorian calendar years or temporally truncated afterlife years, who could say for certain? unless he completed the mystery task set by The Powers That Be.

"Unfinished business, according to my caseworker." His hand automatically shot up to prevent her potential interruption. "No, I will not expound on that either, but I will comment about your thoughtful observation," he said, his velvet voice tinged with contempt. "Some consider you, Miss Granger, the brightest witch of your age, but on the subject of Severus Snape, you are completely ignorant. What you *think* you know of me or my previous incarnation was a carefully crafted veneer honed to deceive and placate two of the greatest wizards of all time... and the general public, yourself included. Do not presume to know what I would or would not do."

She gasped and shook her head. "No, Professor, you misunderstand me. I meant... well, Sir Nicholas said he chose to remain behind because he was afraid of death."

"How ironic that the patron ghost of Gryffindor home of the brave and reckless should be a fraidy-cat, a coward." That last word rolled off his tongue with an ease he'd never experienced while alive. In the old days, when he did manage to say it, the word would stick in his throat, then leave a bitter aftertaste in his mouth. "I was *not* afraid of death," he hissed, his jaws clenched.

"Of that, I'm certain," she said quietly. "I watched you die, Professor." She turned away from him to stare at the graying cinders in the hearth, as though they were the most interesting thing she had ever seen. "You barely flinched when that vile snake ripped into your neck and tore..."

"I do not require a blow-by-blow description," he interrupted in icy, clipped tones. "I remember it in excruciatingly vivid detail. However, we wouldn't be here right now having this inane conversation if you had made some attempt to save me rather than watch as my life's blood drained from two humongous holes in my throat." His outward calm belied the burning rage building inside him, but even his famous self-control had its limits.

Now Hermione couldn't help but watch eyes wide and mouth agape as his pale skin turned an unlovely shade of green and tendrils of black smoke wafted from his ears. Anger overruled shock as she leapt up, looming over the odious ghost.

"Save you? Save you!" she shrieked, vocal histrionics accompanied by her bobbing head, heaving chest, and waving arms, like an adult-sized Blast-Ended Skrewt accidentally dosed with Pepperup Potion. "Sorry, but I was a bit distracted, you know, keeping Harry alive and helping him defeat Voldemort and his homicidal gang. And why should I have cared about you? Voldemort's right-hand man. Dumbledore's killer. You were the enemy. If only I had known then what I know now. And you played the role of duplicitous spy so well; you deserved a BAFTA."

She paused to repeatedly poke an angry, emphatic finger through his chest before continuing her full-body tirade. "No, the blame rests entirely on you, Professor. Completely unprepared for the eventuality of fatal snakebite or other mortal danger. Did you think Voldemort kept that bloody snake because he was lonely? Did it ever occur to you to keep a stash of antivenin on your person? Or dittany? Or Blood-Replenishing Potion? And you called yourself a Potions master," she said, laughing with a scorn that would have made Snape proud if it weren't directed at him. "If I didn't know better, I would say that you were looking forward to death."

He refused to respond to her accusations on the grounds that he might incriminate himself. How ironic that the man who relished exploiting weakness in his enemies was himself fatally flawed: in facing death, his self-preservation gene had petered out when he had needed it most. Slumping in the rickety chair, he assumed a sulky stance of crossed arms and pouty lips: broody, brood, brood. His skin returned to its normal pallor, and the smoke from his ears evaporated. "Next question."

Emotions and breathing seemingly under control, Hermione retreated to her comfortable chair, adjusting the hem of her dress, yet ignoring her list of prepared questions. "The Shrieking Shack proper was renovated into four flats, Professor. If you really want to spend your afterlife alone, as you claim, why didn't you move into one of the unoccupied flats after I arrived?"

Why, indeed. "I wanted access to your library, Miss Granger. My one joy in life was reading for pleasure and knowledge, something you would appreciate. When I had a quiet moment to myself, I would escape to a remote tropical island inhabited by natives, shipwrecked captives, and mutineers; or search for buried pirate treasure; or travel the Mississippi River by raft anything to help me forget the real world and those two rat-bastards who controlled my every move."

This heartfelt confession must have appealed to her bleeding-heart sensibilities just a bit. A slight smile lit her face, and her eyes sparkled. "I understand completely. Books were my means of escape as well before I attended Hogwarts. I would travel to Arabia to listen to a queen spin tales of magic genies, murderous thieves, and brave sailors on fantastic voyages; or accompany a stowaway bear from Darkest Peru on his adventures; or spend a quiet afternoon with the Bennett sisters of Meryton. Anything to help me cope with the endless taunts of my insensitive peers and the interference of my well-meaning, but fearful parents."

Snape nodded and allowed the smile of solidarity to grace his face for a fleeting millisecond. "While you while away the days as indentured servant to Filius Flitwick all in the name of higher education, of course I immerse myself in your library, reading everything, magical and Muggle, reference and pleasure. While you sleep at night, *no doubt dreaming of being ravaged by a certain red-haired idiot*, he thought, "I read the textbooks and professional journals kept in your book bag, trying to stay abreast of recent developments in the field of Charms. It's not really my cup of tea, what with all that foolish wand-waving." His hands fluttered in an elaborate parody of the swish and flick motion, the basis of many a charm and spell. "Anyway," he continued, "I spend my nights on the sofa excellent Transfiguration, that reading and drinking brandy in front of a roaring fire."

"How is that even possible? Your magic is... different," she said softly, grimacing a bit with the last word.

"The magic I had for over thirty-eight years is gone, but something... different to use your elegant word has replaced it. I can manipulate objects to a certain extent, as you have experienced first hand." He indulged in a smirk, hoping it wouldn't ignite her ire once more. "But the brandy and the fire come from the afterlife's concierge service. I would compare it to the Room of Requirement: ask and ye shall receive if deemed necessary."

"Brandy, you say? I thought you more of a Firewhisky man." She paused for a thoughtful moment. "That's a coincidence. A few weeks back, Ron left a secret message, asking me to buy brandy when next I go to market."

"Secret message?" he asked, eyebrow raised in emphasis. "I thought the days of stealth and coded communication had passed for you."

"Pah, nothing so complicated as that. Haven't you ever drawn a picture on a foggy bathroom mirror, one that can only be seen after the next steamy shower?"

Snape's Cheshire cat grin did all the talking without him uttering a word.

A moment of clarity must have passed as her eyes grew big as tennis balls, and she gasped. "That wasn't Ron! That was you!"

"Yes, that was me. And I thought your incoherent babbling in the shower more convincing than anything I heard emanating from your bedroom tonight."

"Wait... you've eavesdropped on me in the bath?"

He smirked in a most lascivious manner. "I've done more than *listen*, Miss Granger."

"You... you've seen me naked?" She made an unnecessary attempt to cover herself before realizing she was fully clothed. Her skin burned a brilliant red from hairline to bosom, perhaps even beyond.

"One is usually in a state of undress when in the shower. Besides, have you forgotten what transpired in your bedroom not an hour ago?"

Her intense blush flared; any further embarrassment might have resulted in her spontaneous combustion. "Professor, how could you violate my privacy like that? I'm offended."

"Miss Granger, how can you begrudge a dead man a peek at those fabulous tits? I used to pay dearly for such an honor."

She stammered a bit before a tiny, reluctant smile twitched upon her lips. "Fab...fab... you think I have nice tits? Ronald said they were a bit too small for his liking."

"Tsk, ts. Fishing for compliments? I was and still am an unmitigated bastard, but there's a grain of truth in my words, even in ridicule."

"Good to know, sir, because... well, I've always been self-conscious about my bottom half; my hips and thighs are too big," she said wistfully.

He huffed an exasperated sigh, but obliged her nonetheless. "You look exactly like a woman should, Miss Granger, with curves and padding in all the right places. You have no idea how frustrating it is to search in vain for some purchase point whilst pounding into skin and bones. I made that mistake once with Trelawney, but I learned my lesson after that... encounter." He shuddered in repulsion. "Never again."

Her eyes grew wide upon hearing that shocking revelation. "Erm, I d-don't... No, Professor, never again."

Their little chat had veered far off course, touching on some very odd topics. He only wanted an honest critique of his scare tactics, so why were they discussing a shared love of books? And why had he revealed his one-off with Sybill? Did he think that tawdry bit of gossip would pull on Hermione's heartstrings? And would preying on her sympathetic bleeding heart earn him his precious solitude? Could a ghost's head explode if filled with too many rhetorical questions?

Despite his confident appearance, Snape felt a twinge of unease creep into his gut. For the first time since he began his month-long campaign of haunting, he thought victory might not be so certain. Hermione showed no fear of ghosts, but how much annoyance would she tolerate before leaving or perish the thought banishing him from the flat? She would never back down from a challenge, but he would not concede defeat... yet.

The lull in the conversation stretched on and on; the tension ebbed and flowed with each second of silence. They both focused on the dead ashes in the grate rather than look at each other. It was like playing a low stakes game of Chicken without the risk of a fatal car collision. Whoever flinched first or spoke, really would lose the Battle of the Hogsmeade Arms Apartments, Building One, Flat One.

"Let me make this perfectly clear..."

"Ha!"

"I'm not leaving, Professor. And while I did not appreciate any of your childish pranks, I'll allow you to stay here if you promise to behave. You'll have full access to my books. But no more sneaking peeks in the shower, and no more nicking knickers or any other annoying trick of yours, understand?" Ah, she had adopted a policy of zero tolerance. At least one of his questions had been answered.

When it came to stubborn behavior, Snape had twenty years on Hermione, but he displayed all the petulance of a child denied his after-dinner sweet: pouty, pout, pout and slouchy, slouch, slouch. "No, I'll not acquiesce to your demands."

The malevolent glint in her eyes looked foreign on the face of a Gryffindor. "You don't have a choice in this matter, Professor," she retorted ever so sweetly. "May I remind you the Ministry has authority over ghosts, and they would bend over backwards to appease a war heroine; but I would prefer to keep them out of my business. I can easily handle setting adequate anti-ghost wards. After all, charms are my speciality. So, I'll give you one more chance to play nice. What say you?" Her wand hand jerked an impatient tap dance of anticipation, as though she already knew his response.

"No."

With that simple, single word declaration, Snape found himself flung into oblivion quite a feat considering his non-corporeal status tossed aside unceremoniously into the adjacent, empty flat, the victim of Hermione's fury and expert spell technique. Hell hath nothing on an angry, frustrated virgin looking to lose it.

The witch in the lounge took great pleasure in her victory, so it seemed, reveling in a triumphant waltz with the reluctant and skittish Crookshanks held tightly in her arms. Hermione sang a loud, off-key version of a popular Muggle rock ballad as they whirled and twirled about the room, her black dress fluttering around her legs, her humidity-tamed tendrils joyously bouncing with each step.

"Weee are the champ-ions, my fri-ends... Isn't it wonderful, Crookshanks? Peace and quiet once again." She paused to release the struggling half-Kneazle onto the hearthrug. "And yet, he was so quiet and discreet, I never suspected a ghost to be lurking here... before tonight, that is. His little annoyances were so subtle and clever;

they could be explained as mechanical failures or house-elf errors... well, except for the curry fiasco. Anyway, I think he's learned his lesson: if you mess with the Gryffindor, you get the claws, or the pointy end of the wand."

She yawned and stretched, her body apparently realizing the full effects of the evening's tumultuous activities. "Goodnight, sweet Crookshanks," she said, bending down to pet her familiar before removing her killer pumps. Slow and weary legs carried her upstairs to the material comfort of her empty bedroom where she would have slept the sleep of the righteous, if only that bloody ghost in the neighboring flat would have stopped banging on the walls.

A/N: A shared love of books? How surprising!

Next up: Snape in exile and Hermione enlists help.

Chapter 6: The Paranormal Expert or Ghost Whispering for Dummies or Things That Go Bump in the Night

Chapter 6 of 12

Hermione seeks outside assistance. Like way outside.

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money.

Chapter 6: The Paranormal Expert or Ghost Whispering for Dummies or Things That Go Bump in the Night

Snape stared at the four blank white walls, contemplating his existence, or lack thereof. Hell, or the dangerous wilderness outside the Shrieking Shack, would have been an improvement over what he had experienced in the seven days since the bushy-haired harridan had banished him from her flat, severing him from the only joy in his afterlife: her books. Now he mainly engaged in navel-gazing, rehashing several life-altering moments in his past and wondering what if... he were given a second chance.

But mostly, Snape was just plain bored. Not bored to tears, for his lachrymal glands had ceased to function. Not bored to death, since... well, no explanation needed. Perhaps bored out of his skull would be the most apt description.

Boredom. Tedium. Ennui. Severus Snape considered himself somewhat of an expert in disinterest, having endured almost sixteen mind-numbing years of Dumbledore's start-of-term, team-building, motivational staff meetings.

Albus: "And now, we will perform an exercise in trust. Could I have a volunteer please? Severus, are you trying to hide behind Filius?"

Severus: "Nooo."

Albus: "Well, come up front, my boy. I promise this won't hurt a bit."

Severus: "Yeah, I've heard that before. Pick on someone else."

Albus: (Eyes twinkling with evil mischief) "Trust me, Severus."

Severus: (Heavy sigh and dagger-throwing glare)

Albus: "Now, turn your back toward me. On the count of three, you will fall backwards, and I'll catch you. Ready? One, two, three..."

Severus: (Thud)

To be fair, Snape had experienced that same level of boredom the self-torturous kind that compels one to insert spiky shards of bamboo under one's fingernails with the Dark Lord's never-ending, morale-boosting, motivational speeches.

Lord Voldemort: "We've had a few minor setbacks, but the Order has suffered many key defeats. Now that Dumbledore is worm fodder, they lack a magnetic leader to unite them. They blow aimlessly in the wind, scattered about like..."

Wormtail: "Excuse me, my Lord, but how can Dumbledore be worm fodder if he's entombed in marble?"

Lord Voldemort: "It's a metaphor, Wormtail. Now, as I was saying..."

Wormtail: "But he could be literal worm fodder if Hogwarts had magically-enhanced, marble-burrowing worms, right?"

Lord Voldemort: "Perhaps, but let's get back on topic, shall we? Potter is the spark which ignites..."

Lucius: (Huffing with indignation) "Do you really consider our loss at the Battle of the Department of Mysteries to be a 'minor setback?' (Emphasizes his point by making air quotes) I'm rather offended by that, my Lord."

Severus: (Belting out in his head)

"She's a killer queeeeeen,

Gunpooowder, gelatiine,

Dynamiite with a laser beeeam,

Guaranteed to blooow your miind,

Anytiime."

To wile away the endless hours of nothing, he recited in his mind the ingredients and step-by-step instructions for every potion he knew. He started with *Advanced Potion-Making* including his marginalia which improved upon Borage's recipes moved on to *Moste Potente Potions* and finally ended with *Undetectable Poisons of the West Indies*. When he ran out of potions, he sang the popular songs of his youth. The Beatles, Elton John, Pink Floyd, Queen, to name a few.

On his first night in exile, he had serenaded Miss Granger with Andrew Lloyd Webber show tunes, crooning off-key at the top of his lungs, no less. When she had stopped screaming profanity-laced diatribes and pounding on the bedroom wall, he had assumed she'd cast a Silencing Charm, finally remembering her magical abilities. From that point forward, he sang quite well, in his opinion for his own enjoyment, a rich and full baritone suitable for a variety of musical genres from pop to punk.

He had quickly found other activities solely intended to irritate the insufferable Miss Granger. On the second day, he had cut off the water supply to her flat while she had been in the midst of a shower. The following day, he had turned off the power at the electrical service panel during her dinner preparation. Her flat had grown increasingly cold on the fourth day her breath coming in icy white puffs, he'd imagined after Snape had shut off the gas.

She had suffered four days of inconvenience before extending the anti-ghost wards to include the basement with its main access to all her utilities. But that hadn't stopped him from using the walls as his personal drum kit. A Silencing Charm would have drowned out the sound of him, but she would still feel the boom, boom, boom percussion of Snape's persistent knocking on the walls adjacent to her flat. To his knowledge, a charm to dampen vibration hadn't been invented yet, but if anyone could do it, Miss Granger would be the one.

He had known enough to vary his location, whacking the walls to chase her from room to room throughout the night. However, by the sixth day of his exile, she had extended the anti-ghost wards to include Flats Two and Three, effectively trapping Snape in Flat Four, its walls abutting her kitchen and spare bedroom. Zounds, thwarted again and by a Gryffindor almost half his age!

On Saturday morning, he entertained his captive, yet appreciative audience of one himself with old standards.

"That old blaaack maaagic

Has meee in its speeeell,

That old blaaack maaagic

That you weeeave so weeeell.

Those icy fiiingers

Up and down my spiiine... "

That song in particular made him think about some of the bad choices he had made in his youth. One in particular stood out as monumentally bad. But before he could start his maudlin game of "*What if*," he felt a shift in the barrier magic that had prevented his freedom of movement within the Shrieking Shack.

What is she doing?

Snape performed a cursory test, attempting to pass his left pinky finger into the adjacent flat; he figured if it were a trap, he would only lose the least useful digit on his non-dominant hand. It moved easily through the wall, suffering no untoward horrors, or any effects for that matter. Next, he tried the entire left hand, then his arm, and finally, his whole ethereal body floated unhindered into the neighboring flat. From there, he cautiously moved into Flat Two, just in time to witness Hermione leaving her flat and walking toward Hogsmeade proper.

The library's open once again.

He spent the day lounging on her sofa and reading to his heart's content. He chose *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, a book he'd read many times before, but he took comfort in its familiarity. Judging from the condition of the book faded cover, tattered and dog-eared corners, broken spine Snape assumed it to be one of Hermione's favorites as well.

He lost track of time. Late in the afternoon, as the sun inched toward the horizon and pink candy floss clouds dotted the purple sky, the sound of laughter mixed with jingling keys shook him from his literary zone. His vaporous body vanished from the scene he left in such a hurry he didn't bother to re-shelve the book reappearing moments later in the flat next door.

From the front window, he saw his erstwhile room-mate in the company of a mysterious figure. Man or woman, he couldn't tell because of the shapeless, hooded cloak concealing the features of her guest. As Hermione drew closer to the front door, Snape noticed that while she looked well groomed from afar her hair tamed and her clothes neatly pressed the purple shadows beneath her lackluster eyes and her slow gait told a different story: she lacked her usual *joie de vivre* and feisty demeanor.

Still not sleeping well, I see, Miss Granger, he thought to himself, smirking in triumph.

At the moment she opened the door and crossed over the threshold, he fully expected to be hurtled through multiple structures walls, flooring, ceiling into his own vacant flat once again. He braced himself, waiting for the invisible bum's rush, and counted one one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand... Nothing. He cracked one eye open, then the second, and finally released the breath he was holding. For whatever reason, she had refrained from casting the ever-present anti-ghost wards.

What are you playing at, Miss Granger?

Snape passed his head just the left ear, not his entire head through the wall into her flat so he could eavesdrop on the conversation between Hermione and her mystery guest.

"I didn't realize you had an interest in... Uh, what do you call it exactly?" Hermione asked.

"Paranormal investigations and counseling," her companion offered. "Some folks call it ghost whispering."

Oh, yes, Snape's inner voice cheered. This is your champion? The one who will vanquish me? That's rich, Miss Granger. I can smell your desperation a flat away.

"So, how many times have you performed... erm, spirit relocation?"

"Oh, dozens of times in theory."

"In theory?" she repeated, her voice shrill with alarm. "How exactly did you learn this... skill?"

"Well, as you know, I've always had an affinity for the strange and unusual, phenomena that most people even magical folk would dismiss if they couldn't see it, touch it, or measure it. Anyway, I was proofreading the classifieds for our July issue, and I came across an intriguing advert. *'Do you have the ability to see or feel things that others refuse to acknowledge? Do you have the ability to think outside the box? Are you looking for an exciting new career? Then ghost whispering is for you. Train with the industry's top paranormal counselors from the comfort of your home. In just a matter of weeks, you'll learn...'*

"Hold on. From the comfort of your home, you say? Your training was..."

"A correspondence course. I studied in my spare time after work."

"Okay. Let me get this straight. Everything you know about paranormal activities came by way of a correspondence course you found advertised in..."

"*The Quibbler*."

"Hahahaha!" Snape's rich belly laugh echoed through Hermione's flat, a never-ending cascade of mockery.

"Is that him?" Luna asked in earnest. "Is that Professor Snape?"

Hermione sighed. "Well, of course it's him. Unless there's another ghost around here I don't know about."

"In the six years I knew him, I never heard him laugh. It's quite lovely. Reminds me of chocolate laced with cinnamon, a treat that's sweet, decadent, and unexpected."

"I find him and his laughter to be cruel and humorless," Hermione retorted icily. "I want them both gone from here. Can you do that discreetly, or do your emotions hamper your judgment?"

"Don't worry, my friend," Luna's dreamy voice assured, "I can be cold and clinical when the situation calls for it."

"Well, the situation calls for it. Rid me of Snape's spirit once and for all, if you can."

If nothing else, this ought to be entertaining. Snape swiveled his head to watch Luna in action.

From the pocket of her robes, she retrieved a miniaturized bag which she then restored to full size. She pulled from it the items of her trade—a smudge stick and a salt cellar—and placed them next to her on the floor of the foyer.

"Erm, Luna... do you really intend to use that stuff? I mean, you're magical, so you don't need to use Muggle methods..."

"It's part of the ritual, Hermione, and I want to be thorough. Would you please open all the windows and doors," Luna instructed as she used her wand to ignite the bundle of sage she held.

"*Adaperi*." Every window and door to the flat snapped open with a muffled bang and a concomitant blast of cold air. Hermione shivered in response.

Luna blew out the fiery smudge stick and traced around Hermione's body with the wispy smoke. "If you would be so kind as to cleanse me as well," Luna said, offering it to her friend.

Hermione drew a smoky outline around Luna and then handed the sage back to her.

Luna placed the dish of salt in Hermione's left hand. "You are in charge of sealing each room after it's been cleansed. It will be easier and less time consuming if we perform the spirit cleansing in one spot rather than the whole Shrieking Shack. Is there some way you could isolate Professor Snape here in your flat?"

"Of course." Hermione whispered an incantation while sweeping her wand arm in a three-quarter, anti-clockwise arc.

Quicker than a wink of Mad-Eye Moody's good eye, Snape materialized in the entry hall, his head arriving a full second before the rest of his body. The abrupt motion left him dizzy and nauseous, and he crumpled to the floor, a billowy heap of blackened ether.

"Granger," he snarled, glaring at her as he righted himself and smoothed his robes. "If you required my assistance, why didn't you..."

"Now, Luna!"

The novice ghost whisperer advanced on Snape, waving the smudge stick at him. "Severus Snape," she intoned loudly, "you are dead..."

"I'm painfully aware of that Miss Lovegood, however..."

"Yet you remain in the world of the living."

"Not my choice, mind you." His droll tone sounded almost conciliatory.

Luna took one step forward; Snape took one step backward. She led him in an awkward dance through the lounge, swirling the smudge stick around and around, the smoking sage forming a haze around them both. Soon the wispy trail of the smudge stick petered out to nothing. Luna whispered, "*Incendio*," and it reignited.

"You are not meant to be here. It is time to move on to the other side, Severus Snape."

"Don't I wish."

Hermione followed them and sprinkled a pinch of the blessed salt in the doorway as they waltzed out of the room.

Snape continued to walk backward in retreat as Luna forced him through the hallway and into the kitchen, stepping to-and-fro in a reverse Fred-and-Ginger mode. He didn't know what to make of the flighty Ravenclaw spouting New Age aphorisms and waving flaming poultry seasoning in the air.

"Go into the light, Professor Snape. You will find the peace you seek... in the light."

"I had peace here before Miss Granger moved in."

"Your friends and family await you on the other side."

"In the light? I seriously doubt that, Miss Lovegood. I ran with a darker crowd, you might remember."

His snarky responses came automatically, second nature to him after years of verbal sparring with countless antagonists. But his ghostly magic failed him, his "fight or flight" response dulled by shock. The ever-ready, perspicacious spy had left the building only to be replaced by a doe in the headlights.

Luna forged ahead, forcing him up the stairs, sweeping through the spare bedroom, Hermione's room and the bathroom, finally descending the stairs to the last unsmudged, unsealed room, the foyer.

The pervasive purple-gray haze of smoking sage added to his gloom and angst. The huffy Hermione Granger hurling the dish of salt through him added to his alarm.

"Luna, you've cleansed every inch of this place, and I've sealed it with the salt. So why is Snape still here? Isn't he supposed to be basking in the light of peace and serenity or something like that?"

"I'm sorry, Hermione, I can't force him to leave. I can only encourage him to move on. Ultimately, it's Professor Snape's decision whether he passes to the other side or

stays in our world."

Snape breathed a prolonged, inaudible sigh of relief. Luna's strange ritual could not send him to the perilous hinterlands outside the Shack or the endless despair of the Lost Souls Room. He would not be doomed to oblivion by the likes of Lovegood, but he could not dismiss the disgruntled Granger. His stomach churned and somersaulted quite uncomfortably, a feeling he hadn't experienced since that staff Christmas party when Albus, trailed by a hovering sprig of mistletoe, strayed a little too close for Snape's comfort. His current suspicions were not unfounded either.

Hermione looked off into the distance as she chewed her lower lip. "I have no choice but to involve the Ministry."

"What will they do to him?" Luna asked, mildly alarmed.

"I don't know, and I don't care. The Ministry intervened when Moaning Myrtle was tormenting some poor girl, a former classmate; they made her return to Hogwarts."

"You know, I could try again tomorrow," Luna offered. "I could come back every day until I've convinced him to leave."

Snape grew cold well, colder at the thought of multiple repeat performances of Miss Lovegood's comedy of errors. That had the potential to push him over the edge.

Hermione shook her head. "No, thanks, Luna. I appreciate what you've done tonight." She paused and raised her wand in dramatic fashion. "In the meantime, it's back to Flat Four with you, Prof..."

"Stop!" Snape commanded, but her wand remained on high, poised for action. "We can negotiate a truce, Miss Granger."

His lips curled into a rare smile. He meant to appear approachable, contrite even, but judging by the look of repulsion on her face, he most likely came across as constipated.

"Well, that's too bad because I've just run out of politeness and compromise. I've offered you the figurative olive branch, Snape, and you all but gave me the two-fingered salute. Now it's back to the empty flat for you until the Ministry sorts you out."

As she moved to cast the anti-ghost wards, Snape glided forward, his hands raised in concession. Hermione lowered her wand inch by agonizing inch her vigilant gaze never straying from his face.

"Very well," he agreed, his tone clipped, yet not unkind. "I'll play by your rules, Miss Granger."

"No tricks. No voyeurism. Period." She crossed her arms across her chest and pressed her full, lush lips into a thin, flat line.

"Promise," he said with utmost sincerity, extending his pearly gray hand, all the while trying to avoid staring at the shiny beacon that was Hermione's ample bosom.

She grasped his hand without any hesitation. Her whole body shivered in response to their brief handshake, and she dropped his hand, as though it were a burning coal.

It took every ounce of self-control to hold back the smirk that threatened to crack his perfectly placid face.

Luna's bulbous gray eyes shifted back and forth between Hermione and Snape. "Well, my work here is done. I'll just be going now. Goodnight, Hermione, Professor."

Snape found untapped reserves of self-restraint holding his eyeballs stock still within their sockets. "Goodnight, Miss Lovegood. Thank you for such an... *interesting* evening."

Hermione's glare would have killed Snape if he weren't already dead. At the other end of the spectrum, Luna seemed to enjoy his sarcasm.

"You're welcome, Professor. I hope it was enlightening for you." She retrieved her discarded smudge stick and salt cellar, stowing them in her satchel, miniaturizing it, then placing it in her pocket.

Hermione escorted her friend to the fireplace. "Thanks again for trying, Luna."

"I'm sorry it didn't work the way you expected. My offer still stands, though. I'll come back and try again if you like. Maybe with more practice, I could persuade him to leave."

"I'll pass for the time being. I think the Professor and I have reached an agreement of sorts."

"That's good because you have a lot in common, you know. The two of you should get along swimmingly unless you kill each other. That's kind of a moot issue, isn't it?"

In one seamless fluid motion, Hermione hugged her friend, grabbed a handful of Floo powder from the container on the mantel, dashed it into the hearth, announced, "Lovegood residence," spun Luna around and gently pushed her into the flaring green flames. "Goodnight, Luna. I'll be in touch."

"I thought she'd never leave," Snape joked, his irrepressible smirk shining like the sun.

"Professor..." Hermione didn't seem in the mood for humor at the moment. She collapsed upon the sofa, her eyes squeezed shut.

Roar. The quiet of the Shrieking Shack was shattered by the sound of a fire bursting to life in the empty grate. *Trickle.* Then the sound of liquid pouring into a glass.

Her eyes shot open upon hearing the unexpected noise. And there was Snape, relaxing in the cushy armchair before the roaring fire, immersed nose-deep in a snifter of brandy.

"Drink, Miss Granger?"

"No, thanks," she sighed. "I'm knackered. I'm going to sleep. But first thing tomorrow morning, you and I will put our considerable intellects to good use and solve the problem of your continued existence... erm, or non-existence, as it were."

A/N: Seems that Hermione isn't the only one who appreciates classic rock.

Luna's ritual is based on real life spirit-cleansing. Author and ghost investigator, hypnobarb1 wrote a very detailed how-to entry at LiveJournal.

Next up: There is peace, but Hermione is still annoying Snape, and his unfinished business remains unfinished.

Chapter 7: The Odd Couple

Chapter 7 of 12

Is their delicate détente in jeopardy of collapsing so soon? And an old friend offers some insight and unsolicited advice.

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money.

Chapter 7: The Odd Couple

Despite having reached an understanding the previous evening, an atmosphere of tension hung over Hermione and Snape on Sunday morning. Breakfast was a mostly silent affair, except for the sounds of rustling newspaper and food preparation sizzling bacon, whistling teakettle, popping toaster. She set her meal upon the table and slid into her chair, all the while avoiding eye contact with her house-mate, not a difficult feat considering that he was hidden behind the *Daily Prophet*.

She took a dainty sip of hot tea, and the peaceful ambiance shattered as she loudly proclaimed, "Fuck a duck!"

He slapped the paper on the table and fixed her with a glare previously reserved for repeat cauldron-melting offenders. "Language, Miss Granger."

She responded with a dismissive "pffft" and a two-fingered salute. "Now, where did I put my...?" Her head twisted left to right, searching for her absent wand. She spied it sitting on the counter-top, next to a jar of boysenberry jam. She moved to retrieve it, but as she rose from her seat, his raised hand stilled her action.

"Allow me."

She responded with a questioning look and a nod of assent. Then her eyes grew wide as she watched Snape insert his pinky finger into her cuppa.

He smirked at the pleasant hissing noise made when his ghostly vapor mixed with the steamy liquid.

Hermione cautiously sipped the tepid tea. "Thank you, Professor," she replied with an earnest smile.

"And your tongue? Does that require my assistance, too?" he said, quelling the leer that tugged at his lips.

"Oh, it's fine, really," she whispered, spots of bright pink coloring her cheeks. For the next several minutes, she concentrated wholly on her plate, devouring her breakfast at a breakneck pace that would have rivaled her erstwhile boyfriend.

Snape resumed his reading, speaking from behind the safety of ink and newsprint. "Slow down, Miss Granger. In my current state, I'm unable to efficiently brew an indigestion-relief potion for you, and I haven't run across any whilst rummaging through your cupboards."

Having finished eating, she savored her perfectly temperate tea. "Of course. Speaking of your current state, Professor," she segued.

"Miss Granger, don't call me that. I'm no longer your teacher, or anyone else's, for that matter."

"May I call you Severus? After all, we are going to be living, no... cohabitating... no, erm... sharing space. Yes, we are going to be sharing space for the foreseeable future."

Her boldness shocked Snape, but he thought her argument valid, and he had just plunged his finger into her tea; it didn't get more forward than that.

"Well, I suppose that's permissible. And may I call you Hermione? After all, I've seen you naked... on several occasions." Now he allowed the smug smile free rein of his face.

She rolled her eyes and huffed, but managed to remain blush free. "Yeah, all right, but would you please stop mentioning that. Let's get back to your problem, shall we?"

"Which problem in particular are you referring to?" he droned, a prescient notion of annoyance creeping into his consciousness.

"Your unfinished business that keeps you here on earth, caught in the shadows between the living and the dead."

"Ah, yes, that problem."

"Do you have any idea of what it is?"

"Hmmm, let me think." He looked away, staring at nothing specific, trying to look pensive by tapping a pale, pearly-gray finger against an equally pale, pearly-gray lip.

She sat on the edge of her seat and stared at him, waiting for his profound response.

He snapped his fingers and turned to face her once more. "I've got it. I know what keeps me tethered to this world."

"Yes!" she cried.

"I left the cooker on at Spinner's End. Would you be a dear and go and shut it off?" he asked with treacle-coated smarminess.

She sprang back in the chair and glared at him. "I'm being serious, Severus."

"I know you're only trying to help, Hermione," he replied, a calm demeanor belying his innate snark. "But if I knew what my unfinished business was, what I was meant to accomplish, then I would have done so and been free of this place. Finito. Gone. But I have no clue as to what I'm supposed to do. I had a short, yet significant agenda that I completed before I died."

Elegant fingers shot in the air as he ticked off each point. "One: make a meaningful contribution to the Dark Lord's demise; I accomplished that by reporting false information to him and leaking his darkest secrets to the Order.

"Two: watch over Potter so he could keep his date with destiny; granted, he possessed some skill and more than his share of pure dumb luck, but it took more than that to keep him alive.

"Three: kill Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. The old bugger forced me into yet *another* Unbreakable Vow. How original.

"Four: protect the students of Hogwarts from the Carrows and other sadistic Death Eaters. Not an easy task considering the tenacity of certain student rebels, especially Longbottom," he snarled the young man's name and then continued. "I couldn't pass off punishments to Filch and Hagrid forever, you know.

"And that's all." He retracted his fingers as he crossed his arms over his chest. "If The Powers That Be think I've overlooked some bloody important task, then they should simply come out and tell me. I'm sick of mysteries, riddles, and fucking unsolved puzzles."

"Language, Severus," she warned in a cheeky tone. "And maybe it's not the task itself that's important, but how you achieve it. Rather like, you know, it's the journey that counts, not the destination."

"Pray tell, Hermione, did you enjoy your months' long camping excursion last year? Wouldn't you have preferred a bit more fact versus conjecture on Dumbledore's part?" He smiled with smug satisfaction.

"Point taken; however, that's not getting us any closer to solving your problem. Was there something you always wanted to do but never got the chance to?"

"To live a life unencumbered: no manipulative masters, evil or otherwise, to dictate my actions, and no obligations except to myself," he said wistfully, staring out the kitchen window to see the pastoral outskirts of Hogsmeade. "And I did indeed have a life's to-do list as long as Nagini." He turned his gaze back to Hermione, who appeared mesmerized, hanging on his every word. "I had always wanted to visit the Continent, walk along the Danube, watch the sunset from the Eiffel Tower, sip ouzo at an Athenian cafe, swim in the Mediterranean on a bright summer's day."

"Oh, now I know you're taking the piss out of me," she said, irritation oozing freely with every word. "There's no way buttoned-up Severus Snape would show that much skin in public, and you couldn't go swimming in a frock coat and trousers."

"There you go, making assumptions again. You know nothing about my life former life outside Hogwarts. I could have spent my holidays at a naturist community, for all you know."

She quirked a speculative eyebrow at him. "Did you?"

His stony silence and expressionless face offered no answer.

She forged ahead, her persistent, relentless Gryffindor attitude working overtime. "Perhaps you were meant to make some great academic contribution to the wizarding world."

"You are familiar with my teaching methods?" he asked drolly.

"Not in a pedagogical sense. Had you been working on a new potion or spell? Certainly, the man who as a teenager improved upon Borage's work would have been capable of formulating a spectacular original creation."

"I may be the least ambitious Slytherin you will ever meet. I definitely lost my mojo during the first war." Once he'd learned that Lily was a target, he lost all desire to further the Dark Lord's cause, especially through any new, ingenious concoction he would have invented.

"Maybe one of your colleagues, say Flitwick or McGonagall, could shed some light..."

"Absolutely not." He slammed his fist against the table, intending to emphasize his objection, but his ghostly hand merely passed through the knotty pine. "I forbid you to speak to anyone there, especially teachers and staff. I may be dead, but I'm still intensely private. I won't have my afterlife become the fodder for gossip and titillating entertainment throughout the wizarding world."

"I assure you I can be discreet," she pleaded. "I don't have to mention you're a ghost."

"No, and that's that," he said succinctly. He paused a beat, then continued. "Circe's tits, but you are like a Crup with a Hippogriff bone. Your tenacity is commendable no doubt another contributing factor to Potter's longevity yet, it's highly annoying."

"I'm resigned to the fact that I'm stuck here for ninety-eight years and seven months. I'm rather powerless to prevent you from taking on my cause, but have you nothing better to do with your free time? Whatever happened to the campaign to get Hermione laid?"

She hesitated a bit before responding, struggling to maintain her unfazed façade her teeth barely grazed her lower lip rather than the usual full-on gnaw. "That is an ongoing endeavor, not that it's any of your business. And I'm more than capable of devoting time to multiple projects; my organizational skills are second to none."

"No doubt. And Weasley? What is your official stance on that matter?"

"Not my problem anymore. He's moved in with Lavender Brown. Apparently, she's less complicated compared to me. And there's no ghost living in her flat." Her steely, narrowed eyes held him fast, flickering briefly to her wand laying on the counter-top.

While Snape didn't mind a bit of flirty repartee with the toothsome witch, he knew better than to push her too far. He saw an opportunity for a graceful exit, and he jumped on it.

"Well, I'm done catching up with current events. Time for some pleasure reading, I think." He rose from his seat, a graceful and ethereal spirit. When he reached full height, however, his vaporous body appeared halved by the table, an absurd vision.

Hermione giggled. "You really do cut a dashing figure."

He might have blushed if he had any blood to spare. Instead, he smiled, a genuine grin. "Indeed." He reached into his robes, pulled out his copy of *Handbook for the Recently Deceased* and tossed the much-maligned tome to her. "For your quest. Maybe you can make some sense of it. I can guarantee it's a hell of a lot more interesting than the *Daily Prophet*, but that's not saying much."

He glided toward the lounge, hoping for some blessed alone time.

The following evening found Snape in his usual spot, on the sofa, reading. Hermione came home early, bounding into the sitting room, breathless, obviously fixated on something important; otherwise, she would have chastised Snape for resting his feet on the coffee table.

He eyed her warily. "You look like the Kneazle that ate the canary. What is it?"

She sat next to him on the sofa, shivering when she accidentally brushed against his leg for a moment. "I've wracked my brain for two days, trying to think of anything and everything that could be holding you here. I've even consulted Hogwarts' reference texts on spirits and the *Handbook for the Recently Deceased*, yet I've come up with nothing. So, I've enlisted some help."

He glared at her, his brows furrowed so tightly they almost touched. "You were forbidden to speak to anyone at Hogwarts."

"Yes, I'm aware of that, and I didn't violate your prohibition." She reached inside her book bag and retrieved her trusty beaded bag. "I didn't speak to any of the staff or teachers." She rummaged through it and, after a few moments, pulled out... "I enlisted the help of a portrait."

Bug-eyed and mouth agape, Snape gawked between the painting and Hermione. Oh, how he hated surprises, and she had certainly caught him unawares with this. His face quickly returned to its normal, unreadable state, but turbulent emotions churned just below the surface: the anger of betrayal, the embarrassment of his breached privacy, and a touch of bittersweet happiness to look upon the likeness of the man he had considered his friend and mentor.

"Hello, dear boy. I'm so thrilled to see you, even though it's under less than ideal circumstances. I had thought our first meeting after the final battle would take place in the headmaster's office." The familiar figure peered about the surroundings beyond his frame. "Yet, this is very pleasant. I really like what you've done with the place, Miss

Granger. The Shrieking Shack was always so dreary, even when it was newly built."

"I thought we had an agreement, Miss Granger," Snape said, his words cold and clipped, his address formal. "We even shook hands on it. But it seems you never intended for us to peacefully coexist. Are you looking to exact revenge for my *crimes* against you? Are you trying to make me a laughing stock?" He stood and walked away to pace upon the hearth. "He appears to be an innocent portrait, made of canvas, gesso, and oil paint, but he is still the worst gossip to ever *grace* the halls and walls of Hogwarts. It's not a matter of *if* news of my spirited return spreads to the wizarding world but *when*."

Her irritated response held not a whit of remorse. "Well, I was only trying to help, and your restriction severely limited my resources."

"Severus, you know I can be the soul of discretion." Dumbledore's eyes twinkled as much as the two-dimensional media would allow.

"Of course, you were very good at keeping secrets, disseminating bits and bobs of information on a "need to know" basis. Nobody but *you* could be trusted to know everything." Snape had spent far too many years as the patsy in the old wizard's schemes and didn't trust him as far as he could throw him, especially now that he was in portrait form and could be hurled a considerable distance.

"Severus, would you stop with the accusations," Hermione pleaded. "He knows."

"Well, of course he knows; he's *omniscient*," Snape said sarcastically. "Wait. What are we talking about?"

"He knows what your unfinished business is."

Snape threw up his hands in supplication. "Tell me, all-knowing one, what is it? What keeps me tethered to this bloody deplorable planet?"

"You were supposed to live, Severus." He was working that damnable twinkle again, much to Snape's annoyance.

"What? I was meant to live? Do you know that for a fact? Have you actually spoken to those in charge of the afterlife?" he asked skeptically. Dumbledore might have been the original know-it-all, but how could he know that bit of information?

"No, I don't need to speak to anyone to know you should have had a second chance... erm, third chance if we're being technically correct. Anyone who knew you well... Hmm, I guess that would only be me... Well, I saw your selflessness, your bravery, your devotion, and I knew if Voldemort were defeated and the Light won, you deserved a life on your own terms with no one to answer to but yourself."

Hermione sniffed and wiped at her teary eyes. "Oh, that's wonderful. It's exactly as you wanted, to live a life unencumbered..."

"I was being facetious," he snarled. "I don't want to live again. My life was awful the first time around. I had nothing to live for then, but even if I had, I would have been treated as a pariah, the scourge of society, forever known as Dumbledore's killer, a scheming double agent playing both sides to his benefit. I can't imagine my post-war life being very pleasant."

"Harry's working on clearing your name, a posthumous pardon, so to speak," she explained. "Then he wants to see that you get the recognition you so richly deserve, the Order of Merlin, first class."

"If that ever comes to pass, tell Potter to take that award and shove it..."

"Severus!" Dumbledore interrupted. "Come now. It's a great big world out there. Surely, you could find something, someone..."

"Perhaps," he said quickly, quietly, while indulging in a discreet glance at his pretty flat-mate. But the moment of reverie dissolved as promptly as it had appeared; Snape and optimism didn't have a very good working relationship. "Then again, I could choose to remain a spirit and bide my time," he replied, defiant to the end. It would be over his dead body that The Powers That Be forced him to live again.

"There are a lot of variables in that scenario," Hermione piped up. "I can't live here forever, and the next tenant may not be amenable to having a pet ghost."

Upon hearing that, Snape went nearly apoplectic, eyes bulging and mouth gaping. Yet before his scathing retort *Pet ghost! You dare to compare me to that frizzy-furred familiar! He more resembles a feline version of you.* could travel from his brain to his mouth, Hermione diffused the situation with a halfhearted apology.

"I meant that in the most sincere, flattering manner, of course. Oh, and what about the issue of your privacy? What's to stop your theoretical future room-mate from running to the Ministry or the *Daily Prophet* and informing them of your presence here?"

"Point taken," Snape said dejectedly. "But now I face the monumental task of resurrecting myself, no easy feat even with the assistance of the brightest witch of her age... and a painting." He waved a dismissive hand in Dumbledore's direction. "And yet, the Dark Lord managed it with two less than brilliant sycophants; however, he had the foresight to render himself practically soulless and immortal prior to his first death.

"You know, a bit of warning wouldn't have been remiss, Albus. If you had dropped a subtle hint, I might have been better prepared." He relished the opportunity to take the old man or rather, his artful facsimile to task. He imagined he might never get another chance to rail against Dumbledore to his face.

"I shan't take the blame for that, Severus. You knew how Voldemort operated, ordering others to do the dirty work, especially Nagini. It wasn't my responsibility to remind you to take antivenin or other precautions. You couldn't be arsed to save your own life because you didn't care."

He knew Dumbledore was right, but he wouldn't admit it. Snape sank into the arm chair by the fire and pouted... again.

Hermione didn't allow him to indulge in self-pity for very long. "Enough of the arguments, Severus. They won't bring you back to life; we have to find out what will."

"Well, we can't use the same restoring ritual that the Dark Lord performed. I have no minion who would willingly donate a portion of flesh, and my father was cremated, his ashes unceremoniously strewn upon the river of industrial waste that flowed through my hometown."

"You paint a rather dismal image of the place," she said, grimacing.

"Quite, yet it seemed a fitting end for the man. However, now is neither the time nor place to discuss my dreadful childhood. Perhaps you can psychoanalyze me later." Snape held up his hand as Hermione opened her mouth to speak. "Much later."

"What about the Deathly Hallows?" suggested Dumbledore. "Miss Granger could retrieve the items, and Severus could use them to bargain with Death. You would have to be very explicit with your request, Severus. You must insist that your body, mind, and soul be united as one, restored to your previous form prior to Nagini's attack. Death is a stickler for details, and I wouldn't put it past him to purposely toy with you."

Hermione fidgeted in her seat, pulling at the hem of her jumper. "Yeah, the Deathly Hallows... erm, about that... Well, Harry's never been very good at handling more than one thing at a time. He's taken excellent care of the Invisibility Cloak, but when the Elder Wand and the Resurrection Stone were added to the mix, things got a bit out of hand, and... he lost them."

"Oh, bollocks! Who appointed Potter the caretaker of some of the wizarding world's greatest artifacts?" Snape whinged. He grew frustrated as another possible solution to his dilemma seemed to slip away.

A wince of embarrassment quickly passed over Dumbledore's face before he assumed his all-purpose "stern, yet gentle headmaster" look. "I distinctly remember speaking to Harry about this," he said, pacing the confines of his frame, pausing between each step. "He intended to place the wand back in my tomb. Do you recall that, Miss Granger?" She nodded and he stopped pacing. "The stone he accidentally dropped in the Forbidden Forest; however, Harry claimed he had no plan to fetch it."

"Well, you know Harry," she said, giggling nervously. "Out of sight, out of mind. If he didn't recover the stone that day, he'll never remember where it is. And I highly doubt 'Accio Resurrection Stone' would yield any results."

"It wouldn't hurt to try, I suppose." Dumbledore sighed and shook his head. "Oh, Harry. How I wish that boy would be a bit more proactive." The boy had done nothing notable except save the wizarding world from a most heinous despot, and now the old man expected him to grow up and be responsible?

"And what of the coveted Elder Wand?" Snape inquired, hoping for a shred of good news, yet expecting nothing but bad luck.

"Misplaced might be the best I can offer," she said in a conciliatory tone. "He meant well, wanting to bury the wand with you, sir, but it wasn't a priority at the time, and now he can't find it. Probably gathering dust under his bed at Grimmauld Place. I tried to keep him on task, but you know he's so easily distracted."

Snape had always felt Harry's tendency toward laziness or his inattention to detail would bite someone in the arse someday; too bad it happened to be him. "The road to hell is paved with good intentions," he grumbled. "I'll mention that to Potter the next time our paths cross." *Maybe in hell if I'm lucky*, he thought.

"I don't suppose the Summoning Charm would work on something as important and powerful as the Elder Wand," she said, her voice filled with contrition.

"Not likely, but you should try, nevertheless," Dumbledore encouraged. He began to pace again, this time in a circuit around a chintz-covered arm chair covered with showy pink cabbage roses; even in death, his decorating sense left much to be desired. "Ah, I've got it. Severus, you should challenge Death to a game of chess. Once again, you must be meticulous in the art of negotiating the terms of your revival."

"Somebody's watched too many existential Swedish films," muttered Hermione.

"More likely the ill effects of turpentine fumes," Snape remarked under his breath.

He had finally heard enough of the portrait's inane recommendations and longed to be rid of it... forever. The hearth lay but a few feet from him. One well-aimed, accurate toss was all he needed...

"Thank you, Albus, for that suggestion. I will talk to my afterlife case manager and have him set up a meeting with the man in charge as soon as possible. I'll have to brush up on my chess skills and strategies. And I would love to sit and chat with you, but Hermione and I have a lot of research ahead of us. She can send you back to Minerva through the Floo. Ta."

Snape then disappeared in an irritated mist of ether, leaving Hermione to make excuses.

A/N: When the going gets tough, the ghost vanishes, leaving the living to clean up. He's probably not the only one who finds daffy Portrait!Albus hugely annoying.

Next up: Research! The hunt begins. With loads of time on his hands, Snape indulges in introspection and a new hobby.

Chapter 8: How Can the Cure Be Worse Than the Disease?

Chapter 8 of 12

Hermione dives into research, and Snape ponders life as he *could* know it.

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money.

Chapter 8: How Can the Cure Be Worse Than the Disease?

Spark. Verve. Elan. Life. To be or not to be or... somewhere betwixt and between.

Those vague words and phrases described Snape's current predicament rather well. He figuratively walked well, glided would be a more appropriate term amongst the living but could not be counted in their ranks, unintentionally dead, through no fault of his own, but by no means resting in peace; however, the past few months had been utterly serene since he and Hermione had come to an understanding. And with that quiescence came oodles of hours for Snape to indulge in his favorite pastimes: reading, cooking (a recent addition), and pondering life's deep philosophical questions also a new hobby, but to his credit, the former workaholic never had any "me time" in his previous incarnation.

Yea, his was but a half-life, a cursed life, yet he had very little to complain about. His days were full of activity, although thoughtful and quiet. He quenched his voracious curiosity by reading the hundreds of books contained in Hermione's vast personal collection; theoretically, he could gain access to countless more, provided she could get her hands on them through her magical and Muggle connections.

In the evenings, he dabbled in the culinary arts, preparing for Hermione gourmet meals worthy of a Michelin two-star restaurant. He had easily exceeded the simple fare his mum had specialized in; toast and baked beans were replaced by Carpaccio of beef and lemon soufflé, tinned rice pudding by mille-feuille and fine patisserie. And in the time-honored tradition of all great chefs, he quenched his thirst (whilst toiling over a hot hob, no less) with fine brandy and cheap plonk, courtesy of Hermione's numerous fact-finding excursions, he assumed. But for all he knew, those gifts the occasional bottle of wine and exotic spices could just as easily have come from Marks & Spencer; he had no clue of her whereabouts on the weekends, and she wasn't very forthcoming about her progress in Operation: Resurrect Snape (to be fair, neither did she mention Project: Get Hermione Laid, but such was a subject not brought up in polite company).

And whence he had his fill of reading and cooking (and quaffing), he engaged in witty repartee and intelligent conversation with the brilliant young witch. They could discuss any topic at length from pop culture Muggles could boast of brilliant musicians such as Elton John and The Who (they just pretended they were wizards), yet how absurd that wizarding music produced "artists" no better than Celestina Warbeck and the Weird Sisters? to any field of magic, both abstract and applied if one could produce water from a wand, why not Firewhisky or another flavorful liquid? Yes, they could talk about anything... when Hermione was actually in residence, of course. Many a weekday passed with Snape's flat-mate missing in action, either consumed with Charms studies or teaching assistant duties. Many a weekend passed with Hermione

running off to Merlin-knew-where; perhaps she traveled to ancient World Heritage Sites to glean the knowledge needed to bring Snape back to life, or perhaps she engaged in activities which purely benefited her own agenda.

Snape had always treasured his solitude, but even that much alone time was overrated. Some days, the silence overwhelmed him, and he found himself holding one-sided conversations with a half-Kneazle, albeit a highly intelligent, but mostly mute half-Kneazle. And that was when he mused philosophical.

He never wasted time considering the common questions that troubled most serious, deep thinkers: what is the meaning of life and why are we here? His ponderings were uniquely Snape centric: what the hell would he do with his life (provided he could be restored back to vigor) and would he behave any differently (read: better) the second time around? All this selfish thought was really quite new to him, having spent the better part of his adult years supporting Voldemort's pureblood supremacy *and* Dumbledore's campaign for the "Greater Good" once again, when had he ever had time for any navel-gazing?

Apparently, The Powers That Be had determined that Snape's first life was unfinished, a work in progress with much room for improvement. While he wholeheartedly agreed with that assessment, he hadn't cared enough to ameliorate his situation he truly hated his job, his home, his sour disposition and frankly, some things were out of his control. If he had treated Potter with civility, if he had smiled rather than sneered but once, if he had even made an attempt to flirt with a toothsome witch or an ugly one, for that matter Dumbledore would have shipped him off to the Janus Thickey Ward faster than one could say, "*Rabidus Domus*." To be fair, Voldemort had also been a concerned employer and would surely have acted with equal speed, but his health plan wasn't as comprehensive as Hogwarts; often, Death Eater health issues, physical or mental in nature, had been solved with a hasty Avada Kedavra, leaving plenty of time for a nice cuppa.

If a new life meant turning over a new leaf, would there be an advantage to being more tolerant across the board? Not in Snape's estimation. He wouldn't waste time suffering fools and dunderheads. He might, however, extend the olive branch to those few former colleagues he deemed worthy and some well-positioned Ministry officials; such selective charm was reminiscent of Lucius Malfoy, another good contact to have depending on the post-war fortunes of that ambitious/ambivalent wizard. Mostly, Snape would mostly be concerned with his own welfare and would care not a whit for the troubles of others... save perhaps one...

So then, what he would do if he were brought back to life, as "those in charge" had intended? Could he fall back on either of his former careers?

Espionage could be a lucrative business in today's peaceful post-war climate, especially when wizarding Britain's former puppet regime was in the midst of a makeover. But for whom would he take on the role of secret agent? The Ministry? The anarchist Death Eaters? Thanks to a recent interview in *The Quibbler*, Potter let slip exactly where Snape's loyalties had lain, so integration into either group for purposes of actual employment or spying was highly improbable. His odds were slightly worse than a snowball's chance in hell, which he had visited briefly in his first posthumous journey outside the Shack. No, espionage was not an option.

So that left... education, a colorful metaphor in Snape's salty vocabulary, which roughly translated to FUCK, NO! Contrary to popular belief, he had no death wish the first time he shuffled off this mortal coil, so why would he voluntarily expose himself to the deadly combination of hormonal adolescents and noxious potion ingredients? Or the equally painful pairing of the aforementioned teens and their shoddy defensive skills? One poorly aimed Reducto, and... Perish the thought. Given his history of bullying students, murdering his employer, and bugging off from his last appointment, he would never be considered a model teacher, let alone a candidate for employee of the month. No headmaster or board of directors in their right mind would hire him, not even Durmstrang with their questionable ethics and "don't ask, don't tell" policy with regards to hiring "former" Death Eaters. No, teaching was out of the question.

But Severus Snape was an intelligent, resourceful, and skilled wizard. Surely, his magical talents would lend themselves to other trades or career options. How would he make a living?

Well, he had been a dab hand at the Dark Arts and the defense thereof, so perhaps a career in curse-breaking for Gringotts? The goblins were notoriously amoral and wouldn't give a second thought to Snape's flippy-floppy loyalties, but... Curse-breaking entailed a great deal of globetrotting, and Snape rather preferred sticking close to home these days a symptom of his current "house arrest?" The inherent danger posed a problem for Snape: any old curse, jinx, or hex he might encounter could be the end of him... again. He vowed never to be cavalier about his "life"... again, not after all the trouble he had experienced in the afterlife thus far. Besides, the goblins were well-know cheapskates, and Snape didn't expect the wages to be commensurate with the high risk level of the profession.

His prospects in banking looked very dim, and he doubted the Ministry would take a chance on him, as a Dark Arts consultant or a lowly quill-pushing civil servant, unless Potter's campaign to restore the good name of Snape had it ever really been so? was successful. So, another strikeout on the list.

Then, what about a potion-related business? If he had an apothecary, he could sell ingredients and/or mass produce small batches of quality potions... because nothing says quality like Severus Snape, Potions master. Scratch that too. What he really meant was nothing says quick and painless death like Severus Snape, murderer of beloved wizards all throughout the UK and the continent. He could imagine the sales pitch: *Got a headache? Try a dose of Severus Snape's Magical Elixir, and you'll never worry about that pesky, perplexing pain again... or anything else for that matter, as you'll likely be dead!* Potions... another ticky box left unchecked.

It seemed to Snape he would never find gainful employment in the magical realm. He couldn't count on a Hogwarts pension he would argue that he was forced out rather than "done a bunk" yet he had to do something to earn a Galleon... or a pound! Yes, he would make his way by Muggle means. Wizarding world be damned! He would... he would... What Muggle jobs would he qualify for? He never attended university, let alone sat for A-level exams, so that left labor, menial, not even skilled. He briefly considered conjuring up credentials for a fancy white-collared position book editor came to mind but if he were going native, so to speak, he wouldn't want to taint his work with magic. Then, what exactly could he do?

He thought of his daily routine and the diversions within. Might he find avocation doing something he enjoyed? Snape couldn't imagine being paid to read, but he could pay his way as a writer. Hadn't he always wanted to create his own Potions text? It would take some finagling to find a publisher willing to work with him (under an assumed name perhaps). And after Potions, he could write about the Dark Arts, and... Two texts did not a financially stable existence make, but with fiction, the possibilities were endless. He'd read enough popular literature to know quality from chaff, but could he produce either in sufficient quantity to make a decent living?

If not, might he find a calling in his most recent obsession: cooking? Hermione was no expert, nor did she possess a sophisticated palate, but she raved about his meals, the simple ones and the elaborate multi-course feasts. Then again, she had spent months subsisting on rustic fare of nuts, berries, and mushrooms, so of course anything more complex was ambrosia from the gods. Plus, she considered Molly Weasley's family-style cuisine to be the height of foodie finesse, so Hermione might not be a reliable source with respect to culinary quality. Still, Snape could start small, gaining experience in a little bistro or pub, and then move on to bigger and better things, a restaurant of his very own. It went without saying that such an establishment would not be named in eponymous fashion. Yea, through his exhaustive musings, Snape appeared to have solved the problem of his future financial well-being.

Such was his process over the past several months: read, cook (and drink), think of what might become of him. Much of his internal monologue was guided by a quotation he'd read many years ago. 'Twas a wise man as if fools are ever notably quoted? who once said, "... A person just needs three things to be truly happy in the world: someone to love, something to do, and something to hope for."

Snape had pretty much covered the "something to do" with all that career self-counseling. The "something to hope for" was obviously his resurrection, but he expected failure there despite having a capable and persistent researcher championing his cause. Oh, how he wanted Hermione to share her findings with him, but he dared not broach the subject, wary that her pointed silence on the matter meant a lack of progress; plus, he would have been supremely disappointed to learn she had spent her free time in the pursuit of other pleasures. So practiced pessimist Snape had contingency goals: the invention of a forward Time-Turner (so his roughly ninety-eight years of "house arrest" could be densely packed into a year at most) or sharing the Shack with quiet tenants who wouldn't mind the spirit realm intruding into their daily routines.

As for "someone to love"... Some would call it avoidance, but Snape chalked it up to bad timing: the topic usually reared its ugly head come late afternoon, and rather than reflect upon the seven efficient habits of his highly fictionalized ideal mate, he chose to direct his energy into meal preparation. Certainly, a ghost could dream, but Snape had experienced enough romantic disappointment to last several lifetimes, and he had no desire to be burned again.

So rather than reflect on an uncertain future, Snape busied himself with the evening's repast, a modern twist on cottage pie made with a blend of beef and veal and topped with celeriac and potato mash, not the dull pedestrian fare his mum would trot out when his underemployed father had been fortunate to secure overtime at the mill and the resultant financial windfall had filled the pantry and icebox. Eileen Snape had been no Delia Smith... not by a long shot. Food had never held his interest at any time, lean or

bountiful, but Hermione was now fascinated with it and encouraged him wholeheartedly; she went so far as to purchase utensils with insulated handles so his icy grip wouldn't unduly affect his cooking.

Snape's cottage pie soon became a top ten favorite meal for the harried student witch, and the rich aromas never failed to bring a brilliant smile to her weary face. Even though he could never enjoy the fruits of his labor, her reactions pleased him to no end not that she would know, given his usual stoic demeanor. He assembled each ramekin with exacting precision: a layer of fragrant meat filling with chopped carrots, onion, herbs, and spices; a smear of well-drained mushy peas, one of his creative flairs; a generous topping of the root vegetable mash combined with a dollop of shredded cheddar cheese; a sprinkling of the remaining cheese on top; wipe the edges with a towel and... Voila! Fancy comfort food in single-serve portions!

At five thirty, he popped it into the oven, as he was expecting Hermione to arrive at precisely five past six she had a long journey from the Charms classroom to the Apparation point outside the school gates and at that time, the pies would be rested and at the perfect temperature and consistency with a luscious brown crust of melted cheddar; this dish made for excellent leftovers the next day and after, but nothing compared to a hot out-of-the-oven meal. At five forty-five, he uncorked the wine, a nice Chilean Syrah with gentle, sweet tannins; he knew this because he had nipped a tiny sample earlier while cooking. And at four minutes after six, he pulled off the ruffled gingham apron protecting his ghostly form, poured two glasses of wine and carried them both to the foyer; he then waited for the familiar jingle of keys... that didn't come. At ten past six, he returned to the kitchen, gracefully lowered himself upon a dinette chair and poured himself a second helping of wine. He constantly swirled the goblet, staring at the wine tears streaking the glass, deliberately avoiding thoughts of where she could be, what she could be doing... and with whom.

Between the third and fourth servings, he inadvertently let his guard down, and a horrific image intruded, unbidden, upon his drunken reverie. Hermione... naked... splayed across a heavy oaken table in the Restricted Section of the Hogwarts library... succumbing to the charms of a handsome, yet faceless suitor... her notes on Snape's resurrection carelessly strewn across the floor as they pumped... and thrashed... and gasped... and moaned... and...

What the fuck? How can that bushy-haired, bossy, insufferable know-it-all be front and center in my idle fantasies?

He shook his head violently, hoping to dislodge the unwelcome image from his skull and the equally unwelcome arousal of his second brain. He poured yet another glass of tangy Chilean Syrah and mentally ticked off all the magical and culinary uses for ginger root and a few other commonly used spices as he waited...

By the time that familiar jingle of keys rang out, the bottle was empty, as were both wine goblets, the ghost chef was more than a bit soused, sitting sourly at the kitchen table, and the cottage pie was ice cold, having been placed in the refrigerator hours earlier by a safety-conscious Snape he might have been brassed off, but he wouldn't endanger Hermione's health by feeding her room temperature, bacteria-laden food.

From the foyer, she dropped her book bag and called out, "Hi, Severus! Dinner smells fabulous! Cottage pie, right? I'll be there in a moment. What a day I had. You won't believe..."

Silent seconds ticked away as Hermione arrived in the kitchen and surveyed the scene, looking like the proverbial deer in the headlamps. Snape swore he heard a penny drop when she finally spoke. "Oh, Severus! I'm so, so sorry. I had no idea of the time."

He took oh so long to stretch his limbs and twitch a quick strained smile, which seemed to speak for itself in passive-aggressive fashion. "*You're late? I hadn't noticed. I've just been stuck here all day, slaving over a hot hob so dinner would be ready when you were supposed to arrive home.*" Expressionless face back in place, Snape actually said (in typical sarcastic fashion), "Ever hear of Tempus? I hear it's all the rage with busy, yet punctual witches and wizards."

The already contrite Hermione held up her hands in surrender. "You're right, Severus. I should have sent my Patronus or Floo-called to tell you I was detained."

This would have been sufficient apology for a reasonable living being or spirit, but Snape was too soused and too suspicious to let it go. "Detained, of course," he repeated, slurring ever so slightly. "I'm used to your absences on the weekend, but on a school night...? Whatever could have *detained* you?"

Slowly, infinitesimally even, the temperature in the flat dropped, although it was moderately warm outside for a late April Scottish evening. "Not that it's any of your business, but I was marking first-year essays so that I'd be freed up this weekend. Those first years are either infuriatingly laconic or agonizingly verbose, as I'm sure you remember." If Hermione thought pedagogical commiseration would lighten the mood, then she was dead wrong.

"Indeed," he droned, still itching for a fight. Morbidly curious about her regularly scheduled disappearances, he had the perfect opportunity to discover just what the hell she did on the weekends, but he wasn't about to reveal his apprehension. It's not as though he could distract Hermione from her hypothetical lover... if that were the case. No, he had to shift the onus onto Hermione spill her secrets. But what angle to employ? Hmm... "Planning another weekend away from home?" he asked, sneering for all his ghostly worth.

The mood turned figuratively icy yet again. Hermione stood rigid in posture, eyes narrowed. "Yes, I'll be away again. And what's it to you? I thought you liked your peace and quiet."

"I do cherish it greatly, and while your frequent absences have no impact on me, of course..." He cast a glance about the kitchen, grasping for a suitable excuse to disguise his motives, and his eyes fell on the feeding dish of her cherished, infernal half-Kneazle. "Your familiar is another story. His caterwauling would wake up the dead if I didn't attend to his needs. Perhaps you'll consider staying put this weekend, if only to give me and your neighbors the chance to regain some hearing."

She waved him off with a dismissive hand. "Pah. You could let him out to fend for himself. He's an excellent mouser and very independent."

The pet in question sauntered into the kitchen just then, turning his bottle-brush tail along with his backside to Hermione and winding around Snape's vaporous ankles... and purring. Snape found the vibration distracting, and he wriggled his feet and dislodged the creature.

"If you insist." With his pet-in-danger angle clearly not working, Snape changed tactics. His former spy eyes, sharp and speedy, scanned the wary witch from frizzy follicles to frayed footwear. "But you might still consider staying at home this weekend. Your familiar's well-being is of no concern to you, but what about your own?"

Her brows knit in confusion. "My well-being? What are talking about? I feel fine."

"No doubt the caffeine in your afternoon tea has kept you going, but look at you," he said, flapping his hand in her general direction, as if making a fashion critique. "You're peaky. The shadows under your eyes are so heavy Pomona could grow *Atropa belladonna* there. And if it weren't for me and the house-elves, you would be underfed, malnourished, and rumped looking."

"Ha!" she cried, fisting her hands on her hips. "You're one to talk. Your appearance wasn't much better when you were alive. You're as pale now as you were then."

He couldn't argue with that. Death hadn't improved his looks one bit, but at least his hair wasn't an oily mess. He dared not attack her coiffure, especially when she seemed one insult away from hexing him; the wand in her pocket was spontaneously emitting delicate red sparks at that point. Snape needed a new course of action, but if she held no regard for her own health, what would jump start her bleeding Gryffindor heart? Cold prickles imbued him, a warning he was about to enter awkward territory.

"Certainly I'm not the only one who's observed your lack of care," he said not unkindly. "Your friends are worried about you, Hermione, but you're too busy, too preoccupied to notice. Potter's owls go unanswered. You never bother to Floo-call anyone. When did you last speak to Weasley?"

If Snape thought he was approaching dangerous ground before, her expression confirmed his arrival. Soft brown eyes hardened, plump lips blanched white, and her previously wan face flared bright red.

"The night his pale, freckled arse walked out my bedroom," she answered, her voice deadly quiet.

How he wished he could take his words back, but... in for a penny, in for a pound. "That being said," he continued, imperiously waving his hand, "it is obvious that you are

not yourself, making poor decisions and acting irrationally. You're overextending yourself between the apprenticeship and these weekend jaunts, running off to Merlin-knows-where with Merlin-knows-whom..."

"You ungrateful bastard!" she roared as she stalked toward him, sparking wand in hand. "I have no social life to speak of. All my free time is devoted to finding the means to resurrect you! I spend every bloody weekend holed up in dusty libraries, musty monasteries, and claustrophobic mausoleums, looking for a spell, a potion... something, anything that will bring you back to life. If you think I'm... gallivanting about with *some bloke*... that this is all about..."

Snape might have been stone cold dead, but he could feel the hot waves of anger rolling off Hermione. He had definitely chosen the wrong tack... again, but there would be no apology on his part. When faced with aggression, Snape did what he knew best: he returned it in kind, matching her gimlet glare and surpassing it with a sneer. "Well, if you had simply shared the details of your whereabouts, we could have avoided," he paused, ineffectually flicking her wand away from his person, "all this."

For countless moments, Hermione stood her ground, towering over the seated ghost, countering his steely expression and topping it with flared nostrils, dilated pupils, and heaving bosom. Then she blinked, her fierce expression wavering, and she backed up a bit and stowed her wand in her pocket. Breathing an exhausted, thoroughly undramatic sigh, she said, "I don't want to fight anymore. I-I..." Her flesh and blood hand hovered above his ethereal one, ready for contact, when she seemingly thought better of her efforts to placate the testy ghost. "I just want to eat dinner and forget about today."

"The pies are in the refrigerator," he offered tersely, coolly, still irritated with the outburst he had prompted. Upon observing her suddenly rigid posture, he softly added, "You'll want to use a moderate warming..."

"I know how to magically reheat food, Severus," she interrupted, her tone huffy and haughty. "Am I not the Charms expert in this flat? Or have you changed your mind about the foolishness of wand-waving?" She imperiously waved him off and headed toward the refrigerator. If inanimate objects could talk, the aforementioned appliance would have screamed bloody murder when she yanked it open and grabbed one lovingly prepared individual serving of cottage pie from within. The combination of her bad day and bruised ego must have dulled her common sense, for she applied the Warming Charm to her meal while she held the ramekin in her hand, and...

POP! The incongruous mix of hot food and cold ceramic reacted poorly, and the dish promptly exploded, sending bits of cottage pie halfway across the kitchen; most of it, however, remained in her hand, burning the delicate skin of her palm.

"OW! Merlin's shriveled testicles, but that hurt!" she cried, shaking off the morsels of ground meats, vegetables, and mash.

In an instant, Snape snapped out of his sour mood and inebriation and jumped to her side. "Let me see please," he gently requested. He wiped her proffered greasy hand with a wet towel and then examined it closely. He applied a kind of ghostly first aid, blowing soft, icy puffs of air upon her crimson hot skin. "I'll say one thing about your apprenticeship," he began, cooling her palm with feather-light caresses, "your swearing has become quite creative since spending so much time with Filius."

Her face reddened even as her hand healed, and she pulled away. "Thank you," she whispered almost inaudibly. The warm glow of friendship? was shattered when her babbling began. "I'm so sorry I ruined your beautiful dinner, Severus. Would you look at this mess? I really need to clean it up..."

"Hermione..." He spoke calmly as she scurried about the kitchen.

"*Evanesco Edulium. Pinus Odorata,*" she chanted while flourishing her wand, and the colorful remnants of her supper disappeared into thin air, leaving the kitchen spotless and smelling like a pine forest.

"Hermione..." He tried to impart a firm, yet gentle tone of voice, like the time he had convinced Hagrid not to crossbreed a honey badger with an eagle in an attempt to promote house unity.

"*Reparo!*" she shouted and twirled her wand with careless flair, as though her loud voice alone could magic the baking dish whole again; regardless of the mechanics behind it, the porcelain shards coalesced in a cloud of white above her head, and the repaired ramekin fell neatly into her outstretched hand. "Have I missed anything?" Her eyes darted around the room, and she spied the empty wine glasses. She pointed her wand at them, and as her mouth prepared to say the magic words, Snape intervened, this time using his most authoritative, student-intimidating voice, the one reserved for serial cauldron melters.

"Hermione! Stop babbling and casting housekeeping charms."

Her frenzied cleansing came to an abrupt halt, and she collapsed into the nearest chair. "Sorry about that. You know how I can get when..."

"Yes, I know very well," he said, his smooth, honeyed voice back in action. "And now that I have your rapt attention..." Snape slowly lowered himself into the chair next to her while he plotted. Their earlier conversation (read: argument) was an unmitigated disaster on the magnitude of an Occlumency lesson with Potter. He needed a kinder, gentler approach. Attempting to appear avuncular, he forced his features into a pleasant expression of compassion and support at least he hoped it looked affable because he hadn't felt his facial muscles ever since Voldemort's fucking snake had cozied up to him. "It is time we have a...", he paused and shuddered, trying not to be repulsed by his inner Hufflepuff, "*talk*, Hermione."

"You lost me there, Severus. What does any of this," she fluttered her hand about, "have to do with sex? I've already told you I'm not seeing anybody. You know, I may not be experienced, but I'm well versed in the mechanics. My mum gave me *Our Bodies Ourselves* when I turned twelve." Apparently, the pathway between her brain and vocal chords was experiencing a slowdown at that moment.

Sex? Why is she blathering on about sex? Once again, the shocking image of a bare Hermione writhing beneath an equally bare wizard violated Snape's mind, and the little blood that remained within Snape pumped in opposite directions, half settling in his nether regions, the other half to his cheeks. Could a ghost visibly blush?

He bit back the brutal remark on the tip of his tongue adjectives such as hairy-palmed and self-polluting would have left him feeling even more uncomfortable instead focusing on Hermione's sallow skin and dark-circled eyes. "No, the talk wherein we address your insanely full schedule, lack of focus, and declining health."

A tinge of pink colored her cheeks, and she turned away. "Well, Filius..."

"Is a fair task master and cannot be blamed for your dearth of free time. No, this is your doing, Hermione. You spend every weekend traipsing all over this godsforsaken planet in search of a "cure" for my spirit-bound state. You're running yourself ragged with all this research, but I see no benefit for you unless you enjoy world travel together with sleep deprivation." He leaned forward and briefly placed one icy finger upon her chin, forcing her to look him in the eyes. "Hermione, when does it end?"

Mandibular lip, meet maxillary incisors. She fought to control her shuddering breath and quavering voice. "I made a promise to bring you back to the world of the living. And not everyone is motivated by personal reward," she paused, swallowing with apparent difficulty, "or guilt. Right, Severus?"

"Indeed," he intoned, his face without expression. He didn't want to continue the conversation with that awful word, guilt, still echoing in his head. Oh, how he hated unpleasant emotions... or any emotions, for that matter. However, she needed help, and he was the only one who could provide it. So he pressed on. "It seems you haven't found the solution to my problem... yet."

She shook her head, but her eyes glowed with fiery determination. "I refuse to stop until you are flesh and blood again. But... no... none of my research has yielded anything that would apply to your specific situation."

"I see. Hmm...", he said, tapping his index finger upon his lips and staring at the scrubbed pine table as though his very life depended on it, which could prove true if some obscure resurrection ritual called for intense scrutiny of soft knotty wood. Now was the delicate moment, the time to gain access to the details of her research. He leaned forward. "I'm certain you've missed nothing, but perhaps a review of your findings by a second pair of sharp eyes and an intellect matching your own...?"

"Well...", she hedged, chewing on her much-abused lip again, "I didn't want to burden you with this. Or give you hope, only to snatch it away if..." She couldn't finish the sentence, instead flapping her hands aimlessly again, a new annoying habit Snape disliked as much as her lip gnawing.

He sighed wearily. "Trust me, Hermione. I'm more than prepared to accept failure, although my inner eternal optimist hopes for success," he stated, adding a reassuring smile, which in all likelihood appeared as a twisted grimace. "My offer to help was sincere, and..."

"*Accio* notes on resurrection," she said with unbridled enthusiasm, jumping up just in time to snatch the flying object before it cut through Snape's vaporous body. Hermione gingerly placed the well-worn hardback notebook on the tabletop and twitched it perfectly centered before pointing her wand at it.

"I'll review it tomorrow, and then we can discuss..."

"*Engorgio!*" The thin book grew and grew and grew in every dimension to become an enormous tome roughly the size of a female adult warthog, its cover riddled with stains, scratches, and gouges travel wear, no doubt. The sturdy pine kitchen table groaned under the weight.

Preemptively, he pinched the bridge of his nose purely out of habit. "Hermione, don't take this the wrong way, but... What the hell is that?" he asked, his voice on the verge of whinging. "Did you copy every necromancy text ever published?"

"Well...", she began, gently caressing the book's careworn spine, "I used a Keyword Search Spell erm... my own invention, actually looking for any references to resurrection, return to life, reawakening, et cetera... You get the picture. Then I used a copying spell so I would have the exact wording found in the books."

"It's huge! Lifting that monstrosity would give Hagrid a hernia. Ghosts have limits, you know. It would probably take the entirety of my spirit containment period to read it."

"I like to be thorough, and you're exaggerating," she said in earnest.

"Thorough, yes, but this...", he paused, pointing a pearly-gray finger at the voluminous volume, "is beyond that, approaching impossible. To say you are an overachiever is an understatement."

"Thank you... I think," Hermione replied cheerily, seeming pleased with Snape's backhanded compliment. "We could start reviewing tonight, if you wish." She literally bounced with excitement, squirming in her chair and beaming brightly.

He shook his head, and her buoyant, light mood promptly deflated. "*We* shall not be reviewing tonight," he said gently. "*You* shall retire for the evening, as you've endured a long, tiring day." Hermione nodded in agreement, disappointment clearly seen on her fallen face. "And *L...*" he paused theatrically, punctuating the silence with a lung-deflating sigh, "shall begin the daunting task of scrutinizing your notes... in the morning when I am refreshed." Snape didn't truly require sleep or rest of any sort he would not reveal *that* to Hermione but he remembered, with painstaking detail, her pedantic nature in writing essays, and he expected reading her notes would be taxing on his gray matter even when he wasn't pissed or irritable. "Now, off to bed you go." Wearing his most austere head of house face, he shoosed her from the kitchen.

She dutifully obeyed his instructions, but not before she nicked a biscuit from the pantry, brilliantly executed with a wandless, wordless spell. From the hallway, she turned around and winked at him. Any residual tension from their earlier tiff melted away and was replaced with a more companionable feeling... or perhaps something more.

"If I were able, I would deduct house points for such cheek, Miss Granger," he warned, his tone more playful than acerbic.

"I know I can't have any pudding if I don't eat my meat, but you sent me to bed without supper," she mirthfully mocked, waving the illicit Jammie Dodger about in a teasing manner.

"You appeared more weary than hungry," he answered mechanically, but his eyes twinkled like that other recently dead headmaster who shall go unnamed. "As a consolation, would you like me to tuck you in and read you a bedtime story?"

"Do you know any fairy tales?" she asked, playing along with his unusually blithe spirit.

"Sadly, all I know are ghost stories," he replied, his jovial mood still apparent in his humor.

"Maybe another time, then. Goodnight, Severus," she called out as she ascended the stairs.

"Goodnight, Hermione," he bade her aloud, and as he retired to the library-cum-lounge, he whispered, "sweet dreams," abandoning her research his potential salvation to the kitchen gods, hoping for a miracle.

A/N: Yes, I did it again, made a song reference. Just wait until next chapter; you'll think you died and went to pop culture heaven... or hell, depending on your tastes (insert wink here).

For your information, the kitchen god, Zao Jun, the most important of the domestic gods, is celebrated in Chinese and Vietnamese cultures. And the wise man with the nifty quote is Tom Bodett, American author, humorist, and radio personality.

For those who like their spells translated:

Rabidus Domus = crazy house

Evanesco Edulium = vanish food

Pinus Odorata = pine scented

Non-UK readers may not be familiar with Delia Smith I know I wasn't until Proulxes brought her to my attention. Think of her as the British Julia Child, or Martha Stewart without the orange jumpsuit.

And speaking of Proulxes, my lovely and extremely talented friend created gorgeous artwork inspired by a tender scene in this chapter. Copy and paste the following link into your browser to check it out: <http://proulxes.deviantart.com/art/Ghostly-First-Aid-409462993?q=gallery%3AProulxes%2F42121468&qo=4>

Next up: Hermione recounts her journeys and her findings, coming to a (not so) surprising conclusion.

Chapter 9: Death and the Maiden and the Grouchy

Ghost

Chapter 9 of 12

Let the hunt begin! Snape dives into Hermione's prodigious notes, hoping to find the one perfect spell he needs.

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Yada, yada, yada.

Chapter 9: Death and the Maiden and the Grouchy Ghost

Spring had finally sprung in Hogsmeade. The sun shone. The birds chirped. The scent of lilacs filled the air. The Whomping Willow stretched winter-weary limbs sporting new leafy growth. And Severus Snape was in hell.

Actually, he resided in a cozy flat with an extensive, diverse library, but at the moment, he considered it purgatory. On any other day, he derived immense pleasure from reading, but Hermione's resurrection research felt like punishment for past sins, likely those unflattering comments he had made regarding her looks and her bookish nature back at Hogwarts.

He certainly couldn't object to the subject matter: death. After all, he was dead, and he'd been surrounded by death his entire adult life. Before and during the years Snape taught at Hogwarts, many a Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor had met a most unhappy ending, and Death Eaters were renown for their short sometimes violent lifespans.

It wasn't as though he'd never read funerary text before. The *Handbook for the Recently Deceased* had good intentions, to prepare the neophyte dead for the afterlife, but that poorly written book it only qualified as such because it had a hardcover, bindings, and numbered pages had no discernible organization, and it read like stereo instructions.

No, no. His torture was the sheer volume of her notes. Those notes... those painstakingly detailed notes! Perhaps her copying spell had gone awry, recording an entire book rather than key passages, or it worked exactly as Hermione had intended, recording an entire book rather than key passages. Either way, the review of her findings was pure torment for him. It was as though he were back in Hogwarts, marking her mile-long essays. Déjà vu for the damned!

That morning, after he had filled Hermione's stomach with a full English breakfast and sent her off to school, he had settled down in the kitchen and begun to review her copious notes... from the beginning, the place where all punctilious scholars begin. Up first, the *Book of the Dead*. Yes, that one. The *Book of the Dead*, the be-all and end-all of funerary texts written by ancient Egyptians. Hermione's facsimile was spot-on, a dead ringer, so to speak, faded hieroglyphs on tattered papyrus; her translation was comparatively mundane, red and black ink on fine quality, lightly scented parchment. The *Book* qualified as magical, consisting of numerous spells to help the dead in the tortuous journey through the underworld and into the afterlife; the path to eternity was populated by fearsome creatures hellbent on destroying the dead, but spell after spell gave the deceased the ability to overcome these obstacles. There were even spells specific to the "Weighing of the Heart" ritual, ones to prevent the heart from bearing witness upon the deceased and confessing to Osiris every sin committed in life: if the heart spoke too freely of a wicked past, casting too many aspersions about one's character, the dead would be deemed unworthy of eternal "life" and the gods would then toss the heart to a voracious monster as a light snack.

Snape appreciated that bit of suppressive magic if he had lived and died in those days of yore, he would have likely cast that spell quite a bit based on the myriad sins he had committed during his actual lifetime and found the *Book* generally informative and entertaining, but nowhere could he find a spell suited for his needs; several spells gave the deceased the power to breathe air, but not for any appreciable length of time. Apparently, ancient Egyptians had no fear of pegging out and viewed life as a brief diversion on the way to an extremely long and prosperous afterlife.

He fared no better with the *Bardo Thodol* commonly known in the West as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Its full name, *Liberation Through Hearing During The Intermediate State* should have been a red flag to Snape, but he poured through it anyway, word by (meticulously duplicated) word. And it was, as he suspected, yet another funerary text guiding the dead through the afterlife, the intervening state between death and rebirth in this particular context. The Tibetan lamas had lofty goals for the souls of the dead: attain enlightenment and liberation, thus bypassing the cycle of birth and rebirth.

Reincarnation intrigued Snape, but that wasn't the same as resurrection. The thought of coming back as a nonhuman especially a snake sent icy shivers through his already cold and ghostly form. In the end, the *Bardo Thodol* was not the "spiritual" enlightenment he had in mind.

The *Ars Morendi* or "The Art of Dying" offered no solutions either. A short treatise, it served as a "how to" guide for the almost dead, showing the perfect way to shuffle off this mortal coil in order to avoid messy complications in the afterlife, the type which Snape was currently experiencing. Perhaps if he'd spent more time repenting for his lousy life and less time giving Potter instructions for his own demise, then he wouldn't have been in such a pickle.

He'd spent the entire morning and a good portion of the afternoon reading funerary texts altruistic, soul-saving claptrap, in his expert opinion, as one who had experienced death firsthand and all he had to show for it was a headache of monumental proportions. In all those words on all those pages, he could not find one reference which would remotely help his cause. Hermione's stringent attention to detail would be the death of him, if he weren't already dead. He would humbly request (or piteously beg for) a York Notes version of her epic-length research after she returned home, yet not before he could chase away the pounding in his skull with copious amounts of brandy and frothy chick-lit.

Hermione arrived hours later as the setting sun cast a rich golden light upon the library-cum-lounge, which is where she found Snape sprawled out on the settee, clutching a sunset-hued brandy in one hand, *Bridget Jones's Diary* dangling from the other. Abandoning her book bag in the foyer, she rushed in, youthful exuberance tempered with nervous anticipation, and pounced on the sofa, awakening Snape from his literature- and liquor-induced stupor.

"Severus!" she cried, "you're taking a break from reading my notes? Does this mean you've found something?"

"Yes," he replied drolly, "the inside of my eyelids are surprisingly free from imperfections, and your attention to detail would drive Dolores Umbridge to distraction."

"I'll forever savor that squishy, sweet compliment buried within its hard and bitter insult," she declared with a sincere sarcasm to rival Snape himself. Hermione then snatched the snifter and book from his hands, grabbing his attention as well. Snape rose to his full height and loomed over the cheeky witch, but his stony glare failed to intimidate as it had in the past. "How far did you get, Severus? Glean any kernels of knowledge, did you?" she asked, smiling eagerly.

With practiced stoicism, equal parts Occlumency and years of holding his tongue when he had dearly wanted to speak his piece *hello, manipulative masters and dunderheaded charges* he answered, "I read three funerary texts and learned, in a nutshell, that clean living leads to a cushy afterlife."

Hermione's bright face clouded, disappointment so readily worn upon her Gryffindor sleeve. Feeling failure, like a snake bite to his miniscule black heart, Snape gracefully crumpled to the couch. "I wish I had better news." *Oh, how I wish* "But I did not get as far as I had intended..."

She cut him off with a strangled cry, really a mixture of growl and exasperated sigh. "Dammit! I never thought I could be too thorough, spewing out more information than absolutely necessary, but I've figuratively drown you in minutiae... once again."

Snape's ghostly placation was futile as always: his pearly, pale hand passed through Hermione's own, with just her mild shudder to reward his attempts at tenderness. "In my previous life, I stood first in line to deride your word-for-word textbook-spewing answers. Now it might mean the difference between death and life... again. I rather

applaud your efforts, but perhaps..." He paused, waiting to hook the curious witch and gain his segue.

"Perhaps...?" she repeated, her voice a breathy, anxious whisper, her eyes fixed on his.

"You could distill a brief synopsis from your magnum opus of research?"

"Yes, of course," she answered, quick as a Niffler on a shiny Knut. "As you know, I started with the funerary texts, but the real research began with my travel plans. I went to..."

His pearly hand, mere inches from her face, interrupted what would have likely been a very long exposition, the wizarding equivalent of Lonely Planet's entire library of guidebooks. "You look a little peaky, and that means something coming from a ghost. I think a bit of dinner is in order before you get too caught up in your tale."

"Now that you mention it..." She sprang up from the sofa and headed directly into the kitchen.

"There's leftover cottage pie," Snape reminded her, floating closely behind. He eased his lanky, pearlescent body into a dinette chair. He had to crane his neck to see above the enormous tome better known as Hermione's resurrection notes planted in the center of the kitchen table.

"I'm way ahead of you, Severus," she said, pulling a ramekin from the refrigerator. Hermione apparently had her wits about her today, for she placed the little crock on the countertop before applying a judicious Warming Charm with twirly whirls of her wand. She inhaled the fragrant spirals of steam rising from the pie's lightly browned crust, and a smile played upon her lips. Her revelry was then broken when Snape cleared his throat with an inelegant cough.

Maneuvering around the elephant in the room, or rather on the table, he gestured to the chair opposite his. "You can just as easily sit as stand for the same price," he said, smirking. "I promise not to steal your supper." Spots of pink from embarrassment or proximity to the steamy meal? colored her cheeks, vanishing as quickly as they'd appeared.

She slid into her seat and dove into her meal with a ladylike daintiness, chewing each forkful thoroughly before moving onto the next. Minutes passed in near silence as the dining ritual continued: scoop, lift, insert, chew *ad nauseam*, repeat. Snape watched her in fascination: he had never seen anyone eat as slowly as Hermione. He thought that for someone so eager to speak, she would have devoured dinner in under sixty seconds. He himself had spent significantly less time carefully consuming one of Hagrid's rock cakes, a tough meal for anyone to endure.

Hermione finally finished eating, scraping the last morsel of meat and mash from the crock and licking the fork clean. "That was amazing, Severus. Even on the second day, the mash is tender and moist, and the meat hasn't a spot of greasiness. You've outdone yourself again. Think I'll have another." Her mind seemed lost in an epicurean haze; any thought of her all-consuming research had been Obliviated by her stomach.

She was rising from her seat when Snape again cleared his throat, gaining her divided attention once more. "Why don't you give your digestive tract some time to process the first pie, and..."

"Do you think I'm fat, Severus Snape?" Now she jumped to her feet, and the only thing protecting him from her oft-used accusatory finger was a small pine table and the enlarged notebook that laid upon it.

He sighed inwardly. *Merlin, save me! The brightest witch of her age is insecure? I'll put a stop to that.* "Not in the least, but I haven't seen you properly in months. Perhaps after you shrink your magnum opus," he gestured at the oversized tome, "to a more manageable *Reader's Digest* version, you'll lift the moratorium on voyeurism and grant me leave to look."

Hermione blushed for the second time that evening, an intense red flowing over her face and neck and likely traveling to her toes. In a flash, she dropped into her chair and wiped invisible dust from the cover of the huge book, steadfastly avoiding all eye contact with her flatmate. "Right, a synopsis," her voice cracked.

Snape had always enjoyed pushing her buttons, but ever since they reached their understanding months ago, those opportunities to set her off balance were few and far between. He was disappointed to see the flush fade away as she regained her composure.

"As I was saying, the real research began with my travel plans. First, I went to Edinburgh's Central Library and came up with a list of funerary texts and the corresponding cities where I could find the original materials: *Book of the Dead* in the Egyptian National Library and Archives in Cairo; *Bardo Thodol* in the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamshala, India, interestingly enough; *Ars Morendi* in the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek in Leipzig; the *Funeral Oration* in the National Széchenyi Library in Budapest, and so on. Next, I visited the magical branch of the Bodleian to..."

His raised hand halted her story. "As one who despises interruptions and incessant questions, I humbly apologize. But why bother traveling far and wide to access materials that are readily available through the World Wide Interweb?"

Her eyebrows raised, more likely from surprise rather than irritation. "I'm impressed. I didn't know you stay abreast of modern technology."

It didn't seem possible, but Snape's ramrod posture straightened up a bit more at Hermione's compliment. "Despite my confinement, I'm rather up to date in both Muggle and wizarding worlds."

"However, the proper terms are World Wide Web and Internet," Little Miss Know-It-All said matter-of-factly, correcting his minor malapropism with a sincere smile.

The now-deflated Snape squirmed in his chair, rolling his eyes but resisting the usual concomitant sigh. "My question...?"

"Right," she began, seemingly ignorant of his annoyance. "It would have easier to review the online texts so much less time consuming, for sure. But I feared the materials could have been compromised, misinterpreted or mistranslated. Copying and translating the originals took those potential errors out of the equation. Plus, traveling to those far off places gave me the opportunity to visit more wizarding libraries."

"Dare I ask how a teenager without A-level qualifications gained access to ancient, rare, priceless documents?" He had a sneaking suspicion his by-the-book Gryffindor flatmate had employed some Slytherin tactics, but if she would admit to as much, the drudgery of reading her prodigious notes would be offset; that he might find the solution to his little problem was beside the point.

She was speechless for the first time that evening well, other than those few brief minutes when she was all but making love to her cottage pie dinner. After several moments of studying her clean, unadorned fingernails, she finally spoke. "Well, you have to understand that desperate times call for desperate measures."

He extended his hand forward, making no attempt to bypass the beastly big book before him. "Hello. My name is Severus Snape. Have we met before?"

"Oh, ha bloody ha," she said brightly, her brow tinged with a soupcon of irritation. "Do you want me to continue, or would you like to joke some more?"

He twirled his hand imperiously, the universal signal for "get on with it now."

She leaned in close to regale him with her tale of deception, speaking in low tones to Snape as though he were an active co-conspirator. "It's astonishing how far glammers, translation charms, falsified documents, and Confundus Charms will take you. I posed as a humanities graduate student, my dissertation being on death and burial rituals in pre-modern times, and my university was conveniently located on the opposite side of the globe within a wholly inconvenient time zone. I carried a letter on 'official' letterhead, of course from the institution's reference librarian to my 'program head' granting me unlimited access to any materials I requested."

He raised one doubtful eyebrow. "So, a never-before-seen girl..."

"Young woman," she corrected with humorless, indignant tones.

He nodded and raised his hands. "Excuse me... a never-before-seen *young woman* walks into the greatest reference collections in the world and expects to be given *carte blanche* entry to invaluable, irreplaceable history. Did no-one challenge your feeble story?"

She leaned in once more, a mischievous glint lighting her eyes. "Of course they did. But I always arrived on the weekends, when the reference librarian was off duty. If the veracity of my letter was questioned, I would suggest contacting the curator. Who in their right mind would bother their boss on the weekend? Besides, my travel-weary appearance usually garnered their sympathy, but if that didn't work..." She produced her wand, pointed it nowhere in particular, and behind her hand, she whispered, "Confundo."

Snape proudly smirked at that revelation. While not considered an Unforgivable Curse by any means, it still had significant moral and ethical implications. *Oh, if McGonagall only knew what her prized cub has been up to. She would surely suffer a convulsion... or choke on her shortbread.*

But he wasn't about to reward Hermione with a BAFTA quite yet. "And speaking of travel, how did you get to these distant destinations so quickly, with only forty-eight hours in a weekend? Egypt, India, Germany, Hungary..."

With a sly grin and cool demeanor, she explained. "I don't have a Time-Turner anymore, if that's what you're implying. But long-range travel was no problem whatsoever... after a quick lesson in world geography and illegal Portkey manufacturing." When she finished her story of deception and felonious crimes, she sat back in her chair, a huge grin upon her young, innocent face. She looked like a Kneazle that had swallowed a flight of conjured canaries.

Snape was pleased as well, smirking at her dubious accomplishments. "Please continue. I think you were last at the magical branch of the Bodleian."

"Yes. I have unlimited access to the restricted section at the Hogwarts library now, much to Madam Pince's dismay, yet I found their selection of necromancy texts and uncensored grimoires to be lacking or nonexistent, really. So I visited Oxford's magical collection of reference books. And you'll be happy to know I entered through my own achievements: Hermione Granger, Charms apprentice, war veteran, holder of eleven N.E.W.T.s." With each pronouncement, she puffed up a bit, and her skin took on a luminous sheen.

"Bravo!" he exclaimed with mock-excitement. "I would place a gold star on your forehead, but I'm afraid my ghostly hand would pass directly through to your brain and cause irreparable damage."

"Ha bloody ha... again," she said, cool and detached.

Snape softened the blow with the whisper of a smile. "While your accomplishments are laudable, I'm more impressed with the elaborate deception you described before."

"Oh," she said, surprised. "It was sort of fun, bending the rules for once instead of following them."

He smirked. "Of course, because you *always* followed the rules at Hogwarts."

"Oh," she repeated sheepishly, like the proverbial biscuit thief caught in the act.

"We can discuss your history of arson and thievery at some future time, but now..." He waved for her to continue.

"I located many a grimoire there, a few containing spells for summoning spirits and supernatural beings, and one..." With a resounding thud, she heaved open the gargantuan book before her and leafed through page after page, searching. "Hmmm, that's odd. It should be here," she repeatedly jabbed a petite finger at the exact replica of a yellowed parchment, "right after the funerary texts." She continued sifting through the book, forward, back, then forward again.

About a minute into her fruitless search, Snape let loose a barely audible sigh. "You do remember you're a witch, don't you? Quite handy with charms, or so I've heard." His ever-present smirk appeared once again.

She glared at him, one of those icy, yet smoldering, looks. "*Promo Glibly's Moste Practical Magik for Terrible Times*." The book slammed shut, then flipped open, the pages whirring so fast it looked as though the ginormous volume could take flight at any second. Then the turning pages came to an abrupt halt, revealing a facsimile of a decrepit-looking grimoire. Black-green mold regularly adorned the tattered pages, and it seemed to emit a musty smell of authenticity. Surely, the magical librarians at the Bodleian had used some industrial-strength spells to stop the deterioration of the original book. Hermione scanned the table of contents, then located the spell titled "For One Who Perished in an Untimely Manner."

She beckoned Snape to stand beside her and read as she expounded her finding. "At first, I thought this was it! How lucky to happen across a resurrection spell in my first journey outside Scotland? Not just for any dead person but for one who died before his or her time. Then I read the list of ingredients for the accompanying potion..." She pointed to one item in particular.

"*'Flea-infested black rat, preferably living'*" he read aloud.

"And the conditions for the deceased...", she added, directing him to the instructions.

"*'Perform this spell, you must, before the sun rises on the second day of the... Black Death.'* Hermione, disregard this was written, I suppose, in the fourteenth century. It's specific for bubonic plague. I died from snake toxin and blood loss."

"Yes, I know," she sighed wistfully, caressing the pages of reproduction parchment. "Finding a diseased rat wouldn't have been much of a challenge, given that *Yersinia pestis* still exists today. The most significant problem is the time of your death, almost twelve months ago; this spell only works for the newly deceased. And when you reach the finely printed footnote, you'll see that best results are achieved when the spell is performed by a close blood relative."

He had none of those that he was aware of not living at least. Snape nodded mutely and returned to his seat, his slightly slumped shoulders the only sign of dejection. If Hermione noticed his disappointment, she politely overlooked it.

"The point to take away is this: I found a resurrection spell! They do exist! And if the Bodleian had one, I would surely discover more in other magical libraries around the world!"

Silent seconds ticked by. Her expectant smile grew strained, and incessant blinking soon followed. She seemed to be waiting for an equally enthusiastic response yet Snape offered nothing. He wore his workaday indifferent expression, a suit of armor to protect his emotions. He would give her no affirmation when the situation appeared so bleak, so hopeless. After a while, he could not withstand her pregnant pause, and his single arched eyebrow impelled her to continue before that rapid fire eye flutter led to a seizure.

"Sooo, I had my itinerary all mapped out," she began somewhat hesitantly before gaining momentum, "but it wasn't so rigid or precise that I couldn't change my plans. The first stop was Durmstrang in Norway. They gave me full access to their collection, but it was an exercise in futility. So many of the really juicy books had entire sections blackened out, censoring charms so intricate and layered that I didn't have the time or patience to dismantle them."

"Apparently, they are still embarrassed by Karkaroff's connection to Voldemort," Snape spoke the name smoothly enough, even if his voice did crack a bit, "but this wholesale elimination of the Dark Arts in the name of political correctness is extreme."

"I abhor censorship, but I had left my soapbox back at Hogwarts, so I just moved on. I couldn't allow that to discourage me when I had endless possibilities before me. Then

I visited Germany and Hungary, as I mentioned before. Ran across a few obscure spell books in their magical libraries and copied those. Next was France. Oddly enough, things were pretty sanitized at Beauxbatons, too, even though they never had the taint of Voldemort on them."

Snape sneered. "You seem surprised by this. Not all magical schools are created equal, Hermione. Some are merely smoke and mirrors and glitter disguising a substandard education. Did you know that Beauxbatons had mostly finished in last place in the early years of the Triwizard Tournaments?"

"Now that I think of it, Fleur did finish last in every challenge. Hmm... Well, to continue... I thought a change of scenery, continent really, was in order next. I went to the Americas. Their ancient native cultures held a strong belief in the afterlife. I found funerary text for the Incas in Cuzco, the Mayas in Guatemala City, and the Aztecs in Mexico City. I saved the Caribbean for later so that I could compare Haitian Vodou with West African Vodun. In between, I went to the United States. That's where I deviated from my proposed travel plans. I started at the Salem Academy of Witchcraft. No joy there, I'm afraid, just more of those abridged collections like the other schools have. But the librarian gave me two leads, and since Arkham is so close to Salem, I veered off course a bit and visited Miskatonic University. The chief librarian, Doris Horus who names their child that? looks dusty and ancient like the collection she oversees, but she's feisty as a Fire-Crab and sharp too. Steered me toward some of the more nefarious works, namely the *Necronomicon*."

She leafed through her gigantic notebook again and demonstrated yet another copy of a tattered and stained grimoire; no translation needed this time, as it was originally written in English. "No luck there either, I'm sorry to say. It has spells to 'awaken' ancient deities monsters, really but none to resurrect the human dead. However, Miss Horus told me about a derivative collection, *Necronomicon Ex-Mortis*. Miskatonic didn't have a copy, but using a locator spell, I found it... in a deserted cabin, of all places, in the remote hills outside Knoxville, Tennessee. Now, I've been to creepy places before hello, Borgin and Burkes but this was pure evil coated in a thick, creamy layer of evil. It wreaked of horror movie cliché. And the book turned out to be *Naturon Demonto*, a Sumerian version of the *Book of the Dead*. Unfortunately, the one resurrection spell within it targets Kandarian demons. Another dead end." She winced, apparently realizing her slip a bit too late. "Didn't mean that. Sorry," she apologized earnestly.

Snape waved it off, his face paralyzed with an unreadable expression, as though his muscles were doused with *Clostridium botulinum* toxin. Hermione's face, however, remained pinched, her body taught, as though she were remembering that hideous hideaway in vivid detail. Snape decided a refocus was in order. "What of the Salem librarian's other recommendation?"

"Right!" she exclaimed, exhaling the proverbial sigh of relief as the anxious lines on her face disappeared. "It wasn't a school or library at all. It was a tiny 'New Age' emporium in New York City owned by this Muggle, Zelda. Supposedly, she brought her own sister back from the dead. I think she might have the gift of Inner Vision."

Snape scoffed and rolled his eyes. He had known one self-proclaimed Seer; in the years of their acquaintance, she had predicted thousands of irrelevant prophecies, but only two meaningful ones. That those two were highly significant never changed his low opinion of her.

"I'm serious," Hermione defended. "That means something coming from one who believes Divination is utter Thestral shite. Anyway, when I asked to see the shop's collection of grimoires, Zelda brought me just one: *The Wisdom of Catagonia*." With a furrowed brow, some twirly, whirly wand work, and a non-verbal spell, Hermione searched her voluminous notes for the title in question. The giant book convulsed and sputtered, shaking the kitchen table like a finely targeted earthquake, and after seconds of unnecessary histrionics, it opened with a whimper.

"I had a true visceral reaction when I touched this book, more than my usual bibliophilic excitement. It gave me goosebumps, chills... in a good way. I had such high hopes..." She inhaled deeply and blew out a weary sigh. "*A Spell to Conquer Death: this must be cast a year to the day of the target's premature death; astrological conditions apply the Earth, Moon, and Dog Star must form a perfect isosceles triangle; the invoker must possess a love that is utterly pure; the target must have purity of soul...*"

"Well, that disqualifies me," he interjected, his voice both bitter and humorous.

Hermione picked up again without missing a beat, but her tone was rote and mechanical. "*And, after the bodily resurrection, find true love before the next full moon or face returning to the spirit realm.*" Another lung-deflating sigh, rivaling any of Snape's petulant exhalations. "So I checked the alignment for May 1st... It's more of a scalene triangle."

"Astrology is the least of my worries, Hermione. Time to face reality. I appreciate all you've done, but it's a waste of time. You could search the entire planet, and you'll never find a spell specific to my needs because..." his pause took on epic proportions, punctuated by his own dramatic alveolus-crushing sigh, "it doesn't exist."

There. He said it. With three short words, he summarized months and months of futile travel and research, a fruitless journey which had squandered Hermione's precious time and effort. It. Doesn't. Exist.

"It doesn't exist," she repeated, her voice soft and small as though defeat had already seeped into her every cell and fiber. "It doesn't exist," she said again, her head hung low, her face obscured by her riotous hair. "It doesn't exist," she uttered once more, her voice gaining strength and volume. She jerked her head up, and the look in her eyes surprised the subdued spirit; they were not dull and defeated, nor glistening with unshed tears, but filled with piss and vinegar and determination. She sprang from her chair and began pacing around the table like a ferret dosed with Pepperup Potion, effervescence amplified tenfold. "It doesn't exist," she spoke with firm conviction.

"Exactly," Snape agreed with a grim finality befitting his perpetual bad luck.

"It doesn't exist," she repeated yet again, this time on the verge of shouting.

"Hermione," he ground out behind gritted teeth, "we have already established that *ad nauseam*."

Suddenly, she stopped in her tracks, her voluminous curls still bouncing even after her body had ceased moving. "Because I haven't created it yet!" she announced, triumphant.

"Wh-wha-wha-what?" he stammered at her unexpected change in direction.

Hermione knelt before him and fixed him with a gaze full of faith and ambition, a gaze so intense it pierced through him and sparked a shred of hope in his dead, parched soul. "Think about it, Severus. None of the spells we know and use today existed before someone created them. So what's to stop me from creating a tailor-made spell for you?"

She had done a one-eighty, but that didn't mean Snape had caught up to her yet. All those rapidly changing emotions made his head spin. He had just become accustomed to indifference and despair once again, and then Little Miss Optimist went and came up with this latest harebrained scheme. Create a spell of her own, indeed! If it failed (and it most certainly would despite her brilliant mind and steadfast work ethic)... How much heartache could a ghost endure?

"Allow me to play devil's advocate, a role I am well acquainted with. To begin with, it could be dangerous, a threat to life and limb, lethal."

"Pah," she scoffed. "No more dangerous than reciting a spell under ideal astronomical conditions." Even the threat of danger would not deter her. This was a witch who had offered to accompany Harry Potter for his *final* fateful face to face with Voldemort. She ate danger for breakfast. So of course, she laughed in its face or at least dismissed it derisively.

"You might have trouble finding rare and unusual ingredients," he offered, grasping at another feeble excuse.

"More rare than a black rat infected with the Black Plague?" She stood up and stood her ground, hands on hips and looking Snape squarely in the eye. "Don't worry about this, Severus. I have it all under control. I will bring you back to life. Just wait and see." She smiled, a dazzling toothy, white grin seemingly meant to allay his fears and instill confidence. He answered silently with a compulsory twitch of his thin gray lips. Then she swished and flicked her wand, and the megaton tome of research notes shrank to

a more manageable size, lifted off the table and followed Hermione as she left the room.

The ghost in the kitchen was left behind to clean up yet again.

A/N: This chapter is lousy with pop culture references. *Necronomicon* and Miskatonic University come from the brilliant mind of H.P. Lovecraft. *Necronomicon Ex-Mortis* and *Naturon Demonto* are from the movie *The Evil Dead*, written by the demented, but nevertheless entertaining Sam Raimi. My favorite "sample," *The Wisdom of the Catagonia*, comes from that cheesy 80s movie, *Hello Again*, starring Shelley Long and Gabriel Byrne. The title of this chapter is a takeoff of a play (and later a movie) from the 1990s called *Death and the Maiden*. The serious subject matter of that has nothing to do with this frivolous fluff.

Along with the fictional works, I've also mentioned actual, honest-to-goodness, real funerary texts: *Book of the Dead*, *Bardo Thodol*, and *Ars Morendi*.

Next up: Action! The resurrection ritual is put to the test. How will that turn out?

Chapter 10: That Old Black Magic or Recipe for Success, Recipe for Disaster

Chapter 10 of 12

Something is a-brewing. Is that the sweet smell of resurrection or...?

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Yada, yada, yada.

Chapter 10: That Old Black Magic or Recipe for Success, Recipe for Disaster

Friday, 30 April 1999 first night of the full moon Hogsmeade Arms Apartments, Building One, Flat One.

The atmosphere was dense and sultry, but it had nothing to do with the fumbling flirtations of the ghost and Ms. Granger. It was the steamy potion, softly simmering on the hob in Hermione's kitchen, plus a soupçon of tension from the anxious spirit hovering over her shoulder.

That evening, Snape experienced a rainbow of conflicting feelings, none of which he cared to examine in any detail; it went without saying, of course, that annoyance was at the top of the list. And at the moment, her brewing technique or lack thereof chafed him even more than any unnamed emotion. Regardless, ghostly inner turmoil had no bearing on Hermione, and her hands remained steady as she sliced bursting mushrooms into delicate slivers.

"Curl your fingers," Snape advised. "I don't recall human parts amongst the ingredients for Fire Protection Potion."

"Thank you, Jamie Oliver. I'll take that under advisement," she replied tartly, continuing her knife work but with a bit more caution. "You know, this isn't the first time I've brewed or cooked, for that matter." She tipped the contents of the cutting board into the standard size 2 copper cauldron, picked up the glass stirring rod from the spoon rest on the counter and began stirring clockwise.

"Of course," he agreed sweetly the saccharine of his voice nearly sending him into a diabetic coma adding, "lock your wrist and elbow. The potion is extremely thick at this point, like cold, day-old Mulligatawny. You'll fatigue less this way."

She shot him a sharp look over her shoulder as she continued to stir. The potion then turned a lovely shade of blue turquoise, to be exact thus signaling the next step.

"And when did you last brew?" he asked, still feeding his daily quota of snark, a fruitless attempt to gloss over his mixed emotions.

"Last spring. Polyjuice Potion." There was no mistaking the pride in her voice, but she kept her eyes focused on dispensing and adding exactly sixty cubic centimeters of salamander blood to the bubbly potion. Now she stirred anti-clockwise from the shoulder, of course the potion thinning to the consistency of warm, soupy, freshly made Mulligatawny.

"Well, I hope that turned out better than your first attempt, although, technically, that was flawless brewing." As his unease grew, so did his sarcasm.

Hermione bristled at his acid-coated compliment and threw herself into stirring, hunching over the cauldron and effectively blocking Snape's view of the potion. Abruptly, it changed from blue to green, a pale seafoam color.

"That's hard for me to say," she said, putting down the stirring rod and donning dragon-hide gloves for the next steps. "I impersonated Bellatrix Lestrange," she explained through gritted teeth as she crushed Wartcap powder with a mortar and pestle. "What's better? A hybrid human/cat or a psychotic witch/bitch?"

Snape laughed, gliding away from Hermione to give her some much needed space. He never did answer her question.

Hermione relaxed her rigid stance and added the powder to the cauldron. She then picked up the stirring rod for the final step, clockwise rotations. The consistency had changed yet again to that of thick, yet homogeneous solution, a honey-like paste that was both liquid and solid at the same time.

Snape noticed a sheen of perspiration blossoming on Hermione's forehead as she struggled to maintain proper stirring technique, her arm tiring from such strenuous activity following a long period of disuse; wand-waving may develop one's muscle memory, but it does nothing for stamina. He had no desire to berate her brewing anymore.

The snippy conversation had died, and the only sounds to be heard were Snape's heavy, petulant sighs and the scraping of glass against copper filtered through dense potion.

After a long interval of sighing and stirring, Hermione broke the tense silence. "I've lived with you long enough to know when something is bothering you, Severus. Would you care to talk about it?"

With his unreadable expression in place, he replied, "Nooo." After another uneasy quiescence, he added, "I'm sorry for criticizing your brewing technique. It was uncalled for."

She spun around, facing him while still maintaining a constant stirring cadence. Her wide-eyed look reminded him of a house-elf about to inflict self-punishment. "Merlin's balls! Something must be wrong if you are apologizing."

In his most disinterested voice, he said, "If you are so conscious of my moods, then you would know something is always irritating me. And when have I ever *wanted* to talk about emotions?"

Hermione turned her attention back to brewing. She had no time to think of a snappy comeback, let alone reply, for after a few more stirs, the potion changed to its final color, a bright red, the color of a raging blaze. With the Fire Protection Potion complete, she hefted the cauldron off the burner, placing it on a cork trivet for cooling, and doffed her protective gear before joining Snape at the kitchen table.

"Let's review the plan again, Severus." She switched from agony aunt to bossy witch in under a second. "At eleven thirty, we move the operation to Flat Four, taking with us the cauldron and the additional ingredients I've stored in my magically enhanced evening bag." She patted the lumpy, ruffle-edged pocket of her gingham apron and continued, "We'll set up in the bedroom where I'll complete the potion. Then you'll drink the potion, I'll recite the incantation, and Bob's your uncle. Any questions?"

"You're not very forthcoming with specific details, are you?" he drawled, trying to maintain an air of nonchalance.

She looked him squarely in the eye and spoke with utter confidence. "As I said before, I have it all under control. Besides, I've found that when I disseminate information at the last possible moment, my compatriots have less time to ruminate or stage a coup."

Just like Dumbledore, he thought. "You've learned from the best of plotters, Hermione."

"Thank you... I think." She shook her head as though clearing out dusty cobwebs and mushy sentiment and, without further ado, rose from her seat. "I'll be getting ready for the ritual. See you later, Severus."

The ghost in the kitchen was once again left behind to... do what?

Clean up? That would have been a productive distraction, but Hermione was very neat for a rank amateur potioneer, and the kitchen was near spotless already; she had even washed her utensils as she brewed.

Retire to the lounge for a spot of brandy and a bit of fluffy reading? A frivolous and enjoyable distraction, indeed, but Snape needed his wits about him for the upcoming ritual; one couldn't be too careful when playing with fire and dabbling in untested spells and potions.

That left the one time killer he was wont to avoid at all costs: introspection. What was vexing him so much?

Control. Just a seven-lettered, two-syllabled word, but to Severus Snape, it meant everything because he never truly had any. His parents had controlled the early years, so his every action, reaction, and utterance had been a perfected response made only to avoid punishment. At Hogwarts, his teachers, peers, and enemies had kept him on guard, vigilant to a paranoiac fault. Voldemort and Dumbledore had pulled the strings in his adult life. Even in death, The Powers That Be confined him until he could resolve his unfinished business. And for that to happen, he was at the mercy of one of the most aggravating thorns his metaphorical side had the misfortune to encounter in his too brief life: Hermione Granger. Granted, her intellect and perseverance made her the perfect candidate to resurrect Snape. Still, it irked him that he was dependent upon another being yet again for his continued existence.

What else to consider on such a lovely evening? Well, there was hope and despair and everything in between. What if the resurrection were a failure? Could he withstand any more heartbreak in his short, miserable, yet memorable existence? But what if the resurrection were a success? How would he explain his sudden reappearance to the wizarding world? What the hell would he do for the rest of his second life? What would that mean for Snape and...?

Having reached his quota of allotted questions in a thirty-second period, Snape retired to the library-cum-lounge for a speed round of chick lit. Would he choose the spendthrift shopaholic or the yo-yo dieting diarist? He really hadn't the capacity for either, considering the "life-altering" ritual which would take place in a few hour's time, so instead he read the seminal work of one of the wizarding world's literary giants, *Magical Me* by Gilderoy Lockhart.

Eleven thirty, Hogsmeade Arms Apartments, Building One, Flat Four.

With elegance and a bit of trepidation, Snape eased his vaporous body through the wall and unlocked the back door for Hermione's unhindered entrance. A heavy, invisible cloud of patchouli and musk wafted into the room, and she arrived a few seconds later. Snape's eyes widened to the extreme, his brows almost blending seamlessly with his hairline; to say he was taken aback, speechless, caught off guard by her appearance would have been an understatement. She was the literal vision of loveliness: a crown of freshly picked spring flowers perched atop her head, the perfect adornment for her wild tresses, and she wore...

"What the hell are you wearing?" he exclaimed when his vocal cords finally overcame their paralysis.

A flush of red infused every inch of her exposed skin, as though she were a hot-flashing middle-aged witch toiling over a hot cauldron. Her hand flew up to the circle of buds and blooms on her head. "Oh, this... erm... Well, tomorrow is the first, and I'm supposed to be..."

"The May Queen, yes, I can see that, but I don't understand why."

"We need all the help we can get. If dressing like this gets the pagan gods on our side, then all the better." She handed Snape her well-used beaded bag and the cauldron containing the potion base. "Would you take these upstairs please? I have one more detail to handle." Using her wand, Hermione began working her magic on the counter top and plumbing.

"Let me guess, we need all the help we can get?" he asked with sardonic insouciance.

"Right!" she exclaimed, finishing her task with a twirly, whirly flourish. "The potion will have everything *and* the kitchen sink." She levitated the porcelain-coated monstrosity and headed toward the staircase. "Well, are you coming or not? We have lots to do before midnight."

Snape rolled his eyes, although he risked offending his savior. He followed closely behind her and admired the view. *This ritual might go pear shaped, but the evening isn't a total loss.* Her long chestnut hair cascaded down her back in a river of ringlets. *Simply beautiful. She truly has mastered Charms if she managed to tame that crazy mane of hers.* The pure white gown made her look like an angelic sex goddess, the gossamer material accentuating her subtle curves, skimming her hips and buttocks like a second skin. *Is this what she meant by 'getting ready for the ritual'? Did she paint that dress on? Is she wearing any underwear? She's killing me and I'm already dead. Hey! Are those tiny buttons on her sleeves and hem?* "Hermione, where did you get that dress?"

She tripped on the last step, the kitchen sink faltering slightly in its mid-air flight, but she continued marching stolidly into the bedroom. The sink landed gently on the hardwood floor, and Hermione blew a sigh of relief. "Whew! That was close. Just put those," she waved imperiously, then began walking around the room, inspecting the windows and ceiling, "anywhere, and I'll take care of them."

Snape placed the cauldron inside the sink and laid her bag beside it. He was waiting for the answer to his question, tapping his foot impatiently, which made a noise only ghosts and half-Kneazles could hear. "The dress...?"

Hermione remained at the back of the room, avoiding the bright beam of moonlight streaming through the window. "Well, as you know, we need..."

"All the help we can get," he chimed in, joining her oft-repeated chorus.

"Right, so necromancers of old would immerse themselves in the macabre parts of death. They ate foods that symbolized rot and lifelessness and wore clothes belonging to the deceased. Some necromancers went to the extreme, mutilating and eating corpses." She smiled tentatively, seemingly embarrassed *and* pleased by her knowledge of ancient necromancy.

"So, you're wearing my transfigured frock coat *and* you cannibalized my body?" He didn't know which shocked him more, the desecration of his body *or* the desecration of his wardrobe.

"What! No! I'm not *that* kind of necromancer. I'm not even an official necromancer. I'm just dabbling in it, and... and, erm, we're wasting time, Severus. There's lots to do still. A potion to finish, a roof to blast off." Once again, she walked about the room, examining the ceiling very closely.

Snape didn't think the night could become any more strange. "And why are you blasting the roof off?"

"The ritual needs to be performed under the full moon and out in the open. But you would run the risk of dangerous temporal anomalies if you step outside the boundaries of the Shrieking Shack. Removing the roof is the next best thing."

"So potential temporal anomalies are dangerous, but taking the roof off a building isn't?"

"And that's why we're here in the empty flat instead of ours. I didn't want to risk losing... Severing Charm! Why didn't I think of that in the first place? It's so much neater than Bombarda Maxima. I'll simply cut off the roof over this room and then mend it with Reparo. I may still get to keep my security deposit." Hermione spoke the incantation, "*Diffindo*," and aimed her wand at the juncture of the wall and ceiling. A diffuse cloud of sawdust and plaster appeared, followed by a razor thin beam of moonlight piercing through the short and slightly uneven incision. She repeated the procedure for each wall, effectively detaching the roof, and then levitated it softly to the ground.

For the first time in almost a year, Snape looked upon the open sky, beautiful, daunting, and filled with moon and stars. A light and unusually warm, late-April breeze caressed and embraced him. The faint sounds of rustling leaves and drunken revelers roared in his ears. All his senses transcended the confines of the Shrieking Shack. It was the closest he'd been to freedom in almost a year. Nature threatened to overwhelm him, distract him from the task at hand, until...

"And now to finish the potion," Hermione announced exuberantly.

She flicked her wand at the kitchen sink, and four sturdy, squat legs grew from the bottom to raise it up several inches from the floor. She decanted the thick and sticky Fire Protection Potion into the sink and then conjured her patented bluebell flames beneath. Soon, tiny bubbles rose to the surface and burst with excitement. Kneeling next to the sink-cum-cauldron, she next reached into her omnipresent beaded bag and retrieved three more bags containing the remaining ingredients.

"This resurrection ritual, including the potion you'll drink, Severus, was inspired by many sources and cultures. The additional ingredients can be categorized into three distinct groups. First, the Greco-Roman elements, tributes to the gods, meant to ensure your safe passage from the underworld... or, wherever it is you've been this past year... back to the land of the living." She reached into the largest and lumpiest of the three bags and pulled out the contents, item by item, explaining the meaning behind each ingredient. "This golden bough is symbolic of the gift Aeneas presented Proserpina, wife of Pluto." Hermione used the foot-long, gilded stick to stir the potion base.

"I know Horace surrounds himself in luxury, but *this* is ridiculous. When did a gold stirring rod become part of the standard potions kit?" asked the cynical ghost.

"It's not, although Horace did allow me free run of the school stores when I told him I wanted to brew a "special" rheumatism potion for Professor McGonagall's birthday. Of course, I failed to mention that it takes place five months from now."

"He wouldn't think to question your motives because you are a decorated war heroine and his head is probably so far up Minerva's arse that he can't tell whether it's day or night."

"Eww, that's just... eww." She shook her head violently, as though she were trying to rid herself of that unappealing mental image. "No, this bough," she waved it about, as though conducting an invisible orchestra, "was donated by everybody's favorite sentient tree, the Whomping Willow, and coated with gold paint purchased from a Sainsbury's superstore in Greater Edinburgh. In fact, that store was a great source for many ingredients like this..." She pulled out several oddly shaped, tan-colored biscuits, crushed them in her hands and sprinkled the crumbs over the potion. "These Bonios, which I've doused in Draught of Living Death, are tribute for a potential guest... Fluffy."

"You have to be joking. Do you really expect a Cerberus to appear tonight?" Apparently, he was wrong earlier when he thought the night couldn't get any more bizarre; it had already surpassed his expectations on the weirdness scale.

"Well, maybe. Frankly, I don't know what to expect. We are performing an untested ritual, and anything could happen. So we have to be ready for anything, even to the point of over-preparation." Then she pulled not one but four coins from the bag. "In ancient Greece, coins of small denomination gold, silver, bronze or copper were used as Charon's obol, payment for entrance into the underworld. We will use Muggle and wizarding currency," she dropped the coins Knut, Sickle, Galleon, and vintage halfpenny one by one into the potion, "to fund your safe return to the land of the living."

Next, she produced a half-liter bottle of a thick, murky substance transparent, gray, and chunky accented with flecks of black; it resembled moldy, watery porridge seasoned with freshly ground pepper. "This represents water from the river Acheron." She uncorked it, tipped it over and forcibly shook the contents into the already-viscous potion, and it became... more glutinous and sticky, the consistency and color of cold molasses. "Huh, what do you know... I thought the water would make the potion... well, more watery."

"The Acheron is both actual and mythological; it's not surprising it would behave in a manner other than expected. And when did you have time to travel to Greece and collect that?"

"Erm, I didn't have time to travel to Greece, but I did have time to visit your hometown of Cokeworth. I thought the sludge-tinged water there could stand in for the major waterways of the underworld." He had spent his formative years in that dismal, dreadful place, and he couldn't argue with her reasoning.

Continuing, she produced a small vial of burgundy-colored liquid. "These are Persephone's tears, metaphorically speaking."

"Persephone is the Greek counterpart to Proserpina. I thought we covered her with the golden bough," Snape commented, a bit perplexed by the redundancy.

"Exactly! Remember, over-preparation... Please as many gods as possible... We need all the help we can get..." She drew the pomegranate juice into an eye dropper and dispensed exactly twelve drops. "One for each month you've resided in the underworld... or wherever." She stirred and stirred the potion, adding one counter-clockwise turn for good measure, and it deepened to a dark blood-red hue, the color of... well, pomegranates.

Having emptied the first bag of ingredients, Hermione began to dispense from the second bag. "These ingredients represent rebirth and regeneration, symbolic of your new start in life, your second chance." Upon hearing Hermione speak those hopeful words, Snape blanched, but fortunately for the stoic ghost, his pale visage hid his reaction well.

She launched into exposition once again, adding items to the potion one by one, and his opportunity for navel gazing was lost. "Most of these were locally grown and harvested from the Forbidden Forest: ouroboros, the tail-devouring snake non-venomous, of course the eternal cycle; caterpillar and butterfly, metamorphosis; phoenix feather, nature's supreme recycler; and finally..."

"You found Fawkes in the Forbidden Forest?" Snape asked excitedly, truly delighted to learn his old friend/mentor/employer/puppet master's familiar had returned to roost. "He hasn't been seen since..." He intentionally trailed off, successfully staving off those messy emotions which threatened to overwhelm and transform him from reserved spirit to weepy, soppy mess.

"No, I nicked Dumbledore's phoenix feather quill from the Headmistress's office," she answered, disappointment and guilt evident in her voice. "And finally," she repeated, quick to divert his attention back to the task at hand, "Olay® Total Effects moisturizer, the ultimate renewal fluid."

"Let me guess... Sainsbury's?" Acerbic Snape had returned to action.

"Exactly! It's one-stop shopping at its best." Hermione poured the creamy liquid into the sink and continued stirring. Now the potion had the consistency of warm pancake syrup, but the color resembled tomato bisque, bright red and opaque with chunky bits strewn about. "Moving on to the last set of ingredients now: the essence of Severus Snape."

Essence. The word disturbed him, made him anxious. What on earth did she think made up the man, the wizard, Severus Snape? Over the past months especially after learning he was never meant to die he had performed a character analysis of sorts, contemplating what he was, who he was. The brutal truth he discovered was neither good nor bad but somewhere in between: he was a complex mixture of commendable characteristics and repugnant ones as well, just like any number of wizarding world citizens, with the exception of Voldemort, who had been overwhelmingly despicable. Her opinions on the subject had little or no practical value to him, yet Snape was afraid and more than a bit curious to learn what Hermione considered his essence, his nature, his very being.

"DNA, Severus, your cellular fingerprint, the biological makeup that distinguishes you from everyone else," she stated, poetic and scientific. His silent sigh of relief could only be heard by ghosts and half-Kneazles. "But to obtain that, I needed personal effects. Sadly, I couldn't find a thing at Hogwarts. Winky was loathe to even part with your frock coat. I literally had to wrest it from her bony, little hands. She's one loyal and creepy house-elf."

"Why didn't you just go to my home at Spinner's End when you were collecting the tainted water?" he offered. "Surely, you would have found personal items there."

"Erm, right..." She hesitated just enough to pique his anxiety again. "Are you familiar with the term urban renewal?"

"Yes, I believe I'm standing in the Hogsmeade version of it, and..." He groaned, his brain finally catching up with his ears. "Do you mean to tell me it's gone? My home is..."

"Razed. Flattened. Torn down last fall. Its 'essence' and contents buried deep within the Cokeworth landfill. That includes your personal effects." She sounded as dejected as he felt.

He groaned again. *Not only was I the unluckiest man on the face of the earth, now I am the unluckiest ghost on the planet!* He buried his face in his hands and continued his lament. "My library, my potions lab... destroyed. Oh, the horror..." He would have collapsed on the floor in a weepy heap of ghostly gray robes had Hermione not been there.

"Hey, Kurtz, don't lose it now. Books and potions equipment can be replaced, even the rare stuff. And for the purposes of this potion, I found a way to get around the lack of Snape-specific DNA."

He regained his composure and looked to Hermione, his face appearing both expectant and indifferent at once. "You have my attention again."

"Keep in mind I'm painting with broad strokes here." She reached into the third bag and began to pull out the last of the ingredients. "These items symbolize your major character traits. There are admirable ones and... Well, remember, even roses have thorns."

He would learn what Hermione thought of him after all. It was the kind of emotional bareness he wouldn't want to endure on a good day. He was about to realize one of his worst fears. It was one thing to endure honest self-analysis; it was an entirely different matter to hear those harsh words spoken aloud by a subjective critic, especially one who had been the frequent target of Snape's sharp tongue.

"When I think of Severus Snape, the first thing that comes to mind is intelligence, and to represent that, I've chosen *cervelle de veau*..." she paused to drop in a pink, slimy, encapsulated mass of tissue about the size of a Pygmy Puff, "calf's brain!" The potion grew violently foamy for a few moments, then settled down to a slow and steady boil.

He scowled, annoyed at her blatant disregard for quality culinary delicacies. "I could have put that to better use: sauteed with brown butter, lemon, and capers."

"When you are resurrected, you can saute all the offal in Scotland, but in the meantime... A slug." *Kerplunk.* "A snail." *Ploink.* "A puppy dog's tail." *Plop.* "That's what..."

"Little boys are made of," he finished the popular nursery rhyme in a flat, humorless voice.

"Well, you had to start somewhere. I can assure you that, despite popular belief, you didn't come into this world fully developed and dressed in black." She blushed for the second time that night, and Snape could only imagine what she was imagining.

"Is there a tail-less dog roaming the Sainsbury's superstore of Greater Edinburgh?" He smirked, horrified and pleased at the prospect of Hermione maiming an innocent animal on his behalf.

"Actually, that's a frankfurter transfigured into a Crup tail. And keeping with the category of food..." She added a thick slice of cold cut, jellied with hunks of meat. "Head cheese to symbolize your pigheadedness."

"I'm not the only stubborn one around here," he countered, becoming very defensive to her analysis.

She exhaled a heavy sigh, one part exhaustion, one part exasperation. "I don't disagree, but time's running out, and I have more ingredients to add to the potion. We can debate this later, but I'd like to finish without interruption, if you don't mind."

He did mind, but to bring a speedy end to the night's worst moments the assassination of his character he acquiesced with a brief, sharp nod to which Hermione responded with a nod of her own, slow and graceful. The painful process continued, alternating between admirable traits and unfortunate flaws.

She reached into the bag and pulled out an oddly shaped object, multicolored and globular, fitting in the palm of her hand. "For endurance, I've chosen the Everlasting Gobstopper, but not the standard commercially available one. This has been transfigured to look like the fictionalized version." The confection floated innocuously on the surface, refusing to dissolve or dissipate in any manner, as its name implied.

"Courtesy of greenhouse number three," she produced an oval-shaped red-green fruit covered with sparse, tiny needles, "a prickly pear because you are..." It went without saying, and the heavy fruit fell with ease through the mucilagenous mass.

"Next, this pork belly, from the soft, unprotected underside of the pig, represents vulnerability." *She probably considers that a positive attribute, given her bleeding heart Gryffindor sensibilities,* he thought.

The next ingredients were presented in quick succession. "These shouldn't need explanation: sweet and sour sauce, salt, Angostura bitters." She emptied the bottles willy-nilly into the sink, sticky drops and granules occasionally falling to the floor, then used her special stirring rod to incorporate the condiments into the mix.

"This is for your grit, your indomitable... spirit." She produced a pickling jar of sand collected from the shores of the Black Lake and emptied the contents atop the catch-all potion. It sat on the surface at first, slowly drawing up moisture, then sank to the bottom of the sink.

Hermione dipped into the bag again and retrieved a leggy cutting of delicate green leaves topped with tiny yellow flowers. "Rue for regret." She crushed the herb and sprinkled it atop the potion. She followed that with another flowery specimen, sparse in appearance with burgundy stalks and untidy pink-purple petals. "In the language of flowers, the ragged robin symbolizes wit." It received the same treatment as the rue.

Next, she used her wand to remove a third plant, obviously too dangerous to touch with bare hands. It had a tall and wiry stem, long spade-shaped leaves with a serrated edge, and tiny hairs covering its entirety. Snape cringed, recognizing the plant and what it meant. *Nettle for cruelty*. Perhaps she witnessed his reaction, for she said nothing in explanation as she dropped the entire specimen into the psychedelic stew pot and stirred the potion again to incorporate the leafy greens and flowers into the mix.

"This last ingredient is most rare and, in my opinion, describes your essence more than anything other." In her hands, she held a heart, recently harvested from the looks of its purple-red flesh and gamey, ferric odor. Was it animal, human, or something else entirely? Snape tried to maintain his workaday unreadable expression, but one quizzical eyebrow had a mind of its own, rising to the occasion. "I can practically see the wheels turning in your head, Severus. There's nothing to fear: this boar's heart came from a local butcher in Hogsmeade. It is doubly special because the boar is a symbol of courage in heraldry and the heart also represents courage." She treated it as though it were a precious gem, lowering it softly and slowly into the resurrection potion. "Just a bit of blending, and the potion will be completed."

Hermione applied near-Herculean effort to stirring the potion for the last time. Kneeling beside the sink/cauldron and gripping the golden bough with two hands, she locked her wrists and elbows, as her Potions master had earlier instructed, and threw herself into churning the goey, grainy, chunky mixture. She rocked with fervid intensity, knocking her crown of flowers askew; she didn't even pause to wipe the beads of sweat from her brow.

Conversation lulled, and the room grew near silent; labored breathing and bursting potion bubbles were the only noises to be heard. In those moments of peace, Snape thought about Hermione's assessment: accurate to a fault regarding his imperfections, but perhaps a bit ambitious in extolling his virtues. *Vulnerable? Gritty? Sweet? Courageous? She's mistaken me for Molly Weasley. Yet overall, the process wasn't terribly painful.*

"Whew! It's finally done," she proclaimed, sitting back on her haunches and dabbing her face with a fluttery bell sleeve. "It needs to rest and cool down a bit." Flourishing her wand like an seasoned Charms mistress, she extinguished the bluebell flames beneath the sink. She reached into her beaded bag once again and pulled out a cup. Not an ordinary cup, nothing that one could purchase at a local Sainsbury's superstore, but a homemade cup fashioned by Hermione herself: a slightly misshapen cylinder made of flimsy-looking silver-gray material...

"Is that a duct tape cup? How can that insubstantial vessel even hold water, let alone that heavy, dense goo?" He could foresee the future, and it featured him covered in resurrection potion.

"It is indeed duct tape, a man-made fix-all for any mechanical problem. I've said it before: we need all the help we can get. Besides, the cup is magically fortified; it will hold. See...?" Using her wand, Hermione directed a slow-moving stream of thick, lumpy potion into the cup, then proudly proffered it to Snape as though it were the prized Triwizard Cup without the evil enchantment, of course.

He reluctantly accepted it, but kept it at arm's length, lest he be overcome by any potential noxious fumes. Snape swirled the cup and, having verified its structural integrity, brought it to his face to examine the contents. Using proper technique, he wafted the scent to his nose rather than plunging his proboscis in the potion and inhaled an earthy, gamey, mineral-laden aroma. *Not bad, not terribly good either.* Gloppy, gluey blood-red droplets streaked the inside of the cup and coalesced, pooling again at the bottom. *Pomona Sprout has better legs than this.* Bits of grit, internal organs, invertebrates, and herbaceous matter peppered the potion. *It couldn't taste any worse than Skelegrow.* "I'm going to need a chaser after this. Is there any beer or brandy in your bag?"

As the old saying goes, timing is everything, and at that moment, he heard the bells toll as the Hogsmeade clock tower struck midnight: the witching hour was upon them like tartan on a Scotsman.

"Sorry, but time has run out." She Evanescod the potion, pulled out an Duraflame Xtra Firelog from her bag, tossed it into the sink and set it ablaze. *"Incendio! Bottoms up, Severus. We have a ritual to perform."*

"Cheers," he said without one iota of enthusiasm. Snape pinched his nose and guzzled the potion as though it were a cheap Cabernet from a screw-top bottle and he were dying of thirst. *If this works, I'll need copious amounts of alcohol to wash away the vile aftertaste. If this fails, I'll still need copious amounts of alcohol.*

Hermione walked a clockwise circuit around the sink-cum-firepit and launched into the resurrection spell. "I appeal to the gods of the underworld. Flesh and bone, blood and sinew, heart and soul, body and mind. Return Severus Snape to life, return him whole."

She turned about and repeated the procedure in a counter-clockwise direction, this time speaking in Latin. "Deorum inferorum appello. Caro et os, sanguine et nervus, cor et anima, corpore et animo. Et convertimini ad vitam Severus Snape, reddite ei pro toto." She then stood stock still, rooted in place beside the fire, reciting the spell in Greek, "Απεθήγῃ ἐκκλίσι stous theoús tou Kátq Kósmou . Sárka kai ostá , to aíma kai ténontas , tῆn kardiá kai tῆn psychῆ , to sóma kai to myaló . Epistrofῆ stῆn Severus Snape stῆ zoῆ , na epistrépsei synoiká," and waving her wand in a pantomime language only the gods and nature could understand, movements nonsensical and haphazard, graceful and precise.

The elements answered Hermione's song and dance with a musical act of their own. The fire flared high, reaching just beyond the erstwhile roof line. The wind whipped into a howling frenzy, rattling the walls and windows. A roiling vortex of dark, ominous clouds gathered overhead. Smoky haze saturated the room, obscuring their vision and enveloping the pearly gray ghost in its foggy embrace.

"Severus!" she cried, frantic, groping the air in futility, searching for the vaporous Snape. "I can't see you! Are you okay?"

"I'm still here," he shouted over the roaring wind. "I'm fine. I feel... I feel..." *Warm, tingly, solid.* For the first time in almost a year, Severus Snape felt something other than cold, numb, and airy. "Keep going, Hermione. I think the spell is working!"

Hermione redoubled her efforts, striding around the column of flame, brandishing her wand, and shouting the incantation in three languages. The elements responded with the same intensity: the fire stretched into the night sky and teased the glittering stars; the wind outside grew stronger and stripped the trees of their springtime growth; the clouds condensed into a swirling black ring, drawing up loose leaves, twigs, and other assorted bits of flora. Hermione's crown was lost in action. She was windblown, mussed, and glorious in her magical fervor.

Snape grew stronger and more substantial, changing from ethereal to material. He dared look at his hands, once gray and transparent, now pink and opaque. He could feel molecules combining, cells expanding, tissues thriving, blood pumping. Heat and density flooded his body. Energy and emotions pulsated within him. Hope and elation and fear swelled his heart; it beat fierce and steady, perfectly synced with Hermione's chanting.

Resurrection. Rebirth. Life. He felt giddy just thinking about it all, but soon he grew lightheaded, full consciousness just beyond his reach. Then the world he knew came crashing down. Without warning, the storm-force wind died, and the air in the room collapsed on itself, forming a veritable vacuum. The pillar of fire petered out with a whimper, but not before belching out a stadium-sized cloud of dense black smoke that extinguished the light from the star-studded sky.

Hermione crumpled to the floor in a heap of white, drained of all vitality and sentiment, the elements and exhaustion conspiring against her. Snape followed in kind, his numb, faltering legs unable to support him. And when the smoke cleared on the first night of the full moon...

Oooh, a cliffhanger. Weren't expecting that, right (insert multiple winks)?

The resurrection ritual is very loosely based on the necromancy rite in Homer's *The Odyssey* in which Odysseus whips up a special beverage complete with the blood of a sacrificial animal for the spirits to imbibe while he recites prayers to Hades and Persephone.

The title of this chapter is a popular song written in 1942 by Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer. It has been performed by way too many artists to mention here.

Next Up: When the smoke clears...

Chapter 11: Time Moves and She Don't Fade

Chapter 11 of 12

Once more... with feeling.

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Yada, yada, yada.

Chapter 11: Time Moves and She Don't Fade

Saturday, 1 May 1999 early morning Hogsmeade Arms Apartments, Building One, Flat One.

Dawn had barely broken in the sleepy wizarding village, and the lazy day already irked Snape. The freshly risen sun, shining through the creme-colored aluminum mini-blinds, burned his eyes. The bright sparrow chatter, filtered through double-paned glass, rang harsh in his ears. The dull pounding in his skull, courtesy of copious amounts of post-ritual brandy, echoed without end. *Thud, thud, thud.*

Worst of all was the incessant, wooden tapping noise. *Tap, tap, tap.* Either Great Spotted Woodpeckers had overrun Hogsmeade, or someone was at the door. After a minute, the light, airy annoyance turned to a loud, headache-exacerbating bang. *Thump, thump, thump.*

"Miss Granger, are you there?" the squeaky male voice asked. After a few moments of silence, the door-shaking discord continued. *Thump, thump, thump* "Please, Hermione, if you're there, let me in," he pleaded to the locked door.

The aforementioned witch woke with a start, bolting upright with a gasp. "Filius!" she whispered, alarmed. "Severus, you need to hide. Filius is here right now!"

"Ooooh," he groaned, holding his head in his hands. "That's good news. I guess we won't be needing that anti-woodpecker charm after all."

"What are you going on about?" she hissed. "Get in the shadows, you miserable ghost!"

"Are you alright, dear?" Filius asked. "I thought I heard moaning."

Hermione scrambled off the sofa and headed to the foyer. "I'm fine. I'll be right there," she shouted at the door.

"Ooooh," Snape groaned again. "Would you keep it down to a dull roar? My head is pounding out the *Anvil Chorus.*"

"Shhhh," she shushed him harshly, her face scrunched, either from annoyance or a wicked headache. "Go and hide. Now!" The hungover ghost begrudgingly glided to the kitchen, blending into the shadows.

She turned toward the staircase, pointed her wand and whispered, *Accio* dressing gown." Hermione grabbed the silken, floral robe from mid-air and donned it as she strode to the door, inhaled deeply and ran her hands through her hair, a futile attempt to neaten her sleep-flattened curls.

Flinging the door open, she greeted the Charms master with a plaque-coated, toothy grin. "Good morning, Filius. Come in please." She stood aside to allow the tiny wizard entrance into the flat. "Would you like some tea? I could use a cuppa myself. Have a seat," she gestured at the sofa, "I'll get the tea started. Won't be but a moment." She started toward the kitchen.

"None for me, thanks. I've already had breakfast and enough tea to drown a dormouse. I'll join you in the kitchen, though." He began to follow her down the hallway.

"No!" she cried sharply and stopped in her tracks, colliding with Flitwick and almost knocking him to the floor. "So sorry, Filius. I'm afraid the kitchen is a dreadful sight. Make yourself comfortable in the lounge. I'll be right back." She made certain he was settled on the sofa before she walked away this time.

The affronted ghost in the kitchen lit into her. *'Dreadful sight?'* he huffed.

"Keep quiet," she murmured and went about making a single cup of tea. She filled the electric kettle, then turned it on. Next she grabbed a chipped, faded Holyhead Harpies mug from the cupboard.

"What are you doing?" he hissed critically.

"Isn't it obvious? I'm making a cup of tea." She opened the door to the pantry and took a box of PG tips from the uppermost shelf.

"Your process is an abomination, not a proper brew. You take care of Filius, and I'll take care of the tea." He quietly transferred the water from the Russell Hobbs to the old whistling monstrosity on the burner. As silent as the grave, he took out the creamware tea service, tea ball, and tin of English breakfast tea, his movements precise and economic like an automaton.

"Are you expecting the queen to drop in as well?" she scoffed.

Snape shooed her from the kitchen with a swish of his hand and continued his task.

Hermione joined Flitwick on the sofa and got down to business without much ado. "What brings you here?"

He responded in kind without any fuss whatsoever. "Where is he, Hermione?"

The reactionary Gryffindor took a page from the Slytherin playbook and maintained an even, unemotional tone. "Where is who? Ron? I have no idea. We haven't seen each other in months. We broke up ages ago, you know."

The sharp-witted Ravenclaw sighed. He likely assumed his apprentice would be more forthcoming; instead, getting straight answers from the dentists' daughter was like pulling teeth. "Well, that's unfortunate, but in my opinion, I never thought the two of you were suited. And back to topic, I'm inquiring as to the whereabouts of Severus Snape. Have you seen him recently?"

"Severus Snape is dead, Filius." And timing is everything, as the saying goes, for at that moment, a high-pitched whistle interrupted the awkward conversation. The reticent witch flicked her wand over her shoulder, and the tea kettle grew silent. Magic! Or perhaps the ghost in the kitchen had something to do with that.

Flitwick sighed again, doubly loud and long. "Is he? Really?" He raised a dubious eyebrow to emphasize his response.

"Of course he's dead. He died before my very eyes right here," she flapped her hand about her modern flat, "in the Shrieking Shack... erm, the former Shrieking Shack, that is. Unless, he orchestrated some grand hoax upon the wizarding world à la Barty Crouch Jr."

"Oh, I agree. He's dead. Toward the end of his life, Severus had too much going to arrange faking his own death. Merlin's balls, overseeing the Carrows was a full-time job in itself, but he did it without them even knowing." His laugh was airy and bittersweet. "Severus Snape didn't deserve to die, but alas, he did. And he should be resting in peace, but I think his spirit remains unsettled. You haven't seen his ghost flitting about here?"

Flitting about? I have never flitted about in death, or when I was alive, for that matter. I'll show him flitting about.

"His spirit? Hmm..." She stalled, focusing on the dust motes swirling in the bright morning light and twirling her wand round and round. A modest, yet elegant tea set on an ornate silver platter floated into the room... carried by the resident ghost.

Hermione glared at him with the intensity of a thousand suns; he was certain to suffer literal third-degree burns if her gaze lingered any longer. Flitwick applauded with annoying exuberance.

"Severus, what a pleasure to see you again!" he exclaimed. "I had a feeling you were still lingering on this astral plane... and somewhere nearby Miss Granger."

"What led you to that theory?" Snape asked in his most disinterested tone. He placed the tray upon the coffee table, then proceeded to prepare Hermione's tea just the way she liked it, one lump of sugar and a generous splash of milk.

"Hermione asked me some really odd questions regarding you. 'Where is Professor Snape buried? Are any of his personal belongs still at Hogwarts?' Oooh," he squeaked, pausing in exposition, "a spot of tea would be lovely, after all. Do you mind?"

"Not at all," he replied with faux sincerity as he handed the cup to Hermione. "I've become quite adept at the domestic arts." Snape poured the tea, then looked to Flitwick with flat expectation.

"Two sugars and a drop of milk please. Thank you, Severus."

Snape tossed the cubes carelessly into the tea and poured a generous dollop of milk, spilling more on the saucer than in the cup. He proffered the messy china to Flitwick, who accepted with a guileless smile, and then the inhospitable spirit settled into the armchair by the hearth.

Flitwick blew into the hot beverage before taking a dainty sip, and then he continued speaking. "Besides the strange questions, there was Hermione's weird behavior: she disappeared every weekend and returned to Hogwarts on Mondays utterly useless, exhausted and absentminded. Not the Hermione we've all come to expect. Then there was her special research..."

"You knew about that?" she finally spoke up, alarmed, jostling her tea cup in the process.

"Not the specific subject, dear. I knew only what Madam Pince told me: you had consulted numerous Dark Arts books. She said nothing more. And I brushed it all aside, the crazy conspiratorial thoughts of a romantic, old fool. But last night..." He paused in dramatic fashion, slurped the rapidly cooling tea and then swallowed, slurping and swallowing and slurping and swallowing until he emptied the delicate china cup.

"Last night...?" Hermione repeated like an overeager budgie.

"An enormous mushroom cloud of smoke and fire appeared in the sky above Hogsmeade last night, almost a year to the day Severus Snape had perished, and then my assumptions were all but confirmed."

She placed her untouched tea on the table and turned to face the little Charms master. "I attempted to resurrect Severus Snape last night, and I failed," she admitted without a hint of remorse.

Flitwick put his empty cup beside hers and took Hermione's hands into his own. Snape frowned for a millisecond, just enough time for the Ravenclaw wizard to witness the jealous ghost's reaction. "I'm sorry, my dear. The majority of such spells are doomed to fail. It's a rare one that meets every condition for success. Care to show me your research?"

Without missing a beat, Hermione summoned her immense notes for Flitwick's perusal. The coffee table, not to mention the tiny wizard, were dwarfed by the size of the overstuffed notebook. He leafed through the tome at breakneck speed, page after rustling page, punctuating the tense, expectant atmosphere with an occasional hum or murmur. "You were extremely thorough in your research, Hermione. That Black Death spell is a real snorter. The Catagonian one is a very rare find, indeed. Tell me about your spell now."

Hermione recounted the entire resurrection ritual for her teacher, adding every single minute detail about the potion and its ingredients, the brewing process, the spell's incantation and wand movements, and the reactions of the surrounding environment. The wizened old wizard nodded thoughtfully as she retold her long tale. He remained silent for several moments after she finished, staring at her research notes and tapping his stubby index finger upon his lips. Finally, he spoke, directing his question to Snape, who was still brooding, arms crossed and perma-scowl etched on his face. "Severus, did you feel anything at all during the ritual?"

"I could feel myself solidifying, becoming corporeal. Cells rejuvenating, tissues swelling, blood pumping, heart beating. I felt energized and... emotional."

"Emotional?" Flitwick repeated squeakily. "Care to expand?"

"Nooo," Snape answered flatly and returned to his previous sullen state. Broody, brood, brood.

"Hermione, did you feel anything?"

She spent a few moments in silent reflection. "I felt an incredible surge of energy flowing through me, as though I had a constant infusion of Invigoration Draught."

"What about your emotions? Surely, you will be more open than our taciturn friend here," Flitwick said, pointing to Snape.

"Honestly, I was so overwhelmed with power and strength that I was unaware of any feelings or sensation."

"Hmmm, just as I suspected," Flitwick announced triumphantly. "As thorough as you were, it seems you've overlooked a crucial element common to all successful resurrection rituals, potions, and spells. Why I daresay that even Voldemort's Regeneration Potion contained this ingredient." Snape and Hermione stared at him, gaping even, waiting for him to reveal the secret life-giving ingredient.

Flitwick had them on tenterhooks, teasing them with his enigmatic grin. "Well, my work here is done." He then rose and made to leave.

"Wait!" Hermione shouted as she fell to her knees and grabbed his tiny lapels, effectively blocking his escape. "What is it? What are we missing? You have to tell us," she pleaded.

Flitwick gently disengaged from her death grip, then smoothed the wrinkles from his fine gabardine garment. "You don't need me to figure it out. Severus has one of the sharpest, most brilliant minds in wizarding Britain, perhaps the whole planet. And Hermione, you are the brightest witch blah, blah, blah. Put your prodigious brains together and puzzle it out." He held her hands again and gazed into her eyes, conveying silent encouragement. "I expect you'll be on time Monday, bright eyed and bushy tailed, figuratively speaking of course. Save the kinky Transfigurations for the weekend, eh?"

Those cheeky parting remarks left Snape and Hermione temporarily speechless, and that allowed for Flitwick's unhindered exit, leaving the flatmates alone again. When they heard the door close, their mouths snapped shut, and they stared at each other, still dumbfounded.

Hermione broke the silence as she climbed back onto the sofa. "What was he playing at?"

"Secret ingredient, my arse," he scoffed.

"Well, he is the Charms expert. Who better to interpret resurrection magic? I must have grossly underestimated the importance of authentic genetic material. Where *are* you buried, Severus?"

He let loose a protracted groan and sunk further into the overstuffed chair. Slouchy, slouch, slouch. "How the fuck should I know? It's not as though I attended my own funeral, if such a formal ceremony even took place." He exhaled a heavy, sullen sigh, adding yet another layer to his peevish mood. "Just give it up, Hermione. What we did last night was ludicrous. It put you in danger and..." He bolted upright mid-sentence. "Sweet Circe's tits! I know what he was going on about! I know what the missing ingredient is!"

She rushed across the room and hovered over him, her nose mere millimeters from his. "Don't leave me in the dark, Severus. Tell me!"

The surly spirit should have protested the invasion of his personal space glaring, scowling, intimidating the impertinent witch. Instead, he smiled, a warm, easy grin, perhaps the first ever in his life. "The answer is right in front of you, Hermione. Think outside the box, clever girl. And if you don't see it there, look within your..."

"Oh. My. God." Realization hit her moments later, like a well-aimed stunner. She braced her hands on the armrests, lest her shaky legs threaten to give out. A warm, easy grin spread across her face too. "It's..."

"Yes," he said, his smile growing wider by the second.

"Severus, there's a full moon tonight. We should perform the ritual again."

"Absolutely. Once more... with feeling."

When the smoke cleared on the second night of the full moon, Severus Snape lived again. Flesh and bone, blood and sinew, heart and soul, body and mind, sweat and tears.

Shaky hands performed a cursory self-assessment. Two arms. Two legs. One torso. One head. One set of naughty bits. One neck... yes, one neck. One dry, intact, and warm neck.

Hermione launched herself at the successfully resurrected Snape, squeezing so fiercely she almost knocked the air out of him. "We did it! You're alive again, really alive!" Only after several seconds of his labored, wheezy breathing did she release him.

Snape cleared his throat, brushed the ash from his clothes, ran a hand through his hair and wiped his glistening face.

"Severus, are you crying?" Hermione asked, concerned.

"I-I've got smoke in my eyes. That's all it is."

"Of course." She smiled knowingly. "Would you like me to conjure you a handkerchief?"

"I'm quite capable of rousing a simple piece of fabric." He patted the pockets of his frock coat and trousers until he found his wand. *Hello, my old friend.*

"Right, there are rumors you're a great wizard. Quite handy with the foolish wand-waving, or so I've heard."

Wand, don't fail me now. He closed his eyes and brandished his wand with smooth, effortless ease, as though it were only yesterday not an entire year since last he had performed magic. When he opened his eyes, a perfect white... dove sat in the palm of his hand. If looks could kill, Snape's gimlet-eyed glare would have cooked that bird's goose; the dove had the good sense to fly away, cooing regrets as it soared into the night sky. "Obviously, I'm a bit out of practice."

Hermione had the good sense to stifle her snickering. "I've got it." With confidence and finesse, she pulled a handkerchief from mid-air and handed it to him.

He expressed his gratitude with a nod and dabbed his face dry; he planned to take better care of his skin this time around. "Now what?"

"That's your decision, Severus. You've been given a second chance at life, a reboot. You can do anything you want: slip silently into the Muggle world, return triumphant to the wizarding community, go back to teaching or become..."

"Hermione, there will be ample time for career counseling and planning tomorrow or even later." He looked to the open sky above, its vast darkness offering freedom and anonymity, the bright moon and stars shedding light and truth. "Care to take a stroll around the lake now?"

"Of course," she answered brightly, bending to retrieve her all-purpose beaded bag. "Let me clean up here first." Snape accompanied her as she put Flat Four to rights, replacing the severed roof and sink and doing a bit of light housekeeping. They slipped out through the back door and locked it behind them.

Snape took his first tentative steps outside the Shrieking Shack in nearly a year, half-expecting some dangerous and out-of-place temporal anomaly a sand worm or a Yeti, for instance to rise up and kick his arse into the next century. He felt relieved and perplexed when confronted by nothing outlandish nor extraordinary. *This is too good to be true.*

One pointed index finger to his soft underbelly shocked him into the here and now. "Nothing strange is happening here, magically or otherwise, Severus. Shall we move on, then?"

In comfortable silence, they traveled the carriage road just outside the high wall protecting Hogwarts and headed toward the Black Lake. For the second time in as many days, Snape found the pastoral surroundings exhilarating. Chatty owls hooted, young leaves rustled in the wind, and gravel crunched beneath their feet; nature's noises, often ignored by him in the past, sounded sweet and musical to Snape. The fragrant scents of spring earthy, musty, flowery charmingly tickled his nose. Shimmering stars filled his eyes with astral beauty; never before had twinkling been so enchanting. A soft breeze caressed his face.

True temperate weather in Hogsmeade was weeks away, however, and Snape noticed Hermione shivering in the cool night air. "I'd give you my coat, but you're already wearing it," he said, fingering the tiny buttons edging the sleeve of her transfigured May Queen frock. "The best I can offer is a Warming Charm, but given my skills are currently on a par with a kiddie party magician, I might mistakenly turn you into a rabbit."

She laughed as she rubbed her gooseflesh-covered arms. "Well, you trusted me to bring you back to life. The least I can do is extend the same courtesy to you."

He trained a keen eye on his target and concentrated on the spell. With a determined *swish* and *flick*, he executed a flawless charm, leaving Hermione cloaked in layers of warmth, not soft white bunny fur.

She released her clenched teeth and a huge sigh of relief. "Thank you. Shall we keep going?" The long trek to the Black Lake continued in silence. She took a chance, making a bold, perhaps foolhardy move, and reached for his hand. Wisely and against his better judgment, Snape didn't pull away. "Mmmm. You're warm."

"Assuredly, but perhaps you are feeling the effects of the charm?" he replied in a silky voice. The night could not have been more black, but the light of the full moon allowed Snape to see her becoming blush and toothsome grin.

They finally arrived at their destination and continued strolling the sandy shore hand in hand. A giant tentacle broke the smooth surface of the dark waters and gave an enthusiastic salute to the long-absent wizard; Snape and Hermione returned the greeting. The subdued roar of tiny waves crashing on the beach filled their ears. Hermione's voice broke the near-quiet darkness. "At the risk of sounding cliché, how are you feeling, Severus? What are you thinking?"

He caressed her hand with his thumb, rubbing rhythmic circles in time with his steps. "Ah, how *am* I feeling? Vital and vigorous and... to go into any more detail would require further analysis to which I cannot devote the time at this very moment. As for my thoughts," he stopped in his tracks and turned to face her, "I think I haven't properly thanked you." He closed the gap between them and stared into her beautiful brown eyes. "You've given me back my life," he dropped her hand, and his fingers inched up her arms, kneading softly from wrist to shoulder, "and with that my freedom." He buried his hands in her sumptuous curls. "I can never thank you enough, Hermione," he gently tilted her head to the left while he angled to the right, "but this is a start." Her eyelids fluttered shut, and he leaned in, so very close, their lips a mere hair's breadth away... "Wait!" he shouted, pulling back a bit, but still holding her tight.

Her eyes flew open, confusion and disappointment staring him in the face.

"I haven't brushed my teeth in a year; plus, that potion tasted abominable, although I appreciate all the effort you put in making it. Some basic hygiene is required on my part before any... intimacy," he purred and smirked simultaneously, if such a thing were possible.

"Intimacy?" she squeaked, as though her mouth had suddenly gone dry, and her eyes grew wide, as if to punctuate her high-pitched reaction. Despite her alarm, she stood rooted to the spot, clutching his robes.

He closed the space between them once again and fixed her with an intense gaze. "Yes, intimacy. Sex. Fornication. Intercourse. Isn't that what the general population calls it these days?"

She swallowed with some difficulty while nodding in affirmation. "Do you think we're moving too fast? Less than an hour ago you were a ghost, and now you're..."

"You act as if my proposal has come out of thin air. We've lived together for months and have been flirting for almost as long. For Merlin's sake, Hermione, I was given a second bloody chance to live. I'm not wasting any more time being subtle." He hoped his charming, albeit plaque-coated, smile would convince her of his sincerity or, at the least, not hinder his attempted seduction.

"You're going to let a little bad breath stand in the way of your conquest?" she teased, licking her lips and fanning his figurative fires.

He pulled back again, keeping her at arm's length. "Well, now," his eyes briefly flicked south to his burgeoning bits, "it's more than simply brushing my teeth."

Once again, she smiled knowingly. "It's getting rather late, and these past two days have been action and emotion filled, to say the least. I've quite enjoyed our moonlight stroll, though, a chance to wind down and contemplate, but it's time we should be getting back to the flat." She Apparated so quickly it was a wonder no body parts were splinched. To Snape, it felt as though his stomach and brain had been left behind on the shores of the Black Lake.

Upon their return to the flat, Hermione retired to the bedroom for some impromptu, romantic decorating while Snape ensconced himself in the en-suite, performing the most thorough personal hygiene regimen in his life, both pre- and post-snakebite. He conjured a toothbrush it only took three attempts before he got it right and used Hermione's extensive collection of oral care products; living with the daughter of dental fanatics had its advantages. Next, he borrowed her pink plastic razor to shave, not willing to risk transfiguring the disposable into a sturdy cut-throat razor; he cut himself only twice, and since he had the forethought to cast a Silencing Charm on the bathroom, his creative profanity "Salazar's saggy codpiece!" fell upon his ears alone. Then he took a long, relaxing, luxurious shower, utilizing Hermione's high-end shampoo and conditioner; quality products really do make a difference, he would learn! Finally, to ensure a successful end to an already successful evening, he indulged in the fastest wank in the history of mankind; that Silencing Charm was doubly useful that night. He emerged relaxed and ready for action, wearing only a low-slung towel.

He leaned against the bathroom threshold and surveyed the newly embellished boudoir. The trusty Chianti-bottle candlestick stood sentry on the bedside cabinet, and the bed was draped in "neutral" black satin and adorned on top with a scantily clad witch. Hermione had swapped her white gown for a red negligee. Upon her feet, she wore red satin and marabou feather pumps with a sensible kitten heel; anything higher would have been excessive, as she would be horizontal and naked soon enough, making all footwear superfluous really.

Candlelight, satin sheets, sexy lingerie, wanton witch... This scene is vaguely familiar. "Deja vu," he muttered.

"Did you say something, Severus?"

"No," he denied. "Perhaps you're hearing things. I'll perform an auditory exam for you." Cocksure and brazen, he walked towards her, dropping his towel on the way; he sported a wicked gleam in his eye and an impressive erection.

She grabbed the duvet at the foot of the bed and covered herself with it up to her chin. When Snape reached the bed, he knelt beside Hermione. She made no conscious effort to move, but her chest heaved beneath the covers and her entire body trembled.

He asked, "Are you..."

"Nervous?" she interjected, clutching the duvet with an unrivaled death grip. "A little, but I'm excited too. You're in a different league compared to Ron."

"Indeed. I'll take that as a compliment, although I don't know what you're referring to exactly. I had the misfortune of seeing Mr. Weasley naked once. Fortunately for him, it's not the size of a man's tackle that matters but how he uses it." He couldn't help but smirk. "But getting back to my question, are you..."

"Still a virgin?" she finished his question, somewhat indignant. "Yes, I am, thank you very much. Between a graduate program and searching for a cure to your... deadness, I had no free time for sex, let alone dating."

"And I'm very, very appreciative, as I've said before, but I'm asking if you are..." he briefly placed a preemptive finger to her lips before she could interrupt him and finished his question, "cold."

"Cold? Not at all. I think your Warming Charm might still be working, actually."

"Then why are you hiding beneath the duvet?" he asked, concerned. "We've established several times before you have fabulous assets, which were on display mere minutes ago, so embarrassment cannot be the reason for the coverup. Perhaps you are worried sex will be painful this first time?"

"Not at all," she replied, bright and earnest. "Between all the jostling of riding a broom, a Hippogriff, and a Thestral, I don't think I have much... Well, without going into too much detail on female reproductive anatomy... No, I don't think it will hurt."

He blew a sigh of relief, rustling her raucous curls. "What good news," he said, his voice as sumptuous as the bed linen. "I won't need that industrial-sized phial to collect

your virgin's blood, then."

She turned away from him, and her lower lip thrust forward, a petulant pout worthy of the master himself. "You're making light of a serious situation here." She dropped the duvet to cross her arms, inadvertently enhancing one of her aforementioned assets. "I want this to be perfect, Severus."

He placed a finger upon her lips again, applying gentle pressure to soften her moue. "You might consider this my first time as well... in this," he gestured grandly at his unclothed form, working the lascivious glint in his eyes, "particular incarnation." He longed to stroke her body and kiss every bit of her patchouli-scented skin, but he knew discretion is the better part of valor, so he settled for restraint and held her hand like a gentleman, albeit a naked one. "Hermione, I cannot promise tonight will be everything you dreamed a first time should be. This night will always be special and meaningful to both of us, regardless of what happens." With a tender touch, he guided her head up and caught her innocent and impassioned eye. One penetrating look managed to convey his lifelong yearning for a connection beyond that of physical pleasures and intellectual endeavors. "However, striving for perfection is an admirable pursuit, and one which we shall thoroughly explore on our own schedule."

His words must have inspired her or knocked loose a few screws within her head as she experienced a magnificent transformation: from shy and retiring girl to dominatrix. Using heretofore untapped reserves of strength, Hermione hauled Snape onto the bed and took his breath away with a kiss, one virtuous and corrupt kiss with tongue of course. "Enough talk. Let's do this now!"

The duvet fell away as she straddled him, affording him unprecedented access to and a lovely view of his horny witch, firm and luscious curves strategically covered in racy red lace. "This is wholly unfair. I'm completely naked, vulnerable, and you're still fully clothed."

She laughed, bright and charming like silver bells ringing. "Right. This flimsy lingerie is the ultimate in protection. I'm impregnable."

In the time it took her to utter that one word, his mind was bombarded with images of Hermione, naked, her abdomen swollen with child. He was speechless... and dizzy, as he shook his head violently to extricate such alarming thoughts.

Apparently, she noticed his concern and allayed his fears. "Don't worry, Severus. I applied a contraceptive charm while you were in the bath."

A bit of color returned to his pale face. "Responsibility and common sense have never been so attractive. Now let me rid you of this armor..." He traced the edges of her nightie, the delicate straps and lace-trimmed cups holding up her ample bosom a marvel of fashion engineering, that briefly appreciating its beauty before grasping the hem, hoisting it over her head, and tossing it thoughtlessly to the ground. Now he had unimpeded access to and a spectacular view of his beautiful witch. He could finally take her in with all his senses, smell her, taste her, feel her warm, supple flesh beneath his fingers and lips from her dainty earlobes, the hollow at the base of her throat, her dusky pink nipples, her decidedly flat belly, the thatch of short, dark curls covering her quim, down to brightly manicured toes.

He breathed deeply of her scent: the sharp earthiness of her perfume combined with the musk of her arousal, creating a most intoxicating aroma for Snape. He pulled back her voluminous halo of hair and sampled the sensitive spot behind her ear. He felt more than heard her muted moaning, the vibrations pleasantly tickling his lips. Frivolous kisses, light as air, turned urgent, and soon he was nibbling her neck and tasting the tender flesh of her shoulder, savoring the sweet and salty flavor of her skin. He changed directions, moving northward, and while his mouth was engaged in games with hers teeth nipping at kiss-swollen lips, tongues playing hide and seek his hands had their own agenda. He stroked her silken breasts, caressing soft and languid at first, growing more rough and hurried with each passing moment. Her mewling ramped up in volume; he silently implored Merlin and any gods within telepathic earshot that she wouldn't attract the attention of Hogsmeade's army of stray cats. He headed southward now, his lips latching onto her nipples, his fingers kneading her flanks, hips, and buttocks. Her breathing became irregular, alternating between fast and shallow, deep and shuddering, and she writhed on his lap, responding to his fine-tuned ministrations. His hands honed in on the prize, finally reaching neatly trimmed borders of her lady garden. His index finger hovered above her clit and...

She pushed him down against the mattress, pronouncing, "That's enough foreplay for now. It's time for real action." She slid up his thighs until she just grazed his balls. Rising up on her knees, she grasped his swollen cock and brought the purple tip to her entrance. In her inexperience, she underestimated the distance required between penis and vagina for adequate penetration. "This isn't quite right. Severus, tip your pelvis up, and support my hips with your hands. I'm going to wiggle up here a bit to a better position, and..."

"Miss Granger," his silky-toned professorial voice boomed, reverberating throughout the bedroom. That got her attention, and she froze in place, still holding onto his erection for dear life. "Allow me." He disengaged her hands from his member and, in one smooth move, rolled Hermione onto her back, thus placing himself in the top position. "Your enthusiasm and domineering personality are hugely appreciated, but this tender situation calls for a seasoned dancer to take the lead." He felt the tension flow from her body as she surrendered control. Supporting his weight on one arm, he held his cock in his free hand, rubbing the tip over her moist labia, all the while gazing into her dilated, sex-driven eyes. With slow, insistent movement, he pressed his length inside her and waited for... some reaction from his neophyte partner.

After huffing a few cleansing breaths, she unclenched her fists, releasing the wrinkled satin sheet beneath, and gripped his buttocks, sending encouragement to move with every squeeze.

Despite Hermione's silent reassurance, Snape remained motionless, relishing the constant grip of her previously pristine (read: tight) cunt upon his cock. Then he began to move, finding a refined rhythm from the onset, the outgoing stroke gentle and agonizingly slow, the incoming reciprocal stroke rough and quick. His free hand roamed about her body, exploring, teasing, pleasing his witch: thumb tracing her lips, palm squeezing her breast, fingers circling her clit. His efforts were rewarded with vocal approval: her moaning grew louder, timed in sync with his thrusting. He thought his preventative masturbation earlier that evening would have lent him some staying power, but after a couple minutes, the telltale tightening of his balls informed him otherwise. He soon lost track of his finely tuned fast/slow pace, and his pumping became erratic. If Hermione's irregular breathing, nonstop wriggling, and fierce arse grabbing Snape's bottom, that is were any indication, her climax was close at hand too. After a few more strokes, he came, ejaculating hard and fast, the tightness in his body released like a faucet opened wide, not unlike the feeling of being reborn. Snape kept his wits about him through it all and continued to thrust and rub until his softening cock felt the faint fluttering of her vaginal walls. She had surely reached orgasm when she shouted his name and released his buttocks from her iron grip. Only then, when his pleasant task was complete, did he collapse beside her, spent physically and emotionally.

Hermione, drained as well, took his face in her hands and planted a sweet, chaste kiss upon his lips. "That turned out perfect after all. Thank you, Severus."

He felt a flare of heat upon his cheek he hoped she couldn't see his blush in the dimly lit room. "You are very welcome. It was my pleasure, indeed," he replied, his voice smooth and velvety, as though his throat had never been torn asunder by that big fucking snake. After a time, when their labored breathing was the only sound to be heard, he added, "Thank you, Hermione."

She sighed contentedly. "Don't mention it. My pleasure. And welcome back to the world of the living, Severus."

A/N: See? There was nothing to worry about; that turned out just fine, a happy ending filled with lemony goodness.

The title of this chapter is taken from the lyrics of the song "The Ghost in You" by Richard and Timothy Butler of The Psychedelic Furs.

The multi-talented Proulxes she can write and draw like nobody's business has created another gorgeous work of art to accompany this chapter. You can find it at <http://proulxes.deviantart.com/art/Severus-and-Hermione-together-435032598>

Next up: The epilogue. What's life like for Snape and Hermione on the first anniversary of his resurrection?

Epilogue: Keep Calm and Carry On

Chapter 12 of 12

A year after Snape's resurrection...

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money. Yada, yada, yada.

Epilogue: Keep Calm and Carry On

From: Filius Flitwick <goodthinginsmallpackage@yahoo.co.uk>

To: Hermione Granger <hgranger@charmsandmore.com>

Subject: I'm keeping my owl for the time being

Date: April 29th, 2000 11:24 AM

Dear Hermione,

I'm so proud of you, Charms mistress extraordinaire! Your ability to seamlessly integrate Muggle technology and magical forces astounds me. The "Internet cafe" you installed for Aberforth is one of your greatest innovations, not to mention that other accomplishment we don't mention.

Miss Lovegood was kind enough to set up this electric address for me, and now I'm writing you from the New Hog's Head Inn. I had to wait over an hour for a free computer! It's so popular with the Muggle-borns and half-bloods that Abe has limited their online time to thirty minutes. He's making a tidy sum selling those fancy coffee drinks lates and kappa-chinos to the folks on queue.

So, this electronic mail business... I'm not ready to grant my owl leave to retire. I like the in-the-moment communication capabilities "e-mail" offers, but that only works if one has near constant access to a computer; I don't imagine those aren't very portable. Plus, there's little beauty in the computer-generated fonts. Give me ink, quill, and parchment, and I'll show you emotions. Perhaps I need to spend time "swimming the web," as Miss Lovegood suggested.

I'm eagerly awaiting your response!

Yours truly,

Filius

From: Hermione Granger <hgranger@charmsandmore.com>

To: Filius Flitwick <goodthinginsmallpackage@yahoo.co.uk>

Subject: Re: I'm keeping my owl for the time being

Date: May 1st, 2000 9:01 AM

Dear Filius,

I am so proud of you, too. Change can be difficult, challenging at best. You have embraced this new, technological marvel with open arms, no easy feat in the traditional wizarding world. You've seen firsthand how popular this electronic medium is. I think you'll come to appreciate the Internet even more as you "surf the web." Have fun, but be responsible. That means if you visit questionable sites, I don't want to hear about it.

Yours truly,

Hermione

P.S.: I absolutely adore your email address! I would expect nothing less from the cleverest Charms master ever.

From: Luna Lovegood <moongoddess81@thequibbler.com>

To: Hermione Granger <hgranger@charmsandmore.com>

Subject: Loose-lipped half-Kneazle

Date: May 1st, 2000 10:09 AM

Dear Hermione,

I don't want to alarm you, but I think we may have a situation here with Crookshanks. As soon as you dropped him off yesterday, he ran off to the Weasleys, where he remained until this morning. He won't admit as much, but I think he was gossiping about Severus. Is this cause for worry? As for me, I've been silent as the grave regarding that subject.

Cheers,

Luna

From: Hermione Granger <hgranger@charmsandmore.com>

To: Luna Lovegood <moongoddess81@thequibbler.com>

Subject: Re: Loose-lipped half-Kneazle

Date: May 1st, 2000 10:13 AM

Dear Luna,

I can always count on you to be the soul of discretion, my friend. Don't fret over Crookshanks. Even if he did let loose a secret or two, we can trust the Weasleys to remain quiet about it. He and I will have a serious conversation about idle chitchat when I pick him Wednesday evening.

Fondly,

Hermione

From: Jane Workman <editor7@harlequin.com>

To: Renata Fenice <rphenice@yahoo.co.uk>

CC: Stephen Smythe <headhoncho@symtheliteraryagents.com>

Subject: Upcoming Book Release

Date: May 2nd, 2000 9:34 AM

Dear Renata,

I hope this letter finds you well and on the mend. The release date for *The Lusty Librarian*, the second novel in your *Spies and Spinsters* series, has been pushed back to July 11th, in the hopes you will have fully recovered from your multiple ailments and be able to attend the book launch party to be held that same evening at Waterstones Trafalgar Square (details to be announced). Harlequin is planning a marketing juggernaut to exploit the breakout success of your first novel, *Double Agent Provocateur*, and the party is our way of honoring our newest rising star/author (and it makes for good publicity too).

What terrible luck you've had this year with regards to your health; your agent tells me it's been one thing after another for you. I understand the weather in London has been spectacular this spring, but sadly, you're housebound with pneumonia. Then if that weren't enough, now you're laid up with a broken leg! Stephen said your cat is a handful, but I didn't believe him at first when he told me the old tabby purposely tripped you up. What a naughty boy he is.

Stephen has also informed me that you're making excellent progress on your current project. He allowed me a sneak peek at the first chapter, and I loved it! You've demonstrated a talent for writing romantic period pieces, but I think your true calling is modern chick-lit. Harlequin would be very interested in publishing this book when it's complete. We'll talk when you're ready.

Wishing you a speedy recovery and continued inspiration in your writing. I look forward to seeing you, mysterious author and your equally mysterious agent at the party.

Sincerely,

Jane

From: Renata Fenice <rphenice@yahoo.co.uk>

To: Jane Workman <editor7@harlequin.com>

CC: Stephen Smythe <headhoncho@symtheliteraryagents.com>

Subject: Re: Upcoming Book Release

Date: May 2nd, 2000 10:05 AM

Dear Jane,

You are so kind to be concerned about my health. I also look forward to a full recovery in the near future, to be hale and hearty once again and take advantage of the unusually glorious spring weather here in the UK.

I'm humbled and overwhelmed by the success of my first published work; never in my wildest dreams did I expect it to be as popular as it has been. I know Harlequin wants to celebrate my achievement, and I appreciate their efforts more than you can know. Becoming a published author is a dream come true for me, and I don't believe I could have attained that without your support and encouragement. But I am an intensely private, shy woman, and even if I were well enough to attend the launch party, I would be supremely uncomfortable as the guest of honor, the focus of all upon me. Please accept my sincerest apologies and extend those to management as well. I hope this development won't impact the release of my book.

Best regards,

Renata

P.S.: While I remain your mysterious, reclusive author, you might still convince Stephen to attend the party. Perhaps you could tempt him with some Macallan 50 or above.

From: Renata Fenice <rphenice@yahoo.co.uk>

To: Hermione Granger <hgranger@charmsandmore.com>

Subject: Dodged a stunner, I think...

Date: May 2nd, 2000 10:10 AM

H,

My editor, Jane, has just informed me the release date for *The Lusty Librarian* has been pushed back to July so that I will be "fully recovered from my ailments" and be able to attend the launch party Harlequin will hold in my honor. To invent yet another illness would look suspicious, so I came out and told her I'm too shy to endure such a public event and I wish to remain outside the spotlight... well outside. However, I mentioned that she might be able to entice with expensive booze, of course Stephen to make an appearance. Ha ha... That will *never* happen.

And now I return to my regularly scheduled morning task of writing. I'll be shopping for groceries this afternoon, so speak now if you have any special requests. For dinner tonight, I'm making veal osso buco, risotto Milanese, and tiramisù.

S

From: Hermione Granger <hgranger@charmsandmore.com>

To: Renata Fenice <rphenice@yahoo.co.uk>, Stephen Smythe <headhoncho@symtheliteraryagents.com>

Subject: Re: Dodged a stunner, I think...

Date: May 2nd, 2000 1:05 PM

S,

Riddle's wrinkly sac! You are a piece of work. Why can't you tell Jane the truth: you are neither a middle-aged, female writer nor a literary agent. Hasn't your reclusive author act gone on long enough?

On the other hand, I've heard you're a dab hand at potions. Why don't you look for a middle-aged woman with a few hairs to spare? Then you won't have to use that trite excuse of the painfully shy author avoiding all publicity.

And what will be Stephen's excuse to avoid the party? There is no such thing as a shy literary agent; that sounds like a bad oxymoron. Agents live to make business connections, so I don't see how you can get out of that obligation unless Stephen contracts a convenient illness at the time of the book release. How does he expect to make a living with one client, anyway? ~wink, wink~

Now onto more important matters. I don't think you realize the importance of today date. It's your rebirthday! What do you have in mind for celebrating? Perhaps I should be in charge of making dinner?

XOXO,

H

From: Renata Fenice <rphenice@yahoo.co.uk>

To: Hermione Granger <hgranger@charmsandmore.com>

Subject: Re: Re: Dodged a stunner, I think...

Date: May 2nd, 2000 1:17 PM

H,

What do I have in mind for celebrating, you ask? I'm a writer, amateur chef, Potions master, Dark Arts expert, and "literary agent," not a social director or a professional party planner. I'll leave the details to you, but I have one request: wear the May Queen dress... only the dress. Do you know what I mean? ~nudge, nudge, say no more, say no more~

S

From: Hermione Granger <hgranger@charmsandmore.com>

To: Renata Fenice <rphenice@yahoo.co.uk>, Stephen Smythe <headhoncho@symtheliteraryagents.com>

Subject: You are incorrigible...

Date: May 2nd, 2000 1:24 PM

S,

I wouldn't have it any other way.

Love,

H

A/N: That's all she wrote.

I just had to give Severus a significant nom de plume because that's how I roll. Renata means rebirth, and Fenice is Italian for phoenix. For my final pop culture reference, I give a nod to those wacky gentlemen of Monty Python.

Thanks again to my wonderful alpha/beta team: astopperindeath, BrenaMarie, kittylefish, nagandsev, Proulxes, pyjamapants. I couldn't have done this without you all.

Gentle readers, I hope you had as much fun reading this as I had writing it. Thank you for showing the love in all the wonderful reviews. Rock on!