

Heart With No Companion

by michmak

"Well, Miss Granger, even incapacitated as you are, you are still causing me trouble."

Snape-Hermione angst/romance with a twist.

Nettie

Chapter 1 of 20

"Well, Miss Granger, even incapacitated as you are, you are still causing me trouble."

Snape-Hermione angst/romance with a twist.

A/N: this is an older story of mine, started almost two years ago, that I am finally posting here. I apologize for the delay, esp. to Notsosaintly, for not doing it sooner. I tend to withdraw when my RL gets overwhelming, and for quite a while it was -- and then, I fell in love with another fandom and have been dabbling in it for the past six months. I'm back on track now, hoping to update this regularly and get the rest of my fic over here as well, and perhaps even write something new. It's only taken a year for HBP to percolate through my sytem. *g*

Chapter One: **NETTIE**

She's been here over a year now, and he comes to see her every day. Rain or shine, I can practically set my watch by him. He always arrives right after dinner. I have come to recognize the sound of his footsteps as he sweeps down the hallway, robes billowing out darkly behind him. I make sure there is a hot cup of tea waiting for him when he arrives. He always sits in the same chair, right beside her bed. He never talks to me -- never talks to any of the medi-witches here, really. But sometimes, he'll talk to her.

That first time, I knew he was coming. My sister Poppy had flooed me, to warn me that he was on his way and in a foul temper. I admit, I didn't know a lot about the man, only what I'd read in the paper and what I'd managed to gather from Poppy the few times she had mentioned him.

He was a hero, of course. It seemed there were a lot of heroes running around these days, what with the fall of Voldemort. Harry Potter himself had been here the first day she was brought in, and one didn't get much more heroic than him.

Mr. Potter had asked me if she was in any pain and if she was comfortable. His eyes had been sadder than any I had ever seen, the color of bruised clover, and so full of shadows that I wanted to comfort him. He'd been through a lot, what with the war and losing one best friend to death in the final battle, and the other to some incurable hex that seemed to have robbed her mind. Before he left, he gave me a bottle of some muggle hair product and asked me to spray it on her hair before I brushed it -- said it would help with the gnarls and tangles as it grew back.

When I told him that we would be keeping her hair short while she was a resident at our facility he had been devastated. He tried telling me that she wasn't just some patient, she was Hermione, and Hermione had hair -- lots of it. He had pulled a picture out of his pocket of a younger Ms. Granger, smiling and laughing and waving in the photo, while he and a young red-headed man I knew to be Ron Weasley kept pushing errant strands of her hair out of their faces. It had obviously been a windy day when the picture had been taken.

I gently but firmly explained to him that I didn't make the rules around here, but was obliged to keep them. As much as I would have liked to make an exception of this rule for him, Dr. Bechtel, the head of St. Mungo's, would never allow it. Mr. Potter was stoic in the face of this news, but I could tell he was devastated. He left shortly afterwards, without so much as a secondary glance in my direction.

I received an emergency floo from Poppy the next day warning me of the imminent arrival of Professor Snape, whom I had never met. I still remember Poppy's words, "He can be a bit disconcerting, Nettie dear. He's not a nice man, but he's been through a lot so do try to keep your tongue in check around him."

As I was used to Poppy treating me like I was still a little witch in pigtails, I ignored her tone as best I could. She was my oldest sister, and by far the one I admired the most, despite the fact that she always treated me like a baby.

So, I knew Professor Snape was coming. I'd like to say forewarned is forearmed, but even though I was expecting him, I still flinched slightly when he appeared out of nowhere right in front of me like some great giant bat.

He glared as a couple of the younger medi-aides jumped at his arrival, before turning his ferocious scowl at me.

"Good day, Pomfrey."

I was a little startled that he even knew who I was, but tried not to show it.

"Professor Snape," I replied.

"Poppy sends her regards." Ah, yes. I guessed the river of knowledge named Poppy flowed both ways.

"Thank you, sir. Please reply to her in kind."

I could hear excited whispering around me as the aides realized who, exactly, was standing outside Ms. Granger's room. One even had the temerity to ask him if he still had his dark mark, now that the war was over, and if he did could she see it?

The man practically bit her head off. Not that I blamed him. Silly chit she obviously hadn't gone to Hogwarts. I sighed as she ran crying down the hallway, followed quickly by the other aides, before turning back to face him again.

His deep scowl kept the sympathetic look I'd attempted to muster up from appearing on my face. I turned on my heel and led him into Hermione's room. I did not think he was a man who would like to be kept waiting.

I turned after we entered and saw he was frowning ferociously at my young patient. I was almost glad, for her sake, that she wasn't awake to see it.

"Well, Miss Granger, even incapacitated as you are, you are still causing me trouble," he muttered, gently withdrawing a long white box from inside his cloak and placing it on her bed. He said nothing more for a while, just studied her intently. The flowers or whatever was in that box appeared to be as forgotten as I. Finally, after an interminable silence, he cocked an eyebrow at me.

"Are you ever going to leave?" he snapped.

Insufferable man. I tried not to look too cowed as I bustled from the room.

When I returned an hour later he was gone. Ms. Granger lay in her bed, just as I had left her almost. She was still staring vacantly at the wall, her eyes dull and lifeless, her hands sitting pale and immobile in her lap. But her hair that short, ragged hair that had so dismayed young Mr. Potter yesterday was now flowing in uncontrollable curls around her face and well past her shoulders.

I hate to admit this, but I did try cutting it. I hadn't been lying to Mr. Potter when I told him long hair is against our policy. It's a nuisance for the medi-aides to look after. Especially when it curled uncontrollably, as Ms. Granger's appeared to. However, every attempt to cut it was futile. Professor Snape had charmed the curls somehow. I don't know how many scissors simply disintegrated in my hands before I gave up trying. She was a war heroine, after all, and she did look so much better with it long.

Poppy and I had a good long discussion about him later that evening. She had popped over for a spot of tea, and after checking out Ms. Granger for herself had merely quirked an eyebrow at me.

"Charmed it, has he?"

I shrugged, "It appears so. I mean, I can't cut it the shears keep breaking. And before you ask, I can't magic it short either."

Poppy pursed her lips thoughtfully, tapping them with her index finger, "Did he say anything to you?"

"No. He just showed up, made some of the medi-aides cry, and ordered me out of the room. When I went back later, he was gone." I topped off Poppy's tea, before pouring a fresh cup for myself and taking a sip. "Why would he care about the length of her hair?"

Poppy shrugged, "Mr. Potter was by to visit yesterday at the school. He was quite upset, poor boy. This has all been very hard on him, you know. First Ron is lost to him, and now, for all intents and purposes, Hermione as well. He was most upset about her hair."

"He seemed to be so when he left here," I agreed, "but what does this have to do with Professor Snape?"

"Harry came to the infirmary, you see. I just let Snape leave yesterday evening for the first time since you know. Anyway, Harry came storming in, practically in tears, demanding to speak to him. There's never been any great love lost between those two, you know, but before I could think of an adequate enough reason to refuse his request, Snape hollered at me that it was alright to let him through."

"And?" I was trying to be patient, truly I was. Poppy did so enjoy telling her stories that I hated to rush her, but I was wondering what the point of all this exposition was. She obviously knew what I was thinking and grinned at me.

"These biscuits are delicious, dear. Might I have another?" She smiled at me as I snorted and pushed the entire plate at her. "Anyway, as I was saying, Harry came to visit Snape. It's not the first time he'd been by the infirmary to see him, mind you, but the last time had been a complete disaster. I'm just grateful Dumbledore was there at the time to prevent Harry from killing the man."

She took a dainty nibble of yet another biscuit, and smiled at my outright fidgeting. "Yes, indeed, if Dumbledore hadn't been there... anyways, that first time, Harry comes storming into the infirmary, intent on cursing Snape to kingdom come. Never mind the poor man was already suffering, Harry was bound and determined to make it worse. You see, Nettie, he blames Snape for what happened to Hermione."

"But why?"

"Hermione was hit with the curse that was meant for Snape. From what we can gather, she saw Lucius as it was cast and managed to get in front of it before it hit Snape. If it wasn't for her, Snape would be the one lying in that bed in St. Mungo's, and he bloody well knows it. Everyone knows it."

"But it's hardly Professor Snape's fault, is it?"

"Exactly what Dumbledore said to Harry when he forcibly took away the boy's wand. Snape couldn't have known Hermione would do something like that. It was hard for all

of us to reconcile he'd never been particularly nice to her, after all, so why would she sacrifice herself for him? Anyway, the poor man is lying there in bed, wandless, with Harry screaming at him that he didn't deserve Hermione's sacrifice - that it would be no great loss to anyone at all if he just slipped off the face of the earth; no one would miss him. It should be Snape who's dead, like Ron, or caught in some unbreakable curse, like Hermione. He was horribly cruel, Nettie. And do you know what Snape says to him after Harry finally winds down?"

I shook my head no, of course I didn't, but Poppy didn't even notice. She sighed instead.

"He looked Harry straight in the eyes, and says, 'I know.' Can you believe that? 'I know.' Took the wind right out of Harry's sails, let me tell you. He just stood there gaping at Snape for a few minutes before collapsing against Dumbledore in tears. So, you can understand why I didn't want to let him in to see Snape yesterday when he showed up, right? Not that I had much choice in the matter."

"So what happened yesterday?" I asked.

"Harry and Snape talked. No fighting, no yelling. Harry goes and sits by his bed, and they talk like civilized human beings. Harry told Snape about his visit to Hermione, how her hair is all short and uneven, and that she doesn't even look like Hermione anymore. He told Snape that she won't be able to grow it back while she's there and that he didn't think he could take it - seeing her so frail and sickly looking, so not like herself. And the more he talked, the more agitated Snape got - not with Harry, mind, but with the whole situation. I watched him, getting more and more wound up with every word, before he finally bellowed at me that he was leaving the infernal infirmary, and nothing I could do would stop him. And then he looks at Harry and tells him that he 'will be rectifying Ms. Granger's hair situation personally.' And I quote direct."

"But if all this happened yesterday, why didn't he show up until today?"

Poppy shrugged, "I do not know. I just know he wasn't around last night. I thought he was here, actually, until he announced at breakfast this morning with more than his typical ill-humor that he was planning on visiting Hermione at St. Mungo's today to correct a little problem. I flooded you right afterwards. I imagine now that he's done his duty and been to visit, you won't have to worry about seeing him again. He never was one for hospitals of any sort, and he's not the type of man with the disposition to sit at a sick bed for hours on end. Hasn't the patience for it, I daresay."

Little did either of us suspect how wrong Poppy was in this pronouncement. Now, over a year later, he still visits her.

He's the only one that really does.

Snape

Chapter 2 of 20

"Despite how pathetic this sounds, I will do my best to save you, Miss Granger."

Chapter Two: SNAPE

527 days. It was odd that he had kept track, but he found that all he did lately was measure time, so why should this be any different? Sitting by her bedside and drinking the hot tea that Nettie so cordially left for him every evening did nothing, really, to provide him with any other distractions. He had nothing to do but think and calculate and conclude that his life was jinxed by the number eighteen.

He had been eighteen when he had taken the dark mark. Eighteen years, again, as a death-eater - reformed or otherwise. Eighteen days in the infirmary after the final battle, unconscious. Eighteen days, again, after he woke up before he remembered what had happened and who it had happened to. And, irony of ironies, she had been eighteen when she had saved his life and, effectively, ended hers.

He wondered what the meaning behind it all was, and if he would need to sit by her bedside for eighteen years before being released from this strange thrall that propelled him to her day after day.

He knew Potter no longer visited her, not that he could blame him. As much as he disliked the boy, he understood. It was hard for Severus to see her like this - unchanging, empty-eyed and lifeless - and he had never been her friend.

Every visit he would silently vow that he wouldn't return, that he didn't owe her anything - not even his thanks. He hadn't asked her to save him; hadn't even hinted that he would want her to waste her brilliance on his worthless hide. It had been her choice and she had made it without discussing any of her plans with him. He should just get on with his life and forget about her.

Problem was, he couldn't. He almost wished he could go back to those first eighteen days in the Hogwarts' infirmary, when he had initially awoken from his coma and been blissfully unaware of the role Miss Granger had played in his survival.

It was a long time before he was able to open his eyes, and when he finally did, he wished he were dead. Bad enough as it was, lying suspended over a bed in the school's infirmary, with Poppy Pomfrey doing her best to twitter him to death.

He wasn't sure how long he had been incapacitated, but it seemed the outcome of the war had been positive. If it hadn't, Poppy's incessant queries as to how he was feeling and if he was in any pain would have been the least of his worries. Voldemort did not suffer traitors lightly.

In the following days he found himself hating everything about the situation he was in - unable to move, his burns constantly being slathered with a thick purple potion he knew he had never produced, and Albus popping by every so often to offer him candy and inquire how the hero was doing in an overly jolly voice. It was hell. Hell with lemon drops.

He had never for a single moment believed that he would survive the final battle. Waking up to discover that he was, indeed, still alive, had been a shock. The fact that he was being billed as a hero, along with the Boy-Who-Annoyingly-Lived-With-Horseshoes-Up-His-Ass, was a hitherto entirely unwanted addition.

It was days before he was able to verbalize these thoughts, however, as Poppy had rendered him speechless with a 'Vox Reparo' potion so bitter it was hard to believe it would actually help repair his hex-damaged vocal chords.

He had managed to overhear her twittering at Hooch, of all people, about him. *Can you imagine Snape without that voice?* she had whispered, apparently aghast, *'It would be like taking away a lion's purr.'*

"You mean a snake's hiss, don't you Poppy?" Hooch had smirked back. 'I doubt he'd like being compared to the symbol of all things Gryffindor.'

It was yet another few days before he actually had the stamina to demand to be released on his own reconnaissance back to his dungeons. Poppy had merely tutted at him in that annoying way of hers, before cackling at Dumbledore that he would be quite the site, lurching about the castle in his medical wrappings.

'I wouldn't want to confuse the children, you know they already think he's a bat. Putting him out there dressed like a mummy would only scare the poor dears.'

He had vowed to get her back for her little remarks, some time in the future when his skin didn't feel quite so new, nor his fingers more brittle than a dried out will-o-wisp wand

The actual events leading up to his incapacitation had been, mercifully, blank. Albus would ask him on occasion what he remembered, but since he couldn't remember much of anything nothing ever progressed from that line of questioning.

It never occurred to him to question why he was still alive. He attributed it to his own damnable luck, or lack thereof. He also never thought to ask Dumbledore who else had survived. He knew that Potter had, of course. He had ears and they worked perfectly fine, despite all the bandages Poppy had wrapped around his head. It was hard to miss all the Potter-induced rapture that seemed to attach itself to every conversation he had the misfortune to hear in the infirmary. It never occurred to him that Granger or Weasley would be anything but sound and whole and basking in the glory-that-was-Potter. They had been an untouchable triumvirate since year one and he didn't imagine anything would have changed that.

He didn't think twice about it, in all honesty. He was recovering nicely, if Poppy could be believed, and he had hopes that he would be permitted to leave the infirmary within the next few weeks.

It was a particularly normal day, if being wrapped head to toe and lying in an infirmary could be called normal, when it happened. Albus was there for his daily chat, smelling of mothballs and lemon drops, and so falsely cheery that it was giving Snape a headache. But, despite all that, things were actually not unpleasant for a change. Until Poppy ran over, looking distracted and upset, and loudly informed Albus that *'they'd found her in a muggle hospital, and Harry was bring her here right now.'*

And then it all clicked. Hermione Granger. They had found Hermione Granger. She was not safe, here at Hogwarts, as he had assumed. She had been found. And she was coming here. She was found, and she was coming to the infirmary because of him. She had saved him.

He had started then and looked up at Albus, realizing how sad the old man suddenly looked.

"Albus?"

"I must go, Severus. I'll be back."

The problem with remembering things is that you cannot chose what to remember and what to forget. It's all or nothing. In Snape's case, it was all. He felt like he was drowning as images and noises from that last battle finally broke free of the barriers his mind had placed on them.

Curses were flying everywhere - bolts of green, blue and red light flashing around him. He remembered twisting and ducking and shooting off curses of his own, moving closer and closer to the Dark Lord with every step, keeping his eye on Potter as he did so.

Like a horrific slideshow each frame of memory began stuttering into view, each scene more shocking than the last. He saw Neville Longbottom dragging an armless Luna Lovegood out of danger; he heard Lucius Malfoy holler 'carnificare' and saw Ron Weasley lose his head in a bolt of purple light. Above it all he heard Voldemort laughing laughing as the wizarding world fell to its knees before him laughing as the future died in front of him.

And then Potter was there, in front of Voldemort, dueling with him. The ground was exploding and Potter was hit by a curse. The boy's magic was faltering. It was all so clear, so clear like a dream inside a dream the yelling stopped. Everything outside Snape's focus on the duel between Potter and Voldemort faded. Potter was going to die if someone didn't help him.

Snape stood and pointed his wand at Potter's back, his voice strong as he hollered 'traductio magicus'. He heard someone calling him a traitor, but his own power was already flowing into Potter, bolstering the younger man and giving him the energy he needed to keep fighting.

And then he saw her fighting her way to his side. Her eyes were flashing and she was throwing hexes everywhere. His magic was almost gone. Potter was sucking him dry and he remembered wondering vaguely if he would be reduced to a squib before this ended. His knees were buckling and he was sinking to the field, but Potter was still fighting.

She was almost beside him when he saw Lucius swooping towards them, wand poised and ready. Snape could not defend himself. He could not pull his magic back from Potter at this critical stage. He was going to die, just as he always knew he would. He was looking forward to it.

Malfoy's voice sounded strangely loud amidst the noise of the battle. Snape smiled when he heard it 'Animula somnus'. A silvery light raced towards him. He could hear it as it sliced through the air and as he turned his face to accept it, she threw herself in front him.

"Professor Snape!"

He collapsed under her weight as the force of the curse threw her into him. He could feel some of the silver tendrils of light hit him from around her slight body, but she had taken the brunt of it. Potter was screaming 'No' as he saw Hermione fall, even as he drained Snape of the last of his magic. The air turned purple, than orange, in a conflagration of hate and love and death and redemption as Voldemort exploded. His skin was melting from his bones, but he didn't care. Granger was dead and she had died saving him. He felt the concussive blast of Voldemort's death carry him away, rolling him down the field of death as his skin melted from his bones. He held onto her as long as he could, before finally sinking into oblivion. The last thing he remembered was her hair melting from the heat surrounding them, and her eyes, wide and brown and empty, staring into his.

So Hermione was being brought back to Hogwarts and Potter was coming with her.

However the moment the boy entered his wing of the infirmary, Snape wondered if his stay at the hospital was due to be extended another few weeks. The child looked absolutely murderous. Albus' calm interference had been the only thing potent enough to diffuse the situation before it got out of control.

"Professor Snape saved your life, Harry. If it wasn't for him, you'd be dead and Voldemort would have won."

Harry had cried against the older man then, hot and bitter tears, before he turned from the two men and went back to Hermione.

Snape agreed with Potter however. He didn't deserve her sacrifice. He didn't deserve to live.

"So, you remember now?"

Snape frowned at the headmaster. "I remember. What in the world possessed that stupid girl to go jumping in front a curse meant for me? And what has she been doing in a muggle hospital all this time? Didn't she realize people would be concerned about her? Of all the selfish, ungrateful...."

"She's in a coma."

Albus' words stopped him dead, mid-tirade. A coma. He blinked, than sneered. It appeared he wasn't the only one who couldn't die properly.

"Severus, do you remember Malfoy's curse? If we knew what the problem was, we might be able to fix it."

Snape frowned, "*Animula somnus* living sleep. I don't know what it is."

Albus sighed, "We'll figure it out." There was a brief pause, before he looked at Snape again, concern dampening the twinkle in his blue eyes. "I suppose that we should test to see if you still have your magic. Now that you remember what happened, it seems the next logical course."

Snape hadn't known what to say to that. As he hadn't remembered before that he had given Harry his magic during the fighting, it would never have occurred to him that his magic may be gone.

Albus had produced a wand Snape's own, surprisingly. He had assumed it had been lost on the field, and was happy to see it had managed to survive relatively unscathed. He let his fingers slide against the familiar wood, remembering the sucking, hollow feeling of the spell and how he had wondered if he would be reduced to the level of squib, and was suddenly nervous.

"Now, now, Severus. Don't be nervous just twist and flick. Lemon drop?"

Snape scowled at the older man, who for all the world looked as if he was expecting some grand show. "I hate lemon drops. *Evanesco!*"

His new skin, still pink and tight, tingled painfully as magical energy ran through his blood, filling him up power. Albus' lemon drops vanished with a loud pop, and Snape allowed himself to smirk when the man looked at his hand, slightly disconcerted to realize it was empty.

He still had his magic.

After a moment of silence, Dumbledore smiled at him beatifically, reached into one of the myriad pockets of his billowing robes and pulled out another bag of candy.

"If only Miss Granger was as easy to fix, Severus. Gum drop?"

And that was that. They had refused to let him see her, saying it would be too much right now, and that Poppy had everything under control. He didn't know whether to be relieved or angry about this. He really didn't think he wanted to see her. His last memory of her was burned in his brain and all he had to do was close his eyes to see her brown ones, empty and lifeless, as her hair melted like a nimbus around her. At the same time, he wanted to see her; she had saved his life, after all. He owed her a life-debt.

Before he actually convinced himself he should go see her, she had been removed to St. Mungo's. Poppy could do no more for her.

When Potter had asked who would look after her while she was there, Poppy had replied that her sister Nettie was being assigned, at Dumbledore's request, as her personal medi-witch. Snape had been relieved by this he didn't like the thought of her being alone with no one to look after her, even though he knew the girl wouldn't even realize it if she was.

He was determined to put her out of his mind the day she left. Potter, however, had shown up to ruin it all again.

"They won't let her hair grow back," he had cried. "She doesn't look like Hermione without her hair, and they won't let it grow back."

The more Potter told him, the more agitated Snape became. While he and Potter would never be friends, they had become somewhat reluctant compatriots. Snape had shared his magic with the younger wizard, and they both shared Hermione as a common bond between them.

That day, Hermione's first day in St. Mungo's, a truce of sorts had been formed between them. He and Potter would never be enemies again.

Upon arriving he had vowed that his first visit to St. Mungo's would be his last. He couldn't stand hospitals and being cooped up in the infirmary at Hogwarts for more than three months had pushed him to his limits. He would do what he had come to do and then he would leave, and that would be the end of it.

The giggling medi-aides did little to improve his mood, nor did Nettie Pomfrey, standing there gaping at him like he was some murdering psychopath.

His tried not to let his reaction to Miss Granger's appearance show on his face as he looked at her for the first time since the final battle she looked more fragile than spun glass; easier to break than fairy wings. He wished Poppy had been able to figure out how to close her eyes it was beyond disconcerting to feel like she was looking at him when he knew she couldn't be.

"Well, Miss Granger, even incapacitated as you are, you are still causing me trouble." A long box was removed from his cloak and placed gently at her side. He continued to stare at her, scowling, as he waited for Nettie to leave, before finally snapping at her to do so.

He waited a few moments to make sure she wouldn't return, before opening the box. It was full of wildflowers.

After Albus' tests were met the day before, he had left the infirmary over Poppy's protests and apparated directly to Holly Meadows, the scene of the final battle. The crater in the center of the field was where Voldemort had died. Albus had told him that immediately upon his death, everyone with a dark mark had simply melted. The skin and muscle had slid from their bones, starting at the dark mark and moving outward. Snape had been the only one to survive.

He picked his way gingerly through the field, looking at the greasy black marks where bodies had been, amazed to see little green shoots of wild flowers and grass poking their way up through the charred earth. Even the frailest of life could survive, if given half the chance. He had gathered the flowers he could find into a small bouquet and taken them back to Hogwarts with him.

After arranging the flowers in a small vase and placing them by her bedside, he allowed himself to look at her again, without benefit of an audience.

Her hair, as Potter had indicated, was extremely short. He allowed himself to reach forward, his fingers skimming through the soft strands, amazed at the tensile strength he detected. Without her overabundance of hair, her small body seemed remarkable frail and her eyes overly large. They were still as empty as he remembered.

He found himself cursing her for her foolishness once again. This her lying here unable to talk or think or communicate was such a waste. She was still just a shell of the girl she had been. The emptiness of her eyes reminded him of all Voldemort had taken from him the irritating girl he professed to detest, the brave intellect he had admired even as he tried to deny it.

He missed her endless questions and hand-waving. He missed the way his blood would surge hotly when she got on his nerves, as she invariably did, the way her eyes would snap with anger when he insulted her. She had made him feel things other than fear and despair. She had reminded him that there really were things worth fighting for, and she had somehow made the role he played in the war more bearable for the knowing. He wanted her back.

He grabbed a nearby chair and pulled it up beside her bed, adjusting his robes around him before sitting down gingerly in the seat.

"Miss Granger," he murmured softly, even though he knew she couldn't hear him, "You are by far the most insufferable, silly girl I have ever known."

One of his hands lifted to touch her head, fingers brushing through the short strands, which seemed to him to grab at his digits as they passed across their shorn lengths.

"I thought you might like to have your hair back. You look more like a cub with your hair as it is and not like the lioness some people have come to expect you to be."

He muttered softly under his breath, infusing his touch with magic, and felt her hair spring to life under his hands. As the curls grew, they clung to his fingers, tangling in his hands as if clinging to him as he had often thought they might, and found himself cursing the irony of it all.

Be careful what you wish for. You just might get it.

When the hair had grown to a length that seemed satisfactory to his memory he pulled a small green ribbon from his pocket, tied off a small section of hair, and cut a lock of it for himself. With another charm he tricked the mass of curls into being impervious to anyone who might try and cut her hair.

She looked more like herself now, with her hair flowing in disarray over her shoulders. He allowed himself to sit by her side a few more minutes before standing. Of its own accord, his hand gently patted her crown one last time. "Despite how pathetic this sounds, I will do my best to save you, Miss Granger."

Now, a year later, he was glad he had not been so foolish as to promise a specific date when the problem might be fixed. He was no closer to figuring out how to counteract Malfoy's curse than he had been at the start. Despite all his research he had thus far come up empty. He knew he didn't need to see her to continue his research, but couldn't bring himself to stop these visits. She was a reminder to him a reminder that at least one person had wanted him to live.

He found he couldn't abandon her.

He wanted to live too.

Hermione

Chapter 3 of 20

And, every once in a while, when he was feeling particularly mellow, he would stroke her hair.

Chapter Three: HERMIONE

He was back again. She recognized his presence before she saw him, sliding into the chair beside her bed. She wished he would move closer so she had something other than a bare white wall in her vision.

She was in a living hell, and she couldn't escape.

She had been struggling, valiantly, to piece together the little snippets of information that were dropped too infrequently in her presence - she still didn't quite know what had happened to her.

She knew she had been hit by a curse, of course. She had seen Malfoy poised to strike Snape and had thrown herself in front of her professor without thinking. Her path through the battlefield had been leading to his side anyway, desperate to guard his back so he could keep sending whatever it was he was sending to Harry. She would never know if her suspicion had been right, that he'd been transferring his magic to Harry. Whatever it had been, the intensity of magic around Harry had grown ten-fold in the short time, and Snape was leaving himself wide open to attack.

She vividly recalled the silver light from Malfoy's wand hitting her, throwing her against Snape as he struggled to stay upright and help Harry. She remembered trying to ask him if he was alright, and her sudden fear as she realized she was unable to speak.

There had been a loud explosion behind them, her ears ringing from the sound of it, and a bright light so intense it had blinded her unblinking retinas as she fell into Snape's arms. A hot wind had plucked at her robes, whipping her hair around her face, while she and Professor Snape had been blown end over end down the field.

When the shockwave passed she had caught glimpses of people dropping where they stood in her peripheral vision, some of them in relief, some of them in screams of agony, clutching their arms as the skin melted from their bones.

Her eyes, still facing Snape even after their tumble down the hill ahead of the conflagration, watched in horror as his flesh had begun to disintegrate. She tried to cry for help but her lips still refused to move, and the sound became a scream that reverberated in her head. She didn't understand what was happening, how Professor Snape could be melting right in front of her while she remained physically unharmed. She was helpless to tear her gaze away from his agonized face, unable to stop her mind from weeping as the burning wind ripped her from his grasp. When the blackness descended, she didn't fight it. She welcomed it with open arms.

When Hermione woke up after the battle she didn't know where she was. She could see cloudy gray skies above her but couldn't move her head to see what her surroundings looked like. When the rain started to fall, she was powerless to keep the drops from filling her eyes. She lay that way, unable to move, talk, or even blink, until she had been found by some muggles and taken to a hospital.

She imagined that everyone she knew and loved was dead. It was the only way she could explain why they hadn't found her. Perhaps Voldemort had won after all, and the life of one muggle-born witch wasn't worth perusing when she was as good as dead anyway. She remembered Snape melting in front of her and wondered if that same fate had befallen her comrades.

Her parents were gone - killed, ironically enough, in a car accident just a few months prior to the final battle. She had always thought that if anything happened to them, it would be because of Voldemort, so it had been a shock to her when their deaths had been so very... muggle.

She became 'Jane Doe' at the hospital, something of a local mystery. No one knew who she was or how she had come to be lying in a field outside Lewis, Scotland, inside the ring of standing stones at Callanais.

To be perfectly honest, she didn't know how she had ended up there either. The final battle had been fought on the Western Isles, not exactly all that close to Callanais. She was desperate to find out what had happened to her friends, but no one at the hospital ever mentioned a great wizarding battle or a series of strange events around Holly Meadows.

She had lost track of the days, lying in that hospital. Initially she'd measured time by the nurses' shifts, as they came in to check her vitals, bathe her, and flip her over to prevent bedsores. They were mostly silent, rarely talking to her.

It was over a month later before Harry found her. She hadn't been aware it was him, at first, speaking just outside the doorway of the ward she was in. It wasn't until he was right in front of her, looking at her with tears in his green eyes, that she realized she hadn't been hallucinating. She wanted to scream for joy, to sit up and wrap her

arms around his neck and hug him until he burst; but of course, she couldn't.

He talked to her for a few minutes, trying to get a response out of her, before he gave up and just grabbed her to him.

'I'm taking you home, Hermione. Poppy will be able to fix you up, I promise. I'm so glad you're still alive.'

She wondered, sometimes, what the nurses at the tiny little hospital had thought when they'd gone to check on her and she was no longer there. Harry had apparated them directly to Hogsmeade.

Her stalwart hopes that Poppy would be able to help her were dashed within a few days. The standard magical medical diagnostics were run, of course, but all they pointed to was the obvious fact that she was in hex-induced coma. How frustrating it was to lie there completely aware of everything going on around her but unable to tell them that it wasn't a coma. It was something much more frightening.

Poppy fussed and fidgeted as usual, trying this potion or that, waving counter-charm after charm over her body, testing her unresponsive nervous system, but it didn't take long for everyone to come to the conclusion that Hermione wasn't aware of what was happening to her. Often times she wished that were actually the case. It would be so much easier if she wasn't acutely aware every minute that she was trapped in her body. When their efforts seemed futile she had turned her mind to trying to figure out the curse Malfoy had used, recalling his voice and the extreme expression of malice on his face as he had pointed his wand at Snape. The curse itself *animula somnus* was one she'd never heard of before. She could only hope that in the course of battle someone else had heard the curse, providing them with a way to eventually find the counter-curse and cure her.

Harry visited her almost everyday while she was at Hogwarts. He liked to sit by her side and talk to her, and she didn't in the least mind listening. She had seen Ron fall, of course. It hurt to remember the look of shock on his face as the curse had hit him. But at least it had been quick at least he had been spared from being locked in a prison of his own body. She tried to remain positive, she really did; but as the days slid into weeks, her hope diminished and her inner thoughts turned bitter.

When she had been moved to St. Mungo's it seemed that was to be the end for her. She had never been fond of in-residence facilities her grandmother had suffered from Alzheimer's disease and had spent the last years of her life in a nursing home. It had been hard visiting her there and Hermione had always left the home feeling deflated and depressed. Institutions like that were lonely places. She wondered if she had been put on the same floor as Neville's parents, and briefly imagined herself, years from now, only getting the obligatory visit from Harry on Christmas and her birthday.

She remembered her surprise the first time Professor Snape had visited her. She hadn't seen him the entire time she was at Hogwarts, and had initially believed him to be dead. She had been rather put out with the fact that she hadn't managed to save him - that despite her best efforts, being hit by Malfoy's curse had served no purpose. It was because of him that she'd been reduced to a vegetable, after all.

It was a few days after she'd been brought to Hogwarts that she realized Snape was still alive. She had heard him snapping, quite loudly, at Poppy from the other end of the infirmary.

'I refuse to eat these runny eggs for breakfast one more day. I assure you my esophagus is fine and won't be hurt by a couple pieces of toast and a cup of tea. I fail to see how starving me to death is suitable to your line of work!'

She had paid particular attention to his voice from then on, often laughing to herself when he would take every opportunity to complain while Madame Pomfrey was in the room - about the food, her incompetent quality of care, or the fact that she wouldn't let him leave.

'Woman, I survived as a double-agent against the vilest wizard the world has ever known, but I doubt I shall survive you!'

Hermione had been strangely gratified to discover that, despite everything that had happened, Snape and his bad-tempered sarcasm had not changed. His snarky comments quickly became the highlights of her otherwise dull days at Hogwarts.

She didn't actually see him until her second day at St. Mungo's. He had lost weight that he could ill-afford to lose, and his skin seemed pinker, somehow, almost as if he was recovering from a sunburn. His hair was shorter as well, just barely touching the top of his collar. He had scowled at her, no different than the way he always did, before muttering a comment about her being trouble and snapping at the medi-witch behind him to 'get out!'

The soft click of the door was the only confirmation that the woman had listened to him. She watched him watching her, strangely content to finally see him after only hearing his voice for so long, and waited to see what he would do next.

She could never have predicted that he would remove a lovely bunch of wildflowers from a box he had placed by her feet, or that he would then arrange them so carefully in the complimentary vase next to her bed. The only deed that seemed in character for the dark, imposing potion's master was when he muttered a do-not-notice charm over the flowers as he placed them on her bedside table.

'We can't let anyone know I have enough of a heart to bring someone flowers, he had muttered sarcastically, 'It might wreck my reputation as an evil git.'

Hermione had giggled in the personal space of her mind when she realized that only they would be able to see them.

After the surprise of the flowers, things quickly took a deeper turn into the surreal as Snape tentatively reached out and touched her head, before settling himself in chair to her side.

'Miss Granger, you are by far the most insufferable, silly girl I have ever known.'

His words might have stung, had they not been spoken so softly and with such strong undertones of remorse. Could he really be feeling sorry for her? She could just see him in her peripheral vision, and when his touch returned to her hair the tingling feeling against her scalp was heaven. No one had touched her outside of a professional manner since Harry had found her and taken her to Hogwarts not even to hold her hand.

His fingers were strong and oddly warm, and his voice was gentle as he spoke, *'I thought you might like to have your hair back. You look more like a cub with your hair as it is and not like the lioness some people have come to expect you to be.'*

She felt the electricity of his magic as it penetrated her scalp and literally felt her hair growing, the weight of his fingers pulling on it the longer it became. When he finished she cried out internally at the loss of his hand from her head. She hadn't realized how much she had missed human contact until Snape had provided it.

He left soon afterwards, but not before smoothing the hair on her crown with a light pat and murmuring, *'Despite how pathetic this sounds, I will do my best to save you, Miss Granger.'*

She had been elated and dismayed by his words. His simple presence had already saved her sanity where before she had been hopeless, now she had hope. Whatever hostility had existed between her peers and the professor, she had always admired the wealth of intelligence he possessed and his infallible determination to succeed where countless others had failed. Their work in the Order had shown her that on many occasions. His word was true, he would not allow himself to fail in this not necessarily because of her, but because he refused to be defeated when a challenge had been presented. But her dismay stemmed from her surety that this would be the last time she'd see the professor, or any other familiar face, because Snape had to be the last person on earth who'd make her a personal visit.

Words could not express her surprise when she was proved wrong the next day, and the day after, and each day after that. She soon felt as if she only lived for his evening visits and occasional touches. During the day, when he wasn't with her, she kept her sanity by methodically running scenarios for researching through her mind, wondering if Snape had thought to investigate this or that route for the cure. She was determined to somehow communicate to him that she was there, that she was still alive and that

she had been here the whole time.

It became apparent within her first month's stay at St. Mungo's just how cruelly designed the curse was she'd been hit with. She cringed inside to imagine the care Malfoy must have taken to find the perfect curse that would guarantee the remainder of Snape's days would be full of bitter torment. Hermione couldn't conceive of anything worse than being trapped in one's own mind, especially for someone as intelligent as Snape or herself - unable to speak, read, write, or touch a wand ever again - the complete lack of intellectual stimulation was its own brand of torture and a quick road towards insanity. She dreaded to contemplate what might have become of her had Snape not started his daily visits - at the end of two months she had already felt like she was going crazy; her brain slowly atrophying, turning her into just a shell of the woman she used to be.

That wasn't to say that no one else had come, but none came the unfailing frequency Snape had adopted. Harry had visited her several times during her first few weeks out of Hogwarts. But as her condition stayed unchanging as the days passed, his visits came less and less, much as she had suspected they eventually would. She didn't blame him, of course. He had lost so much in his short life; she imagined that losing her must have hurt him to the point of breaking. She knew if their roles had been reversed, even she would have been hard pressed to face that kind of pain day after day.

It continued to amaze her, when she allowed herself to think about it, that Professor Snape had returned every day since that first visit. He could have easily researched and experimented with ways to cure her back at Hogwarts. Her presence wasn't necessary to the success or failure of his ideas - not at this early stage. But she was grateful nonetheless, as his clockwork presence was a reassurance that he was steadfast in his refusal to abandon her to her fate.

More than anything, she cherished how he spoke to her, as if she was actually awake to hear him. In the beginning it had been long moments of silence, intermingled with him speaking about his research into her condition, theories he was exploring that might provide a cure. As time progressed, he grew more comfortable talking to her, and started revealing more of his frustrations with the lack of material on the mysterious curse, which soon led to frustrations that nettled him on a daily basis. Tales of exploding cauldrons and potions having adverse effects on the students who had created them were always amusing, as were the stories he told about the other staff members. Her favorites though were the ones told, rather fondly, about the Headmaster.

On a particularly cold evening many months into his visits, he told her an amusing, droll story about Albus Dumbledore, strolling around that Monday, with a bright yellow lemon drop stuck in his beard.

'Imagine, Miss Granger, if you will, this rather obvious lemon drop against that long white beard. I had noticed it at breakfast, of course, but wanted to see how long he would go before noticing it for himself. At dinner time it was still there. No one had mentioned it to him the entire day. When I finally decided to point out that he had a sweet hanging from his chin, he merely plucked it off, muttered 'that's were you've been hiding' and ate the damn thing. I swear the senile old codger is getting worse every year!'

Sometimes he even brought papers with him to mark, and would read to her examples of *what he had to put up with from those dunderheads.*

Best of all were the days where he would sit by her side, and tell her of the latest article he had read in 'Ars Alchemia', or any one of the other scholarly papers he received. *'I found myself wondering what you would say about this latest article that hypothesizes that wizards are actually a separate branch of hominids, much like the Neanderthal and Cro-Magnons were.'*

The first time he had called her Hermione, nearly a year after that first meeting, she had found herself smiling internally for days. She wondered what he would say if he realized how happy his visits had made her, and if she would ever get the chance to tell him.

She enjoyed his company, enjoyed his voice and his sarcasm and his biting wit, which, when unleashed and not directed at her, was something else entirely. She enjoyed his one-sided conversations with her, when he would share ideas and theories and opinions, challenging her to keep up with him, even though he didn't know he was doing so. His very presence soothed her, and if sometimes she was disheartened at their lack of progress, hearing her own frustrations in his voice helped her to bounce back quickly. Just having him nearby, speaking to her in that smoked velvet voice of his, was enough to keep her going.

And, every once in a while, when he was feeling particularly mellow, he would stroke her hair.

A/N: When I wrote this originally, I had a whole list of clues that I had to keep track of. Unfortunately, this list was lost in the great computer debacle of '05 and is no longer available, but I do remember this much -- many of the songs I'll pop in at the end of the chapters are hints.

"Heart With No Companion"

Written and performed by Leonard Cohen

I greet you from the other side

Of sorrow and despair

With a love so vast and shattered

It will reach you everywhere

And I sing this for the captain

Whose ship has not been built

For the mother in confusion

Her cradle still unfilled

For the heart with no companion

For the soul without a king

For the prima ballerina

Who cannot dance to anything

Through the days of shame that are coming

Through the nights of wild distress

Tho' your promise count for nothing

You must keep it nonetheless

*You must keep it for the captain
Whose ship has not been built
For the mother in confusion
Her cradle still unfilled
For the heart with no companion
For the soul without a king
For the prima ballerina
Who cannot dance to anything
I greet you from the other side
Of sorrow and despair
With a love so vast and shattered
It will reach you everywhere
And I sing this for the captain
Whose ship has not been built
For the mother in confusion
Her cradle still unfilled*

Snape

Chapter 4 of 20

"He's lucky you were there to save him, you mean," Albus retorted, eyes twinkling. "Really Severus, rescuing students seems to have become a past time of yours."

sorry for the delay in getting this up. I've been computerless most of the summer, due to a virulent/killer worm that wiped out both my tower and my laptop, and the fact that I couldn't afford to fix either until just recently. Sorry!

Chapter Four: SNAPE

As far as days went, this one ranked up there as one of the worst ever and that was saying a lot. He had, after all, been a Death eater and a spy. Some of the things he had seen and done just didn't bear thinking about.

However, with the fall of Voldemort his life had finally established some type of normalcy and stability. After he had been released from Poppy Pomfrey's redoubtable care following the epic final battle, he had picked up the pieces of his life and carried on. He was still Potions Master at Hogwarts, obliging him to teach classes where stupid idiots who probably couldn't even brew a good cup of tea mixed potentially deadly ingredients together on a daily basis, to periodically create stock for Poppy's medicinal potions, and to take part in the meetings and duties a member of the faculty was expected to do. And during it all, he worked on finding a solution to Hermione's condition.

It was simplistic but it was his life, and he had come to enjoy the relative tranquility it brought him. The dark mark was long gone, burned away with the rest of his old skin when Voldemort had died. If he was still haunted by disturbing dreams, it was no less than he deserved. If certain people within the Wizarding world still whispered about his 'dubious loyalty to the cause', despite everything he had done to prove himself, there was nothing he could do about. He had been given a reprieve, a second chance, and though he didn't believe he had deserved it, he found himself being able to live with it without much bitterness.

Or rather he had.

He should have known that he wasn't destined for tranquility or even a reasonable facsimile of such. Men such as he didn't deserve it.

* * * * *

He knew it was going to be a bad day the minute Poppy sat down next to him for breakfast at the high table and began sending him covert, searching looks that she must have been stupid to think he wouldn't notice. He hadn't spent nearly twenty years as a spy for nothing. The hairs on the back of his neck were quick to hackle in annoyance as she casually loaded her teacup with far too many spoons of sugar and continued to play her irritating game of off-handed glances.

A meddlesome medi-witch and her gossip-fodder questions was not something he was up to this morning, or any morning for that matter. He had been up half the night, reading a book he had finally received on ancient curses and their cures, hoping to find anything remotely related to what Hermione had been hit with. He hadn't, of course, and his growing frustration with his lack of progress combined with less than 2 hours of sleep was leaving him stressed and agitated even more so than usual.

It had been 18 months since Voldemort had fallen since she had fallen and he was no closer to a solution now than he had been at the beginning of his search. *Animula somnus*, living sleep, sounded simple on paper but was an entirely undocumented type of curse. No references existed explaining its affects or duration, let alone a counter-curse to dispel it. He had only the medical records and his own observations to go on concerning Hermione's condition. Her body was alive, albeit barely, but for all intents it was as if her very soul had been separated from her body. Sucked out, destroyed, or locked away, he didn't know. A year and a half later and being not a step closer to a solution was wearing thin on his nerves.

So, when Poppy had smiled at him over her teacup and inquired oh-so-casually after 'Miss Granger's health', the snarl was already firmly affixed to his face.

"Madame?" he replied warningly.

The foolish woman continued undaunted. "How is Miss Granger doing? I hear you visit her every day." Poppy's words sent a hushed ripple down the entire length of the staff table, stopping all conversation dead. Every eye turned to fix on him, save for Albus', who was attempting to direct a piece of scrambled egg onto his toast. The Headmaster was aware, of course, of his ongoing effort in researching the curse, and probably already knew about his daily visits to St. Mungo's. The man knew everything.

"Why, Severus, I didn't realize you were visiting Hermione!" Minerva exclaimed, her head tilted to the side as if puzzled by this sudden bit of news.

Hooch, just a bit further down the table, was looking at him suspiciously. "Why would you be visiting her, then? It's not like she was one of your pets when she was here; you could barely tolerate the girl if I remember correctly."

There were several nods of murmured agreement from the other staff members.

"I imagine he's feeling guilty, isn't that right, Severus? After all, you're the reason she's in St. Mungo's." Severus wrenched away the arm Poppy had been leaning over to pat in a consolatory manner. Though her tone was sympathetic, each word from the nurse's mouth was like a blow to his midsection.

"I only wonder why you need to see her everyday," she continued blithely, then giggled most unbecomingly to a woman of her age. "Just what do you do in her room every evening anyway?"

Snape looked at her, appalled, and briefly at a loss for words, before snapping, "You know perfectly well I'm researching her condition in an attempt to find a cure."

"You've not had any luck though, I assume?" Minerva sniffed knowingly. "After all, poor Hermione's still locked up in that asylum."

Flitwick squeaked something along the lines of, "That poor bright girl!" before returning his attention to a large stack of waffles.

"I would have thought you'd admit by now that there is no cure," Poppy added kindly, "I tried everything known to wizard to lift it and it cannot be done. It's not like you to waste your time on something so completely futile."

Poppy leaned closer and Severus found himself scooting backwards, his blood suddenly quite cold. "Tell me, Severus, is there another reason for your visits? I hope you're not going in an attempt to alleviate some of your guilt, that was all so long ago. Unless, perhaps, could you have actually developed a *tender* for the girl?"

"Are you insane?" Snape hissed, before pushing away from the table and standing abruptly to glare at his gaping colleagues. "Unlike the rest of you, I do not believe that Hermione is irredeemably lost to us, and I am attempting to find a solution. If I find the need to visit her to assess her condition, then that is my prerogative and none of your damn business!"

With much scowling and swooping he exited the great hall through the staff door, Hooch's cackle following him out.

"He's calling her Hermione now, is he? Since when?"

He was furious. Poppy had just provided the entire staff with enough gossip to occupy them for the rest of term. Snarling at a few unlucky students, he continued on his way to the dungeons, trying to banish the memory of the curious looks on their faces and Hooch's parting comment about Hermione.

When he reached his quarters he grabbed the first book within reach, a muggle text he had managed to track down that discussed comas and coma patients in great detail. At the time he'd thought that learning a bit more about comas and their causes might give him a better insight into why Hermione still remained in one. However all the book had done was create more questions than it answered. He hadn't considered that her coma might have been caused by simple head trauma, as was so often the case in the muggle world, and the spell had simply reacted with it in some unforeseen way. Not the sole result of a spell after all, but possibly brain damage, even irreparable injury. At the time, the book's information had been more painful to consider than helpful.

Recalling his earlier misgivings about the book, he dropped it back on the table and set about completing preparations for his morning class. However the menial work of paper shuffling and equipment arranging was not helping to abate his irritation and lingering anger over the conversation at breakfast. What right had those nattering old hags to question him? For eighteen months they had not lifted a pinkie finger to help Hogwarts' brightest student in a decade, and suddenly he was a pedophile just for visiting her?

He didn't think one of them - with the possible exception of Minerva - had even laid eyes on the girl since her short stay in the school infirmary. It bothered him, though he was loathe to admit it, that even though he had proven himself time and again, they still felt they had the right to question him about his actions. They still didn't fully trust him. And they wondered why he despised them all.

Not once, in all his years as a Professor, had he ever stooped so low as to even look at a child under his care as anything other than that a child. To imply that he Snape was perhaps visiting Hermione with less than the purest of intentions was unbelievable. He wanted to save the girl because the loss of her mind would be a blow to their world. That was the only reason.

If, perhaps, he had noticed the beginning of her seventh year that she had quite grown up over the summer, it didn't mean anything. He was a man after all, and despite what anyone else may think of him, he could appreciate beauty in its myriad forms whenever he saw it. That didn't mean he was a pervert.

His thoughts continued along this dark and moody path as he took stock of the ingredients to be used in that day's upcoming classes. Upon retrieving a bottle of powdered lace wings he was startled to see something other than his handwriting on the label. In a flash of memory he realized that it was one Hermione had prepared during her last detention with him. He recognized her precise script, the same that had covered every test and essay she'd turned in, and briefly wondered if he should change the potion for the third-years so as not to use them all up. Cursing himself for a fool, he ruthlessly banished the fleeting thought from his mind, snarling as he did so. He refused to be sentimental over a bottle of bug wings. He refused to be sentimental at all.

Five minutes into his first class, he had already made three students cry, much to his satisfaction. But when Bertie Bones, a barely competent third year Hufflepuff who made Neville Longbottom look like a potions genius, knocked Hermione's bottle of lace wings to the floor, shattering it, Snape had exploded.

The next 20 minutes were spent, rather spectacularly, ranting at Bertie and calling into question the genetic line that had managed to produce his sorry hide for the Wizarding world.

He had never been more relieved to see the backs of his students as he had been when the second class of the day finally ended. In his coat pocket rested the delicate bottle Bones had broken, the shattered glass and torn label made whole again by a snarl and a quick reparo. He ran his fingers over the paper and glass and stayed his hand from returning it to the storage room, telling himself unconvincingly that the smoked glass was really too pretty to be used as a receptacle for lace wings.

He took his time cleaning up the messes left behind, not the least bit sorry that lunch arrived and he was too busy to attend to it in the great hall. His morning had been horrendous enough, and knowing his colleagues as he did, his mere presence would invite more insipid questions about Hermione and his visits to her.

And that was another thing - Hooch had been right. Since when had he started calling her Hermione and not Miss Granger? He had taken on the familiar use of her name in his one-sided discussions with her during his evening visits months ago. The change had not been intentional, it had simply happened. She was no longer his student, which entitled him to call her by her given name if he so chose. Besides, he preferred Hermione to Miss Granger. Miss Granger had been the irritating little know-it-all he had detested. Hermione was the young woman who had saved his life. He didn't know why Hooch had found it important enough to remark on. There was no great significance to a name - none whatsoever - the others only proved their idiocy for making such a fuss about it. Perverse, clucking hens, the lot of them.

He stewed over this as he ate his rather tasteless mutton sandwich and by the last bite had decided there were plenty of things he needed to attend to in the dungeons that would keep him away from the great hall and the staff for the rest of the week.

The sixth-year students that afternoon were well on their way to brewing a stronger variant of the pepper-up potion, though not one of them had been able to answer the simplest questions or recite even three of the ingredients. Not one moron was ever brave enough to raise their hand, let alone answer when called on without stuttering or breaking into tears. His thoughts were replaced by a memory of Hermione, on the first day of class, unabashedly waving her arm in the air while he had drilled the Potter brat.

He hadn't been sure at the time to laugh or snap at the girl - and even though a harsh snarl had won in the end, he'd never seen that hand hesitate to rise again over the next seven years. He hadn't known until now how much he missed it. Dealing day in and day out with students who had less than half her intellect was frustrating. She had raised the bar so high the lucky nitwits he currently had the misfortune of teaching didn't even have to crick their necks to walk under it.

Yet for all that vitality and sparkling knowledge, she was lying in a bed in St. Mungo's, still alive but not living. He recalled how she had looked that first visit - her small frame laying so still, her hair short and spiky before he had magicked it back, completely changed from the student he'd known - and he felt something inside him twist.

Could Poppy, perhaps, be correct in her assumptions that he visited her for reasons other than his research? They had never been friends, let alone close colleagues, before all this. If he was somehow able to save her, would they be friends after the fact? He didn't think so. To her, if she ever awoke, the time passed would have been only a moment, perhaps no more than a long dream. Would she even care to know of his part in saving her? What could she possibly need in a friend like him? The thought was deflating and, curiously, saddening.

It was while he was contemplating Hermione and the remote possibility of any future relationship with her that it happened: a cauldron exploded in class so suddenly that he was caught unawares. Students were screaming and he himself tried not to show alarm as he caught the distinctive smell of dragon's blood mixed with moon dew and troll urine. Some dolt had inadvertently created a toxic gas, one that could burn the breather's lungs to ash if inhaled for any more than a few seconds.

"OUT!" he roared, covering his mouth and nose with the material of his sleeve as the stench grew. "Do not breathe in the fumes!"

It took him several valuable seconds to cast three sets of *evanesce* to banish the noxious fumes, and by the time he was done he could barely breathe. The entire class had emptied as per his instructions, probably out of fear of him more than the potion, except for one student. Dennis Creevey was in worse shape than he, slumped on the floor under the destroyed cauldron, his lips already turning blue as Snape gathered the boy into his arms and ran to the infirmary.

Snape barely managed to get them both to Poppy and gasp out *liquefacio pulmo* before collapsing in a heap at her feet.

When he awoke, hours later, Poppy was hovering over him. He groaned.

"Dennis?" he managed to croak out.

"He'll survive," Poppy replied. "Just. If you had cast *evanesce* one second later..." she trailed off, tutting at Snape. "I've been busy. Between the two of you, you've lost three lungs. What happened?"

Snape sighed, and ended up doubling over in pain as his lungs protested. "Some fool managed to get hold of troll urine and decided to add it to our potion today. When I find the idiot..."

"He's lying on the other side of the infirmary, feeling even worse than you do, I dare say." Albus stepped into Snape's small cubicle, smiling at him. "It seems young Mr. Creevey is the culprit. He obtained the urine from some street peddler on his last visit to Diagon Alley. It appears he was told just a couple of drops would magically make any potion perfect."

"Perfectly lethal," Snape hissed. "He's lucky he didn't kill us all!"

"He's lucky you were there to save him, you mean," Albus retorted, eyes twinkling. "Really Severus, rescuing students seems to have become a past time of yours."

Snape scowled and pressed a hand to his throbbing chest. "I don't know why I bother, ungrateful little brats. I should just let them kill me and put them out of their misery."

Poppy smiled at him fondly, before reaching forward and patting his hand, "We'd be much worse off, if you did that. Imagine what would have happened if you hadn't helped Harry? Why Voldemort..."

"Enough, Poppy," Snape said coldly, "Don't even mention that name in my presence. Merlin's balls, my chest is killing me."

"It'll be sore for a few days yet." Poppy assured him cheerfully, "You're growing back fresh pieces of lung you know. Now if only we could figure out some way to grow a new heart for you, to go with your new skin and lungs, you'd be a changed man!"

Albus chuckled at that, before leaning forward and patting him on the shoulder, "Now, Poppy," he admonished, "I kind of like Severus just the way he is. Now, I must be off I've taken the liberty to cancel your potions classes for the rest of the week "

"Damn it, Albus I'm perfectly fine. I'll resume classes tomorrow."

"You will not." Poppy interjected firmly. "You'll be lucky if I even let you out of here by tomorrow. You will need a full week to recuperate, at the least! If you cooperate, you may return to your quarters tomorrow evening." She handed him a smoking cup of liquid. "Now, drink this. It will lessen the pain and help you sleep easier. That's what you need right now - lots of sleep."

Snape took the potion churlishly, sniffing suspiciously and scowling as the vile fluid finagled its way down his aching throat. "This is the vilest potion I've ever tasted woman!" he growled, even as he felt the tingling heat of restorative sleep slide over his skin.

Poppy shrugged, "If you don't like the taste, perhaps you should consider adding peppermint to it the next time you brew me a batch."

He was trying to think up a suitably sarcastic response to that as he slid into the arms of Shiva.

That night, as he lay in the infirmary regrowing pieces of lung, his mind relived the explosion in his classroom over and over. But it wasn't Dennis Creevey he had scooped up in his arms and rushed to the infirmary - it was Hermione. Only he couldn't save her. The dream always ended with her sparkling cinnamon eyes becoming dull and empty, her last breath rattling from her blue lips as she breathed his name: "Severus."

It was also the first time in over 18 months that he had failed to visit Hermione.

liquefacio pulmo means dissolving lungs

Nettie

Chapter 5 of 20

?Your sister, Madame Pomfrey, is an interfering old bat,? he interrupted in a cold, ferocious voice, standing up to his full height to look down his nose at me. ?I had hoped her inherent nosiness and proclivity to gossip was a trait not shared by the rest of your family. It appears I was wrong. Rest assured, I am perfectly aware when I have overstayed my welcome.?

Chapter Five: NETTIE

I have always been a hopeless romantic. I hate to admit it, but it's true. I suppose that's why Professor Snape interested me so much. Don't get me wrong I'm not in love with the man. Quite honestly, I don't believe I've ever met a more sarcastic, condescending, antisocial bastard in my whole life.

He wouldn't be proper for me at all. But... there was something about him when he visited Miss Granger that was just - right is the only word that comes to mind. Don't look so shocked. It's not as if I was spying on him during his visits or anything. Far from it, actually. As soon as Professor Snape showed up, I generally skedaddled.

However, over the course of so many months, you do inadvertently walk in on things, or past slightly open doorways and hear things that perhaps you shouldn't.

Take, for example, the way he talks to her. With everyone else he's cold and sarcastic. The man has a tongue that could deflate a zeppelin. Poppy tells me he's that way with everyone and not to take offense when he sharpens it on me, so I try not to. She seems to be somewhat fond of him, despite his lack of manners. I told her as much the last time we discussed him, and you know what she said to me?

'Of course I like him dear, as much as *onecan* like a man like him. I like him in spite of himself, and I daresay that's the best kind of liking there is. I've patched him often enough over the years to know that he bleeds red just like the rest of us. He doesn't scare me anymore much.'

I liked him too, I admit. He was a fascinating dichotomy of a man so harsh and sarcastic with everyone he met yet so gentle and devoted to her. He was the perfect tragic hero, dark and tortured, yet underneath it all longing for companionship, just like the rest of us. At least, I liked to view him this way. Poppy would tell me I was reading too many Muggle books if I ever told her this, of course. I do like my Bronte and Austen!

Anyway, on the occasions when I've happened by Miss Granger's room when he's visiting, he is always talking to her. His voice, when he's not using it like some weapon, is actually quite lovely. It's all deep and smooth, almost velvety, like a lion's purr. He'll tell her stories about this or that, or mention something he's read that she would have enjoyed. Once I even overheard him reading to her from a book - nothing poetic or flowery, just some vague theorem on the properties of salt taken direct from the runes of Sodom and Gomorrah versus salt from Atlanta. But his voice had been so melodious and gentle it made me catch my breath.

I often wondered about him and her and them. Why did he continue to visit her every day? After all, according to Poppy, he and Miss Granger had been far from friendly before and during the war, yet he showed her a gentle devotion unmatched by even her closest friends.

I'm not saying no one else ever visited her, mind you. Harry Potter popped in every once in a long while. I've seen him more than three times since that first day - once on her birthday, once at Christmas and once in the early spring - but he was always clearly uncomfortable to be there and never stayed long.

Molly Weasley has been by a few times as well. There was a woman hard to miss, let me tell you. She always brings fresh nightgowns for Miss Granger with her name neatly written on the back labels. Each visit she goes to sit by her bedside wringing her hanky, and like clockwork she always ends up crying within five minutes. At Christmas, she brought a large handmade dressing gown for Miss Granger in the ugliest burnt orange I had ever seen, with an even uglier row of banana yellow H's adorning the trim which she insisted I put it on Miss Granger right away.

I've always felt a little sad for Miss Granger after Mr. Potter and Mrs. Weasley would visit her - not that they weren't perfectly lovely people, but they didn't talk to her the way Professor Snape did. Visiting her made them sad and when they left there always seemed to be a dismal pall in the room. Their visits seemed too forced, like something done out of obligation instead of desire.

With Professor Snape, it was completely different. He visited her because he wanted to, I was sure of it. You could tell the minute he stepped into her room and looked at her - the tension would just melt off his frame. He enjoyed being with her, I could see no other explanation for why he'd come every day. That's what I imagined.

And there's my second fault. On top of being a hopeless romantic, I also have a vivid imagination. I find myself creating little scenarios in my head about people who interest me and Professor Snape was one of those people. How could he not be? The man was an enigma wrapped in mystery. It seemed to me that no one really knew him, not even my sister, though she's mentioned on more than one occasion that Headmaster Dumbledore seems to understand Snape well enough. Somehow, knowing this makes the rumors of his omnipotence all the more believable.

So when Poppy had first learned from me that he was still visiting Miss Granger every day, she had been beyond surprised.

'But what does he do?' she had asked. *'Why is he visiting her?'*

I was sure I didn't know, but I imagined it was because he cared for her. Perhaps he had admired her from afar during her school years, all too aware of the taboo of a relationship between a teacher and a student, preventing him from telling her his true feelings. Then, when she had sacrificed herself to save him, he had realized he would never have the chance to tell her how he felt - so, heart broken, had vowed to visit her every day as a show of his loyalty.

Don't snort! It's far-fetched, I know. If I ever said anything like that to Poppy she would have laughed in my face. But I enjoyed weaving my little stories and it didn't seem to hurt anyone. What could be more tragic and romantic than a man like Snape loving the girl who had saved him? Especially when said girl was still alive in body, but not really living.

If I was to be perfectly frank, it seemed to me his was a heart with no companion and a soul without a home.

I became so used to seeing him every day that when he didn't show up it caught me totally by surprise. He always arrived, like clockwork, at 6:45 pm and visited until 8:15 pm. Always. But last Monday, he hadn't.

Miss Granger had been ready, as usual. I always propped her up with pillows before he arrived - made her look more human and less corpse-like, if you know what I mean. I made sure that her eyes were well moisturized so I wouldn't have to put drops in them while he was here, and that her hair was loose and freshly combed.

As it was a Monday, she even had a fresh nightgown on - a beautiful kelly green cotton which was very flattering to her coloring. It was amazing how healthy she looked, actually, considering she had been in a coma for so long.

Imagine my surprise, then, when he didn't show up. I reasoned with myself that he was just held up - after all, he hadn't missed a visit in over 18 months. But his tea remained untouched and had grown quite cold by the time I finally removed it from the side table.

"I guess he's not coming tonight, dear," I murmured to Miss Granger as I prepared her for sleep, removing the pillows and gently lowering her to a more comfortable

position for resting, "I hope nothing's happened to him."

I could have flooded Poppy of course. As a matter of fact it took almost all my will power not to do so, but I didn't want to invade his privacy in that way. More than like, he was fine and had just decided not to come tonight, for one reason or the other. I tried to imagine what could possibly keep him from Miss Granger's side after his previous dedication, but everything I came up with seemed too mundane.

I knew he wouldn't stay away just because he had papers to mark he had shown up here before with work. I didn't think he would just suddenly decide to take a break, as he had never seemed inclined to do so in the past. I tried not to think the worst; that perhaps something had happened to the man to keep him away, but I quickly put that thought from my mind.

It wasn't until the next day, when I finally had a chance to read the Daily Prophet, that I learned about the accident. Running right beside the article on the explosion was a particularly unflattering picture of the man, glowering down his nose at whoever had been brave enough to snap his photo.

I told Miss Granger all about it later that day when I was changing her bedding. 'It seems your Professor Snape is a hero again, dear! According to the paper, he saved a young boy at Hogwarts from certain death when a cauldron exploded in potions class. Both of them are in the infirmary and I imagine Poppy's been patching them up quite nicely!'

Later that evening, when I flooded my sister to inquire after Professor Snape's health, she had laughed. 'I had to give him a double dose of sleeping potion to keep him in his bed, dratted man. Even after all these years he refuses to believe that I do know what I'm doing. How's Hermione, by the way?'

I sighed, 'Same as always. I'm glad Professor Snape wasn't seriously injured.'

Poppy laughed again, 'Oh, he was. Him and Dennis Creevey both. Any longer breathing in those fumes and there wouldn't have been enough lung in either of them to grow anything back. I'm afraid poor Dennis caught the worst of it, but still... I don't expect that Severus will be visiting there any time soon.'

'Please send him my regards, Poppy, and best wishes to a speedy recovery. I'm sure Miss Granger won't even notice he's gone.'

My sister grinned mischievously at that, 'I'll be sure to tell him exactly that, Nettie!'

It was a long week without his visits. I hadn't realized how much I counted on them to break up the routine of my day. Normally, when he came, I would take a small spot of tea myself in the staff lounge before getting caught up on paperwork or other small duties I had neglected during the day. With him not visiting Miss Granger, I found myself oddly reluctant to leave her room. Poor girl truly was all alone now, even if only for a while, and I felt sorry for her.

Perhaps it was only because I had begun to spend more time sitting with her, but during that week I began to notice something strange. The third day of Snape's absence while I was working the snarls out of Hermione's curls, I found myself remarking that her hair was feeling unusually dry and brittle. As it normally felt like living silk ribbons, the change had been somewhat disturbing. I decided to wash her hair again, this time using extra moisturizer, to see if it'd fix the problem. While it was drying I took an added measure and charmed the room to hold a little more humidity than was usually standard. It quickly became apparent that neither seemed to be helping.

This morning I had to clean the brush of her broken hair. I also noticed several strands on her pillow case and sheets. Her hair had never broken off before not since Professor Snape had grown it back his first visit. When I took a moment to study the strands, I noticed that they were dull of color, as if someone had leached all the little golden and nutmeg highlights out of them.

It was Friday, and I decided that Miss Granger would get a bath that afternoon, a proper bath with water and scented lotion afterwards, and an application of that infernal muggle spray Mr. Potter had left for her so long ago. Despite how irritating looking after that mass of hair could sometimes be, I admit I had come to admire it. I hated to think that her enforced coma could finally be catching up with her, that something had the power to actually damage the hair Professor Snape had so carefully restored to her.

I was just in the process of carefully rinsing the soap out of her hair when, to my surprise, Professor Snape swooped into the room with a little less grace than usual. As it was the middle of the afternoon I had not been expecting him, so Hermione was still wet and wrapped in a loose sheet. I was entirely forgotten as he gaped at Miss Granger for a full 30 seconds before turning his back quickly to look at the wall.

I wanted to laugh, really I did. Having not seen him for so long I was happier with his presence than annoyed for the way he gawked at my patient. The poor man was probably blushing like a school boy.

"Professor Snape, I wasn't expecting you today," I said, forcing the cheeky smile out of my voice. I finished rinsing Miss Granger's hair of soap and began to towel it dry. "Poppy's let you out, has she? How are you feeling?"

I could tell from the stiff line of his profile that he was scowling, "I'm breathing, thank you. Are you almost finished?"

"Just give me a moment, I need to get her into a nightgown. I find that a nice bath with water does so much more for her than charming her clean. Her hair always looks particularly lovely after a good washing."

Snape, back still turned and arms crossed tightly against his chest, snorted. "Indeed."

I quickly removed the sheet that had been carefully tucked under her arms and slid her gown over her head, muttering a modified drying spell over her skin. The spray Mr. Potter had left smelled heavenly, like freesia and jasmine. I could see Professor Snape inhale the scent lightly, his shoulders loosening a fraction as the warm steam from the bath wafted around his head.

"There we go, all done." He turned about then and I smiled professionally, my eyes clinically taking in his appearance. He looked terrible. His skin was pale, more so than usual, with dark circles hanging like half moons under his eyes. He had lost some weight in the week since he'd last visited and the gauntness of his face made his nose even more prominent than usual. I could tell he was still in pain because he stood with his shoulders hunched inward, like someone had punched him in the chest. And, even though I knew from Poppy that he had been on forced rest from his classes, he looked like he hadn't slept since I last saw him. The man was a wreck.

"Can I get you some tea? Is there anything you need?" I tried not to let my concern for him show, knowing he would hate it, but he scowled at me anyway.

"What I need, Madame Pomfrey, is to be left alone."

I decided to follow his wishes and quickly left Miss Granger's room. As I departed and turned to close the door, I saw him slump wearily into his customary seat beside her bed.

When I returned 40 minutes later, I had a fresh pot of tea with me and some lovely butter cookies I had found in the lounge area. If there was ever a man in need of a hot drink and something to eat, it was the man I had left sitting in Miss Granger's room. I just hoped he wouldn't be too upset at my invasion I was bearing gifts after all.

I knocked softly on the door with my elbow before pushing it open with my foot, "Professor Snape?"

He lay slumped over in his chair, his head resting on the mattress by Miss Granger's arm. His lank hair had fallen over the side of his face, some of the longer strands lying across Miss Granger's stomach.

"Professor Snape? Are you alright?" I asked worriedly, putting down the tray to lightly shake his shoulder.

The man blinked awake sleepily, before suddenly jerking upright and glaring at me, even as he turned a startling shade of white.

"You look paler than normal, Professor Snape. Does Poppy know you're here? I bet she doesn't. I daresay it looks as though you need a few good hours of sleep."

Snape glared at me, his normal color quickly returning to his face. "Poppy and her wishes are no concern of mine. I am an adult and can go where I wish, despite what you may have heard from her."

I tutted under my breath and his eyes narrowed even further. "Don't you dare presume to begin lecturing me, woman. I need neither you nor Poppy nattering over me like a pack of overbearing hens!"

"What you need, Professor, is a lot more sleep than you've been getting since the accident," I reasoned sensibly. I had no idea he could be so vile simply from being awoken too soon. "I'm telling you this as a medi-witch and also, hopefully, as a friend. Poppy's advice is no differ-"

"Your sister, Madame Pomfrey, is an interfering old bat," he interrupted in a cold, ferocious voice, standing up to his full height to look down his nose at me. "I had hoped her inherent nosiness and proclivity to gossip was a trait not shared by the rest of your family. It appears I was wrong. Rest assured, I am perfectly aware when I have overstayed my welcome."

He shoved past me and made for the door, but his step was clumsy and he had to hold onto the door frame to keep himself from running into it. I was torn quite severely at that moment between wanting to help him and the desire to keep my head attached to my neck. "But when will you return?" I dared to ask, too surprised to say anything else.

"I will not be," he snarled, and then with a swoosh of his cape, he was gone.

Hermione

Chapter 6 of 20

She allowed herself to remember other things, as well. The way he had saved her life time and again, protecting her and her friends from the dangers surrounding them. How his beetle-black eyes snapped with intelligence and a fierce loneliness she had failed to recognize until she became as trapped as he was. The feel of his long white fingers threading through her hair as he grew it back for her and the warmth of them stroking through the long curls. The gentle regrets in his voice when he had first visited her.

Chapter Six: HERMIONE

Hermione Granger was losing her mind. She knew it as surely as she knew her own name, however much longer that might be. Despite how hard she tried to keep a grip, to remain rooted in the reality that was now her life, it was becoming harder and harder to do so.

She sometimes questioned whether it was even worth it. Insanity seemed so much easier to deal with at this point. It would definitely be less painful.

She had only seen Severus once in the last three weeks. Once. The daily visits that she had come to rely on so much to keep her anchored to the real world had stopped abruptly and without reason.

The first week that he didn't visit, she had worried he was dead. Nettie Pomfrey, her medi-witch, had mentioned an accident at the school the day after his first missed visit but didn't tell her anything else. Hermione had feared the worst when he failed to show up the remainder of the week.

It had been agony, thinking she had lost him. He was her anchor, the only thing that kept her going, the only thing that kept her hanging on to the real world. She lived for his visits, hoped each and every day that maybe that night would be one of the few when he'd gently stroke her hair. He was as constant as the sun and the moon. She needed him.

She tried to tell herself that he would return to her as soon as he could, but it was hard to keep that fact in mind. Without him, the days bled together, one into the other, with nothing to distinguish the passage of time or break up the monotony.

In an attempt to escape the pain of his absence she threw herself into her psyche, taking solace in the memories and rooms she'd placed there. They were the painstakingly built constructs she'd manifested over the many months of her coma, familiar places which she could escape to when Snape or Nettie weren't in the room with her. She cherished them as much as she feared them, for she was sure this was the trap Malfoy had intended for the curse all along.

During the first few months of her incapacitation it had been difficult to see anything other than what her unmoving eyes showed her of the world. She could daydream much as she used to, turn her sight inward and touch upon old memories, or even replay the conversations Snape carried on at her bedside.

Sleeping was not something she was often aware of doing rather, she would feel her consciousness sinking, alerting her to her mind's need for REM sleep, and sometime later she'd wake with the fuzzy remnants of dreams dissipating like broken cobwebs from her thoughts. But, wary of what this virtual prison had in store for her, she rarely took the time to remember her dreams or spend too long frolicking in her imagination.

Besides, with Snape's constant daily presence and the fresh ideas he brought to her, she was never without something to mull over. More than anything he kept her mind stimulated, and on occasion provided her with the casual physical contact her body craved. His touch rarely descended below her hair, once or twice there may have been a gentle pat on the shoulder, but for the most part he seemed happy to finger his handiwork on her head. She'd never seen her new hair of course, but heard it praised often enough by Madame Pomfrey and the aides to know that it looked good probably better than anything she'd managed to charm it into during her school days.

The first time she'd tried to create something original in her mind it had been an experiment out of boredom. She'd imagined herself writing upon a simple blackboard with white chalk, expressing her thoughts concerning an article Snape had read to her the night before. When she was done the blackboard had been banished to the back of her mind and she'd felt a little better after writing her thoughts down, even if it had only been in her imagination.

A few days later, she'd imagined the blackboard again and found it blank. She hadn't exactly expected the writing to still be there, but her disappointment prompted her to write on it again and hold the image clear in her memory. It took doing this many times over and over again, but eventually the blackboard began to hold the writing upon it, until she could freely erase and add new content to it, and come back a day later to find it exactly the way she'd left it.

From there her natural curiosity had led her to explore what else her mind could create. Using the blackboard as her focusing point she'd slowly, and with many disappointing setbacks, created a classroom. She had to spend so much time creating it piece by piece that she didn't realize how similar it looked to the potion's lab until much later. It was far from a perfect copy though there were taller windows, four work benches instead of the normal dozen, two large squishy chairs on either side of

Snape's bulky desk, and an enormous blackboard, all as part of the personal changes she'd conjured up.

The classroom - his classroom - had been the hardest room to recreate in her mind. But its preliminary completion was a lesson well learned, and in the end taught her much about what her mind was capable of. From there it became almost like playing a game with puzzle blocks - she created the school library, the Gryffindor common room, her old bedroom at home, a smaller version of the great hall with the same charmed ceiling, and even a mismatched version of the gardens and grounds around Hogwarts. Well-lit stone corridors were used to connect each of these rooms if she felt like walking between them, and over time she began to feel quite comfortable in the new home she'd created for herself.

It was now her only haven. When Snape wasn't with her these rooms and corridors were where she spent nearly all of her time. His classroom was an especially favorite room of hers; it represented her first achievement and a place where she could feel connected to him. It was a room that embodied all of her hopes. But when his visits stopped, she found she couldn't go back there without feeling a sharp pang of nostalgia and sadness. Without Severus, there was no hope at all.

How often had she felt just like the speck of dust in one of her favorite childhood books, Horton Hears a Who... the same book which sat on a shelf in her reconstructed bedroom. No matter how hard she cried, no matter how much she screamed, *'I'm here, I'm here, I'm here, I'm here'* at the top of her lungs, no one ever heard her, including him.

Would he never return to her?

After the first few days without him being in the potion's classroom had been too painful, so she'd sequestered herself between the Gryffindor common room and her bedroom and decided to stay put until he came back. At times she simply lay down on her bed and let herself drift. Without even concentrating, she could feel the rhythmic beating of her heart, the soft swoosh of her breathing, and wondered how long she would be forced to live like this. Would it be years before her body finally succumbed to death? She didn't know what scared her more, dying or living without him. She suspected it was living without him.

Sometimes the only thing that kept her from bursting into tears was her ability to conjure up memories of his visits to her; conversations he'd had with her. When she ran out of those, she reached into herself and relived the times when she had been alive when he had insulted her and made her cry. When he had glared at her and made her feel inferior and gauche.

She hadn't liked him; had thought him cruel and arrogant, ugly in both face and spirit. She wished she still felt that way about him now - it would make things so much easier.

She allowed herself to remember other things, as well. The way he had saved her life time and again, protecting her and her friends from the dangers surrounding them. How his beetle-black eyes snapped with intelligence and a fierce loneliness she had failed to recognize until she became as trapped as he was. The feel of his long white fingers threading through her hair as he grew it back for her and the warmth of them stroking through the long curls. The gentle regrets in his voice when he had first visited her.

'Miss Granger, you are by far the most insufferable, silly girl I have ever known.'

* * * * *

Near the end of the first week, deep in the state of her loneliness, she found she could conjure him perfectly in her mind, the sallow skin and thin mouth pulled into a semi-permanent sneer, the lank black hair that hung in his face, often obscuring everything but his nose from view.

'Are you still alive, then,' she asked him one day, *'or are you dead?'*

Of course, imaginary Snape ignored her. She decided then that he couldn't be dead, that he was out there somewhere, injured or unable to visit. If she believed he had died, it would be admitting defeat. Without him, there would be no one to help her, to keep her sane. Without Snape, there would be no one who cared about her.

'Harry loves you,' her mind whispered. *'Harry needs you.'* She knew she was lying to herself. Of course, Harry cared, but he wasn't strong enough to love her despite everything; despite the curse that kept her from him. If he needed her, he would be visiting her more often than he did.

'Snape doesn't need you.'

'He does.'

'He feels guilty.'

'He needs me. He cares for me. He visits me.'

'He doesn't.'

'He does.'

'Where is he then?'

'He's sick.'

'He's dead.'

'He's not.'

'He doesn't care.'

'He does. I care about him.'

'You're a silly girl. You don't know him.'

'I do. I do know him. We'll save each other.'

'You'll never see him again. You're trapped. You'll be alone forever.'

She tried to ignore the voices in her head, running from them down the stone corridors. Her feet echoed loudly, but never loud enough to drown them out.

'No one cares, no one cares, no one cares.'

'He promised me!'

'He broke his promise.'

Sometimes, the voices were quiet, trying to stifle their sobs. She always heard them crying, though. *'Shut up!'* she would holler, *'just shut up and leave me alone! You're driving me crazy!'*

'Not far to go, now,' the voices would sneer. Sometimes she sounded remarkably like Snape.

* * * * *

It was a week before he returned to her. She was just finishing a bath. Nettie had muttered something about her hair and begun to wash it gently. Hermione was reluctantly roused from her chair in the Hogwarts' library by the light touch on her head. The potion she was trying to brew seemed to be simmering along quite nicely, so now was a good time as any to relax. As the fingers tugged on her wet curls she continued reading an article she had found in an old issue of *Witch Weekly: 10 Sure Signs that Prove You're Insane*.

She eyed the bubbling cauldron sitting on the desk in front of her and tried not to think about the trouble she'd be in if Madame Pince showed up. With the tip of her bright pink quill she made little check marks in the appropriate places.

'Hearing voices check, tell me something I don't know... 50 stirs counter clock wise and don't forget to add the hippogriff lice... On the fifteenth of May, in the Jungle of Nool, In the heat of the day, in the cool of the pool... Talking to dead people yep. Although I'm not sure if that counts. I talked to Nearly Headless Nick all the time before was I crazy then? Damn lice, I wish they'd just keep still and shut up!... Falling in love with inappropriate men that will only lie to you and break your heart. Merlin's balls! He was splashing, enjoying the jungle's great joys, When Horton the elephant heard a small noise...'

The sound of a door slamming made her jump, knocking her cauldron over and sending the viscous fluid from her potion sliding over the page. The hippogriff lice skittered away across the table, taunting in their high-pitched voices, *'50 points from Gryffindor, 50 points from Gryffindor!'* Damn bugs. Hermione frowned at them before focusing outwards for the first time in days, surfacing to see stark white walls in her vision, and something else quite unexpected.

He was there, staring at her as if he'd seen a ghost. The hands on her head never stopped, and it was many long seconds before he abruptly scowled and quickly turned away.

She had cried internally with joy he was alright! He had come back! Her thoughts clamoring and the potion forgotten, she had exhorted Nettie to hurry up and go away, go away, go away!

She had screamed when her nightgown had slid over her, hiding him from her sight for a few moments. She relished the sarcastic voice when he had told Nettie he was still breathing, cheered when he had told the woman to leave him alone. And when he had turned back to her, standing at the foot of her bed studying her for a few long moments before taking his customary seat at her side, she had felt her heart would burst with happiness.

He had returned.

She wanted him to say something, to tell her where he had been what had happened, but the voice she so longed to hear was silent. She could see him in her peripheral vision, watching her, but he said nothing.

She was begging him, *'Touch me! Talk to me! Promise me you'll never leave me again!'* but the words echoed in her mind only.

She realized with some surprise, when his head and upper body slumped down onto the mattress, that he had fallen asleep. She could feel his warm weight beside her, pinning the sheet above her more tightly across her torso. Some of his hair had fallen forward over the skin of her arm and onto her stomach, the silky feel of it electrifying every single nerve ending she possessed. His breath was hot against her hip, wafting humidly through the cotton sheet and nightgown covering her.

She longed to be able to move her arm, to run her fingers through the greasy hair she had missed so much. She wanted to use her palm to cup his scalp, trace his taut face with her fingers, feel the heat of him against all of her. She wanted to turn against him, feel him breathe against her stomach; his head nestled under her breasts, proving to her that he was still alive.

His scent that of half-brewed potions and sandalwood swept over her body, making her skin feel more aware than it ever had under his gentle touches and Nettie's care. She was on fire, burning from the inside out, and she had never felt more alive. She was repeating his name, over and over, half-crying, *'Severus... Severus...'*

And in his sleep, she heard him whisper her name like a benediction, *'Hermione'*.

And then it was over. Nettie returned with a pot of tea and Severus had woken with a start, pulling away from her aching body so abruptly she was left bereft. She didn't know what had just happened; she didn't know what was going on. All she knew was that he left, without another glance in her direction, after saying he wouldn't be coming back.

She didn't believe it at first. How could she? She convinced herself she had heard it wrong, that it was simply his nasty temper speaking and not the man she knew underneath, the man who had diligently stayed by her side for over a year.

But he did not return, and her fragile emotions took a turn for the worse. She knew now that he was alive, but staying away from her by choice. He had abandoned her, and she didn't know why.

Soon she didn't bother to try and keep track of the time anymore. Nettie talked to her, as she always did, but Hermione didn't pay any attention. She didn't care what happened to her. All she had now were her rooms and her memories, bittersweet as they were.

She managed to rouse herself back to the surface only once, when Harry stopped by unexpectedly. But she had felt no joy. As much as she loved Harry and she did he wasn't Snape.

She had begun to drift back into her make believe Hogwarts when she heard him say something about 'the greasy git'. Frantically she'd cast her mind backwards, trying to recall what he had been talking about.

Harry had been to see Albus, that much she remembered him saying. He had heard rumors that Snape was a frequent visitor to St. Mungo's and had gone to the Headmaster to find out what the professor was up to. It became quickly obvious to Hermione that, despite the fact that the war was over and said 'greasy git' had saved Harry's life, the young wizard still felt ambivalent at best about the older wizard.

'I know I shouldn't, Hermione,' he had admitted, 'but I just can't help it. It's his fault you're like this; his fault I lost you. No one would have missed him if he had died, not the way everyone misses you. Not the way I miss you.'

Hermione had wanted to sit up and snap at him to grow up, but contented herself with snarling at Harry in her mind. Severus had sacrificed everything for the cause; friendships, companionship - he had given up his very soul, made people hate him, allowed himself to be hated and viewed as evil, all so no one would ever suspect the dangerous game he was playing. Hermione was under no delusions regarding the things he had probably done and seen in his capacity as a Death eater and spy.

He wasn't a nice man, per se but he was honorable. And, as the days had passed to months and he had continued visiting her, she had come to realize that he was fiercely loyal. There was a gentleness to him, an empty aching loneliness she sensed when he visited her that she was positive only she knew about. She was sure that, had anyone realized she was aware of everything happening around her had he been aware of it he would have been much more circumspect. He was, after all, barely civil to Nettie and from the stories he had shared with her, as solitary in his life after the war as he had been during it.

Yet she had seen first hand his gentleness; had heard his self-deprecating asides, had been privy to the obvious fondness he had for Albus Dumbledore. She knew him the real Severus Snape, not the façade he so carefully presented to everyone else. He was a fractured man, admittedly. He didn't give his trust easily; nor his friendship. He was a man who had been broken by the world, and had managed to put himself back together one piece at a time. He was a survivor, his inherent core of nobility intact. She admired him more for that than she could possibly express.

She had been relieved when Harry finally left her. He hadn't come to visit her, not really. He had come to make himself feel better for not visiting her more often. He had come out off a sense of guilt and possibly shame. It bothered him that Snape, the man he professed to distrust despite everything, was the only one brave enough to come and face her everyday. He resented Snape for being there for her when he, himself, could not be. Harry had become no better than a broken record to her ears: 'I want to visit you more, but it's just so painful. You're not Hermione anymore, just a shell of the girl I knew.'

She wanted to resent him for those words so badly, but she knew them to be true. Without Severus' visits, she was slowly but surely losing her grip on reality. One day soon, she really would become just a shell of the woman she was.

Not very long after Harry's short visit, she found a new room. It was large, full of pictures. For a few moments, she allowed herself to be distracted.

'Oi, Hermione!' A picture of Ron looked up at her from a game of wizard's chess and grinned, 'You think Harry will ever beat me at this game?'

She had tried not to cry at the sound of his voice. She longed to pull him from the picture and into her arms, and hug him tight.

'Why are you crying then? Feel that bad for Harry, do you?'

'I miss you, Ron. I miss you so much!'

'Why? I'm right here.'

'You're dead, Ron.'

'I know it,' he had winked at her, 'but it's not too bad, see? Once I beat Harry here, come play a game of chess with me. Hey, now that I'm dead, do you think the others will let me join the Headless Hunt?'

Hermione had quickly turned away. She couldn't bear it.

'Hermione, darling, why don't you visit us more often?' her mother nagged from another image. Her arms were up to the elbows in soap suds as she washed dishes in the sink, 'Your father and I miss you!'

'Mum, I miss you too!' she had cried out, 'Why did you leave me?'

'Quit your sniffing, you irritating chit. Can't you see I'm trying to ignore you?' Professor Snape glared at her from another picture, 'Why must you plague my life like the black death?'

'You don't visit me anymore.'

'Why would I want to,' the reply was cold. 'Your conversation has been less than stimulating of late.'

'You said you'd save me!'

'I'm too busy trying to save myself, Miss Granger,' the picture had hissed back. 'Now, leave me alone.'

Hermione decided not to visit that room again.

She wandered instead. *'You're losing it, Hermione,'* she told herself as she trailed through the empty hallways. *'The first sign of insanity is hearing voices.'*

'He won't be coming back you know.'

'That's what I'm afraid of.'

The voices whispered harshly then died and disappeared into the void, making her feel more lonely and isolated than ever before. The walls were crumbling around her, her feet leaving trails in the dust behind her. She twisted her ankles time and again, but continued searching anyway. She knew he was here someplace, but everywhere she turned was another dead end.

She didn't realize where her feet had finally carried her until she stumbled through a midnight black door at the end of the hallway. The entire room smelled of rot and decay and a thick green moss was growing up the stone walls.

All around her wooden desks were covered in wet rot. Books lay half open, the faded pages green with mold. Yet, for some strange reason, she knew this place. She stepped around fallen stones and other rubble, and made her way to the front of the potions classroom. She curled herself tightly into the chair behind his desk, its twin no more than a pile of springs. The two pieces of furniture were the only items in the room that were unaffected by the decay surrounding them.

She missed him. She couldn't even remember what his voice sounded like any more. All she heard in her mind was her own crying, and the echoing sounds of emptiness and silence.

Hermione wanted to die.

A/N: Go read Horton Hears a Who by Dr. Seuss right now! Mug a child to get a copy, if you must, but read it.

Snape

Chapter 7 of 20

'What do you mean, boy?' Snape felt suddenly cold, as if he had just been submerged in ice water. The muscle that passed for his heart started beating painfully against his chest, 'What do you mean, she's dying?'

Chapter Seven: SNAPE

He should never have gone back. It wasn't as if he had needed to see her, not really. And his chest was aching. Apparating from Hogsmeade to St. Mungo's and then back again had almost killed him. Sitting in the dark in his study, he frowned. Perhaps the ache in his chest could be attributed in part to the Old Ogden's he had tossed back moments ago, but he didn't think so.

If he was being perfectly honest with himself, he didn't even really think the pain was from his still healing lungs. He felt as if someone had just ripped his heart out. He would not be going back.

Taking another sip of fire whiskey, he winced against the burn of it sliding down his throat and wondered how much of it he would have to drink before he forgot about her.

He was depraved. Any illusions he had about the kind of man he really was had just been shattered beyond all recognition by a girl who would never comprehend what she had done to him.

It had been a hell of a week.

He remembered waking up in the infirmary the morning after the explosion, feeling as if a herd of wild hippogriffs had run rough-shod over his chest. Poppy was in her element, twittering over him indulgently, like he was a child. He abhorred being bossed, especially by nosey old gossips who felt they could call him by his first name and tease him unmercifully.

After shoving another dose of last night's vile brew down his throat, she had smiled at him; *'Nettie flooded me this morning to see how you were doing. I told her you were fine, dear, but that you wouldn't be visiting Hermione anytime soon. She told me to tell you not to worry Miss Granger will be the same as when you left.'*

He tried his best to ignore her, as his silent glares in her direction had failed to incinerate her on the spot as he somewhat hoped they would.

After a forced morning nap, and dreaming another disturbing variation of Hermione dying in his arms, Albus had come by to visit, bringing with him a copy of the Daily Prophet. The gossiping rag had, in its usual hyperbolic way, managed to both praise and condemn him within a couple of pages of each other. Where one article had focused on his quick actions in saving the life Dennis Creevey, another had managed to insinuate that Snape had set up the explosion to provide himself with a little excitement now that his days as a double agent were over.

Dumbledore had been unhappy on Snape's behalf, but Severus himself had merely shrugged. If he had been paying attention in class and not thinking about his personal problems, the accident would never have happened. Luckily, Creevey had survived despite his inattention. He shuddered to think of the amount of paperwork he would have had to fill out if the dunderhead had actually died. Poppy had laughed at him, when he said as much to Albus.

'We're onto you, Severus. We know how much you like your students.'

Snape decided that prolonged bouts of *crucio* were preferable to putting up with her inane comments and innuendo any more.

The next morning Poppy had finally allowed to let him leave the infirmary on the clear understanding that he was to take meals in his room and keep away from fuming cauldrons; she had also commented lightly that he was permitted to visit Mr. Creevey if he wished to. When Snape had looked at her blankly, demanding to know why he would have any interest in visiting the idiot child that had almost killed him, she simply smiled.

'You visit Hermione.'

But he didn't visit Hermione not for the rest of the week. For one thing, physically he just couldn't do it. His chest still ached every time he breathed and the thought of apparating without splinching himself was, frankly, terrifying.

On top of that, he did not want to provide any gossip for the rumor mill of Hogwarts. There was absolutely no reason for him to visit Hermione at all, so he wouldn't do so.

He hadn't counted on the dreams. That first night of dreaming in the infirmary seemed to have opened the flood gates. It was as if each time he closed his eyes, a dream centering around Hermione would take hold of his mind.

At first, the dreams had been of her dying whether on the floor of his classroom, or on the battlefield as she lay limp in his arms. But over the course of the next few days, they changed into something else completely. And though it sounded even more cruel of him than usual, he wished for the dreams of her death more than these dreams of things that could never be.

In one of the dreams he had been in his chambers, alone, with the light of day gleaming through the windows. But the dream had shifted almost unnoticeably, day turning to night and the awareness of another presence in the room trickling through his mind. He'd turned to his sitting room, and to his surprise, found someone sitting in his favorite armchair in front of the fireplace, an open book between their pale hands. Without seeing her face, he already knew who it was, the feeling coming from somewhere deep in his gut. Her hair had glowed like a halo around her head, the warmth of the fire bathing her in a golden aura as she had sat up and smiled at him.

'No exploding cauldrons today? That's good,' she'd said, and her voice had been something caught between a child's high pitch and a woman's lower timbre. In retrospect he really couldn't say if it had been her voice at all - it had been so long since he'd heard it.

In another dream he'd found himself walking away from the school on a crisp, autumn day, his stride much shorter than usual and his footsteps accompanied by another pair. A dainty hand was tucked into the crook of his arm and, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, he and Hermione had discussed potential improvements to the wolfsbane potion. The wind had picked up, blowing leaves and cold air around them, and he had gallantly offered her his muffler to protect her throat. The dream had faded away with a strange, impish smile on her lips as she transfigured the green and silver stripes on the scarf into the red and gold of Gryffindor.

Those and many more visited him during his nightly slumbers, their memory clinging to him so strongly he was grateful for not having class to teach for the week; he feared these would drive him to distraction even more than his previous thoughts had. Each morning always came bright and clear, leaving him feeling empty and bereft. She would never smile at him on their way to Hogsmeade, or wear his scarf, or hold his hand in companionable silence. She was still in hospital and he was the man who had put her there.

After four nights of dreaming and nearly a week away from her, he returned to St. Mungo's. It was an early afternoon when he finally decided to visit her again. He needed to see with his own eyes that she was still there, that she had not turned into some ghost set out to haunt him.

Earlier in the week, he had vowed that he would not return to see her until he was sure he had a cure. He vowed to never again let thoughts of her distract him - bad enough that it had gotten to the point where he'd almost lost a student, but he most certainly did not wish to provide his colleagues with any more reasons to resume their interest in his dealings with Hermione. The best way to accomplish these tasks was to stop his visits and put her out of his mind.

The problem was, he couldn't. Between his dreams and the time he spent during the day thinking of her while he was recuperating, she was never far from his thoughts. Over the course of the week, he found himself missing her missing the hour or two he would visit with her yearning for the tranquility he enjoyed just from sitting by her side. He tried to deny this was so; refused to let the times he spent with her, regaling her with anecdotes about his day, to take on any sort of significance.

Time and again he rejected the notion that Poppy had been correct that he had, indeed, developed feelings for the girl. Because, if that was the case, how pathetic would that make him? A man whose only close companion was a girl half his age; a girl who could never talk to him, or smile at him, or even recognize his presence.

He was so caught up in his thoughts that it took him a few minutes to realize that Nettie Pomfrey was also in the room with Hermione when he arrived, just rinsing her hair free of soap. The bedridden girl was wearing little more than a sheet, tucked firmly under her arms across her breasts. He could see the fragile beat of her heart in the little hollow of her clavicle and he'd stood, transfixed, for many seconds before he had been able to spin away from the sight.

The medi-witch had quickly finished Hermione's ablutions, bothering him with her inane chit-chat, until he had snapped at her to leave. It wasn't until the woman had bustled from the room, cheeks slightly tinged from his stinging remark, that he allowed himself to turn back towards Hermione.

Her hair was still slightly damp, even though he had heard Nettie mutter a drying charm over her. She had been changed into a white nightgown, serviceable and plain, but her arms were still bare.

Standing gingerly at the foot of her bed, he looked down at her and sighed. He was glad to be back. The empty feeling he had experienced all week seemed to diminish at the mere sight of her.

Moving to her side he sank down into the chair beside her bed, before turning to face her again. Her skin seemed almost as pale as his own, translucent over her cheekbones. Her arms were long and thin, but still with good muscle tone. He supposed Nettie Pomfrey was physically manipulating them to keep the muscles from atrophying, recognizing grudgingly that she did a good job. He looked down the sheets at her hands, noting how small they were. Her fingers were slender and he suddenly remembered, almost as if it had actually happened and he hadn't just dreamed it, the feeling of them pressed into the crook of his arm.

For the first time all week, he felt himself relaxing, and it was with a muttered sigh that he dropped into the chair next to her bed. His chin came to rest upon his hand and it didn't take long before his shoulders began to slump of their own accord, his eyes growing heavy with each passing second - until, quite soon, he was fast asleep.

He was in his quarters but they were changed somehow. There was the definite feeling of space being more cramped than usual, probably caused by the extra wardrobe against the wall and the books stacked high on either side of the bed. He was puzzled, but started at hearing a noise behind him.

Hermione appeared in the doorway to his private bathroom, her wet mess of hair wrapped up in a large towel and a glowing expression on her face. She had borrowed his robe - the silver one with the green snake on the pocket. The sash was tied loosely around her waist, leaving a tantalizing amount of skin exposed.

'Why are you wearing that?' he demanded when he saw her. She seemed so perfectly natural standing there, as if the robe had in fact belonged to her all along, and the rooms were hers, not his.

'Oh, Severus,' she chided in that voice again, a child and a woman's tone blending together in a way that made them slide past his ears straight into the depths of his soul. 'I like this velvet one, I feel like a cat when I wear it.'

A greater part of him was slipping further into the dreamscape, accepting it as reality, while another rationale part of him - though very small at this point - watched on with mortified embarrassment.

'You look like a drowned lioness,' he heard himself say, his feet carrying him towards her.

'And you like a panther, getting ready to pounce,' she smiled back. 'But first, would you mind brushing my hair before it dries in knots?'

She dropped the towel, shaking her hair loose as she did so, and handed him a brush. 'I love it when you brush my hair. It's so relaxing.'

He took the wide brush in hand and stared at it for a moment, his purpose momentarily lost to him. He looked up and found them both in front of a vanity, Hermione sitting on a chair with her back presented to him. 'Well, hurry up,' she teased, and he could see her smile reflected back at him in the mirror.

That little voice of rationale in the back of his head was melting under the warmth of that smile. He reached out and her hair curled around his fingers like a caress, the brush sliding in an easy rhythm through it. The perfume of her shampoo was tantalizing, a exotic blend of freesia and jasmine, so unexpectedly strong it made his senses reel.

The silence surrounding them was broken only by the smooth stroking of the brush in his hands and their breathing. Hermione was sitting with an arm propped casually on the vanity table, her head resting back on her neck, almost against his chest as it rolled with the movements of the brush.

He could see her heart beating against her collarbone and wondered, briefly, what it would be like to taste that fluttering movement - to skim his tongue over the pulse point and wrap his lips around the clavicle and suck on it. The movement of his hands through her hair became more languorous. The brush clattered to the floor beside his feet.

He leaned forward and felt his head drop to her neck of its own volition as he whispered her name. 'Hermione...'

'Severus...'

"Professor Snape... Professor Snape? Are you all right?"

Snape snapped awake with a start. The muscles of his chest screamed in protest as he sat up too quickly, his head rising with a sharp jerk from the side of Hermione's bed. He had fallen asleep beside her, his body slumped into an awkward, half crouching position. He could feel a slight crease in the skin on his cheek from her bed sheets, and felt himself pale in embarrassment as the subject matter of his dream came rushing back in a torrent.

At the foot of the bed, Nettie Pomfrey regarded him with some concern. "You look paler than normal, Professor Snape. Does Poppy know you're here? I bet she doesn't. I daresay it looks as though you need a few good hours of sleep."

Snape had glared at her, a dull flush slowly working its way up his neck, the heat in his face only matched by the heat of his temper. He couldn't quite recall how he had responded to Pomfrey's concern, but he knew he hadn't been pleasant.

When she had stopped him in his flight to inquire when he would be returning, he'd had to grab the doorway to support himself against the flaring pain in his chest. 'I will not be,' he had growled, trying to squelch the sudden urge to scream in agony. He could not allow himself to see Hermione...no, Miss Granger... ever again.

Damn Poppy and her interfering; her damned innuendoes and her teasing! It was her fault he was dreaming of Hermione - she was the one who had planted the suggestion in his mind that he might have feelings for the girl. He would never have thought of her in that way otherwise. He was as depraved as everyone thought, secretly lusting after the girl he was trying to save, dreaming of her soft hands and gentle smiles, the private conversations that were all their own.

Somehow, despite all attempts at denial, he could no longer fool himself into thinking otherwise. He did care for the girl, more than he should. He thought he might even love her.

* * * * *

Old Ogden knew how to make fire whiskey and Severus was truly grateful. The burn of it sliding into his belly became a welcome pain over the course of the next few weeks. He had not returned to Miss Granger's side, despite his almost compulsive need to do so. He refused to give into his baser instincts and go see the girl. She was

better off without him.

His temper, always quick to fly, had become even worse. Students and colleagues alike muttered that he was even more foul and loathsome now that Voldemort was gone than he ever had been before.

The whispers made him smirk darkly, *'What else would they expect? I am a degenerate of the worst sort.'*

During the day, he taught his classes with a single minded ferocity that burned everything in its path. His students were scared to so much as breathe the wrong way; terrified that he would let loose a stream of invective so hurtful and profane it would incinerate them were they stood.

Snape was pleased. There were no further accidents of any kind in his classroom.

His colleagues steered clear of him, treating him as they had before he had become a 'war-hero', ignoring him as much as they could and keeping any conversation with him as brief and to the point as possible.

Even Albus seemed to be giving him space, for which he was truly grateful. Snape couldn't stand to face the older man's disappointment and disgust in him. For what else would he feel, when he realized that Severus had abused his trust had come to care for young Miss Granger in a way wholly inappropriate for a professor to feel for a student.

And, if sometimes a little voice would remind him that Hermione was no longer a student and hadn't been for quite some time, he would squelch it ruthlessly beneath a torrent of self-loathing and disdain so deep it would eventually drown.

Snape had tried everything he could think of to stop the dreams, but nothing seemed to work. Even the dreamless sleep potion was not strong enough to drive Hermione from his mind. So, he numbed himself nightly with Old Ogden's and tried to stay awake as long as he could. His dreams of Hermione were killing him.

It wouldn't surprise any who knew him that he was a man of deep passions and emotions. They would be surprised, however, that all his passion the breadth and depth of his feelings had, over the course of his visits to Hermione, become solely focused on her.

He had never felt this intensely in all his life, had never hated himself more. He had taken his intentions to save her, a completely altruistic move on his part, and perverted them into something base and shameful. He wondered if he was doomed to always destroy every good and pure thing in his life; to taint his every effort with the evil he knew dwelled within.

If Hermione had been truly whole, she would have run screaming in the other direction the minute she even suspected the way he felt about her. She would never welcome him the way she did every night in his dreams; with smiles and soft words, gentle caresses that turned him to dust at her feet. He was an animal. He stayed away from her for her own good and tried to drown himself in drink.

Several weeks after his final visit Potter had come pounding into his rooms. The young man didn't even have the grace to wait for an invitation to enter, and if Snape hadn't already finished his second glass of whiskey he might have decided to hex the boy.

As it was, he merely cocked an eyebrow at him, 'Potter. What an unpleasant surprise.'

Harry had thrown himself ferociously into the armchair opposite Snape's own, noting with a scowl Snape's redolent sprawl. 'A little early on a Saturday to be drinking, isn't it Snape?'

'Sod off, or pour yourself a drink. I care less, either way.'

'You're a bastard, you know that?' Potter had hissed, as he poured himself a drink.

'You're just realizing this now? Tut, tut, Potter. I always knew you were slow. To what do I owe the displeasure of your company?'

'I can't believe you didn't tell me about Hermione!'

Snape sneered, 'I didn't realize we had become confidants. Why should I tell you anything about Hermi... Miss Granger?'

'Because she's dying, dammit! Nettie Pomfrey told me she's dying, and there's nothing I can do about it!' The younger man was shaking with anger, his green eyes swimming with unshed tears. 'I went to see her today and she...she...' his voice broke suddenly, the tears free, 'she's the only one I have left, and I'm losing her. I can't believe you didn't tell me!'

'What do you mean, boy?' Snape felt suddenly cold, as if he had just been submerged in ice water. The muscle that passed for his heart started beating painfully against his chest, 'What do you mean, she's dying?'

'How could you not know? You see her every day Albus told me, several weeks ago, when I asked him what you were doing. He said you were trying to find a cure for her, aren't you?' he demanded hotly.

'I have not been to visit Miss Granger since the week of Creevey's accident,' Snape hissed. 'Now, why does Nettie think she's dying?'

'It's everything,' Potter whispered, 'her hair is falling out, and her body she's all curled up and her skin is so gray. I went to visit her this morning and she looks like a cadaver. I... I couldn't... the last time I saw her, she looked like she always did, and that was just two weeks ago! Now, she looks like she's made of twigs.'

Snape stood, dropping his empty glass on the stone floor and listening to it shatter with an odd detachment. 'I must go.' He looked at Harry, at the boys' tears and pallor, and realized he actually felt a strange kinship with him. 'Go get Albus, tell him to meet me at St. Mungo's.'

He didn't know what to expect, but the still body lying on the bed was not it. She was even more far gone than Potter had described. She looked worse now than she had the first time he had seen her at St. Mungo's, when she had been practically bald and as frail as a kitten.

Over the course of the last year and a half, she had managed to regain the look of health and vitality he had come to associate with her. He supposed it was one of the things that made it so hard for Potter to visit she still looked just as she had before falling into this coma almost as if she might sit up at any moment and start asking any number of questions that would probably piss him off in the long run, even if he would enjoy the challenge.

But now sweet Merlin! Her skin, normally a healthy pale honey, was whiter than that milk-toast Poppy had forced him to eat when he had been in the infirmary. Underneath her skin he could see the sharp angles of her bones. The firm muscle tone that had been present only two weeks ago had deteriorated, and she was curled in an almost fetal position on her side. Her glorious hair the hair he had dreamed of curling around his hands - was lank and lifeless; straw-like and brittle not the untamable mass of curls that grabbed his fingers and clung to his skin the few times he had allowed himself to touch it.

Nettie Pomfrey was looking at him with something akin to pity as he gaped at the broken form of Hermione.

'Why is she laying on her side?' he demanded, 'Why are her arms and legs curled like that?'

'It happens when patients have been in prolonged comas for too long. The tendons lose their elasticity and shrink.'

Snape didn't reply, just stepped closer to the bed and reached out his hand. 'She's lost so much weight. She looks like a single touch could break her. What happened?' His tone was not sarcastic, or demanding, but sad and almost pleading.

'I don't know,' Pomfrey replied. 'She started going downhill after your last visit. There's nothing more I can do for her.'

'I can't accept that,' he murmured. 'Dear Gods above...'

He felt himself crumble to his knees at her side, his hand reaching out and gently brushing her brittle hair away from her eyes.

They hadn't changed at all. They were still wide and empty, the color of mud, where once they had been cinnamon and gold, snapping with an intelligence he suspected could equal his own. He became caught in her gaze, mired in her eyes. Their very emptiness mocked him; accused him. He had failed her, despite his promise.

An incredible weight settled on his chest, suffocating him. He could practically see the shaded nimbus of death hovering over her, and it occurred to him suddenly that if she died a part of him one he was just starting to recognize would die with her.

He looked into her eyes again, remembering them as they had been determined that he would not let her go. He felt himself falling into the brown, sending his mind into hers as he did so, calling her name. He could hear his voice echoing down the empty hallways of her mind and the very bleakness of the sound made him shudder. He had been mad, to think he would find any remnant of the girl he once knew, here.

She was gone. His last chance at redemption, and she was gone. He was a fool.

His hand reached out and cupped her head, feeling the fragile bones of her skull under his palm, 'No,' he pleaded into her mind, 'No!'

It was then that he felt it, just the slightest brush of - something against his thoughts. The touch was tantalizing, so gentle he was afraid he had imagined it. His gaze focused and narrowed, his mind suddenly reaching out and probing, 'Miss... Miss Granger? Hermione?'

He chased the feeling down hallways that were crumbling to dust around him, pushing past great overgrown trees and stepping precariously over bricks and broken mortar. Ahead of him he could see a vaguely familiar black door, half-rotted and askew on its hinges.

It took him a while to get there, to push the door gently open. It crumbled at his touch, the dust sifting through his fingers and disappearing before it touched the stone floor. He blinked against the sudden grit, barely daring to breathe. He could hear crying. 'Hermione?'

For a moment, there was only darkness, before it broke wide open in a kaleidoscope of colors. His knees buckled under the sudden barrage of emotion he was feeling anger, pain, loneliness, despair a depression so strong that it nearly overwhelmed him and threatened to suck him in.

'Severus?' her voice was the voice of angels, the voice of mercy, the voice of atonement and salvation, 'Is it really you? Is it really you?'

He collapsed to his knees in front of her, trying to tell himself the moisture in his eyes was caused by the dust from the door 'It's me, Hermione. I'm here.'

She slid off the large chair she had been curled in, throwing her arms around him and burying herself against his chest 'Severus, where have you been? I've missed you so much!'

In the broken down Potions class, through the cracks in the stone floors, flowers began to bloom.

A/N redux: This chapter was written while I listened, over and over, to Don McLean. I've noticed a disturbing proclivity on my part to listen to really, really sad songs lately. If you find this story angsty and emotional, blame the music! In particular, blame this song:

Crossroads - Don McLean

I've got nothing on my mind: Nothing to remember,

Nothing to forget. And I've got nothing to regret,

But I'm all tied up on the inside,

No one knows quite what I've got;

And I know that on the outside

What I used to be, I'm not anymore.

You know I've heard about people like me,

But I never made the connection.

They walk one road to set them free

And find they've gone the wrong direction.

But there's no need for turning back

Cause all roads lead to where I stand.

And I believe I'll walk them all

No matter what I may have planned.

Can you remember who I was? Can you still feel it?

Can you find my pain? Can you heal it?

Then lay your hands upon me now

And cast this darkness from my soul.

You alone can light my way.

You alone can make me whole once again.

*We've walked both sides of every street
Through all kinds of windy weather.
But that was never our defeat
As long as we could walk together.
So there's no need for turning back
Cause all roads lead to where we stand.
And I believe we'll walk them all
No matter what we may have planned.*

Hermione

Chapter 8 of 20

She didn't want to be alone anymore. She would rather be delusional and insane than alone, that much was certain. If she was going to fall pell-mell into insanity, she'd rather do it in his arms than anywhere else.

The voices were back. Or, rather, not voices but voice. Curled up in a ball in the old potion's classroom, she heard it echoing in her mind, calling her name *Hermione!*
It was his voice.

She didn't answer, of course. The voices had tried to trick her before, had tried to get her to leave the sanctuary of this room. She wouldn't do it. She knew if she left this spot she would lose her last link to him, and in doing so, succumb to the madness she was finding harder and harder to deny.

"Hermione!"

She could hear footsteps echoing rather loudly down the hallways; harsh breathing she knew was not her own. Whatever ghost her mind had conjured up to drive her over the edge of insanity was moving closer.

"Hermione!" The voices had gotten sneakier, using his voice like that, when they knew how much she missed him. It was hard not to answer. She could feel herself biting her lip against his name, tears forming in her eyes. She tried to stifle the sobs rising in her throat but found they escaped regardless of her will.

She was so tired of being alone.

Outside in the hallway the footsteps stopped. The large black door, half hanging on its hinges, swung forward slightly before crumbling to dust.

"Hermione?"

He was standing there in the open doorway, outlined by the grit floating around him. His voice sounded slightly raspy, as if it were holding back a great emotion. Hermione knew this would break her.

He was not really there. Her mind had finally cracked and conjured up the one thing guaranteed to destroy her. *'Severus?'* her voice was soft, rusty from disuse and tears, and so full of futile hope it made her wince. *"Is it really you? Is it really you?"*

Snape stepped forward into the room, his long strides eating up the distance between them, before he sank to his knees in front of her. It appeared he was crying, with slow tears leaving tracks in the dust on his face. *'It's me, Hermione. I'm here.'*

Hermione knew he was lying, even as she slid out of the seat she had been curled on and fell into his arms, but she didn't care.

She didn't want to be alone anymore. She would rather be delusional and insane than alone, that much was certain. If she was going to fall pell-mell into insanity, she'd rather do it in his arms than anywhere else.

"Severus, where have you been? I've missed you so much!"

She didn't know how long it had been since she had last heard a voice or seen another person in her mind. She had thought her doppel-Snape had disappeared ages ago, not long after the real Snape had deserted her, but he was back and this time he was not being nasty.

She had started crying in earnest as she slid into the arms of this figment, relieved at how real he felt. The strength of the arms surrounding her were just as substantial as the rest of this world she had created inside her mind. She burrowed her head against his chest, breathing in his scent, and tried not to think as his soft murmurs washed over her and his hands soothed her.

Finally, when she felt she could speak again, she whispered, *'Why can't you really be here?'*

Beneath her, Snape stiffened. *'I am here, Hermione.'*

'No, you're not. You're just a figment of my imagination a subconscious manifestation, as it were. You're one of the 10 steps the article in Witch Weekly warned me about. It's quite interesting actually. I must not be as crazy as I thought, if I can recreate you so perfectly in my head. Where did all these flowers come from, Severus?'

She frowned at the flowers beneath her feet, *"I suppose they're an improvement on crumbling ruins. Gods, I must look a sight,"* she muttered suddenly, pushing against his chest and leaning back. *"Do forgive the mess, but I haven't felt much like cleaning. It's been a long time since I had visitors."*

"Hermione," Snape said quietly, 'what are you talking about?'

Hermione didn't reply immediately, instead she ran her hands unsteadily through her hair and noted with a weird sense of disconnection that she was covered in dust. She could see the imprint of her body where she had been leaning into him, and held back a smile.

"I've mussed your bat suit."

"Pardon me?" Snape's voice was still quiet, but the tone of it had changed somewhat. It was no longer quite so gentle, a hint of confusion had crept into it.

Hermione smiled at him, before reaching out and trying to dust off his chest, "I've mussed your bat suit. It's a good thing you aren't real, or you'd be furious with me. I can hear you now the real you, I mean Miss Granger! What is the meaning of all... this... dust!" She had growled that last bit out in a fair imitation of Snape at his most supercilious. "Fifty points from Gryffindor, you impertinent dirty chit!"

"Hermione, I assure you, I am real and I..."

Hermione was starting to get cross. "Don't lie to me! Why are you always lying to me? You aren't real! You said you weren't coming back. You were my only hope and you you -" she stood suddenly, turning away from him. "You abandoned me. You left me here, all by myself. You promised you'd save me and then you just left me here..."

She had wrapped her arms across her chest, hugging herself defensively, her back turned to him. She was shaking and biting her lip, trying not to cry. She couldn't let this thing break her, not after she had survived so long.

Hermione knew he had risen to his feet as well. She could feel the heat from his body ensnaring her; his eyes studying her with an intensity that seemed all too real. He stepped forward, crushing the flowers that seemed to be blooming everywhere under his feet. The sharp smell of their perfume, in conjunction with his proximity, was nearly overwhelming.

She felt his hands reach out to clasp her shoulders. The grip was painfully tight, but she welcomed it anyway. She didn't care if this existed only in her mind anymore. She would take Snape any way she could get him, even if he was just a 'complex manifestation of her subconscious desires.'

"I came back, Hermione," his voice was firm. "You're dying."

Hermione scoffed, "No, I am not. It's impossible. The curse wasn't designed that way I cannot die, as much as I want to. It's the 'Living Sleep', which implies that the recipient of said curse namely me must live."

"You are dying, Hermione," his voice was stronger. "I came as soon as I heard. I've somehow I've entered your mind using legilimency."

Hermione turned to face him again, gratified when his warm hands didn't fall from her shoulders. "Now I know you're really not here. Legilimency doesn't work on me Headmaster Dumbledore tried when I was at Hogwarts and he could never find me. That's why everyone thinks I'm in a coma."

Snape paused, a myriad of emotions flickering across his face. "I'd forgotten about that... then how was I able to find you?"

Hermione rolled her eyes at him, "Because you didn't find me. I made you up. Will you pay attention?"

He smiled at that, a fleeting smile that somehow made his face look like it was going to crack in half. "So, when Albus tried legilimency it didn't work. What did it feel like?"

"Why do you care so much?" she shot back, shoulders stiffening like a cat ready to hiss. Just as quickly though her tone changed, and it was defeated. "I suppose it doesn't matter. Either way you're better company than... than..."

She shivered, "It was like I was standing behind a pane of glass, looking through a dark mirror. I could see him, but he couldn't see me." Hermione sighed, "It's always the same I can see everyone, when I want to. All I need to do is look! It's so hard when no one sees me back. It was the same way with you, every time you came to visit me. I could see you, I heard you gods... I even... could feel your hand on my hair..."

His hands were caressing her shoulders now, almost subconsciously, thumbs gliding back and forth across her collar bone, fingers sliding up her neck to caress the shell of her ear and the back of her skull. The real Snape would never do this never touch her like she was a piece of glass, or a fragile butterfly. She could quite get used to this Snape, if she let herself. Suddenly, being crazy didn't seem quite so unappealing anymore.

Humming with pleasure, she leaned into his hands and tilted her head to the side to give him more access to the smooth column of her throat. She couldn't stop looking at him, and wondered if she had ever noticed the nobility behind his taciturn features before. His stern mouth was softened slightly and his eyes glittered like polished onyx, such a deep black they were fathomless. Hermione would gladly throw herself into them to drown, if she could. She had never realized how beautiful they were. She could see the universe in his gaze.

They stood that way for several moments, before Snape realized what he was doing and pulled his hands away from her, staring at them as if he didn't recognize them as his own. Before he could apologize, Hermione had sighed peevishly, "Did I give you permission to stop touching me?"

Snape looked dumbfounded at this, "Pardon me?"

"Look," she replied, "I've created you. Somehow my mind has finally figured out how to construct a you that actually responds to me, that can actually touch me. I realize you're just a figment of my imagination, doubtless I've finally lost what little sanity I had left, but you're here now, and you can touch me, so don't stop!"

"Hermione, for the last time, I assure you, I am really here. You have not imagined me. And it is entirely inappropriate for me to stand here and," he paused, as if struggling to find a word that wouldn't choke him, "caress your neck as if... as if..."

"As if you have any right too?" Hermione supplied. "If not you, then who? If I had wanted someone else, I wouldn't have brought you here, would I? I may be nuts, but I still know who I want. And I get to say what's right and wrong in my own mind. You're not my professor here you're Severus. Simply Severus. And I want you to touch me. I've wanted you to touch me for a long time now."

"Are you insane?" Severus hissed, even as he paled suddenly and stepped away from her.

"Yes! That's what I've been trying to tell you," Hermione agreed pleasantly. "I'm barking mad. Don't you want to kiss me?"

"I cannot, in good conscience, take advantage of you in such a manner, Hermione. I will not. Once I've managed to convince you I'm real, I don't want you to have done anything you might... regret. Now that I know you're still with us, I will work even harder to find a cure for you. I will need you to help me perhaps you will remember something I might have missed. But I need you sane and talking to me without hating me for any indiscretions here."

Hermione smiled, "You looked just like him when you said that! I cannot, in good conscience, take advantage of you in such a manner!" she mimicked. "You even sounded

like the Snape I remember the arrogant one, from Hogwarts; not the one that visited me. I am an adult, you know. I'm not a student anymore. I know my own mind.'

Snape smirked sarcastically at that, "How can you know your own mind if you are insane? His arms folded quite familiarly against his chest. 'Now, what do I need to do to convince you I am real?'

Hermione paused at that, before responding, 'You can't. Now, will you please get off that high horse of yours and start listening to me?'

'Eighteen months in a coma hasn't cured you of your bossiness, I see. You always thought you knew better than any one else' Snape reached out and grabbed her arm, none to gently, and attempted to drag her from the room. 'Come with me. I'll prove to you I'm really here.'

Hermione refused to budge. "This is a trap. I won't go. The minute I leave this room, I'll be lost for good, and then you'll desert me, just like he did."

'For Merlin's sake, girl!' Snape was starting to get impatient, 'I had to stop visiting you it was for your own good, as well as mine. Had I known you were actually rattling around inside this disorganized mind of yours, I would have never left you alone. I came back when I heard you were dying does that not count for anything?'

'Don't take that tone of voice with me,' Hermione replied acidly, 'If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be here in the first place, would I? I'd be listening to Harry rattle on and on about quidditch and it would be you trapped in your own mind, waiting for someone to visit you. Only, no one ever would because everybody hates you.'

She stopped talking the moment Snape dropped her arm. His face froze into the icy mask she had been all too familiar with as a student, and tears of shame and remorse rose in her eyes. 'I'm sorry,' she whispered contritely. 'That was mean of me, and I didn't mean it.'

'But it's true nonetheless, Miss Granger.' Snape replied, his voice suddenly devoid of inflection, even if he hesitated slightly over her name. "It is my fault you're here; I recognize this as fact. However, I am doing my best to rectify your situation. I do not want you and your sacrifice lying on my conscience any more than it already is. I know I am really here and am determined to prove it to you, even if that means I must pick you up and carry you to where you can actually see me with your own eyes.'

Hermione shivered at his words. She could feel the hurt behind them and recognized the closure for what it was his inner walls slamming shut. She looked at the man in front of her, noticing lines at the corners of his eyes that she had never noticed on the real Snape, grooves around his mouth that appeared deeper than they had during the war. There were even a few strands of silver in the black of his hair. Why had she aged her image of him? She stepped closer to him, suddenly aware of the disarray of their surroundings.

Why were there flowers growing through the floor? When had everything rotted? This room - her sanctuary was crumbling around her. Snape stood in front of her, stiff and cold, radiating discomfort in a way that made him seem all too real.

'I'd visit you,' she stated quietly. 'I'd come everyday, and bring you flowers. I'd talk to you and read to you and hope that my visits would keep you anchored to reality, as your visits did for me. I would give you the same devotion and loyalty you gave to me, and I would never give up on you.'

She watched as the broken walls around her slowly started reforming, the cracks in the mortar repairing themselves as she spoke. She was starting to believe that, maybe, just maybe, he was real and even if he wasn't, the fantasy was nice. She stepped towards him, reaching out a hand to touch him, half-smiling as she saw his eyes widen imperceptibly as she shifted her reality around them and brought the potion's room back to the appearance of normalcy.

'That last day you visited me, when you fell asleep in my room, you were dreaming. I heard you whisper my name. What were you dreaming about?'

Snape looked at her, before quickly looking away, 'Nothing important.' His voice was quiet, but Hermione sensed the sudden tension in him. She watched in amazement as a slight flush crawled up his face, tingeing the blades of his cheek bones.

And that's when she knew. She could never have conjured up a Snape that would blush. It was outside the realm of her abilities to even envision. Laughing and crying at the same time, she threw herself back into his arms. "It's really you! You're really here!"

He stood stiffly against her onslaught for a few moments. She could hear his heart hammering against her cheek, could feel his breath across the top of her head as he looked down at her. Finally, she felt his arms tentatively wrap around her.

"Silly girl," he murmured. "Silly girl."

"Promise me you'll never leave me again," she cried, "I don't think I could take it. I need you."

"Hermione, I -" and then he was gone, her arms holding only empty air.

"Severus... Severus!"

A/N redux: please don't hate me for that ending. Hehe. Also, I've been listening to Gordon Lightfoot all day long and feel the need to force you all to read these lyrics:

The Way I Feel Gordon Lightfoot

The way I feel is like a robin

whose babes have flown to come no more

like a tall oak tree alone and cryin'

when the birds have flown and the nest is bare

Now a woman Lord is like a young bird

and the tall oak tree is a young man's heart

among his boughs you'll find her nesting

when the nights are cool she's warm and dry

Your coat of green it will protect her

her wings will grow your love will too

But all too soon your mighty branches

will cease to hold her and she'll fly from you

Now the way I feel is like a robin

whose babes have flown to come no more

like a tall oak tree alone and cryin'

when the birds have flown and the nest is bare

when the birds have flown and the nest is bare

NETTIE

Chapter 9 of 20

His face was still tight with desolation but a strange sense of calm seemed to settle over him as he held her in his strangely intimate embrace. 'I'm here, Hermione. I'm here.'

Chapter Nine: NETTIE

I will never forget, as long as I live, the day Professor Snape returned to Miss Granger. The image of the man, half mad with worry, his eyes bleak with an overwhelming fear, was burned in my mind's eye as clearly as a photograph.

It had been two weeks and a day since he had been here last; since he had vowed not to return. Those two weeks had not been kind to him. I was used to seeing him a certain way, all buttoned up and overly formal in his frock coat and robes not in shirt sleeves, unbuttoned at the cuffs and throat. He smelled stale, like stagnant air, with a strong over tone of whiskey. His hair, which was normally neat if not bordering on clean was even greasier than normal and in disarray around his face. He looked as if he hadn't bathed in days. For a man I had always seen as overly fastidious and imposing, his appearance was shocking.

I tried not to let that shock show on my face when he finally managed to tear his gaze away from Miss Granger's still form.

'Why is she laying on her side?' he had demanded, 'Why are her arms and legs curled like that?' His voice was hoarse, as if he had to force it from his throat.

'It happens when patients have been in prolonged comas for too long,' I replied gently, 'The tendons lose their elasticity and shrink.'

'She's lost so much weight. She looks like a single touch could break her. What happened?' The tightness in his voice had increased, rasping from his throat. He stepped towards her, reaching out a hand that was visibly shaking to touch her. His despair was palpable. At that moment I think I began to understand him, just a little. I had to fight back the urge to step forward and hug him, as one would hug a small child, wishing to protect him from all the hurts the world could send one's way.

'I don't know,' I replied softly, instead, 'She started going downhill after your last visit. There's nothing more I can do for her.'

In all my years as a medi-witch, I have seen more than my fair share of people fall apart when facing the death of someone they care for. Husbands and wives collapsing in despair as their spouse died in their arms, parents keening with unbearable grief as a beloved child would succumb to the various injuries and illnesses that seemed to plague the young; it was always hard to watch. But this... well, if ever I had imagined that he might possibly love the girl, his reaction left no doubt in my mind now. He was breaking apart in front of my very eyes, his grief and his guilt was unmistakable and overwhelming. I could hear his heart shattering from ten feet away.

'I can't accept that,' he murmured. 'Dear Gods above...'

And then he was sinking to his knees at the side of her bed, hands trembling over her shoulders, gazing into those empty, disconcerting eyes of hers. His voice was on the verge of cracking as he spoke, 'Miss... Miss Granger... Hermione?'

I didn't know what to do for him. I didn't know how to assuage the waves of grief I felt emanating from him, and wondered vaguely how he would survive her loss. There was no doubt in my mind that Miss Granger was dying, you see. No doubt at all.

I stood, transfixed, as a man I had always heard to be cold; a man described as ruthless, heartless, dark a man who had flayed me with his sharp tongue on many occasions, broke down at the bedside of a girl half his age.

'No,' his voice was low and pleading, the agony in that one word more eloquent than a thousand novels. 'No!'

His long slender hands, first one than the other, slid through her hair, cupping the back of her head as he leaned forward, supporting his upper body against the edge of the bed. His forehead pressed against her own, his breath fanning a few of the brittle tendrils of hair that crossed her cheek.

I wasn't exactly sure what he was doing at first. My desires were torn, professionalism urging that I offer this man his privacy, even though I was obligated to keep a vigil on the situation. But in the end, I could only continue to watch, ensnared, as the tangible presence of magic filled the room and centered on the man and my patient.

Several pieces fell into place then: snippets of information I had learned from Poppy, Snape's rigid gaze pinned on Miss Granger, and the prickle of magic across the back of my neck. He was attempting to use legilimency on her, searching her mind with his own for some hint that she was there. I bit my lip at the futility of it all. It would not work.

Poppy had told me that Dumbledore had already tried, on several occasions, to locate Miss Granger this way. They hadn't sent her to St. Mungo's until he had admitted there was nothing there to find, and that they could do no more for her. She told me it had almost broken the older man to do this. Hermione Granger had been a particular favorite of his.

I wanted to go to Professor Snape and offer him what comfort I could, but I held back. His past rebukes had taught me to be wary, the way one is wary of a stray and hurting animal. I had learned from prior experience that all attempts at consolation and friendship with this man would be spurned. I didn't know how to help him.

I noticed after an indeterminable period of time that his breathing had slowed, becoming less harsh. His face was still tight with desolation but a strange sense of calm seemed to settle over him as he held her in his strangely intimate embrace. 'I'm here, Hermione. I'm here.'

And then silence. The oddest silence you have ever heard, if you know what I mean. It seemed like I could hear his heart beating from where I stood, a steady thrum, thrum, thrum that slowed in its racing and gentled. After a while, I heard an echoing beat, and realized it was coming from Miss Granger. I stood transfixed as her breathing seemed to match his, her chest rising and falling as his did, her heart beat which had been so reedy and weak coming to the fore, gently answering his own.

His lips were moving but no words came out that I could hear. He had somehow leaned forward onto her bed, his upper body supported by hers. His hands were still tangled in her hair, his forehead still pressed tightly to hers, his mouth inches from her own. His breath seemed to almost have substance it was like I could see it, sliding past his lips and into her mouth, before she returned it to him. They were breathing in tandem.

I gaped at the strangely intimate vision before me, unable to move or blink, entranced by this display as Professor Snape tried to will the life back into her fragile body. If I hadn't seen it happen before my very eyes, I would never have believed it. It was magic in its purest form.

Forgive me for being caught unawares then, when I heard a voice cry out in anger and dismay, 'What is he doing to her?' Harry Potter barged into the room and viciously yanked Professor Snape away from Miss Granger, pulling him off the bed and spinning him around before punching him as hard as he could right in the face.

Professor Snape fell unceremoniously to the floor the minute Potter let him go, sinking to his hands and knees, head bowed. When he finally raised it, his eyes burned with cold anger and were locked on the younger man. 'You stupid boy!' he snarled, 'You fucking idiot! I could kill you! Do you know what you just did?' His voice became more and more ferocious as he slowly rose to his feet, ignoring the blood dripping from his nose as he advanced towards the younger man. 'I was talking to Hermione! I had just convinced her I was really there when YOU TOOK ME AWAY FROM HER!'

Mr. Potter didn't even flinch, his face stony and cold as he reached for his wand. Albus Dumbledore, who had entered the room without my notice as well, quickly stepped forward, 'Stop this right now, the both of you!'

Professor Snape snarled at the older man, but stopped his unfriendly advance towards the boy. Mr. Potter smirked at the man, before turning to face Dumbledore. 'I told you he was up to something. He's not helping her, he's molesting her!'

The stupid boy. I stepped forward, suddenly angry on Professor Snape's behalf, 'Mr. Potter, I doubt he was molesting her, as you put it, with me right in the room.'

The Professor and Potter jumped at the sound of my voice, but Dumbledore simply inclined his head towards me and nodded, 'Nettie, how good to see you again.'

I nodded my head back, but continued pinning Mr. Potter with a stern, rebuking gaze. Really, the young man had no sense at all. I already knew that he and Professor Snape weren't friends, but still he had eyes. All he needed to do was look at Miss Granger to know that Professor Snape hadn't hurt her in any way. In fact, he appeared to have helped her.

'Look at Miss Granger, Mr. Potter. Just look at her! Look at her hair, look at her skin! Does she look as sick to you as she did this morning? Does she? It's not because of me that she looks any better; I can assure you of that. It's Professor Snape here he's done something to her!'

Even as I spoke, she continued to improve. Her body was still curled in on itself, but her hair had regained its suppleness while we were speaking, the brown returning to the chocolate sheen I remembered so well. Her skin had lost its grayness and was quickly returning to its normal pale and honey tones. I was sure that, given enough time, her limbs would soon regain their normal tone and litheness. Hermione Granger was no longer dying.

I can't say who was more surprised at this revelation, Mr. Potter or Professor Snape. While the younger man gaped at his friend, Snape seemed to collapse in on himself. The shakiness I had noticed when he first arrived returned and he allowed himself to sink into the chair beside her bed.

'Hermione,' he breathed, reaching towards her.

'Don't touch her, you sodding bastard.' Potter practically sneered as he quickly approached her other side. 'What's going on?'

'That's what I'd like to know,' Dumbledore interjected mildly. 'You said you were *talking* to her, Severus?'

'Yes,' Professor Snape stated flatly, 'I was talking to her. She's there, Albus she's been there the whole time and we never knew it. Whatever the curse was, it's trapped her in her mind.'

'And you used legilimency to find her?' Dumbledore was stroking a hand through his long beard and alternately tapping his lips thoughtfully, 'Interesting.'

'He's lying,' Potter stated flatly. 'He has to be. You tried legilimency on her, Professor Dumbledore, several times! If you couldn't find her how could he?'

'I am not lying.' The full force of Snape's glare was riveted on the boy. 'She's there.'

'I've seen you use legilimency before, Snape,' Mr. Potter hissed his name, mockingly. 'As a matter of fact, I seem to recall you using legilimency on me before, and you didn't need to be lying on top of me in order for it to work.'

Professor Snape paled, but still managed a snide, 'Jealous, Potter?'

I tried not to laugh. Really, the man could be terribly funny in a deliciously sarcastic way. Mr. Potter stiffened slightly but didn't reply. Instead, he turned towards Dumbledore. 'Professor Dumbledore, you don't believe him do you?'

The older man stepped forward, glancing at the stiff posture of Professor Snape before turning his head to Mr. Potter and speaking gently. 'He's not lying, Harry.'

'But that's impossible! It'd mean she's been in there, trapped... with...that's...'

'Horrifying,' Albus supplied sadly, and moved closer to Mr. Potter to lay a wrinkled hand on the boy's shaking shoulder, 'Severus, do you think she'd respond to me if I tried to talk to her myself?'

Professor Snape sat in stony silence for a long moment. I noticed that his hand was sitting on the bedcovers in front of Hermione's limp fingers, as if restraining himself from touching them with Harry and Albus in the room. 'I don't know,' he admitted finally. 'She mentioned that when you tried before, she could hear you and see you, but you couldn't do the same. She said it was like being trapped behind a mirror.'

'That's convenient,' snorted Potter.

Professor Snape ignored him, 'Unfortunately, Miss Granger's mind has deteriorated somewhat since your last attempt. When I spoke to her, she was under the impression that I was a 'manifestation of her subconscious'. It wasn't until Potter yanked me away that she began to believe I might really be there and not some construct in her made-up world. She has taken the first steps towards insanity, Albus. The majority of time I was there she thought she was dreaming.'

Potter scowled again, 'Nightmare, more like.'

I wanted to smack the boy in the back of the head. I knew he was the savior of the Wizarding world, but honestly! Was I ever that young?

'Harry,' Dumbledore stated mildly, 'You're not helping matters here. Severus, are you sure it wasn't just you imaging her?'

Professor Snape looked affronted at the older man's words, 'Surely, Albus, you don't think I made this up?'

'No, not intentionally, of course. But you have been under a great deal of stress lately, and I know how much Hermione and her condition have been plaguing you. It's only

natural that you want her to be there.'

'I am not crazy,' Snape hissed. 'She's there. Try to talk to her. Even if she doesn't respond, tell her something that she can relay to me when I go in and find her again. That should satisfy your doubts.'

'It's not that I doubt you, Severus,' Albus began, but Professor Snape cut him off, his voice suddenly tired.

'I know, Albus. Just do it.'

Dumbledore and Snape traded places at the edge of Miss Granger's bed. The elder wizard leaned over her slightly and looked deeply into her eyes. He didn't touch her.

'That's how you do legilimency,' Potter whispered sarcastically at Snape after a few moments, 'No hands.'

'Shut up, Potter,' Snape growled back, 'before I decide to rip your tongue out.'

It must have been a good ten minutes before Albus straightened and sighed, 'I sense nothing.'

Mr. Potter straightened up, gloating, 'I knew he was lying!'

I sighed. You'd think the boy would realize he had nothing to gloat about. If Miss Granger truly wasn't there, she was more than likely lost and would never recover. Professor Snape snapped that exact sentiment at him as he quickly moved to take Dumbledore's place.

I watched, transfixed, as he seemed to fall into her empty gaze once again. As before, the two started noticeably breathing in tandem, and Professor Snape reached out a hand to tenderly brush some hair from her forehead. It was obvious, to me at least, that he was talking to her. A slight smile slid across his features, softening their harshness. His hand slid down to her shoulder, and when he broke her gaze and stood up, he didn't remove it.

'Hermione would like me to relay that you're a great bloody prat, Potter, and that if you can't control your temper to get the hell out of her room.'

I huffed at that, not quite a laugh, but all three men turned to look at me. Only Professor Snape seemed to share my amusement.

'You would say that,' Potter replied. 'What did she say about Albus?'

Professor Snape turned his head slowly to look at the older man. 'She knew you were there, Albus, but you could not hear her. She says thanks, but no thank you to the lemon drop you offered. She also thinks the reason I'm the only one that can talk to her has to do with our proximity when Malfoy's curse hit. She blocked the majority of it, but some of it trickled around her and dusted me.'

Dumbledore smiled slightly at this, 'Ahh...she always was quite intelligent.' His eyes sparkled in sudden amusement, 'I can tell that she also gave you the rest of my message.'

Professor Snape shifted uncomfortably, his eyes darting to Miss Granger before coming to rest on the bed. 'Yes, you interfering old sot,' but his voice held no malice.

Potter stood there, dumbfounded. 'Snape is right? She's actually there?'

'He did give me the gist of what I said to her,' Dumbledore agreed. 'I tried to tempt her out into the open by offering her a lemon drop.'

'She hates lemon drops,' Mr. Potter stated, his voice shaking. 'She's really there. Bloody hell.'

'Bloody hell is right, Potter,' Professor Snape snapped, though he seemed to have relaxed somewhat, his words devoid of their usual sting. 'I want to take her back to Hogwarts.'

'What?' I could see Potter didn't like the idea too much. 'What do you mean take her back to Hogwarts... with you?'

'It will be easier for everyone concerned if she is somewhere close by. Exiling her from familiar faces just because she cannot communicate with anyone else is a cruelty even I am not capable of, Potter.' Snape sneered at the reddening boy. 'She's still in there, and now she may be able to help me come up with a cure. She's the brightest witch I have ever taught and I need her nearby so we can work on this together.'

'Yes, she must come back to Hogwarts,' Dumbledore agreed, 'but she cannot stay in the infirmary. Poppy has too much work as it is and she cannot look after Miss Granger on top of that. You cannot be with her 24 hours a day either, Severus, so we must find an alternative.'

'I'll come,' I offered suddenly. 'I can take a leave of absence from St. Mungo's. I'm already familiar with her case and her needs, and after so long I'd like to be able to say I had a hand in her recuperation.'

In reality, I couldn't bear the thought of the rest of this drama playing out where I couldn't see it. I had come to care for the girl and, oddly enough, for Professor Snape. I wanted to see if their story would have the happy ending I so desired for them.

'But where will she stay?' Potter interjected, frowning at Professor Snape.

Dumbledore looked at the younger man reassuringly, 'There are extra rooms in the dungeons, near Severus' quarters. We can prepare a suite there for her and Madame Pomfrey. Are you sure you can do this, Nettie?'

I smiled at the older man, 'I'm sure, Sir. I have time coming to me anyway. When do you want to transfer her?'

'As soon as can be arranged,' he replied, moving towards the open door. 'I can stay and sign the paperwork right now, as a matter of fact. How soon can you leave?'

'As soon as she's been released,' I responded, before I turned and smiled at Professor Snape and Miss Granger. 'Did you hear that, Miss Granger?' I asked cheerfully, 'Professor Snape is taking you home!'

Snape

Chapter 10 of 20

By all rights, the memories he had of her should have remained those of the irritating little girl. Instead, the images most

prominent in his mind had been the brave girl battling to his side to protect him even as he helped her friend; the brilliant girl who had thrown herself into his arms and taken a curse meant for him; the frail beauty who's hair had grown under his fingers, clinging to them like a thousand silken kisses on his first visit to St. Mungo's.

Chapter Ten: SNAPE

Snape would have been amused at the look of shock on Poppy Pomfrey's face when he stepped through the floo into the infirmary if it hadn't been directed at him. Actually, it wasn't the shock that bothered him so much as the latent suspicion behind it. It wasn't as if he had never arrived at the infirmary before (though granted, not usually by green flames) cradling a student in his arms. Dennis Creevey immediately came to mind.

'Severus...is that is that Hermione Granger?' she finally managed to stutter out.

'I see your powers of observation are as astute as ever,' Snape replied sarcastically. 'And before you ask, no, I did not kidnap her.'

Poppy had the grace to flush, and smoothed the smock of her uniform nervously with the palms of her hands. 'What is she doing here?'

Snape ignored her for a moment, gently placing Hermione on an empty bed before turning back to face the older woman. 'She's coming back to Hogwarts. Albus and your sister are just finalizing the details now.' His hand reached behind him of his own accord, touching Hermione's arm almost as if to reassure himself she was still there, 'She's trapped in her mind, Poppy.'

The medi-witch started at this, stepping closer to the bed to look down at the overly-thin girl lying so silently on it. 'That's impossible. Albus tried....'

'I know what Albus tried,' Snape interrupted. 'But she is there. I've spoken with her.'

'And she's been...aware...this entire time?' Poppy inquired shakily. 'What a nightmare.'

'Indeed,' the potions master turned his back on her to look at the girl, 'I need to go and arrange for a suite of rooms to be set up for her and your sister. Can you stay with her, Poppy, please? I don't want her to think she's been abandoned again.'

His voice was soft as he said this, a tone of remorse to it that Poppy had never heard before.

'Abandoned... again?'

Snape crossed his arms, his posture straight and stiff under the white shirt he was wearing. 'She thought I had forgotten about her when I stopped visiting after the Creevey accident,' he replied, the gentle tones of before replaced with his normal coolness. His pale jaw clenched as if to elaborate on that fact, but the moment passed in silence, and he turned back to the medi-witch with a familiar glare. 'She can see you if you stay within her line of vision, and she can hear everything you say to her. If you need to leave before I get back, please let her know.'

'Of course, Severus,' Poppy stuttered, allowing a little of the surprise she felt to show on her face.

Snape didn't smile at her, but he did nod his head in a far more courteous manner than Poppy had ever seen from him. 'Thank you.'

Turning once again to face the young woman on the bed, he leaned over until he was looking directly into her eyes and allowed himself to fall through into her mind.

He found himself back in the potion's lab. Miraculously, the scenery was much changed from he last remembered seeing. All traces of dust and crumbling mortar were gone. The stone floor was clean, and tall windows with crimson curtains were thrown back to let in the generous sunlight. He noted the addition of the windows with a smirk and turned his attention to the woman hunched over a very familiar, large oak desk.

She had managed to replicate the desk in his office almost perfectly, down to the detailed molding and tarnished knobs on the drawers. He felt himself at once touched that she would choose to create something of his in her mind, and at the same time stunned by her ability to do such a thing. Her quill made a final pass across the piece of parchment in front of her before her eyes lifted to his, a warm smile on her face that made him suck in his breath.

'Hermione.'

'Yes, Severus?'

'I have to leave you here for a bit. I promise I'll be back.'

Hermione's smile widened at that, 'I have ears, you know. I heard what you said to Poppy.'

'Still, I didn't want to just leave you again without letting you know. He stepped closer to her side to look down at the strewn arrangement of parchment. 'What are you doing?'

Hermione motioned him forward until he was bent over her shoulder, and showed him the page she had been writing on when he arrived, *thought I'd start making an account of everything I remember about the curse. I'd done it before, but... I can't find the scroll. I think I might have destroyed it when you said you weren't coming back.*

Snape flinched, 'Hermione, I'm - '

The young witch cut him off, 'You didn't know. How could you? The important thing is... you're here now.'

Severus found he couldn't respond to that. Instead, he breathed in her scent, allowing it to wash over his senses, watching with interest as she leaned back slightly and tipped her face up towards his, before he pulled away quickly. He could feel the heat of her permeating through him and marveled that this girl this woman seemed to revel in his presence. No one had ever done so before.

'I'll be back soon,' he murmured, disengaging from her mind with regret. He hated leaving her.

~~~~~

It was a simple matter to see to organizing the suite of rooms Albus had indicated could be used for Hermione and Nettie. He did nothing, really, other than relay the instructions to the house elves and supervise their normally efficient work as they bustled about making the rooms habitable. Hermione would only be two doors down from his own suite, which pleased Severus rather more than he thought it should.

He still had a hard time believing Hermione was actually alive inside her mind. He had expected, when he had rushed to St. Mungo's in a panic, he would find nothing except her empty body. It had been a shock when he had actually found her.

He could still remember the feel of her, collapsing in his arms and crying when he had found her amidst the destruction of her mind, sitting in a reasonable if rotted facsimile of his potions classroom.

He had never seen a more beautiful woman. The depth of feelings which had rushed to the fore in that encounter had taken him aback. He had known, of course, after much drunken rumination and many nights spent dreaming of her, that he had come to care for the girl. How it had happened, he could not explain it was not as if he knew her, not really. She had always been just a student to him prior to the curse a bushy-haired, know-it-all girl who irritated him with her persistence and insatiable curiosity and her unexplainable friendship with Weasley and the Boy-Who-Lived-to-Drive-Him-Insane.

After she had been hit by Malfoy's curse, things had changed. Why they had, or even how they could, considering she was in a coma, was beyond his understanding. By all rights, the memories he had of her should have remained those of the irritating little girl. Instead, the images most prominent in his mind had been the brave girl battling to his side to protect him even as he helped her friend; the brilliant girl who had thrown herself into his arms and taken a curse meant for him; the frail beauty who's hair had grown under his fingers, clinging to them like a thousand silken kisses on his first visit to St. Mungo's. It was as if he had only begun to see her for the first time during that fateful final battle.

In turn, those memories had been surpassed by his dreams of her smiling at him with that impudent mouth of hers, sitting on the arm of his chair and leaning over him as he tried to read, running her fingers through his hair and massaging his scalp after a hard day of classes. It was those dreams the visions of the little things that could make a relationship that had made him fall in love with her.

They were visions and images of a life he had never thought would ever be his and had long denied he even desired.

Seeing Hermione so close to death had finally forced him to admit that he did, indeed, love her. He had known at that precise moment that all his denials were for nothing; without her he could never be whole. She might have been hit by a curse meant for him, but his life stretching empty and lonely without her in it was a curse in and of itself. And even if it meant staying by her motionless side until the day he died, then so be it they would be alone, together, for all eternity. A fitting fate for a man like him.

He remembered her voice after he found her, *'gods...I feel your hand on my hair...'* and the way his hands had gripped her shoulders, caressing the soft skin of her neck before traveling up to cup her face.

She told him that she needed him *him* Severus Snape. In her delirious state she'd stated simply and explicitly that she wanted his touch, wanted his kisses, and he had been hard pressed not to comply, even though she hadn't believed at the time he was really there. He wondered, now that she knew his forays into her mind were real, if those feelings would change out of shame.

When Potter had yanked him away from her and punched him in the face, Severus had wanted to kill the younger man. He had been so engrossed in Hermione that the sudden feeling of his consciousness spinning out of her mind had been disorienting. She had finally started to believe him and Potter was determined to destroy what few fragile truths he had managed to build. He had been afraid that his scant progress would be undone by his sudden disappearance she would never trust him again.

But, she had. Somehow, when he had been allowed to reenter her mind he had felt her reach out and grab him, yanking him to her. She had been waiting for him just behind those eyes of hers, in the foyer he had found himself in the first time he had been there. However, the cobwebs and dust had been removed and the darkness had been replaced by a radiant light which seemed to be emanating from Hermione herself. The only other item in the foyer was a black board, covered in her tiny round writing and a large, overstuffed armchair in a hideous red velour which she immediately pushed him into.

Before he could recover himself, she conjured a bucket of icy water and a clean linen cloth and began to gently clean his face. He didn't realize until then that his nose was bleeding.

*'Harry is a great bloody prat,'* she'd muttered, as she held the cool cloth under his nose. *'If he ever does that to you again, you have my permission to hex his balls off!'*

*'I didn't realize I needed your permission,'* Snape had responded, but his voice had taken on a teasing tone to it. He almost didn't recognize it as his own.

*'I can't believe he punched you, the idiot.'*

*'He was just trying to protect you,'* Snape replied, *'I would have done the same thing, had our situation been reversed.'*

Hermione had gaped at him. *'Are you defending him?'* her voice was incredulous. *'Any one with eyes could see you weren't hurting me. Tell him if he can't control his temper to get the hell out of my room.'*

Snape grunted. She continued to fuss over him a few moments more, and he was oddly content to let her do so. Every so often, he could feel her hair slide over his hand or his shoulder as she mended his nose, or the gentle brush of her arms against his chest. He had never felt so content.

When she was done she'd gently run her index and forefinger down either side of the bridge. *'At least he didn't break it.'*

*'How could you tell?'* Snape had drolled, and had a hard time not smiling at her when she started to laugh.

When she finally stopped, she had thrown her arms around his neck. *'I'm so glad you're here.'*

He'd allowed himself to lean into her, savoring the feel of her arms around him and her body pressed against his. But as propriety began to rear its ugly head once again, he'd pulled away from her. *'I can't stay here much longer Albus and Potter are waiting for me to prove you exist.'*

*'Yes Horton,'* she'd grinned at his confusion. *'Well, Albus offered me several lemon drops. I would love to have taken one, as much as I detest them, just to be able to see the look on his face, but I couldn't make him hear me.'*

*'How original of him,'* Snape had muttered, burying his disappointment.

*'I've also been wondering,'* Hermione continued, *'why it is you can enter my mind and Professor Dumbledore can't. I'd written down a lot of my memories and did a fair amount of research with my limited resources before, well before. I remember that Malfoy's curse hit me in the back, but I could see some of it slid around me to touch you as well. I didn't think anything of it when I recalled that because you obviously weren't affected, but maybe that's why you can come here now. Something about the curse touched you too.'*

Severus had felt a swell of admiration for her intuitive thinking, even though she'd spent probably the last two weeks on the edge of insanity. Her turnaround and ability to think objectively regardless of emotional stress had been enough to make him want to smile. However, that likely would have lead to either more hysterics or more hugging, neither of which he'd felt very comfortable with at the time, so instead he'd merely lifted an eyebrow.

*'Anything else?'*

She nodded, and assessed him quietly, *'He said he hoped I was really here, for your sake. He seems to think you may... care, about me, and he didn't think you would handle it very well at all if it was determined you were just making me up, or if I died.'*

Snape hadn't said anything to that, just looked at her intently as she colored slightly and bit her lip.

*'Well, do you?'* she'd finally asked.

*'Do I what?'* he prevaricated.

*'Do you care for me?'*

He had sighed, *'That depends on whether you want me to or not, Hermione.'*

She'd frowned at that, *'If you have feelings for me, they'd be there no matter what I said.'*

*'I would not burden you with my feelings if I felt you didn't share them'* He had winced as he said this, realizing how distant he sounded, but she had just smiled at him.

*'Did you know that I always thought your best visits were the ones where you told me things about your day and stroked my hair?'* Her eyes softened as she spoke and she leaned into him. *'I remember, one time you actually traced my cheek with your fingers. It made me feel so alive and so I don't know but for hours after you left, I could still feel the heat of your hand.'*

As she spoke, her own hand had lifted up to lightly cupped the side of his face. She allowed her thumb to run softly from the edge of his nose and trace across his eye socket. He could hear the slight rasp of his stubble against the smooth skin of her palm even as he tipped his head into it, yearning for more. Snape felt the sizzle to his toes.

Her eyes had been glowing. *'Do you feel it, Severus? Do you feel the magic when I touch you? That's what you do to me. No one else has ever touched me like this. No one else ever will.'*

Snape had shuddered and lifted his own hand to grip her wrist. The skin around it was soft and he had felt her blood coursing through the pulse point, a poignant reminder that she was alive despite everything. He'd held her hand steady, open against his cheek and turned his face into it, kissing the skin of her palm before opening his mouth slightly and biting the fleshy mound.

He was acting purely on instinct, with a gentleness he had never known he could feel. Each sweet exhalation from Hermione's mouth, each succulent hitch of her breath as he nuzzled her palm, made his blood heat, running through him like molten lava.

*'You're magic, Hermione.'* His voice had been heavy, rasping with emotion and a thick, rich chocolate desire. *'I will never leave you.'*

*'I will never let you,'* she'd replied, but her words had burned like a vow, seeming to glow in the air around them. *'Now that I know....you've saved me, Severus.'*

*'Not yet I haven't, but I will,'* he'd let go of her hand and pulled regretfully away from her.

*'I have to go. Albus and Harry... I promise I'll be back soon.'*

He'd looked at her for a moment more, burning the image of her standing before him, face slightly flushed and hand hanging in mid-air as if still caressing his face, before allowing himself the slightest of smiles and vanishing.

~~~~~

'Professor Snapes, we'se done sir,' the high-pitched voice of one of the house elves broke through his reverie. Shaking the mental fog that had encompassed him, Snape looked around the large suite, inspecting the bedrooms and the main sitting area.

'This will do,' he agreed.

The elf smiled at him timidly, twisting its ear. Snape could never tell their gender at first glance before it asked in a frightened whisper, 'It true Missuz Hermione is backs, sir? She won't try to makes us wear clothes, will she?'

'Not right away, at least,' Snape muttered, watching as the little elf disappeared with a frightened pop, crying, 'Noddy doesn't likes socks, no he doesn't.'

Smirking, he grabbed a pinch of floo powder and threw it into the fireplace, muttering 'infirmary' as he followed it. He wasn't surprised to see Dumbledore and Nettie had finally arrived, Potter in tow.

'Severus is Hermione and Nettie's suite ready?' Albus greeted, eyes twinkling as the younger man fastidiously flicked at the ash on his shoulders.

'Just finished, Albus,' Severus replied, barely noticing any of the people in the room as he looked at Hermione. She was almost restored to her full physical health, and the change was breathtaking. He reluctantly tore his gaze away when he heard Potter's petulant tone.

'I still don't see why she needs to be in the dungeons.'

'Because it will keep her from becoming a curiosity,' Albus replied. 'She won't be bothered down there by students wanting a look at the famous Hermione Granger. And it is more convenient for Severus. He'll be with her a lot, trying to find a way to cure her.'

Potter scowled at this, his green eyes blazing as he looked at Snape, 'Don't think I won't be watching you.'

Severus sneered, 'I don't plan on hurting her, Potter. I only want to set her free. Now, if you don't mind, I think we should get Hermione and Madame Pomfrey settled. It's been a trying day, and I promised Hermione I would return as soon as possible.'

He swept forward, and for the second time that day picked Hermione up, cradling her gently in his arms. 'I'm taking you to your rooms, now, Hermione. Madame Pomfrey,' he nodded at Nettie, 'If you would be so kind to follow me.'

The last thing he heard as he disappeared in the floo was Potter calling after him, 'I don't trust you, Snape.'

'But Hermione does,' Severus muttered under his breath, stepping into the new rooms. *And she's the only one that matters.*

Diamond Rio I Believe

Every now and then soft as breath upon my skin

I feel you come back again

And it's like you haven't been gone a moment from my side

Like the tears were never cried

Like the hands of time are holding you and me

And with all my heart I'm sure we're closer than we ever were

I don't have to hear or see, I've got all the proof I need

There are more than angels watching over me

I believe, oh I believe

Now when you die your life goes on

It doesn't end here when you're gone

Every soul is filled with light

It never ends and if I'm right

Our love can even reach across eternity

I believe, oh I believe

Forever, you're a part of me

Forever, in the heart of me

I would hold you even longer if I can

Oh, the people who don't see the most

Say that I believe in ghosts

If that makes me crazy, then I am

'Cause I believe

Oh I believe . . . yes I do

There are more than angels watching over me

I believe, oh I believe

Every now and then soft as breath upon my skin

I feel you come back again

. . . and I believe

HERMIONE

Chapter 11 of 20

'Sometimes, the beauty doesn't need to kiss the beast to transform his life,' he murmured softly, reaching out and pushing a tendril of her hair behind her ear, skimming the tip of his finger around its shell.

Her heart was pounding, his words making her strangely lightheaded, 'And sometimes the beast isn't a beast at all,' she added shakily, 'just a man who can't seem to trust his heart.'

Chapter Eleven: HERMIONE

Hermione was still going crazy, but it didn't bother her so much anymore. She was back at Hogwarts, Severus was spending countless hours with her discussing her situation and potential cures, and she was exceedingly happy. It didn't make her any less crazy, though.

Not that going crazy was a bad thing not at all. As a matter of fact, this kind of crazy she could live with, because she knew eventually it would end and she'd get what she wanted. What she wanted was Severus.

And he was driving her mad.

She didn't understand why he couldn't just take her at her word and believe her when she told him she wanted him, that she ached for the slightest of his touches. For every step forward she took, he seemed to take two steps backwards.

She had thought it would be easy that first day, when he had found her, he had all but admitted to her that he cared for her. Dumbledore himself had entered her mind and told her as much; even though the older man hadn't been entirely convinced she was there.

Even Nettie, as she puttered around their suite at Hogwarts, would twitter to her 'It's so romantic, like beauty and the beast come to life!' and 'He loves you dear. The magic in the air when he looks at you is enough to give an old witch like me heart palpitations!'

Hermione had smiled at that, *'Imagine what it does to me!'*Of course, Nettie couldn't hear her, but it didn't really matter. Hermione still had conversations with her.

The problem wasn't that Severus didn't return her feelings she was pretty sure he did, even if he remained frustratingly closed-mouth about the matter. It was the fact that he didn't seem to be inclined to act upon them that was making her mental. Despite the hours they had spent together since her return to Hogwarts, he had done nothing more since her first day back, when he had kissed the palm of her hand.

It wasn't that he seemed averse to touching her far from it but he never instigated anything. She was always the first to reach out and grab his hand, or lean into him for hug. She knew that eventually she would just give in to her physical yearnings and kiss him herself, but she was hoping it wouldn't boil down to that. She wanted him to woo her was that so much to ask?

She had caught him staring at her once, while they were discussing her memories of the curse, and his gaze had been so hungry and intense it had made her breath hitch in her throat and her heart do an odd little jig within her chest. She had stopped talking, completely ensnared by his gaze, watching in fascination as the tip of his tongue had moistened his bottom lip. She had moistened her own in response and leaned towards him slowly, as though an invisible cord was reeling her in. And just when she had thought that finally finally he was going to kiss her, he had broken her gaze and stepped back, shaking his head as if trying to clear it.

'You're sure the curse was cold when it hit you, not hot?' he had inquired politely, and she had wanted to scream her frustration. Severus Snape was a tease and he didn't even realize it.

If she had thought his visits were important to her before, she realized quickly that her world now revolved around them. Each minute that he was away from her that she was alone in her mind seemed to last hours. She would try to keep herself busy, making notes or revising ideas they had come up with, but eventually everything came around to remind her of Severus. Times like that her quill would come to rest and her eyes would turn even further inward, reliving the moments they had spent together with uncanny clarity. She often found herself wondering what she had to do to get him to kiss her, and bent more time than she should have plotting on how to get him to do just that.

One evening, on her second day at Hogwarts, she made sure that when Snape came to visit her he arrived while she was on the tail-end of completing exercises similar to the ones she had engaged in during her time before being hit by the curse. Her fifth year summer had introduced her to yoga at the community center, and it had quickly become her favorite mode for relieving stress and keeping nightmares about the Department of Mysteries at bay. When Severus found her she was in her favorite burgundy yoga leotard, stretching.

'Just cooling down,' she had explained to him, smiling to herself as she noticed him twitching uncomfortably and trying not to look at her *'I lost track of the time.'* She had surrounded the room they were in with mirrors and he was turning from wall to wall, trying to escape the sight of her in her form fitting suit. He eventually resorted to looking at his feet, a stiffness to his hunched shoulders that briefly brought a twinge of guilt for her ruse.

'There now, all done.' Realizing she had teased him enough for one visit, she finally approached him, a towel around her neck and her hair piled high in a loose ponytail atop her head. *'I think it's important to stay limber, even if it is only in my mind, don't you?'*

She sighed and rolled her head on her neck, pulling the top of her sticky leotard away from her chest and flapping it ineffectually *'Now all I need is a quick shower. Can you wait a moment?'*

She could tell Severus noted the movement with interest because his breathing quickened slightly and his eyes shot to her face, burning her with their intensity. The stubborn man refused to comment though, other than to ask her if he could go over some of their notes in the lab.

'Good idea,' she'd agreed, banishing the mirrors and quickly conjuring a changing screen, which she flung her discarded leotard over the top of. *'Give me a few minutes and I'll be out.'*

His quickly retreating footsteps from the room made her want to laugh and snort at the same time. She was going to make him crack, she was determined.

The next day, he came by for an unexpected visit during the lunch hour. *'Hermione,'* she had heard him calling her from the stone corridor, *'where are you?'*

'In the library,' she hollered back, *'20th row, section B I'm looking for something.'*

He found her up a ladder, perched precariously on her toes as she pulled random titles from a dusty shelf. *'Be careful, Hermione! You could fall,'* he'd muttered darkly.

She just laughed at him, *'But you'd catch me, wouldn't you? Ah, here it is!'* she had found the book she was looking for, pulling it triumphantly from the stacks and quickly descending the ladder until she was at his side. *'I wasn't sure if this was still here.'*

Severus smiled slightly at her excitement, *'What is it, a book on counter-curses and spell-breaking?'*

'Unfortunately, no.' Hermione replied. *'It's a book of fairy tales.'*

He cocked an eyebrow at her, *'Fairy tales? Whatever do you need that for?'*

'Nettie mentioned something earlier about Beauty and the Beast, Hermione smiled shyly, 'and it got me to thinking. People are always getting cursed in fairy tales, right? Snow White and Sleeping Beauty were both cursed with sleeping death...'

'And how does this apply to your situation?' Severus interrupted, *'You know as well as I do that the sleeping death is a potion. Snow White ingested it with the apple and Aurora absorbed it when she pricked her finger on the potion coated spindle. What you've suffered is completely different the living sleep. There were no potions involved.'*

'That's true, but what's the common factor in all these stories? Even the ones that don't involve enchanted sleep?'

Snape stiffened, *'It wouldn't work.'*

'How can you be so sure?' she retorted, *'In all these stories, the curse is always lifted with 'love's true kiss'. Even in Beauty and the Beast, the beauty restored the beast to life and his human form when she kissed him, using every ounce of love in her heart.'*

She was facing him now, watching the myriad of expressions filter across his face as she spoke, noticing the way a small hope passed through his normally unreadable dark eyes when she mentioned love.

'Sometimes, the beauty doesn't need to kiss the beast to transform his life,' he murmured softly, reaching out and pushing a tendril of her hair behind her ear, skimming the tip of his finger around its shell.

Her heart was pounding, his words making her strangely lightheaded, *'And sometimes the beast isn't a beast at all,'* she added shakily, *'just a man who can't seem to trust his heart.'*

A wistful smile danced across his features, before he withdrew from her, *'Indeed.'*

They stood silently for a few moments, each contemplating the other, before he spoke again, *'I came to see if you'd like to go for a walk in the gardens. It's a beautiful day'*

outside.'

'I'd love to,' she smiled, 'but I won't give up on this, you know.'

He nodded his head in acknowledgment of her determination. 'We shall see.'

The walk through the gardens, like most of her time spent with Severus, had been lovely. She couldn't see him, of course, but he kept up a running dialogue as he pushed her along the slate gray path in a wooden wheel chair he had procured from somewhere. When the stone path had ended, he had lifted her from the chair and continued their walk on foot, taking her to the edge of the lake.

From her position in his arms, head on his shoulder, she could hear the strong beating of his heart against her ear and see his Adam's apple bob with each breath. The line of his chin was sharp and strong, the stubble under the skin thick and dark looking. Every once in a while he would turn his head slightly and look at her, his eyes skimming her face tenderly. She could see herself reflected in his dark gaze and realized, with a start, that she was beautiful.

'You remind me of a dandelion, Hermione,' he murmured once as they walked. 'Your spirit is tenacious, always searching for new ways to grow despite the obvious setbacks. And I must admit, your hair has a tendency to be just as annoying as dandelion seeds.' He said this with a smirk while removing a wayward curl from the edge of his mouth, the strand glinting in the sunlight. 'And, like dandelion wine, you can be quite intoxicating.'

She smiled at that and decided she didn't mind so much him thinking she was a weed.

One of the things that made it more bearable while Severus was away was when Nettie read to her. She had almost finished 'Wuthering Heights' and had admitted to Hermione one afternoon before the reading commenced that she had chosen that particular novel because she was a sucker for tragic romances with brooding leading men such as the one who took every opportunity to visit her.

Hermione liked the soft drone of Nettie's voice and often found herself imagining Severus, striding over the moors and cursing her ghost with words of love and despair. She said as much to him one day and he had almost smiled at her.

'I trust we will have a more fitting end than either Catherine or Heathcliff did,' he retorted dryly. 'As I recall, Heathcliff went mad.'

'Be with me always - take any form - drive me mad! only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you!' Hermione quoted softly, before reaching out and grabbing his hand. 'But you're not Heathcliff and I have no need to haunt you.'

'You do, though,' his reply sent thrills of delight up her spine, 'you do, Hermione.'

A few days later, she brought up her fairy tale theory again. 'I still think you should try it,' she argued when he snorted, 'if only to rule it out as a potential cure.'

'It won't work,' he stated flatly. 'We don't need to rule it out, because we both know it's futile.'

'We don't know it,' she retorted, 'we just think it. But we could be missing something. What if it is the way to break this curse and we never try it? I'll be trapped here forever because you were too scared to kiss me.'

Severus had grabbed her shoulders at this, shaking her slightly. 'You silly girl!' he growled, 'think for a moment. You are in a coma, your body is not responsive to anything and Potter already thinks the worst. You have a chaperone, for Merlin's sake, whose main responsibility outside looking after you is to make sure I don't take advantage of you when you are like this. What do you think would happen if she saw me kissing you? What would Albus and Potter say?'

'How can you take advantage when it is something I offer freely?' Hermione asked, suddenly angry. 'And Nettie is not here to keep an eye on you. She knows you wouldn't hurt me. And Harry,' she threw her hands up at this, 'can sod off. He's just upset that it's you who found me, and not him. He's too used to being the hero.'

Snape raised an eyebrow at this, 'Potter still doesn't believe you're here. He thinks I'm imagining all this and that I brought you to Hogwarts for my own selfish reasons. And Nettie is here to keep an eye on things how can you say she's not.'

'Severus, listen to me,' Hermione was suddenly gentle again, reaching out to grab his hands, which were cool to the touch, 'she talks to me. She knows you wouldn't take advantage, as you put it. She likes you, quite a bit. She's told me so herself. Just the other day, she said to me, 'Miss Granger, dear, I've never met a man like your Professor. He's all sharp edges on the outside, but I can see his loneliness. I'm so glad he has you.' She would be your friend, if you let her.'

Snape snorted, 'Hermione...'

'No, I'm telling you the truth. Why must you always think the worst?' Her eyes watched him shrewdly, studying his face with an intense tenderness. 'Or, is it that you aren't thinking the worst of other people but thinking the worst of yourself?'

He stiffened and tried to pull his hands away, but she wouldn't let him. 'That's it, isn't it? You can't believe that anyone would want to be friends with you, that no one could care about you. How can you have such a low opinion of yourself?'

'Hermione, I don't...' he sighed wearily, 'I'm not a nice man.'

'No, you're not,' she agreed, 'you're an intense man. You're sarcastic, bitter, sometimes cruel... but you're also intelligent, loyal, and capable of more tenderness than anyone I have ever met. Why can't you see all the wonderful things you are, instead of focusing on all the negatives? I wouldn't even be here if it weren't for you!'

'Don't remind me,' Snape replied darkly, a snarl taking root on his lips.

'That's not what I meant, and you know it! You give me hope, Severus, where before I had none. You give me courage, to keep on fighting. You give me your strength and make me believe in the future... and when I try to give you things in return, you turn me away and try to deny my feelings. I... I love you, Severus. As much as this damn curse has been terrifying, I can't totally regret it. If I wasn't like this I would never have gotten to know you, would I? You're the best part of this whole mess you're my silver lining.'

Severus didn't say anything for the longest time, just stood there and looked at her hands clasping his. 'You're a foolish girl,' he finally murmured, 'I'm not anyone's 'silver lining'. More like the black cloud that wrecks an otherwise lovely day.'

Hermione felt her heart clench and tried for a soft tone, 'Maybe if you didn't swoop around in black so much...'

He smirked at her gentle teasing, bringing her hands to his mouth and gently kissing her knuckles, a tender action that nearly made her knees buckle! 'I have never done anything in my life deserving of you.'

'You're a hero. And that's not where I want you to kiss me,' she whispered breathily, leaning into him.

'...Hermione...' his face was tight with uncertainty and desire, and Hermione sighed. She could feel the very air crackling around them; little electrical impulses that made the tiny hairs on the back of her neck stand up in anticipation. There was a delicious coiling tightness in her belly, spreading languorous heat like liquid honey through her veins. Her heartbeat became slow and heavy, and she licked her bottom lip when she saw him staring at it.

He was going to kiss her. He was going to kiss her and she was going to spontaneously combust right here in his arms. He was going to kiss her and she would finally get to taste him, to learn the feel and flavor of his mouth...oh yes yesyes...

'I apologize for the interruption Professor Snape, Miss Granger, 'Nettie's disembodied voice intruded, 'but it's past midnight, and I know you have class tomorrow, sir.'

Hermione clutched her hands reflexively in his, *'No, don't...'*

But Severus was already pulling away, a mixture of regret and relief mingling on his face, *'I have to go, Hermione. I have to...'*

'Promise me,' she whispered after him, as he faded from her mind, until he was outside of her again looking into her eyes *'promise me you'll love me too.'*

She didn't know if he heard her.

When he returned to her the next day, it was as if the conversation of the night before had never taken place.

'I've been thinking we're going about this curse the wrong way,' he stated in greeting as he strode into the potions room. *'It occurred to me last night that animula somnus is taken from the Latin masculine. I no longer think Malfoy found this curse in some ancient text I think he created it specifically for me.'*

Hermione frowned at him, *'What do you mean?'*

'I don't think we'll find an answer in books,' he stated reasonably, *'and I don't know why it took me so long to figure that out. The curse was directed at me it was never supposed to hit you at all. If it had been meant for a woman, he would have said 'animulae somnusi'.'*

'But we've known all along it was directed at you!' Hermione protested, *'How is this news?'*

'We've been assuming there was a cure for it, when there may not be now, not if Malfoy designed it. It would appeal to his ludicrous sense of justice to think he had trapped me in a heretofore undocumented, cureless curse of his own design. He always was a right brilliant bastard.'

They had worked the rest of the evening on theories and postulations, writing scrolls of ideas with the new information and scratching them out.

'If it was meant for you, how come it worked on me?' she finally asked in exasperation, after another hypothesis hit a brick wall.

'Maybe because you were touching me when it took full effect,' Snape offered quietly. *'Maybe that's why you feel so connected to me. Malfoy's curse recognized its true target and bound you to me...'*

Hermione felt a twitch settle on her left cheek, *'I hope that's not what you've been telling yourself all day long. I have not been cursed into caring for you.'*

Suddenly, the conversation from yesterday evening loomed before them, causing all the tension from the prior evening to return ten-fold. *'That's why you won't kiss me, isn't it?'* she accused, *'You've been telling yourself all along that it's not real, that I can't really love you... That's it, isn't it?'*

Severus frowned and looked at her, *'It makes sense, if you think about it. At the very least, you yourself have spoken of your loneliness.'*

Hermione snorted, *'Bullocks. I know my own mind.'*

'I'm sure you do,' Snape replied, *'I don't question that. However, you must realize Hermione, you are only 20 years old and you have been trapped here in your mind for over a year and a half. You have told me yourself that you crave simple human touch, of which I have been one of the few people to provide. However I feel... anything further than that would be taking advantage of this situation you are in. You might think you want me to kiss you...'* his voice shook slightly at this, *'but I'm sure, given the opportunity to choose someone else, you would change your mind.'*

Hermione shook her head, feeling desperation loosen her tongue, *'I wouldn't. I've told you this before who else would I want but you? And I know you want me too... I know you care for me. You kissed the palm of my hand. You... you dreamed about me.'*

Snape looked uncomfortable at this, *'Yes. Well,'* he cleared his throat and pinched the bridge of his nose, *'I cannot deny that I've come to care for you. You saved my life and I feel responsible for this situation you've find yourself in. But I shouldn't have kissed your palm. My only excuse is that I was overwhelmed with the events of the day; of finding you alive and somewhat sane in this delightful mind of yours.'* He smirked gently at the last of his little speech, a look Hermione found herself quite taken with.

'But you want me.' Hermione hated the pleading sound that had crept into her voice, *'You can't deny it.'*

'You are making this very difficult,' Snape replied irritably. *'I am only a man Hermione, and a principled one, despite what others might think. Perhaps, after we've released you from this spell, if you still want me...'*

He wasn't looking at her as he said this. Instead, he was smoothing the material of his frock coat, his fingers almost luminescent against the dark fabric. Hermione had noticed he did this often when he wanted to appear as if he wasn't interested in what they were discussing as if the minutiae of picking lint from his sleeve or erasing imaginary wrinkles was more important than what she might say. It gave her the courage to want to settle this matter completely before he left again.

'I'll still want you,' she stated firmly, but quietly, *'and I'll prove it to you as soon as I'm free. The first thing we need to do is rule out all possible potential cures. Like a kiss.'*

'Hermione...'

'No. I will not listen to this again. I know you don't think it will work, and I happen to agree, but wouldn't it be just like Lucius Malfoy to do something like that, thinking no one would ever kiss you? You have to admit I have a point.'

Severus nodded at this and Hermione let a small smile touch her face. *'Talk to Nettie, Severus. Tell her what you're going to do. I think she'll be more understanding than you might think. She won't run off and tell Albus or Harry that you kissed me.'*

'I wouldn't be so sure,' Snape gritted back, *'keep in mind she's related to the biggest gossip at Hogwarts.'*

Hermione laughed, her heart swelling, because he hadn't said no. *'Leave Madame Pomfrey out of this. Please, talk to Nettie. I think you'll be surprised.'*

On My Own - from the Les Miserables soundtrack.

*And now I'm all alone again
Nowhere to turn, no one to go to
Without a home, without a friend,
Without a face to say hello to.
And now the night is near
Now I can make believe he's here.
Sometimes I walk alone at night
When everybody else is sleeping
I think of him and then I'm happy
With the company I'm keeping
The city goes to bed
And I can live inside my head.
On my own
Pretending he's beside me
All alone, I walk with him till morning
Without him
I feel his arms around me
And when I lose my way I close my eyes
And he has found me
In the rain the pavement shines like silver
All the lights are misty in the river
In the darkness, the trees are full of starlight
And all I see is him and me for ever and forever
And I know it's only in my mind
That I'm talking to myself and not to him
And although I know that he is blind
Still I say, there's a way for us
I love him
But when the night is over
He is gone, the river's just a river
Without him the world around me changes
The trees are bare and everywhere
The streets are full of strangers
I love him
But every day I'm learning
All my life I've only been pretending
Without me his world will go on turning
A world that's full of happiness
That I have never known!
I love him
I love him
I love him
But only on my own.*

NETTIE

Chapter 12 of 20

Her color always looked better when he was with her, as if she had been dusted with gold. Even his austere features took on a different light; his pale skin glowing like the moon, reflecting the glory of the sun.

Chapter Twelve: NETTIE

As much as I loved my sister, I hated living in the same building as her, even when said building was a castle as large as Hogwarts. You see, Poppy is the eldest sister and I am the baby of the family. We have two sisters in the middle - Marigold and Petunia - but Poppy doesn't treat either of them like they're half-wits. That's a pleasure she reserves solely for me.

I suppose it's partly my fault. She does love to boss and tell people what to do and I have become so used to it over the years, I suppose I just naturally fill my role as the youngest sister. Normally, I don't let it bother me. I just listen to her and sometimes I'll do as she asks and sometimes I won't. But I never tell her to mind her own business, or to take her advice and shove it somewhere painful and wholly inappropriate.

I wish I'd done that this time.

Of course, I haven't lived in close proximity to her for years, so there's never been the need. That, and I don't like confrontation, more's the pity. It started the same day I arrived at Hogwarts with Miss Granger. After I had gotten her settled in our new suite of rooms, Poppy had made an appearance to 'see how I was coping' with the move. In reality, she had come to spy and she had brought several compatriots with her.

I had heard stories from her in the past about her colleagues but had never really met any of them before, with the exception of Professor Snape, Headmaster Dumbledore, and Minerva McGonagall. I had met Professor McGonagall twice prior, when she had visited Miss Granger at St. Mungo's.

So, there I was with Miss Granger. Professor Snape had left just a little earlier, indicating he would return after 'discussing with Potter and Albus what he was hoping to accomplish with Hermione.' His tone had been so dry when he told me this I knew right away this meeting was not his idea. I rather suspected that Mr. Potter needed further reassurance regarding Professor Snape's intentions towards my young charge. Mentally, I wished him luck. From the suspicious way Potter had been looking at him most of the day, I suspected he was going to need it just to keep control of his temper.

The last thing I had wanted was to have a roost of gossipy old hens descend upon me my first day back at Hogwarts without so much as one word of warning, led by my sister. The door to the chambers was open and I could hear them coming before I saw them, their voices and slow foot steps echoing down the stone corridor.

'It was dreadful!' Poppy was saying, 'There I was, tidying up, when Professor Snape burst through my floo like a wraith. You should have seen him, white shirt and dried blood down his chin, and carrying Miss Granger too! I nearly had a fainting spell.'

'Blood down his chin? From what?' an unidentified female voice asked curiously.

'Harry punched him in the nose!' Poppy replied, aghast.

There was a chorus of titters and one voice muttered what sounded like, 'Wouldn't make much difference.'

The sound of Poppy's throat clearing took back the attention of her audience. 'Apparently, he found Snape in a rather *intimate* position with Hermione, and had to pull them apart.'

There were several exaggerated gasps and one clear cackle among the voices. Poppy's salacious tone and the willing ears of her cohorts to listen to such nonsense made my blood boil. Intimate position indeed!

'Don't fret dears, Nettie will tell us what's going on,' Poppy concluded sagely. 'We'll get the scoop from her - she's been brought to make sure Hermione isn't... taken advantage of.'

Of all the nerve! I looked at Miss Granger and bit the inside of my cheek, trying for a welcoming smile, even though inside I was fuming. 'Here come the hoards, my dear. I hope you're ready... I know I'm not.'

Professor Snape had left Miss Granger in the living area, arranged comfortably in an overstuffed armchair, for all appearances as if she were waiting for a cup of tea. I had assumed he would immediately carry her to her room and place her in bed, and had been a little surprised he hadn't done so. When I had asked him what he was doing, he had stated flatly that, 'Hermione was not bedridden, and therefore did not wish to be imprisoned in her bedroom for the duration of her stay.'

Can't say I didn't blame her. The walls in her room were quite boring.

When Poppy and her herd entered our suite, it was amusing to note the look of surprise on all their faces when they saw Miss Granger sitting there waiting for them.

'Nettie, what is Hermione doing out of bed?' Poppy squawked, quickly looking my way before turning to Miss Granger again.

'Hello Poppy. Ladies,' I nodded, my voice professional and polite. 'Miss Granger wanted to sit out here for a while.'

'Told you that, did she?' a witch I didn't know leered at me.

'No, she told Professor Snape,' I replied coolly.

'Right,' the same witch responded, rolling her shrewd yellow eyes, 'I just bet she did.'

The other witches started talking all at once, 'Poppy, do you really think...', 'I can't believe Dumbledore...!', 'That poor boy, no wonder he punched Snape...!', 'Is she really, well you know...!', 'I always knew he'd go off the bend someday...'

I was quite taken aback by all the noise. Poppy moved closer to me and tsked under her breath, 'That man doesn't have the sense the gods gave a goat. Hermione is in no state to be sitting up, as if she were taking visitors. Nettie dear, help me move her back to her room.'

'No,' I replied, quite firmly. 'Miss Granger is fine right where she is, aren't you dear?' I patted the younger woman's hand as I spoke, showing her I had no indication of allowing her to be moved anywhere.

'Really, Nettie, as the head medi-witch here at Hogwarts, I must insist...'

'You will do no such thing,' I retorted. 'I am here to care for Miss Granger, not to work for you. She is my charge, and she has indicated she does not wish to go to her room. Until Professor Snape returns and is able to tell me otherwise, she will remain here.'

The other witches in the room had stopped clucking and were watching me with interest.

'Do you really believe she's trapped in her mind?' one tiny little witch inquired curiously, her wizened face reminding me of the apple dolls my mother used to make.

'I am sure of it,' I retorted stoutly. 'Professor Snape does not strike me as the type of man to make things up. And since he found her this morning, her condition has quite improved.'

'Still looks like she's in a coma to me,' the witch with the weird eyes muttered sarcastically.

'That's because she is still in a coma,' Poppy replied imperiously. 'Really, Nettie how can you say she's improved?'

I bristled under her superior attitude and big-sister tone. 'Because she has,' I snapped. 'This morning she was dying, which you would have known if any of you ever bothered to visit her.' I glanced apologetically at Professor McGonagall as I said this, but continued none-the-less. 'Her hair was brittle and falling out, her arms and legs were twisted in on themselves even her skin was a hideous gray. But look at her now! Since Professor Snape found her and spoke with her, she's had a remarkable turnaround. That's how I know she's there.'

'She couldn't have been as bad as all that,' Poppy started, but I interrupted.

'Are you questioning my abilities as a medi-witch?' I demanded. 'You think I don't know what a dying person looks like?'

'Now Nettie, I didn't say that...' Poppy began, 'I just question if you have become too close to Miss Granger and her situation. Perhaps you were imagining she was worse than she actually was.'

'I don't imagine things,' was my flat response. 'I know what I saw. Professor Snape came back and saved her.'

'What do you mean, came back?' a rotund, earthy looking witch asked suddenly. 'He stopped visiting?'

'He was recuperating from his accident,' my voice had grown stony. I was not about to start sharing stories with any of these ladies, as I didn't really know why his visits had stopped for their extended duration, and I wasn't about to start hypothesizing.

'Are you telling us he hadn't been to see her for three weeks?' McGonagall's voice was frankly shocked.

'He's been fine enough to apparate for a couple of weeks now,' Poppy added, looking at me shrewdly. 'What aren't you telling us, Nettie?'

I shrugged, 'Nothing that concerns you, believe me.'

Poppy sniffed at me. 'You seem to be a little short today, Nettie. I trust that it's just the stress of relocating to Hogwarts and nothing too serious. I suppose I should be getting back to the infirmary. I'll see you tomorrow?'

I nodded in assent, 'You know where I am.' I smiled politely at the other witches, 'Ladies.'

It didn't take them long to leave, for which I was grateful. But their voices continued to linger as they returned the way they came down the corridor. I couldn't help but suppress a shiver from their tone, blatant skepticism and suspicion towards Miss Granger's savior being the least of what I could hear in their gossip.

Turning back to look at my charge, I smiled grimly. 'You realize not one of those women bothered to talk to you while they were here, Miss Granger? And none of them even introduced themselves to me. Rude cows!'

Over the course of the next few days, I settled into a nice routine with Miss Granger. Professor Snape became a frequent early morning visitor, stopping by to visit with Miss Granger before breakfast every morning. Quite often, he would actually stay to eat and avoid the great hall altogether, not that I could blame him. From the few tidbits I heard from Poppy when she visited, the rumor mill at Hogwarts was running rampant, and he was the main focus.

Since he always arrived at 7:00 am, I would make sure Miss Granger was up and dressed before his arrival. He had requested on Miss Granger's behalf that she be allowed to wear normal clothes during the day, and I was happy to fulfill this desire. I didn't blame the girl for wanting to appear as normal as possible for his visits. And I, always eager to help along a romance in the making, did my best to make sure she looked her best. She really was a very pretty girl when her hair was charmed against frizz.

If the day was pleasant, he would sometimes show up at lunch and put Miss Granger in an old, muggle style wooden wheel chair he had found, wrap a warm blanket around her legs, and take her for walks through the gardens nearest the lake, away from the prying eyes of students and teachers alike. On those occasions when the wheels would get stuck in the mud, he would lift her from the chair as if she were a piece of glass and continue his walk on foot. I knew this because I enjoyed the opportunity to be out of doors as well, and often took a book with me to read in the sun while the Professor watched over my charge. I admit without guilt that spying on them together was often times more interesting than whatever book I had selected that day.

At the end of every day, he would return to our rooms and visit with Miss Granger for at least an hour and a half, following the same routine his other visits had in the past. Although I wasn't privy to their conversations, I was aware of his actions when he spoke with her. He always treated her with such deference; it was almost heartbreaking.

The minute Professor Snape looked into her eyes, it was impossible not to see the connection between them. He didn't so much look as dive, if you know what I mean. Even when he was making polite and superficial conversation with me, his eyes would search her out, running constantly over her face almost as if he never really believed she was there. He would sit in front of her if she was in her armchair, lean forward and just fall into her mind. Her color always looked better when he was with her, as if she had been dusted with gold. Even his austere features took on a different light; his pale skin glowing like the moon, reflecting the glory of the sun.

He would never start out touching her during his visits, but by the end would often be holding her hands. Sometimes, he would reach out and silently brush her hair behind her ears, or stroke a gentle finger down her cheek. I often saw him smile, the expression at once seeming so foreign and yet so perfect on his stern features I wondered why he didn't do it more often. Perhaps, in his every day existence without her, he had no reason to.

He never really seemed to realize that I was there when he was with her, and I was always hesitant to remind him. I would normally just putter around the suite or sit quietly in the small alcove that substituted as a miniature library and read. Sometimes, if the hour would grow very late, I would approach them and gently tap him on the shoulder.

'I apologize for the interruption Professor Snape, Miss Granger,' I would say, 'but it's past midnight, and I know you have class tomorrow, sir.'

He would always break away from her with reluctance, and I could tell he hated leaving her alone.

One evening when Professor Snape was there, Poppy stopped by to visit. She said she came to 'Have a spot of tea with her baby sister', but I knew she was really there to see what was going on. I managed to drag her through to the alcove fairly quickly, positioning her so neither Miss Granger nor Professor Snape were in her line of vision.

'So, Nettie,' she began, after squirming around for a few minutes, trying to figure out a way to turn around without appearing obvious, before finally giving up. 'I expected to see more of you while you were here!'

I smiled, 'Poppy, you know I can't leave Miss Granger alone.'

'It would be nice if you would circulate a bit more, get to know the girls.'

How to tell her I didn't really want to get to know 'the girls' they seemed like a bunch of irritating, nosey gossips to me. Instead, I remained politely silent. Poppy frowned at me.

'Would it kill you to make an effort to get to know them better? They're very concerned about Hermione.'

'I'm sure they are,' I responded, 'but they have no reason to be. Professor McGonagall has been by to visit a couple of times she could tell you the same thing.'

'There are... rumors... that Severus takes her for walks around the garden. Professor Sprout was telling me she saw him carrying her to the lake.'

'She likes to get outside,' I agreed. 'I doubt you'd want to be cooped up inside all day if you didn't have to be. Fresh air is good for her.'

Poppy raised her eyebrow dubiously, 'You never go with them. Aren't you supposed to be their chaperone, or at least her nurse? We all heard how Harry discovered them the day you came here.'

I tried to keep calm, I really did, but this was getting to be too much. 'Young Mr. Potter has been spreading tales out of school, has he?' I asked waspishly. 'I swear, that boy needs a smack to the back of the head! Do you think Professor Snape is going to harm the girl?'

Poppy didn't answer, and I rolled my eyes at her. 'Honestly, Poppy! Sometimes you are too much. After everything that man did during the war, after the way he almost died trying to save Potter, what do you think he actually plans on doing? Molesting her? Forcing his attentions on her when no one is watching? What?'

Poppy had the grace to blush, 'No, I don't think he'd hurt her. We've just never seen Severus act this way before and we're concerned.'

'Act what way,' I snapped back, 'like a human being? Why shouldn't he want to help her? I think he's probably the only one here who understands what true solitude is all about. That man wears his isolation like a shield, and no one else seems to want to break through it. Why shouldn't he want to talk with Hermione? She probably knows him better than anyone else, at this point.'

'What are you saying?' Poppy huffed back, her face settling into the tight lines of annoyance I recognized from childhood.

'I am saying,' I enunciated each word slowly, 'that the bunch of you are more content to just tease the poor man and cackle like hens behind his back. I am saying you would rather listen to salacious gossip and innuendo than to actually try to get the facts. I'm sure you care for him in your own way, Poppy, but I don't think anyone here has ever really forgiven him for the role he played in the war. You're all so used to seeing him as expendable, that you never tried to see the real man behind the act. Why can't you all just leave him alone, and keep the gossip to other less important things?'

'Why not indeed, Madame Pomfrey. That's a question I ask myself everyday.' Professor Snape's dry voice made both Poppy and I jump, both of us flushing guiltily. I wondered how long he had been standing there, listening to our conversation, and hoped it hadn't been for too long. I'm sure some of the things Poppy had said would be hurtful to him.

'Professor Snape, sir,' I managed to choke out, 'I didn't realize you had finished your visit with Hermione. It's rather earlier than normal.'

'Yes, it is,' he agreed pleasantly, although his voice remained cool. 'Hermione had something she wanted me to discuss with you, although I didn't realize your sister was here.'

The way he said 'sister' was a sneer, his lips curling in distaste around the word as his snapping black eyes pinned Poppy to her seat. 'Is there anything you wish to say to me, Poppy?'

Even though I was exceedingly irritated with her at this moment, I still felt a twinge of empathy as she cringed under Professor Snape's glare.

'No... nothing, Severus. Nothing at all. Nettie here... well, Nettie...'

'Has defended my honor quite well. I heard. Don't you have something better to do than sit here and try to cause trouble? Perhaps an irritating little dunderhead needs the kind of medical attention only you can provide.'

Poppy had the grace to look chagrined, 'Severus, you know I don't believe...'. She trailed off miserably, glancing quickly at me before standing. 'It's just talk, Severus. No one means anything by it.'

Professor Snape nodded his head slightly, 'Good evening, Poppy.'

She reached out a hand and patted him contritely on the shoulder as she walked by, still unable to meet his gaze. 'I'll talk to you later, Nettie,' she mumbled as she closed the door behind her.

I slowly turned to face Professor Snape after she had left. The man hadn't said anything to me yet, but I was waiting for what I was sure was going to be a severe dressing down. I was very surprised then, when he merely asked if he could sit in the chair recently vacated by Poppy.

'Do you do that often?' he asked quietly as he sat, minutely adjusting the cuffs of his robe with his elegant fingers.

'Do what?' I responded weakly. I found myself enthralled with his hands. 'Talk to my sister?'

If I didn't know any better, I'd say his snort sounded suspiciously like a choked laugh. 'Find yourself in the position of defending me,' he clarified.

I allowed myself to look at him and realized he didn't appear angry. In fact, he seemed curious. I shook my head, 'Not all that often. But then again, I haven't talked much to anyone except Miss Granger since we arrived.'

The man smiled slightly at that, 'Yes, Hermione tells me you're keeping her great company when I'm in class. She particularly appreciates the daily readings of Wuthering Heights. She's taken on the notion that I am a fitting portrait of a real life Heathcliff.'

I smiled at that, 'The similarities are uncanny, sir.'

'Perhaps,' he agreed. All in all, this was turning into a very pleasant if surreal conversation. There was a moment's comfortable silence, before he leaned forward slightly and rested his elbows on his knees.

'Madame Pomfrey,' he began, but I quickly interrupted him.

'Please sir, call me Nettie. Madame Pomfrey is my mother or sister. Not me.'

He nodded his acquiescence, 'Nettie then, I have a... favor... to ask of you.'

I waited, trying to keep my open curiosity from showing on my face, 'Yes sir?'

'You know I am trying to find a way to bring Miss Granger out of this curse,' he began, obviously uncomfortable with what he was about to discuss. I simply nodded again, and waited for him to continue.

'Miss Granger believes that if I were to... kiss her... she may wake up.'

I couldn't help but smile, 'Like Sleeping Beauty, sir?'

'Exactly,' he responded, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. 'I don't think it will work. As a matter of fact, I am almost positive it won't, but she is very insistent that we leave no stone unturned.'

'Indeed not,' I concurred. 'If it works in fairy tales, who is to say it won't work in real life? So, what did you need to discuss with me?'

Professor Snape cleared his throat, 'I am aware that you are here not only to provide care for Miss Granger, but also to make sure that nothing untoward happens between us, and...'

'Pish tosh, sir!' I cut in. 'As if you would ever do anything improper to her. Don't ever let yourself think I believe that for a minute. You couldn't bring yourself to hurt a hair on her head.'

He looked at me for a moment, decidedly nonplussed by my firm declaration, 'I am not a nice man, Nettie. I have done many... far worse, things in my life.' That last part was said softly, as if he were ashamed.

'We've all done things we wish we hadn't,' I replied. 'You're no longer the man you were back when you first joined Voldemort. I daresay you're not even the man you were 8 days ago, when you found Miss Granger. You don't need to confess your sins to me.'

Professor Snape said nothing for a moment, before he bowed his head. 'How can you be so sure I won't hurt her?' His voice was low, almost as if he was making a plea. I suppose he was, in his way. If ever a man needed someone to believe in him unconditionally, it was Professor Snape.

I sighed, 'I've got eyes, don't I? It's obvious to anyone who cares to look past their own myopic prejudices that you care for Miss Granger. I trust implicitly that you would die before you would allow her to be harmed.'

He nodded at that, 'I won't let anything hurt her.'

'I know it, sir. So Miss Granger wants you to kiss her does she? I always heard she was a smart one.' I grinned at the sudden flush that crept up his neck.

'It is purely to rule out the possibility that it might work,' he began, but I laughed.

'Of course,' I grinned at him cheekily. 'I think she might love you, Professor Snape.'

'The deluded girl,' he muttered quietly, but there was a blush on his cheeks. 'And please, call me Severus.'

Snape

Chapter 13 of 20

As long as he could remember, no one had ever loved him before. It scared him to the very depth of his being, more so than those last horrifying months as Dumbledore's spy had scared him, more so than facing down Voldemort in that final battle.

Chapter Thirteen: Snape

It had been quite a day. Snape sighed as he sank into the armchair in his sitting room, pinching the bridge of his nose tightly, trying to stem the migraine he could feel pushing to the forefront.

He didn't want to take a potion for it, because he needed to be clear-headed to think.

Nothing had gone today as he thought it would, starting from the time he woke up, to his reluctant return to his own lonely rooms.

Tomorrow he was going to kiss Hermione.

She had been after him all week to do it, of course, trying to drive him over the brink with her soft touches and trembling lips, her theories that perhaps she was living in some type of fairy tale.

He knew it wouldn't work. His kiss would not wake her up she might be beautiful, but he was no one's Prince Charming.

The very thought made him smirk darkly.

He knew what she was trying to do, and he honestly couldn't blame her. Being trapped as she was, with no means of release and limited physical contact, would be terrifying. She had convinced herself that she wanted him him of all people and it didn't seem he could dissuade her otherwise. Not that he really wanted to.

It was hard denying himself the very thing his heart yearned for. After tomorrow, he didn't think he would be able to do it for much longer, if at all.

Putting off his desires, while at the same time trying to ignore hers, had been hard enough over the last week, and he hadn't even kissed her yet.

She really was a remarkable woman. Closing his eyes and leaning his head back on his chair, he remembered her sweet voice, 'I love you, Severus... You're the best part of this whole mess you're my silver lining.'

As long as he could remember, no one had ever loved him before. It scared him to the very depth of his being, more so than those last horrifying months as Dumbledore's spy had scared him, more so than facing down Voldemort in that final battle. She had power over him no one else had ever had and he was terrified of losing her.

What if he did manage to free her? What then? Despite her protestations of love would the sudden reversal of the curse, coupled with her freedom to have her pick of young men, change her interests? He couldn't help but think that it would.

The irrational, bitter part of himself indulged in the scenario that might play out if he played the part of what everyone seemed to think he was a horrible monster. In that case he wouldn't free her at all he would keep her all to himself and no one would ever be the wiser except him. Then he wouldn't need to worry about losing her. The thought, while briefly tantalizing, was one he could never truly consider. He loved her enough to let her go, if it came right down to it. He couldn't contemplate living without her any longer, yet it was a chance he had to take. He couldn't leave her like that.

He sighed again and decided a small glass of firewhiskey wouldn't be amiss. His thoughts were maudlin tonight, tinged with uncertainty and a deep aching loneliness. He needed her. He felt more real inside her mind than he did at any other time, and leaving her there to come out and face the so-called real world was becoming more and more difficult.

It didn't help that the only person who really seemed to believe that he had found Hermione was Nettie Pomfrey, of all people. He had been startled to realize that he had perhaps found a friend in her, a confidant as it were.

Potter didn't believe him that was a given. Snape knew the younger man showed up every day to visit with Hermione and grill Nettie. Neither woman had told him this, of course. He had simply overheard Potter talking to Hagrid about it a few days ago. He hadn't meant to eavesdrop, but he had heard his name and old habits die hard. He had been a spy, for Merlin's sake! That would never change.

He had been in the library, retrieving a book on ancient Latin curses, when he had spotted Potter and Hagrid sitting at one of the larger tables. He knew what Hagrid was doing there, of course the giant man had asked him just that morning if he knew of any books that described the proper care for sick Chimera.

Snape, of course, didn't. 'I would suggest you look in the library, Hagrid,' he had suggested coldly. 'Although I doubt they'd have anything there either. Those things are an outlawed creature, remember?'

Hagrid had looked at his thumbs and tried to effect an air of innocence, 'I'm not sayin' I 'ave one! Jus' curious, is all, as to wot I would do if a sickun ever came in my possession, see?'

So, Hagrid had taken Snape's advice, and Potter well, the brat was obviously there to stir up trouble.

'She does look better, Hagrid,' Potter was saying, 'but how do we know Snape wasn't the one in the first place to make her look so ill and then reverse the charm afterwards to make her look like she was getting better because of him?'

'But 'arry,' Hagrid rumbled at the younger man, 'why would 'e do it, eh?'

'I don't know, but I don't trust him,' Potter replied. 'I'm not saying he purposely wants to hurt her or anything. Albus said that Snape was telling the truth about talking to her but he could've just made her up in his head. He could really believe he is talking to her, in which case Albus would say he's telling the truth, right? I think he might be going crazy.'

'But the test, 'arry.....' began the giant, before being interrupted.

'That so-called test was a joke. Albus asks everyone if they want lemon drops and he never did make Snape specify what else he had said. Even Hooch and Minerva agree with me on that.'

'S' true...' Hagrid amended, slowly.

'And,' Harry plowed ahead, 'Madame Pomfrey told me herself that she's never heard of a case like this, and that it should be impossible for someone to be alive in their head and only one legilimens can talk to them. Doesn't that sound suspicious? Don't you wanna know what Snape's up to?'

If the half-giant answered, Snape didn't know. He had stopped listening by then. He didn't need to hear anymore.

He was used to being the subject of gossip and speculation, but that didn't make it any more palatable. Two decades of subterfuge had worked against him, and even though he had won an Order of Merlin, First Class for Services Meritorious to the Light, he was still seen as an evil ex-Death Eater far too familiar with the Dark Arts for anyone to be truly comfortable in his presence. Even Albus, at times, seemed to doubt him and Albus knew him better than anybody else or had, until Hermione.

The problem, it seemed to him, was not only that no one seemed to believe him, but that no one wanted to believe him. He couldn't really fault them for that it was bad enough thinking Hermione was lost to them, but to learn she was trapped; that she could hear and see everything going on around her but couldn't make contact; was deeply horrifying.

Snape resigned himself to the rumors spreading throughout Hogwarts and was determined to only allow himself to gloat only a little when he finally saved Hermione and everyone learned the truth.

Albus spoke with him almost daily to discuss his progress, but the rest of his colleagues avoided the topic of Hermione and her return to the point of irritation. They never asked him how she was doing, what he was doing nothing. But he knew they talked about it behind his back. Their lack of forthrightness shouldn't have offended him, but it did. He had never given them reason to distrust him or think he would hurt anyone under his care, yet their speculation remained.

Only Nettie Pomfrey seemed to trust him. Snape found this vaguely disconcerting that a woman he barely knew and hadn't been overly pleasant with seemed to know he wouldn't hurt Hermione, when people who had known him for years questioned his motives in helping her.

His talk this evening with Nettie had been illuminating, to say the least. He had been amazed to see her defending him against her sister, of all people. He had assumed they were thick as thieves, sharing the gossip and innuendo with each other like the nattering hens he had thought they were. It was amazing to him that she had managed to see through his shields and pretenses to the very core of him and that what she saw hadn't disturbed her in the least.

'I think he's probably the only one here who understands what true solitude is all about,' she had said. 'That man wears his isolation like a shield, and no one else seems to want to break through it. Why shouldn't he want to talk with Hermione? She probably knows him better than anyone else, at this point.'

Knowing where she stood on the matter had made talking to her easier. Hermione had been correct in saying that Nettie could be a friend. At the very least, Snape now felt very strongly that she was on their side. When he had told her about Hermione's idea, she had laughed and said she knew her charge was smart. That had been it.

So, Snape was going to kiss Hermione Granger tomorrow and Nettie Pomfrey, the de facto chaperone of the woman in question, was not only not going to tell anybody about it, but she was actually in cahoots with him for planning it.

Incredible.

~~~~~

His stomach was in knots. He didn't think he could do this not because he didn't want to, but because he knew it wouldn't work. And even though he knew it wouldn't work, he also realized he would still be disappointed when it didn't. Damn it all!

He had been in Hermione's suite of rooms for 30 minutes already; had downed three cups of hot tea with lemon while nervously sitting in the armchair beside Hermione's bed. Nettie had informed him earlier she thought 'the kiss' would be easier if Hermione were reclining in her own bed and not sitting awkwardly on the sofa in the front room.

It lent a surprising intimacy to the situation Snape hadn't been anticipating.

Hermione had been excited to see him. *'I thought I would have to send Nettie to get you,* she had teased when he had first arrived.

*'I'd like to see you try,'* he had retorted dryly. *'Before we do this, we need to lay some ground rules.'*

*'Ground rules?'*

Snape had shifted uncomfortably, pulling at the cuffs on his frock coat, *'I won't be in your mind when I kiss you.'*

Hermione had frowned at that, *'Why not?'*

*'I need to be totally focused on what is happening,'* he replied. *'I need to be able to analyze it and I don't think I'll be able to think properly if I'm in your mind while I'm kissing you.'*

*'Am I that distracting?'* Hermione had queried, her voice sweetly innocent and seductive at the same time.

He had merely stared at her, his gaze hard, *'You know you are.'*

*'Fine,'* she had smiled back, *'but I want a full report when you return that is, if it doesn't work.'*

*'Hermione, I trust that you aren't counting on this as a cure. I would hate for you to be disappointed.'*

*'You could never disappoint me,'* she returned, biting her lip as she did so. *'I don't expect miracles.'* She reached out and ran her small hand against his cheek, *'Now go and kiss me, before you lose your nerve.'*

Easier said than done. He felt quite uncomfortable, sitting there with Nettie standing guard in the doorway. She had asked him if she should leave, but he had requested her presence in case anyone burst in and tried to punch him in the nose, as had happened the last time.

He shifted to the side of her bed, sitting gingerly and facing her, his hip pressed against hers. Her hands, which had been lying across her stomach, had shifted when he sat down, one falling to her side and the other into his lap. He picked it up carefully, studying the dainty fingers and the small, square palm, before bringing it to his lips and kissing the back of it.

Her hand was exceedingly cold. Leaning forward slightly, he studied her face, lifting the hand that wasn't holding hers to trace the contours of her chin and cheekbones, his index finger running lightly over her eyebrows. The desire to look into her cinnamon eyes and fall into their depths was overwhelming. Shutting his eyes against her, he took a deep breath before allowing his hand to continue its deft exploration. Her lips felt soft and plump against his finger as he traced the little dent in her upper lip. Freeing his other hand from hers, he ran it gently up her arm and into her hair, cradling the back of her head in his long fingers.

*'I'm going to kiss you now, Hermione,'* he whispered, leaning forward and allowing his lips to brush lightly against hers. He was surprised at how cold they were.

Applying a bit more pressure, he waited for something to happen.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Sighing internally, he went to pull away and suddenly felt a strong arc of electricity a jolt which caused him to jump slightly and open his eyes again, looking into her own. Something had grabbed him.

He was falling.

Her lips were cold.

*Her lips were warm.*

Beneath his hands, she lay motionless.

*She was pressed against him, her sweet mouth opening under his.*

His lips were dry and tight.

*Wet, so wet. Gods, her tongue was delicious.*

Nothing was happening.

*He was being swept away on a current of desire so intense it left him reeling.*

His hands were still in her hair.

*His hands were no longer in her hair, but wrapped around her waist tightly.*

Her hands were still, one on the bed, the other on his knee.

*Her hands were on him, running through his hair, running around his back pressing tightly against his chest.*

He was silent.

*He was gasping her name, 'Hermione....'*

She was unresponsive.

*She was a firecracker in his arms, 'Severus! Please, don't stop kissing me!'*

He was going crazy.

*She was driving him mad.*

Gasping, he pulled himself away and out of her mind, his sudden movement almost making him fall off the bed. His blood was surging hotly through his veins. He wanted to dive back into her mind and finish what she had started when she had pulled him in.

He was furious she hadn't listened to him.

*He was ecstatic she hadn't listened to him.*

She was as still as death, lying there on the bed. His kiss had not woken her up.

'Are you all right, Severus...sir,' he heard Nettie inquire as if from a great distance, and his shoulders slumped.

'It didn't work, Nettie.'

'You didn't expect it to,' her voice was calm, reasonable. He turned his head slightly and looked at her, his expression grim.

'I wanted it to, though.'

She didn't say anything to that, just smiled at him sadly. 'I suspect Miss Granger is just as disappointed as you are. Go talk to her, Severus. I'll get you a cup of tea.'

Entering her mind was becoming easier and easier. The first time he had done this, it had been like falling through mud sticky and uncomfortable yet, each successive visit became easier and easier. Now, it was simply a matter of looking into her eyes and stepping through air.

Hermione was waiting where she had left him, her face flushed and her hair wild above it. Her lips were rosy and plump from his kisses and she reached out for him the minute she saw him.

'Severus.'

He wanted to grab her. He wanted to continue where he had left off. He could still taste her against his mouth, still feel the heat of her pressed against him. Instead, he glared at her.

'What was that?'

She looked confused, 'What was what?'

*'You weren't supposed to pull me in. I was trying to be objective.'* His voice was harsh with suppressed anger and thwarted desire.

Hermione looked stunned, 'I didn't pull you in. You were kissing me my lips I could feel you. Nothing was happening. And then you were suddenly here kissing me, and it was....wonderful!'

'You pulled me in,' he reiterated. 'I felt it, Hermione.'

'I didn't,' she retorted, moving closer to him. He could feel her heat radiating from his in waves. *'I swear I didn't. I wasn't even looking at you, just feeling. You felt so good, Severus.'* Her voice had dropped an octave, the seductive whisper trailing up his spine and making him shiver. *'Please, kiss me again.'*

Her arms were reaching out to him, her face flushed. He watched the rapid beating of her heart in the hollow of her throat with fascination.

'Hermione,' he whispered, allowing himself to grasp her hands and pull her to him, *'we shouldn't be doing this.'*

'Yes, we should,' she replied as her mouth met his again, gently this time, and so sweet it made his knees buckle. *'No one is here but us, there's only you and I. I've wanted this for so long, Severus. No one will ever know.'*

He was weakening. He knew he was, but Merlin's balls! She was so addictive.

'No one will ever know,' he agreed, as her hands pulled free of his, her fingers finding the clasped buttons on his frock coat and quickly undoing them before, before sliding under the dark material to his back.

He thought his heart would burst from adrenaline and joy as he wrapped his arms around her and leaned in to kiss her once again. *'I love you, Hermione.'*

'I know,' she replied.

He had stayed with her the rest of the day, enjoying their conversations and their silences. They had picnicked in the garden and walked along the lakeside before returning to his study, sharing a camaraderie tinged with such acceptance and affection, he had a hard time believing it was directed at himself. She was a wonder, a shiny prism refracting the light around her and shining into all the dark places of his soul.

The tea Nettie had brought for him had remained cold and untouched on the night table, as had the sandwich she provided. Snape hadn't even heard her return. Finally, as the sun was sliding down beyond the horizon, he pulled himself from Hermione's arms, despite her protests.

'Stay.'

'I can't.'

'You can.'

*'I need to think, Hermione, while everything is still fresh in my mind. Besides, Albus is expecting me in the Great Hall for dinner tonight. I'm probably already late.'*

*'Promise me you'll come back.'*

*'I'll come back.'*

Now, sitting in the Great Hall, staring forlornly in to his soup, he realized he was... content. It was a foreign concept for him he had never been content in his life. Hermione loved him. He didn't doubt it any longer he couldn't. Curse or no curse, she loved him and he well, suffice it to say he felt lost without her. Just knowing that he could return to her, slide into the sweet haven of her mind and converse with her, hold her in his arms... the very thought made him smile.

He glanced around nervously to see if anyone had seen him grinning like an idiot at his soup spoon and sighed when he realized they were all to busy with their meals to

notice him.

Unless... was that Sybil Trelawney, staring at him? What was she doing out of her tower? Her eyes looked excessively large through the thickness of her glasses, her brow pinched in concentration as she studied him. He frowned at her, but she just smiled that dopey smile of hers before leaning across Sprout and letting her beads drag into her soup.

'Professor Snape... Severus,' she began, in that high lilting tone he so detested, 'What have you done to yourself?'

'I don't know what you're talking about, Sybil.' His voice was cold but he shifted in his seat uncomfortably.

'There's something different about your aura today,' she continued, as if she hadn't heard him. Her myopic eyes continued to study him. 'It's full of color.'

Snape rolled his eyes at her, and Sprout tittered, 'Color, Sybil? Whatever do you mean?'

'Don't get her started, Sprout,' Snape hissed, but it was already too late.

'Everyone's aura is a different color,' Sybil turned her glance towards Sprout. 'You, Pomona, are always shades of green, with other strong earth tones mixed into it. Your aura represents you your love of nature, your ability to grow things...your love for the outdoors. Our dear Albus is mostly purple, the wisest of the aura colors, with flecks of gold overlaying it. The purple represents his strong magical powers and the gold shows he is always working for the highest good Albus has a very powerful aura indeed.'

She paused and turned squarely back to look at Snape, her eyes no longer quite so vacant but shrewd and assessing. All the other professors were listening now, leaning forward in anticipation.

'Professor Snape here, almost without exception, has almost always been black the color of anger, resentment, unhappiness and pain. He's also had flashes of purple to indicate his strong magical abilities but now! My dear young man, are you in love?'

Snape almost choked. To his left, he could hear Hooch cackle and Minerva was gazing at the back of his head with such ferocity he thought she might sever it from his neck. He scowled at Trelawney. 'Pardon me, Madam?'

'Your aura is pulsing with life,' she replied, in her irritating droning nasal, 'it's full of color! Red, clear and intense, for passion. Pink, for love and sensual bliss. Orange, for stamina and creative or sexual energy and yellow for contentment. Your aura tells me you are happy.'

Her pronouncement was met with silence. His colleagues were staring at him with various expressions of shock and amusement on their faces. No one said anything for a minute and then Hooch asked, her voice full of insinuation, 'Did you visit with Hermione this morning, Severus?'

Snape didn't even take the time to glare at her. His mind was whirling colors, Trelawney saw colors around him. Merlin's balls and Circe's teeth! Colors! Looking up at Trelawney, he pinned her with his eyes.

'What does gray mean, woman?' he barked, his jaw tight with intensity.

'Gray?' Trelawney echoed, 'gray is the division of self from spirit. A blocking of energies and soul. Gray is the color of unfulfilled life.'

Snape rose abruptly as she spoke, pushing his chair away from the table with a loud bang as he reached out and grabbed Trelawney's arm. He needed to take her to Hermione right away. The divination dingbat had embarrassed him beyond all endurance, but she had given him a clue to the curse the biggest clue yet.

### **Peter Gabriel - In Your Eyes**

*love I get so lost, sometimes*

*days pass and this emptiness fills my heart*

*when I want to run away*

*I drive off in my car*

*but whichever way I go*

*I come back to the place you are*

*all my instincts, they return*

*and the grand facade, so soon will burn*

*without a noise, without my pride*

*I reach out from the inside*

*in your eyes*

*the light the heat*

*in your eyes*

*I am complete*

*in your eyes*

*I see the doorway to a thousand churches*

*in your eyes*

*the resolution of all the fruitless searches*

*in your eyes*

*I see the light and the heat*

*in your eyes*

*oh, I want to be that complete*  
*I want to touch the light*  
*the heat I see in your eyes*  
*love, I don't like to see so much pain*  
*so much wasted and this moment keeps slipping away*  
*I get so tired of working so hard for our survival*  
*I look to the time with you to keep me awake and alive*  
*and all my instincts, they return*  
*and the grand facade, so soon will burn*  
*without a noise, without my pride*  
*I reach out from the inside*  
*in your eyes*  
*the light the heat*  
*in your eyes*  
*I am complete*  
*in your eyes*  
*I see the doorway to a thousand churches*  
*in your eyes*  
*the resolution of all the fruitless searches*  
*in your eyes*  
*I see the light and the heat*  
*in your eyes*  
*oh, I want to be that complete*  
*I want to touch the light,*  
*the heat I see in your eyes*  
*in your eyes in your eyes*  
*in your eyes in your eyes*  
*in your eyes in your eyes*

## HERMIONE

### *Chapter 14 of 20*

He would never be a handsome man, of course – years of self-loathing and downright neglect of his physical self had guaranteed that – but he was a sensual man, in a way entirely earthy and enticing. Coupled with the sheer brilliance of his mind, Hermione couldn't have imagined ever finding someone more suited to her.

#### **Chapter Fourteen: HERMIONE**

It was hell waiting for Severus to return to her. She knew he had to leave of course he couldn't spend every waking moment in her mind with her but she still hated it when he left.

She suspected she hated it for two reasons the first and most important being she loved him and felt incredibly empty when he wasn't around. The second reason was more ambiguous, but she supposed it boiled down to the fact that each time he left, she was always fearful he wouldn't return.

Not that she didn't trust him. She did. She knew he would always come back to her as long as he was able. However, Hermione was very aware that he might not always have the ability to return, and that's what scared her.

Nettie, of course, was a dear talking to her and making little comments as she pattered about Hermione's room after Severus had left.

'Well, my dear,' the older woman had stated, 'I've never seen a man look so rattled from one little kiss! Too bad it didn't work, though. I know Professor Snape...Severus...was disappointed.'

Nettie had plumped up Hermione's pillows as she said this, before running a comforting hand across the top of her head. 'He visited with you a rather long time afterwards, didn't he? He didn't even bother to eat the sandwich or tea I had brought in for him. Could you remind him to eat, dear? He gets so caught up in what he's doing that he sometimes forgets. He's not a man that can afford to lose weight he's spare enough as it is.'

Hermione started protesting that he had eaten lunch with her before she realized that it didn't really count, despite the fact that it had seemed so real. They had shared a beautiful picnic in the garden next to the greenhouses, discussing other options and ideas as to how to go about freeing Hermione from the curse, now that the 'fairy tale kisses' had been ruled out.

'I knew it wouldn't work,' Snape had reiterated as he sectioned off an orange he had pulled from the basket.

'I knew it wouldn't work as well,' Hermione agreed, grinning at him, 'but it was the only way I could get you to kiss me.'

He had smirked at that, a dull flush creeping up his neck at the same time as he muttered something about ulterior motives before he looked at her and smiled. He was doing that more often when he was with her smiling and every time he did, she would find herself suddenly breathless. She wouldn't have ever thought a smile would suit his dour features but it did. His lips were really quite full and sensual when not drawn down into their normal sneer, and the deep grooves on either side of his hawkish nose didn't look quite so forbidding when viewed as laugh lines.

He would never be a handsome man, of course years of self-loathing and downright neglect of his physical self had guaranteed that but he was a sensual man, in a way entirely earthy and enticing. Coupled with the sheer brilliance of his mind, Hermione couldn't have imagined ever finding someone more suited to her. To Hermione, he was the perfect man perfect for her, anyways.

They shared the orange he had sectioned in companionable silence, before she spoke again. 'Severus, where do we go from here, with the curse?'

'I don't rightly know,' he admitted.

'The fairy tales were a bust.'

'Yes. But we won't give up, Hermione.'

'What if we never find a cure? What then?' Her voice was shaky as she asked this and she sighed as Snape tilted her face towards him gently, his fingers sticky from the orange.

'We will find a cure. Malfoy was a smart man but no smarter than you or I. We'll figure it out, Hermione, his voice was sure and strong, his eyes intense as he studied her face.

'You can't work on this forever,' she protested, 'you have a life.'

Snape continued stroking her face with his fingers before replying seriously, 'Not really. I teach potions to a bunch of idiot children where one wrong ingredient added at an inopportune moment could kill me. Being a known Death Eater has not improved my social standing...'

'Ex-Death Eater!' Hermione interrupted, but Snape merely shrugged.

'Ex or not, it doesn't make me any more trust-worthy in the eyes of the public. Not that I particularly care,' he added when he saw she was about to interrupt him again, 'And the only person I care to spend any length of time with is you. I would suggest that perhaps the best way for me to have a life is to help you. You are my life, you silly girl.'

She saw his words as both a declaration and a vow. 'One of these days you'll have to stop calling me that,' she whispered tremulously, tilting her face easily into his palm and looking at him from under her lashes, 'or I might think you don't mean it.'

'Hermione...'

'Just kiss me again, please, Severus. Let's not think about this silly curse right now. I'm tired of it. Tomorrow we can start from scratch.'

'No more fairy tales.'

'No more fairy tales,' she agreed, smiling against his mouth as he bent to kiss her gently. 'Although I do want to live happily ever after.'

The rest of the afternoon was spent in pleasurable conversation and equally as enjoyable silence. 'I never would have thought,' Severus had teased as they walked along the lakeshore, 'that you knew how to be quiet. It's quite shocking, really.'

'Who would have known that the dreaded potions master actually had a heart under all that black,' she replied in kind, 'certainly not I.'

Later still, they returned to the dungeons, Hermione carrying her shoes in hand and leaving damp footprints on the floor as Severus led her into a cozy study she had never seen before. An inviting fire was blazing in the hearth and the walls were surrounded by book shelves stuffed full to overflowing. A large overstuffed sofa was situated facing the fire, and both Snape and Hermione sank into the sofa. She was glad he had chosen to sit with her again, and not in the armchair off to the side.

'You're feet must be freezing,' he muttered as he tucked an arm around her. Hermione felt him burying his nose in the hair at the top of her head and smiled.

'They're not too bad. And it was lovely, to walk around the lake like that. I'd never realized how far past Hogwarts it extended!'

'The next time we walk, we should make sure we take baskets to gather some of the roots that grow along the shore. I need to replenish my gilly-weed.'

Hermione murmured in agreement and leaned into Severus, twisting her upper body until she could wrap her arms around his chest. Beneath her ear she could hear the steady beating of his heart and felt contentment wash over her like a balm. 'I've had the loveliest day.'

'But tomorrow, it's back to the research,' Snape inserted. 'We need to go over every aspect of today's - test to see if we've learnt anything.'

She sighed, 'I suppose so.'

'Hermione, when I was...kissing...you. What did it feel like? Outside not here, in your mind.'

'It didn't really feel like anything, Severus. I knew you were doing it I could feel the pressure of your lips on mine. I remember thinking how warm they were...and then, you were here with me and I stopped analyzing after that.'

*'And you didn't pull me in, somehow?'*

*'No. If I knew how to reach out and grab you like that, I would never let you leave,' she teased. 'I hate it when you go.'*

*'What does it feel like when I visit you before I'm here is there a shift in your perception when I enter your mind? A jolt as it were?'*

Hermione bit her lip, *'I've never thought of it before. Normally, I'm just so happy to see you that I don't pay attention to what it feels like. All I know is that when you're not here I feel empty. That's the only way to describe it like I'm incomplete on some level. When you're here with me I'm fully myself.'*

Severus shifted at that, tightening his arm reflexively around her before pulling away and coming to stand. She couldn't tell if her words had upset him or not, but she recognized that he was getting ready to leave her.

*'Stay,'* she murmured.

*'I can't.'*

*'You can.'*

*'I need to think, Hermione, while everything is still fresh in my mind. Besides, Albus is expecting me in the Great Hall for dinner tonight. I'm probably already late.'*

*'Promise me you'll come back.'*

*'I'll come back.'*

She remained sitting on the sofa before the fireplace for the longest time, letting her mind drift, when it suddenly hit her that she had no idea where she was. She had never been in this room before; had never been in a room like it, to be perfectly honest.

The colors were a little dark for her taste, chocolate browns and dark greens that were entirely too masculine. The decorations around the room were sparse; there was no bric-a-brac or clutter, just clean lines and a casual elegance that somehow reminded her of Severus. Behind the sofa she was curled in was another arched doorway and she wondered what lay behind it. It had been many months since she'd gone exploring her last foray had led her to the room with the pictures of Ron, her mother and Professor Snape at his most cutting and sarcastic. She hadn't been exploring since.

*'Curious,'* she muttered to herself as she unfolded her legs from underneath her and stood, *'I wonder where that leads to.'*

*'Only one way to find out, Hermione,'* her little voice said, *'and that's to go through it.'*

*'I don't want to talk to pictures of dead people again,'* she replied. *'It's too depressing.'* Yet, even as she said this, she still walked forward and gingerly pushed the door open.

The room behind it was dark, the only illumination coming from behind her, shadows flickering across the wall in mimicry of the flames from the fireplace.

*'Illumina!'* Hermione murmured as she stepped forward into the shadows, gasping as the sconces on the wall lit up.

She was in a bedroom. A large four poster bed sat squarely in the middle of the room, a deep black duvet covering it. There was a squat little armchair sitting in the corner with black teaching robes thrown over it. A little end table sat against the wall to the left of the bed, a pair of reading glasses perched precariously atop a book of spells. To the right of that, a large mahogany armoire was pressed against the wall; its doors open as if someone had forgotten to shut them in their haste to leave. Hanging inside it were several black frock coats, neatly creased black linen pants and the white shirts Severus favored.

She was in his rooms. This was his bedroom. She had been sitting on his sofa, in front of his fireplace with him earlier. Spinning on her heel, she quickly walked back into the sitting room and to a book shelf, grabbing a title randomly from it and opening it up. There, on the inside cover, was his name in his familiar spiky script: Severus Snape.

Glancing around the room in confusion, she noticed a desk she hadn't seen before, tucked away into a little alcove. The desk had parchment strewn about it, and several quills lying haphazardly along the corner. Still holding the book she had taken from the shelf, she approached the desk and realized it was just a smaller version of the desk in the potions classroom. She was surprised the parchments were so scattered, as Severus had always seemed so organized and fastidious with his notes in the class room.

*'Hermione,'* she read her name, *'living death spell animulasomnis....Latin, masculine word usage. AnimulaeSomnusi, Latin feminine....Malfoy curse created for me? Can counter-cure be created?'*

Shifting the parchment on his desk carefully, she realized they were covered in notes he had made in regards to his research on the curse, including references to books he had studied. Near the bottom of the pile, a smaller piece of well-creased parchment caught her eye. Sliding it out carefully, she studied it intently and smiled. It was an ink drawing of her, faithfully rendered down to the last bushy curl. In the corner, Severus had scratched his initials and underneath it he had written, *'My Eurydice.'*

Hermione felt like crying at its simple eloquence this one image of her, drawn with Severus' own hands showed her that she was beautiful and that she was loved. Putting it reverently back on his desk, she walked slowly back to the sofa and sank into it, mind reeling with questions.

Severus had a room in her mind. She was pretty sure it was not just any room either but his room, with his books and his belongings. The entire construct was much too complex to be anything but them only thing was, she had never been in his rooms before. She had no idea what they were like or where they were situated, so how did they come to be in her mind, created just as precisely as her own bedroom had been?

Thinking back, she recalled their walk around the lake earlier that day, along a path she had never been down before but which he obviously had. Other instances came to mind things she had never really taken account of before, but now, when thinking about them, struck her as odd. The other day in the potions classroom when they had been writing ideas on the blackboard, Severus had asked her to pass him the small flask of firewhiskey he kept in the bottom drawer of his desk. She had done so, never once stopping to question how he knew it was there when even she hadn't.

There was a marble statue along one of the small pathways in the garden they would walk through that she had never recalled seeing before, but which Severus had assured her was there. In the library, there was a hidden book case that he had shown her casually dropping the wards around it until it became visible to her. When she had expressed her surprise at its sudden appearance he had smirked at her, *'Your reputation as a Know-It-All seems to have taken a hit today. Madame Pince always did believe in hiding things in plain sight. Some of these books are so rare Hogwarts has the only known copy. Perhaps something in one of them will shed some light on your condition.'*

Perhaps things like that had been happening from the start. She recalled now, even that first day when he had found her tiny red flowers had bloomed around them, covering the floor of the potion's room, growing through the cracks in the stone. She had always thought she had been so overwhelmed with emotion that she had just forgotten she had done that but now she realized that wasn't necessarily so Severus could have forced them to bloom. She doubted he even realized that he could do so, but it appeared he could create things in her mind as easily as she could, and this elaborate, private room was testament to that.

She couldn't wait for him to come back after dinner, so she could tell him what she'd discovered in his absence. She knew that even the most talented legilimens could not enter someone else's mind and create false memories or build false constructs, so why could Snape do this in hers? And why did the constructs stay even after he had left? All logic dictated that it couldn't be done and yet it had been. Hermione was sure it was all somehow related to the curse and she was justifiably elated at this discovery. It was another clue, she was sure of it.

Jumping from the couch again, she decided to wait for Severus at the front of her mind, where she would see him the minute he returned. She was so excited she couldn't sit still anyway the walk would do her good.

She was almost there when she heard the door to her rooms bang open. Looking out of her eyes, she realized that Nettie must have moved her from her bedroom into her sitting room without her even being aware of it. She had been so caught up in her discovery she hadn't been paying attention to what was going on around her. She hoped Nettie hadn't been reading to her this entire time, as she had no way of asking the woman to start over if she had.

She wondered why Severus had banged her door open when she finally saw him. His face was white, his normal pallor highlighted by the two flags of bright red on his cheeks and the glittering black of his eyes. His hand was clenched tightly around someone's arms, the knuckles shining white against the filmy purple material they were wrapped around.

It took Hermione a few seconds to place who, exactly, that purple clad arm and over abundance of clicking beads belonged to, and she almost groaned when she did. What the hell was Professor Trelawney doing here?

She was the last person Hermione ever expected to see in the dungeons, especially being dragged by Severus, beads clicking and hair flying behind her in a fairly close approximation of Hermione's own bushy locks. Several other professors hastened behind Trelawney and Snape, eyes agog and mouths open in astonishment as the divination teacher was thrust into Hermione's rooms.

The woman's normally airy voice was panicked and high pitched with fear as she apologized to Severus for...something...Hermione didn't really know what was going on.

'Severus, Professor Snape please, my arm....had I known you would react so unfavorably to what I was saying, I would never have said it! Please, forgive me...'

'Do shut up, Sybil,' Snape snapped, 'I'm not planning on killing you!' Hermione could tell that he had to refrain himself from adding 'yet' to the end of that sentence and watched with interest as he thrust Professor Trelawney forward. 'What colors do you see when you look at Hermione?'

His voice had a tense excitement to it, which puzzled Hermione as she stepped closer to the forefront of her mind to better assess what was going on. Trelawney looked just as confused as Hermione felt, although there was still a healthy glint of fear in her eyes.

'Colors?' her voice shook slightly and she blinked slowly, her bottle-bottom glasses making her eyes look incredibly huge and cow-like.

'Yes, colors,' Severus replied impatiently, 'Her aura, woman. What do you see?'

'Uhm...oh yes, her aura.' Hermione watched in amusement as the divination professor adjusted her shawls and trained her face into the vacuous look of mystery she had always tried and failed to achieve during her classes. Her voice returned to the dreamy tones she always employed when making her pronouncements, as she turned and stared at Hermione, as if in great concentration and began muttering to herself, 'My. Oh, my oh my...very unusual.' Hermione longed for the ability to roll her eyes - she was sure it would scare the old fraud to bits.

Trelawney finally turned back to Severus, 'I fear her aura is gray, as I suspected you already knew from the question you asked back at the Great Hall.'

Snape nodded stiffly, 'There are no other colors at all just the gray?'

'Just the gray,' Trelawney agreed, 'I am so sorry, but it seems Miss Granger just isn't there. Her spirit has been separated from her body.'

'I knew it!' Hooch muttered loudly, 'She's not there.'

Snape didn't even turn to scowl at Hooch, although he did growl, 'She's there all right, I've spoken with her myself you irritating wench.' His eyes were snapping at Hermione, black and intense, before he flicked a quick gaze back at Trelawney. 'Is my aura still as you indicated at dinner?'

Trelawney turned to him and nodded, 'Your colors are pulsing around you, Severus. I've never seen a more brilliant aura.'

Hermione watched Severus as he steepled his fingers and brought them to his lips, his posture still and thoughtful. In the background, she could hear some of the other professors murmuring amongst themselves, although she couldn't see them as they weren't in her immediate line of sight. Not that she cared she was more interested in watching Snape. She could practically hear his mind whirring; could feel his excitement radiating from him as his gaze shifted from Trelawney to herself.

'Sybil...tell me if my aura changes at all in the next few minutes,' he demanded, stepping towards Hermione and looking into her eyes. This time, she felt the pull he had mentioned to her earlier as well the sudden jolt from her body to his as he fell into her eyes.

'Severus, what's going on?' she demanded the minute he was there. *Why's Trelawney here?*

He gripped her shoulders tightly, *'I'll explain it in a minute, Hermione...just hold on.'*

Even as he spoke to her in her mind, she could hear him speaking to Trelawney, 'I'm with Hermione now, Sybil. What do you see?'

'Your aura....your aura is changing, Severus!' Trelawney was no longer using the breathy tones she employed while making a reading, instead her voice was vaguely incredulous. 'It's wrapping itself around Miss Granger as well....the colors....the gray....'

'What's going on,' Hermione murmured again, but Severus didn't respond. Instead, he demanded of Trelawney, 'Tell me exactly what you see, Sybil.'

'It's like your aura is combining with hers...you're sharing...I don't know how to describe it! She is inside your aura now, and you are in hers...the gray is overlapping you both, making your colors dull but they are still there, only...less so.' Trelawney's voice broke off in confusion, 'How can that happen?'

'How can that happen?' Hermione echoed.

Snape smiled at Hermione grimly, and she could see the same horrible smile pasted on his face outside her minds' eye. 'Because Lucius Malfoy was always a bastard,' he replied to them both at once. 'His curse was silvery-gray.'

His pronouncement was met with stunned silence, both inside Hermione's head and in her rooms. Professor Trelawney was the first to speak, 'A gray curse? But curses are never gray. They always have color like green, or blue...even red.'

'Gray,' Hermione murmured, *'I'm gray.'*

'Sybil, how can we incorporate color back into Hermione's aura? And if we did, would the color free her spirit? Would it break the curse?' Hermione could feel the intensity of his question burning through the air, even as he muttered for her ears, *'I can't believe I'm asking Sybil Trelawney, of all people, for advice on curse-breaking.'*

'I've never heard of this before,' Trelawney replied weakly, 'a gray aura. I suppose there is a way to re-introduce color to it, but you would have to introduce all the colors in

equal amounts to bring her aura into balance, before letting it go to take on its customary hues. If I recall correctly, Miss Granger's aura was always predominantly orangey-yellow, indicating her intelligence and loyalty, with strong flecks of purple for her magic and muddy green for skepticism. She was not open to the wondrous powers of divination.'

Hermione snorted.

'This could be the break we've been waiting for,' Severus smiled as he squeezed her hand, before asking Trelawney, 'How do we bring her aura back into balance?'

Professor Trelawney looked at him in consternation, waving her hands about vaguely, 'I'm sorry, Severus truly I am. But I do not know.'

By the time Trelawney finally left, followed by the other professors, Hermione was exhausted. Snape had kept up a running conversation with both herself and the divination professor for almost an hour, posing question after question. Hermione had been hard pressed to keep up with him, the very fact he could have two conversations at the same time confused her somewhat. After he could think of nothing more to ask the divination professor, he'd thanked her for her time and apologized for dragging her through the dungeons.

Trelawney had smiled airily at that. 'I knew we were coming here, Severus. Remember, I have the second-sight,' before she stood and regally departed. One by one, the other professors had trailed out after her some looking more thoughtful than others, but all of them wishing Snape a good evening. The only one who wished the same to her was Professor McGonagall, who had been the last to leave.

'Severus,' she had asked tentatively, 'do you really think this idea is the right track? I'd hate to see you disappointed.'

Snape had merely nodded at her, 'It makes sense, Minerva. You heard what Trelawney said about our auras overlapping each other.'

'Well, yes, but it is Sybil who said this, remember? Since when do you put stock in anything she says to you?'

'It's the only thing that makes sense right now, Minerva. The only thing.'

Professor McGonagall had sighed at that, before reaching out and giving Severus' shoulder a gentle squeeze. 'I appreciate what you're trying to do here Severus, but don't get your hopes up. It's been going on two years now that we lost Hermione. No one will blame you if you give up your search for a cure.'

'She's not lost, she's right here,' Snape replied stiffly. 'I'm not imaging her.'

Minerva had turned and looked at Hermione then, her face suddenly older than her years, creased with worry and concern, 'Of course she is, Severus. Of course. I will bid you goodnight, then. And goodnight to you as well, Hermione.'

*'I wish she believed you,'* Hermione stated softly as she watched the retreating back of Minerva exit the room. *'I know I do.'*

Snape smirked at her, gently pulling her into his arms, *'I think we're on to something here, Hermione. As much as I hate feeling indebted to that dingbat Trelawney, I think her input tonight has been invaluable. I'm sure the color of the spell was part of the curse we just have to figure out how to reverse it now.'*

*'Too bad Malfoy isn't still alive for you to talk too,'* Hermione agreed, *'or that he didn't leave notes of some sort.'*

*'No notes,'* Snape replied. *'I already checked everything he had was destroyed by either Aurors or looters, who ransacked Malfoy Mansion and burned it to the ground after it was made public knowledge that Lucius and family had been Death Eaters.'*

They were silent for a moment, before Severus added against her hair, *'But maybe Draco might know something. Lucius is the type that would have gloated, especially to his son the little sycophant.'*

*'Draco's alive?'* Hermione was incredulous, *'I thought he had died with the rest of them.'*

Snape shook his head, *'No he hadn't taken the Dark Mark yet. He's still alive and in solitary confinement at Azkaban, where he'll remain for the rest of his life.'*

*'Can you go see him?'*

*'Not without some heavy string pulling on Albus' behalf. I had hoped I would be able to solve this without having to beg for help, but it seems we have no other choice. I'll speak to Albus in the morning about arranging a visit.'*

Hermione was so surprised at this, that it completely slipped her mind until Severus left for the night that she had a bit of her own news as well: he could create things in her mind as easily as she could.

---

### **And So It Goes Billy Joel**

*In every heart there is a room*

*A sanctuary safe and strong*

*To heal the wounds from lovers past*

*Until a new one comes along*

*I spoke to you in cautious tones*

*You answered me with no pretense*

*And still I feel I said too much*

*My silence is my self defense*

*And every time I've held a rose*

*It seems I only felt the thorns*

*And so it goes, and so it goes*

*And so will you soon I suppose*

*But if my silence made you leave  
Then that would be my worst mistake  
So I will share this room with you  
And you can have this heart to break  
And this is why my eyes are closed  
It's just as well for all I've seen  
And so it goes, and so it goes  
And you're the only one who knows  
So I would choose to be with you  
That's if the choice were mine to make  
But you can make decisions too  
And you can have this heart to break  
And so it goes, and so it goes  
And you're the only one who knows*

## Snape

*Chapter 15 of 20*

Azkaban, even without the Dementors, was still a horrible place.

### Chapter Fifteen: Snape

Azkaban, even without the Dementors, was still a horrible place. Snape drew his robes closer about him as he was escorted through the lower levels, trying to ignore the inherent feeling of misery he felt exuding from the very stones.

The waiting area he was led to was darkly lit, bare except for a heavily scarred wooden table and a couple of chairs. Snape had found it ironic that Draco's fate was so similar to Hermione's; but where Hermione was trapped in her mind, Draco had been condemned to spend the rest of his life in a solitary cell, denied access to the outside world and simple human contact.

The Wizengamot, in their wisdom, had cursed Draco to the same fate Lucius had cursed Hermione. Snape thought perhaps death, in this case, would have been more merciful.

In the distance, he could hear a steady dripping, his sensitive nose smelling wet mold and stagnant water, his ears catching the occasional moan. Try as he might, it was hard to believe the dapper and dangerous young Draco, a boy he had known almost since the day of his birth, was living in a place like this. Lucius, gods rot him, was probably spinning in his grave.

'Since when am I allowed visitors?' he could hear Draco now, muttering as he was brought down the hallway, his steps and the accompanying tread of a very large guard echoing loudly. 'I was told no visitors ever! Do you suppose it's someone who wants to write my biography? I'll allow no one to profit from my confinement, you hear me?'

Snape rose to his feet, fingers gripping the table tightly, and waited for Draco to enter the room.

The boy still looked exactly the same, except for the clothes. His platinum blonde hair was somewhat longer, but still swept high off his forehead, showing off his aristocratic features. The lip still had that familiar disdainful sneer, and the eyes were still an icy blue. It was obvious he kept himself as neat as he could his finger nails were trimmed short and impeccably clean. He wore his gray prison uniform as if it were the highest fashion.

Draco looked at him silently for a moment, cocking his eyebrow and curling his lip in his father's patented sneer. 'Professor Snape. I wish I could say I was surprised to see you still alive, but unfortunately that would be a lie. Bad news has a tendency to travel, even through walls as thick as these.'

'How have you been, Draco?' Snape replied civilly, sitting back onto the scarred wooden chair when the younger man sat down as well.

Malfoy waved a hand airily, 'The accommodations aren't quite up to my usual, but the guards normally manage to keep the riffraff out. Why are you here? I know it's not out of concern for my well-being, godfather.'

The last word was fairly spat out. Snape sighed and leaned forward, 'I would have helped you if I could have, Draco. Unfortunately, your father had much more influence over you than I ever did. I am sorry you are here, but I was glad to hear you had survived the final battle.'

'You're a traitor.'

'That depends on who you speak to.'

The two men sat quietly for a moment, before Draco broke the silence. 'My father trusted you. I trusted you! How could you...'

'Your father didn't trust me, boy. He barely tolerated me and the feeling was mutual, I assure you. As to you, what did you expect me to do? Tell you I was a double agent, working for Dumbledore? You would have run to daddy immediately and I would have been dead before the end of the day.'

Draco sneered at that, 'Maybe I would have, but you'll never really know now, will you? I may have surprised you.'

Snape nodded his head at that, before replying, 'You may have, but it was a chance I wasn't prepared to take. I am sorry, Draco.'

The younger man snorted. 'Do you know what it's like, being stuck here? No one to talk to; nothing to do. They won't even give me anything to read. At night time, the walls groan. I can hear the rock creaking and sighing, telling stories I'm sure no one wants to hear. There is always water dripping somewhere... listen....' his voice trickled off, his head cocked to one side, and Snape could once again hear the echoing drip he had recognized earlier. Draco scowled. 'The dripping is even louder at night. It never stops never. I haven't seen the sunlight in almost two years. The air tastes moldy, and when I complain the guards ignore me or laugh. I wish I had taken the Dark Mark, than at least I'd be dead instead of trapped in this infernal hellhole, losing my mind!'

'Draco, I...' Snape began, but was quickly interrupted.

'Save it, Snape. I know why you're here.' The younger man's eyes glinted starkly in the flickering light of the candle flame as he smirked. 'You want to know about father's curse.'

Snape said nothing.

Draco started laughing, 'I can't help you. I don't know what he did.'

'But you knew about it.'

'Of course I knew about it! Do you honestly think my father Lucius Malfoy would ever waste an opportunity to point out his own brilliance?' Draco's tone was derisive, his laughter subsiding into spurts of hiccupping giggles. His eyes were glittering wildly now. 'You were right he did hate you. He started developing that curse even before he knew you were a traitor. He was going to hit you with it and then claim some Auror had taken you out. He wanted you out of the picture.'

'And instead he hit Hermione.'

'Oh ho! Hermione, is it? Her my o- nee....' The younger man's voice dragged out the name in a derisive sing-song, 'Stupid mudblood bitch. At least Lucius managed to rid the world of her.'

'She's not gone, Draco. She's merely trapped, in her mind. I've spoken to her.'

Draco grinned, 'Are you sure, or have you finally lost your mind, Severus?'

Snape shrugged, 'I'm sure.' He looked at the boy, assessing, 'I was hoping you could tell me what you know about the curse.'

'I know that you'll never free her, if that's what you're thinking of. It's unbreakable.'

'But it wasn't designed for her, it was designed for me.'

'I'd keep that in mind if I were you.' Draco's voice was gleeful, malicious and giddy at the same time. 'My father was a brilliant man.'

'Your father was a deluded psychopath.'

Draco smirked, 'As I said. So, Severus... tell me about Hermione... does your skin tingle when you touch her?'

Snape didn't reply, but he did stiffen, narrowing his eyes thoughtfully as the younger man started giggling again. 'It's in her, you know. And it's hungry, Severus... so hungry.'

The younger man said nothing more until the guard declared it was time for him to return to his cell. As he was pulled to his feet, his eyes pinned Snape's, suddenly sad and desperate. 'I wish you'd brought me a potion so I could kill myself. I don't want to be alone anymore.'

'Draco...' Snape began, but found he couldn't continue. The tall young man, being dragged from his cell was no longer the little boy he had wished to save. He had turned into his father.

'You'll get it in the end, Severus... you'll see. My father's already won!'

~~~~~

Standing once more on the shore where Azkaban prison rose in the distance through a shroud of fog, dim light, and anti-Muggle spells, Severus found himself reluctant to return to Hogwarts. Albus would be waiting for him there to hear of any helpful information this meeting might have produced, but the experience was too fresh in his mind to relate just yet.

He needed to think. Draco had been more helpful than the younger man probably realized.

Half-consciously snatching a destination from memory, Snape apparated from the foggy shores and reappeared in the center of a panoramic scene bathed in yellow sunlight. He was not surprised to find himself standing in the field where the final battle had occurred. He had not been back since the time he had come to gather flowers for Hermione, the day before his first visit to her at St. Mungo's. It felt a bit ironic to be here again, as if all loose ends of the circle were trying to close upon themselves and create the inevitable ending to the past two years.

The field was nothing like it had looked a month after the final battle, still scarred and pockmarked by curse-burnt trenches and black puddles where Death Eaters had once lain. Now it was filled with wild flowers and knee high grasses, and a perfume of earth and renewed life hung heavy in the air. Kneeling down in the tall green stalks, Severus closed his eyes and allowed himself to truly remember that day.

The yelling and screaming had been ferocious that was easy enough to recall. The bodies of students, Death Eaters, and Aurors alike had littered the field around him. In death they were all empty vessels that had suffered the same fate, regardless of affiliation. The air had smelled of charred flesh and blood, and the taste of magic on the back of his throat had been near nauseating. So much hate, so many curses, so much magic twisted by bitter emotions and malevolent intentions. The air on the battlefield had nearly pulsed in pain with every spell that was cast.

Among the throng he had moved steadily, black robes billowing, silver mask already discarded, and single-mindedly determined to reach Potter's side. None of the other Death Eaters, not even Voldemort himself, had realized that Snape was not with them that he had long ago realized he would rather die for the Light than live the rest of his miserable life kowtowing to a deranged madman, bent on destroying the world. There was no regret in his mind when he decided to give over his magic to the annoying teenager, only the self-satisfaction of knowing he would die with all his debts repaid.

He could remember Lucius' voice clearly, passionate and cold, when he realized Snape had betrayed them. There was the hot release of his own magic into Potter the younger man absorbing it at a rate almost too fast for Snape to control. His momentary fear that he would be reduced to a squib if this kept up, soon replaced by a fearful urgency that Potter take it all before Lucius reached him and broke the connection. And then, he had seen Hermione.

She had been fighting her way to his side as his magic deserted him, hair wild and eyes practically glowing from the incredible amount of magic being harnessed by her will. She was a beautiful vision of a vengeful spirit, and he could admit that observation freely now in the comfort of his mind. Under her aim two Death Eaters had fallen before she was suddenly in front of him, throwing herself bodily between him and Lucius to absorb the brunt of the spell. She had fallen into his arms then, Malfoy's enraged scream sweeping over them as the last vestiges of his magic left him. He remembered the few silver-gray strands that had wrapped around her, thinner than

spider webs, and how they brushed his skin, enveloping him in a bone-deep coldness, words echoing in his head as it stroked his skin *'it's him, it's him, it's him, it's him....'*

The flow of magic between him and Harry had flickered and faded, but not before an icy chill had swept through his wand hand, jumping across that final filament of shared power before the connection died completely.

He remembered her eyes, empty and mud-colored, completely devoid of the glow which had inhabited them only moments before. They had reflected back at him blankly, acting as mirrors to his own bleak future. He had wanted to sink into them, they were calling to him, urging him to drown in their flat embers and let it all end. But across the field someone was screaming, roaring words of power, and Potter's final stand after seeing his last friend fall carried every desire of those who wished to see the Dark Lord dead.

The shockwave had been tremendous, picking up Severus and Hermione to carry them end-over-end away from the center of the blast. His arms had somehow stayed around her, taking her with him, and around him Death Eaters screamed in keening finality as they dropped like flies, their voices echoing in agony across the battlegrounds. There had been a horrible pain that spread like wild-fire through his body, prompting him to release Hermione as his throat screamed his agony along with the rest. He'd felt every second, every seared nerve burning then dying, every patch of flesh being reduced to a molten gelatinous mess before sliding from his bones.

The pain was unbearable, worse than crucio, and through it all her eyes had been on him. He had felt the remnants of Malfoy's curse in her in him - and his body seemed to grow colder in the places where they had touched even as his flesh burned off his bones. There had been a voice inside his head, screaming, *'have him, have him, have him....'*

Blinking through the tears at the edge of his eyes, Snape retreated from the painful memories. His legs shook as he pushed himself upright, the dry stalks brushing his calves and snagging on the edges of his robes. The last thing he honestly remembered before oblivion had overtaken him was her; the overwhelming need to get Hermione to safety. Those thoughts had overridden the pain and fear, and he'd been consumed with the desire to save her in some way save her as she had saved him. Without even realizing it then, but sure of it now, he had focused on her empty gaze and somehow drawn forth the last shred of magic he possessed to send her away. That place had been, it seemed, straight to the ancient sanctuary of Calanais.

~~~~~

When Snape arrived at Hogwarts, he was surprised that someone was there waiting for him. Just beyond the main entrance, standing inside the foyer, Minerva had given him a small smile as he stepped past the large oak door.

'Hello, Severus. Did things go well?'

'As well as could be expected,' he replied, his voice lacking its usual bite. The visit to Holly Meadows had drained him, and he was in no mood to trade words when he was late for an appointment with the Headmaster.

He began walking in the direction of Dumbledore's office, but was surprised when McGonagall fell into step beside him. 'Is it alright if I walk with you?'

'If you wish.'

After a few seconds, she spoke again. 'Severus...I know I haven't been as supportive of your research into finding a cure for Hermione as I could have been, but...'

Snape interrupted her, 'I know, I know she's always been your favorite student and you've been worried about my intentions.' His voice was, surprisingly, not bitter when he said this. Minerva sighed.

'It's not that, Severus. I do care for her, of course I do but I care for you too. I just didn't want to see you getting caught up in something that we had all come to believe was incurable. I admit, when you first told us you were able to communicate with her I was we all were skeptical. Not because you have ever been anything less than truthful with us, but because the notion just seemed so unbelievable. I've always thought that you trying to help Hermione is a way for you to try to redeem yourself, and I've felt that unnecessary. You have nothing to prove to me; to any of us, for that matter.'

'That's nice to hear, but why are you telling me this now, Minerva?' Snape was genuinely curious. Her words had angered him somewhat, but his usual biting reaction to such emotions was greatly tempered by the underlying affection he had always had for the older woman.

'None of us have treated you fairly, Severus. Of all of us, I think you have suffered far more than even Harry did during our fight against Voldemort. It's been hard to break 20-some-odd years of perception and action.... While Voldemort was still alive even when we just suspected he was but couldn't quite prove it I had to treat you with suspicion and derision, so as not to raise alarm. You had to act as you did towards the students and the rest of us to avoid having your loyalties questioned. I suppose after 20 years, treating you in a certain way has become habit. I wanted to apologize for it for making you feel as if we didn't value you. For refusing to recognize the war is well and truly over, and we no longer need to act as if we distrust you for the sake of appearances. And I'm glad that you've finally found someone you seem to love.'

Snape grimaced, 'Even if it's your favorite coma-ridden Gryffindor? Not that I admit to anything.'

'Especially if it's her,' Minerva replied. 'She's the only one I know who could possibly give you a run in the brains department.' She stopped walking, and placed a hand on his arm, forcing him to stop as well. He looked at that boney hand, slightly wrinkled with the beginnings of sun spots, and realized that Minerva was getting old. 'Just promise me Severus, that you won't become so immersed in saving her that you lose sight of who you are and what you mean to so many people. I want Hermione back of course I do but I don't want to lose you in the process.'

Her serious words made him shift uncomfortably. He was not prepared for this, today of all days he didn't think he could handle her earnest declaration of care and concern, nor what was obviously a heart-felt apology.

'Promise me, Severus.'

'I can't, Minerva,' he finally replied. 'I'll do whatever I have to to free Hermione. I promised her first.'

The older woman grimaced and was about to say something else when Hooch and Trelawney rounded the corner of the hallway, a couple of older students walking with them. When Hooch saw him, her eyes gleamed.

'Sybil!' she said in a bright, overly loud voice, 'tell me, has Severus been to see Miss Granger yet this morning? How's his aura look?'

Snape stiffened and glared daggers at the pompous woman while Trelawney, wisely, didn't reply. With a stiff nod at Minerva, he spun on his heel and walked past the two, feeling his temper rise as the older students with them tittered behind their hands.

Behind him, he could hear Minerva speaking to Hooch in her iciest tones, 'Xiomara, was that really necessary?' By the time Hooch made her reply if she ever did he was already out of range.

It was bad enough that his colleagues felt free to laugh at him and discuss him behind his back, but to make their comments in front of students was entirely inexcusable. He could feel the anger that had been absent the majority of the day, buried under atypical sadness and remorse, returning to burn viciously at the forefront. By the time he was less than two hallways from Albus' office, his righteous indignation was looking for a suitable outlet in which to express itself. It was then he heard his name and stopped, slipping into the shadows as a gaggle of giggly young students stopped their forward momentum a mere 20 paces from him.

'I'm serious!' one girl Ravanna Hickles, Hufflepuff, 3rd year protested loudly. 'My cousin said it was obvious he loved her even when she was still a student!'

'No way,' this was Alicia Bones, Bertie Bones' younger sister. 'Snape has never been in love with any one. It's beyond him he doesn't have a heart.'

'Everyone has a heart,' scoffed a third girl, 'even the black bat. I think it's rather sweet, actually.'

'It is very romantic,' agreed Ravanna, sighing. 'It's a tragedy that the only girl he ever loved was stolen from him and now he'll spend the rest of his life sitting by her sickbed, longing for her... I mean, he is a hero he deserves some happiness!'

'He's a bastard,' this was Merry Parkinson. 'And I think it's disgusting he's twice her age. The thought of what he might be doing to her, when she's locked away in her rooms downstairs, makes me sick.'

Ravanna rolled her eyes. 'You make me sick,' she retorted, 'always thinking the worst. I think it's very romantic he's like Darcy.'

'Who?' the unknown girl asked.

'From Pride and Prejudice; Muggle studies? Really, Eugenia, you should pay more attention in class!' Ravanna chided, before turning to her friends and sighing. 'Honestly, I think he wears so much black because he's in mourning...'

'He's always worn black,' Merry scoffed, cheeks slightly red with anger. 'And if this is the way he acts when he's in love, I'd hate to see him when he's in a bad mood!'

'But you shall,' Snape hissed from the shadows, before stepping forward and pinning each girl in turn with his eyes. 'You insufferable, moronic chits! Bad enough I have to teach you and your ilk in classes everyday, trying to ensure no one blows themselves, their fellow students or worst of all me to pieces! But to have to stand here and listen to your malicious gossip and disgusting innuendo,' he hissed the last bit of this, his voice more sibilant than a snake's, 'is something I. Will. Not. Do! Fifty points from each of you, and detention for a month with Filch starting this evening! Do I make myself clear?'

The girls were shaking, their faces red with mortification. 'Yes, Professor Snape, sir,' they murmured softly. Ravanna inched forward slightly, 'We're sorry, sir.'

'Not as sorry as you're going to be, if you all don't get out of my sight!' he roared. The image of them, running down the hallway as fast as they could, coupled with his cathartic outburst, helped improve his mood somewhat. Smirking darkly, he continued towards Dumbledore's office.

Insufferable, melodramatic, hormone ridden charlatans! How dare they compare him to some romantic figure from Muggle literature Hermione was the only one allowed to do that, and only because she had earned the right. She knew him, in a way those simpering idiots did not and never would. He would have to remember to tell her about the conversation he had overheard and the girls' reactions when he had popped from the shadows and surprised them all. Hermione would find it terribly amusing, he was sure, and since not one of the irritating twits was from Gryffindor she could not reproach him for taking so many points from them. Keeping his sudden grin hidden, he realized he had finally reached Dumbledore's office.

Based on how his day had been going so far, he shouldn't have been surprised that Albus wasn't alone. Potter was there as well, and the younger man did not look happy to see him.

'I'm back, Albus,' Snape offered in way of greeting, not even bothering to acknowledge Potter. 'However, if this is a bad time I'll be more than happy to return later.'

Dumbledore smiled benignly at him, 'No need, no need, Severus. Sit down. Gum drop?'

'Thank you, but no. You know I detest candies.'

'And I keep telling you that a regular intake of these sugared delicacies might sweeten your disposition!' Albus replied blithely.

Potter snorted and Snape finally turned to acknowledge him, eyebrow cocked and sneer at the ready. 'Do you plan on leaving anytime soon? I have something I need to discuss with Albus and you are definitely not invited to contribute.'

Potter scowled at him. 'I heard all about your aura, Snape. You're happy, are you? Full of passion and sexual energy, are you?' The boy spat out the last of this, his voice hoarse with anger. 'What are fuck are you doing with Hermione?'

'Precisely!' Snape replied coldly. 'I've always been fascinated by necrophilia, Potter, and it makes things especially titillating to have an observer such as Nettie Pomfrey in the room while I have my evil way with Hermione.' He smirked at the embarrassed flush creeping up the younger man's face, before sitting back in his chair and adjusting his cuffs.

'I assure you Potter though I don't know why I should that I only have Hermione's best interests at heart. It is imperative that a cure for this curse is found, and I intend to do so. Regardless of the way you feel about me, or the way I feel about you, I think we can both agree that saving Hermione is of utmost importance. I don't have time to waste my energy trying to reassure you that I am not forcing my attentions on her. You will believe what you will, with little regard to anything else. Now, if you have any more questions regarding my visits with Hermione, I suggest you speak to Nettie Pomfrey and leave me alone.'

The younger man didn't reply, his mouth set mulishly on his face as he turned to face Dumbledore. 'You'll think about what we discussed?'

'There's no need, Harry,' the older man replied gently, 'No need at all.'

'Fine then. I think I will go find Nettie.'

'Try to take a moment to talk to Hermione while you're there, Potter.' Snape was sarcastically judicious as Harry rose to his feet and headed towards the door. 'She says you never talk to her anymore, and your puppy dog eyes and droning sighs are depressing her.'

He smirked when the door slammed, before turning back to the older wizard. 'Now Albus, instead of offering me a tea, how about a glass of Old Ogden's instead? It's been a very trying day.'

### ***Too Much Love Will Kill You by Queen***

*I'm just the pieces of the man I used to be*

*Too many bitter tears are raining down on me*

*I'm far away from home*

*And I've been facing this alone*

*For much too long*

*I feel like no-one ever told the truth to me*

*About growing up and what a struggle it would be*

*In my tangled state of mind*

*I've been looking back to find  
Where I went wrong  
Too much love will kill you  
If you can't make up your mind  
Torn between the lover  
And the love you leave behind  
You're headed for disaster  
'cos you never read the signs  
Too much love will kill you  
Every time  
I'm just the shadow of the man I used to be  
And it seems like there's no way out of this for me  
I used to bring you sunshine  
Now all I ever do is bring you down  
How would it be if you were standing in my shoes?  
Can't you see that it's impossible to choose  
No there's no making sense of it  
Every way I go  
I'm bound to lose  
Too much love will kill you  
Just as sure as none at all  
It'll drain the power that's in you  
Make you plead and scream and crawl  
And the pain will make you crazy  
You're the victim of your crime  
Too much love will kill you  
Every time  
Too much love will kill you  
It'll make your life a lie  
Yes, too much love will kill you  
And you won't understand why  
You'd give your life, you'd sell your soul  
But here it comes again  
Too much love will kill you  
In the end...  
In the end.*

## **NETTIE**

*Chapter 16 of 20*

'She pulled me in, even when I wasn't looking at her,' he hesitated momentarily, carefully considering his words. 'At least, something pulled me in. I think it might have been the curse.'

## Chapter Sixteen: NETTIE

I can never remember to call Professor Snape, Severus. He has been Professor Snape in my mind for so long now that I find it nearly impossible to see him as anything else. Although, I have to admit, that with each passing day here at Hogwarts he has become less and less like the Professor Snape I had first encountered almost two years ago at St. Mungo's.

It's not just his demeanor that has changed because, honestly, I'm pretty sure that other than Miss Granger, I am the only one privy to his softer side. I do see him every day, after all. His hard edges seem to disappear the moment he enters Miss Granger's and my rooms; his shoulders loosen, and the tight lines around his face relax. Even his eyes, so obsidian and black, seem to take on a warmer cast like dark shadows in a candle lit room. I'm sure that sounds silly, but it's true.

When he enters our suite the first thing he normally does is loosen the top few buttons of his frock coat, as if that small gesture is the way he gives the rest of his body permission to unwind.

Even though we have become, dare I say, friends, he still doesn't talk to me that much. We'll exchange the normal pleasantries, he'll inquire as to my day and how Miss Granger has been, and then he'll spend the rest of the evening with her. It's only when he is with Miss Granger that I truly see the Severus in him; that the persona of Professor Snape he adheres to so rigidly dissipates completely.

I have taken to calling him Professor Severus, which seems to amuse him.

The first time I greeted him as such, he cocked an eyebrow at me and, it seemed, bit back a slight grin that was tugging at his mouth.

'You can drop the Professor, Nettie.'

I sighed when he said this, before shaking my head at him emphatically. 'I can't, sir Professor Severus, sir. You only seem like a Severus when you're with Miss Granger. At the same time, I find it impossible to see you as Professor Snape anymore, because I believe we are friends now and you no longer scare me. Professor Severus is honestly the best I can do.'

Lately, though, his physical presence seems to be diminishing. I can't explain it really I mean, the man has lost weight of course. I know for a fact he often forgets to eat; and from what he's let slip, I believe he is sharing meals with Hermione when he visits her. The problem is that he seems to forget that the food he shares with her is imaginary.

Since I first met him, he's always been spare. Even the black frock coats, vests and shirts he prefers to wear do not hide the sharp angles of his frame. And since he's practically stopped eating, those angles have become more noticeable. Where once his face was thin and aristocratic, it now seems gaunt. His cheekbones are like blades over the hollows of his jaw, and his eyes are seeming deeper within the pronounced sockets of his face.

Not only has he lost weight he can ill-afford to lose, but his once impeccable grooming is no longer as evident. It seems he has always had rather greasy hair, but lately it has become worse. The black strands are lank and dull, and hang lifeless against his neck. Some days it seems as if he hasn't even brushed it. And his clothes once the deepest of blacks, without even the slightest hint of lint on them, and crisp as a fresh sheet of parchment are more often than not wrinkled and stained. The white cotton ruff of his linen shirt is starchless and gray. Over the last few days I've questioned if he's even changed his clothes at all. When he stopped by for an early morning visit to Hermione and I to remind us of his visit to Azkaban, the man hadn't even bothered to shave. The starkness of his dark whiskers against his lean and pallid cheeks presented quite a contrast. After he left, I turned to Miss Granger.

'You must remind Professor Severus to eat, dear. He's losing too much weight, and it doesn't look good on him. It is not my place, I know, but I am worried about him, Miss Granger. The Severus I met last year would never step outside in clothes as rumpled and stained as he was wearing today.'

I really began to notice the changes in him the day after he first kissed Miss Granger, and it had me worried. I could not, for the life of me, figure out why his physical condition seemed to be deteriorating so rapidly. If I was not able to converse with the man and observe his actions as often as I did, I might have even questioned whether or not he was slipping into some sort of dementia.

Miss Granger, of course, never looked better. Being here at Hogwarts really agreed with her or, more likely, it was being here with Professor Severus that made her hair and skin glow. As quickly as the Professor seemed to be deteriorating, with her it was just the opposite for a young witch who had been so close to death less than two full weeks ago, she really looked quite remarkable!

'So, Miss Granger what shall we do today?' I asked her, as I sat down in the chair beside her bed with my tea. 'I have a feeling we won't be seeing Professor Severus again until much later this evening. Perhaps, a nice bath in the big tub and a massage? I have a new charm I thought we could try on your hair I've been told it will make curls into ringlets! I bet your hair would look even lovelier than it does now.'

I had just settled Miss Granger into her chair and was preparing to read to her when I heard a sharp knock on the door. Our day had gotten off to a slow start, but I was surprised to see that it was Minerva McGonagall who decided to stop by unexpectedly not long after the Professor had left.

'May I come in?' she requested, when I opened the door at her knock.

I was genuinely surprised to see the older witch. Although she was visiting Miss Granger with more regularity now that she was back at Hogwarts, she had just been here not two evenings ago, when Professor Severus had dragged that odd-looking Trelawney into the rooms. I smiled at her politely, 'Professor McGonagall, Hermione is still in her room. Would you like a cup of tea?'

The older woman smiled, 'Please, Madam Pomfrey. I find it very chilly down here.'

'You get used to it, dear,' I replied. 'Go on in, I'm sure she'll be happy to see you.'

She nodded at this, before asking, 'Would you have a tea with me while I visit with Hermione?'

Her request caught me off guard. I was sure she was going to question me about the Professor, and I had no interest in easing her mind in any way, or providing any more fodder for the gossip mills. I was about to decline, when she smiled at me suddenly. 'I heard about your dressing down of Poppy. She does admit grudgingly that she probably deserved it.'

I bit back a grin at that, 'I won't talk with you about Professor Snape, you realize.'

Her smile grew wider at this, 'I'd heard you were championing him. It's just tea, Madam Pomfrey.'

The ensuing visit was actually quite nice. Within the first 30 minutes, Minerva and I were laughing like old friends. I was especially pleased that she included Miss Granger in the conversation.

'He was so upset your first year here, Hermione,' she chuckled, patting the younger girl's hand. 'He couldn't believe you had figured out his riddle so quickly, and it was quite fun to tease him in the staff room about it. He was sure you had cheated, somehow. It took him ages to admit that you were, in fact, as intelligent as everyone kept saying you were!'

'I can see how that might have bothered him,' I agreed.

'He is rather prickly, Madam Pomfrey, as I'm sure you noticed.'

'I've noticed, all right. And please, call me Nettie.'

The older woman looked pleased at this, 'And you must call me Minerva, then. I have to ask, Nettie what is your name short for?'

I laughed, 'My name has a curious tale behind it. You see, my father was bound and determined to have a son. My mother, bless her, was equally determined that I would be the last baby. You would understand this if you had ever been around my sisters when they were little hellions, the lot of them! When I turned out to be another girl, my father was more than a little disappointed. When it came time for him to name me, instead of going with Daisy which is what my mother wanted he chose Nettle, because I had stung his heart.'

Poor Minerva didn't know what to say to that, which made me laugh even harder. 'Oh, don't feel badly for me, Minerva. He got over his disappointment he really was a wonderful man. And Nettle quite suits me can you honestly picture me as a Daisy? Gods forbid!'

All in all, it was a lovely visit. Minerva didn't leave until just after lunch, her smile warm as she wished a good day to Hermione before turning to me. 'You are doing a wonderful job here, Nettie. I'm glad we had this opportunity to talk I'm sorry it took so long in coming.'

'Better late than never,' I replied as I walked her to the door.

'True.' She paused just inside the hallway then, looking at me, 'What you said to Poppy about the way we treat Severus...you were right, you know. We have been horrible to him. I wonder why we didn't see it?'

'It's hard to see what's become habit, Minerva,' I replied gently, watching her nod to herself as she slowly left the dungeons.

~~~~~  
I was just getting Hermione settled comfortably in her big chair when the door sounded again. It was much later in the afternoon I had read to her for a while after Minerva's departure, before finally giving her the bath I had promised earlier in the morning.

I had a large fire blazing in the fireplace, as her hair was still wet. She had on a beautiful thick terry robe Professor Severus had bought for her when she first arrived, and I was looking forward to brushing and charming her hair as it slowly dried by the fire.

'Who can that be now?' I muttered to myself. 'Professor Severus would have just walked in, so it's not him.'

It was Harry Potter.

I have to admit I wasn't thrilled to see him. While I didn't dislike the boy, I wasn't a fan either it was hard for me to believe that this young hothead was the savior of the Wizarding world.

'Mr. Potter what a pleasant surprise,' I said, even though my heart wasn't in it. 'Hermione's just had a bath she's sitting in front of the fireplace.'

Potter shifted uncomfortably, before looking at me and declaring, 'I've actually come to visit with you, Madam Pomfrey.'

Oh, bother.

Sighing, I stepped back, 'I need to brush Miss Granger's hair. Come on through you can tell me why you're here as I do that.' I didn't offer him a cup of tea.

'Hullo, Hermione,' he said quietly as he slipped into the room behind me. I rolled my eyes at her and grabbed the hair brush before turning back to face him.

'What can I help you with, Mr. Potter?'

The younger man looked slightly uncomfortable, 'I'm just here to see what's going on with Snape and Hermione. I'd heard ... about this aura thing....' he grimaced as he said this. 'And it's worried me somewhat.'

I sighed. 'What, exactly, is bothering you about it?' I tried to, but couldn't quite hide, the impatience in my voice.

'I'm just wondering...you're here with them all the time, right? You never leave Snape alone with Hermione, do you?'

He flinched at the look I shot him. 'Mr. Potter must you come by every few days to ask me the same questions? I'm getting rather tired of it.'

'I can't help it if I don't trust him,' he retorted sullenly. 'You wouldn't either, if you knew him like I do.'

'I know him better than you do, Mr. Potter,' I retorted angrily. 'Honestly! What makes you think you know him at all? Just because he was your professor for a few years?'

'He's always been a miserable git! He's never liked anyone - he's never liked me!'

'He liked you well enough to save your life!' I snapped back. 'Or have you forgotten that?'

Potter flushed, 'I haven't forgotten. But Hermione... she's like this because of him.'

'You hate the Professor because of a choice Miss Granger made?' My voice was incredulous. 'He didn't ask for any of this you know. None of it. Yet it seems to me, for a man who doesn't like anyone, he's pulled the wool over a lot of people's eyes. Professor Dumbledore seems to like him, and he strikes me as an intelligent man. Minerva likes him; I like him. I'm betting that your Hermione here loves him.'

'Don't say that!' he shouted suddenly. 'She doesn't love him.'

'She does, Potter.' I had stopped brushing Miss Granger's hair as we spoke, and found myself now looking intently at the boy. 'Look at her she looks like a woman in love.'

'She looks like a woman in a coma,' Harry retorted bitterly.

'That too,' I agreed. 'She is in a coma of sorts, but that doesn't mean she's not there. That doesn't mean she's not allowed to have feelings, or dreams, or anything else you seem to think being in a coma implies.' My voice was gentle now. I stepped towards him and crouched down, tentatively reaching out and touching his hands which were clasped tightly on his knees.

'Remember that day you came to visit her, and I told you she was dying? Remember how badly she looked? Her hair was brittle, her skin gray and lax... you yourself said she looked like a cadaver. Remember?'

The young man nodded miserably.

'It was Snape that gave her back her health. I believe she looked like that because she thought he had left her; she was dying without him.'

'How do you know it wasn't a trick?' Harry offered hesitantly, 'Maybe Snape charmed her to look like that, so we would think she would die without him. Maybe it was a ruse to get her back to Hogwarts and under his thumb.'

I shook my head gently. 'The only reason he came back was because of you, Mr. Potter. You were the one that went to him when you realized she was dying. For that matter, you went to him when I told you we had to keep her hair short remember? Why would you do that tell him these things if you hate him as much as you claim? What did you expect him to do about it?'

Potter looked confused, 'I don't know. I don't know! All I know is that I miss her. If Snape... if he hadn't been helping me... she wouldn't be here at all. She would never have had to throw herself in front of Malfoy's curse.'

'So you blame Professor Snape because you feel guilty,' I pointed out, gently. 'That's not very fair of you.'

'I can't help the way I feel!' His green eyes were swimming with tears. For the first time in a long while, I felt sorry for the boy.

'Of course you can't, Mr. Potter. None of us can but think about this for a moment: what if he does manage to free her? What are you going to do when she tells you herself she loves him? Are you going to hold onto your anger towards Severus; make Miss Granger choose between you? Because I have to tell you from where I'm sitting, she would choose him. You don't even believe she's really there, inside her mind. It's been Professor Snape who has visited her every day, who's struggling to find a cure for her despite the obstacles you seem to be trying to put in his way.'

Potter looked like he was going to interrupt, but I didn't let him. 'Don't you think Miss Granger might ask you why you weren't more willing to listen to Professor Snape? To help him? I'd always heard you were a powerful young wizard... yet you haven't lifted a finger to contribute in any way to breaking this curse.'

The younger man looked down at his hands, 'He won't take my help.'

'You mean, he won't ask you for it,' I corrected. 'He does have his pride, you know, just as you do. I think if you offered it, he might surprise you. Promise me you'll think about what I've said.'

He didn't reply, instead choosing to wipe his eyes with his sleeve. I was about to offer him tea when I heard Professor Dumbledore's voice coming from the fireplace, 'Nettie dear, are you there? Can I come through?'

Rising from my crouched position, I turned towards the fireplace, 'Of course, Professor Dumbledore please come in!'

I looked at Hermione, smiling, 'I think we should ask Professor Severus about getting a sign that reads Platform 9 3/4 to hang on the wall over there, dear. It's been excessively busy today.'

Dumbledore, who was brushing pieces of ash from his beard, smiled at me when I said this. 'Who else has been by?'

'Minerva, for one, and Mr. Potter he's still here, as a matter of fact.'

The older man peered at the young lad over the top of his half-moon spectacles.

'Hullo Albus,' Potter greeted quietly.

'Harry, my dear boy. I suspected you would have left by now.'

Potter shrugged, 'Not quite yet. Where's Snape?'

'I imagine he's in his quarters, straightening up. He was waiting for a book from Durmstrang and wanted to see if it had arrived before he came to see Hermione. Which leads me to you, Nettie,' he said, turning to me. 'Severus said he was coming to have dinner with Miss Granger this evening, and I wanted to ask you...' He paused, the twinkle in his eyes fading as he leaned closer to me and lowered his voice.

'I'm worried about him, Nettie. He doesn't look good, and I just wanted to make sure he was eating. I've only seen him in the Great Hall once in the last two days the night he dragged Sybil down here and he didn't eat more than half a bowl of soup.'

Potter was listening in unabashedly. I suppressed the urge to scowl at him before replying, 'I do make sandwiches and the like for him, sir, but more often than not they are left uneaten. He does drink lots of tea though. I'm... I've been worried about him myself.'

'He's lost a bit of weight,' Potter inserted, 'big deal. Everyone does.'

'Not like this, Harry,' Dumbledore's voice held a bit of a bite to it. 'It's not just the weight didn't you notice how rumped he looked when you saw him earlier? He hasn't bothered to shave yet today, and I don't think he's washed his hair in a week.'

Before Potter could respond at that, I snapped at him, 'If you say 'How can you tell?' I shall smack you, Mr. Potter.'

The boy shut his mouth.

I bit my lip as I turned back to the Headmaster, 'What do you want me to do, Albus? He's a grown man, I can't force him to eat and I don't think he'd appreciate it if I tried.'

'No, of course not, of course not,' Dumbledore responded, 'I'm just concerned he hasn't looked this bad since the final battle, and he didn't have any skin then.'

We stood silently for a moment, thinking. Even Potter looked like he was considering something. I must admit, we all jumped a little when the very man we had been discussing swept into the room without announcing himself.

'Nettie. Albus... Potter...' he greeted civilly, although he growled Potter's name slightly. He was in shirtsleeves and black britches, his vest and frock coat obviously forgotten when he had left his rooms. Under his arm he carried a large, leather bound book.

'I must say, I'm surprised to see so many people here. I was only expecting Nettie and Hermione.' He stepped towards her as he said her name, and I could see his free hand reaching out as if to touch her, before falling back to his side. Instead, he placed the book on the table next to her chair and turned to look at the three of us.

'Is there a problem?'

'None, Professor Severus, sir,' I replied. 'Mr. Potter just came by for a visit and Albus came to tell me you'd be arriving soon.'

'I see your book arrived, Severus,' Dumbledore stated calmly. 'Does it contain what you'd hoped?'

'It contains something I can modify, at the very least,' the Professor nodded.

'I hope your trip to Azkaban was beneficial, sir,' I remarked.

'Azkaban! What did you go to Azkaban for?' Potter had jumped to his feet and was looking at Snape searchingly. I sighed. Snape cocked an eyebrow.

'Hermione keeps telling me you're intelligent, Potter, so put that brain of yours to use. Why do you think I went there?'

'Draco...' Potter breathed suddenly. 'I suppose Albus pulled some strings to get you in, did he?' He tilted his head at Dumbledore, before adding, 'Why didn't anyone tell me

you were going there?'

'Whatever for?' Snape retorted icily. 'What difference could it make to you?'

I watched with interest as Potter bit back the retort I knew he wanted to make, before he asked, relatively calmly, 'Did you get any information from him?'

Professor Severus cocked his eyebrow at him skeptically, and I could tell he was a little surprised at the boy's relative politeness. He looked at Potter as if considering something, before turning to me, 'Had a little talk with Potter here, did you, Nettie?' I flushed, and hoped it was dark humor I was hearing in his voice, and not irritation.

'You look tired, sir. Can I get you some tea?'

He actually smiled when I asked this. 'Someone must have told you a tea cures all ills, the way you bandy it about woman. Yes, a tea would not be remiss.' He turned to Albus and Potter again, 'I needed to talk to you both, anyway. Would you mind staying here for a bit? I just need to talk to Hermione and then I want to try something.'

Both men nodded their assent, Potter watching with great interest as Snape moved into Miss Granger's line of vision and leaned forward to look into her eyes. In the sudden silence of the room, I quickly conjured the tea service and prepared tea for all of us, handing a hot cup to Professor Severus the moment he straightened up.

'Thank you, Nettie,' he said, absently taking it from me as he studied Hermione. 'Hermione tells me you finished 'Wuthering Heights' today?'

'Yes, indeed,' I replied, smiling. 'I told her tomorrow we would start 'Sense and Sensibility', if that was okay with her.'

'She loves Jane Austen,' he remarked, reaching out a finger and absently pushing a curl from her face, being careful not to touch her skin. From the corner of my eye, I saw Potter stiffen slightly, before forcing himself to relax a bit.

'Are you going to tell us why we're still here, Snape,' he managed to grit out. His knuckles were so tight around the dainty handle of his teacup I was surprised the thing hadn't shattered. Professor Severus turned to look at him, nodding.

'Of course, Potter.' His voice was not as cold as it could have been, but it was not exactly friendly either. 'First, I want to see if I can find Hermione just through touch alone. It occurred to me today something Draco said that perhaps I do not need to be looking into her eyes to enter her mind.'

'You've touched her before, haven't you?' Potter's voice was genuinely curious. 'Wouldn't you have noticed if that were the case?'

Snape shifted uncomfortably, 'Perhaps. Perhaps not. It's not something I've been looking for, so I might not have noticed it. And, I have reason to believe my reaction to her has become stronger since...Saturday.'

'What happened Saturday?' Potter was instantly suspicious.

'Hermione had a theory she wanted me to test,' Severus replied curtly. 'She wanted to rule out that a... kiss... could be a possible cure. So, we I did.'

'You kissed her?' Potter's voice rose slightly, 'Did you know about this, Albus?'

'Severus told me about it today, Harry,' the older man replied gently. 'It was a valid theory. A kiss did save the princesses Snow White and Aurora, after all.'

Potter and Snape both snorted at this. The younger man turned back to Snape, his eyes glittering angrily, and demanded, 'So what happened to make you think you can touch her now without looking at her eyes?'

Snape sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. 'She pulled me in, even when I wasn't looking at her,' he hesitated momentarily, carefully considering his words. 'At least, something pulled me in. I think it might have been the curse.'

'You are insane!' Potter shouted. 'Are you telling me you think the curse is still is somehow *live* in Hermione?'

The professor shrugged, 'I believe so yes.' A shocked silence reigned for a few moments, before he looked at Hermione, eyes inscrutable, and reached out and grabbed her hand. I knew immediately that he had been right the minute he touched her, he was with her. They were breathing in tandem and that strange peaceful look that always stole over his features when they were talking was evident on his face.

'My Gods!' I whispered.

'Merlin's balls!' Albus echoed.

'As I thought' Snape said. 'I won't let go of your hand, Hermione. I know you want to be part of this conversation. Albus, Potter, Nettie... we need to talk.'

~~~~~

'So what you're telling us is that the curse is still active?' Potter sounded slightly dubious, but at least he was still listening.

'It makes sense,' Professor Snape replied. 'We've hypothesized the reason I can visit Hermione is because some of the curse hit me but what if it's more than that? What if the curse is keyed to me? What if it recognized me and let me in?'

Dumbledore was frowning, the normal twinkle in his eyes replaced with worry. 'Severus...'

'Albus,' he cut the older man off, 'I've got it under control.'

'So, you're a target, then. You think it's still trying to get you?' Potter was sitting now, his eyes darting from Hermione to Professor Severus and back again.

Snape shrugged, 'I'm willing to concede it's a strong possibility. The very fact that it gets easier and easier for me to visit Hermione seems to indicate that something is letting me in. Hermione wants me to add that she feels it too... she can feel the pull. It's not her doing it, either.'

'But you think you can break the curse, right? You're not going to stop trying, are you?' Potter suddenly sounded panicked, and I looked at him oddly. Severus quirked an eyebrow at him.

'I thought you wanted me to stop trying, Potter. Isn't that what you were discussing with Albus earlier today?' He sneered at the younger man, but his heart wasn't in it. Potter had the grace to flush, but he didn't confirm what Snape had said. His guilty expression said it all for him, anyway.

'I do believe I can free Hermione,' Snape continued. 'Sybill's help in discovering Hermione's aura led me to collecting information on potions that are meant for restoring or balancing one's set of colors in their aura.' He tapped the book on the table for emphasis. 'If we can obtain the proper ingredients of the appropriate color items with some significance to either Hermione or the curse I believe it will lead me to developing a modified version of the potion that will allow the proper balance of colors to be restored to Hermione.'

'It will require at least two drinkers to perform the necessary charms that will activate the potion in her system. If we can balance out her aura and keep mine stable while I'm in her mind, I believe I shall be able to push her free of the curse so that the new aura can take hold.'

'You can't do it by yourself, Severus.' Dumbledore said tiredly. His voice suddenly sounded old. 'If the curse is as you think, it's strong. Stronger, perhaps, than you yourself

are.'

The room was silent at that pronouncement. Professor Severus stepped towards the older man, keeping his grip on Hermione's hand firm as he said gently, 'I cannot leave her there, Albus, when I could free her. Don't ask it of me.'

'What if I drank the potion, too?' Potter asked suddenly. 'You said I might have a link as well, if I absorbed some of the curse when it hit you and Hermione. At the very least, I can transfer my magic to you...'

Snape looked at Potter, considering his offer. 'That might work,' he conceded. 'The potion is a binding potion, and the colors should protect your aura from any tampering by the curse.'

'Is there anyway you can put something in it to make it possible to see the curse?' Potter added. 'If it's visible it should be easier to defeat or to avoid, if you can.'

'Excellent suggestion, Harry!' Dumbledore smiled at the younger man, seeming to have perked up at his offer. 'And if you are anchoring Snape, it would be easier to bring them both out.'

Professor Severus frowned, 'It is a good idea, Potter. May I ask why you're suddenly so helpful?'

The younger man grinned at him, his look open and honest and devoid of the dislike that was usually there whenever he spoke to Severus. 'We're both working towards the same goal,' he replied. 'I want Hermione back just as much as you do.'

'I doubt that,' the older man growled. I noticed that his fingers were gripping Hermione's tightly, the knuckles white against his pale skin. 'However, I won't say no to any help you are prepared to offer.'

'How long until you can have to potion ready, Severus?' Dumbledore asked.

'Saturday, I believe. Less than a week.'

### ***Here, There and Everywhere by the Beatles***

*To lead a better life I need my love to be here...*

*Here, making each day of the year*

*Changing my life with a wave of her hand*

*Nobody can deny that there's something there*

*There, running my hands through her hair*

*Both of us thinking how good it can be*

*Someone is speaking but she doesn't know he's there*

*I want her everywhere and if she's beside me*

*I know I need never care*

*But to love her is to need her everywhere*

*Knowing that love is to share*

*Each one believing that love never dies*

*Watching her eyes and hoping I'm always there*

*I want her everywhere and if she's beside me*

*I know I need never care*

*But to love her is to need her everywhere*

*Knowing that love is to share*

*Each one believing that love never dies*

*Watching her eyes and hoping I'm always there*

*To be there and everywhere*

*Here, there and everywhere*

## **HERMIONE**

*Chapter 17 of 20*

*'You're the very picture of health,' she'd replied honestly. 'I don't know what everyone else is talking about.'*

## Chapter Seventeen: HERMIONE

Severus was irritated. Hermione watched him in amusement as he spoke with Sybill Trelawney, doing his best to remain calm in the face of her vacuous replies to his questions. Inside her head, he was cuttingly sarcastic.

'Really, Sybill I just need to confirm the colors we should try to incorporate into this potion.'

'All the colors of the rainbow,' Trelawney replied, dreamily.

'As if I have the time to look at rainbows,' he snarked at Hermione. She tried not to laugh.

'Specifically, Sybill I just need the standards.'

Trelawney beamed at him, blinking absurdly behind her glasses before she started humming.

Snape stared at her, aghast. 'What on earth are you doing, woman?' he growled as she began to sing horribly off-key.

Inside her mind, Hermione joined in, laughing, 'Red and yellow and pink and green, Purple and orange and blue, I can sing a rainbow, Sing a rainbow, Sing a rainbow too!'

'Oh gods,' Snape muttered, the look on his face priceless. Trelawney was still singing, but Hermione had petered out and was now standing with her arms wrapped around his waist, trying to stifle her laughter against his chest.

'Sing with me, Severus!' Trelawney demanded as she took up a new verse. 'Listen to your heart, Listen to your soul, and sing everything you feel, When you can sing a rainbow, sing a rainbow, You'll know love is real. Red and yellow and pink and green....'

'Yes, yes,' Severus interrupted, snidely, 'I have it, thank you. Are there specific colors we should focus on something there should be more or less of?'

'Do not introduce any more gray to her system, of course,' Trelawney was beaming at him. 'But you must add black for balance, white for purity and something clear for clarity. Do you suppose, once this is done and you've brought Hermione back, we could work together on a paper extolling the virtue of potions in regards to the healing of auras? It would be very well received in the Divination field, I assure you. Quite groundbreaking!'

'I'm not sure I'll have the time to do that Sybill,' Severus responded tightly. He was gritting his teeth so strongly, Hermione was surprised his jaw didn't shatter. All this pleasant treatment towards Trelawney was killing him.

Hermione grinned at him, '*I don't think your reputation would survive a co-authorship with her. No one would take you seriously again.*'

'*No one seems to take me seriously now,*' Severus retorted. '*They all think I've lost my mind.*'

'Is there anything else anything at all I should be aware of Sybill?'

The divination professor smiled at him, 'Not that I can think of, but again aura's are not really my specialty. Severus....' she paused, dropping the dingbat persona and weighing her words carefully, 'when you are ready to attempt to adjust Miss Granger's aura, I hope you will consider letting me attend. At the very least, I'll be able to tell you what is happening to her and you I might be able to be of some assistance.'

Hermione looked at Snape in shock, '*She sounded almost reasonable there.*'

'*It's a good idea, too,*' Severus sighed, reluctantly. '*She really has been quite useful.*'

'I will be sure to let you know when we are ready, Sybill,' he replied, 'We appreciate the offer.'

Trelawney was beaming. 'Thank you, Severus. I think it behooves us all to help you break this curse. You're much more biddable when you're happy.'

~~~~~

It was a strange turn of events for Hermione, least of all because Harry seemed to be making an honest effort to be helpful for a change, instead of challenging Severus at every turn. It seemed the talking to Nettie had given him had helped, and Hermione couldn't be happier.

She couldn't be more excited either. She was confident that by the end of the week she would be free again free to talk to her friends, to laugh, to prove to Severus that she still loved him, even when she was no longer trapped in her mind.

She knew Albus was worried, however. It would have been hard to miss his concern when Severus had finally explained to everyone what he believed was going on. The notion that the curse was active and alive and in her was not a pleasant thought. However, she refused to entertain the idea that it might somehow capture Severus, ensnaring them both.

The one time she had mentioned it to him, he had looked at her intently. '*I'm confident I can free you, Hermione. Have I ever lied to you?*'

Of course, he never had not even when she had been his student and had disliked him. He was true to his word, even if the recipient did not like what they heard.

'*Are you sure the curse isn't hurting you?*' she had asked then, '*I know Nettie's very concerned she says you're not eating.*'

'*I've been distracted lately,*' he had practically purred this last part, his eyes glittering darkly at her. '*I'm also busy with this potion. Do I look sick to you?*'

Hermione had studied him closely, admiring the blue-black of his hair, tied neatly back from his face with a thin piece of leather. He was in shirt sleeves again, the cuffs undone and rolled up, revealing pale, sinewy forearms. His skin had lost that ghostly pallor she had so long associated with him while he was still pale, he seemed to glow with a healthy vitality. He was still not handsome, but he looked good strong and clean and healthy.

'*You're the very picture of health,*' she'd replied honestly. '*I don't know what everyone else is talking about.*'

~~~~~

'*I can't get used to a solicitous Potter,*' Severus grumbled when he stepped into the library two days after the visit to Azkaban. '*It's not natural and it's giving me indigestion.*'

Hermione hid her laugh behind the book she was reading. She reached up and absently patting the hand he had placed on her shoulder as he moved to stand behind her. '*What's he done now?*' she inquired.

'*He's brought me some red anemone wildflowers from Holly Meadows, along with some purple cranesbill and white ransoms he thought we could use them in the potion.*'

'*And this is a problem because?*'

'I'm not used to Potter using his brain and I find it distracting,' Severus replied snidely. 'However, it was a good idea to collect flowers from the scene of the final battle; the curse was cast there and the area has meaning to all three of us. You do realize, though, that cranesbill can become quite bitter when mixed with the oil of ransoms? This potion will not be palatable.'

'Since when has that ever stopped you from brewing anything?' Hermione retorted, sighing as she shut the book and leaned her head against the lower part of his chest. 'Your potions always taste horrendous. I could never understand why you wouldn't add peppermint to improve the taste.'

'Waste my peppermint to make things taste better for obnoxious children who should never have been doing something that would require them to take a potion in the first place?' Severus scowled mockingly. 'Really, Hermione.'

She smirked at him. 'I knew there was a reason. Evil git.'

Snape chuckled softly. 'Have you had time to work on the list?'

'Since you left,' Hermione replied. 'I think for black, a snip of your hair will work to create the connection needed to replace my aura. I also thought it wouldn't hurt to use finely ground obsidian to open the first chakra, since we're looking for all possible ways to combat the curse as a living force. Are those alright?'

'Not a problem. What else?' Snape was rubbing his fingers along her collarbones and shoulders as they spoke, sending disquieting sparks of energy throughout her system.

'Red definitely needs to be blood. A few drops from you and I and Harry since all three of us are ingesting the potion. I was thinking it might help to strengthen the mixture to have some of the staff contribute a drop each people we know love us. Blood magic can be a powerful tool of protection, as you know. Harry's red anemones will work for that color aspect as well.'

'Of course,' Snape agreed sarcastically. 'Musn't forget those.'

Hermione ignored him. 'The blue was easy tourmaline and bluebells. Professor Sprout always has the most beautiful bluebells in her greenhouses, and perhaps the nectar will lessen the bitterness of the cranesbill.'

'Don't count on it,' Severus grumbled.

'Stop complaining and sit down,' Hermione smiled up at him. 'Don't forget I have to have some of this potion as well.'

'Have you actually tasted anything Nettie has fed you since this curse kicked in?' Snape raised a mocking brow at her. Hermione didn't reply, instead choosing to slide her notes over to him.

'Severus, I think you enjoy being exasperating.'

Snape quirked his lips at her, before bending to read her notes, 'Brown shredded willow bark. I also think we should add some of your hair.'

'I never thought of that,' Hermione admitted. 'I'm so used to thinking of my hair as unbreakable. Do you have the counterspell for the charm?'

'There's no need,' he replied silkily. 'I cut a small amount of your hair after I grew it back, in case I would ever have need of it. One of the advantages to being a Potions Master is the excellent foresight that comes with it.'

Hermione ignored him, 'Yellow sunflower oil and citrine.'

'And Draco's hair. We can't get anything from Lucius, but the curse may recognize the hair as the progeny of its creator. I believe the Malfoy blood will work as the trigger to make the curse visible once again.'

'And how do you propose we get this?'

Snape shrugged, 'Already done. Albus sent the request to Arthur last night, and the Prison Barber paid a visit to Malfoy Jr. this morning. The hair is already sitting in an apothecary jar in my office, waiting to be used.'

'For pink, I think we should use the natural oils of eucalyptus, and diced rose-hips. The purple Harry's cranesbill, and natural oils of the lotus flower and its leaves, shredded. Orange should be ylang-ylang and steeped marigold petals, and green is peridot and emerald oils. I also did a little more research, and I think purified glacial water is the ideal base we should work with. That book you got from Dumstrang suggests using water from the ice flows in Siberia, but while I was still awake I once read that the glaciers north of Japan are a little more pure in quality.'

Severus jumped at that, slightly startled. 'How were you able to read the book I received from Dumstrang?'

'It was in your study,' Hermione replied brightly, 'Now...'

'How could you have seen it, Hermione? You've never been in my rooms.' His eyes narrowed suddenly, 'unless you snuck into my quarters when you were still a student which would be impossible. There is no way you could have gotten through my private wards.'

'You took me to your rooms the other day, Severus, honestly...' Hermione stopped then, biting her bottom lip in sudden realization. Severus probably didn't even realize he had been the one to create his rooms and a copy of the book. So much had happened in the last three days it had slipped her mind to tell him she suspected he was able to create constructs in her mind that were just as real as the ones she created. 'Circe's teeth!' she exclaimed, 'I didn't tell you!'

'Tell me what, exactly, Hermione?' Snape was staring at her, eyes narrowed. 'When did you see my rooms?'

'Saturday, after you kissed me. Remember? After our walk around the lake, we went back to your rooms and warmed up in front of the fireplace. I don't think either of us realized it at the time, and in all the excitement recently I completely forgot about it. I'm sorry for forgetting until now, but I think you can create things in my mind just like I do.'

He looked like he was about to deny it, when he paused, face thoughtful. 'You're sure we were in my rooms, and that it was the same book?'

Hermione nodded, 'I'm positive, I had never laid eyes on the book before until yesterday. As for your rooms, when you took us there, I only sat with you in your main living area, but after you left, your entire suite was accessible. I was able to walk into your bedroom. You wear reading glasses little half moons like Albus sometimes wears. They were sitting on an open book on the end table by your bed. Your armoire was open, and I could see your clothes hanging in it. Your teaching robes were thrown over

a dark green velvet sitting chair in the corner. I looked through the books on your book shelf and even though there were titles there I hadn't read, I was able to open them up and see the text. I even saw your research notes...' she blushed suddenly. 'I saw the picture you drew of me. I never realized you were an artist.'

Severus smiled slightly, 'There are many things you don't know about me yet.' He was suddenly deep in thought. 'The day I found you in the potions classroom, flowers bloomed through the floors. They were red anemone, the same flower Potter brought back today from Holly Meadows.'

'They were in the bouquet you brought me the first day you came to St. Mungo's,' Hermione realized.

'I think I've been subconsciously incorporating my memories, pieces of me, in to your mind. The question is, can I knowingly do it?' Severus was studying her intently. 'I wonder.... Hermione, have you ever tried creating familiar places outside of Hogwarts in your mind other than your bedroom? Have you ever gone to Hogsmeade, for example.'

'I've never really thought about it,' she replied. 'Until you came and took me to the gardens, I never realized I could actually go 'outside' in my own head.'

Severus quirked a brow at her, 'You realize how crazy that sounds?'

'What's crazy is that you know exactly what I mean,' Hermione retorted. 'That day at the lake, walking along that path I'd never been there before. Take me some place else, right now, that I haven't seen. Let's test this and see what our limitations are.'

Snape reached forward and grabbed her hand, 'Where do you want to go?'

'Someplace I've never been,' she replied, smiling at him. 'Someplace important to you.'

Just along the edges of her peripheral vision, Hermione saw the walls shift, the colors blending and fading as she stared at Snape. Beneath her feet, the floor fell away, causing her to blink in an effort to overcome the sudden feeling of vertigo that was making her stomach heave. When she opened her eyes again, they were standing at the top of a sandstone cliff, the smell of salt water heavy in the air. Below them, waves rolled along stretch of white sand as sandpipers chased the foam up and down the shore line.

'Where are we?' Hermione exclaimed, tilting her face up towards the heat of the sun.

'Greece,' Severus replied. 'Merlin's balls, it's just like I remember it.'

Hermione smiled, 'Remember what? Greece doesn't give me much of a clue.'

Snape disentangled one of his hands from hers, pointing towards a tiny villa she hadn't even noticed several meters behind them. 'Albus forced me to come here for vacation once. He said I needed to 'get away from it all', if you can imagine.' He smirked. 'It was too hot, and I was bored stiff within two hours of my arrival. He had forbidden me to go anywhere, but failed to leave me anything with which to occupy my mind. The library in that little villa is sadly lacking although, I'm sure Nettie would enjoy it.'

'If you hated it so much, why did you bring me here?'

'I thought you might like it,' he replied, tucking a wayward strand of hair behind her ears.

'It is beautiful,' Hermione agreed, looking around her again, before smiling at him coyly. 'What was Albus thinking about, leaving you here?'

Severus rolled his eyes, 'I have no idea. You should have seen the hideous swim trunks he left. Black with pink flamingoes.'

Hermione started giggling, 'Did you wear them?'

'What do you think, impertinent wench!' he growled at her, before adding, 'I prefer to swim in the nude. There are no tan lines that way.'

He smirked wickedly at Hermione when she choked on her tongue at his pronouncement, before he leaned in and kissed her smiling mouth.

They didn't return to Hogwarts until much later that day.

~~~~~

Over the course of the next few days, they continued to test Severus' ability to create places in her mind. They found that as long as they had been to the place at least once, they could go there again. When Hermione mentioned she found it disconcerting to wander through Hogsmeade or Diagon Alley with no one else present, Snape had merely cocked an eyebrow at her.

'Didn't you tell me once you had re-created me in your mind?' he queried.

Hermione nodded, 'Yes, but you didn't talk. Or, rather, the picture you I created talked, but the construct-you didn't.'

'Picture me?'

'Yes that first week you didn't come to visit me at St. Mungo's, after Creevey's accident I found a room in my mind full of pictures. Ron was there...my mom...you. I talked to all of you.'

'Hmmm... interesting. So, pictures can talk to you but constructs can't?'

'Not yet, anyway,' Hermione agreed.

'But you can make them?'

'Yes.'

'Well then, when we go visiting, let's inhabit your mind with other people. I'm sure, if we put our minds to it, we could get them to talk.'

'It would be nice,' she agreed. 'Then, when you're not here I could still have someone to talk to and I wouldn't feel so lonely.'

On Thursday, when he took her to see the Great Wall of China, a little old man smiled toothlessly at them and bowed when Severus purchased a copy of Chairman Mao's little red book.

'Do jeh! Do jeh!' he exclaimed happily after Snape indicated he could keep the change.

'Foon ying,' Severus replied calmly, tucking Hermione's hand in the crook of his elbow, before turning to walk along the wall for several kilometers.

When Snape came to visit her the next day, he found Hermione in the library, having a very animated conversation with herself. Literally. For a moment, he watched in stunned confusion as the two Hermiones argued over the slow-simmering potion, before they both looked up and saw him standing there.

Before he could blink, one of the Hermiones had disappeared with a pop similar to the sound made during an apparation, leaving the other Hermione blushing furiously. 'You must think I'm terribly odd,' she began, before he cut her off.

'I don't think, I know,' he replied silkily. 'Whatever were you arguing with yourself for?'

Hermione shrugged, 'I still can't get the construct you to talk, and I wondered if that may be because you can actually come in to my mind already. So I thought I would see if I could create a duplicate of myself - as a test. In theory, my duplicate shouldn't be able to talk either, but she can. As a matter of fact, once she got going it was hard to shut her up. She was trying to tell me that I was stirring too quickly, if you can believe it!'

'A fairly accurate construct then,' Severus replied. 'Now you know how the rest of us feel.'

She glared at him, but it was easy to see she was trying hard not to smirk. 'I'm not that bad!'

He merely inclined his head, as if to say 'Oh yes you are.' However, since he refrained from saying it out loud, Hermione decided he was conceding her point. He stayed with her the rest of the day.

Later that evening, she watched with some amusement as he paced nervously around the potion's classroom, checking and rechecking his notes. Off to the side, a duplicate of the potion simmered on a flame just low enough to keep it warm. They had decided to brew the potion in her mind as well as outside of it, so she could participate in the creation of her cure. Severus had admitted more than once that her observations had been helpful, and she was confident that tomorrow she would finally be free.

She had already decided the first thing she was going to do when she had control of her own body again was kiss Severus senseless, and see if kissing him was as wonderful on the outside as it was in her mind.

'Are you always this apprehensive after brewing a potion?' she teased, as Snape stalked by her again, still muttering to himself.

'I want to make sure we haven't missed anything,' he retorted. 'I'm still not convinced that the phoenix tears were a good idea.'

'They won't hurt,' Hermione replied. 'And Trelawney did tell us specifically to use something in our aura-strengthening potion that was clear.'

'They're more iridescent, actually,' Severus replied, 'I'm not sure that counts.'

Hermione rolled her eyes, 'There's nothing else you can do. You've been telling me all week you were sure this would work have you been misleading me?'

'No,' he said, before repeating more strongly, 'No. It will work.'

'Then what is the problem? I know it's going to work. The entire brewing process went just as you described changing colors when you said it would; everything.'

They both turned to look at the potion together. It was thicker than tea but not as thick as honey, shimmering gently as the color changed from moment to moment, reds bleeding into blues, which turned green before flickering purple. Hermione thought it looked like a liquid rainbow.

'Didn't Trelawney tell you the changing colors looked just like auras blending from one to the other?'

'She did; however she was always abysmal at potions. Just because she thinks it's pretty doesn't mean it will work.'

'You're right,' Hermione agreed, 'but you are a Potions Master and you've told me yourself it's going to work, so why worry? It's our last night here. There's no one else around to bother us. I can't guarantee the same tomorrow I have a feeling Harry's going to have a hard time letting me out of his sight when I'm free again. And you know Albus is going to have something special planned.'

Severus snorted, but allowed her to lead him away from the potion and through the side door into his sitting room. 'True enough,' he agreed, 'that's the one thing I'll miss about visiting you here. There is no one else around to annoy me.'

'So take advantage of it then,' Hermione breathed as she turned into his arms, leaning into him as she stood on her toes and kissed him.

Severus left a few hours later, insisting that she get some sleep. She had walked him as far as the large foyer at the front of her mind, which happened to be an exact replica of the Hogwarts main entrance, while rolling her eyes when he told her again where to be waiting for him on the morrow.

'I want you to be waiting for me, Hermione, right near the front. The potion will be strongest right after it's ingested, so we need to work quickly.'

'I know, Severus, and I'll be ready,' Hermione replied. 'Imaginary wild horses couldn't keep me away. Do you think we'll actually be able to see the curse, if it's active?'

'We'll be finding out tomorrow, won't we,' he replied almost cryptically. 'Just remember, if Draco was telling the truth, it's not going to want to let you or I go. I hate to admit it, but I'm glad Potter will be participating I just hope the curse doesn't go after him as well.'

Hermione bit her lip, looking at him thoughtfully, 'I know this is going to be dangerous, but is there something you're not telling me? I mean, we are going to be able to break free, aren't we?'

'I promise you, this time tomorrow you'll be able to tell Albus what to do with his lemon drops, and he'll be able to hear you,' Snape smirked.

Hermione grinned at that, 'And I'll tell Harry what you said about being glad he came to help.'

Severus scowled at her but didn't argue. Instead he leaned forward and kissed the top of her head. 'Just don't tell Sybil she broke the curse for us, or I'll never hear the end of it. Now, get to sleep.'

'You too, get some sleep. I love you, Severus.'

He gave her a small, fleeting smile that just touched his eyes. 'I love you too, Hermione.'

He left after that, leaving her to wander back to his suite of rooms. She had started sleeping there the day she realized they were actually his rooms. His preference for Egyptian cotton sheets, and the subtle hint of his spice and clove smell which seemed imbedded in the pillows were a comforting safe haven to be wrapped in while she was alone. The weight of his heavy duvet was like being wrapped in his warm embrace, and often times while lying under it at night, she could almost believe she was merely waiting for him to join her in their shared bed.

Entering Severus' rooms, she smiled a pleased, secretive smile to herself. Soon very soon she really would be sleeping in his bed and he would be next to her, holding her. His bedspread would cocoon them both, and if she had anything to say about it, things would remain that way indefinitely.

Murmuring a charm at the fire to lower the blaze, Hermione stretched her arms over her head and yawned as she wandered into his bedroom, humming the rainbow song Sybil had been singing earlier that week. She stepped into the bathroom and quickly washed her face and brushed her teeth, shivering against the chill creeping into the room as she quickly changed into her pajamas. She would have to talk to Severus about doing something to keep the dungeons warmer perhaps a permanent charm to heat the slate floor, or the addition of a fireplace in the bedroom as well. Maybe a couple of thick throw rugs. They would definitely need to add another armoire for her clothes, and she was still trying to figure out where they would find room on his shelves for all her books. Blinking sleepily, and full of content dreams of her life outside of her mental prison, she slid under his blankets and fell asleep almost immediately.

As it had happened many nights before however, and many times during her waking hours, she didn't stir when several invisible gray chains wrapped themselves around her curled limbs. Nor did she feel them twine around her neck, sliding through her hair to pass through the skin and into the depths of her mind, where her dreams took a familiar, pleasant turn. Her mind hummed happily as it was filled with thoughts of her and Severus together for the rest of their lives, traveling wherever they pleased, and eternally free of the limits the physical world placed upon them.

** The little old Chinese man tells Snape 'Thank you!' in Cantonese, and Snape replies 'You're welcome.'

Rose Colored Glasses by Blue Rodeo

She sees the world through rose-coloured glasses

Painted skies and graceful romances

I see a world that's tired and scared

Of living on the edge too long

Where does she get off telling me

That love could save us all, save us all.

She takes my hand and leads me to nowhere town.

No matter where I stand it's always neutral ground,

And in the cool of the evening blue

I feel so tired and alone

Where does she get off telling me

That love could save us all, save us all.

And it's day after day

I keep hanging around can you tell me why

Night after night, yeah I know I should leave

But there's something in those eyes

That keeps me hanging on, I'm hypnotized

It breaks my heart and I don't know why

Tell me why, tell me why

She sees the world through rose-coloured glasses

Painted skies and graceful romances

I see a world that's tired and scared

Of living on the edge too long

Where does she get off telling me

That love could save us all, save us all

And it's day after day

I keep hanging around, can you tell me why

Night after night, yeah I know I should leave

But there's something there, yeah...

Day after day after day after day

And I don't know

Day after day after day after day

And I don't know why

HARRY

Chapter 18 of 20

'The curse is alive, Potter. It is seeking me. I am positive that I can get Hermione free of it, but if it is too strong – if it looks like the only way to get her out is to let it take me, I will do so.'

A/N: Two chapters left after this one, both of which will be posted at the same time, probably in a day or two.

Chapter Eighteen: HARRY

Harry Potter had never asked to be famous and yet it had happened, much against his will. He had never asked to be the 'salvation of the Wizarding World' and could quite happily go the rest of his life never hearing the annoying misnomer 'the Boy-Who-Lived' again.

He hated being 'the Boy-Who-Lived', because it meant he was 'the Boy-Who-Lived-To-See-All-His-Friends-Suffer-and-Die.' The war had changed him – made him harder, quicker to anger and slower to forgive. Less optimistic, less trusting – just less. He honestly didn't know who Harry Potter was anymore, if he ever had. All he knew – all he believed – was that things would be better with Hermione back. She had always been the sensible one. He had relied on her for more than friendship – he had relied on her to be the voice of reason, the one who would call him on being a prat, or to study more or worry less. During the last months before the final battle, she had been his calm center in the eye of the hurricane around him.

Since the final battle – since he had lost her – he no longer felt balanced. His emotions veered wildly from one moment to the next, leaving him anxious and angry. If Snape hadn't been helping him, Hermione would still be with them. Harry couldn't fathom that she may have thrown herself in front of Malfoy's curse knowing full well her actions; couldn't believe for a moment that anyone would willingly choose to sacrifice themselves for that man.

He had never liked Snape and Snape had never liked him. Everyone knew it and there was no sense in trying to pretend it was otherwise. During these hard months of Hermione's confinement, it had been Harry's inherent dislike and mistrust of the older man that had kept him sane and kept him focused. He knew it was wrong. Yet he allowed the feelings to persist. Hating Snape was easier than hating himself.

And he did. Hate himself, that is. If it hadn't been for his friendship with him, Ron would not have been a target during that last desperate battle. Harry would never have had to see his friend's head separated from his body with such raw power that the wound was cauterized even as it was made. He would never have had to face Molly and Arthur – the closest he had ever come to having parents – and know it was his fault their youngest son was dead. He still found it incredibly difficult to visit the Burrow, surrounded as it was by memories of happier times, when the Weasley family had been whole. It was not only Harry's fault they had lost Ron in the conflict, but Percy as well. When he had finally killed Voldemort, the older boy had melted with the rest of the marked Death Eaters.

Ginny – she still wasn't talking all that much, although the last time he had seen her she had tried to joke that the jagged scar running down the middle of her face was more impressive than his little lightning bolt, before bursting into tears and running from the room. Arthur hadn't asked him about anything Muggle-made in over a year and every time Molly looked at him, Harry was sure she was wishing he were Ron instead.

He had needed someone to blame for it all, and Snape had been there to do just that. Harry had actually come to rely on the older man to provide him the ability to project his blame and his guilt, his anger and despair, at someone other than himself.

He had known for months, of course, that Snape was not hurting Hermione in any way. It was impossible to miss the fact the man was killing himself in an effort to come up with a cure, and it looked like maybe – just maybe – he had done it.

And Harry had done nothing to help. The young man sighed with disgust as he adjusted his glasses on his nose and headed to the dungeons. Today was the day they were going to test Snape's hypothesis; the day they would take the potion and try to free Hermione.

Harry wondered if she would ever forgive him.

~~~~~

Snape was waiting for him outside Hermione's suite of rooms, pacing the corridor. Harry had heard the echoing footsteps several hallways away and had recognized them. Seven years of listening for them when he had been sneaking about with Ron and Hermione meant he was remarkably familiar with the various sounds Snape made when he walked, from the near-silent swish as the older man slid through the shadows down the hallways in the hopes of catching some errant student, to the heavier heel-toe click of each foot as they hit the ground when he was angry or impatient. He hoped what he heard now was impatience.

Snape glared at him as he rounded the corner. 'Potter.'

'Professor Snape.'

The two men stood uncomfortably in the hallway for a few moments, before Harry nodded at the closed doors. 'Should we go in?'

'In a moment,' the older man scowled. 'We need to talk, and I don't want Hermione to overhear this and start worrying.'

Harry stepped closer, brows suddenly drawn in concern. 'Is there a problem? Do you think it won't work?'

Snape waved his hand dismissively, 'It will work. But it's more dangerous than I have led Hermione to believe. She is convinced that I shall free her today, and I will. She is equally convinced that I will be returning with her. Of this, I am less certain.'

Harry gaped at the older man. 'Pardon me?'

'The curse is alive, Potter. It is seeking me. I am positive that I can get Hermione free of it, but if it is too strong – if it looks like the only way to get her out is to let it take me, I will do so.'

'You can't do that!' Harry protested, 'She would never agree to let you sacrifice yourself to free her!'

'Precisely why I haven't told her,' Snape concurred impassively. 'You must promise me, Potter, that you will do exactly as I tell you. I will enter her mind first and then take your hand. The potion should link the three of us and allow my touch to bring you in with me. You will more than likely find yourself in a large foyer, similar to the main entrance at Hogwarts. Stay there I need you at the forefront of her mind to anchor us should the curse try to take us both. If I've calculated correctly, you will see a tether of sorts, attaching you to me, and me to her. Once I have her, I will place her between us you will be the first one to leave her mind, pulling us out as you do so. If, for whatever reason, I must cut the bond between us, you will only have a finite amount of time to get her out before you will be forcefully expelled from her mind. If I tell you at anytime to get out, get out do not argue, just grab her and run. Do not let her go, do not look back. Do you understand?'

'But -'

'No "but"s, Potter.' Snape growled, 'Do you understand. Yes or no. I can do this without you, if I must.'

'I understand, Snape.' Harry replied. 'I'll do as you say.'

The two men stared at each other silently for a moment, before Snape inclined his head. 'I have one more favor to ask of you, Potter. Should I fail to return, please make sure Hermione gets my books. I want her to have them. Albus is familiar with what else needs to be done.'

'You won't fail, Snape. Hermione will never forgive you if you do.'

'A fact I am well aware of, let me assure you. She is quite stubborn that way.' Snape replied sarcastically, but Harry could hear the honest affection for his friend in his voice as he said it.

'I wish we could have been friends, Snape.' Harry offered suddenly, reaching out and grabbing the older man's arm as he started to turn towards the door.

Snape smirked at him, 'I'd like to say I feel the same way Potter, but honestly, I do not. Perhaps after we free Hermione, I may change my mind.'

Harry found himself grinning absurdly as he followed Snape into Hermione's rooms.

~~~~~

The potion was gritty and foul. Harry wasn't sure what all Snape had put in there, but he definitely hadn't tried to make the concoction taste good. Harry had to pinch his nose as he drank it, fighting the urge to gag the entire time. Snape, of course, smirked at him and shot his entire goblet back in two quick swallows. Nettie was manipulating Hermione's throat to get her to swallow, being very careful not to let any dribble from the sides of her mouth.

Standing on either sides of Hermione's bed were Albus and Trelawney. Harry knew why Albus was there he was Headmaster, after all and the man did seem to genuinely like the dark potions master. He supposed Trelawney was there to let Snape know how their auras were looking.

'Severus, my dear boy,' Albus had stepped forward as Snape put his goblet down. His fingers were fumbling nervously with the obligatory bag of candies, and his voice was slightly shaky as he spoke, 'Promise me you won't do anything foolish.'

'I promise.' Snape's voice was strong and full of affection for the older man.

'None of your heroics, now,' Albus continued, as if he hadn't heard Snape reply, 'We've been through too much together for it to end this way.'

Snape reached out and grabbed the older man's hands in his firm grip, 'Albus.'

Harry was surprised to see Dumbledore had tears in his eyes. 'I don't think I have ever told you how very proud I am of you....'

'Albus...'

'How I admire all you have done to promote the Light...to keep us all safe.'

'Albus...'

'You are the bravest man I know, Severus. You have become like a son to me. Please...'

'Albus...' Snape freed a hand and reached into his pocket, pulling out a handkerchief and pressing it into the older man's wrinkled fingers. 'There is no need. I am not worth all this.'

'You are worth this and more,' Albus replied. 'And once you have brought Miss Granger back to us, I never want to hear you disparage yourself in such a manner again. Do you understand me?'

'Yes, Albus. I understand perfectly.'

Dumbledore looked up at Harry then, the blue eyes glittering like sapphires behind his tears, 'Look after him for me, Harry. Bring them both back.'

Harry nodded mutely.

Snape turned to him, 'Ready, Potter?'

'As I'll ever be,' he replied.

Snape turned to Nettie, who was standing to his left, wringing her hands nervously. Harry watched, amazed, as he leaned forward and kissed her lightly on the cheek. 'Don't look so nervous, Nettie. I can assure you, the thought of you reading those stuffy Victorian romances to me in perpetuity holds no allure. I will return.'

Nettie sniffed at him, 'Impudent man.' But she smiled as she patted him fondly on the arm. 'I cannot wait to finally talk to Miss Granger.'

'You may change you're mind when you realize she never shuts up,' Snape replied gently, before turning to acknowledge Trelawney.

'I'll be listening to you, Sybill. I doubt I'll be able to respond, but let us know what you are seeing. I need to know the minute the gray seems to be growing stronger, or overpowering us.'

Trelawney nodded at him, replying in a serious tone Harry had never heard before, 'I won't let you down, Severus.'

Snape was finally facing Albus again. 'Lemon drop?' the older man offered, holding out the bag to him.

'I believe I shall,' Snape replied, fishing one out and popping it into his mouth gamely, trying not to choke when Albus suddenly pulled him into a tight embrace, which the younger man gingerly returned.

Harry looked away, blinking ferociously, and tried to remember his promise to Snape. He would let go, if he had too. Getting Hermione out was their first priority.

Snape looked at him and cocked an eyebrow, mouth curled in his trademark sneer. 'Haven't got all day, Potter.'

Harry nodded at him in agreement. 'Right, let's go then.'

Snape reached out and grabbed Hermione's hand, his face slackening somewhat as he delved into her mind. His voice sounded strangely disembodied as he spoke, 'Take my hand, Harry.'

Harry grabbed his free hand, trying not to lose his balance as he was suddenly pulled through a tunnel of mud and darkness into a dimly lit, cold and empty foyer. Each breath was like breathing through cotton-batting. He felt his lungs burning as they struggled for oxygen, and he lurched forward a bit, trying to keep his feet under him. His body felt heavy and weighted, as if it were coated in the mud he had fallen through, and he looked down at his hands to see if this were actually the case.

There was nothing on him. He could see a cord of white luminescence in the darkness and realized it was attached around his waist, like a rope. The other end stretched down the foyer he could barely make out Snape at the end of it, his dark robes blending easily into the shadows.

'Hermione!' the older man was calling out, his voice echoing oddly against the vaulted ceilings. *'I told you to be here waiting for us. Where are you?'*

There was no reply. Snape called out again, his voice louder, more urgent. Harry winced at the stringent tone as it assaulted his ear drums. *'Hermione!'*

In the distance, as if coming to him from underwater, he heard Professor Trelawney's voice. 'Severus, your aura is blending with Hermione's, just like before. The colors remain strong, however. Harry is unaffected.'

'Snape,' he called out, *'What's going on?'* He shuffled a few feet further in, moving with great difficulty.

Snape turned around and snapped, *'Stay where you are! Have you already forgotten what I told you?'*

'Where's Hermione!' Harry hollered back. *'Why isn't she here?'*

'I intend to find out,' the older man replied tensely. *'Stay there and do not move.'* Even as he spoke, Harry could see him retreating further down the darkened hallway. Snape seemed to have no trouble moving, causing Harry to wonder if the man was even aware of the thick, sludge like atmosphere that seem to be pressing in on Harry from all sides, or if he had just gotten used to it after so long.

He could hear the echoes of footfalls, growing fainter and fainter the further in Snape went. Hinges on doors reverberated creepily down the hallway as rooms were checked, Snape's cries of *'Hermione'* becoming more and more haunted. Harry felt like crying.

Eventually, he couldn't even hear Snape anymore. The cord around his waist was thin almost to the point of breaking, pulsing weakly with light. Harry took another step forward, *'Snape! Snape!'*

'No change to their colors,' Trelawney continued droning, 'No change.'

'Snape!'

It was then that he heard it frantic footfalls running down the hallway towards him. Behind the hurried steps was something else entirely Harry was straining his ears to make it out. It sounded like the thrum of a hummingbird's wings, or the angry drone of a hoard of bees, or like the rapid movement of the legs of a thousand centipedes. The hairs on the back of Harry's neck stood at attention and his body broke out in a cold sweat. Something was coming.

It was a momentary relief to see Snape burst through the far end of the hallway, dragging Hermione with him, frantically ripping what appeared to be ropes of gray mist from her as they ran.

'Don't look back!' he was screaming at her, *'Just keep moving! I've got you, you're safe. You're safe!'*

Harry took another two steps forward. *'Hermione!'* he hollered.

'Stay the fuck where you are, Potter!' Snape responded viciously, *'I told you not to bloody move!'*

'Harry!' Hermione cried back.

'The gray... it's coming. You must hurry!' Trelawney's voice was changing, getting louder. Snape had Hermione in front of him now, grabbing the cord tying him to Harry as it slackened the closer they got. He wrapped it around her and tied the slack off in a slip knot behind her.

Looking around, he realized he was almost in the middle of the decaying foyer, no longer at the edge of it as he had been when he first entered. Hermione was a good 75 feet from him, with Snape another 10 beyond that. Grabbing the cord around his waist, Harry began to pull on it frantically, all the while trying to fight his way back towards the wall. It was like walking through a nightmare.

Whatever was chasing them down the hallway was much closer, hissing madly like steam being expelled from a locomotive. Harry could feel the air shift around them as it was displaced from the hallway a putrid gust of rot and death, damp and cold swept over him. He suddenly felt like ice, and he realized that both Snape and Hermione were moving more and more slowly. The very air was thickening and the walls around him seemed to melt before his eyes, oozing something dark and unspeakable. The scent of tangy copper hit his stomach like a lead weight.

The hallway Snape and Hermione had emerged from mere seconds before was yawning widely in an inhuman howl, stretching as if it sought to overtake the pair. A strange, chilling, silvery light seemed to glow from its mouth, running like sharp fingers of ice across the floor and the walls, turning everything gray at its touch. A thousand voices were gibbering madly, *'he tricked us, he tricked us, he tricked us....must catch him, must catch him, must catch him....'*

Harry was pulling harder now, as if sheer will alone would separate Hermione into his arms. He could see she was crying, her tears freezing on her face as her hair streamed wildly behind her. The curse for that's what it was, Harry realized was gaining ground.

Hermione was still fighting her way forward when it happened. Snape had stopped moving, turning instead towards the faceless thing hunting them so determinedly. Harry watched in horror as the older man reached into his frock coat and pulled out a dagger, which gleamed golden in the darkness, and cut the cord around his waist.

The result was immediate the curse started hissing and cackling, as if in triumph, and Hermione ricocheted forward so suddenly she almost knocked Harry to his knees when she hit him.

The sludge around them disappeared but the foyer remained cold and rotted, as if it were holding its breath. Harry ignored this and pulled Hermione into his arms, laughing and hugging her tightly, *'Hermione, oh Hermione!'*

'Get the hell out of here!' Snape was screaming at them as he sprinted across the floor, his limbs suddenly as free as theirs.

'Not without you!' Hermione hollered back, *'Hurry Severus, hurry!'*

Behind him, the gray had suddenly and mysteriously vanished.

Harry could hear Trelawney yelling now, 'Get out of there Severus! I can't see... I'm losing your colors, get out now!'

Snape was hollering as well, *'Run Potter! Pick her up and get her out of here!'*

Harry did just that reaching forward, he practically threw Hermione over his shoulder and moved as fast as he could to the entrance of the foyer. Hermione was kicking and scratching and wriggling like a wild cat, and he almost dropped her under the force of her protests.

'Severus!' she was screaming, *'Severus!'*

Harry was scared to turn around and look. The voices had started up again, mindless whispering from every corner, laughing in victory, *'we have him, we have him, we have him...'*

'Get out, Potter! Get her out of here!'

'Harry, put me down! Severus! Severus!' Hermione was crying now. *'Put me down, Harry. I can save him I can save him!'*

'I can't,' Harry gasped out, *'I promised him I'd get you out of here.'*

'Harry Potter, if I'm your friend if you love me you'll put me down.' Her voice was broken and breathless from screaming, *'I can't live without him. I'll never forgive you if you don't let me go.'*

'You can have me, you bloody beast!' he heard Snape holler, *'Just leave them alone and let them go! Potter! Get out get her out of here!'*

'Hermione' Harry was crying himself now. He had made it back to his initial entry point. Looking out, he could see the others waiting in Hermione's rooms.

Albus and Nettie were standing side by side, clutching each others hands and staring at the prone form of Snape, still tightly gripping Hermione's and his hand, sprawled across her lap. He could see his own face, the tears streaming from his eyes, which were widened in fear. Behind him, Trelawney was muttering loudly, *'I only see two of them; the third has been overtaken....'*

'He wants to do this, Hermione,' Harry said, *'he wants to save you.'*

'And I want to save him,' she replied, brokenly. *'Please Harry. I know I can bring him out. I KNOW it. But once I leave here, I won't be able to come back once the link is gone, he's lost.'*

Harry looked out at the room again, before putting Hermione down and gripping her shoulders tightly, very aware that time was ticking and that at any moment he could be pushed out. If he was still holding on to her when this happened, she would be free.

The gray ropes had reappeared while their backs were turned and had almost completely overtaken Snape now, enveloping his body in a thick cocoon that seemed to suck the very life away from the interior of the room. Every once and a while, Harry could see the flash of a golden knife, but he knew Snape was fighting a losing battle.

'Hermione, I can't lose you I can't!'

'But you will anyway, if you don't let me go. I'll never talk to you again, Harry, I swear it.'

Harry's eyes widened, glittering with tears. *'Can you... do you really think you can save him?'*

'I know I can,' she replied, *'Just like he saved me. Have I ever lied to you before, Harry? Just trust me....I need to get him back...please, please....I can't leave him....I love him, Harry!'*

Looking at her, her tear ravaged face, the panic in her eyes, he realized he had to let her go. He loved her, and loving her meant wanting what she wanted - and she wanted Snape. He wasn't sure if she could get him and bring him back, but he knew he didn't have the right to stop her. This wasn't about him and his needs - this was about Hermione. And she loved Snape. The greasy git. Severus.

Snape was being pulled now, still struggling weakly, through the hallway he had dragged Hermione out of what seemed hours ago now.

'Promise me you'll come back, Hermione. Promise me!'

'I promise Harry,' she replied. Her voice was as sweet as he remembered, *'We both will.'*

Harry pulled her close into a tight hug and kissed the top of her head. He couldn't stop the tears leaking from his eyes, and didn't try to hide them.

Hermione hugged him quickly and kissed his cheek, before turning from him and running back after Snape. *'I'll see you soon, Harry. I promise!'*

'I love you, Hermione. I only ever wanted you to be happy.' Harry said as he let her go. Deep in his heart, he knew was really saying goodbye.

Harry stood there as long as he could, watching her as she disappeared down the hallway, his heart breaking all over again like the day on the battlefield.

'Hermione,' he whispered. The world flickered around him and he was expelled backwards, rushing headlong down the black tunnel he had traveled through to find her again.

Crowded House - Fall At Your Feet

I'm really close tonight

And I feel like I'm moving inside her

Lying in the dark

And I think that I'm beginning to know her

Let it go

I'll be there when you call

And whenever I fall at your feet

You let your tears rain down on me

*Whenever I touch your slow turning pain
You're hiding from me now
There's something in the way that you're talking
Words don't sound right
But I hear them all moving inside you, go
I'll be waiting when you call
Hey and whenever I fall at your feet
Won't you let your tears rain down on me
Whenever I touch your slow turning pain
The finger of blame has turned upon itself
And I'm more than willing to offer myself
Do you want my presence or need my help
Who knows where that might lead
I fall
Whenever I fall at your feet
Would you let your tears rain down on me
Whenever I fall, ever I fall*

Snape / Hermione

Chapter 19 of 20

Her kisses had baptized him and set him free, and no matter what lay before him now – whether or not he managed to get out with Hermione – he realized that in all the ways most important, fleeting salvation had found him for a brief and precious time.

The Epilogue: Nettie follows this chapter

Chapter Nineteen: Snape / Hermione

Severus Snape knew the possibilities that all three of them would make it out of Hermione's mind were slim. He also knew that without Potter helping them, the possibilities of just him and Hermione getting out were nil.

While Arithmancy had never been his strongest subject, he had still been quite good at it. In every single equation he had worked out over the last seven hours, plugging in this variable or that, all three of them had only ever managed to get out in one instance. One instance in fifty. The odds were not good.

Sighing, he pushed himself away from his desk and wandered into his bathroom, filling the small sink with cold water and splashing his face, before looking in the mirror.

He almost didn't recognize himself. His eyes were deep and hollow, his skin so white it was almost translucent; stretched so tightly across his gaunt face he expected his cheekbones to slice through the pale flesh. He hadn't shaved in several days, and the black hair on his face was a stark contrast against that alabaster pallor. He looked like Death himself.

He had known for days of his diminishing appearance that he was starving to death but he couldn't bring himself to eat outside of Hermione's mind. He wasn't hungry. He ate with her, when he visited, and even though he knew none of that was real, it still filled him up. He knew Albus was worried about him. So was Nettie. Even Minerva and Sybill had expressed their concern, but he just couldn't bring himself to do anything about it, so instead he made excuses.

'I am eating,' he would tell them. 'Researching the curse has occupied much of my time. Once Hermione is free, things will return to normal trust me.'

And what could they say, really? What could they do? They had no choice but to take him at his word. It wasn't like they could force him to eat.

His face was still slightly wet and cold from the quick cleansing he had given it. He walked over to his closet and quickly changed, pulling on a clean linen shirt, before layering his vest and frock coat over top of it and adjusting the cuffs.

Walking back to his desk, he quickly rolled the sheet of arithmantic problems, tying them off with a small piece of leather before sliding them between the desk and the wall. He neatly straightened up the other papers lying there in an orderly pile, pulling the picture he had drawn of Hermione out and placing it on top of the stack, along with a sealed letter for Albus and one for Hermione.

Snape was a man who believed in being prepared.

Taking one last look around his suite of rooms, he realized that this was it. He was going to free Hermione, and in freeing her lose himself. Whispering 'nox', he turned on

his heel as the lights slowly died out, and made his way down the hallway towards Hermione's rooms. He needed to talk to Potter somewhere Hermione wouldn't overhear them.

~~~~~

Severus wasn't entirely convinced that Potter would follow his instructions. He had told the boy to get Hermione out, regardless of what was happening to him. Harry had promised to do so. Yet... it wasn't in Potter's nature to leave anyone behind, even someone he disliked as much as he did Snape. It was his Gryffindor spirit, Snape supposed. Everyone might think it brave, but Snape himself just thought it foolhardy. It was impossible to save everyone, as much as Potter had always thought the opposite. The younger boy should realize that by now how many people did one have to lose before one started saving only those that were most important? Hermione was important more so than he could ever hope to be. If anyone was worthy of being saved, it was her.

As for himself, he had given up on the idea of salvation long ago. He knew what he was, what he had done things he was still capable of doing, if the need ever arose. The thought should have made him bitter, but it didn't because he had been saved in the end after all.

He had been redeemed by her love, by her belief in him. Her kisses had baptized him and set him free, and no matter what lay before him now whether or not he managed to get out with Hermione he realized that in all the ways most important, fleeting salvation had found him for a brief and precious time.

And now, here he was, standing beside Hermione's comatose body, surrounded by people he realized were his friends. It was ironic that he had found love and companionship too late for it to make a difference. He was grateful of course, for Albus' firm hug and for Nettie's tears, but they would change nothing of today's outcome. His only comfort was that none of them would treat Hermione wrongly for his sacrifice they understood him, perhaps they always had, and they would know why he had chosen to walk this path.

It terrified him that he didn't even need to concentrate on falling into her anymore entering her mind had become as easy to him as breathing. It was a dangerous taste of what the curse had been able to do to him without his knowledge. The passage was painless, effortless, like stepping through a doorway from one room to the next. He could feel Potter grabbing his hand when he was instructed to do so and concentrated on pulling the younger man through. It took longer than it should have it felt as if Potter was up against some barrier and Snape was dragging him through. Snape didn't even bother to make sure Harry was all the way in before moving across the foyer.

Something was not right. Hermione was not there.

*'Hermione!' he called out, 'I told you to be here waiting for us. Where are you?'*

There was no reply, just the sound of his voice echoing down the empty hallway. *'Hermione!'*

He could hear Sybill's disembodied voice, like the buzzing of a gnat in his ear, *'Severus, your aura is blending with Hermione's, just like before. The colors remain strong, however. Harry is unaffected.'*

He barely registered what she was saying. Looking down at his waist, he saw the link between himself and Potter pulsing strongly, but the link that should have attached him to Hermione was barely visible. Instead of the warm yellow glow the occupied the other rope, the link to Hermione stretched thinly, looking like a dried umbilical cord. He gave it an experimental tug to see if it was tensile and was relieved to feel it pulse slightly against his fingers.

*'Snape,'* Potter called out, *'What's going on?'* The younger man was moving away from the outer edges of the foyer, into the middle and closer to Snape, against the older man's explicit instructions.

Snape turned and glared at the younger man. *'Stay where you are! Have you already forgotten what I told you?'*

*'Where's Hermione!'* Harry responded. *'Why isn't she here?'*

*'I intend to find out.'* Snape looked at the link again and moved into the area it seemed to be stretching to, *'Stay there and do not move.'*

The hallway was dark, full of shadows that only appeared worse when Snape's muttered *'illumina'* lit only every other candle sconce. The air was turgid and damp; every breath seemed to coat his throat in slime. *'Hermione!'* he called, as he opened doors which led into empty rooms, *'Hermione!'*

With each step forward, he became less aware of Sybill's voice; less aware of the young man linked to him and more aware of the smell of decay and rot that seemed to be filling the hallway. Hermione's mind looked worse than it had that first day he had found her in his potions classroom, half mad with solitude it felt deserted and empty, as if Hermione had never really been there at all.

Snape fought down the sudden panic he could feel twisting in his stomach; swallowing the bitter bile that rose in his gorge. He realized he was petrified.

The link between Potter and himself was stretched thin as fishing wire now, still pulsing with a dim light but completely insubstantial looking. The link between Hermione and himself was glowing faintly, becoming thicker the further into her mind he journeyed. He hadn't a clue where she was or what was going on.

In the distance, he could hear a steady dripping, his sensitive nose smelling wet mold and stagnant water, his ears catching what sounded like the occasional moan. Try as he might, he could not reconcile this dark and dank place with the mind he had come to be so comfortable in Hermione was in Hogwarts, not Azkaban.

Not Azkaban.

Not Azkaban...

Snape stopped and looked around him again, more slowly, as realization suddenly hit him. This wasn't Hermione's mind anymore nor was it his, not really. While elements of Hermione's constructs remained, they were overlaid by memories of his visit with Draco. Just 20 paces more? 30? and he would find the room he had waited in when the guard had gone to retrieve the younger man.

The dripping was getting louder, echoing eerily as it bounced off the moss-covered slate. *'... the dripping never stops... never...,'* Draco's voice whispered in his ear, *'I don't want to be alone anymore...'*

*'You're not really here,'* Snape muttered, *'it's all in my mind.'*

*'I'm here... I've always been here, waiting... waiting for you dear Severus, wanting you, waiting...'* The voice he had thought was Draco's was deepening into that of his father with every whispered syllable.

*'Lucius, you're sick,'* Snape hissed into the darkness. A delirious chuckle reverberated around him.

*'You've done something, Severus, something naughty arse-licking Dumbledore lapdogs shouldn't do... made yourself a potion did you?... you seek me now... my dear, dear Severus, come to me at last, to make you mine...'*

The voice, louder now, hovered just over his shoulders, tickling the side of his neck and sending shivers down Snape's spine. Lucius' voice was mad with dementia, a haunting replica of his son's forced insanity. It was more dangerous sounding than he'd ever heard the man before.

*'You're a sad and pitiful ghost of a man who was even more pathetic in life, Snape replied acidly. 'I'm not here for you, nor will I stay. Where's Hermione and what have you done with her?'*

*'Lost, Severus?' the voice crooned, teetering on the edge of a chilling laugh. 'You never knew it looked like this did you... a Mudblood's mind is so filthy... dirty, horrible, impure, wretched bitch...'* As Lucius spoke his voice divided, then divided again, until all Severus could hear was a polyphonic cackling, multiplying exponentially, echoing and reverberating all around him. It was the sound of utter madness.

Severus halted his steps, and cast his eyes upon the closed iron doors around him. The twisting shadows around him clung to their warped faces and oozed through the cracks in the bars. Behind every door the promise of a lonely, chilling death awaited.

*'This is not her mind. It never was. Don't play games with me Lucius, it won't work.'*

The voice Lucius the curse didn't respond, just kept laughing at him. Snape let out the air in his lungs and tugged at his link to Hermione again. At the end of the hallway, past the visitor's waiting room at Azkaban, he saw the door to his private suite and headed towards it.

*'She's a tasty little dirty treat,'* Lucius offered suddenly, his rich voice redolent with malevolence and an odd sort of pride, *'Such a mind, such a joy; so easy to manipulate.'*

Snape was beyond being concerned over playing mind games with the curse. Instead, he flung open the door to his rooms and walked in. Everything was as he had left it last night. Looking at his desk, he realized the notes he had left for Albus and Hermione weren't there. *'You don't know everything,'* he muttered. *'Where is she, Lucius?'*

*'In bed, where I left her,'* the voice chuckled. *'Such a tasty little morsel and the things she dreams about you, Severus... my, my...'*

Snape moved carefully towards his bedroom, trying to remain calm as he opened the door.

She was lying on his bed, wrapped in gray chains that looked as insubstantial as mist. Her eyes were closed, as if in sleep, her mouth open obscenely as a gray tendril forced its way down her throat.

Severus gaped and felt the air catch on its way into his lungs. *'Hermione!'*

*'I have her, Severus, I've always had her, she's a part of you, I'll have you both now, you'll never be free, she's part of you, part of you...'*

Lucius' voices were whispering to him, pushing past his ears to wrap around his mind, almost hypnotic in their intensity. Snape felt a strange torpor invade his limbs. It would be so easy to just lie down beside her and let the gray wrap around him too. He couldn't live without her; wouldn't leave without her....

*'That's right, Severus, come closer...come closer...forget about the link...you are not like Theseus... be with the one you love... never leave her... never...'*

Snape was standing at the edge of the bed now. Lucius' curse was chanting seductively in his ears, exhorting him to give up. His hand unconsciously wrapped around the weightless link between Hermione and himself, the cord still pulsing weakly. The thread to Harry was almost invisible.

Thread.

Link.

Snape lifted his free hand to join the other holding Hermione's link, both hands gripping it tightly. His fingers tightened convulsively, grasping the flickering thread for a tense heartbeat before ripping it apart.

Hermione sat up in his bed, screaming.

All around them, the curse was hissing angrily, *'It won't work Severus... I'll have you both... you can't get her free like this...'* As if to emphasize its point, the chains still wrapped around Hermione tightened and writhed like living snakes, bringing her back down hard on the bed.

Hermione's eyes focused on Severus, her voice coming out small and scared. *'Severus, what... what's happening?'* She struggled weakly against the bonds, twisting and squirming on the blanket.

Snape's right hand moved towards his robe, before returning to rest at his side. *'Don't struggle, Hermione'* he commanded, praying he was going about this the right way.

*'What do you need her for?'* he asked aloud, lacing his voice with contempt. *'Why take the Mudblood when you could have me?'*

The gray chains loosened their wriggling hold and seemed to still, as if contemplating. They began slowly sliding free of Hermione, a few seeking tendrils coming closer across the bed to where Snape stood. *'Offering yourself instead, Severus?'* the curse hissed, sounding hungry.

*'Freely,'* he agreed, fighting the urge to step back as the gray reached out and stroked him down the length of his frock coat.

On the bed, Hermione was staring at him with wide, confused eyes, but comprehension was struggling to flicker through their brown depths. When the chains had released enough of her to allow movement, she bonelessly slid off the other side of the bed, watching Severus all the while. He hoped his eyes were readable to her perceptive gaze.

*'So good... so good...'* Lucius' voices crooned, mocking in their tone, *'sacrificing yourself for the bitch... so easy, so weak... come to me Severus, I've been waiting...'*

When the first chain coiled around his left arm, Snape was ready. He dove into his robe with his free hand and pulled forth a short dagger that flashed gold in the room. He swung in an arc across the mist in several places, and felt a heady satisfaction when the curse screamed loudly in an inhuman shriek of pain.

Close beside him, Hermione stood with only a few clinging bits of mist on her body, looking ready to flee at any moment. Snape turned and grabbed Hermione by the hand, dragging her out the door of his rooms and up the hallway, slashing the chains off her as they ran. Behind him, he could hear the curse bellowing, *'Kill him, kill him, kill him, kill him!'*

Hermione was still not fully herself, stumbling like a broken marionette with half its strings cut. He heard the scurrying of a thousand rats, the angry slither of a hundred snakes, and knew the curse had recovered enough to chase them.

He pulled free the last chain of gray from her as they burst into the foyer.

*'Don't look back!'* he was screaming at her, *'Just keep moving! I've got you, you're safe. You're safe!'* He looked up when he heard Potter screaming her name and realized the younger man, against all reason, was moving towards them

*'Stay the fuck where you are, Potter! I told you not to bloody move!'*

*'Harry!'* Hermione cried suddenly, pulling Severus' arm with surprising strength as she struggled to move forward. Their mutual progress, however, was slowing

considerably since they'd emerged into the foyer. The curse was not ready to allow them to leave quite yet.

'The gray... it's coming. You must hurry!' He could hear Sybill again, her voice loud with fear. Snape managed to pull Hermione in front of him, wrapping her in the slack of his connection to Harry as they moved towards him, and tying her in between them with a slip knot.

The air around them was turning to ice, crystallizing with each breath. He felt like he was running through mud, thick, cold and remorseless, clinging to him with every step. Potter was trying to move backwards now, towards the entrance, pulling on their link as if by sheer force of will he could get them closer.

The foyer was turning silvery-gray, a wind emanating from the hallway with the force of a nor' wester, a thousand Lucius' gibbering madly, *'He tricked us, he tricked us, he tricked us....must catch him, must catch him, must catch him....'*

Hermione was crying, her tears freezing on her face as her hair streamed wildly behind her, struggling to get to Potter despite the thickness of the air, but the curse was gaining ground.

They were so close. So close. Potter was almost at the exit now if Snape could only get Hermione to him, at least they would be safe. He had promised her... but he didn't want to give up himself yet, either. Not if it meant never seeing her again.

There was one chance just one. Lifting his hand, the blade of his concealed dagger glittered in the air. Gold, the color of highest good and cut the link between himself and Potter with it.

The result was immediate the curse started hissing and cackling as if in triumph, and Hermione snapped forward as if on the end of an elastic, right into Potter.

The thickness around them disappeared suddenly and Snape started running as fast as he could, watching as Potter pulled Hermione into his arms, hugging her fiercely against his chest. *'Hermione, oh Hermione!'* the younger man cried jubilantly.

*'Get the hell out of here!'* he screamed at them, vowing to personally hex Potter six ways from Sunday if the younger man didn't pull his head out of his ass and move while the curse was momentarily incapacitated. Snape didn't know how long Potter would stay in Hermione's mind without the link to him.

Hermione turned back to look at him, eyes wide and fearful as she saw how far away from them he was *'Not without you!'* she insisted, *'Hurry Severus, hurry!'*

As if to verify her statement, Sybill whose voice had gone silent when Snape had cut the link between himself and Harry was yelling now, *'Get out of there Severus! I can't see...I'm losing your colors, get out now!'*

He could feel it reaching for him and tried to pick up his pace *'Run Potter! Pick her up and get her out of here!'*

The younger man finally did just that, grabbing Hermione and throwing her over his shoulder, turning from Snape and running towards the entrance. Snape could see Hermione struggling against him, wincing as one particularly well placed blow almost caused Potter to drop her.

*'Severus!'* she was screaming, *'Severus!'*

A gray chain suddenly materialized out of the floor and wrapped around his leg, causing him to tumble to the floor *'We have him, we have him, we have him...'*

*'Get out, Potter! Get her out of here!'* he shouted again, slashing madly with his dagger as the chains enveloped him.

Potter had put Hermione down. The curse was gleeful, chanting in his ear and echoing through his head, the voices seeping into his very pores. The chains around his ankles tightened and moved farther up his legs. *'We'll get her too... a tasty treat... dirty, filthy Mudblood...'*

*'You can have me, you bloody beast!'* Snape snarled, still struggling wildly, *'Just leave them alone and let them go! Potter! Get out get her out of here!'*

His body was pinned to the floor. Snape felt the chains slither around his legs and back, trapping him against the cold stone. His arms remained free only through reflexes a hair ahead of the curse's attempts to completely twine around him. But it was a losing battle.

His head snapped back as a gray chain suddenly wrapped around his neck. Both hands lifted to pull at the wispy cord, a frustrated snarl leaving his throat. He broke the chain with little effort, only to find his left arm pinned against his side by a thicker chain, another one circling his chest. He attempted to slash it with the dagger, managing to damage a few, but deep in his gut he knew the curse was toying with him; enjoying his struggles for freedom.

*'You're ours now Severus... don't resist us... give in... give in... she's left you Severus, the Mudblood's left you to die... come with us... come...'*

Snape grunted as his shoulder connected painfully with the hard floor. The chains were completely around his body, writhing like living creatures, shivering and tightening as they secured their hold on their prey. He felt the chilling slide of chains against his neck, over his cheek, across his forehead, before a muffled scream left his throat and the world went black.

~~~~~

Hermione Granger was furious. Furious and fearful. Severus had lied to her he was trying to sacrifice himself to save her and she wasn't having any of it. She refused to leave without him.

She didn't know what had happened to bring them to this point the last thing she remembered before Severus had started dragging her down some moldy hallway was falling asleep in his bed just moments ago, imagining what it would be like to finally sleep with him beside her.

Yet, it couldn't have been moments ago, because Harry was here, and she was running back to Severus' side. His body was now nearly completely shrouded with the gray chains that had clung to her upon awakening from her sleep.

Her heart was beating with adrenaline and fear she would not leave without Severus. She would not take back her life at the cost of his own. She loved him; she refused to live without him. She refused to look back at Harry to see if he was even still there when everything in her life that was most important to her was forward. *'I will not be Eurydice,'* she vowed. *'Neither Severus nor I have to give up our lives we can save each other.'*

She could hear the curse laughing now, as she got closer. Severus was wrapped in its coils, his eyes barely visible through the opening of the chains as his head was yanked back suddenly so she could see his blank, lifeless eyes.

'You can't save him,' Lucius' voice, the curse, hissed, *'stupid Mudblood, so easy to manipulate....'*

'Let him go!' Hermione demanded, kneeling beside Severus' body to yank viciously at the misty chains surrounding him.

'Never!' the curse hissed back, *'he's mine, as you are... forever and ever and ever...'*

'He's mine!' Hermione retorted. *'You can't have him.'*

'I'll have you both,' was the sneering reply. *'You can't get free anymore... you're stuck here too... impure girl, stupid bitch....'*

Hermione launched herself with renewed determination at the curse, fingers curled into claws as she ripped into the chains holding Snape. *'I refuse to let you have us!'* she screamed, her voice like a banshee of fury.

The curse laughed. *'You cannot win,'* it sneered, *'I have used you to trap him... it's all your fault... stupid girl....'*

Severus was suddenly struggling again, Hermione's voice and efforts to free him awakening him from his drugged stupor. *'No...'* he gasped, as Hermione flinched at the curse's words, *'Not true....'*

Lucius' voice grew strangely hypnotic, the chains wriggling and trapping Hermione up to her elbows against Snape. *'Is true, is true...'* it sang. *'She's been the bait... I fed her dreams, I fed her heart.... I made her fall in love with you, pathetic fool... did you think she could love you without my influence...'* The gray was spreading as it spoke, traveling over her shoulders, curling into her hair, *'You don't love him, you don't love him....'*

'I do,' she insisted, even as the gray overtook her, *'I do. Don't believe what it says, Severus. The curse doesn't control my heart... if I didn't love you I would have left with Harry. You cut the link and freed me, didn't you? If I was cursed to love you, my feelings would have disappeared when you broke the link.'*

Severus was still struggling, but she could see his eyes. They were infinitely sad, painful to behold, as if all the dreams they had ever held were being shattered. He believed the curse.

'I'll stop fighting you if you let her go,' he murmured brokenly, *'You've no need for her if you've got me.'*

'Noble, so noble,' the Lucius-curse mocked, *'I'll never let her go... I have you both... the traitor and his bitch...'*

'Severus,' Hermione pleaded, tears coming to her eyes. She had managed to break through some of the gray to grab his hand. *'Look at me. We can fight this! You promised me you'd get me out of here and you never break a promise. You need to free me and I won't leave without you. I love you, Severus. I love you. Gods, gods, please...'*

'How can you love me?' Severus muttered brokenly, sinking away from her into the nest of chains, *'when I have failed you so badly?'*

'Never!' she replied vehemently, *'You have saved me. Time and again, you've saved me. I want to save you this time. Lucius can't beat us not unless we let him. It's elemental magic. Love is more powerful than hate and I love you. Believe me, I do!'*

'I love you too,' Severus replied, but his voice was tired, automatic.

The gray around them pulsed and cackled, drawing Hermione deeper into the writhing mass. *'I love you, Severus!'* she repeated again, her eyes widening as his fingers suddenly clenched tighter around hers.

'I love you too, Hermione.'

'Fools,' the curse whispered, *'you don't know love.'*

'Yes,' Hermione retorted, *'I do. I love him. You cannot have us.'*

'You cannot have us,' Severus reiterated, *'Not when I've finally found a life worth living.'*

The chains around them shuddered, weakening, *'You have nothing... nothing... weak fools!'*

'Yes, Severus,' Hermione insisted, gripping his hands to pull with all her strength, *'Live with me. Stay with me, please. Don't give up, don't let him win, we can beat this together.'*

Snape's arms were suddenly free and around her, letting her pull him away from the curse, which was shrinking and disappearing through the floor. *'Hermione...'*

'No, no, no, no...' the curse tried to shriek as it faded away, leaving the hall empty and cold.

They were standing, wrapped around each other, in the middle of the foyer. Hermione was crying and Severus gently wiped her tears away before leaning down to accept a relieved kiss. After a moment he broke away from her, smiling as he gripped her hand firmly in his own and pulled her to the entrance.

'Let's go and live my dear.'

Hermione felt warm light envelop her, and then her inner world dissolved.

~~~~~

Harsh, blinding light assaulted her first. She blinked against the intensity, and heard a loud shout of happiness erupt from her left side. Before Hermione had a chance to make sense of what was happening, she suddenly found her body crushed into a warm hug that tore the air from her lungs.

*'Hermione!'* Harry's voice was close to her ear, and through her blinking eyes a stone ceiling lit by sunlight resolved itself. *'You got out! You came back! Oh, Hermione!'*

*'Mr. Potter!'* a sharp voice cut through Harry's elation, and Hermione felt the warm body of her friend remove itself from her left side.

She turned her head slowly, feeling muscles sting and nerves tingle with the long forgotten movement. She was really out. Everything felt real, for the first time in so long. Tears prickled at the edge of her eyes as she looked upon Harry, his glasses askew and green eyes overflowing with happy tears.

*'Harry,'* she croaked out, coughing slightly.

*'Now, now, give the girl some room Mr. Potter. Oh my, Miss Granger, you gave us such a fright there. Here drink this dear, you'll be able to speak better.'*

A cup was brought to Hermione's lips and cool liquid slid down her throat, soothing her unused vocal chords. A familiar face smiled down at her, framed by brown hair graying at the temples. But the appearance didn't matter, she would have recognized Nettie's voice anywhere.

Hermione licked her lips and smiled. *'Nettie,'* she greeted softly. *'Where...?'*

A movement on her right side prompted her to look down. She realized then that her right hand had remained firmly clasped in a much larger one, long fingers and a clammy palm pressed against her own. Lanky black hair spilled across her forearm and a few strands lay against her stomach. The body clothed in black stirred and the head lifted slowly, face averted from her vision.

'Severus,' Hermione breathed, squeezing the hand that clung to her.

Snape's head whipped around then, black eyes wide and glittering, almost as if he was surprised to actually see Hermione awake and speaking. She offered him a shy smile that he didn't return. Instead he sat up straighter beside her bed, but his hand didn't leave hers.

'You did it,' she pressed, wanting that look of disbelief to fade from his eyes. She was so happy that she knew those eyes so well, that even in the real world they looked the same as they had in her mind. 'We got out, you saved me.'

Professor Dumbledore came into her line of sight then, coming to Snape's side. He put a bony hand on the man's shoulder and gave it a firm pat, relief and something that sparkled suspiciously like tears at the corners of his periwinkle eyes. 'Excellent job, my boy,' he congratulated.

Hermione found herself grinning, knowing full well the expression probably looked ridiculous on her face. Snape looked positively haggard dark circles sat under his eyes and his hair lay in greasy clumps all over his head. He looked far worse than she'd ever seen him in her mind, but that hardly mattered. It was still the face of the man she loved.

'Severus, you look positively wretched,' she teased.

That seemed to get a reaction from him, but it wasn't the one she'd been expecting. He pulled away from her suddenly, dropping her hand as if he'd been burnt, and stood up quickly from the edge of the bed.

Hermione blinked, worried. 'Severus...?'

'Miss Granger,' he cut in, voice stiff. 'I am glad to see you well. It seems the extraction was a success.'

'What the hell are you blabbering about, Snape?' Harry snapped from her other side, a scowl on his face.

'Severus...' Dumbledore began, trying for placation.

'Shut up, Potter. I'm alright Albus, just a bit tired from... the...!' Snape swayed on his feet, his eyes suddenly becoming unfocused. There was a small groan from his lips before he keeled forward, landing ungracefully beside Hermione on the wide bed.

Nettie rushed forward and checked Snape, putting a hand to his wrist and then his forehead. 'Exhaustion,' she announced after a few seconds.

Hermione breathed out heavily in relief.

'He'll need to go to the Infirmary,' she continued. 'He needs at least a day's full rest uninterrupted and the chance to eat a real meal.' Her eyes met Hermione's apologetically. 'He's been pushing himself so hard for you dear.'

Hermione nodded in understanding, dropping her right hand to rest lightly against the side of Snape's head. 'Please take care of him, Nettie. I'll come by to visit once I feel well enough to move.'

The nurse smiled. 'I thought you might say that.' She turned to Harry, 'Watch over her, I'm going to take Professor Severus to see Poppy.'

With a wave of her wand, Nettie had Snape's body lifting from the bed and gliding silently across the floor towards the floo. Hermione settled back on the pillows of her bed, ignoring the urge to laugh out loud. Severus really was stubborn, whether it was here or in her mind. She just hoped he didn't make her wait several months again before he allowed her to kiss him.

~~~~~

Luckily, it seemed Hermione didn't have to wait that long. When Snape awoke in the infirmary the next day, the first thing he saw was Hermione at his side, curled up in a chair and reading one of the library's newest copies of a charm textbook. She smiled at him, touched his arm, then his cheek and hair, the touch so familiar and yet so new to him now that it was a part of the real world. His heart still fluttered and thumped in that strange, giddy way when she was near him. He still found it hard to believe this brilliant witch loved him.

She stayed and talked with him, carrying most of the conversation herself until he finally started opening up again. When his food came, she fed him herself off the end of a fork, and smiled and teased him for the surly looks he gave her when she cut the pieces of meat into tiny, easy to chew cubes. Snape let her sit closer as the afternoon wore on, until he finally allowed himself to touch her gently. It was only a fleeting caress on the back of her head, but she felt it, and beamed at him before pressing a kiss to his stubble-covered cheek. He knew in that moment he had been forgiven for doubting her.

Two days later the news was all over the school. The Welcome Back Feast was everything they had expected it to be and more. Albus had outdone himself, and the tables of Hogwarts were groaning under the weight of the spread. The students of Hogwarts, who had never seen their potions master happy before, watched in trepidation as he smiled often at the woman sitting at his side: the legendary Hermione Granger, who had miraculously been rescued from the curse that had incapacitated her for almost two years.

Nettie Pomfrey and Harry Potter had both been given places of honor at either side of Snape and Hermione. Every once in a while, Madam Pomfrey would lean across Snape to say something to Hermione, or reach up and pat Snape on the arm almost as if trying to reassure herself he was really there.

Potter, for a change, did not scowl once at Severus nor did the older man scowl at him. When word got around a few days later that the two men had actually worked together to free Miss Granger, more people tended to believe it than not.

It came as no great surprise when Professor Snape and Miss Granger announced their engagement a few weeks later. When Snape decided to give up teaching for a private life of research, Albus Dumbledore and Minerva McGonagall were the first to congratulate him and tell him it was about time he was able to do what he wanted to do.

The couple bought a small cottage just outside Hogsmeade it had an excellent lab for them to work together in and was close enough to Hogwarts to encourage visitors, while far enough away to ensure that no one ever overstayed their welcome.

They traveled the world for their three month long honeymoon Severus taking his young wife to the places he had always visited alone: the pyramids of Egypt, the ruins of Atlantis, the Great Wall, the Mayan libraries, and Greece where Hermione learned he wasn't kidding about the tan lines.

Severus Snape, bastard-extraordinaire, ex-Death Eater, ex-Spy, ex-Greasy Git and newly-minted man-in-love finally learned what it was to be accepted by all the people that mattered most.

And Hermione Granger-Snape? She got her happily ever after.

If Bread

If a picture paints a thousand words,

Then why can't I paint you?

The words will never show the you I've come to know.

If a face could launch a thousand ships,

Then where am I to go?

There's no one home but you,

You're all that's left me too.

And when my love for life is running dry,

You come and pour yourself on me.

If a man could be two places at one time,

I'd be with you.

Tomorrow and today, beside you all the way.

If the world should stop revolving spinning slowly down to die,

I'd spend the end with you.

And when the world was through,

Then one by one the stars would all go out,

Then you and I would simply fly away

EPILOGUE: NETTIE

Chapter 20 of 20

'Take good care of my friend, Snape,' Harry added. 'She loves you.'

This is the second of two chapters posted today, so make sure you've read Chapter 19 first or this one won't make sense.

Epilogue: NETTIE

They've been here over four years now, and he comes to see them every day.

Some days are worse for him than others, but as time passes it seems the wounds are healing, although even I was unsure they ever would. I honestly can't decide what he regrets more: letting her go, or not trying harder to stay with her to stay with them and fight with them, for their freedom.

It had been hard for Harry, leaving Hermione behind.

It's been hard on all of us.

Don't mind me, dearie, if I dab at my eyes once and a while well we talk. You see, I've always loved a good tragic romance and this one well, it ranks right up there at the top.

I can still picture that last day, in Hermione's rooms, perfectly. Albus dear, dear, Albus his worry for Severus evident on his face, tears in his eyes, as he said goodbye to the younger man he had come to love like his own son. I think he knew even then that Severus would not be returning to us.

Harry Mr. Potter then but no longer barely able to restrain his excitement at the thought of having his friend back with him, even though his smile seemed a bit dark, like he knew something the rest of us didn't.

Sybill, of course, for once looking focused behind her bottle-thick glasses, as she studied the three of them with an electric intensity as they drank the potion and fought to free Hermione. Her voice had been sure and steady as she had described the gray; where it was, what it was doing...

Excuse me dear, while I clear my throat and dab my eyes again. Mind if I have a sip of tea before I continue? I used to believe a hot cup of tea cured all ills but I know better now. Still, the warmth of it is settling and the tingle of sugar on my tongue gives me something else to focus on for a moment.

Severus looks good, don't you think? Those last few days, before...well, he's no longer quite so spare, is he? We take good care of him here. I daresay, he's even gained a couple stone since they arrived three years ago. Hermione looks the same as she ever did such a beautiful girl - woman now. I think they make a lovely couple, don't you?

Anyway, where was I? Oh, yes. That day.

Well.

Severus was in good spirits that morning, kissing my cheek and even teasing me about my choice of reading material, if you can imagine! He told me he had to come back, because he didn't want to be subject to me reading him Victorian romances if he didn't. I've kept that in mind, as I'm sure you've noted the stack of James Bond novels on the end table there. I figured I need to read them something after all and I think Severus and Hermione both would appreciate the irony of reading spy novels to the greatest double agent of our times.

Anyway, Severus just seemed peaceful that morning. I thought it was because he knew that he would soon have Hermione freed and they would be able to get on with their lives together but it wasn't that at all. He was content because he knew it was the end, you see. Don't get me wrong I don't think he purposely gave up or anything. I

truly believe he had every intention of making it out with Hermione if he could. Failing that, however, he knew he could get her out without him and he was willing to sacrifice himself for her.

Some days, I find myself quite upset that Hermione didn't come out with Harry like Severus had intended that he sacrificed himself for nothing and now both are lost but my anger never holds. I would hate for him to be alone he was always so alone in the outside world as it was.

None of us were really expecting Harry to return, you see, in the spectacular fashion he did. One minute, he had been standing there, tears leaking silently from his eyes as he gripped Severus' hand, and the next he was practically thrown across the room, his tenuous connection to them broken.

I had rushed to his side when I heard the sharp click of his skull against the wall but before I had reached him he had jumped to his feet and rushed back to Severus, his hands reaching out grabbing the older man's face as he looked into his eyes.

'Snape!,' he choked out, 'Snape! She wouldn't come with me...can you hear me? She wouldn't come!'

Severus' beetle-black eyes were wide and dead, the color flat and lifeless. Albus stepped forward after a few moments and pulled Harry away with shaking hands.

'What happened, Harry? What happened?' his voice was old; shaky, the blue eyes clouded with tears.

'She wouldn't leave him,' Harry cried out. 'I could have saved her...I could have...'

'But what happened, Harry?' Albus demanded again, his voice a little more strident than before.

It took a while, but young Potter managed to get out his story stumbling as he told us of the empty foyer they had first entered, how Professor Severus had gone looking for Hermione, leaving Potter alone. He told us of their sudden emergence from a hallway, how the curse was screaming after them, how the very air congealed around them as they tried to run. 'I swear, Albus, the curse had a thousand voices...and they all sounded like Lucius Malfoy....'

Harry told us about the golden dagger that had cut their link; how Hermione had practically flown into his arms; Severus suddenly able to run towards them hollering for them to get out.

His green eyes refracted like emeralds behind his tears as he recounted Hermione begging him to put her down and let her go back for Severus, even as Severus offered himself to the curse if only it would let both he and Hermione free. 'He loves her,' he cried, 'loves her enough to die for her! And I let him down he made me promise to bring her out no matter what...but I just I couldn't do it. She needs him. Gods forgive me, but I've failed them and now they're both lost!' He had thrown himself into my arms after that, his thin arms wrapping around my waist as he sobbed into my apron. It was the first time I had ever allowed myself to see that the hero of the Wizarding world was really just a little boy who needed a mother.

'Shh,' I had murmured, even as tears leaked from my own eyes, stroking his back and his hair, 'shh.'

Albus, of course, tried legilimens within moments of Potter telling us what had happened but he was unable to find anything at all.

'It's like a wall has gone up,' he murmured sadly. 'Before I could at least enter her mind but now...!' It was hard not to notice the way his hands shook as he reached out and gently pushed Professor Severus' hair from his face. We had managed to get him beside Miss Granger on the bed, never once allowing their hands to separate....I fear we've lost them both.' His wrinkled fingers continued to stroke Severus' lanky hair with a shaky hand. 'My boy,' he was murmuring, 'dear, dear boy...'

It was absolutely heart breaking.

None of us knew what to do, really. I made tea just gave myself busy-work to keep from collapsing in tears. Harry had grabbed Hermione's hand and sat to one side of her bed, alternately murmuring 'You promised me, Hermione...you promised me...' and 'Snape...I'm sorry. She wouldn't leave.'

Albus, of course, was on the other side of the bed, which had been charmed wider when we placed Severus on it beside Hermione. Sybill who had said nothing since Harry's return stood at the end of the bed staring at the two prone forms, barely allowing herself to blink.

The four of us kept vigil for hours, waiting and hoping that somehow Hermione and Severus would break free. Minerva McGonagall came to see what was happening when no one showed up in the Great Hall for dinner. She had been so confident that Severus and Hermione would be joining everyone at dinner time she had spent the entire day in the kitchens, overseeing a feast of momentous proportions.

When it was explained to her quietly, by me, that the retrieval had been less than successful she had joined us, standing behind Albus and offering him much needed support.

Finally around midnight that evening Sybill finally broke her silence. 'The grey is defeated,' she whispered. 'Their auras have returned.'

Harry smiled brilliantly when she said this, gripping Hermione's hand even tighter in his own, 'I knew you could do it, Hermione! You've always been brilliant.'

If we were expecting them to wake up, though, we were left waiting. Three days after Sybill's pronouncement there was still no change to their condition. According to Sybill, their aura colors remained strong, with no hints of gray, but neither Hermione nor Severus so much as blinked.

Albus had left after the first 36 hours at Minerva's insistence but Harry had remained. 'It's my fault,' he had cried the second afternoon, 'I could have saved her and I chose not to.'

'It sounds like the decision was hers,' I replied gently, handing him a thick ham sandwich and hot tea. 'It wouldn't have done, to force her to leave him against her will.'

'I know,' he had sighed then, brokenly, 'I know. But I promised Snape Severus that I would bring her out and I failed him. The only thing he ever asked me to do for him...'

I didn't say anything to that, because how could I respond? Instead, I sat on the other side of the bed and tried to eat my sandwich. After a short period of time, Harry broke the silence.

'You know, the other day when you asked me why it was Snape I ran too about Hermione's hair and the day you told me she was dying...I didn't know how to respond to that.' His eyes darted from Hermione's face, to Severus', to mine. 'It wasn't something I'd ever consciously thought about. I mean, why DID I go to Snape, and not Albus?'

His thumb traced idly against the back of Hermione's hand as he spoke, speaking so softly I had to strain to hear him.

'I never liked him, you know. He was always so...nasty...to me. Calling me names. Being sarcastic and cruel. Yet over and over he would save my life, and Hermione's and Ron's...everybody's really. I'm sure it was never pleasant, being a spy.'

His voice trailed off again; his thumb stilling on the back of Hermione's hand. 'I knew when I went to him about Hermione that he would do something about it...he was always doing things. Always rescuing us, despite the way he felt. And after the war when everyone was fawning over me, and treating me like I was the best thing to ever happen to the Wizarding world...he never changed. He still treated me just the same as always. Just like Hermione would have treated me, if she hadn't been struck down by this curse. I would have been just the same old Harry to her; not Harry the boy who defeated Voldemort; Harry the hero just Harry.'

'You liked him,' I murmured, nodding when he looked up and blinked back his tears. 'You didn't want to, but you did.'

'I suppose, in a way, I did like him. At the very least, I admired his ability to hate me no matter what.' We both chuckled a little bit at that sentiment.

'They're not coming back, are they?' he asked sadly.

'I don't think so,' I replied.

* * * * *

A week later, during Albus' evening visit, Harry suddenly asked what would happen if we knowingly broke the link between Hermione and Snape.

'Sybill has said their aura's are strong...what if it's the fact they're still linked physically that's keeping them from returning to us?' he had asked, seemingly out of the blue. 'Maybe all we need to do to fully defeat the curse is to break their link.'

Albus had looked up at this, eyes suddenly narrowed in thought. 'I don't know if that would work.'

'We don't know that it wouldn't,' Harry rebutted. 'If the gray is gone, they're obviously still alive...still together in Hermione's mind...we should break the link.'

'What if breaking the link doesn't help them?' I asked, 'What if breaking the link actually damages them in some way?'

'How could it damage them?' Harry shook his head at me as he spoke, as if banishing my words from the room, 'What could be worse than never being able to wake up?'

'I think it's obvious they're together in their minds,' I replied. 'If they weren't, Professor Severus wouldn't be looking better now than he did when he was still with us and Miss Granger would be deteriorating, much as she did the last time they were separated. But that's not happened, has it? She looks better than ever! If you break their physical link, what's to say you won't be breaking their mental link as well?'

'What's to say we will be?'

I turned to look at Albus, who was studying the pair on the bed intently. 'We need Sybill before we do anything. Nettie has a point separating them could cause irreparable damage. She needs to be here to tell us what's going on with their colors.'

Harry grinned at this. 'I'll go get her right now!'

I didn't say anything as he rushed from the room, waiting until he had disappeared before saying, 'I think this idea needs to be thought out a bit more. I know you miss Professor Severus, Albus I do too but I think this idea is extremely ill-advised. If he were here, Professor Severus would never allow this to be done not without researching it first.'

The Headmaster had taken Potter's recently vacated seat, his sad blue eyes barely looking at me. 'It's the only thing that might work, Nettie. If the gray is gone they should be able to wake up.'

'What if they already think they are awake?' I retorted, 'What then? If you take them away from each other....' My voice trailed off and I could feel tears filling my eyes. 'Breaking the link could kill them!'

Albus, however, refused to listen to me. When Harry returned via flu network with Sybill, I turned to him.

'I know you want Hermione back, Harry but think about what you are going to do here. When Professor Severus broke his link to you, you came back to us like you were supposed to because you were the anchor. You're not in there with them anymore what happens if, when you break the link between them, they lose each other? What if they can't find their way back to us without an anchor to show them the way? What then?'

Harry listened to me, chewing his lip thoughtfully. 'If it looks like it's not going to work, we can join their hands again, Nettie,' he finally answered. 'But I think this will work.'

I could say nothing more. Sybill took her place at the foot of the large bed, with Albus and Harry on either side. At Harry's nod, Albus took Professor Severus' hand and gently pried his fingers from Hermione's. Harry, who was holding onto Hermione's wrist easily slid her hand free once Severus' fingers were open.

The result of breaking the connection was almost instantaneous. I watched in abject horror as the pair seemed to start disintegrating before my very eyes. Within minutes, Hermione looked like she had when Snape had stopped visiting her. Her skin seemed too tight, her body curled in on itself in a fetal position; her hair became brittle and broken.

Severus looked even worse it was as if, without her touch to keep him whole his body just collapsed in on itself. The flesh that had so recently started filling out and looking healthier quickly became hollow again, before turning an alarming gray. It was as if the very muscles under the skin had melted away, leaving not only his face gaunt and sickly, but his frame as well. Where Albus was holding his hand, I could easily make out the tendons on his fingers and around his wrist.

Sybill was so horrified by what she was seeing that it took her a few moments to find her voice, but when she did she was crying 'Put them back, put them back they're dying.'

I jumped forward and wrenched Professor Severus' hand away from Albus, wincing as I heard the bones in his wrist snap as if they were twigs. 'Harry,' I hollered, 'you're killing them! Give me Hermione's hand!'

Potter stood there staring at me for a few minutes, before thrusting Hermione's hand towards me, helping me align the fingers with Severus' as I urged them to touch each other again.

'It's okay,' I was murmuring, 'it's okay. You're together again.' I was frantically rubbing their hands against each other, urging them to feel their connection, but it didn't seem to be working. I was practically straddling Severus now, folding my hand around his, forcing his fingers to close around Hermione's. 'Feel her. She's right here, Severus, FEEL her!'

Harry was murmuring too. He had managed to get in behind Hermione, his chest cradling her back as he whispered urgently in her ear, 'He's there, Hermione. Find him. You have to find him! I promise, you'll never have to be apart again...I swear...'

After what seemed like hours, Severus' slack hand finally held Hermione's on its own. The sudden disintegration of their physical selves slowed to a stop, but it was several days before they started looking healthy again, and Severus' wrist never did heal properly.

Harry had been beside himself when he realized what breaking their connection had almost done to them. Albus himself was devastated when he realized how close they had come to killing them, and it was weeks before he could look at the two of them without allowing his guilt to show on his face.

Albus was there a few days later when Potter came for his daily visit. Both men had talked quietly for a few moments, before Harry had turned to me, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a beautiful white binding ribbon.

'You were right, Nettie,' he said, 'We should have never tried to separate them. We need to make sure it doesn't happen again, because I don't think they could survive it.'

I nodded at him, 'They need each other to survive. I don't know what happened, or how it happened, but I'm sure they're together and happy wherever they are.'

Behind Harry, Albus cleared his throat. 'Harry's brought a binding ribbon,' he stated.

'I can see that,' I replied. 'It's beautiful.'

'Molly Weasley helped me pick it out,' Harry replied, handing me one end before handing the other end to Albus. He let go of the ribbon and reached between the pair on the bed, lifting their hands gently and placing them on top of the ribbon.

I moved closer to the bed, and began winding my half through Hermione's fingers, helping Albus lace his half of the ribbon through Severus', before we traded ends and repeated the process, tying their hands together.

Harry watched us, tears streaming down his face, as Albus and I completed the elaborate knot at the bottom around their wrists. Finally, after several minutes of silence, Albus intoned, 'Hand to hand, heart to heart. Their lives are one.'

'Their lives are one,' Harry and I both agreed.

'Take good care of my friend, Snape,' Harry added. 'She loves you.'

They haven't been separated since.

* * * * *

What else would you like to know? There's not much more to tell. I stayed at Hogwarts to look after them for several more months. Harry became the new 'temporary' Potions Master, until a replacement could be found. Eventually, when it could no longer be avoided, Albus broke the wards on Professor Severus' chambers and he, Harry and Minerva entered his rooms to see if Severus had left them anything.

That picture of Hermione, hanging on the wall over there you see it? Professor Severus drew it. He also left her a letter, which I've tucked away in the pocket of her robe. No, I haven't read it no one has. And no one ever will I've charmed it so that only she will be able to open it up.

That terrible Skeeter woman snuck in once and tried to steal it. She claimed she was writing an 'unofficial' biography about Professor Severus and Miss Granger, but that didn't help her in the end. I don't believe she's a journalist anymore, actually.

I eventually came back to St. Mungo's with my two charges. I couldn't stay at Hogwarts forever, nor could they. In his will, Professor Snape left a large sum of money to St. Mungo's for a new ward one for terminal cases; victims of incurable curses with the stipulation that I be the ward administrator and that he be the first permanent resident. He also made sure that the Longbottoms would be transferred to my care as well. I try to make all of my patients feel like this is a home we've done away with the hospital beds and the generic rooms. Instead, each room is decorated with pictures and items from the patients own home, in the hopes that this will help them feel more comfortable and relaxed.

Albus comes to visit as often as he can. The loss of Severus was a hard one for him he retired as Headmaster the end of the school year, saying his heart wasn't in it anymore, and he's stopped eating lemon drops altogether. He lives in a small cottage just outside of Hogsmeade.

Harry never really left Hogwarts. He's not teaching Potions anymore, something for which he says Snape would be enormously pleased. Instead, he teaches Defense Against the Dark Arts. He's married to Ginny Weasley and seems to be generally content. They just had their first child a few months ago, a sweet little girl he and Ginny named Jane, in honor of Hermione.

I suppose life goes on. As for me, I miss Professor Severus more than I could possibly say. In the short time I knew him it became obvious to me that there was more to the man than even he was aware of. Prickly, stubborn cuttingly sarcastic. Gentle, loving and willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of a love he never thought he'd find.

And how do I know this? He did leave a letter for Albus, you know. And Albus was kind enough to provide me with a replicant of the letter, which I keep with me always. It helps me to remember exactly who Professor Severus was, and why the world will never be the same without him in it.

"My dear friend - and yes, it does seem odd to be addressing a letter this way if you are in possession of this letter, I have failed to return with Hermione and Potter. You will find several notes in my suite and instructions on the breakdown of my estate.

Are you surprised I am so prepared?

Albus, I regret that I did not accept more lemon drops from you when they were offered. I understand now that it wasn't just candies you were offering me, but companionship and guidance. I shall miss your twinkling and your outlandish robes, but most of all I shall miss talking with you. You have ever and always been a friend before anything else I regret that I seem to have failed you in this.

Please tell Minerva to go easy on my Slytherins they're not as bad as she may think, and they are going to need someone with the brave heart of Gryffindor behind them to bring them back into the fold of Hogwarts. I fear that the scar Voldemort has left on the Wizarding world is more deeply felt in my house, where so many parents and friends were supporters. I know Minerva will champion those remaining in my absence, as she has always favored the underdog.

I would also ask that you tell Nettie how much I have come to admire her loyalty and friendship. She is not old enough to be my mother, but I do wish I had had a sister like her growing up. If I had, I doubt the paths I chose would have led me to the place I am now. I am sure my life would have been far happier with her no-nonsense guidance to keep me on the straight and narrow.

There is a leather folder in the middle drawer of my desk I would like you to give to Sybill. She had been wanting to do a joint paper on auras and potions, and I trust the notes I have left for her will be sufficient in this endeavor. However, tell her I want top billing on the thesis, else I will appear to have gone soft.

As for Potter I know he will be blaming himself for not getting both me and Hermione out. He has to realize it was always my choice. I was not willing to sacrifice either of them to this curse and if the only way to ensure their freedom was to stay, how can the fault be his? Besides, I needed to free Hermione and she needs someone to take care of her who better than the boy wonder? He might not be my favorite person in the world, but I do respect him and I know he loves her. That's good enough for me.

Please make sure Hermione receives all my books even the Dark Art ones. I know she will treat them with the respect they deserve and they are the only things of value I have that I believe she would enjoy. If there is anything else in my rooms she wants, please ensure she gets it. I daresay her Gryffindor heart will need a memento of some sort. I recommend offering her the job as Potions Professor in my absence, as she truly is a remarkable and gifted witch. You can tell her I said so.

It's rather odd that I should find myself regretting, more than anything else in my misspent life, the loss of friends and the loss of Hermione, when until that final battle, when Hermione saved my from Malfoy's curse, I didn't realize I could have either. I have thought for quite some time now that it would be almost impossible to free Hermione and make it out myself in the process. It seems Lucius was smarter than I ever gave him credit for this curse of his is rather brilliant.

I want you to know, regardless of anything, I wouldn't change these last two years. Without them, I would never have known the joys of friendship and the limitless bounds of love. Not so long ago, the idea of being trapped in my mind would have terrified me, but no longer. I now understand there are people in this world that will always care for me -

I shall never be truly alone again.

Severus Snape

The End

Mark Knopfler Storybook Love

*Come my love I'll tell you a tale
Of a boy and girl and their love story
And how he loved her oh so much
And all the charms she did possess
Now this did happen once upon a time
When things were not so complex
How he worshipped the ground she walked
And when he looked in her eyes he became obsessed
My love is like a storybook story
But it's as real as the feelings I feel
My love is like a storybook story
But it's as real as the feelings I feel
It's as real as the feelings I feel
This love was stronger than the powers so dark
A prince could have within his keeping
His spells to weave and steal a heart
Within her breast but only sleeping
My love is like a storybook story
But it's as real as the feelings I feel
My love is like a storybook story
But it's as real as the feelings I feel
It's as real as the feelings I feel
Now he said, don't you know I love you oh so much
And lay my heart at the foot of your dress?
She said, don't you know that these storybook loves
Always have a happy ending?
Then he swooped her up just like in the books
And on his stallion they rode away
My love is like a storybook story
But it's as real as the feelings I feel
My love is like a storybook story
But it's as real as the feelings I feel*

AN Redux: Okay I hope I haven't made anyone out there too angry. If you go back through the course of the story, you will hopefully find hints and clues as to this final outcome. I consider it a sad-happy ending, as opposed to a happy-happy ending, because Snape and Hermione are still together and think they're free, even though they really aren't.

Also, the story idea actually stems from real life, in a way. When I was a little girl, my Oma died rather suddenly, shortly before my grandparents 50th wedding anniversary. Within days after the funeral, my Opa stopped talking to anyone, unless he thought he was talking to her. Eventually, the doctor said he had Alzheimers, but I never believed it. I think he retreated to a place in his mind where they could be together always. When he finally died, eight years later, I dreamed about them walking together in a field full of flowers, and my Opa was happy again. This dream and this belief of mind has always stayed with me despite everything, love prevails.

I apologize to the lovely Notsosaintly for taking so long to finally get all of this story posted here. The best laid plans of mice and men and all that. For those of you just reading this story for the first time, thank you for your comments. For those of you re-reading it a second (or more) time, thanks for your support.