

Tidings of Comfort and Joy

by StormySkize

Hermione Granger has been absent from the wizarding world for more than five years. When Severus Snape runs into her in a Muggle bookstore, he discovers why. An old promise made to Albus Dumbledore prompts Snape to offer his help to his former student.

One

Chapter 1 of 10

Hermione Granger has been absent from the wizarding world for more than five years. When Severus Snape runs into her in a Muggle bookstore, he discovers why. An old promise made to Albus Dumbledore prompts Snape to offer his help to his former student.

Author's Notes: This was written for the HG/SS holiday exchange on Live Journal. This was the prompt I chose: #71. Fic: Post-war Hermione and Severus are both doomed to spend Xmas alone until they run into each other in Diagon Alley or London. How, why, and what happens next is up to you. Happy ending, please. Any rating. This prompt was submitted by GinnyWeasley31 and the story is dedicated to her.

Special thanks to my beta reader, JuJuJenn. And thanks to Illyria who did some Brit-picking for me. Any errors, however, are mine alone.

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. The author is in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended.

One

As she was pushed and jostled by the teeming crowd on Oxford Street, Hermione cursed herself for ever thinking that this sojourn was a good idea. It was cold and raw out, the sky leaden with scudding grey clouds. Sleet fell intermittently, making it seem even colder and drearier than it actually was. The lowering weather had failed, however, to keep the throngs of holiday shoppers at home. Still, it was her own fault she was being shoved and trampled. She'd procrastinated for weeks. Now, with only three days until Christmas, she had reached the point of desperation. Her gift from Aunt Jane had arrived by post ten days before and sat on her coffee table, mocking her each time she passed it. She *had* to find a gift for her godmother today and post it if there was to be any hope of it arriving in Wales before Christmas, and she would pay dearly for the cost of the expedited delivery.

Hermione glanced at her watch and was dismayed to discover it was only eleven o'clock. She'd been out and about for just ninety minutes and she was already exhausted from the strain of keeping her glamour in place. As she pushed her way towards Great Marlborough Street, she briefly considered sending her godmother a cheque or a gift certificate. Then, she gave herself a mental shake and discarded that notion. Aunt Jane was the only family she had left, other than her parents; she deserved a hand-picked gift. Besides, her godmother considered cheques and gift certificates 'the afterthoughts of a muddled mind'. No, she would just have to call upon her reserves of magical energy to see her through. It wouldn't be the first time.

She finally managed to reach the door of Grant and Cutler and pushed it open, grateful to be out of the bone-chilling weather. The interior of the bookstore was well-lit, pleasantly warm, and, more importantly, nearly deserted. Apparently, few Londoners considered foreign-language books an appropriate Christmas present. Luckily for Hermione, her Aunt Jane adored foreign languages and tried to learn a new one every couple of years. She considered any book written in one of her new languages a great treasure especially if it was a murder mystery.

Hermione spoke a smattering of French, the result of vacations with her parents during her childhood. She also recognised a few words of German, Italian, and Spanish, but could hardly be called fluent in any of them. Her aunt had not-so-subtly informed her that learning Italian was her latest project, so she asked the shop assistant where she could find murder mysteries written in Italian. The shop assistant insisted on escorting her to the appropriate section. He was about thirty, tall and lean, with sandy brown hair and warm brown eyes. He smiled at her and tried to engage her in conversation. Hermione tried to discourage his blatant flirting without being rude. There were just some activities that were forever off limits to her now. Flirting with handsome Muggles was one of those activities. After a few minutes, the poor man admitted defeat and withdrew gracefully. He pointed to a couple of shelves and left her to browse.

After several minutes, Hermione saw the perfect gift for her godmother. It was *Assassinio sull'Orient Express*. She didn't have to be fluent in Italian to translate that to *Murder on the Orient Express* by Agatha Christie. Her aunt had several of Dame Christie's books in both French and German, so she knew this one would be a welcome addition to her library.

She was about to head toward the front of the store to pay for her purchase when she spotted another book she thought her godmother would enjoy. It was an Ellery Queen mystery titled *Il Mistero delle Croci Egizie*. Ellery Queen was another of her aunt's favourite authors and, in the past, Hermione had gotten her a few of his books in French and Spanish. This one was in Italian, but Hermione only recognized one word *mistero*, or *mystery* in the title. She reached for the book to see if there was an English translation of the title on the dust jacket.

"Dra't it," she muttered as she realised the book was about two inches out of her reach.

She looked around to see if there was a ladder or a step-stool nearby, but she didn't see one. She didn't relish the idea of asking the flirtatious assistant to get the book down for her.

She made one more attempt to reach the book, standing on her toes and stretching her arms as much as she could. She could touch the spine of the book with the tips of her fingers, but couldn't grasp it. She briefly considered using a surreptitious Summoning Charm, but didn't want to take the chance. This was, after all, a Muggle shop. The last thing she needed was to have the Ministry come down on her for doing magic in front of Muggles. Besides, she barely had the energy to maintain her glamour. Using even a simple Summoning Charm would compromise what little magical strength she had left.

She sighed and reconciled herself to asking the shop assistant for help.

"Allow me," said a deep voice from behind her. A long, black-clad arm reached over her shoulder and easily plucked the book from the shelf above her head.

"*The Egyptian Cross Mystery* one of Queen's best," said the man.

Hermione stiffened. She recognised that voice, even though she hadn't heard it in more than five years.

"Professor Snape," she gasped, turning toward the voice. Then she mentally berated herself as she realised her error. She would have remained an anonymous stranger if she hadn't addressed him by name.

"You have me at a disadvantage, madam," Snape replied. "Do I know you?"

Snape looked down at the young woman. She appeared to be in her mid-twenties. She had long, straight, dark hair, eyes the colour of old brandy, and pale skin. At the moment, two spots of colour accentuated her high cheekbones. She was very thin, even by the unrealistic standards of current fashion. She wore a woollen coat that hung off her spare frame.

Snape had an excellent memory for faces; he knew he had never seen this woman before.

"Who are you?" Snape asked.

For a brief moment, Hermione considered lying; after all, she hadn't seen him in more than five years, and she'd probably never see him again. Then her innate honesty and her Gryffindor courage combined to impel her to tell him the truth.

"Hermione Granger," she said, looking up and meeting his eyes.

Snape scowled at the person in front of him. This was Granger, best friend of the boy-who-lived-to-become-the-wizarding-world's-greatest-hero, and the brains of the Golden Trio? This was Hermione Granger, who had gone into seclusion after the Final Battle and hadn't shown up at any of the countless functions the Ministry insisted on throwing for the heroes of the war? As he recalled, she hadn't even shown up to receive her Order of Merlin (First Class), but had allowed Potter to collect it for her. This was Granger, bushy-haired know-it-all and one of the brightest students to pass through Hogwarts in nearly a century? What had she done to herself? And why?

Snape felt a tingle at the back of his mind. The girl was in some kind of trouble, and the tingle was reminding him of the promise he had made to Albus Dumbledore. Would he never be free?

"Miss Granger," he said after a moment, "I see you have finally managed to tame your hair."

Hermione glared up at him and opened her mouth, prepared to offer a scathing retort something along the lines of the absurdity of him, the man Harry and Ron had unfailingly referred to as the 'greasy git', having the audacity to comment on the state of her hair. Then she realised that she simply didn't have the energy to get into a verbal sparring match with her former Potions professor. Besides, it looked like he had finally managed to do something about *his* hair as well.

"Professor," she said with a small, sad smile, "you have no idea."

"May I have that book now, please?"

"Of course," he replied and handed her the book he was still holding.

"Thank you," she said. She turned toward the front of the store so she could pay for her purchases and get home as quickly as possible.

He could just let her go. The tingle would go away. Eventually.

She had nearly reached the end of the row when he called out to her.

"Miss Granger!"

She stopped and turned back to find Snape approaching her.

"Yes, Professor?"

"Why don't you explain it to me, then?" he asked as he stopped in front of her.

"I'm no longer a student you've caught out of bounds. You can't deduct House points or assign me detention. I don't have to explain anything to you," she said with a defiant lift of her chin.

Snape looked at her more closely. He could see the exhaustion etched on her face, even through her glamour. Her eyes looked haunted. Even without the promise, he would have recognised that the girl needed help.

"You're correct, Miss Granger. You are under no obligation to tell me anything. I must admit, however, to that all-too-human failing of curiosity," he said. "Where have you been for the last five-and-a-half years?" He glanced around to make sure they wouldn't be overheard before he continued speaking. "And why have you resorted to using a glamour, especially such an elaborate one? Your magic is at a very low level. Perhaps I can help you."

"Why would you want to help me?" she asked. "I was one of the banes of your existence for more than seven years. I would think you'd be glad you've been shut of me."

He would have been glad to be shut of her, if not for the obligation he still felt to Albus. He couldn't very well tell her that, however.

"Let's just say that after the losses of the war, it pains me to realise that a bright and promising young witch has exiled herself from a world that could desperately use her intellect and abilities."

"I don't owe that world anything!" Hermione hissed.

"Only your magical training and education," Snape replied.

"Which I've paid for, quite dearly," Hermione said, her anger overcoming her good sense.

"Have you, now?" Snape asked in a chiding tone.

"Indeed, I have!"

Hermione flushed and then she glanced around. When she saw that the aisle they were in was empty, she turned back to Snape.

"This is what my magical training and education cost me," she said.

Snape watched as her long, dark hair disappeared to be replaced by her usual bushy brown locks, but only on the left side of her head. Short, burnt-looking fuzz covered the other half of her scalp. The left side of her face looked as he remembered it when he had seen her last, on the eve of the Final Battle. The skin there was smooth and creamy with a dusting of light freckles across her cheek and the bridge of her nose. The right side of her face, however, had a reddish cast, the flesh hanging in lumpy-looking folds that pulled down her eye and the corner of her mouth. She looked like a wax doll that had been hit with a blowtorch.

Only years of practice at hiding his reaction to just about anything kept Snape from gasping out loud as he saw her ruined face. She had, indeed, paid a price a price far beyond that which should have been extracted from her.

"A parting shot from Bellatrix Lestrange," Hermione said.

Snape watched as she drew a deep breath and then closed her eyes. The glamour re-formed, and she was, once again, the pretty young woman she'd been.

"Pulpa Adustum," Snape whispered.

"You know the curse she used?" Hermione asked. Without realising she had done it, she reached out and grasped his upper arm with her free hand.

"I know *of* the curse or, at least, of a curse of a similar nature. Whether it is actually the curse she used, I couldn't say," Snape replied. "It's very old and very Dark. It was once an Unforgivable, but the Wizengamot removed it from the list more than three centuries ago because it hadn't been used in nearly a millennium. It was thought to be lost."

"Well, Bellatrix apparently found it," Hermione said with a harsh twist to her mouth. She realised she was still grasping his arm, and she dropped her hand to her side.

"Is there a counter-curse?" she asked, already suspecting what she would hear.

"If there is, it is lost in antiquity," Snape replied.

"Well, you've already told me more than I've managed to find out in more than five years. I guess I'll just keep searching.

"Thank you, Professor Snape," she said and turned away.

Once again, he considered just letting her walk away. But then he felt the tingle again, reminding him of his promise to Albus.

"Miss Granger," he called.

"Yes?" she said, turning back to him.

"Where have you been searching?"

"The Ministry allows me to use their library after hours, of course, and only if I keep my glamour intact. They don't want me to frighten anyone who might be prowling the halls." Her tone was bitter.

"My private library has books the Ministry has never even heard of," Snape said. He felt the tingle begin to recede.

"Would you be willing to look for information about this curse?" she asked. She couldn't prevent the note of desperation that crept into her voice.

"If we worked together, we could get through the books twice as fast," Snape suggested.

"You would allow me into your private library?"

"As you pointed out, you're no longer a student. I doubt I have to be concerned that you will damage any of my rare volumes," he said.

"Even when I was a student, I wouldn't have damaged them!" Hermione exclaimed.

Snape looked down at her, inwardly amused by her look of furious indignation.

"No, I'm sure you wouldn't have," he said. "I'm not as sure about those two reprobates you associated with, however. I don't recall that they shared your love of books and learning."

"Yes, well, they certainly took better care of their brooms than they did of their books," she conceded. "But then, you can't fly a book to play Quidditch."

"Are they still as single-minded?" Snape asked. He didn't really care, but he would rather not run into them if he could help it. The last thing he needed was to discover that one of them needed his assistance, as well.

"Actually, I don't see them very often," Hermione said in a sad tone.

"Why not? I thought you were like the Three Musketeers," Snape said.

"I can't endure anything more than a short visit. Maintaining my glamour takes a tremendous amount of energy. As a matter of fact, I really need to be going. I'm quite near

the end of my tether now, and I've still got to post these to my aunt in Wales.

"The Tube ride home should be an interesting experience," she added. "It's a lucky thing my coat has a hood, else I'd be giving the children of London nightmares."

She tried to smile as she said this, but Snape could see the pain in her eyes.

"You no longer have the strength to Apparate?" he asked.

She just shook her head.

"Pay for your purchases and have them wrapped for posting. I'll take care of it for you," he offered. He wasn't sure what had motivated him to make the offer, but when he saw the relief on her face, he was glad he had.

"Oh, that would be grand. The Tube station is just a couple of blocks from here. If I leave now, I should get home before I'm too exhausted to maintain my glamour.

"Thank you, sir."

Snape followed her to the checkout counter and watched her pay for her purchases. The Muggle shop assistant flirted with her outrageously as he wrapped the books, but Hermione deftly turned his overtures aside.

After the transaction was complete, she turned back towards Snape. She nearly stumbled, and he reached out a hand to steady her. He led her to one of the small reading areas set up near the shop's front window.

"Stay here while I take care of this package. I'll be back in a few minutes to escort you home," he said.

"Really, sir, you've done enough. If I just rest here for a few minutes, I'll be fine," she said as she sat down.

Snape leaned over her. "Do not force me to take drastic action, Miss Granger," he whispered into her ear.

"What? Are you going to use the Imperius on me?" she asked.

"If I must," he replied.

Hermione was sure he was bluffing or joking, as unlikely as that seemed but she was simply too tired to argue with him.

"All right, I'll wait here. The post office is ..."

"I know where it is," he interrupted.

Snape had no intention of walking to the Muggle post office and then standing in what was sure to be an interminable line of people who had waited until the last minute to send their holiday parcels. Instead, he ducked into a deserted alleyway and cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself. He concentrated on the address written on the label and Disapparated soundlessly.

He found himself standing in front of a neat, little storybook cottage, complete with ivy covered walls. He traversed the stepping stones that led to the front door, placed the parcel on the mat, and knocked.

Perhaps half a minute later, the door swung open. He stepped back, even though he knew he couldn't be seen because of the Disillusionment Charm.

The woman who opened the door was in her sixties, but Snape noted her resemblance to Miss Granger. She had the same gold-flecked brown eyes, and her hair, although pulled back and streaked with grey, had a thick unruliness that was familiar.

The woman looked up and down the street and then bent down to pick up the package.

"Bloody postman was in a hurry," the woman muttered.

Snape waited until she re-entered the house and closed the door behind her. Then he Disapparated once again. When he was back in the alley, he removed the Disillusionment Charm, walked back out of the alley, and re-entered the book store. The whole excursion had taken less than five minutes.

Hermione was still sitting in the chair where he had left her.

"Did you forget something?" she asked. "Where are the books?"

"They've been delivered," Snape assured her.

Hermione looked puzzled for a moment, and then she realised what Snape had done.

"Ever so much more reliable than the post," she said with a small smile. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now, if you'll come with me, I'll see you safely home."

Hermione stood on shaky legs and let Snape take her arm to lead her out of the store. This was a Snape she didn't know at all. She looked at him through her lashes. Not only was his hair less oily-looking, but his skin seemed less sallow. The lines around his eyes and mouth seemed softer. Without his perpetual scowl, even his nose seemed less prominent. He was even wearing Muggle boots and jeans. They were black, of course, as was the jumper and pea coat he wore over them. Without his teaching robes billowing out behind him, however, he appeared less intimidating. She realised that if he hadn't spoken, she probably wouldn't have recognised this man as her dour former Potions master.

Her thoughts were interrupted as Snape led her into a deserted alley way and then spoke.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

Hermione told him her address.

"Have you a back garden?" he asked.

"Yes," Hermione said.

"Hold on," Snape instructed as he wrapped an arm across her shoulder.

Hermione hesitated a moment and Snape's eyes narrowed in annoyance.

"You must hold on to me for Side-Along-Apparition, Miss Granger, else we'll splinch for sure."

Hermione nodded, put her arms around his waist, and closed her eyes.

A moment later, they were standing in the garden behind Hermione's small house.

"I can make it from here, Professor Snape," Hermione said as she dropped her arms and stepped away from him. "Thank you for your help."

Hermione walked slowly toward her back door, fishing in her purse for her key.

Snape watched as she tried to fit the key into the lock. After she dropped it a second time, he walked up behind her.

"I'll do it," he said as he took the key from her trembling fingers.

"I ... I ..." Hermione stopped speaking. Her eyes rolled back and she started to fall. Snape caught her as her legs collapsed beneath her. Her glamour faded as she lost consciousness.

Snape didn't bother with the key. He muttered an Alohomora Charm and nudged the door open with his shoulder. He kicked it closed behind him as he carried Hermione inside. The door opened into the kitchen. He could see a small parlour beyond and he headed there.

He laid Hermione down on the sofa and then pulled her into a sitting position so he could remove her coat. She was wearing a jumper under the coat, and he opened the first two buttons. He'd known when he'd first seen her that she was thin. When he'd carried her, he'd been surprised by how light she was. He guessed she weighed less than eight stone. He was appalled by how thin she was. Her collarbones jutted out and her arms were little more than skin and bones. He could see that the damage from the Pulpa Adustum Curse extended down her neck, across the right side of her chest, and at least to the top swell of her breast. He didn't allow his eyes to follow the line of ruined flesh any further than that. He removed her shoes and then eased her back down onto the sofa.

He considered using a Rennervate Spell, but decided that it would probably be best to let her revive on her own. There was a small, knitted blanket thrown over the back of the sofa. He pulled it down over her and tucked it under her chin. She moaned softly and burrowed into the soft wool, but she didn't awaken.

She was exhausted, both physically and magically. He could sense how low her magical energy was. She needed rest and food. He would let her sleep for a while, and then he would wake her up and feed her.

He went back into the kitchen and began looking through her cupboards.

Hermione was dreaming. In her dream, she could smell onions frying. Since she couldn't remember the last time she'd cooked onions, she knew she had to be dreaming. She opened her eyes a little, yawned widely, and sat up, stretching as she did so. The woollen blanket that was covering her slipped down to her waist. Why was she sleeping on the couch instead of in her bed? And why could she still smell onions in spite of the fact that she was now, indisputably, wide awake? She tried to remember what had happened. She had gone to Grant and Cutler to get her godmother's Christmas present. She had run into Professor Snape, of all people, and he'd actually Apparated to her aunt's house in Wales to deliver the package for her. Then he'd taken her home. She remembered fumbling with her key; she'd dropped it at least twice. She'd been so tired and light-headed; she'd thought she was going to pass out.

She felt herself flush as she realised that she *had* passed out. Professor Snape had obviously gotten her into the house and put her on the sofa. He'd also taken off her coat and her shoes.

Before she could speculate any further, Snape walked into the parlour. She turned quickly, presenting him the undamaged side of her face.

"Good, you're awake," he said. "I was just coming in to rouse you. Dinner is ready."

"Dinner is ready," she repeated. "You ... you made me dinner?"

Had the whole world gone insane? Severus Snape, who'd done nothing but belittle and torment her throughout her days at Hogwarts, had made her dinner?

"Actually, I made enough for both of us. I took the liberty of inviting myself to your table. Is that acceptable?"

"Since you cooked, it would be incredibly rude of me to throw you out, wouldn't it?" she asked.

"Indeed," he agreed.

Hermione stood and discovered that her nap had restored a good deal of her energy.

"How long have I been sleeping?" she asked.

"Nearly five hours," Snape replied. "It's just gone five o'clock. A bit early for dinner, but then, you slept through the lunch hour."

"I need the loo. Will dinner hold?"

"I've put a Stasis Charm on it; it will keep."

"I'll only be a few minutes."

Snape was leaning against the counter, reading the newspaper, when Hermione walked into the kitchen. He glanced up and noted that she had restored her glamour, but he made no comment about it.

"Sit," he said. He refolded the paper and put it down on the counter. He waved his hand over the dishes, and then he picked them up and carried them to the table.

"I can't eat all this!" Hermione protested as she saw the amount of food on her plate. A perfectly broiled pork chop sat on the plate, surrounded by a scoop of potatoes mashed with the fried onions she'd smelled upon awakening, and a large serving of steamed broccoli with herbs. There was a basket of warm dinner rolls and a butter crock already on the table.

"You are far too thin, Miss Granger. Your cupboards and your refrigerator were nearly bare. Don't you ever eat?"

Hermione flushed. "Sometimes, I ... I forget to eat," she admitted. "Besides, I don't really enjoy cooking."

"I did notice that you had plenty of coffee in your larder, however," he said.

"I like coffee," she said.

"Coffee and will power will only carry you so far, as your collapse today so aptly demonstrated. The body requires regular infusions of protein, carbohydrates, and even some fats, in order to continue functioning optimally," Snape said. "Now, eat."

Snape took the seat across from her and began on his own plate of food.

Hermione picked up her fork and took a small bite of the mashed potatoes. They were delicious—creamy and buttery. The fried onions gave them a wonderful tang. She didn't know why it surprised her to discover that Snape could cook. He was a Potions master, after all. Some people would consider potions making to be simply a specialised form of cooking, though she was sure Snape would be insulted if anyone had the temerity to suggest such a notion to him.

They continued their meal in silence for several minutes. When she had finished about three-quarters of what was on her plate, she pushed it away.

"I can't eat another bite," she said when Snape glared at her. "It was delicious, though. Thank you for making it for me."

"Unlike you, I enjoy cooking," he replied, "though this was so simple a meal as to barely qualify as cooking. My specialty is French cuisine *coq au vin*, *duck à l'Orange*, *châteaubriand*, and the like."

"Anything more elaborate than a tin of soup and a cheese sandwich is haute cuisine to me," Hermione said.

"Bourgeois," Snape muttered as he stood and began clearing the table.

Hermione's eyes narrowed. She was about to say something when she saw him arch his eyebrow at her.

"Comment, Miss Granger?"

"When did you develop a sense of humour, Professor Snape?" she asked. She got to her feet and moved to the sink to begin the washing up.

"I've always had one – a biting and caustic one, I admit, but a sense of humour, none the less. I simply had very little opportunity to display it. The Dark Lord truly *did not* have a sense of humour and tended to lash out at anyone who showed the slightest hint of possessing one. I learned early on to keep that facet of my personality well-hidden."

"It was so well-hidden as to be deemed positively non-existent, at least to your students," Hermione replied.

"My students would be the last people I'd reveal it to," Snape declared. "Most would perceive it as a weakness and try to exploit it, somehow."

"But, it might have put an end to the rumours that you were a vampire," Hermione said with a small smile.

"And why would I want that?" he asked and then he chuckled.

"Well, you're certainly not the same person I knew at Hogwarts," she said.

"Are you the same person you were then?" he asked, looking at her intently.

"No. No, I'm not," she replied. And then she looked away.

They worked in silence for several minutes. Hermione washed the dishes, and Snape dried them and stacked them on the counter.

When Hermione opened the refrigerator to put the butter away, she gasped.

"Where did all this food come from?" she asked.

"Your larder was appallingly bare, Miss Granger," Snape replied. "As I noted earlier, you are far too thin. The cure for that is nutritious food partaken at regular intervals. You'll find that your cupboard has been replenished, as well."

"I don't know what to say." She felt a prickling of tears behind her eyelids.

"The correct response would be, 'Thank you, Professor Snape.'"

"But why?" she asked.

"Because the customs of polite society dictate that when one person performs an act of kindness for another person, the receiving party usually says thank you."

She looked at him blankly for a moment, and then she ducked her head.

"I didn't mean why should I say thank you; I do thank you, most sincerely. I meant why did you do it?"

"I suspect that one of the reasons you are so underweight – other than the fact that you think coffee is food, of course – is that you expend a tremendous amount of energy maintaining your glamour when you go out."

"It's exhausting," Hermione conceded.

"I would guess that other than your nightly forays to the Ministry library, you seldom leave your house. Am I correct?"

Hermione nodded.

"Trips to the market are rare."

"I have things delivered," Hermione said.

Snape just arched a brow at her.

"I do," Hermione said, "when I think of it."

"Which is seldom," he insisted.

"Yes ... well ... I have a lot on my mind," she mumbled.

"Does the Ministry give you any compensation?" Snape asked, changing the subject.

"Why should they?" she asked.

"Your injury was a result of the war. You are, in effect, a disabled veteran. Others are receiving payments. Mundungus Fletcher and Kingsley Shacklebolt are just two that I know of. Did you ever apply?"

"I didn't know there was anything like that available," she said.

"You mentioned before that you do research at the Ministry library. Is anyone at the Ministry aware of the extent of your injury?" he asked.

"Rufus Scrimgeour knows. I had to ... to ... show him before he would allow me access to the library. No one else knows. Scrimgeour asked me to keep it a secret – not that I wanted anyone to know, anyway. Even after he saw what had happened to me, he was reluctant to allow me permission to do my research there. I very nearly had to beg him. He placed a lot of restrictions on my activities. I can only go to the Ministry after hours. I have to keep my glamour intact, and the glamour has to be other than my own appearance. In addition, I'm not allowed to talk to anyone about my ... my ... injury or about my research. Technically, I'm breaching my agreement with Scrimgeour by

discussing it with you."

"Rest assured; I have no dealings with Rufus Scrimgeour or the Ministry if I have any choice in the matter.

"Might I ask how you earn your living? Do you work for the Ministry?" he asked.

"No! I wouldn't work for them if they offered, which they haven't. I work from here, on my computer. I do tech support for a software company." She paused as she realised that Snape probably didn't know what she was talking about.

"A computer is a Muggle device ..."

"I'm a half-blood, Miss Granger. I lived exclusively among Muggles until I went to Hogwarts, and I've kept up with Muggle technology. I know what a computer is."

"My apologies, sir, I meant no disrespect. At any rate, my needs are simple, so I get by. It's not like I waste money going out partying or buying clothes." This last was said with a touch of wistfulness.

"So you work from home during the day probably ten hours at a stretch, if I recall your industriousness and then you spend another six or eight hours at the Ministry library each night. Am I correct?" He was staring at her pointedly.

"That sounds about right," Hermione agreed, refusing to meet his eyes.

"Which means you're averaging less than six hours of sleep in each twenty-four hour period," Snape concluded.

"If I'm lucky. I've had trouble sleeping since ... since this happened," she said, waving a hand to indicate her glamour.

"Nightmares?" Snape asked.

"Yes."

"I'm not surprised."

"I asked Madam Pomfrey for some Dreamless Sleep Potion, but she didn't think that was a good idea," Hermione said.

"She's quite right. It can become addictive if misused. You should try some lifestyle changes first."

He moved towards the stove as Hermione glared at him.

"Tea?" Snape asked, holding up the kettle.

"Coffee?" Hermione countered.

"Coffee is a morning beverage, Miss Granger," Snape said. "The caffeine may be contributing to your inability to sleep. Tea is much more appropriate in the evening. I'll put honey in it. You'll find it quite soothing and less likely to keep you awake."

"Tea has just as much caffeine as coffee," Hermione said in her know-it-all voice.

"Some teas do," Snape agreed. "This tea, however, is one of my own blending. It contains kava kava, valerian root, and lemon balm. It contains no caffeine. It will help calm your nerves a bit and promote a restful, natural sleep."

"I've just woken up," Hermione said. "I'm not ready to go back to sleep, yet."

"It's not Sleeping Draught," Snape said. "It won't put you to sleep. It will simply relax you and allow you to slip into a natural sleep when you're ready to sleep."

"In that case, I'd love a cup of tea, Professor Snape. Thank you."

As they sat drinking their tea, which was delicious and soothing, they talked.

"Why don't you see Potter and Weasley anymore?" Snape asked.

"I do see them, just not very often. Most of the time, I'm just too tired to hold my glamour."

"Are they so shallow that the sight of you without your glamour would offend them?" he asked.

"They don't know about my injury," Hermione replied in a soft voice.

"Why not?" Snape demanded to know.

"I told you, Scrimgeour made me promise not to reveal what had happened to me," she replied.

"He had no right to do that. You need the support of your friends and your family ..." Snape's voice trailed off as he saw Hermione's stricken look.

"Do your parents know what has happened to you?" he asked.

Hermione just shook her head.

"Who does know about your condition?"

"Well, Neville is the one who found me on the battlefield after Bellatrix hit me with the curse. Neville had fired off a hex just before she did, and when his hex hit her, it deflected the curse she was throwing at me. I was hit with just the nimbus of the curse, rather than the main portion of it," Hermione said.

"That probably saved your life," Snape said. "Had the curse hit you with its full force, you would have died within moments as your internal organs cooked."

"Who else?" he prodded.

"Madam Pomfrey. She tried everything she knew of to heal me, but nothing worked. She did manage to stop the pain, however."

"So other than Longbottom, Scrimgeour, and Poppy, no one else knows that you were injured during the Final Battle?" Snape asked.

Hermione shook her head. "Harry and Ron think I was *Stupefied*. No one else knows what really happened. Well, now you know, but otherwise, no one knows. I didn't want anyone to know because I was embarrassed by the way I looked. I didn't want anyone to see me like that. I couldn't have borne the pity. I made Neville promise not to tell Harry or Ron. I told him I wanted to tell them myself. I forbade Madam Pomfrey to tell anyone. Ethically, she had to follow my orders, even though she didn't agree with me.

"I isolated myself for months, refusing to see anyone or even to talk to anyone. I wanted to die, but I didn't have the guts to kill myself."

"Is that when you stopped eating?" he asked.

She flushed slightly. "It wasn't a conscious decision on my part. It just sort of happened. I was depressed and I just ... just kept forgetting to eat."

"And not even your parents noticed?" Snape persisted.

"I used an even more elaborate glamour when I visited them, and I've kept my visits short. My parents, although they've been quite supportive of me since they found out I was a witch, have never really understood the wizarding world.

"I never told them about Volde ... the Dark Lord. I didn't want to worry them."

"When did you begin your research at the Ministry?" Snape wanted to know.

"Not until nearly a year after the Final Battle. I woke up one morning and realised that I wasn't going to just die. And, since I lacked the courage to kill myself, that meant I was going to live. I decided that as long as I was going to live, I might as well try to find out what had been done to me and if there was any way to reverse it.

"I made some discreet inquiries, but I couldn't find out anything about the curse that had been used against me. I tried to gain access to the library at the Ministry, but I needed authorisation. I submitted all the proper forms, but kept getting denied. I tried to make an appointment to see Rufus Scrimgeour, but I didn't get anywhere with that, either. I finally asked Harry to make an appointment with him. The Ministry has been trying to get Harry to speak on their behalf for years. Scrimgeour nearly fell over himself when Harry Flooded him. He invited Harry to step right through into his office. When both of us came through, Scrimgeour was his usual, unctuous self. 'I don't know why my secretary didn't put you through to me, Miss Granger. *Of course*, I would have taken your call if I had known'. Blah ... blah ... blah."

"Arsehole," she finished.

Snape chuckled. "Didn't Potter wonder what business you had with the Minister of Magic?"

"I told him I needed access to the Ministry library for some personal research. He's been putting up with my bookishness since we were first-years. He didn't ask me what the research was for, and I didn't volunteer the information.

"Harry told Scrimgeour that he'd consider it a 'personal favour' if he would listen to what I had to say and then gave me the authorisation I needed to use the library. Then Harry left me with Scrimgeour."

"That is when Scrimgeour imposed the restrictions on you?"

"Yes. He seemed to know, somehow, that Harry wasn't aware of my injury. I'm afraid I wasn't very good at trying to bluff my way through the lie. I really didn't want Harry to find out what had happened to me. Scrimgeour implied he would tell Harry if I didn't agree to his terms. He also made me promise to keep trying to get Harry to speak out publicly in favour of the Ministry and himself, of course."

"He really *is* an arsehole," Snape said with barely suppressed rage. "He knew you wouldn't find anything in the Ministry library."

"How would he know that? He certainly can't have committed the entire library to memory," Hermione said.

"No, but he was the former head of the Auror Office. He would have known that the Pulpa Adustum Curse was once on the list of Unforgivables. In addition, he would have known that there is nothing about it in the Ministry library."

"The bloody bastard has let me go to the library almost every night for more than four years, and all the time he knew ..."

"He's been using you to get to Potter," Snape said.

"He's been wasting his time, then," Hermione said through clenched teeth. "Harry hates Scrimgeour. He'll never become the Ministry's poster boy."

"He's been wasting your time as well," Snape said.

Hermione looked at Snape. "I've nothing *but* time, Professor," she said in a quiet voice.

"Well, you'll be putting it to better use, starting tomorrow," Snape declared.

"Couldn't we get started tonight, since I won't be going to the Ministry library as I had originally planned?"

"You need to rest," Snape insisted.

"I've just woken up. I'm fine, really."

"Your magical energy is still quite low. You'll be stronger after you sleep some more. School is out for the Christmas holidays. I'll come round and get you in the morning."

"I can take the Tube," Hermione said.

"Don't be absurd," he said. "Why would you waste time and energy using that ridiculous means of transportation when I can take you to my home in just seconds?"

"I suppose you're right," she conceded.

"I'll come by at nine o'clock. I'll even prepare breakfast."

"Thank you, sir," Hermione said.

"Go to sleep, Miss Granger. I'll see you in the morning."

Hermione nodded.

Snape stepped back and silently Disapparated.

Summary: Hermione Granger has been absent from the wizarding world for more than five years. When Severus Snape runs into her in a Muggle bookstore, he discovers why. An old promise made to Albus Dumbledore prompts Snape to offer his help to his former student.

Author's Notes: This was written for the HG/SS holiday exchange on Live Journal. This was the prompt I chose: #71. Fic: Post-war Hermione and Severus are both doomed to spend Xmas alone until they run into each other in Diagon Alley or London. How, why, and what happens next is up to you. Happy ending, please. Any rating. This prompt was submitted by GinnyWeasley31 and the story is dedicated to her.

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. The author is in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended.

Special thanks to my beta reader, JuJuJenn. And thanks to Illyria who did some Brit-picking for me. Any errors, however, are mine alone.

Two

At precisely nine o'clock the next morning, Hermione heard a knock on her back door. She opened the door and greeted Snape.

He was wearing Muggle jeans again, she noted, but a dark indigo today, rather than black. His jumper was charcoal grey. He was also wearing the same black pea coat he had worn the day before.

"Good morning, sir," she said as she gestured him inside.

"Good morning, Miss Granger," Snape replied as he stepped into the kitchen. "How did you sleep last night? You look well-rested."

"I slept quite well, actually," Hermione replied. "I wasn't tired when you left, so I signed on to my computer and put in a solid four hours of work. Then I read for an hour or so before I went to sleep. Reading for pleasure is something I haven't had a lot of time to do of late. It was a nice break. And your tea really did relax me. I don't remember any dreams I might have had, good or bad."

"I left a canister of the tea mixture in your cupboard. Let me know when you get low, and I'll blend you another batch," Snape said.

"Thank you, I appreciate that. I made coffee this morning, however," she added.

"Good, I enjoy my morning coffee. Now, if you'll move out of the way, I'll prepare breakfast." He shrugged out of his coat and hung it on a hook near the door.

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I thought you didn't enjoy cooking," Snape said as he moved toward the refrigerator.

"I don't; I'm merely trying to be polite," Hermione replied.

"In that case, you can set the table. I'll also put you in charge of making the toast when it's time for that chore. I trust you know how to operate the toaster?" he asked.

"I just might manage it."

In the end, she barely did manage it. She caught the toast about two seconds before they would have burned beyond redemption. As it was, the edges were too dark.

Hermione was a bit chagrined. Snape had prepared mushroom and cheese omelettes, sausages, and fried tomatoes all perfectly cooked and finished at the same time while she had struggled to provide four pieces of edible toast.

Snape made no comment about the toast. He merely buttered them liberally and slathered on some strawberry jam. Hermione followed his example.

When breakfast was done, Hermione did the washing up. Although she protested, Snape insisted on wiping the dishes as Hermione placed them in the rack.

"Really, Professor," Hermione protested, "I'll do the washing up. You cooked, after all."

"Do you expect me to just sit, watching you work?"

"Why not? I sat and watched you cook."

"Yes, but I enjoy cooking. No one enjoys the clean up afterward. That's why cleaning charms were developed," he said.

"I don't waste my magical energy on cleaning charms," Hermione said.

"I know, and if you'd waited three seconds, I'd have cast a cleaning charm before you filled the sink with water."

"I'll keep that in mind next time," she said.

"Next time?" Snape raised a sardonic brow at her. "What makes you think there will be a 'next time', Miss Granger?"

Hermione flushed. She was about to stammer out an apology when she caught the telltale twitch of Snape's lips.

"Are you having me on?" she asked.

"I am," Snape admitted. "I suspect that once I leave you to your own devices, breakfast will revert to being a cup of coffee and a promise to your stomach to fill it later."

"I guess I've just gotten out of the habit of eating in the morning," Hermione said.

"I think you've gotten out of the habit of eating entirely," Snape countered. "However, the new term doesn't start for nearly three weeks. Perhaps I can help you to establish some new and healthier eating habits by then."

"Are you going to come and make breakfast for me every morning?" she asked.

"Would you have any objections if I did?" Snape asked. "I wouldn't want to impose on you."

"You're willing to come here every day to cook for me, and you're worried about imposing on me?" Hermione asked. "I should be worried about imposing on you. I'm sure you have better things to do with your free time than to babysit me."

"I'm going to make you earn your breakfasts, Miss Granger," Snape assured her.

"Really? How?"

"We will spend the morning doing research in my library. I will then prepare lunch. After lunch, you will assist me while I brew a few of the potions Poppy needs to replenish her stores. Then I will prepare dinner. After dinner, I will bring you back here."

"It sounds wonderful ..." Hermione began.

"I'm detecting a 'but' about to be uttered," Snape said.

"I have to work, Professor Snape. I can't afford to take three weeks off. As soon as all the computers that people have received as Christmas presents are unwrapped, the calls for tech support will be very heavy. I get paid based on the number of calls I take.

"Besides ..." Again, Hermione let her voice trail off.

"Yes?"

"I can't maintain my glamour for that long. I don't usually use it when I'm home alone."

"I've changed my mind," Snape said. "We will be spending the morning at the Ministry of Magic. By noon, you will be on the list of persons receiving disability compensation from the Ministry."

"I won't take their charity," Hermione said.

"It isn't charity; it is legitimate compensation. You've earned it. Scrimgeour has been misleading you for years. He's been using you under the guise of 'helping' you. Without your contribution, Potter would never have been able to defeat the Dark Lord, and we'd all be living under the thumb of that madman."

"The Ministry gave me a medal in recognition of my services to the wizarding world," Hermione said.

The dishes were all washed. She opened the stopper on the sink to allow the dirty water to drain away.

"Had Scrimgeour been able to find a way to avoid doing that, without having the whole wizarding world rise up in protest, he would have," Snape said with a sneer. "You'll notice that I was not so 'honoured' by the Ministry."

Snape wiped the last pan and put the damp towel across the counter to dry.

"You can't buy groceries with an Order of Merlin," he continued. "Besides, how would you really rather spend your time: researching a cure for your injury or working?"

"Well, when you put it that way ..."

"As for maintaining your glamour," Snape said, "my home is completely warded against uninvited visitors. You could leave your glamour down while we're working there."

"I'm not sure I'd be comfortable doing that," Hermione said.

"I assure you, Miss Granger, your appearance, sans glamour, is not at all off-putting to me. Unfortunately, you are not the first victim of the Dark Lord and his followers that I have encountered. You should not feel embarrassed by your injury. You survived when so many did not. Your injury is a symbol of your courage in the face of the enemy."

Hermione considered his words before she spoke again.

"My great-grandfather survived Dachau," she began. "He was a university professor who spoke out against Hitler's Master Plan. The SS came in the middle of the night and took him away. After the camp was liberated, he went back to his post and resumed teaching. But, he continued to fight for what he believed in. He never again wore long-sleeved shirts, and he even made my great-grandmother shorten the sleeves of his jackets so that his tattoo was always visible. He said that the whole world needed to be reminded of what had happened so that it would never happen again.

"I don't think I'm brave enough to do anything like that," she concluded.

"Nor are you required to be. I completely understand your desire to maintain your glamour when you are out and about. People can be cruel, even when they don't mean to be. Pity is, in a way, the worst form of cruelty, is it not?"

"Yes, it is," Hermione said.

"So, shall we go visit Minister Scrimgeour?" Snape asked.

"How will you get in to see him? It seems his lackeys keep him very much insulated from those he has no wish to encounter."

"I have a secret or two that Scrimgeour would prefer remain such. I'm sure I can convince him to see us. As a matter of fact, I'm going to go on ahead and smooth the way. I'll be back in an hour to escort you there."

"All right," she agreed, albeit a bit reluctantly.

"Remove your glamour while I'm gone. Conserve your strength," he advised.

"I will," she promised.

Snape stepped back and Disapparated without a sound.

"Scrimgeour is looking forward to meeting with you, Miss Granger," Snape said when he returned.

"I'm sure," Hermione replied.

"He's going to leave the wards in his office down so that we can Apparate right in."

He reached out to put his arm across her shoulder and saw her flinch slightly.

"I know you find it distasteful to be in such close proximity to me, but it is necessary for Side-Along-Apparition."

Hermione flushed. "If that's the impression I gave you yesterday, and even just now, I'm sorry," she said. "My hesitation has nothing to do with you. I'm not used to being in such close proximity to anyone."

"My apologies, then, for misinterpreting your reaction," he said after a moment.

Hermione nodded and stepped into his arms.

Two hours later, Hermione and Snape were standing outside the Ministry. Hermione had a Ministry bank draft clutched tightly in her hand.

Not only had Scrimgeour authorised the monthly disability compensation, he had also insisted that the Ministry owed her retroactive payments going back to the end of the war. The failure of the Ministry to provide the compensation she 'so richly deserved' was a 'terrible oversight'; an oversight that he was 'proud and happy' to correct.

Snape had engaged every bit of self-control he possessed and had managed not to laugh outright at Scrimgeour's insincere posturing. Hermione had said nothing not even thank you. She had taken the bank draft and walked out of Scrimgeour's office with her head held high.

"I want to go to Gringotts right away," Hermione said.

"Not a very trusting soul, are you?" Snape asked with a smirk.

"I want to cash this and make a deposit to my account before he changes his mind and puts a stop payment on the draft," she insisted.

"He wouldn't dare," Snape replied.

"I'm not taking any chances. This," she said, holding up the bank draft, "is enough for me to pay back my parents. They loaned me the money to make the down payment on my house."

"Is the monthly payment enough to meet your mortgage?" Snape enquired. He'd only guessed at the amount she might need when he'd 'suggested' an appropriate payment to Scrimgeour.

"Yes, and I'll even be able to afford groceries," she said with a small smile. "There won't be a lot left over, however. I'll probably keep my job to supplement this, though I'll work a lot fewer hours."

"But you will take the next three weeks off, won't you?" he asked.

"I'll need to work at least a couple of hours each day, if I want to keep my job. I'll work in the evenings, however, so that I can research with you in the mornings.

"I'm looking forward to delving into your library," she added.

They'd been walking as they talked and soon found themselves outside the Leaky Cauldron.

Snape pulled the door open and allowed Hermione to precede him into the pub.

"Afternoon, Professor Snape," said Tom from his post behind the bar. "Will you be wantin' a table for two?"

"Maybe next time, Tom," Snape replied. "We have business in Diagon Alley."

"Good day to you both, then, and Happy Christmas," Tom said and went back to polishing glasses.

"And to you, Tom," Snape replied. Hermione merely smiled and nodded. It was unlikely that Tom would recognise her voice after all these years, but she didn't want to take the risk.

When they passed through the pub and into the alley behind it, Snape drew his wand. He tapped the bricks in the prescribed pattern, and the bricks reformed themselves into an archway. He held his arm out to Hermione. She took it, and they walked through the archway and into the bustle of Diagon Alley itself.

As they walked past the Apothecary, Eeylops Owl Emporium, Flourish & Blotts, and the other shops that lined Diagon Alley, they received quite a bit of notice. Almost everyone recognised Severus Snape, of course. Besides being the Potions master at Hogwarts, he was recognised as the notorious Death Eater-turned-spy who'd helped the boy-who-lived to bring about the final and indisputable end of He Who Must Not Be Named. The fact that he had killed Albus Dumbledore on Dumbledore's own orders only added to his mystique. (If there were those who still questioned his loyalty, they had the good sense to do so privately.) The pretty young woman on his arm was a stranger to everyone, however, and she engendered a lot of curiosity.

Snape ignored the stares and the whispers and kept his attention on Hermione. He could feel her trembling.

Hermione kept her head down and leaned into Snape, letting him guide her footsteps.

"We're here," said Snape, leaning down over her bent head to speak softly into her ear.

Hermione looked up at the towering marble edifice and reached for the door. Snape nearly knocked her over when she stopped suddenly, and he ran into her back. He reached out a hand to steady her.

"What's the matter, Miss Granger?" he asked.

"I ... I don't look anything like Hermione Granger," she whispered. "What if they won't cash this draft?"

"Do you have your vault key?"

"Yes."

"And your wand?"

"Of course."

"That's all you need. You don't think you're the first patron ever to have entered the bank while wearing a glamour, do you? The goblins don't care what, or who, you look like. They'll check that your wand signature matches the one they have on file, and as long as it does, you'll have no problem," he assured her.

The goblin sitting on his high stool behind the counter barely glanced at her as she made her request. The Ministry draft was cashed without question. Hermione had the majority of the Galleons exchanged into a cheque made out to her parents, and payable in British pounds. She kept a few Galleons and a few pounds, which she slipped into the pocket of her jeans. The rest of the Galleons were deposited into her vault. The cart ride down into the bowels of the bank was just as frightening as she'd remembered, but the thought that her small nest egg had been augmented helped to alleviate some of her unease.

An hour after they'd entered Gringotts, they were once again standing outside.

"Are you hungry?" Snape asked.

"I am, actually," Hermione replied.

"A novel experience for you these days, I'm sure," Snape said.

"Is the invitation to lunch still open?" Hermione asked.

"It is, indeed," Snape replied. "We can Apparate from behind the Leaky Cauldron."

They walked as quickly as they could through the crowds of people and made their way back to the archway that led to the Leaky Cauldron. Once again, Snape used his

wand to open the gateway, and they stepped through. Once they were through, Snape tucked his wand back into his sleeve.

"Ready?" he asked as he placed his arms across Hermione's shoulders.

"Yes," she replied, wrapping her arms around his waist and closing her eyes.

When Hermione opened her eyes, she was standing in the middle of a small, rather dark parlour. The furnishings were old and slightly shabby.

She stepped away from Snape as he dropped his hand from her shoulders.

Snape pointed his wand at the ceiling and muttered, "*Lumos*," under his breath. A large overhead chandelier brightened and cast light over the centre of the room. Several wall sconces also lit, chasing the shadows out of the corners.

"You've charmed the electric lights to respond to a *Lumos* Charm."

"I must admit that electricity is one of the few things I missed when I chose to live among wizards rather than Muggles. I still use *Lumos* the magical way, as well," he said and aimed his wand at the small fireplace. Flames leapt to life in the small grate.

"Oh my," Hermione said, as she turned in a circle. Bookcases lined every available foot of wall space. She took a step towards the nearest one, but Snape's voice stopped her.

"Lunch *first*, Miss Granger," he said as he moved toward a room behind the parlour.

Hermione made a small moue of disappointment, but dutifully followed him.

When she entered the kitchen, her mouth dropped open.

In contrast to the old-fashioned styling and genteel shabbiness of the parlour, this room was a marvel of modern kitchen design. A large stainless steel refrigerator and a six-burner stainless steel stove dominated the room. The cabinetry was a light oak and looked new. There was a microwave oven, a four-slice toaster, and a coffee maker on the smallest stretch of counter. On the other side of the large stainless steel sink, a longer stretch of counter held a canister set and a large butcher block cutting board. A kitchen island served as the table. Two high-backed swivel stools were tucked under one side of the island.

"I've been renovating," Snape said. "The house was virtually unchanged since I was a child. I spent very little time here when I began teaching at Hogwarts. Once the war was over, and I realised that I had actually survived, I decided some changes were in order."

While he'd been talking, Snape had been opening and closing the refrigerator and the cupboards, taking out containers of food and dishes.

"Well, the kitchen certainly reflects the fact that you enjoy cooking."

"The kitchen was the first room I renovated. The house isn't very large it's just a two-up, two-down, but it suits my needs. The upstairs has been done over as well, including modernising the loo. The parlour is the only room left, and its refurbishing will be a formidable task because of all the books."

"Why don't you use a Shrinking Charm on the books and put them all in a couple of boxes?" Hermione asked.

Snape threw her a baleful look. "Some of my books are hundreds of years old. They are in delicate condition. I would never subject them to the stresses of first a Shrinking Charm and then an Engorgement Charm to restore them."

"I didn't realise that the process could harm things. It seems a rather common practice," Hermione remarked.

"It is a common practice. For the most part, it causes no damage to the items being shrunk. But, as I said, some of my books are very old. The pages are brittle, the inks are fading, and the bindings are cracking. I need to have some of them restored or copied before the contents become too faded to read. Filius Flitwick is working with me to develop some charms that will preserve the most fragile of them, but it's very difficult magic."

As he spoke, he opened another drawer, pulling out a couple of placemats and napkins. He handed these to Hermione, and she began setting the table.

"If anyone can do it, Professor Flitwick can," Hermione offered.

"I agree," Snape said. "Filius is probably the most talented wizard alive when it comes to charms. Nearly a tenth of the charms in common usage these days were developed by him."

"I didn't know that," Hermione said.

"He keeps a low profile, both literally and figuratively," Snape explained. "He has some goblin blood, back a few generations. The Ministry has always been intolerant of wizards with non-human blood in their family tree."

"That's a ridiculous attitude," Hermione said, upset on behalf of her former Charms professor.

"You're right, but it's hardly a surprising one. Filius has found a home, and a refuge, at Hogwarts. He does nothing that will bring him unwanted attention. He quietly develops his charms and introduces them to the wizarding world through discreet intermediaries."

"It seems rather unfair," Hermione said.

"It's completely unfair," Snape agreed, "but the pure-blood families have always had far too much influence over the Ministry and its policies. The prejudices and 'laws' against those that fail to meet their false standards are a direct result of that influence."

"One would think that after the war, wizard folk would be more tolerant. It was Voldemort's prejudices that led directly to the war, after all," Hermione remarked.

"It was the Dark Lord's unbridled lust for power that led to the war. His prejudices simply appealed to the pure-bloods who chose to follow him."

"Is that why you kept your half-blood status a secret?" Hermione asked. Then she clapped a hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry, sir. That's none of my business."

"No, it isn't, but I'll tell you anyway. I didn't intentionally keep my parentage a secret, at least not at first. When I was sorted into Slytherin, it was assumed I was a pure-blood. There hadn't been a non-pure-blood sorted into Slytherin for years, possibly since the Dark Lord himself. I did nothing to correct that assumption. That was merely the first of the many mistakes I've made in my life," he replied with a touch of bitterness.

Although he'd been more forthcoming than she'd thought he would be, she decided not to pursue the subject.

As they talked, Snape worked at the stove. Soon the tantalising aroma of some sort of stew filled the air.

"It smells wonderful," Hermione said. "What is it?"

"After your comment about a tin of soup and a cheese sandwich being haute cuisine, I decided I'd demonstrate that soup and a cheese sandwich actually can be a meal

worthy of note. We're having a lamb stew, which is really just a thick soup. The cheese is called Caboc. It's made from cow's milk, but without rennet. It has a very smooth texture and a slightly nutty flavour. Instead of bread, we'll be eating the cheese spread on oatcakes, which is the traditional way it is eaten in the Scottish highlands."

Hermione smiled as Snape talked about the seasonings he had used in the stew and further expounded on the importance of using fresh herbs rather than the dried ones offered in most markets. It seemed he put as much effort and passion into cooking as he did into Potions making.

The meal was just as delicious as Snape said it would be. Hermione sat back with a satisfied sigh after finishing the portion of stew that he had ladled into her bowl. The cheese was different from any she'd ever eaten, and the oatcakes were a new experience, as well.

"Tea?" Snape asked when she was done eating.

"Another special blend?" she asked.

"Earl Grey," Snape replied. "Not very special at all, I'm afraid, but it will go well with the sponge cake we're having for pudding."

Hermione groaned. "I've no room for pudding. I barely finished the stew."

"We'll wait a little while before we indulge," Snape said. "We can begin our research, if you'd like."

Hermione could feel the familiar tension teasing at the edge of her glamour. Her energy level was already starting to fall, in spite of the large meal she'd just consumed.

"I'm afraid that the stress of dealing with Scrimgeour and the goblins at Gringotts is beginning to take its toll on me. Not to mention the terrifying journey on that cart."

"It is quite an experience," Snape agreed.

"Do you think they do it that way to deliberately intimidate us?"

"Of course."

"At any rate, I'm feeling the stress."

"You could drop your glamour. You could get in a few hours of research if you weren't expending so much energy to maintain it," Snape said.

Hermione flushed and bit her bottom lip. "I ... I just don't feel comfortable doing that."

"I understand. I hope that in time, you'll feel comfortable enough around me to do so."

Hermione shrugged but made no comment.

"I'll take you home," he said.

"I'm sorry, Professor Snape," she said.

"You've no need to apologise, Miss Granger. In spite of the fact that I was your teacher for many years, we're still virtual strangers to each other. It will take some time for us to develop a rapport."

Snape dropped his arm across her shoulder, and Hermione lifted her arms to wrap around his waist. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them, they were standing inside her kitchen. Hermione stepped away from him as soon as she steadied herself.

"May I call you later to see how you're doing?" Snape asked.

"I'm not on the Floo Network," Hermione said.

"I have a telephone, Miss Granger," Snape said with a small smile. "I actually know how to use it, and it's not nearly as messy as the Floo."

"You're just full of surprises," she said.

She found a scrap of paper and a pen in a drawer and wrote down her number. Snape took the pen from her hand, scribbled his own number on the bottom of the paper, tore it off, and handed the paper back to her.

"Call me if you need anything," he said as he put the paper with her number in his pocket.

"I will," Hermione said.

"I'll call you after dinner," Snape said.

"Thank you for lunch and for your help with the Ministry. I doubt I'd have been successful without your influence."

"You're welcome," he replied. "Though, I should be thanking you. I do so enjoy the opportunity to make Rufus Scrimgeour squirm."

Hermione smiled at that remark.

"Good day, Miss Granger," he said as he stepped back.

"Good day, Professor Snape," she replied.

A moment later, she was alone.

Hermione drew a deep breath and let her glamour drop. It was a relief to be able to relax and let her magical energy begin to rebuild. She sometimes wondered how long she'd be able to continue without depleting her magic completely. Perhaps the research with Professor Snape would turn up something. If it didn't, she would be forced to exile herself even more from both the wizarding and Muggle worlds. She'd be a modern day Elephant Man forced to hide behind a veil or a mask whenever she went out. It was not something she looked forward to doing.

She signed on to her computer and began taking calls. She worked for a couple of hours and then took a break to use the loo and brew another pot of the tea Snape had left her. It really was soothing to her nerves. She hadn't realised how jumpy all that coffee had made her.

As she went into the kitchen, she had a sudden craving for the sponge cake she'd refused earlier.

Hermione looked at the counter where the paper with Snape's telephone number lay.

Before she could think about it, she snatched up the phone and dialled the number.

The phone rang three times. She was just about to hang up when it was answered.

"Yes?" Snape's voice sounded different over the phone, but she had to smile at his terse greeting.

"Professor? It's me, Hermione Granger," she said.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine." Now that she was actually talking to him, she realised how foolish it had been of her to succumb to her childish impulse.

"What can I do for you, Miss Granger," he asked.

"It's silly, really," she stammered. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have called. I'll hang up now."

"You don't strike me as the type to make harassing phone calls," Snape said.

"I'm not!"

"Then you must have had a reason for your call, even if it was a 'silly' one. What is it?"

Hermione tried desperately to think of a plausible lie, but couldn't come up with one. Finally, she just blurted out the truth.

"Cake," she said.

"Cake?" he repeated.

"Specifically, sponge cake," Hermione said. She knew she was blushing, and she was glad that Snape was on the other end of the phone rather than right in front of her.

Snape chuckled. "Put the tea on, Miss Granger. I've a few small details to tend to here, but I'll be there in ten minutes with cake."

Before Hermione could reply, he rang off.

When Snape knocked at her back door ten minutes later, Hermione had the tea things ready. The kettle on the stove was just coming to a boil.

She had also made sure her glamour was firmly in place.

They sat at her kitchen table, sipping tea and nibbling the cake, which was delicious.

"Did you bake the cake?" she asked as she helped herself to a second piece.

"I'd like to claim responsibility for it, but baking is not my forte," Snape replied. "There's a very good bakery not far from my home. It's been run by the same family since I was a boy. I'll have to introduce you to their *éclairs*. Amazing."

"I never would have guessed that you have a sweet tooth, Professor," Hermione said.

"I usually don't, but when I do get a craving for a pastry of some kind, I want the best."

He paused and drew a deep breath before he spoke again.

"I used to bring *éclairs* back to Albus whenever I went to London."

Hermione had been one of the very few people who had been privy to the memories that Professor Dumbledore had left behind. Professor McGonagall had shown them to Harry, Ron, and her a few days after his funeral. It had been difficult for them to understand and accept that Dumbledore had orchestrated his own death. Harry had been especially hard to persuade; it had taken some additional information provided by Remus Lupin to finally convince him that Snape wasn't a cold-blooded murderer. Hermione had long been intrigued by the paradox that was Severus Snape. Although outwardly he'd been contemptuous of Harry and she and Ron, as well, simply by dint of their association with him, Snape's actions were often in direct contrast to his words. Once she had seen Dumbledore's memories and heard Professor McGonagall's explanation, she had been willing to accept that Snape had been working to their benefit the entire time she had known him.

"It must have been very difficult for you to do what you did," Hermione said. In spite of the fact that the three of them had worked with Snape, using Remus as an intermediary much of the time, they'd never actually discussed that night.

Snape scowled at her, and Hermione thought he would refuse to comment. Then she saw him take another deep breath, as though fortifying himself.

"It was the most difficult thing I've ever had to do in my life," he said at last.

"Professor Dumbledore always told us that he trusted you with his life," Hermione said.

"I can only regret that he had to trust me with his death, as well," he replied.

"He wanted his death to serve a purpose ..." Hermione began.

"Stop!" Snape shouted as he jumped to his feet. He leaned over Hermione, bringing his face close to hers.

"I *know* all the reasons. I *know* all about the 'higher purpose' his death served," Snape whispered harshly. "I even know, intellectually, that he would have been dead within minutes anyway.

"None of that *matters*. I killed my best friend, my mentor, the man who treated me like a son. *Killed* him." Snape sat back down heavily.

"*That* is the reality I live with each day, Miss Granger." He dropped his head into his hands, but not before Hermione saw the raw emotions etched onto his face and the pain in his eyes.

She didn't stop to think, she simply reacted. She reached out and placed her hand on the top of his head, curling her fingers into his hair.

"How can I help you?" she asked. She could feel him trembling under her hand.

Snape lifted his head and looked into her eyes. He drew her hand from his head and held it between his own for a moment before he released it. Then he stood again and walked to the sink, turning his back to her.

"I don't need your help, Miss Granger," he said.

Hermione got up and walked over to where Snape stood. She reached out and touched his shoulder, somewhat tentatively.

"Sometimes it helps to talk about things ..."

"Don't try to psychoanalyse me," Snape said, shrugging off her hand and turning to glare at her. "Even if I felt the need to 'bare my soul', why would I bare it to you? You can't even bare your face to me, never mind your soul."

Hermione stood resolute under his withering glare. She could sense the hurt coming off him in almost palpable waves.

He'd already done so much for her. He'd done so much for the entire wizarding world. All she wanted to do was help ease his burden in some small measure. To do that, she knew she would have to prove to him that she trusted him.

"I've already bared my soul to you," she said. "You already know more about what happened to me than anyone else in the world. You know that I wanted to die. You know that I've isolated myself from my friends and even my parents."

"You've done more for me in two days than the entire wizarding world has done in five years. Yet, you won't accept my help because I won't show you my face?" She was nearly shouting by now.

She closed her eyes for a moment, gathering her courage, and then she let her glamour fade. She felt the skin across her scalp tighten. She felt the corner of her eye pull down slightly. She felt her lip droop under the weight of the lumpy flesh.

She opened her eyes and glared at Snape.

"Well, here's my face, Professor Snape," she said, her words almost imperceptibly distorted by her ruined lip. "Now what's your excuse?"

Snape listened as Hermione shouted at him. He watched as her glamour dropped and she thrust her damaged face toward him defiantly.

For as far back as he could remember, he'd hidden behind a wall of sarcasm and indifference. He pushed everyone away, afraid to let anyone get too close. He'd never wanted to admit to any weakness, any vulnerability.

Only one person had ever been able to break through.

Until now.

The other one had been a Gryffindor, too.

"I miss him, Miss Granger," Snape said at last.

He gestured to the chair she had vacated, and she sat back down. He noticed that she kept her head turned slightly, as though trying to shield the damaged portion of her face from his gaze.

He sat and picked up his cup. The tea had gone cold, but he didn't care. He drank it anyway, hoping to swallow the lump in his throat along with the tea.

"He is the only person who ever gave me unconditional love and acceptance."

"What about your parents?"

He paused for a moment, as though debating with himself how much to reveal to her. Then he drew a deep breath and began to speak.

"It's a terrible thing for a child to know that he was a mistake."

"Oh, no ..."

"Oh, yes. Every argument between them ended the same way.

"My mother, you see, was to have been married to a man of her father's choosing. She barely knew the man, but he was wealthy and well-placed in wizarding society. The Princes, although pure-blood, were only comfortable, not wealthy. She thought to have a last 'fling' before she settled down to respectability. Why she chose to have a dalliance with a Muggle is a mystery. When she discovered she was pregnant, she told my grandmother. She, of course, told my grandfather. The arranged marriage was called off. A dose of Veritaserum in her morning tea was all it took to find out the name of the man responsible for her condition.

"My grandfather himself broke her wand, thus condemning her to live out her life as a Muggle. You can guess the rest of it. My father blamed my mother for trapping him into marriage and fatherhood. My mother blamed me for the loss of her easy life as the wife of a wealthy wizard and for the loss of her magic."

"Did neither of them ever think to take responsibility for their own actions?" Hermione asked.

"It was much easier to blame me."

"What happened to them?" Hermione asked.

"My father died in an industrial accident a few months before I started at Hogwarts. My mother reconciled with her father soon afterward, and another marriage was arranged. I was sent off to Hogwarts and forgotten."

"Do you see her very often?"

"As I said, I was sent off to Hogwarts and forgotten. I haven't seen my mother since I was eleven years old. She and her husband live in Germany, I believe."

"That's awful!"

"I was an embarrassment to her and to her parents. My grandfather paid my tuition and put a small sum into a discretionary account for me each year. When I turned seventeen, the money stopped. My last year at school was funded by a scholarship or so Albus told me. I think he paid the tuition from his own pocket, but he'd never admit that to me. When I turned eighteen, I inherited my house. It had belonged to my father's parents, and he'd inherited it from them. My mother could have sold it but, in some final spark of maternal concern, she let it pass to me.

"I'm sure you know the rest of my story," Snape said. "My affinity for the Dark Arts led to my friendship with Lucius Malfoy. That friendship led to my taking the Dark Mark shortly after my eighteenth birthday."

"When did you start working for the Order of the Phoenix?" Hermione wanted to know.

"At about the same time I started teaching. I was already disillusioned with the Dark Lord, by then. Dumbledore and I worked out a plan to eliminate Voldemort on Halloween. It would have worked if Peter Pettigrew had not betrayed James and Lily Potter. Instead, James and Lily died, Harry became the boy-who-lived, and I was accused of plotting their deaths."

"That's when Professor Dumbledore testified before the Wizengamot, isn't it?" Hermione asked.

Snape nodded. "He vouched for me, and no charges were brought against me."

"He believed in you," she said.

"Yes, he did, and that belief never wavered. I would have done anything for him. I would gladly have died in his stead."

"I'm sure Professor Dumbledore wouldn't have considered that."

"You're right. And neither would he consider allowing Draco to kill him; nor Potter to blame himself for forcing him to drink the potion protecting the fake Horcrux."

"So, he left it up to you."

"Yes."

"How ... how did you ... I mean, Alastor Moody well the person we thought was Alastor Moody told us that in order to cast the Unforgivables, one had to ... to have the proper *intent*."

Snape got up again and began pacing back and forth in the small space between the table and the sink. He opened his mouth as though he were about to speak and then closed it again with an audible snap of his teeth.

"I'm ... I'm sorry, sir," Hermione said after watching him pace for a few minutes. "It's none of my business."

Snape glared at her, and then he came and stood over her.

"You're the one who wanted me to talk about it, Miss Granger," he shouted. "Now, you'll hear it whether you bloody well like it or not!"

"How could I cast the Killing Curse? I'll tell you how. I could cast it because I hated him! He'd made me promise to do it. I was hesitating. He ... he entered my mind and reminded me of my promise. And in that moment, I hated him enough to be able to do it, just as he'd known I would!"

Snape's voice cracked on the last word, and for one horrible moment, he was afraid he would break down and cry in front of her. It was only with the greatest effort that he didn't.

Through his own distress, he could see that she was crying. Tears slid down the soft smoothness of her unblemished left cheek and twisted and turned through the puffy grooves of her damaged right cheek.

"I didn't mean to make you cry," he muttered. He pulled a couple of paper towels off the dispenser over the sink and handed them to her.

"I ... I ..." she stammered as she wiped her eyes and her face.

"If you're about to say you're sorry, please don't," Snape said, rather more sharply than he'd intended. "I don't want your pity."

"Pity is a wasted emotion," Hermione said. "I was about to say that I understood. I almost hate him myself for what he forced you to do."

"We were all forced to do unconscionable things, Miss Granger. Such is the nature of war."

"Now, I don't know about you, but I could use a drink. Do you have anything?"

"There's a bottle of Scotch in one of the cupboards. My dad gave it to me as a housewarming present. He said it was always good to have something on hand to offer unexpected company. There's a bottle of brandy, as well. Mum thought that was more civilised than Scotch."

"Your father is a wise man," Snape said as he rooted around in the cupboard over the sink, finally emerging with a couple of dusty bottles. He put the Scotch on the counter and returned the bottle of brandy to the cupboard. "We'll save the brandy for when we feel the need to be civilised. Right now, I need something stronger." He got out two glasses from another cupboard and poured a measure of the Scotch into each one.

He handed one of the glasses to Hermione and tipped back the contents of the other glass in one long swallow.

He almost shuddered as the Scotch burned a trail of fire down his throat and into his belly.

He refilled his glass and sat down.

"Your father has excellent taste in whisky," he said as he took a small sip.

"I'll be sure to tell him you said so, next time I see him," Hermione said as she sipped at her own glass.

"Will you see them on Christmas?" Snape asked.

Hermione shook her head. "No. They're in France, skiing. They go every year and have since before I was born. They shut down their practice from the week before Christmas until after the New Year. They used to joke that they were going to name me Noelle. I never got it until I was much older."

Snape smiled.

"I used to go with them when I was a child. Once I started at Hogwarts, I think I only made it home for Christmas once or twice. They've invited me to join them every year, but ... well ..."

"Why did you never tell them?" Snape asked. "Surely you don't fear their rejection? They appear to be most doting parents."

"They are. They're wonderful. They've encouraged and supported me throughout my life. I don't worry that they'd reject me, but rather that they'd go too far the other way and smother me."

"You will be alone for Christmas, then?" Snape asked.

"I'm used to it," Hermione replied.

"I shall be alone, as well," Snape said.

"Won't there be a feast at Hogwarts?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, of course, but I only used to attend because Albus *suggested* it. Minerva isn't nearly as insistent."

They sat for a few minutes, sipping their drinks and not saying much.

Finally, when Snape had emptied his glass for the second time, he spoke.

"Perhaps you would care to dine with me at my home on Christmas?" Snape asked.

Hermione was a bit surprised by his invitation. Although he'd been more than kind to her over the last couple of days, she hadn't expected this. Suddenly, the prospect of another Christmas alone held no appeal for her.

"I'd like that. Thank you, sir," Hermione replied.

"I can prepare a traditional meal such as goose or turkey. However, if you're feeling a bit more adventurous ..."

"Oh, yes!" Hermione interrupted. "I'd love to try something new and different."

"New and different' it shall be, then," Snape replied.

They were silent for a few more minutes.

Hermione kept the undamaged side of her face toward Snape.

"I realise that you are self-conscious about your injury, Miss Granger," Snape said a moment later, "but there really is no need to try to hide your face from me."

Hermione looked at him and said, "Do you know what bothers me more than my face? My hair. I know it's really silly most people didn't think my hair was my best feature, anyway." She held a hand to the burnt-looking frizz on the right side of her scalp.

"I understand completely," he said with a small, ironic smile. "I've been hiding behind my hair since I was a child."

As though to prove it, he bent his head slightly, and his hair swung forward, like a pair of black curtains, to cover most of his face.

"Why don't you use a minor glamour just on your hair?" he asked as he lifted his head again. "It would use a considerably smaller amount of your magical energy."

"Why didn't I think of that?" Hermione asked.

She closed her eyes in concentration. A moment later, the burnt looking frizz on the right side of her scalp had been replaced with a fall of brown hair that matched the bushy hair on the left side of her head.

"How does it look?" Hermione asked as she lifted a hand to touch the springy locks.

Snape stood and circled the chair on which Hermione sat.

"From the back, none of the damage is visible at all. From the side, only a small amount is visible. From straight on, of course, the drooping of your eye and your lip is the most obvious sign of your injury, but your hair covers a lot of the redness and the damaged folds of skin," he said.

"Thank you for not sugar-coating it," she said.

"That is the last thing anyone would ever accuse me of doing," he replied.

"That's probably true," she agreed.

"Can you feel the difference in your magic?" he asked.

"I can feel the glamour affecting it, but not very much. I should be able to maintain this glamour for far longer than I could the other without it tiring me out too much."

Before either of them could say anything else, Hermione's telephone rang.

"That's probably my mum," Hermione said. "She usually calls around this time."

"I'll see you in the morning, then," Snape said as he stood up.

Hermione nodded and picked up the phone.

"Hello, Mum," she said as Snape stepped back and disappeared.

Three

Chapter 3 of 10

Summary: Hermione Granger has been absent from the wizarding world for more than five years. When Severus Snape runs into her in a Muggle bookstore, he discovers why. An old promise made to Albus Dumbledore prompts Snape to offer his help to his former student.

Author's Notes: This was written for the HG/SS holiday exchange on Live Journal. This was the prompt I chose: #71. Fic: Post-war Hermione and Severus are both doomed to spend Xmas alone until they run into each other in Diagon Alley or London. How, why, and what happens next is up to you. Happy ending, please. Any rating. This prompt was submitted by GinnyWeasley31 and the story is dedicated to her.

Disclaimer: All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. The author is in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended.

Special thanks to my beta reader, JuJuJenn. And thanks to Illyria who did some Brit-picking for me. Any errors, however, are mine alone.

Three

Hermione had the coffee brewing by the time Snape knocked at her door the next morning.

She had the modified glamour in place, and she felt more relaxed around him.

He made poached eggs with bacon, and she managed to prepare the toast without burning the edges.

When they were done eating, Snape cast a cleaning charm on the dishes.

"Are you ready to begin your research?" he asked as he stacked the clean dishes on the sideboard.

"I'm looking forward to it," she replied.

"Although I can sense that your magical stores are a bit higher, now that you are no longer expending the energy necessary to maintain your more elaborate glamour, I think it would still be better if you were to allow me to Apparate you to my home."

"I'm sure of it," Hermione said. "I haven't Apparated in years; I'd splinch myself for sure."

"Are you ready to go?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied.

"Put on your coat," Snape said, taking his own off the hook by the door and handing hers to her. "You may need it later."

Hermione slipped into the cranberry-coloured woollen coat. She buttoned it and pulled the hood up over her head.

Snape dropped his arm across her shoulder, and she stepped closer, wrapping her arms around his waist and closing her eyes. It was getting easier every time.

When she opened her eyes, she was once again standing in the old-fashioned parlour of Snape's home at Spinner's End.

"I spent some time last evening sorting through a number of books," Snape said as he dropped his arm away from her shoulders and stepped away from her. "I've put aside a stack of those that are most likely to contain any reference to the Pulpa Adustum Curse. There aren't many. I'm afraid our research will mostly be a matter of choosing a book and reading it, looking for any reference to any type of curse of a similar nature. We might also be able to look for any reference to injuries such as yours."

"I don't suppose you heard the incantation Bellatrix spoke as she cast the curse?" he asked.

Hermione shook her head. "There was too much noise and confusion. Everyone was shouting. I'm not even sure what colour the curse was there were so many flying all over the place, but I think it may have been orange. I remember thinking that I'd never seen an orange curse before."

In spite of the fact that her hair now hid most of the damage to her face, Hermione still tended to keep that side turned away from him.

"It's also possible that Bellatrix modified the curse," Snape said. "If she did that, it will be even more difficult to counteract it."

"Could she have created an entirely new curse?" Hermione asked.

"It's possible, but I wouldn't think so. Although she was quite a powerful and capable witch, Bellatrix was not much of an innovator. It seems much more likely that it was given to her by Lucius Malfoy or even by the Dark Lord himself."

Hermione's eyes lit up at the mention of Lucius Malfoy.

"Do you think Draco might know anything?" she asked. "Once his mother was safe, he repudiated his father ..."

"And Lucius repudiated him in turn. He wouldn't have given Draco any information. Besides, Malfoy Manor, along with all its contents, burned to the ground in the last days of the war. Lucius is dead. If he gave Bellatrix the curse, we won't get it from him. I'll try to contact Draco, but only because we should explore every possibility, no matter how remote. You would be courting disappointment to believe that anything will come of it, however," he warned.

"The Aurors never discovered where Voldemort's hideaway was, did they?" Hermione asked.

"No."

"When you were summoned, where did you go?" Hermione asked.

"Various places and seldom the same place more than once, except for Malfoy Manor. None of us believed that the Dark Lord was living there, however."

Why not?"

"Because, as overbearing and pretentious as Lucius Malfoy was, he would have been constitutionally unable to keep from boasting to the rest of us that the Dark Lord was living in his home."

"Name-dropper," Hermione muttered.

"Exactly."

They spent the next few hours looking through some of the books that Snape had set aside the night before. It was slow-going. Many of the books were hand-written, rather than printed, and the calligraphic style was difficult to decipher. And, as Snape had told her the day before, a lot of the books were in delicate condition and required very gentle handling. Hermione was terrified that she would tear one of the fragile pages. Snape insisted that they wear white cotton gloves as they worked to avoid contaminating the parchment with the oils from their skin. This made it even harder to turn the pages without damaging them.

At one o'clock, Snape closed the book he was looking through.

"Time for lunch," he said.

"I'm not hungry," Hermione said. She had a particularly large tome opened on the low table in front of the sofa. She was bent over it, running her gloved finger down the page.

"Well, I am," Snape said. "It would be impolite of me to eat without you; therefore, I must insist that you join me."

He placed a thin piece of parchment in the book to mark Hermione's place and then closed it gently.

Snape had noticed that when she was engrossed in her work, she forgot to keep the damaged side of her face turned away from him.

Now that she was aware of him again, she turned slightly.

"I'd rather keep working," Hermione insisted.

"You've been at it for three hours, Miss Granger. If you don't take a break, it is likely you will begin to make mistakes; you may overlook something."

Hermione knew he was right. "I suppose I could do with a cup of coffee at least, since you wouldn't allow me one while I was working," she said.

"And risk a spill? Not even *water* when we're working with these books, never mind coffee," Snape replied.

"I could use the loo," Hermione said. "I mean, as long as we're going to take a break."

"It's upstairs first door on the right," Snape said. "I'll go prepare some sandwiches."

When Hermione walked into the kitchen ten minutes later, Snape had a plate of sandwiches on the table along with a bag of crisps and a jar of olives.

He placed two glasses of milk down next to their plates.

"Milk?"

"Is there something wrong with milk?" Snape asked. "You're not lactose intolerant, are you?"

"Not that I know of," she replied. "I just wouldn't have thought you the milk type."

"What, exactly, is the milk 'type'?" he asked with a scowl.

"Never mind," she said. "I'm really going to have to alter my perceptions of you. You're not the bad-tempered tyrant who taught me Potions."

"Yes, I am," Snape retorted. "Do you dislike milk?"

"Actually, I like milk and don't drink nearly enough."

Snape gave a soft snort. "Tell me something I don't know. Your bones are probably thinning already."

"Perhaps I should start taking calcium supplements," Hermione said.

"Perhaps you should eat better and drink your milk," Snape countered.

Hermione smiled and picked up her glass. "Yes, sir," she said and began drinking.

After lunch, they worked for another two hours without finding anything.

Snape finished with the book he was looking through, and then he stood up, peeling the cotton gloves off his hands.

"I really need to go to my lab and work on some of the potions Poppy needs. Would you care to assist me, Miss Granger?"

Hermione looked up, biting her bottom lip.

"I don't think I'm ready to face anybody at Hogwarts," she said.

"We can get in and out without anyone even knowing you're there. No one would dare come into my lab uninvited and I never invite anyone."

"I should feel honoured then, shouldn't I?" she asked.

"Indeed."

"I don't know how much help I'll be," she said. "I haven't brewed anything more complicated than a headache potion in years."

"I'm only brewing simple potions. Besides, you can still peel Shrivelfigs and chop roots, can't you?"

"Yes, I suppose I could do that."

"Come, then. I'd like to get at least two of the potions finished before dinner."

They put their coats on and prepared to leave Snape's house.

Snape Apparated them to a secluded area on the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Hermione could see Hagrid's hut a short distance away. Snape dropped his arm from across her shoulders, but held onto her elbow.

"The path is overgrown somewhat these days," he explained. "I don't use this trail nearly as often as I used to."

"Is this is how you got in and out of the castle when the Dark Lord called you?"

"This is how I got out. There were many times that I only made it back as far as Hagrid's hut. Hagrid would summon Albus, and Albus would summon Poppy, usually against my wishes. Albus would lower the anti-Apparition wards long enough to get me to the infirmary."

"Why did Voldemort torture you? Did he suspect your true loyalties?" Hermione asked as they carefully picked their way along the path.

"He was a madman. He didn't need a reason to torture any of us, only an excuse not showing the proper respect, talking out of turn ... breathing. As for suspecting me, well, he suspected everyone and trusted no one."

"Why would anyone follow such an unstable leader?"

"He had a talent for knowing everyone's price, be it money, power, or recognition. He exploited that talent. He dangled the carrot just close enough to make a person believe he might actually get to eat it someday, in spite of the stick that accompanied it."

"What was your carrot?" she asked.

"Acceptance and approval, Miss Granger. It was what I yearned for my entire life. And, for a brief time, I found it. Then I realised that the price I had to pay for it was far too high, even for me."

They didn't say any more as they made their way along the path that led in a wide circle towards the back of the castle.

They stopped in front of what appeared to be a blank wall. Snape pulled out his wand and tapped the bricks in a pattern similar to the one he'd used to open the archway into Diagon Alley. The bricks obediently rearranged themselves into a small opening that led into the castle.

"The students used to think you could walk through walls," Hermione said as she watched the doorway form.

"I trust you won't disabuse them of that notion," Snape responded. He stepped into the opening and held out a hand to Hermione.

"It's quite murky along this corridor. Mind your step."

Hermione took his hand and let him draw her into the corridor. As soon as she'd cleared the doorway, the bricks rearranged themselves again, sealing off the entrance.

Guided only by the dim light from Snape's wand tip, they walked along the corridor, which sloped downward slightly, leading them underground.

The corridor ended at another brick wall. Snape once again tapped the bricks with his wand, and another doorway obediently appeared.

"It will be a rather tight squeeze in here," Snape said. "The doorway in front of us won't open until the one behind us closes."

"A safety measure," Hermione said.

"Exactly."

Hermione moved into the small space, pushing as far forward as she could. Snape moved in behind her.

"This pass-through wasn't designed for two people," Snape explained as he inched even closer to her. The archway behind them finally closed, trapping them in the narrow space. Snape reached over Hermione's shoulder and flattened his hand against the wall in front of her. He muttered an incantation that Hermione didn't understand. A portion of the wall in front of her swung open, allowing her to pass into a larger room beyond.

Hermione looked around.

"This is your private storeroom!"

"And how would you know what my private storeroom looks like, Miss Granger?" he asked with a small scowl.

"Well ... I ... I've sort of been in here before," she stammered.

"Ah, yes, your little experiment with Polyjuice Potion. When was that? Your fourth year?"

"My second, actually," Hermione said.

"It's a good thing you're no longer a student, else I'd be forced to deduct House points as punishment for stealing from me."

He opened the door that led from the storeroom into his office.

"If you're still carrying a grudge, I'll pay you for the ingredients I borrowed," she said as she followed him through the door.

"Stole," Snape said over his shoulder.

"Very well stole. I owe you a cloak, as well," she said.

"A cloak?"

"I set fire to yours," Hermione explained.

"That was *you*?"

Although she'd never tell him, she was secretly pleased to have been able to discombobulate him.

"Yes, sir. We thought it was you trying to knock Harry off his broom."

"I was trying to save him," Snape grumbled.

"Well, I know that *now*."

Snape closed the door to the storeroom after Hermione passed through.

"You may hang your coat there," he said pointing to a pair of hooks beside the door that led from his office to the Potions classroom. He shrugged out of his own coat and hung it on one of the hooks he'd indicated. Hermione took off her coat and hung it beside his.

"My lab my *private* lab is through here," he said as he moved to another door. "Did you also manage to find your way in there during your stay at Hogwarts?"

"Uh ... no, I didn't."

"Nice to know some things were sacred, even to you lot of rule-breakers," he muttered.

"I would have loved to have seen your lab. I probably would have, if I'd thought I could get away with it. I would have loved being able to use it even more. It sure would have been better than brewing Polyjuice Potion in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom."

"Although the results were not what you'd expected, Miss Granger, it was still quite an accomplishment to be able to brew it at all. It's quite an advanced potion."

"Was that a compliment, Professor Snape?" Hermione asked.

Snape just snorted and led her through the door that opened into his private lab.

"You may begin by chopping these Blue Vervain roots," Snape said as he put a basket of plants down on the table in front of her. "Poppy is low on Pepperup Potion, and I'm sure that once classes resume after the Christmas break, the infirmary will be overrun with students suffering from the common cold."

"What size do you need them to be?" Hermione asked as she picked up a chopping knife.

"Between an eighth-inch and a quarter-inch. No leaves, just the roots. Do not discard the leaves, however. I can use them in something else."

With a gleam in her eye, Hermione raised her hand, waving it over her head.

"Yes, Miss Granger?" Snape said with a small smile.

"You could make a cough relieving potion with them," Hermione suggested.

"Ten points from Gryffindor," Snape said.

"Ten points *from* Gryffindor?" Hermione said.

"Yes, for being a know-it-all."

"At least you didn't say I was an insufferable know-it-all," she said. "I'm making progress."

"I'll be the judge of that," Snape replied.

Hermione laughed softly and bent over the pile of roots to begin chopping.

Four hours later, they were decanting the Pepperup Potion, the Coughaid Potion, and a headache potion into vials. Snape wrote the labels for the vials in his spiky script, and Hermione affixed the labels to the vials and packed them into a box for easy transport to the infirmary.

"Thank you for your help, Miss Granger," Snape said. "I wouldn't have finished all three of these without it."

"I was happy to do it, sir," she replied. "You wouldn't have fallen behind if you hadn't been helping me. Besides, I enjoyed it. I'd forgotten how much I like brewing potions."

"Well, the work certainly goes faster with two pairs of hands," he said. "Now, are you ready for some dinner?"

"I can make something at home, if you'll take me back," Hermione said.

"Nonsense. I'll have the house-elves bring something to us here, since I'm sure you don't want to face the Great Hall."

"You're right about that," she said.

"Minerva would enjoy seeing you, you know. And she wouldn't ..."

"No! I mean ... I'm just not ready for that."

"As you wish. But, I insist that you eat before I take you home. I know you'll begin working as soon as you step through your door and dinner be damned."

"Well, I was hoping to get in a couple of hours. It's Christmas Eve. I'm sure some people have already opened their new computers and don't have a clue what to do with them."

"You'll be better prepared to tackle their problems on a full stomach," Snape insisted. "And while the house-elves can't prepare French cuisine, the food is certainly more than passable."

"How do they bear such lavish praise?"

"Careful, Miss Granger, such sarcasm is hardly becoming."

"Why is it humour when you say something like that and sarcasm when I do?"

"Home pitch advantage," Snape replied without missing a beat.

Hermione clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle.

Snape led her to another door that had remained hidden until he approached it.

"This door leads to my private chambers," he explained. "No student has ever been in here, and very few of my colleagues. Albus, Poppy, and Filius are the only ones, though Minerva has seen them through the Floo since she became Headmistress."

"Ah, the sanctum sanctorum," Hermione said.

"Precisely," Snape agreed.

Hermione followed Snape through the door and into a well-appointed sitting room. She tried not to be too obvious about it, but she couldn't help looking around, slightly goggle-eyed, taking advantage of this unique opportunity.

The room was large, with heavy, dark furniture. The rug was a Persian in dark blues and maroons. There were a couple of comfortably worn-looking chairs and a large settee arranged around the fire. All were covered in thick upholstery of an indeterminate shade of dark blue or black. A long, low table was in front of the settee, and there were matching side tables next to each chair. There was a small pile of books on one of the tables, and a chess board, with a game in progress, on the other.

A dining table and four matching chairs were arranged against one wall. Two places were set, and Hermione wondered when he had informed the house-elves that he would have a guest for dinner.

"As Head of House, don't you have to be available to your students all the time?" she asked.

"That door," Snape said, pointing to the far side of the room, "leads to another small office. It opens out into the Slytherin common room. If there is a problem which the Prefect can't resolve, he, or she, can go into the office. There are wards in place there that notify me that I am needed. I can be there in seconds. All the Heads of House have a similar arrangement.

"My Slytherins, however, know better than to bother me with trivialities," he added.

"I'm sure they do."

"Do you need to use the loo before we eat?" Snape asked.

"I looked for a likely door in your lab, but didn't see one."

"Since my lab is right off my quarters, I never needed a loo in there. You can use my bathroom. It's off the bedroom, through that door," he said as he pointed.

"I can just use the one off the Potions classroom," Hermione said. "I wouldn't want to intrude on your private space."

"It's not an intrusion when you are invited, Miss Granger," he said. "Just think of the opportunity you'll have to report to your friends that the 'greasy git' does, indeed, have a shower in his quarters. You'll even find shampoo in it."

Hermione's eyes narrowed a bit. "I never called you a greasy git, or any other derogatory names, for that matter. I'll admit that Ron and Harry were often ... less than complimentary... when they talked about you. You must admit that you purposely projected a negative image of yourself."

Snape thought for a moment. "I concede the truth of that statement," he said at last.

"One of the first things I noticed when I saw you at Grant and Cutler, was that your hair was a lot less oily, and even your skin seemed less sallow. I am not a gossip, Professor Snape. Furthermore, why have you put yourself out so much if you have such a low opinion of me?"

Snape looked a bit taken aback by her outburst.

"I do not have a low opinion of you. I spoke out of ... habit a very old habit that I really should concentrate on reforming."

"Much as I had to alter my perceptions of you," Hermione said.

"Indeed. Now, perhaps we could continue this discussion during dinner? I also need to use the loo before we eat, but you may go first," Snape added, gesturing toward the door that led to his bedroom.

Hermione had told Snape the truth; she did not engage in gossip. That didn't mean, however, that she wasn't going to take in as much as she could of this rare look into Snape's private rooms.

The bed was a modest four-poster, very much like the beds in the students' dormitories. It was neatly made with a plain counterpane of dark blue with matching hangings. There were no silks, damasks, or brocades in sight, and not a speck of Slytherin green anywhere. The rug was a serviceable dark blue wool. There was a tall dresser and an armoire, both closed. On the table next to the bed there was another stack of books and a carafe and glass.

She passed into the bathroom and gaped. Every bit of opulence that was missing from the bedroom was here in the bath, instead. There was a huge, dark blue marble tub with about twenty different burnished-brass faucets. It was nearly as large as the tub in the Prefects' bathroom on the fifth floor. There was a separate shower stall, also dark blue marble, with a side bench. The sink was large and set into a stretch of dark blue marble counter. Even the commode was dark blue marble. Thick, white towels hung from racks set near the tub and shower, as well as by the sink. When Hermione closed the bathroom door, she noticed that there was a dark green dressing gown hanging from a hook on the back of the door. It was the only bit of green she'd seen in all of Snape's private quarters.

Hermione used the facilities and washed her hands in the huge sink. The towels were every bit as soft and fluffy as they looked, and she wondered what the house-elves washed them in. They were certainly of a higher quality and absorbency than the ones provided to the students, unless things had changed since she'd left Hogwarts.

She moved back through the bedroom and into the sitting room.

"I trust you found everything you needed?" Snape asked politely.

"Yes, thank you, sir," Hermione replied.

"I'll be right out," he said and passed her to enter his bedroom.

Hermione took the opportunity to look at the pile of books that sat on the table near one of the chairs. There were two Potions texts and a book of Charms. She was surprised to also find a copy, in English, of the Ellery Queen novel she'd purchased for her aunt. Then she remembered that when he'd gotten the book down off the shelf for her, he'd said that the book, *The Egyptian Cross Mystery*, was one of Queen's best. This implied that he'd read it, and others.

She was reading the dust jacket when Snape came out of the bedroom.

"I see you've discovered one of my secret vices," he said.

"You mean, besides cooking?"

"When I saw the book you had selected for your aunt, I was reminded that I hadn't read any of Queen's books in a while. I looked through my library and found my copy."

"I would have thought you'd had enough mystery in your life," Hermione commented.

"I actually started reading them when I was a child. My father had a fondness for American mysteries. He read Ellery Queen, Dashiell Hammett, and Raymond Chandler, among others. I was reading *The Maltese Falcon* when other boys in my neighbourhood were reading *The Beano* and *The Beezer*."

"My parents had dentistry journals," she said.

"Something you could really sink your teeth into."

"Oh, I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that; it is so far below your normal standards."

"Hunger must be dulling my wits. Let's sit down and eat."

Snape led her to the table and held out her chair for her.

They ate Cottage Pie that tasted even better than Hermione remembered. When they finished, they shared a pot of tea, which Snape brewed himself in his office and brought back into the sitting room.

When they finished their tea, Hermione stood up.

"Thank you so much for inviting me to stay for dinner, Professor Snape. It was lovely, but would you mind taking me home now?" she asked. "I'd really like to get a couple of hours of work in."

"Of course." They moved back into the laboratory. Snape retrieved their coats from the hooks and held Hermione's open for her. She slipped into it.

"Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome," he replied as he put on his own coat.

They passed through Snape's office and into his private storeroom. Snape touched his wand to one of the shelves, and a section of the wall swung open.

"This is where it's rather cramped," Snape said.

Hermione stepped into the small pass-through, moving in as far she could. Snape squeezed in behind her. He muttered an incantation, and the door behind them swung shut.

Snape lifted his wand over Hermione's shoulder and touched the blank wall in front of them. The bricks rearranged themselves into a narrow doorway, allowing Hermione and Snape to pass into the murky corridor that led out of the castle.

"*Lumos*," Snape murmured, and the tip of his wand lit, casting a dim glow along the rough passage.

When they reached the end of the corridor, Snape once again tapped the bricks to open the doorway out of the castle.

He held on to Hermione's elbow as they traversed the overgrown path that led past the anti-Apparition wards and back to the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

When they reached the spot, Hermione wrapped her arms around Snape's waist, and he raised his arm to drape it across her shoulders.

A moment later, they were standing in Hermione's kitchen.

"I need to start practicing my Apparition skills again," Hermione said as she stepped away from Snape and slipped out of her coat.

"Not until you're a lot stronger than you are now," Snape said in a stern voice.

"If I'm going to work with you, I need to be able to get around on my own. I feel like such a burden when you have to drag me along like an old piece of luggage."

"I don't mind," he insisted.

"Yes, well, you'll feel differently when the new term starts and you have all those essays to grade, rounds to make, and detentions to oversee."

"That's not for almost three weeks. Let's just continue this way for now and see what happens. You may be a lot stronger by then, especially since you're not expending so much energy maintaining the elaborate glamour you used before."

"That's true. I've had this glamour in place for over ten hours, and I'm not very tired at all."

"I suppose you're going to sign on to your computer and go at it hammer and tongs for the next four hours, then?"

"At least two hours," Hermione conceded.

"Would you mind if I lingered a bit?" he asked. "I'm curious as to what you do."

"I don't mind, but I'm afraid you'll find it rather boring."

"I won't find it boring if you explain it to me," he replied.

"Take off your coat if you're going to stay," Hermione said.

Snape took off his coat and hung on the hook by the door.

"I used to make coffee to keep me going," she said. "Now, I find that I really like the tea blend you left me. I slept well again last night."

She filled the kettle with water and set it on the stove to boil. She brought down the tea canister and got the tea pot ready.

A few minutes later, the soothing scent of lemon balm and valerian root filled the air as the tea steeped.

When it was done, Hermione filled two mugs, added honey to both, and handed one of the mugs to Snape.

"Now, I'm ready to work," she said as she took a sip from her cup. "Bring one of these chairs in. You can sit next to me at the computer and see what I'm doing."

Snape followed her into the living room, his mug of tea in one hand and one of her kitchen chairs in the other.

Hermione sat at her computer and turned it on. She signed on to her internet provider and then went to the homepage of the company she worked for and logged into their system. She spread out a number of printed manuals on her desk and opened a number of help files on her computer. She fitted a headset over her head. Within seconds, she was fielding her first call.

"Software Solutions, this is Jane. How may I help you?"

In between calls, Hermione tried to explain to Snape what she was doing.

Far from being bored, Snape was fascinated by what Hermione did. She listened to her callers' problems, and then she patiently talked them through the steps necessary to correct the problems.

Every few calls, Hermione would mutter something about an 'eye-dee-ten-tee' error. Snape didn't have a clue what that was about, though after a few calls, he did understand a good deal of what was going on.

Two-and-a-half hours after she'd signed on, Hermione logged out and removed her headset with a sigh.

"That's enough of that for one night," she said as she stretched her neck and rolled her shoulders.

"Why don't you use your real name?" Snape asked. "Is there a way for the people who call to find out who you are or where you live?"

"No. I use Jane because it's short and easy to pronounce. It's my middle name, so it's not completely foreign to me."

"If I understand the nature of the calls, I would estimate that nearly a third of the people who call you could probably solve their own problems if they simply read the literature that accompanies the product. Failing that, they could read the help file and find the answers to most of their questions."

Hermione smiled. "You're right, but then I'd be out of job."

"And what in the seven hells is an 'eye-dee-ten-tee' error? I read several of the files you had open, as well as a number of the printed manuals, and I didn't see any reference to such an error."

Hermione smiled again. "It's an inside joke among techies."

She grabbed a blank piece of paper and a pen and handed them to Snape.

"If you jot this down, I think you'll understand. Print what I say rather than use cursive writing."

Snape obediently held the pen over the paper.

"Upper case I. Upper case D. The number one followed by a zero. And lastly, an uppercase T."

Snape wrote down the letters and numbers as she spoke them.

"That's an 'I D 10 T error,'" Hermione said.

He looked at what he had written and started to chuckle.

"And I thought I was the only one cursed with dunderheads," he said.

"They're everywhere," she said, and then she had to stifle a yawn.

"Oh, excuse me."

"It's getting late," Snape said as he stood up. "I'd best be heading home. You need to get to bed, else you'll miss your visit from Father Christmas."

"I stopped believing in Father Christmas when I was eight, although I actually got suspicious when I was seven. All the other kids in school got candy in their Christmas stockings; I got fruit, nuts, and books."

"That's what comes of having parents who are dentists," he said. "At least you had a Christmas stocking."

Snape took his coat from the hook by the door. "I'll be here at nine in the morning to prepare breakfast, if that's agreeable to you."

"I'll have the coffee on," Hermione said.

"Good night, Miss Granger," Snape said.

"Good night, sir," she replied.

He stepped back and Disapparated silently.

Four

Chapter 4 of 10

Hermione Granger has been absent from the wizarding world for more than five years. When Severus Snape runs into her in a Muggle bookstore, he discovers why. An old promise made to Albus Dumbledore prompts Snape to offer his help to his former student.

Disclaimer: All publicly recognisable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. The author is in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended.

Special thanks to my beta reader, JuJuJenn. And thanks to Illyria who did some Brit-picking for me. Any errors, however, are mine alone.

Four

Hermione was awakened the next morning by a loud knocking on her back door. A glance at her bedside clock told her it was too early for her visitor to be Professor Snape.

She slipped into her dressing gown, knotting it closed as she stepped into her carpet slippers.

"I'm coming!" she hollered.

She closed her eyes and concentrated. A quick look in the mirror over her dresser assured her that her glamour, one that mimicked her own appearance, was firmly in place.

With her wand held discreetly behind her back, Hermione threw open her back door.

"Happy Christmas!" shouted Harry and Ron.

"Harry ... Ron," she stammered. "What are you doing here?"

"At least she remembered our names," Harry said to Ron.

"That's a fine greeting for your best mates," Ron said. "Can we come in?"

"Oh ... well, of course you can come in," Hermione said, stepping back and opening the door wider to allow them entry. "Happy Christmas to you as well. I didn't mean to be rude; I wasn't expecting you."

"We got tired of your excuses," Harry said. "We decided to just surprise you."

"Aren't you glad to see us?" Ron asked.

"I'm always glad to see you," Hermione said. "I just wish you'd let me know you were coming. How did you know I'd be home?"

"Your mum told us," Harry said.

"My mum? You talked to my mum?"

"I called her a couple of weeks ago. I know your parents go to France every year, so I called to ask her if you were going with them. She told me you hadn't gone in years."

"No, I haven't," Hermione admitted.

"I know my mum and dad invite you to the Burrow every year," Ron said.

"And I appreciate it, Ron, really I do. It's just ..."

"Just what, Hermione?" Harry asked. "You'd rather be alone on Christmas?"

"You don't understand."

"No, we don't," Harry said. "That's why we're here; *wewant* to understand."

"It'd be one thing if it was just me," Ron said. "I mean, I know I was a right prat about ... well, about you and me ..."

They'd tried the boyfriend/girlfriend thing, briefly, during seventh-year. It hadn't worked out, and both had been glad to revert to being just friends.

"We weren't suited, Ron, not really. I never held it against you that we couldn't be more than friends."

"But we haven't even been friends lately, it seems," Ron protested. "And Harry didn't have anything to do with what happened between us. You shouldn't hold it against him."

"I'm not holding anything against him, or you, either. We're still friends."

"Every time we try to get together with you, you're busy," Harry said.

"I have to work, Harry," Hermione said.

"Seven days a week?"

"I do research ..."

"On what?"

"It's ... it's personal," Hermione said.

Before anyone could say anything more, there was another knock at the back door. Hermione swore softly under her breath. Although it was only a little after eight o'clock, she knew it had to be Professor Snape.

Resigning herself to the inevitable confrontation, she opened the door.

"Good morning, Professor Snape," she said as she stepped back. "Happy Christmas."

"Good morning, Miss Granger. I apologise for being early. I hoped to catch you before you put the coffee ..."

His voice trailed off as he stepped into the kitchen and saw Harry and Ron. He turned to Hermione.

"You didn't mention that you were expecting other guests."

"Harry and Ron decided to surprise me," Hermione said.

"Snape!" Harry exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"Unlike you, Mr. Potter," Snape said in a frosty tone, "I was invited."

Ron, whose mouth was hanging open, had yet to say a word.

Snape was quite pleased to realise that although he could sense the waves of hostility and dislike emanating from both the young wizards, there was no trace of a tingle to remind him of the promise he had made to Albus Dumbledore. Apparently, both Potter and Weasley were doing well and not in need of any help from him, thank Merlin.

"What were you saying about coffee, Professor?" Hermione jumped in.

"I've brought a coffee I thought you might enjoy," Snape said. He handed her the packet he'd been holding, and then he took off his coat and hung it on the hook by the door.

"It's called Ethiopian Yrgacheffe. It's one of my favourites. Would you care to start it brewing while I prepare breakfast?"

Hermione took the packet and moved to the coffee maker.

Snape opened the refrigerator and pulled out eggs, milk, a package of sausages, and some cheese.

"What are you doing here, Snape?" Harry demanded.

"I'm cooking breakfast. What are you doing here?" Snape retorted.

"Why are you making Hermione breakfast?" Ron asked, having finally recovered the power of speech.

"Because she doesn't like to cook," Snape said, as if that explained everything.

Harry shook his head.

"Hermione, what's going on?" he asked.

Hermione looked to Snape who merely arched a brow at her.

"Professor Snape and I are working together on some research," she said.

"Over breakfast?"

"No, Potter, after breakfast," Snape interjected.

"Is he the reason you've been too busy to see us?" Harry demanded. "He's making you breakfast what are you doing for him? ~~On~~ him?"

Hermione heard Snape's sharp intake of breath and saw him reach for his wand. She quickly stepped between the two wizards. She put a hand on Snape's arm.

"Please don't," she said in a pleading tone.

"He's has impugned your honour and insulted me, as well," Snape said.

"He just doesn't understand."

"You're bloody well right, I don't understand," Harry said.

Hermione turned to Harry.

"First of all, Harry, Professor Snape is right he was invited here today, and you weren't. That doesn't mean you aren't welcome, however. You and Ron are my best friends. I love you both like brothers, but it would have been better if you had let me know you were coming.

"Secondly, even if there were something of a ... a personal nature between Professor Snape and me, it would be none of your business. I don't interfere in your relationships, and you have no right to interfere in mine.

"Professor Snape is helping me. What difference does it make to you if that help includes cooking breakfast?"

"I just don't understand what you need his help for! Ron and I will help you. Right, Ron?" Harry said, turning to Ron.

"Course we will, Hermione," Ron agreed.

"It's not something you can help me with," she insisted.

"How do you know that? How can we help if you won't tell us what the problem is?" Harry asked.

"I just know. You'll have to trust me on this one, Harry."

"I trust you. It's him ..."

"Don't you dare say it, Harry! Don't you *dare!*" Hermione hissed. "You know the truth!"

Harry flushed. Hermione was right. He did know the truth and, as difficult as it was for him to admit it, he knew that Snape had never betrayed the trust that Dumbledore had placed in him.

Harry dropped his gaze and muttered, "Sorry."

"I'm not the one you offended," Hermione said, glaring at him.

Harry lifted his head. Both Hermione and Snape were looking at him expectantly.

"My apologies, sir," he said at last.

Snape looked at Hermione. He could see that the acrimony between him and Potter was causing her distress. For her sake, he decided to try to put it behind him.

"Accepted," Snape replied. "Now, perhaps, we'd all enjoy some breakfast?"

"I'll put the coffee on," Hermione said as she moved back to the counter where the abandoned packet of coffee rested in front of the coffee maker.

"I'm going to go get dressed now," Hermione said, once the coffee started dripping. "I trust you three won't kill each other while I'm gone?"

"I assure you, Miss Granger, I shall be on my best behaviour," Snape said.

"I gave up killing once Voldemort was gone," Harry said.

Thirty minutes later, the four of them sat around Hermione's kitchen table eating scrambled eggs with cheese, sausages, and fried bread.

"This is *good*," Ron mumbled around a mouthful of eggs.

"Please refrain from oral communication while you are masticating, Mr. Weasley," Snape requested in a polite tone.

Ron coloured slightly. "I'm not mast ... mast ..."

Hermione giggled. "He means don't talk with your mouth full, Ron."

"Precisely," Snape said.

"Oh. Yeah, all right. Sorry," Ron muttered as he reached for another sausage.

"But, this is really good. I didn't know you could cook." He stopped talking and lowered his head over his plate.

"There is much about me you don't know," Snape replied. "Probably much more than you *do* know."

"You got that right," Harry mumbled.

There was an awkward silence.

"You were right about this coffee," Hermione said a moment later, as she put her cup down. "It's wonderful."

"I was sure you would like it," Snape replied as he picked up his own cup.

Harry pushed his empty plate away.

"That was very good." He paused a moment and then sighed as he saw Hermione throwing him looks.

"Thank you, Professor Snape," he said.

"You're welcome, Mr. Potter," Snape said as he stood up and began clearing the dishes.

Ron jumped to his feet to help.

"Don't look so surprised," Ron said. "I come from a big family. We all used to pitch in and help Mum with the clean-up."

Snape cast the cleaning charms, and soon the kitchen was put to rights again.

Snape looked over at Hermione. He could see the strain on her face, and he could sense that her magical energy was already starting to flag. He wondered why Potter couldn't sense that there was something wrong.

"Potter, Weasley, go into the parlour. I need to speak to Miss Granger for a moment regarding our research."

Harry glared at Snape for a moment, but Ron grabbed his arm and dragged him toward the parlour. Snape could hear Potter muttering as the two younger wizards moved into the other room.

"Who does he think he is, giving us orders? It's her house," Harry said as he and Ron sat on Hermione's sofa.

"Yeah, but she's not contradicting him, is she?" Ron reasoned.

"What's going on with them, Ron?"

"I dunno, mate, but like she said, it's her business."

"Don't you care?"

"Course I care. I mean, me and Hermione didn't work out as boyfriend and girlfriend, but she's still my friend, and I care what happens to her. The thing is; she doesn't seem unhappy about what Snape's doing."

"Maybe he's got her under the Imperius," Harry said.

Ron snorted. "Come on, Harry, you know he doesn't."

"I know, I know," Harry said with a sigh. "I just don't get it!"

"Miss Granger," Snape said as soon as Harry and Ron were out of ear shot, "you must either tell them the truth or ask them to leave."

"I can't just throw them out," Hermione said. "They're my friends."

"You will probably collapse in a matter of minutes. Your glamour will drop as soon as you lose consciousness. That will leave me with the unenviable task of having to explain your condition to Potter and Weasley."

"I know. I'm exhausted already," she admitted.

"They are your friends. For all their faults and they are myriad they care for you. They will not turn away from you in horror. Even give them more credit than that."

"I know you're right, sir. I should have told them years ago. Now, I know they'll be angry that I didn't."

"They won't stay angry. They will want to help you. Though I admit it is difficult for me to understand what you see in them, I know you miss the closeness you once shared."

"Yes, I do."

"You can have that closeness again, Miss Granger. You deserve the support of your friends. If you let this opportunity pass, you are continuing to allow Bellatrix Lestrange to have control over your life. She tried to kill you. You survived and thwarted her plan. Don't let her win now."

Hermione bit her bottom lip thoughtfully.

"Will you help me explain things to them?" she asked at last.

"I'll help in whatever way I can, though I suspect they will want to hear things from you rather than from me. It would probably be better if I left."

"No! Please, sir, I want you to stay while I tell them. I need the moral support."

"I'll stay, but you must tell them immediately. I'll not stand by and watch your magical energy dissipate even further."

"I ... I'll tell them now," she agreed.

She squared her shoulders and walked into the parlour, Snape right behind her.

Harry jumped to his feet when Hermione entered the room.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Actually, Harry, I'm not all right," Hermione said.

"What's the matter? He hasn't done ... anything, has he?"

"My problem has nothing to do with Professor Snape. As a matter of fact, he's trying to help me with it. That's what all the research is about."

"What is it, Hermione?" Ron asked.

Hermione looked to Snape who nodded encouragingly. "Tell them, Miss Granger."

"Tell us what?" Harry asked.

"Harry, Ron ... I was ... I was injured during the Final Battle."

"Well, we know that," Harry said. "One of the Death Eaters *Stupefied* you."

Hermione shook her head. "I was never *Stupefied*," she said. "I told Madam Pomfrey to tell you that because I didn't want you to know what really happened."

"What did happen, then?" Ron asked.

"Bellatrix Lestrange hit me with the Pulpa Adustum Curse," she said in a quiet voice. "At least Professor Snape thinks that's the curse she used."

"I've never heard of it," Ron said. "What is it?"

"It's a flesh burning curse," Harry whispered.

"How do you know about it?" Ron asked.

"Remus mentioned it to me once. Back when he was giving me private Defence lessons. It used to be an Unforgivable."

"Did Remus ever mention a counter-curse?" Hermione asked. She felt a brief glimmer of hope.

"No. He said it was always fatal."

Hermione sighed, and the tiny flame of hope flickered out. Remus had not survived the Final Battle. Any information about the Pulpa Adustum Curse that he had possessed had died with him.

"It should have been fatal," Snape broke in. "Apparently, the curse Mr. Longbottom aimed at Bellatrix deflected her arm. Miss Granger was hit with the nimbus of the curse, rather than the full force of it. That saved her life."

"What happened to you, then?" Ron asked. "You look all right."

"You're using a glamour, aren't you?" Harry said with sudden insight.

Hermione nodded. "I've used one every time I've seen you since it happened."

"That's why you've been avoiding us, isn't it? The glamour uses a lot of energy."

"Yes. It exhausts me, actually."

"She needs to drop it now, as a matter of fact," Snape said. "I can feel how weak she is."

"I can feel it, too," Harry said. Then he turned back to Hermione. "I never understood why your magical aura was so depleted. I thought you were just tired."

"Every time you saw her?" Snape said in a derisive tone. "You're even denser than I thought you were. I sensed that her magical energy was dangerously low immediately."

Harry flushed. He knew Snape was right. He *should* have sensed that Hermione was in trouble.

"Please!" Hermione cried out. "I can't bear to hear you two sniping at each other!"

She swayed slightly, and both Harry and Snape rushed to her side.

"Sit down, Miss Granger, before you fall down," Snape said, guiding her to the sofa.

Harry sat on one side of her, and Ron sat on the other.

"Let the glamour drop, Hermione," Harry said.

"I ... I'm ... it's ugly. I'm ugly."

Ron put an arm across Hermione's shoulder.

"You're our best friend, and we love you," Ron said. "It doesn't matter. We'll always be here for you. Right, Harry?"

"Right."

Hermione closed her eyes. In a few minutes it wouldn't have mattered anyway; she'd been that close to passing out again.

Snape kept a surreptitious hand on his wand as he watched Hermione close her eyes and let her glamour drop.

He saw Potter draw a deep breath on her left. He saw Weasley swallow a gasp on her right. To their credit, neither of them pulled away from her.

He'd been fully prepared to hex them if they had. A quick *Obliivate* on all three of them and Potter and Weasley wouldn't remember seeing their friend's injury, and Hermione wouldn't remember that her best friends had turned away from her in disgust.

Snape shook his head and wondered when he had stopped thinking of her as Miss Granger and started thinking of her as Hermione.

"It's a good job Neville already took care of Bellatrix Lestrange," Ron said with a catch in his voice. "I'd kill her myself for what she did to you."

"Why didn't you tell us, Hermione?" Harry wanted to know. He was patting her on the back awkwardly as she sobbed softly against his shoulder.

"I ... I w ... was ashamed," Hermione hiccupped out.

"You've got nothing to be ashamed of!" Ron exclaimed.

"Ron is right," Harry said. "You didn't do anything wrong. I just don't understand why you didn't tell us."

"Haranguing her will only serve to upset her more," Snape interjected. "Now that you know the truth, you should be supportive of her, not critical."

Harry raised his head and met Snape's eyes. He wanted to lash out at Snape. He wanted to tell him to go away and leave the three of them alone. They'd been working and fighting together since they were eleven years old. They didn't need him intruding and coming between them. But, in a moment of sudden clarity, he knew that Snape was right. The last thing Hermione needed was for him and Ron to lecture her for her failure to confide in them. And, in all fairness, it hadn't been Snape who'd come between them; Bellatrix Lestrange and her ancient, horrible curse had.

"You're right," Harry said. Then he turned back to Hermione.

"I didn't mean to get upset with you, Hermione," he said. "Ron and I just want to help you. What can we do?"

Hermione sat up and rubbed her hand across her cheek, trying to wipe away the tears.

Snape walked over to the sofa and placed a clean handkerchief in her hand.

"Thank you," she mumbled and then blew her nose.

"Harry's right," Ron said. "We just want to try to make things right for you. If we'd known, maybe we could've done something by now."

"I've been searching at the Ministry library for more than four years; I haven't found anything."

"Is that the reason you asked me to get Scrimgeour to authorise your library privileges?" Harry asked.

"Yes, for all the good it's done me," she replied.

"As a former head of the Aurors, he knew she wouldn't find anything," Snape put in. "He was using her to get to you."

Harry jumped to his feet.

"I know I said I'd given up killing once Voldemort was gone, but for Scrimgeour, I'll make an exception."

"Calm yourself, Mr. Potter. You won't do Miss Granger any good if you're rotting in a cell in Azkaban. Leave Scrimgeour to me. He and I have a history. If he has any information about the Pulpa Adustum Curse, I'll get it from him."

"He's right," Ron said. "You'll get more out of Scrimgeour if you let him think you might help him in some way. Let Professor Snape apply the muscle that's what

Scrimgeour expects from him. You use your charm."

Hermione smiled a little at Ron's words. "Harry, have you been taking Ron to the cinema?"

"He's turned into a regular film-addict," Harry said.

Ron grinned. "He's corrupted me."

Snape could see that Hermione had stopped crying completely. She was even smiling a bit at the exchange between Potter and Weasley. He recognised, however, that the physical and magical strain of maintaining her elaborate glamour for two hours and the emotional turmoil of revealing her injury to her friends had combined to exhaust her.

"Since it's a holiday, we'll accomplish nothing today," Snape said. "I suggest that we meet again in a couple of days and try to work out a plan for searching for information. Two additional pairs of hands and eyes should help our efforts."

"We should get going anyway," Ron said. "My mum is making Christmas dinner and she'll be waiting on us."

"Ginny will wonder where I've gotten to," Harry added.

"Come on, Hermione," Ron said.

"I ... I can't go with you, Ron," Hermione said.

"Why not? There's no reason for you to hide any more. Not now that we've seen you. You belong with us."

"She's exhausted, Weasley," Snape said with a glare. "She doesn't have the strength to re-form her glamour. And, even if she did, she wouldn't be able to maintain it."

"She doesn't need a glamour," Ron replied. "She'll be welcome no matter what she looks like."

Snape saw Hermione flinch as Ron spoke those words.

"And here I thought you had outgrown being a dunderhead," Snape snapped out. "She has hidden her injury for five-and-a-half years. In the past three days she has revealed it to three people. She is not ready to expose herself to the stares and whispers of a house full of people."

"It's just my mum and dad," Ron protested. "They love her like she was their own daughter. They won't mind."

"It's your mum and dad, Charlie and Tonks and their son, Bill and Fleur and their three sons, Fred and Padma and their two daughters, George and Parvati and their daughter, and Ginny. Have I forgotten anyone, Ron?" Hermione asked.

"I ... I'm ..." Ron stammered.

"I appreciate the invitation, honestly I do," Hermione said. "But even if I were ready for that and I'm not I wouldn't be able to go."

"Why not?"

"I've already made plans for the day," she said.

"You can't spend Christmas working on your computer," Harry protested.

"I have no intention of working today. I have an invitation to Christmas dinner, and I'm quite looking forward to it." She looked to Snape and smiled.

"Him?" Harry asked.

"He has a name, Harry," Hermione said in a sharp tone. "When Professor Snape discovered that I would be spending Christmas alone, he kindly invited me to share Christmas dinner with him. I accepted."

"But, that was before. Now that Ron and I know about ... about your problem, you don't have to settle for him. Ron and I will stay here with you," Harry said.

He turned to Ron. "We'll explain things to your mum; she'll understand."

Before Ron could say anything, Hermione turned to Harry.

"I'm not *settling* for Professor Snape, Harry. And how dare you presume to speak for me?"

"I haven't begun preparing dinner, Miss Granger. If you would prefer to spend the day with your friends ..."

"Are you withdrawing your invitation, Professor Snape," Hermione asked spinning on her heel to face him.

"Not at all. I'm simply offering to relieve you of your social obligation to me."

"I have no wish to be relieved of my 'social obligation'. I never thought of it as an obligation at all; I was looking forward to it. I still am."

"In that case, I should go and begin my preparations. I'll return for you in three hours. I suggest you rest while I'm gone and try to replenish some of your energy."

Snape turned to Harry and Ron. "If you are as concerned for Miss Granger's welfare as you purport to be, you will end your visit and allow her to rest."

Harry bristled, but Ron nodded. "We'll be leaving in just a few minutes, Professor," he said.

Snape nodded, and then he stepped back and Disapparated.

Harry turned and glared at Ron. "How can you take his side?"

"I'm not taking his side, Harry. I'm taking Hermione's side. Even I can see how tired she is. When I invited her to the Burrow, I wasn't thinking. At least I wasn't thinking of her, and neither are you."

Harry turned back to Hermione.

"Would you really rather spend the day with the greasy git?" he asked.

Hermione gave a tired sigh. "I know you and Professor Snape never got on, but he's always been on our side, Harry. Why can't you just let go of the past?"

Harry looked at Hermione really looked at her and he realised that Ron was right. She was exhausted, and the last thing she needed was a load of his shite.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," he said. "I ... I know that you're right about Snape."

"If you want to help with the research into my injury, you're going to have to work with him, Harry. That means you're going to have to treat him with respect. He wasn't obligated to help me, you know. I'm grateful to him, and I won't listen to you denigrating him."

"I'll try," Harry conceded, "but you may have to remind me every once in a while."

"Oh, I will," she said with a smile.

"I'll remind you, too," Ron said. "My mum and dad have a lot of respect for Snape."

"We should go, then, Ron, and let Hermione get some rest before he comes back for her."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione shared a long, mutual hug.

"I'll call you in a couple of days," Harry said. "Get some rest."

"I will," Hermione said as she sniffled a bit. "I'm really glad you know. It's been horrible keeping it a secret."

"We're glad we know, too," Ron said.

Harry just nodded.

"Tell your mum and dad I wished them a Happy Christmas," Hermione said as Ron and Harry put on their coats and prepared to leave.

"I will."

"Happy Christmas," Hermione said with a little wave.

"Happy Christmas," Harry and Ron said in unison.

Then they stepped back and Disapparated.

Hermione went to her bedroom, set her alarm for two hours, and climbed back into bed.

When her alarm buzzed, Hermione sat up in bed and stretched. She felt better than she had in some time. As she got up and walked into her bathroom, she realised that her sense of well-being had little to do with her physical condition. She was simply relieved that Harry and Ron were now aware of what had happened to her. She had missed them so much. Looking back over the past five-and-a-half years, she wondered why she had chosen not to confide in them. Her self-imposed isolation had served no purpose. She couldn't even use Rufus Scrimgeour's restrictions as an excuse. She had already isolated herself before she ever talked to him about doing research at the Ministry library. Now, if only she could summon the courage to tell her parents what had happened. She missed them even more than she had missed Harry and Ron. Perhaps she'd make it a New Year's resolution to sit down with them and tell them.

Hermione was dressed and ready to go when Snape knocked at her back door. She had forgone the elaborate glamour and had used only the minor one that he had suggested on her hair.

"You look rested," Snape said as he stepped into the kitchen.

"I slept for about two hours after Harry and Ron left."

"Are you ready? I left the oven on and need to get back to it."

"I'm ready," Hermione replied. She stepped close to Snape, closed her eyes, and put her arms around his waist without hesitation.

When she opened her eyes, they were standing in Snape's parlour. The first thing she noticed was that all the books had been put away. The second thing was that the low table that had been in front of the sofa was no longer there. There was, however, a small table off to one side of the room that had been set with snowy-white linens and what appeared to be genuine Limoges tableware.

"I've prepared some of my favourite French cuisine," Snape said. "I hope you'll enjoy it."

"I love French food," Hermione replied. "When I went to France with my parents, we always stayed at this rustic inn. The owner prepared incredible meals."

"Would you care for an aperitif?" Snape asked.

"Only if you're having one," she said.

Snape went to the sideboard and poured. He dropped a twist of orange peel into each glass before he picked them up.

"This is Lillet," he said as he handed Hermione a glass. "It's made in a little town near Bordeaux."

Hermione sipped. "Oh, this is lovely. I can taste the orange and a hint of mint."

"I'm glad you like it."

"What are we having for dinner, or is it a surprise?" Hermione asked.

"Not at all," he said. "We'll begin with *Mousse au Roquefort et Avocat*. Next we will have a *Velouté de Potiron et de cèpes*. That will be followed by a *Salade de Betterave et de Mâche*. The main course is *Veau à la Normande* served with *Pommes Tapées au Beurre Noisette* and a *Confit d'Oignons*. *L'entremets* is a *Clafouti aux Pommes avec Crème glacée*. There is also some *brioche*, which I purchased at the same bakery where I bought the sponge cake."

He paused to take a sip of his Lillet, and then he spoke again. "Do you need a translation?"

"Well, I understand some of it," Hermione said with a smile. "The first course is a mousse or pudding of a blue cheese and avocados. I know *velouté* is some kind of soup."

"Pumpkin and mushroom," Snape supplied.

"*Salade* is obviously a salad, but I'm not sure of the ingredients."

"Beet and mâche, which is also known as lamb's lettuce."

"The main course is veal, prepared in the style of the Normandy region, though I'm not sure what that is."

"Veal medallions and mushrooms in a cream sauce."

"It sounds delicious," she said.

"What else?" Snape prompted.

"The side dishes are potatoes with butter and something with onions."

"Flattened new potatoes with brown butter and onions in a wine sauce," Snape said.

"*L'entremets*, what the English call pudding and the French call *dessert*, is something with apples and ice cream," Hermione finished.

"I'm quite impressed, Miss Granger," Snape said with a smile.

"So am I, actually. I haven't been to France in years. I'm surprised I recognised as much as I did. Of course, it helped that you spoke impeccable French without a trace of an accent."

She sipped her aperitif.

"I confess that my everyday French isn't nearly as good," he said. "I learned the language of food in order to be able to indulge my zeal for preparing French cuisine."

"Will we be eating soon?" Hermione asked. "I'm afraid I was too nervous to eat very much breakfast."

"I noticed that. Although a meal at this time of day should properly be called 'lunch', we'll call it dinner and eat now.

"I hope you don't mind eating in the parlour," he continued. "This house lacks a proper dining room. I've transfigured the coffee table into a more suitable dining surface."

"We could have eaten in the kitchen ..." Hermione began.

"Peasant," Snape said.

"Snob," Hermione countered.

"Provincial."

"Parvenu."

"Bourgeois."

"Arriviste."

Snape chuckled. "Shall we call it a draw?"

"Only if it means we'll eat instead of sparring."

"It does, indeed," Snape assured her.

"Then it's a draw," Hermione agreed.

"Sit, Miss Granger," Snape said, leading her to the elegantly appointed table and pulling out her chair. "I'll bring out the first course."

The meal was even better than Hermione had anticipated. Professor Snape had paired each course with an appropriate wine.

"Would you like to wait a bit for *L'entremets*?" Snape asked when Hermione pushed the last dish away.

"Please," Hermione replied. Although each serving had been small, she wasn't used to eating four courses for dinner. "It was a lovely meal; everything was delicious. Thank you for inviting me. I appreciate it."

"You're very welcome. Now, go and sit while I finish cleaning up," Snape said.

"I could help ..."

"You are my guest today, Miss Granger. Besides, I cleaned up as I went along. There isn't much to do."

"If you're sure."

"I am."

"Then I'll sit and enjoy the fire while I wait for you."

"Would you like an after-dinner cordial?" Snape asked as he watched Hermione settle into a corner of the old sofa.

"Oh, no, thank you, sir," Hermione replied. "Between the aperitif before dinner and the wine with dinner, I've had more alcohol today than I usually have in a month. It's starting to make me logy."

When Snape entered the parlour a few minutes later, Hermione was sleeping. She had slid down a little into the corner of the sofa and, of course, her glamour had faded when she'd fallen asleep.

Snape went upstairs to his bedroom and got a blanket from the closet. He spread it out over her and eased her down a bit more so that her neck wasn't bent at an awkward angle. She stirred a little, but didn't awaken. He picked up his current issue of *Potions Monthly* and sat in one of the arm chairs that stood on the other side of the small fireplace. Every few minutes, he would look up from the magazine to see if Hermione was still sleeping.

An hour-and-a-half later, she began to stir. Snape got up and went into the kitchen to put the kettle on and to put the prepared *blafouti* into the oven to bake. When he returned to the parlour, Hermione was sitting up, and she had restored the glamour on her hair.

"The dreamer awakes," Snape said.

"I can't believe I fell asleep," she said.

"I've put the kettle on," Snape told her. "We'll have tea with our *Clafouti aux Pommes avec Crème glacée*. You must be ready for pudding by now."

"Oh, yes, but I need to use the loo first."

"Do you remember where it is?" Snape asked.

"Upstairs, first door on the right."

"I'll go prepare the tea."

"I thought you said baking wasn't your forte," Hermione said after she swallowed the last bite of apple.

"It isn't. This dish would hardly be considered a pastry by a true French *pâtissier*. As a matter of fact, *clafouti* is oft times served as a breakfast dish, sans the *crème glacée*, of course."

"Oh, yes. Now that you mention it, I recall being served a similar dish at the inn we always stayed at. I think it was made with cherries, though."

"It can be made with almost any fruit, but I prefer apples."

"I do, too," Hermione said.

"Would you like to finish your tea in front of the fire?" Snape asked.

"Yes, and I promise not to fall asleep this time," she replied.

They stood and carried their cups over to the sitting area in front of the fireplace.

Hermione settled back down into the corner of the sofa, and Snape took his place in the chair on the other side of the fireplace.

"I want to thank you again for inviting me to spend the day with you. Although, I wasn't much company, I'm afraid," Hermione said.

"In spite of the fact that you fell asleep, I found your presence ... agreeable," Snape admitted.

"This has been the nicest Christmas I've had in years," she said. "I was so very tired of being alone."

"If you had asked me a few days ago, I would have said that I preferred to be alone," he said.

"And now?"

"Now? Well, at the risk of sounding maudlin, Miss Granger, I will say that today has been the nicest Christmas I've had in years, as well."

Five

Chapter 5 of 10

Hermione Granger has been absent from the wizarding world for more than five years. When Severus Snape runs into her in a Muggle bookstore, he discovers why. An old promise made to Albus Dumbledore prompts Snape to offer his help to his former student.

Author's Notes: This was written for the HG/SS holiday exchange on Live Journal. This was the prompt I chose: #71. Fic: Post-war Hermione and Severus are both doomed to spend Xmas alone until they run into each other in Diagon Alley or London. How, why, and what happens next is up to you. Happy ending, please. Any rating. This prompt was submitted by GinnyWeasley31, and the story is dedicated to her.

Disclaimer: All publicly recognisable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. The author is in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended.

Special thanks to my beta reader, JuJuJenn. And thanks to Illyria who did some Brit-picking for me. Any errors, however, are mine alone.

Five

During the week between Christmas and New Year's, Snape and Hermione fell into a routine. Snape would knock on Hermione's back door each morning at nine o'clock. They would eat the breakfast that he prepared, and then he would Apparate them back to the house at Spinner's End. They would spend the morning researching through the books most likely to contain information on the curse that Bellatrix Lestrange had used on Hermione. A couple of mornings, Harry and Ron joined them, but because they both worked in the Aurors' Office at the Ministry, it was difficult for them to get time off. They promised to help on the weekends, however. After their research, Snape would prepare a light lunch, and then they would either continue their research or go to Hogwarts to work on the potions that Madam Pomfrey needed replenished. They would either eat dinner at Hogwarts, or they would return to Hermione's, and Snape would prepare something there. After dinner, Hermione would sign on to her computer and work for a couple of hours. Most nights, Snape would remain watching her work and offering the occasional comment about a particular caller. They would talk between calls.

Snape was surprised to realise that he found the computer a quite fascinating piece of technology. He wondered if there was any way to channel some of Hogwarts' internal magic into powering such a device. It would certainly make recordkeeping a lot easier. He would mention the possibility to Minerva and Filius and see what could be done.

But that was a project for the future. For now, he needed to concentrate on exploring every possible means of helping Hermione.

At first, all of Snape's and Hermione's conversations were about their research, but after a few days, they began to branch off into other areas. They discovered that besides liking the same kinds of foods, they also had similar tastes in literature and music.

On New Year's Eve day, Snape and Harry arranged a visit to Scrimgeour. In a 'good cop/bad cop' pas de deux that would have made Ron proud had he been there to see it, the two of them alternately cajoled and threatened the Minister of Magic into revealing anything he knew about the Pulpa Adustum Curse. Unfortunately, Scrimgeour knew even less about it than they did.

"I might be able to make some inquiries, Harry," Scrimgeour said. "I could even introduce you to some friends of mine who might be able to help. I'm having a small gathering at my home this evening to welcome in the New Year. Perhaps you'd care to join us?" As he spoke, Scrimgeour sidled up to Harry and draped an arm across his shoulder.

Harry shrugged off Scrimgeour's arm and stepped away from him.

"Oh, I don't think so, *Rufus*," Harry said. "I'm not interested in meeting anyone who'd call you 'friend'."

Scrimgeour's ruddy face flushed an even deeper red.

"You'd better mind that mouth of yours, boy," Scrimgeour said, dropping all pretence of friendliness. "As the Minister of Magic, I can make things very difficult for you and for your friends. With the Dark Lord gone, I'm not sure the Ministry really needs the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects any longer. Wouldn't it be a shame if Arthur Weasley had to find another job? Or if the Aurors' Department were suddenly down-sized?"

Snape took a step toward Scrimgeour, but Harry held up a hand.

"Don't threaten me," Harry said in a deceptively quiet voice. "And don't threaten my friends. The only reason you're still the Minister of Magic is because I haven't spoken out against you."

"You overestimate your influence, Potter," Scrimgeour sneered.

"On the contrary," Snape said, "you underestimate it, Scrimgeour. I've no doubt that were Potter to speak out against you, it would be you looking for a job. It's always been my opinion that Arthur Weasley is wasted in his current position. He would make a very good Minister of Magic."

"An excellent suggestion, Professor Snape," Harry said.

"Now, Harry," Scrimgeour said in a conciliatory tone, "I was just ... thinking out loud. The Ministry wouldn't be able to function without Arthur as head of his department."

"Since Mr. Weasley is doing such a fine job, maybe it's time he had a raise?"

Scrimgeour sputtered, "But ... but ..."

"If I heard that Mr. Weasley had received a big raise, I'd be inclined to maintain my ... disinterest ... in politics."

"That's blackmail!"

"As opposed to extortion?" Snape asked with a snort. "Your hypocrisy astounds me."

"Shut up, Snape," Scrimgeour snarled. "I'm not worried about *your* influence in politics."

"You're quite right. Politics is not my area of expertise, but brewing potions is. I suggest you remember that the next time you eat or drink anything."

Scrimgeour took a step back. "Get out both of you!"

"We're leaving," Snape said. "I suddenly find myself quite desirous of a shower."

"Yeah, me, too," Harry said.

On New Year's Day, Snape arrived to prepare breakfast at the usual time. He knocked on Hermione's back door.

"Good morning, Professor Snape," Hermione said as she opened the door. "Looks like you'll be my first-footer. Happy New Year to you."

"Good morning, Miss Granger," Snape said as he stood on the back step. "Happy New Year to you, as well. I'm not sure I'm qualified to be a first-footer, however."

"You're tall and dark-haired; I'll count myself lucky. Now, come in."

Snape stepped through the door. "I'm probably at least two stone too light, and I'm certainly not good-looking. I hope I won't bring you bad luck instead of good."

"I'm not really superstitious; I just mentioned it for fun. I think Ron was my first-footer last year, and you know it's never supposed to be a redhead," she said with a smile.

"I'm not sure I even had a first-footer last year," Snape said. "You may have been the only person, other than me, to cross my threshold the entire year."

"And the first-footer is never supposed to be a woman, either, so let's assume our bad luck indicators will cancel each other out."

"Agreed," Snape said.

They ate their breakfast and then went to Spinner's End.

The next few days passed in much the same manner. Then, two days before the new term was to start, there was a break in their routine.

When they were finished with breakfast and the cleaning up afterward, Hermione turned to Snape.

"Professor Snape, might I ask a favour of you?"

"What is it, Miss Granger?"

"My parents returned from France last night. They are going to come and visit me this afternoon."

"I'll excuse you for the day; I'm sure I can manage my potions-making without your assistance," Snape said dryly.

"I've no doubt of that, sir. I haven't done much more than chop roots and decant the potions," she replied. "I wasn't going to ask to be excused."

"What is it, then?"

"I ... I've decided to tell my parents about my ... my injury."

"I think that's a good decision."

"I was wondering ... that is ... I was hoping that you would agree to stay and help me explain things to them."

"I have no problem with staying, but I'm not sure what help I could be. This seems a rather personal moment between you and your parents. My presence would most likely be an unwelcome intrusion."

"I wouldn't consider it an intrusion at all and neither will my parents," Hermione insisted.

Snape's first impulse was to refuse. The last thing he needed was to be embroiled in the emotional upheaval that was sure to accompany Hermione's revelation to her parents.

He was formulating a negative response when a tingle at the back of his mind reminded him of his promise to Albus.

He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose with a long finger.

"I will stay and offer what support I can," he said.

"Thank you, sir."

Several hours later, Hermione, with Snape standing next to her, bid her parents goodbye. It had been an emotionally exhausting afternoon. Her mother had spent most of the afternoon crying. Her father had been angry and upset.

Most of Richard Granger's questions and anger had been directed at Snape. He didn't seem to understand that there were some things that not even magic could fix.

"I'm sorry my father was so querulous."

"I understand his attitude. You were the victim of a brutal attack; he could hardly berate you. I, as the tangible representative of the wizarding world, became the object of his ire. Sometimes when one feels powerless to affect important events, one lashes out at the nearest available target."

"Does that explain your behaviour for most of my time at Hogwarts?" Hermione asked.

Snape arched his brow at her. "You may draw whatever conclusions you wish from my remarks, Miss Granger."

"At any rate, I truly appreciate your staying here with me today and helping me to get through it."

"Now that your parents know, you will receive the emotional support you need from them during this difficult time."

"It will be good to be able to spend some time with them without worrying about having to maintain an elaborate glamour. Though my mum did say she thinks I'm too thin, so I'm sure I'll have to listen to her nagging me about my eating habits."

"Perhaps it is a fortunate thing you didn't reveal yourself to them three weeks ago," Snape said.

"You've managed to fatten me up considerably since then," Hermione said with a smile. "I think I've gained more than half a stone."

"That means you're only underweight, instead of dangerously underweight."

"My stress levels have dropped considerably."

"And your magical energy has increased proportionally," Snape added.

"I can certainly feel the difference," Hermione agreed. "I've worried that my magical energy would be totally depleted."

"As long as you continue to eat properly and conserve your energy by limiting your use of an elaborate glamour, you should be able to maintain your current levels."

"I won't be using that glamour at all any more. Since I no longer need to go to the Ministry to do research, I'm finished with allowing Rufus Scrimgeour to dictate to me," she said with vehemence.

"Which brings us to the subject of your research," Snape said.

"Yes?"

"As you are aware, the new term starts the day after tomorrow. I will need to return to Hogwarts tomorrow to prepare."

"I know," she replied in a soft voice.

"In the past, I've had very little reason to return to London during term. I have my lab at Hogwarts for my private research, and the library there is extensive enough to satisfy my needs."

"I understand," Hermione said. "I ... I am very grateful for everything you've done for me. I knew it was highly unlikely that we'd uncover anything of any importance in so short a time, but I appreciate your allowing me to make the effort."

"You are ready to give up your research, then?" Snape asked.

"No! I don't want to give up."

"Then why are you talking like you do?"

"I thought ... I mean ... you said ..."

"I said that *in the past* I had little reason to return to London during term. Now, I have a reason, and I will be returning to London as often as I can. Because of my duties as Head of Slytherin House, as well as my teaching duties, I doubt I'll be able to get back here more than one or two weekends a month, however."

"I would be happy with one or two *hours* a month," Hermione broke in. "Thank you, sir."

"If you would allow me to finish speaking?"

"Of course. My apologies for interrupting."

"As I was saying, I won't be able to return to London very often. There is no reason, however, why you cannot continue your research on your own."

"But ... but ... how? I mean ..." Hermione stammered.

"My library and my home is at your disposal, Miss Granger."

Snape reached into his pocket and pulled out a key. He held it out to Hermione, but when she showed no inclination to take it, he reached down and took her hand in his. He dropped the key into her hand and closed her fingers around it.

"You ... you will allow me to spend time in your home without you being there?"

"Are you going to steal the silver, Miss Granger?" Snape asked.

"What? Steal the silver? Of course I won't steal the silver!" she sputtered.

"Well, you do have a history of larceny of my possessions," he said.

Before Hermione could respond, Snape held up a hand.

"I'm joking, Miss Granger. If I didn't trust you, I wouldn't have given you the key. I've adjusted my wards to recognise your magical signature. You may come and go as it suits you, though I will know if you push yourself too hard. I would say that you should be able to manage four hours a day without exhausting yourself."

"I could probably manage six hours," she said, clutching the key tightly.

"Five and not a minute more," he said in a firm voice.

Hermione smiled. "Five."

"If I think you are strong enough during the Easter holidays, we will work on your Apparition skills. In the meantime, I'm afraid you'll have to take the Tube to get back and forth."

"I don't mind. I've become rather used to it over the last few years," she said.

"Apparition is faster and safer, as long as you don't splinch yourself."

"That's true," she agreed.

There was an awkward moment of silence as they stood looking at each other.

"I should be going," Snape said at last. "I need to finish my packing. I'll be leaving first thing in the morning."

"Are you taking the Hogwarts Express?" Hermione asked.

Snape gave a sharp snort. "Are you daft, woman? Six hours on a train full of rambunctious children? I'll be Apparating, just as I always do."

"How silly of me," she said.

"Indeed."

Another awkward moment ensued. This time it was Hermione who spoke first.

"May I write you?" she asked. "Harry lets me borrow Hedwig when I need her."

"I would be interested in knowing how your research is progressing," Snape replied.

"I will, then."

"I'll look forward to hearing from you."

"I guess I'll have to get used to making my own breakfast," Hermione said.

"Just be sure you eat," he said.

"I will. I promise I will."

Hermione was turning the key over and over in her hands.

"I really must go," Snape said.

Hermione raised her head and looked into Snape's eyes.

"Goodbye, Miss Granger," Snape said as he stepped back. "I'll let you know when I am coming to London."

"Goodbye, Professor Snape," Hermione said. She let her gaze drop to the floor. "I'm going to miss you," she added in a soft whisper.

She lifted her head, but Snape was already gone.

Snape heard Hermione's whispered words just as he Disapparated.

"I'm going to miss you, as well, Miss Granger," he said to the empty air of his small parlour.

The next several weeks went by quickly. Hermione took the Tube to the nearest stop and then walked to Snape's house every day. She spent the mornings looking through his vast collection of books. It was very slow-going, but she tried not to get discouraged. More than four years of fruitless searching in the Ministry library had given her patience, if not satisfaction.

She saw Ron and Harry at least once a week. They would come to her house, usually with pizza and beer. (Harry had introduced Ron to this Muggle combination, and Ron had quickly made it his favourite food.)

She saw her parents at least a couple of times a month. Her mum still cried every time she saw Hermione. In a strange reversal of roles, it was usually Hermione who ended up comforting her mother, instead of the other way around. Her father had insisted that she forward his written apology to Professor Snape. She had, and in an even stranger turn of events, the two had begun a correspondence.

Snape had tried sending messages to Draco, but none of his inquiries were answered. No one seemed to know where Draco Malfoy was.

Because Draco had turned against his father in the last year of the war, he and his mother had become targets. The Dark Lord had put a price on Draco's head, and Lucius himself had promised a reward to any Death Eater who could return his 'wayward' son to face the punishment he deserved.

When Harry killed Voldemort just a few days after Lucius died, it was thought that Draco and Narcissa would be able to come out of hiding. An attempt on his life by his former friend Goyle had prompted Draco to resume his secret life. There were rumours that he and Narcissa were living as Muggles somewhere in America. Although the 'last' Death Eater had been captured three years after the Final Battle, Draco and Narcissa did not return to England.

Several weeks after he'd sent his last message, Snape was in his quarters, looking over some essays, when his Floo activated.

"Professor Snape," called a voice he hadn't heard since the night he'd been forced to kill Albus Dumbledore.

"Draco!" Snape exclaimed, getting to his feet and moving to the fire.

"Come through, Draco," Snape invited.

Draco shook his head. "No, I can't."

"I understand."

"I received your messages. I've been ignoring them."

"I surmised as much since they weren't returned."

"If they had come from anyone else, I would have continued to ignore them, but since I am in your debt, I owe you the courtesy of a reply."

"You owe me nothing, Draco," Snape said.

Draco smiled. "I won't debate that issue with you, sir. I know exactly what I owe you."

"How is your mother?" Snape asked.

"She is well. She asked me to tell you that she is grateful for your help."

Snape just nodded.

"I wish I could help you with your problem," Draco said, bringing the conversation back to the subject of Snape's inquiries.

"I didn't really expect you to know anything. It was a matter of not overlooking any possibility, no matter how slight."

"I hope that you'll be able to help whoever the victim is. If my father or Aunt Bellatrix was behind it, however, you've got a hard road in front of you."

"Indeed," Snape replied.

"I hope you will understand when I ask you not to try to contact me again," Draco said.

"Of course," Snape replied.

"Thank you, sir."

"Goodbye, Draco. Stay well."

"Goodbye."

Draco's head disappeared from the fire, and the emerald flames returned to their normal colour as the Floo connection closed.

Snape had only managed to make it into London three times in the weeks between the beginning of term and the Easter holidays. They had crammed as much research into their limited time as they could.

The Easter holidays had passed much as the Christmas holidays had, with one major difference. Snape still went to Hermione's home each morning and prepared breakfast for the two of them. Then they went to Spinner's End and did more research. After lunch, however, instead of more research or trips to Snape's lab, they worked on refreshing Hermione's Apparition skills.

Late in the afternoon, on the last day of the Easter holidays, Hermione was able to Apparate to Spinner's End on her own.

"No more Tube rides for me!" she exclaimed as she popped into Snape's small parlour just a few seconds after he did, although with a lot more noise.

"You've done well, Miss Granger," Snape said. "By the time next term ends, you may be able to Apparate all the way to Hogwarts on your own."

"Do you think so?"

"I do. You've kept your promise to me and have managed to bring your weight up to an acceptable level. I can sense that your magical energy is nearly at the level it was before your injury. I can't see any reason why you won't be able to do long-distance Apparition very soon."

"I'm sleeping much better, as well," Hermione said. "I limit myself to one cup of coffee in the morning. I drink milk with my lunch everyday, and I drink the tea blend you make for me in the afternoon and evening. Not having the stress of trying to hide my condition from my parents and from Harry and Ron has made a difference, as well," she added.

Snape didn't relish the idea of bringing up an unpleasant subject, but reality had to be faced.

"We've been through nearly half the books in my library," he said.

"I know."

"There is a very real possibility that we won't find out anything about what was done to you. Are you prepared for that?"

"I knew there wasn't much hope when I started. Even when I was searching at the Ministry, I think I knew that I'd never find anything. The search itself kept me going, though. If we don't find a counter-curse, I'll just have to accept that I'm going to look like this for the rest of my life.

"My ... my mother mentioned the possibility of plastic surgery."

"You would entrust yourself to a *Muggle* doctor?"

Hermione almost laughed at the horrified expression on Professor Snape's face.

"Only as a last resort. I don't even know if a *Muggle* doctor would be able to do anything with a magical injury. And how would I explain it? I'm not seriously considering it at this point, although I've told my mum I'll think about it. She's taken this really hard."

"I know. Your father has expressed some concerns about it. I don't suppose there is any harm in allowing your mother to believe you are considering the possibility of going to a *Muggle* doctor for help."

"I haven't given up on finding a magical solution," Hermione said.

"Nor have I," Snape assured her.

"Are you leaving in the morning to go back to Hogwarts?"

"I was actually going to leave this afternoon," he replied. "I have some reports to finish for Minerva."

"Oh."

Hermione tried not to let her disappointment show. She'd been looking forward to their last dinner together.

Snape watched Hermione's face fall as he told her he would be leaving that afternoon. It appeared she was truly disappointed that he wouldn't be staying for dinner. He realised that he didn't really want to leave sooner than he absolutely had to.

"I hardly think a few hours will make a difference. I can go after dinner just as easily as before."

"I wouldn't want to be the cause of Professor McGonagall being angry at you for shirking your duties," Hermione said in a tone that convinced Snape it was a token protest at best.

"I'm usually the first teacher to hand in my reports. I doubt she'll be angry with me for being a few hours late for the first time in my career," he said with a small smile.

"In that case, I'm glad you'll stay until after dinner."

"Now, the problem is that I hadn't planned anything for dinner," Snape said.

"We could always order a pizza," Hermione said.

"You can eat that slop with Potter and Weasley, if you've a mind to. I have much more discriminating tastes, Miss Granger."

"Of course you do, sir. How silly of me."

"Do you have evening attire?" he asked, eyeing her jeans and jumper with a critical eye.

"You mean like a dress?"

"I mean exactly like a dress," Snape said in his driest tone.

"Well, I have a basic black dress that my mum insisted I buy. I haven't worn it in while, but I'm sure it will still fit me."

"Then get yourself home and put it on. I'll call for you in an hour."

"We're ... we're going to *goout* for dinner?" Hermione asked in a shaky voice.

"Are you embarrassed to be seen with me, Miss Granger?"

"Truly, I was thinking it would be the other way around, Professor Snape," she replied in a quiet tone.

"I suppose I can understand why you might feel that way, but be assured that I would not be in the least bit 'embarrassed' to be seen with you under any circumstances. I don't want to make you the subject of other people's stares and whispers, however. If you would be more comfortable with a full glamour, rather than just the light one you've been using, I will understand and I will Apparate us back and forth so that you can conserve your energy."

"Actually, I haven't been to a nice restaurant in years. I'm much stronger than I was a few months ago. I'm sure I could manage a full glamour for a few hours without exhausting myself."

"I'll take you home now so you can get ready. I'll come back for you in an hour. Is that sufficient time for your primping?"

"An hour will be more than sufficient, Professor. I don't primp."

Snape dropped an arm across her shoulder, and she wrapped her arms around his waist and closed her eyes.

When she opened her eyes, they were standing in her kitchen.

Snape stepped away from her.

"I'll be back in an hour."

"I'll be ready."

"And, Miss Granger? *All* women primp!"

Before she could reply, he was gone.

An hour later, Hermione was ... well, she was *priming* as she waited for Snape's knock. To her surprise, he rang the front doorbell rather than knocked at her back door as he usually did.

Hermione opened the door and very nearly gasped as she took in Snape's appearance. He was wearing a Muggle suit in a dark grey. With it, he wore a white linen shirt and a silk tie in a dark, navy blue. He had tied his hair back in a queue. Hermione decided he looked very distinguished.

"Your mother has excellent taste," Snape said as he took in the elegant black dress she wore.

The dress had a high neckline, long sleeves, and ended an inch above her knees. Her black leather pumps had three inch heels which brought the top of her head level with his shoulder. She wore a plain gold chain around her neck and a matching gold bracelet.

Snape noted that she had used a full glamour, but not an elaborate one. She had tamed her hair into waves that fell from a side part to cascade on either side of her face, effectively covering most of the ruined flesh. The glamour she had used on the parts of her face that did show hid the redness and most of the folds of flesh. She'd made judicious use of cosmetics. The result was that if one didn't know the damage was there, it was barely noticeable. He could sense that her magical energy still remained quite high.

"You've done an excellent job with your glamour, Miss Granger," he said.

"Thank you. I've been practising it. I guess I'm preparing myself for the likelihood that we will never find a counter-curse."

"I don't believe we should abandon our search just yet. However, I think that your attitude is a mature and realistic one."

"Now, have you finished your primping? I took the liberty of making reservations at one of the few decent French restaurants in London."

"I'm ready to go," she said as she picked up her evening wrap.

Snape took it from her and held it for her. As he dropped the wrap across her shoulders, she wrapped her arms around his waist and closed her eyes.

When she opened her eyes, they were standing on a quiet, cobbled alley not far from Charterhouse Square. She dropped her arms from his waist, but took the arm he offered.

After a short walk, they arrived at *Le Café du Marché*

When Snape gave his name to the maitre d', they were whisked immediately inside to a small, candlelit table. Off in a corner a three-piece ensemble played, and a few couples danced on the small dance floor.

There were no menus; a blackboard listed the evening's offerings. Snape ordered for both of them in his impeccable French.

The food was superb, and the wines that Snape and the sommelier chose complemented each course perfectly.

They talked quietly as they ate, but avoided the subject of their research and the dimming hope that they would find a counter-curse.

Snape excused himself just after they ordered their *dessert*. As he headed back toward the table, he noticed Hermione watching the dancers and swaying slightly in her chair, her foot tapping in time to the music.

"Would you care to dance, Miss Granger?" he asked holding out a hand to her.

Hermione placed her hand in his and let him draw her to her feet. They moved toward the small dance floor, and she slipped into his arms.

"At the risk of incurring your wrath, may I say that I didn't know you could dance, Professor Snape," Hermione said, looking up at him.

"Do you think your class is the only one that Minerva McGonagall gave dance lessons to, Miss Granger?" he replied.

Hermione smiled and leaned into him, letting the music carry her along.

Snape wasn't sure how it happened. One minute they were dancing quite formally, one of his hands on Hermione's waist and the other holding her hand out in the classic waltz position while her other hand rested on his shoulder. The next thing he realised, her head was on his shoulder, and their arms were wrapped around one another. He could feel her breasts pressed against his chest and the slight roundness of her belly rubbing against his groin.

He stifled a groan and tried to shift his lower body away from hers as he felt himself begin to harden. Thankfully, she seemed unaware of the effect she was having on him.

He was absurdly grateful when their waiter gave a discreet cough and informed them that their *dessert* was ready to be served.

Snape nodded his thanks to the waiter and led Hermione back to their table.

After they'd been served their *dessert*, Snape tried to hurry their departure along as much as he could without being blatantly rude. He ignored Hermione's longing glances at the dance floor as she toyed with her *Blanc mange*. There was no way he was putting himself in that position again.

They'd barely materialised in Hermione's kitchen when Snape stepped back.

"I really need to go now, Miss Granger," he said in a tone that came out rather more harshly than he'd intended.

"Of course," Hermione replied. "Thank you for dinner and for the dance. It was lovely."

Snape looked at her sharply, trying to discern any hidden meaning behind her words. She met his gaze guilelessly, and he could see that she'd meant exactly what she'd said. She hadn't realised that he'd become aroused by her closeness, a fact for which he was extremely grateful.

He merely nodded at her and then Disapparated without a sound.

Two weeks after he returned to Hogwarts, Snape was sitting at the High Table eating breakfast when the Owl Post arrived.

When Hedwig set down in front of him and stuck out her leg, he assumed that the missive was from Hermione. They had resumed their regular correspondence, keeping each other apprised of their research.

His name was scrawled on the outside of the parchment, but not in Hermione's neat script. He recognised Potter's handwriting and had a momentary fear that something had happened to Hermione.

He slid a nail under the wax seal and unrolled the parchment.

I've found some books that Remus left at Grimmauld Place. Most are about the Dark Arts. I don't know if they are books that you may already have copies of, but I thought you should take a look at them in case they have any information that may help.

Let me know when it's convenient for me to bring them to you.

I've instructed Hedwig to wait for your reply.

Harry Potter

Snape doubted that Remus Lupin had owned any books that he did not already possess, but he acknowledged that Potter was right in that he would need to look at them.

He fed Hedwig a piece of bacon from his plate and stroked the top of her head softly.

"I'll be right back with my reply," he told the owl and then took the note to the staff room to compose a reply.

After dinner, any night this week except Friday, will be convenient for me.

S. Snape

That same evening, Harry Potter and Ron Weasley walked into the Great Hall at Hogwarts just as dinner was ending. There were a number of whispers, and a lot of fingers pointing as the two of them made their way to the High Table. A very large box filled with books floated between them.

"Still making grand entrances, I see, Potter," Snape drawled.

"I thought you could use some cachet with your students, Professor," Harry said with a grin.

"Are you trying to impress me with your vocabulary?"

"Well, I could never impress you with my potions-making," Harry replied.

"At last, we agree on something," Snape said as he got to his feet.

Even the other teachers were staring as Snape came around the High Table to stand in front of Harry and Ron. The rest of the staff knew that there had never been

anything but enmity between Severus Snape and Harry Potter.

Minerva McGonagall nervously fingered her wand, prepared to intervene should it prove necessary.

"Would you gentlemen care to bring that to my quarters?"

"Lead on," Ron said, speaking for the first time.

Snape turned and headed toward the staff exit. Harry and Ron followed him, waving at the other professors as they passed.

Harry and Ron followed Snape out the staff exit, down a long corridor, and then down a long staircase. They emerged not far from the Potions classroom. When Harry turned back to look the way they had come, the staircase was no longer there.

"I didn't think I'd ever seen that staircase before," Harry muttered.

"And were you not with me, you wouldn't have seen it now," Snape said.

"No wonder the students used to think you could walk through walls," Ron said. "You could."

Snape just smirked.

"I don't suppose I have to warn you gentlemen not to touch anything, do I?"

"We're not twelve anymore, you know," Harry said.

Snape stopped in front of a blank wall. He touched his wand to one of the bricks at shoulder level, and a door appeared. A moment later the door swung open.

"Hold a moment while I reset my wards," he said.

Harry and Ron stopped, the box still floating between them, and watched as Snape moved his wand in a complicated pattern.

"I'll be changing that once you two are safely gone," Snape warned.

"Like we could ever remember that," Ron muttered to Harry.

"Well, come on," Snape chided. "I don't want any of the students to see this."

"As if any of them would have the guts to come anywhere near this place if they didn't have to," Harry said as he and Ron entered Snape's quarters.

Harry took a surreptitious look around, surprised by the ordinariness of the room. While he'd never believed the rumours that Snape was a vampire and slept hanging upside down from a branch, he would have expected a bit more fanciness.

Ron was frankly goggling. He edged over to the large fireplace and the sofa and chairs that were arranged in front of it.

"Oy, black's in a lot of trouble," he said as he peered at the chess board which rested on one of the small tables near the chairs.

Snape raised a brow. "Oh, really, Weasley?"

"Oh, yeah. Another three or four moves and it'll be goners for you."

Snape closed his eyes and swallowed hard.

"Actually, I'm white in this particular game. Albus was playing black. I warned him two days before ... before he died that his king was in jeopardy."

"You've kept the game set up since he died?" Harry asked.

"Yes, I have. Do you find that peculiar?"

Harry looked at Snape, really *looked* at him as he never had before. And saw, for the first time, the burden that Snape still carried.

"I find it *enlightening*, Professor Snape," Harry said with a measure of respect his voice had never before carried.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter," Snape said quietly.

Harry just nodded.

"I suppose I should look through these now," Snape said.

He picked up the first book in the box. As he'd suspected, it was a title he already owned and one he'd already gone through meticulously without finding the slightest reference to the Pulpa Adustum Curse.

The next three books were also books he already owned.

The next book he picked up had a dark green leather binding. There was no title on the cover or on the spine. He opened it, looked at the title page, and gasped aloud.

"What is it, Professor?" Harry asked.

"Do you know where Lupin got these books?"

"I know he had some of them when he was teaching here, back in my third year," Harry said. "He sometimes referred to them when he was giving me private Defence lessons. He mentioned to me once that Sirius had given him some of the books that were in the library at Grimmauld Place. Back before he was sent to Azkaban."

"After Remus left Hogwarts, he went and stayed with Sirius at Grimmauld Place. I found all of his personal belongings there. I ... I hadn't been in their room since Sirius died."

"Do you recall ever seeing this particular book?" Snape asked.

Harry moved closer to get a better look. Ron trailed after him.

"I don't think so. Why? Is it important?"

"The Dark Lord was obsessed with obtaining this book. There were rumours that there were only two surviving copies. He wanted at least one, preferably both of them, and he offered a boon to any Death Eater who could bring a copy to him. I know that Lucius Malfoy and Thaddeus Nott both spent a great deal of money searching for them."

"Do you think there's information in there that will help Hermione?" Ron asked.

"I don't know. I will have to look through it very carefully. It's written in Greek, and though I recognise some of the words, Greek is not a language I am fluent in. I will try using a Translation Spell on it, but it may have to be translated without magic the old-fashioned way word by word."

Snape continued to sort through the books in the box. There were several more books that were extremely rare, and at least two that he'd only heard spoken about. They were so old that their very existence had passed into legend.

"Do you recognise any of these, Mr. Potter?" Snape asked as he indicated the books he'd put aside.

"I don't think so, sir," Harry answered.

Snape shook his head. "Remus Lupin wore old and patched robes, and when he arrived here, it seemed that he hadn't eaten in weeks. Yet, he possessed a library that contains several priceless volumes. Selling just *one* of these books would have earned him more Galleons than he probably earned during his entire lifetime."

"But, he wouldn't have sold them for anything," Harry said. "He wouldn't have wanted them to fall into the wrong hands. Besides, if Sirius gave them to him, they would have been even more special to him."

"The entire wizarding world can be grateful that Remus Lupin was a man of honour," Snape said. "I can only imagine the use the Dark Lord would have made of these books."

"If these books came out of the Black library, wouldn't Bellatrix and Narcissa have had access to them? They were Blacks," Harry said.

"They were your godfather's cousins, not his siblings. Grimmauld Place and its contents passed to Sirius Black as the eldest son. They may have visited the library, however, which may explain how Bellatrix learned of the Pulpa Adustum Curse."

"You think it's in one of these books, don't you?" Harry asked.

"If it's anywhere, it's in one of these books."

"We have to tell Hermione!" Ron exclaimed.

"No!" Snape and Harry shouted, almost in unison.

"Why not?" Ron demanded.

"We can't say anything until we know for sure, Ron," Harry said.

"Miss Granger has begun to come to terms with what has happened to her. It would be cruel in the extreme to give rise to false hope, Mr. Weasley," Snape explained.

"I guess you're right," Ron conceded. "I just want to help her."

"As do we all," Snape said. "I will begin working on these immediately, but it will take weeks, perhaps months, to get through them."

"You'll let us know as soon as you find out anything?" Harry asked. "We have a Floo connection in our flat. You can contact us there."

"Your flat has a fireplace?" Snape asked.

"It has an electric fire, but I've charmed it to accept Floo calls and messages. I can even use it to travel in a pinch, though it's a tight squeeze. Ron's too tall to use it," Harry said with a grin at his best friend.

"I'd rather be tall," Ron insisted. "Witches like their wizards tall. Isn't that right, Professor Snape?"

"I'm sure you'd know better than I, Mr. Weasley. My social interactions are rather limited here. However, I would guess that your status as a war hero is more a contributing factor to your success with the fairer sex than is your height."

"You're probably right," Ron agreed with a sigh. "The whole world knows Harry is engaged to Ginny, and he still has to beat them off with sticks."

Harry blushed. "Ron ..."

"As fascinating as this discussion is, perhaps I should begin looking through these books? I will contact you if I discover anything of importance," Snape said.

"We'll let you get started, then," Ron said.

Snape just nodded absently. He was sorting the books into piles, trying to decide which volume he should look into first.

"Professor?" Harry said.

There was no reply.

"Sir?" Harry said, more loudly.

"What is it, Potter?" Snape said, looking up from the book in his hand.

"How do we get out of here?"

Once he had escorted Potter and Weasley out of his quarters, Snape sat on the edge of the sofa. He pulled on a pair of white cotton gloves and carefully opened one of books. It was well after midnight before he closed the book and went to bed.

Snape spent every free moment carefully searching the books that had belonged to Remus Lupin.

The book written in Greek had, much to Snape's surprise, yielded itself readily to a translation spell. Unfortunately, however, it contained no information about the Pulpa Adustum Curse. It did contain information on other curses that would have given the Dark Lord much power. Snape could only be thankful, once again, that Remus Lupin had never been seduced, as he himself had been, to the side of the Dark Lord.

Several weeks passed. He and Hermione continued to exchange frequent letters, but they tended to be more impersonal than they had been before their dinner out. Snape had encouraged Hermione to write to Minerva and tell the Headmistress about the curse that had been cast on her by Bellatrix Lestrange.

Although it hadn't been easy, Hermione had done so. Minerva had been sympathetic, of course, and had offered the resources of the school to aid in the quest for a cure.

Snape was pleased that he no longer had to keep his work secret from Minerva. He knew that if they ever did discover the curse, they would need the resources that Minerva promised. It would be much better to have her working with them from the beginning.

Snape didn't return to London. He told Hermione that he was busy preparing his fifth-years for their O.W.L.s and his seventh-years for their N.E.W.T.s and that was true. His research into Remus Lupin's books took up the rest of his time, though he didn't tell her that.

Neither of those things was the real reason he didn't return to London, however.

The truth, he reluctantly admitted to himself, was that he had begun thinking about Hermione in a way that was totally inappropriate.

Sex, for him, had always been a merely physical act. The body built up an excess of hormones, and one did what one had to do to achieve release. Muggle bars were always good for finding a temporary partner during school breaks. During term, he could usually sublimate his libido or, failing that, he could indulge in the occasional instance of self-gratification. After a day of trying to instill knowledge into a bunch of unenthusiastic dunderheads, he was usually too tired to think about his nonexistent sex life, anyway.

That had changed on the night he'd returned to Hogwarts, the night he and Hermione had danced.

After he'd left Hermione's, he'd Apparated home. He'd finished his packing and gone to bed thinking he would get up early to go back to school. After tossing and turning for more than an hour, he'd given up on trying to sleep. He'd got out of bed, dressed, and Apparated to Hogwarts.

He'd unpacked, finished the reports for Minerva, and then Flooed them to her office. He worked on some lesson plans for another hour or so. Finally, sheer exhaustion had driven him to his bed.

He'd fallen into a fitful sleep. He'd come half-awake in the early hours of the morning with his cock hard and aching from the vague memory of an erotic dream. He'd taken a hand to himself and brought himself over with only a few quick tugs. He'd fallen back asleep before he even remembered to cast a cleansing charm.

It was only after he'd woken a few hours later to find the dried semen on his sheets that he remembered the dream that had so stimulated him. He was appalled and disgusted with himself when he realised that the woman in his dream, the woman who had fuelled his sexual fantasy, was Hermione.

He resolved to never again allow erotic thoughts of Hermione to invade his mind. He worked until he was exhausted, and then he worked some more. He fell into bed each night determined to be too tired to masturbate, too tired to dream.

For the most part, he succeeded. Every once in a while, however, he would wake up with an erection that no amount of determination could diminish. When that happened, he would purposely conjure a fantasy about another woman any other woman. He thought about the first girl he'd ever had sex with. It had been during his sixth-year. She'd been a seventh-year Ravenclaw with grey-green eyes and a mouth that had swallowed him whole. He thought about the last woman he'd enjoyed. She'd been a Muggle he'd picked up in a bar in London. She'd been blonde and a bit on the plump side. She'd straddled him, her large breasts bobbing in his face, and her hips driving furiously, as she'd ridden him to a shuddering climax that had left him limp and breathless.

But, it seemed that no matter who he chose to fantasise about when he could no longer ignore his persistent erection, the face that floated to the surface of his mind as he arched into climax was always Hermione's.

Six

Chapter 6 of 10

Hermione Granger has been absent from the wizarding world for more than five years. When Severus Snape runs into her in a Muggle bookstore, he discovers why. An old promise made to Albus Dumbledore prompts Snape to offer his help to his former student.

Author's Notes: This was written for the HG/SS holiday exchange on Live Journal. This was the prompt I chose: #71. Fic: Post-war Hermione and Severus are both doomed to spend Xmas alone until they run into each other in Diagon Alley or London. How, why, and what happens next is up to you. Happy ending, please. Any rating. This prompt was submitted by GinnyWeasley31, and the story is dedicated to her.

Disclaimer: All publicly recognisable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. The author is in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended.

Special thanks to my beta reader, JuJuJenn. And thanks to Illyria who did some Brit-picking for me. Any errors, however, are mine alone.

Six

It was ten days before the end of the school year. Snape had spent three exhausting days trying to cram enough information into the heads of his fifth-year students to enable most of them to at least squeak out an 'Acceptable' on their O.W.L.s. In spite of his efforts, he was convinced that at least three students, including one from his own House, would fail. Because he only accepted the best students into his N.E.W.T. class, he was more optimistic about the seventh-years, but he'd spent a lot of time revising with them, as well.

He'd missed dinner to oversee a final revision with the three students most in need of help. He doubted it would make a difference, but at least he knew he had given it his best effort.

He ordered a bowl of soup from a house-elf, and while he waited for it to be delivered, he picked up one of Lupin's books.

He was hungry, he was exhausted, and he was guilty of doing exactly what he'd warned Hermione against the first day she'd begun working with his books. He'd told her that people who were tired and hungry made mistakes and overlooked things, and he very nearly had.

The book he'd picked up wasn't really a book; it was actually the journal of a wizard who'd been indentured to one of his father's debtors. In exchange for the forgiveness of a gambling debt in the sum of thirteen Galleons, the young wizard was forced into three years of service as scribe and accountant for the man to whom the money was owed. He kept a detailed journal of all the goings-on in the house in which he was a virtual prisoner.

According to Galen, the author of the journal, the wizard who had become his master was a practitioner of the Dark Arts who specialised in creating curses that caused painful death. He would practice these curses on the animals he hunted in the forest that was part of his estate. The man would frequently invite his friends to join him on these hunts.

He skimmed over the account of a hunt that Galen had been forced to attend. Galen was, apparently, a peaceful soul and didn't enjoy hunting.

Snape closed his eyes and rubbed them wearily. Galen may have been forced to be a scribe, but his handwriting was small, cramped, and very difficult to read. Not to mention that the style and word usage were archaic.

He almost missed it.

Snape was about to put the journal aside when a sentence he'd read and passed over suddenly leapt to the forefront of his mind. He forced himself to go back to the beginning of the section he'd skimmed over and read every word carefully.

And there it was. Galen had chronicled a curse that his master had used to kill a wild boar.

My master did raise his staff and point it at the beast. A bolt of orange flame did issue from his staff, and when it struck the beast, it did bellow as its skin burst into flames. In moments the animal was dead. The stench of burning hair and smouldering flesh did cause me to retch most horribly.

"Very vivid description, Galen," Snape muttered to himself, "but what was the bloody incantation your master used?"

My master turned to me and did mock me most cruelly for my weakness. He raised his staff again and pointed it at me. His companions urged him to cast the spell. They were in a blood lust that the death of a mere beast had not satisfied. I huddled on the ground and waited to hear the words that would bring forth the orange flame.

Before my master could act, there was a great commotion nearby. The mate of the beast he had killed had come. The second beast gored one of my master's companions, and my master quickly turned and cast 'kaiomai sarka' on the second beast. I fled the forest and returned to my ...

Snape stopped reading. He had it. He had the incantation. It would need to be tested, of course, but he was sure this was the curse that Bellatrix had used on Hermione. Bellatrix had obviously had access to the Black library at Grimmauld Place in the years before her cousin Sirius had inherited the house and turned the books over to Remus Lupin.

If they could recreate the curse, there was a chance of creating a counter-curse. He would need to get Filius involved. To do that, he would have to obtain Hermione's permission. He also wanted Potter and Weasley to be involved with the testing of the curse and the development of a counter-curse. As irritating a brat as he'd been, Potter had matured into a powerful wizard, and Weasley had a knack for strategy, as he'd so ably demonstrated during the Final Battle. He could, perhaps, think like Bellatrix when it was necessary. Besides, there was a deep bond of affection between the three of them; Hermione would need their encouragement and support during what was sure to be a trying and frustrating time.

His hunger and exhaustion forgotten, Snape went to his desk and penned a note to Potter. As they'd previously agreed upon, he Flooed the missive directly to Potter's flat. It was nearly ten o'clock, but he wasn't surprised when Potter's head appeared in his fire a few minutes after he'd sent the message.

"May I come through, Professor?" Potter asked.

"Yes, of course, Potter. That's why I sent you the note," Snape replied.

Harry stepped through the hearth and stood, brushing soot from his jeans and t-shirt.

"Sorry about the mess," Harry said.

"An unavoidable consequence of Flooing," Snape said. "The house-elves will take care of it."

"Ron will be coming through in a few minutes. He had to Apparate back to the Burrow to use the Floo there. He doesn't fit in the electric fire in our apartment."

"Yes, I remember that minor detail. He'd rather be tall."

Before Harry could comment, Snape's Floo activated again.

"Professor Snape, it's Ron Weasley. Can I come through?"

"I don't know, Weasley, can you?"

"Isn't that what I just asked you?" Ron said in a puzzled tone.

Snape shook his head, and Harry grinned.

"You may come through, if you can," Snape said.

A few minutes later, the three of them were huddled over the journal that had yielded the information they had been seeking for so long.

"We'll need to cast the curse to make sure it's the same one," Harry said.

"I agree, but I think there is little doubt this is it. See the incantation?" Snape pointed. "It's Greek. The literal translation is 'burn flesh.' Miss Granger stated that she believed the curse Bellatrix cast was orange. She remembered it because she'd never seen an orange curse."

"Neither have I," said Harry.

"I've never even heard of a curse that's orange," Ron added.

"Nor have I," Snape said. "Yet Galen clearly states that a 'bolt of orange flame' accompanied the curse."

"Let's hope he's right," Harry said.

Snape's soup, which had been delivered while he was writing the note to Harry, had gone cold. He was about to cast a warming charm on it when a house-elf popped in carrying a tray.

"I has brought you fresh soup, Professor Snape," said the elf as he set the tray down.

"Thank you, Dobby," Snape said. "I got distracted."

"Hello, Dobby," Harry said.

"Harry Potter!" Dobby cried out. "Oh, Harry Potter, Dobby has missed you so much!"

Large tears leaked from Dobby's eyes and rolled down his cheeks.

"I have a feeling you'll be seeing quite a bit of me for a while," Harry said.

"Is you be wanting anything, Harry Potter?" Dobby asked. "Dobby can bring you some pumpkin juice or some treacle tarts."

"Oy, Dobby, I'll take a treacle tart," Ron chimed in.

"Pumpkin juice would be good," Harry agreed. "You can't get pumpkin juice in London. And a bowl of that soup would be nice, too. It smells great."

"Dobby will be right back." With a snap of his fingers, he disappeared.

"Didn't you have dinner, Professor?" Harry asked as he watched Snape pick up his soup spoon.

"I was revising a few of my fifth-years. O.W.L.s start tomorrow," Snape said.

Ron very nearly shuddered. "I remember those. Horrible, just horrible."

"As much as it pains me to admit it," Snape said, "you two were not the worst dunderheads ever to sit in my classroom."

Before Harry or Ron could comment, Dobby was back with another tray, this one much larger than the one that had held Snape's soup.

Dobby put the tray down and then lifted the cover to reveal a pitcher of pumpkin juice, a pot of tea, a plate filled with treacle tarts, two more bowls of soup, and a dish of raspberry trifle.

For a few minutes, there was only the sound of spoons clinking into bowls as the three wizards ate their soup. Harry poured pumpkin juice for Ron and himself. Snape filled his cup from the tea pot, and the soothing scent of lemon balm filled the air. When the soup bowls were empty, Ron picked up one of the treacle tarts and took a bite.

"I'd forgotten how good these are," he said, remembering to swallow before talking.

"Did you gentlemen miss dinner, as well?" Snape asked as he watched Harry scoop out a portion of the raspberry trifle.

"We ate," Harry said.

"I never would have guessed," Snape said in his driest tone.

"It was Ron's turn to cook," Harry said without further explanation.

Snape just arched a brow.

"I hate to cook even more than Hermione does," Ron said.

"Tonight we had kippers on toast," Harry said, and he would have sworn that Snape turned green.

"Have some more trifle, Mr. Potter," Snape offered.

When Ron and Harry stood to leave an hour later, the three of them had formulated a plan to begin testing the curse.

Though they all hated the idea, they recognised the necessity of using animals for testing purposes.

"Muggle researchers do it all the time," Harry said. "At least we'll *Stupefy* them first so they won't feel anything."

"We will work here," Snape said. "I will ask Hagrid to trap some of the more pesky creatures from the Forbidden Forest. Though I would like to get started right away, we'd best wait until the students leave for the summer. It's only ten more days; nine really, since today is just about over."

"Are you going to tell Hermione?" Harry asked.

"If this is the correct curse, Miss Granger will need to work with us to develop the counter-curse. We will also need to bring Filius Flitwick into our confidences. I am reluctant, however, to speak to her until we are certain."

"Ron and I are both due a holiday from the Ministry. We'll request time beginning in nine days. We'll come back here then to test the curse. Once we know we've got it, we'll tell Hermione."

"Is that acceptable to you, Mr. Weasley?" Snape asked.

"As much as I'd like to go wake her right now to tell her, I understand why we should wait. I won't say anything to her until we're sure."

"In that case, gentlemen, I will see you in nine days. Right now, I am going to bed. I trust you can see yourselves to the Floo?"

"Good night, Professor Snape," the two younger wizards said.

Snape just nodded and turned toward his bedroom. He fell across his bed fully clothed and didn't even hear the Floo activate.

The next nine days, although both busy and stressful, seemed to drag by. Snape was on edge and was even more sarcastic and unapproachable than usual. The one bright spot was that the three fifth-years who'd seemed likely to fail their Potions O.W.L. actually managed to pass. One of them, though not his Slytherin, had even earned an 'Exceeds Expectations'.

It was with relief and anticipation that he watched the Hogwarts Express chug out of Hogsmeade Station, carrying the students away for the summer holidays.

Harry and Ron arrived late that same afternoon. There had been a flurry of communications between the three wizards during the past nine days as they made preparations to test the Pulpa Adustum Curse.

The two young Aurors had arranged to have a full six weeks off. The head of the Aurors' Office had balked at first, but when Harry had offered to take the time without pay, he had finally agreed. Harry had also made arrangements, privately, for Ron to continue to receive his regular salary while he was gone.

With Minerva's permission, Snape had spoken to Hagrid about obtaining some test subjects. Hagrid had been reluctant at first. He was a gentle soul and had never met a beast he didn't like. Snape had explained the situation, without actually naming Hermione as the victim. Once Hagrid understood the importance of the experiments, he had trapped a number of animals for Snape's use. He was keeping them in secure cages in a remote part of the forest. He'd shown Snape the spot, but had told Snape he didn't want to be present when the 'wee beasties' were sacrificed.

"I suggest we get started immediately," Snape said as he led Harry and Ron through the Forbidden Forest to the area where the test animals were being kept.

When they arrived at the spot, Snape turned to the two younger wizards.

"We will start on one of the feral rats that Hagrid has captured. Mr. Weasley, grab one of them and put it in a cage by itself. Mr. Potter, you will cast the Stunning Spell. Once the animal is unconscious, I will attempt the Pulpa Adustum Curse."

Ron immediately went to a cage that contained a number of rats. He opened the top of the cage and pointed his wand down into it.

"*Accio*," he said, and one of the rats seemed to leap into his hand.

He dropped the rat into another cage.

Harry pointed his wand at the rat.

"*Stupefy*," he muttered, and the rat fell over sideways, unconscious.

"Stand aside, gentlemen," Snape said. Harry and Ron quickly moved to the side and slightly behind Snape. Neither of them wanted to be caught in the nimbus of the spell Snape was about to cast.

"*Kaiomai sarka*," Snape said as he aimed his wand at the unconscious rat.

None of them expected what happened next. A brilliant flash of orange light seemed to explode from the tip of Snape's wand. When it hit the rat, the unfortunate creature burst immediately into flames. Seconds later, the only thing left of the rat was a small pile of smouldering ashes.

"What was *that*?" Ron asked.

"Bloody hell," Harry said.

"Fuck it!" Snape snarled.

Harry turned to Snape. "Bellatrix Lestrange modified the curse, didn't she?"

"It would appear so," Snape replied. "We will continue the testing. Perhaps the relatively small size of the target is responsible for the unexpected consequence."

"Want to try a ferret?" Harry asked.

Snape nodded.

Ron and Harry repeated their tasks, and soon one of the ferrets was unconscious, awaiting Snape's curse.

"*Kaiomai sarka*," Snape said again.

The result was the same.

"We could try it on a Nogtail," Ron said. "Hagrid managed to capture two of them."

"No," Snape said.

"Why not?" Harry asked.

"It is obvious that this is not the curse that Bellatrix Lestrange used on Miss Granger."

Snape held up a hand to halt the protest he saw forming on Harry's lips.

"There are similarities. The colour of the curse is correct. The effect is different, however. Miss Granger's skin was not burned to this degree."

"But she wasn't hit directly. Maybe you should try aiming the curse to the side of the target," Ron said.

"Your suggestion has merit, Mr. Weasley," Snape said. "Prepare another specimen, another ferret, if you will. I don't think the rats have enough mass to be viable test subjects."

Two hours later, the three wizards walked back to the castle more discouraged than any of them wanted to admit.

In spite of repeated attempts, they had been unable to duplicate Hermione's injury on any of the animals they tested. They had tried casting the curse to the side of the animals and even aiming it over their heads. Then they had tried casting the curse from different distances. The results were all the same: if any portion of the curse hit the target, the animal burst into flames and was incinerated.

"Now what, Professor?" Ron asked.

"Now we call in reinforcements," Snape replied.

"Professor Flitwick?" Harry guessed.

"Yes. We need to have him watch us cast the curse. He will also need to see Miss Granger."

"That means we have to tell Hermione what we've discovered so far."

"Yes."

"She's going to throw a wobbly," Ron said.

Snape threw him a questioning look.

"She'll be pissed off that we've kept this information from her until now," Ron said.

"Then I suppose we'll just have to bear the brunt of her displeasure," Snape replied.

"She'll take the information better from you, I think," Harry said.

"No," Ron said, "we need to tell her, Harry. We can use the fact that she kept her injury from us for so long to deflect her anger."

Snape smirked. He'd been right. Weasley was a brilliant strategist. "I don't envy you the task, gentlemen."

"Thanks a lot," Harry muttered.

"You're not getting off that easy ... sir," Ron said.

"Oh?"

"We'll tell her what we've found out. You'll have to convince her to show Professor Flitwick her injury."

Snape grimaced, but agreed.

"When do you want her here?" Harry asked.

"As soon as possible. Tomorrow, if it can be arranged. I will speak to Filius tonight."

"We'll go talk to Hermione right now. We'll bring her here first thing in the morning," Ron said.

By this time, the three of them had made it back to the Apparition area outside the castle.

"I'll see all of you here tomorrow," Snape said.

The two younger wizards just waved, and then they both disappeared.

Snape walked back into the castle. He went to his quarters to retrieve Galen's journal, and then he made his way to Ravenclaw Tower. He knocked on the door to Filius's private quarters.

"Severus," Flitwick squeaked.

"Filius, I need your help," Snape said.

Two hours later, the diminutive Charms master knew as much about the Pulpa Adustum Curse as Snape did, except for the name of the victim.

"You've presented me with a most intriguing puzzle, Severus," Flitwick said.

He and Snape were sitting in front of Flitwick's fire, sipping glasses of Firewhisky.

"I hope it's one you'll be able to help me solve."

"How soon will I be able to see the victim? It will be impossible for me to make any kind of assessment until I actually see the injury."

"Some friends of the woman will be bringing her to Hogwarts tomorrow. I will then have to try to convince her to allow you to examine her. She is understandably reluctant to expose herself to people she does not know well. She hadn't even told her family until earlier this year, more than five years after the injury occurred."

"A woman, then," Flitwick said with a small sigh. "Even more horrible because women tend to be more concerned about their physical appearance than men are."

"Probably because men tend to judge women based on their physical appearance rather than on more lasting qualities such as intelligence and character," Snape replied.

"Shallow bastards, aren't we?" Flitwick said.

Snape chuckled. "Indeed, we have all been guilty of that at one time or another."

Flitwick turned serious. "You must convince Miss Granger to allow me to examine her."

"I never said it was Miss Granger," Snape said, carefully keeping his tone neutral.

"Harry Potter's owl is well known here at Hogwarts. Then there was the delivery of a large box of books. And Miss Granger has seldom been seen since the Final Battle. It wasn't that difficult to puzzle out."

"I hope the counter-curse will be as easy a problem for you to solve. She belongs here, in the wizarding world, using her gifts properly."

"I promise you, Severus, that I'll do everything I can to give her the opportunity to do so."

Snape nodded and then stood to leave.

"Thank you, Filius."

When Snape returned to his quarters, there was a parchment sitting on his hearth. He picked it up and unrolled it.

Professor Snape,

*The three of us will arrive at Hogwarts at nine o'clock tomorrow morning. And we were right she was **hacked off!***

Harry Potter

The following morning at nine o'clock, Snape was waiting at the Apparition point outside the gates.

He watched the three friends pop into existence. Harry had his arm across Hermione's shoulder, and she had her arms around his waist. Apparently, she didn't feel confident enough in her Apparition skills to attempt the journey from London to Hogwarts on her own.

When they steadied themselves, Hermione stepped away from Harry. As soon as Hermione noticed Snape watching them, she approached him.

Her chin was thrust out belligerently, and she had a stormy look in her eyes.

From behind her, Ron grinned at Snape, and Harry just shook his head.

It was apparent that her ire had not abated overnight.

"I'd like a word with you, Professor Snape," she said as soon as she was clear of the circle of stones that marked the Apparition area.

"Just one?" Snape asked with a small smile.

"Don't think you can charm your way out of this," Hermione said as she grabbed his arm and began pulling him toward the castle.

"Me? 'Charm my way out of anything? Surely, you have me confused with someone else, Miss Granger," he said as he allowed her to drag him along.

"I've already given Harry and Ron a piece of my mind," Hermione said.

"And you still have some left over for me? I'm impressed."

Hermione stopped short at that. She turned and glared at him.

He looked back at her ingenuously.

She took a deep breath and blew it out. "I'm being puerile, aren't I?" she asked.

"Your anger is understandable," he replied. "You should try to remember, however, that your friends were trying to protect you."

They had resumed walking, Hermione holding on to Snape's arm as they traversed the path that led to the back of the castle. They would enter through Snape's private entrance. Harry and Ron would enter through the front door and meet them at Snape's office. This would keep Hermione's presence a secret from any of the staff who might be wandering around the castle.

"And what was your motivation for not telling me?" Hermione wanted to know.

"It was the same. I saw no point in giving you false hope. You've endured enough disappointments over the last few years," he replied.

They had reached the back wall of the castle. Snape drew his wand and tapped the bricks to open the hidden corridor. Hermione stepped through. Snape stepped in behind her and lit the tip of his wand with a muttered, "*Lumos*."

As they moved down the dim corridor, the bricks closed behind them.

When they got to the end of the corridor, Snape tapped the bricks in front of them.

"It will be a tight fit, if you recall," Snape said.

"Yes, I remember. The pass-through wasn't designed for two people."

The opening formed in front of them, and Hermione stepped into the small room. She moved as far forward as she could, and Snape stepped in behind her.

As Snape stepped into the tiny pass-through, he could feel Hermione's buttocks pressing back against him. She was wearing trainers, rather than high heels, so it was his thighs, rather than his groin, she was pressed against. His traitorous body seemed unable to make the distinction, however, and he felt himself beginning to respond to her nearness.

If Hermione was aware of his burgeoning erection, she didn't indicate it by word or action. She merely hunched forward a bit, trying to make enough room for the door behind them to close properly and the door in front of them to open.

The door behind them stayed open.

"You've put on some weight, Miss Granger," Snape said. His head was bent over hers, and she could feel his breath against her ear.

"You're the one who said I was too thin," she replied.

"You were. Now, however, what was once merely a tight squeeze appears to be impossible."

"Back out," Hermione said. "I'll turn around, and we can try again."

Although reluctant to put himself in a face-to-face position with her, he could see no other option. If this didn't work, they would have to go back through the corridor and enter the castle another way.

Snape gritted his teeth and backed out into the corridor. Hermione turned inside the pass-through, putting her back against the wall that would open into Snape's private storeroom. Snape stepped back inside. Hermione put her arms around his waist and drew him closer, pressing against him. Her breasts flattened against his chest, her thighs against his.

Snape drew in a sharp breath as he felt the rounded softness of her belly pressed against him. There was no way she could not be aware of his raging hard-on.

Instead of pushing him away, as would have expected her to, she dropped her hands to his buttocks and pulled him even closer.

He stifled a groan.

Mercifully, the door behind them closed, and the one in front of them opened. They very nearly stumbled to the floor as the narrow pass-through released them.

Snape released her and jumped back away from her as quickly as he could.

"My ... my apologies, Miss Granger," he stammered.

"It's all right, sir," she replied in a quiet voice. "I understand that it was the circumstances you were reacting to and not me."

Snape wanted to pull her into his arms and show her that it bloody well was more than the 'circumstances' that had caused his reaction. He knew that was impossible, however. She was a former student; she was in a delicate and vulnerable emotional and physical state. He could not *would not* take advantage of her in any way.

"I apologise for ... for touching your ... your ..." Now it was Hermione's turn to stammer.

"My arse," Snape supplied the word with a smile as he watched her blush.

"Yes, well, it seemed that it was that slightly protruding bit of your anatomy was preventing the door from closing."

"I've always thought my arse was rather flat," Snape replied.

"Apparently, it's rounder than you thought," Hermione said, still blushing slightly.

"As intriguing a subject as my arse undoubtedly is," Snape said and watched as Hermione blushed again, "there is something much more important I need to discuss with you. Let's go into my quarters. I'll make you some tea."

Snape was glad to diffuse the situation with a bit of humour.

"Do you have coffee?" Hermione asked. "Ron and Harry woke me up so early this morning, I didn't have a chance to have any."

"Have you eaten breakfast?" Snape asked.

"Harry brought me an egg sandwich thingy he got at a donut shop, but it looked disgusting. I couldn't eat it," she replied, "so I gave it to Ron."

"A wise choice," Snape said. "I'll order you some porridge and some proper eggs to go with your coffee."

They had arrived at Snape's quarters, and he summoned a house-elf to place Hermione's breakfast order.

"Sit," he said pointing to the table.

Hermione sat.

The food was delivered very quickly, and Hermione began to eat. She didn't know how Harry could stand the terrible food he ate. Of course, he'd been half-starved for most of his early childhood, so perhaps he wasn't as particular as he could be about what he ate.

Snape sipped at a cup of coffee and watched Hermione eat. She had so much more enthusiasm for food than she'd had just six months ago. He enjoyed watching her eat. He gave a little mental snort as he realised that he enjoyed watching her work, he enjoyed watching her read bloody hell, he enjoyed watching her, period. His erection, which had subsided, surged back to life. He shifted in his chair and crossed his legs. Damn, he had to get his mind on other things!

Hermione finished her plate of scrambled eggs and sat back with her cup of coffee.

"Oh, that's better," she said. "Thank you."

"Now that you've had your coffee, there is something important we must discuss," Snape said.

"Harry told me that he found some books at Grimmauld Place."

"Yes."

Snape then went on to tell Hermione of the weeks spent searching through the books and of how he had nearly missed the information in Galen's journal.

"May I see it?" she asked.

"Of course," Snape said. He stood and retrieved the journal. He found the page with the reference to the flesh burning curse and handed her the opened journal.

She read intently for a few minutes. He saw her go back and re-read the description of the curse.

When she lifted her head from the journal, there were tears in her eyes.

"This is the curse, isn't it?" she asked.

"We thought so," Snape replied.

"You don't think so now?"

"We tested it several times. The colour of the curse is correct. It's orange. The effects of the curse seem to be different, however. We could not duplicate your injury on any of the animals we tested."

"That's it, then," Hermione said, closing the journal firmly. Her voice was shaky with suppressed emotion. "It's over."

"Only if you want it to be, Miss Granger; I'm not quite ready to capitulate."

"What's left?"

"I would like to have Filius Flitwick examine you," Snape said.

"Why? So he can cluck his tongue, shake his head, and tell me what a pity it is that I've ended up in such a state? No, thank you."

She got up and began pacing.

"You give him far too little credit. I want him to examine you so that when he watches me cast the curse on the test animals, he can try to determine why it doesn't have the same effect on them as it did on you.

"The curse in this journal has been modified. If Bellatrix Lestrange could modify it, then Filius should be able to figure out how she did it and duplicate the modified curse."

"What good will that do?" Hermione demanded.

"Possibly nothing, but do you really want to abandon your efforts without exhausting every available option? There can be no counter-curse unless we know the exact curse that was used."

Still Hermione hesitated.

Snape made one last appeal.

"Do you remember when we met at Grant and Cutler last year?"

"Yes."

"I chided you for wasting your training and education, and you became angry with me."

"I remember," Hermione replied.

"You dropped your glamour to show me your injury and said that it had been the result of a 'parting shot' from Bellatrix Lestrange."

"Is that what I said? I don't remember my exact words."

"I do, and that *is* what you said. Now, I implore you, Miss Granger, to do everything in your power to parry that 'parting shot'! You did not choose to become a victim. If you do not make this attempt, however, you are choosing to remain one."

Hermione glared at him. "You're still not sugar-coating things, are you?"

"Would you really want me to?" he asked.

Hermione drew a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"No. No, I wouldn't."

"What is your decision, Miss Granger? Filius has agreed to give up his holiday in Florence to work with us on this. If you aren't willing, we should tell him right away before he cancels his reservations."

"You've already spoken to Professor Flitwick about my injury?"

"I spoke with him about the curse. He guessed your identity."

"How?"

"Do you really believe that your absence from the wizarding world for the past six years has gone unnoticed? You are one of the Golden Trio and a hero of the war. Potter and Weasley have had their pictures splashed across the front pages of *The Daily Prophet* and *The Quibbler* at least weekly since the war ended. Don't you think yours would have been, as well, if anyone had known where you were? Your continued absence, coupled with my questions to him, led Filius to logically conclude that you were the injured party.

"Now, what is your decision?" Snape asked again.

"Well, since Professor Flitwick already knows I'm injured, I don't suppose there's really any reason for not showing him, is there?"

"I'll Floo him right now," Snape said.

"Afraid I'll change my mind?" Hermione asked.

"Not at all. I just don't want to waste any time finding a counter-curse."

Three minutes later, Professor Flitwick stepped through the emerald flames in Snape's fireplace and onto the hearth.

"Thank you for coming so quickly, Filius," Snape said. "You remember Miss Granger?"

"Of course, of course," Professor Flitwick said in his squeaky little voice. "The very first student in her class to master *Wingardium Leviosa*."

Professor Flitwick bent over her hand in a courtly bow. "How are you, my dear?"

"I've been better, Professor Flitwick," Hermione said.

"And, hopefully, you'll be better again," Professor Flitwick replied. "Now, will you kindly drop your glamour and allow me to assess your injury?"

Hermione sat on the sofa, and Professor Flitwick stood on a small stool he had transfigured. When she let her glamour fade, he leaned over her, peering through his spectacles.

She had been at least partly right. He did cluck his tongue and shake his head, but other than an occasionally muttered, "Diabolical bitch, simply diabolical," he made no comment as he probed gently at her scalp, her cheek, and her shoulder.

"I'm sorry I have to ask, my dear," he said a moment later, "but I really need know how extensive your injury is. Does it cover your entire breast?"

Hermione blushed. "Not quite. It stops about an inch above my ... my nipple. Do you ... do you need to see it?"

"Breast tissue has a different density than the tissue on your scalp and face. It would be helpful if you would allow me a peek. Would you be more comfortable if Madam Pomfrey was present? I believe she is still in the castle."

"I ... I don't suppose it matters," she said. She began unbuttoning her blouse.

"I'll be outside," Snape said hastily.

"Please don't go, Professor Snape," Hermione said in a pleading tone. "Believe it or not, I'll be more comfortable with both of you here."

Snape just nodded.

Hermione finished unbuttoning her blouse. She reached behind her and unhooked her bra. She let the cup of her bra fall forward, exposing the lumpy-looking flesh. She was careful to keep her nipple covered. She told herself that she wasn't any more exposed than she would be wearing a swim suit or a low-cut evening gown. She looked down, keeping her eyes focused on a spot of soot on the rug. She felt Professor Flitwick touch her breast right above the lowest area of damaged flesh.

"Thank you, Miss Granger," he said a moment later.

Hermione quickly refastened her bra and buttoned her blouse. Only when she was done did she lift her eyes from the floor. That was when she discovered that Snape was staring at her.

She lifted her chin. Snape flushed and looked away.

Snape was mortified. He'd been staring at her exposed breast like a randy teenager. That was bad enough, but the fact that she'd caught him at it made it even worse. He'd simply been unable to look away. And he'd also been unable to prevent the erection the sight of her breast had produced. What kind of perverted bastard was he to become aroused by the sight of her damaged breast?

"Severus, you must cast the charm for me," Flitwick said, unaware of the interplay between the room's other two occupants.

Snape cleared his throat and pushed his self-recrimination to the back of his mind. "Ah, yes, of course, Filius. We'll need to go to the Forbidden Forest. Hagrid has some test subjects caged in a remote area."

Snape turned toward the door, and Flitwick followed him. Hermione stood and walked toward the door, as well.

"There's no need for you to accompany us, Miss Granger," Snape said, not quite meeting her eyes.

"I want to see it," she said.

"It may stir up unpleasant memories."

"Believe me, sir; my memories can't be any more 'unpleasant' than they already are."

"Miss Granger *should* come," Professor Flitwick said. "Seeing the curse being cast may actually help her to remember something helpful to us."

Hermione arched a brow at Snape as if to say, 'See? I told you so!'

"If you faint," Snape said in a sour voice, "I'm not carrying you back to the castle." He felt the faint tingle of the promise he'd made to Albus teasing at the back of his mind, but he ignored it.

"I won't faint," Hermione insisted.

"Very well, then," Snape said. "I'm going to cast a Disillusionment Charm on you so that we don't have to use my private entrance. It will be quicker that way."

Not to mention the fact that I won't have to feel your body pressed against mine, he thought and wondered why that solution hadn't occurred to him sooner.

She just nodded.

Snape cast the charm over her, and she walked out between him and Professor Flitwick.

Hermione didn't faint, but it was a near thing. She stood next to Harry and Ron who had joined them when they left Snape's quarters. She watched as Snape cast the Pulpa Adustum Curse over and over again on a number of rats and ferrets, always with the same result. The animals burst into flames, and in moments they were nothing but piles of smouldering ashes.

"You can see, Filius, that this is not the effect the curse had on Miss Granger," Snape said.

"Indeed not," Professor Flitwick said. "And you tried from greater distances?"

"Yes," Snape said.

"She was only about ten metres away from me when she threw the curse," Hermione interjected.

"We tried from nearly twice that distance with the same result," Snape said.

Flitwick turned to Hermione.

"I know it was a difficult moment, Miss Granger, but did you notice anything about the curse that seems different from the one Professor Snape is casting?"

Hermione closed her eyes as she thought back to that moment.

"I don't think the curse-light was as deeply coloured as this one appears. It was orange, but not as dark an orange. Also, the curse itself seemed to be more ... more diffused, if that makes any sense," Hermione said.

Flitwick's eyes lit up a bit. "It was less concentrated, less intense?"

"Yes, exactly."

"It is obvious the curse has been modified," he said turning and speaking to

Snape. "I will need some time to figure out how."

"Do you think you'll be able to do it, sir?" Ron asked.

Flitwick looked up at Ron and fixed him with a penetrating stare.

"At the risk of sounding immodest, Mr. Weasley," he said in his thin, piping voice, "Bellatrix Lestrange's charms work is no match for mine."

Seven

Chapter 7 of 10

Hermione Granger has been absent from the wizarding world for more than five years. When Severus Snape runs into her in a Muggle bookstore, he discovers why. An old promise made to Albus Dumbledore prompts Snape to offer his help to his former student.

Author's Notes: This was written for the HG/SS holiday exchange on Live Journal. This was the prompt I chose: #71. Fic: Post-war Hermione and Severus are both doomed to spend Xmas alone until they run into each other in Diagon Alley or London. How, why, and what happens next is up to you. Happy ending, please. Any rating. This prompt was submitted by GinnyWeasley31, and the story is dedicated to her.

Disclaimer: All publicly recognisable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. The author is in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended.

Special thanks to my beta reader, JuJuJenn. And thanks to Illyria who did some Brit-picking for me. Any errors, however, are mine alone.

Seven

The next several weeks passed slowly. Every other day or so, Flitwick and Snape, along with Harry, Ron, and Hermione, would make their way to the Forbidden Forest to test another of Professor Flitwick's permutations of the Pulpa Adustum Curse.

Each failure was more discouraging than the last. Even Professor Flitwick's ebullience seemed to be fading.

The five of them were sitting at the table in Snape's quarters on the evening before Harry and Ron would have to go back to work. They had just returned from the Forbidden Forest after yet another unsuccessful test of the curse. They had all given their dinner order to Dobby and were waiting for the food to be delivered.

"I don't understand why Bellatrix Lestrange would have even used this curse," Ron grumbled. He was holding a glass of pumpkin juice in his hands, twisting it round and round.

"It used to be an Unforgivable, Ron," Harry said. "She was a master of the Unforgivables. Maybe she just wanted to be able to say she knew and used all of them." He took a sip from his own glass of pumpkin juice.

"It may have once been an Unforgivable," Snape said, "but it was certainly not an efficient one."

"It kills," Harry interjected. "That seems rather efficient to me."

"It is *messy*," Snape insisted, "and although death occurs swiftly, it is not instantaneous as with the Killing Curse."

"And if she just wanted to cause pain, the Cruciatus works quite efficaciously for that," Hermione added. She had a cup of tea in front of her, but hadn't yet drunk from it.

"Yeah, but you've got to *maintain* the Cruciatus for its effects to last. As soon as you release it, the pain starts to fade," Ron said. Suddenly, there was a bright gleam in his eye.

"What if she wanted to throw a curse that would cause a lot of pain, but would kill only slowly, if at all? What if she really wanted a curse that would keep causing pain for a long time without the caster having to maintain it?"

"But Madam Pomfrey was able to stop the pain relatively quickly," Hermione said. "Bellatrix would have known that anyone with basic medical skills would be able to stop the pain."

Ron looked crestfallen for a minute. Then he brightened again.

"Well, what if she was trying to cast a curse that would cause disfigurement? The kind of disfigurement that a simple *Finite Incantatem* wouldn't be able to reverse?"

"Oh, well done, Mr. Weasley! Bloody well done!" Professor Flitwick squealed.

"Severus, do you have a Greek dictionary handy? I have one in my quarters but if you have one ..." Flitwick was pushing his cup of tea away, making room on the table for the book.

"Of course," Snape said as he got to his feet and moved to one of his bookcases. He found the book he was looking for and opened it on the table in front of Flitwick.

Professor Flitwick started flipping the pages of the dictionary back and forth.

"I need a piece of parchment and a quill," he muttered, never lifting his eyes from the book.

As soon as Snape brought the requested items, Flitwick started scribbling furiously.

When Dobby and another house-elf appeared a few minutes later, Flitwick was done. He closed the dictionary, and Snape removed it from the table.

No one spoke as Dobby set the food out on the table, but as soon as the two house-elves were gone, Snape turned to Flitwick.

"Well?" he asked.

"These need to be tested as soon as possible," Flitwick said.

"It's too late tonight," Snape said. "The Forbidden Forest is not the place to be after dark, especially the spot we've been using."

"Ron and I have to go back to work tomorrow," Harry said. "If you want to wait till late afternoon, we can come back then."

"I can cast the Stunning Spell," Hermione said. "All I've been doing is standing around watching the rest of you."

"Are you sure, Hermione?" Ron asked.

"I don't want to have to wait. I can do it."

"That's settled, then," Snape said.

"I hate to ask you, sir," Hermione said, turning to Snape, "but could you come and get me tomorrow morning? I'm not sure I'm up to Apparating so far. I've been coming in with Harry or Ron each day."

Things had been tense between Snape and Hermione since the day she had discovered him staring at her while Professor Flitwick was examining the injury to her breast. Since then, he seemed unable to meet her eye, and he spoke to her only when he had no other choice. The rapport that they had established was gone. His sense of humour had evaporated. Ron had commented upon it, and even Harry had said that Snape was starting to act like a git again.

Snape scowled at her, but nodded tersely.

"Thank you," Hermione said quietly and then bent over her dinner plate, toying with her food, but eating little.

Snape watched Hermione push the food around her plate. He had noticed over the past six weeks that she was losing weight again. There were dark circles under her eyes, indicating that she wasn't sleeping well, either. He knew it was his fault, but he wasn't sure how to put things right.

He knew that things had started to fall apart the first day of the summer holidays. All of his behaviour that day had been despicable. He had let her nearness in the pass-through affect him to the point where she hadn't been able to ignore his erection. Then, he had leered at her like a ... a dirty old man!

He should have apologised to her, he knew, but instead he'd simply turned away, ignoring the hurt in her eyes. Once delayed, the apology became impossible.

He sighed and pushed away his own plate of uneaten food. The situation was becoming more uncomfortable with each passing day.

When Dobby came to clear the dishes away, Professor Flitwick got to his feet.

"I'll be returning to my quarters now, Severus. I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night, Filius," Snape said.

Hermione, Ron, and Harry said goodnight to the tiny Professor and watched him step into the Floo and disappear.

"We'd better get going, too, Hermione," Ron said. "It's back to work tomorrow for us."

"Good night, Professor," Hermione said.

"Good night, Miss Granger," Snape replied. He nodded at Harry and Ron.

They nodded back, and the three young people stepped through Snape's door and into the corridor. They made their way out of the castle and to the Apparition point.

"What's up with him, lately?" Ron asked.

"I don't know. Just when it seemed he was starting to act like a normal person, he gets all wonky again," Harry said.

"He has a lot on his mind," Hermione said, defending him in spite of the fact that she felt betrayed by the change in his attitude towards her.

"Is that why you're acting all wonky, too?" Ron asked.

"There's nothing wrong with the way I'm acting!" Hermione lashed out, her behaviour disproving her words.

"Yeah, right," Ron muttered.

"Just take me home," Hermione demanded. "I'm not in the mood to fight."

"I've got you," Harry said and dropped an arm across her shoulder. She wrapped her arms around his waist and closed her eyes.

At nine o'clock the next morning, Snape was standing outside Hermione's back door. He'd considered sending her a message saying he couldn't make it. He'd written it and had been about to summon a school owl to deliver it when he'd felt the tingle at the back of his mind. He'd roundly cursed Albus Dumbledore and the thrice-damned promise he'd made, but in the end, he'd thrown the note into the fire and made his way out of the castle and to the Apparition point.

He knocked and waited for Hermione to open the door.

"Come in, Professor Snape," Hermione said as she swung the door open. "I'm almost ready."

Snape stepped through the door and closed it behind him.

He moved toward the refrigerator. Hermione stepped in front of him.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm going to prepare breakfast," he said.

"I ... I've already eaten," she said, not quite meeting his eye.

"Oh? What did you have?" Snape asked.

"Um ... eggs and toast," she said.

Snape opened the lid of the dust bin. "Where are the egg shells?"

"I've already taken the rubbish out."

"You're lying, Miss Granger," Snape hissed. "You haven't eaten this morning, and you didn't eat any dinner last night. You probably haven't had a proper meal in weeks."

"It's none of your business!"

"I made it my business last December," Snape retorted.

"Yes, well you've done enough, Professor Snape. I no longer wish to be a burden to you."

"Did I ever say you were a burden?"

"You haven't had to. Do you think I haven't noticed the way you treat me lately? You loathe me. I'm sure that if Harry and Ron and Professor Flitwick hadn't become involved in my ... my problem, you would have washed your hands of me by now."

"Do not presume to tell me what I think, what I feel, or how I might act under other circumstances. Your *Legilimency* skills are not up to reading *my* mind!"

"I don't need *Legilimency* to recognize that your attitude towards me has changed," Hermione said. "I know you never liked me, but until a few weeks ago it seemed you had at least begun to tolerate me. Now, you don't talk to me. You avoid me. You won't even look at me since ... since ..."

Her voice caught, and she had to draw a deep breath and close her eyes to avoid bursting into tears.

"My behaviour that day was contemptible," Snape said. "I ... I have wanted to apologise, but I didn't know how to bring up the subject without embarrassing you."

Hermione opened her eyes and looked at him. "You wanted to leave the room when Professor Flitwick examined my ... my breast. I should have let you go. If I had, you wouldn't have been repulsed by how ugly I am."

"You think I was *repulsed*?" Snape asked.

"Why else would you begin avoiding me?" She hung her head, blinking rapidly, determined not to cry in front of him.

Snape touched a finger to her chin, urging her head up.

"Look at me," he said. When she lifted her head and met his eyes, he spoke again.

"I've been avoiding you because I didn't want you to know how much I desire you."

"You can't desire me! I ... I'm ugly ..."

"Stop!" he demanded. "You are not ugly. What was done to you is ugly. It was an abomination! The pain and the isolation you have been forced to endure is ugly. The unrealistic attitude of a society that judges people on form instead of substance is ugly. *You* are not ugly."

"And, again, I must remind you not to presume to know what I think or what I feel. *Can* desire you and I do." He paused a moment and then spoke again. "I have since the night we danced at *Le Café du Marché*"

"You have a strange way of showing it," she murmured.

"I knew there was no hope that you could ever reciprocate ..."

"Why would you believe that?"

"You have said that you think yourself ugly. Well, *I know* I am ugly, both inside and out."

"Stop!" she said, echoing his words. "You are *not* ugly. Your childhood was ugly. The way your parents treated you was ugly. The way Lucius Malfoy exploited you was ugly. And yes, your actions in the service of the Dark Lord were ugly. But you realised your mistake and spent years making amends. You have also had to face the attitudes of a society that judges on form, not substance, just as I have."

"I have had to change my perception of you. When I looked beyond the harsh and caustic exterior you present to the world, I found much to admire. Why would you think that I could not desire you just as much as you say you desire me?"

"Miss Granger ..." he began.

"My name is Hermione," she interrupted. "You've never called me Hermione."

Snape looked into her eyes and saw his own longings reflected there.

"I have; you've just never been there to hear me ... Hermione."

"I've never much liked my own name," she said. "You make it sound different, special."

Snape reached out and cupped her cheek in his hand. She leaned into his touch. His thumb stroked her cheek softly.

"This is wrong," he said in a harsh whisper, but he didn't stop.

"Why is it wrong?" she asked as she reached up and cupped his cheek in turn.

"I'm old enough to be your father. You're a former student. You're emotionally vulnerable; I shouldn't be taking advantage of you."

"I'm twenty years younger than you, so I suppose that mathematically you are old enough to be my father, though my father was nearly forty when I was born. Yes, I'm a former student, the emphasis being on the word *former*; I haven't been your student for more than seven years. I don't consider myself emotionally vulnerable at all. I came to terms with what happened to me the day I decided I was going to try to find a cure. Having the support of my parents and my two best friends has been a tremendous boon to me.

"And lastly," she said with a smile, "I hardly think that stroking my cheek would be considered 'taking advantage' of me."

"This might, though," he said.

And then he bent his head toward hers and kissed her.

It was a soft kiss, a gentle kiss, a mere brushing of his lips across hers.

Snape wanted nothing more than to deepen the kiss. He wanted to explore her mouth with his. He wanted to taste her. He wanted to feel her mouth come alive under his. Instead, he lifted his mouth from hers and moved his head back, allowing her to decide where that small kiss would lead.

He watched as Hermione lifted a finger to her lips, as though wanting to discover if she could feel the kiss with her fingertip. Then she smiled and looked up at him.

"That was ... lovely," she said.

Snape gave her a small smile in return. "I thought so, as well."

She reached up and took his face between her two hands, drawing his head down to hers. She fitted her mouth over his, her lips slightly parted.

He put his hands on her waist, but didn't pull her against him. He let her take the initiative. He nearly groaned aloud when he felt the tip of her tongue flick across his bottom lip. He relaxed his jaw and let his lips open a bit, inviting her to explore, if that was her wish. Her tongue moved a bit deeper into his mouth until it touched his. She held it there for a second and then withdrew.

She lifted her lips from his, but her thumb brushed against his bottom lip.

"I ... I never much cared for that kind of kissing before," she said.

"It can be distasteful if not done properly," he agreed.

"I'm glad you know how to do it properly, then," she said in a soft, husky whisper.

She wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her head on his shoulder. He draped his arms around her and held her close.

For the moment, they were content to simply hold each other.

Several minutes later, Hermione lifted her head from Snape's shoulder and tilted it back to smile at him.

"Might I ask a favour of you?" she asked as she used her nails to rub small circles on his back.

"Typical female," Snape said in a mock-sour tone. "The status of our relationship changed a mere five minutes ago, and already you are trying to use your feminine wiles on me."

Her smile grew a bit wider. "Guilty as charged," she said.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Breakfast I'm *starving!*"

Forty minutes later, they were done eating and ready to go to Hogwarts to begin testing the latest version of the curse.

Filius met them in the Forbidden Forest. He was practically jumping up and down with excitement.

"I have a very good feeling about this, Severus," he said. "I spent a good deal of time last night working on these versions of the curse, and I think I've discovered where we were going astray."

"I cast the curse exactly as Galen claims to have heard it," Snape said.

"Yes, yes, you did," Flitwick agreed, "but when Bellatrix Lestrange modified it, she changed the basic incantation.

"*Kaiomai sarka*, which is the incantation you used, is Greek. It means, literally, *burn flesh*, and when you cast it, that's exactly what it did. The animals burst into flames. Now, depending on the size of the subject, death was either instantaneous or it occurred within seconds. An animal the size of a boar might have lived for two or three minutes. A human being would probably be dead in a minute or so.

"Miss Granger did not burst into flames when the curse was cast upon her. As a matter of fact, she wasn't *burned* at all. Instead, it appears her flesh was melted, not burned. This is a subtle, but important, distinction."

Professor Flitwick reached into an inside pocket of his robes and brought out a slip of parchment.

"Here are a number of incantations I would like you to try, Severus," he said.

Snape took the parchment and read the lines written there. He sounded out the words one at a time preparatory to casting the curse.

"I'm ready to try," Snape said a minute later. "Miss Granger, will you cast a Stunning Spell on one of the rats, please?"

Hermione nodded and soon had the animal ready to receive the curse.

Snape pointed his wand at the unconscious rat and spoke the incantation.

"*Liono sarka!*"

Nothing happened. There was no flash of orange light. The animal remained unconscious, but untouched by heat or flame.

"Try the next one," Flitwick urged.

"*Liono derma!*" Snape said.

Again, there was nothing.

"Bloody hell," squeaked Professor Flitwick. "Severus, are you sure you are projecting enough intent? This curse used to be an Unforgivable. You must have the proper frame of mind."

"I have been casting Unforgivables since I was eighteen years old, Filius," Snape chided. "I know how to form the *propeintent*."

"Yes, yes, of course you do," Flitwick sighed.

"Is my pronunciation correct?" Snape asked. "I'm not accustomed to casting incantations in Greek."

"That's it!" Flitwick squealed. "Oh, Severus, if you were shorter, I'd kiss you!"

"Oh, thank the gods I'm tall, then," Snape retorted. "Now what are you blathering on about?"

"Bellatrix Lestrange wouldn't have been any more comfortable casting in Greek than you are. I'll bet my pointed little hat that the bloody whore modified the incantation to Latin!"

Snape turned back toward the rat in the cage and raised his wand.

"*Viscus fundol!*" he said and had to hide the sharp stab of disappointment he felt when nothing happened.

"Try *tergum fundol*," Flitwick urged. "*Viscus* means 'flesh', *tergum* means 'skin'. They can be used interchangeably most of the time, but an incantation must be exact."

"*Tergum fundol!*" Snape said.

A beam of pale orange light shot from his wand and enveloped the rat. As they watched, the skin of the rat melted and peeled away, leaving nothing but a quivering lump of bloody flesh.

Hermione very nearly gagged, and even Snape, who had seen horrors most people could only imagine, felt queasy.

Snape quickly dispatched the unfortunate animal.

"Thank Merlin that wasn't the incantation Bellatrix used on you, Miss Granger," Flitwick said in a shaky voice.

"Yes, but I'm afraid that leaves us right back where we started from," she replied.

"Is there a way to vary the intensity of the curse, Filius?" Snape asked.

"I'm not sure. I'll need to do some more research. And, unfortunately, we will need to continue the animal testing."

Two weeks later, Hermione and Snape were sitting on the sofa in Snape's quarters. They had just finished dinner, and Snape was pleased to note that Hermione seemed to have gained back most of the weight she had lost. The dark circles under her eyes were gone as well.

They had fallen back into a familiar routine. Snape went to her house each morning and prepared breakfast. Afterwards, he would Apparate them to Hogwarts. They would meet with Flitwick to discuss how his work on the curse was progressing. Often, she would help him brew some of the potions Madam Pomfrey needed. Hermione was still working, so after dinner, Snape would take her home. Most nights he stayed with her while she worked. Sometimes he would read, other times he would sit beside her, absorbing information, as she worked. He was determined to bring Hogwarts into the computer age, though he knew it would be an uphill battle. When Hermione signed off her computer for the night, Snape would make tea.

They had, by mutual agreement, decided to allow their relationship to progress very slowly.

Hermione wasn't the type to rush headlong into relationships anyway. And because of her injury, she hadn't really been close to anyone for years. She was doubtful of her own feelings, not quite sure whether she was beginning to care for Snape for himself, or simply because he seemed to want her in spite of her injury.

Snape, for his part, knew that he *wanted* Hermione. He knew he desired her, physically. What he didn't know was whether he was even capable of something more than that. He sometimes felt that his dysfunctional childhood, and his years of working as a double agent, had left him emotionally stunted. In any case, he knew it would be grossly unfair to Hermione to begin a physical relationship with her when he didn't know if he'd ever be able to make the emotional investment that should accompany it.

Whatever the reasons, the end result was that other than the fact that when they were alone, they now addressed each other by their first names, and that they shared an occasional kiss, their relationship hadn't changed much from what it had been before the summer holidays. They were, once again, comfortable in each other's company.

"Severus," Flitwick called as Snape's Floo activated, "may I come through?"

"Of course, Filius," Snape answered.

The tiny wizard stepped out onto Snape's hearth. He brushed off his robes in an absent-minded way.

"I've got it this time!" he said.

"Really?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, my dear girl, I'm so sorry that you've had to be kept on tenterhooks while I've stumbled around, too stupid to find my own arse with both hands and a torch."

Hermione smiled at the mental picture his words painted. In contrast to his rather staid classroom demeanour, the 'off-duty' Professor Flitwick possessed a caustic wit

similar to Snape's and the colourful vocabulary of a drunken sailor.

"What have you discovered?" Snape asked.

"I have been stymied by the result of the last incantation we tried. At first glance, Miss Granger's injury looks like it is the result of a skin melting curse *Tergum Fundo* is a skin-melting curse. Therefore, that curse should have reproduced the injury, but it didn't. It did, literally, melt the skin of the animal. But, it melted it so completely, the skin was destroyed. I concluded, therefore, that Bellatrix Lestrange, that bloody, sadistic woman, had to have modified the curse in some other way. I needed to see Miss Granger's injury again, but I didn't want to upset and embarrass her, so I used a Pensieve and looked at my memories of the examination.

"When I revisited the memory, I wanted to kick myself in the arse for missing the obvious."

"Apparently, you weren't the only one who missed it, Filius," Snape said. "What did we overlook?"

"Miss Granger's injury was not the result of a curse developed to melt the epidermis the outer layer of skin, but rather of one developed to melt the subcutaneous or subdermal tissue the tissue *beneath* the skin!"

"But my skin *is* melted," Hermione said. "It's all red and lumpy and folded over."

"It is lumpy and folded over because the underlying connective tissue has been destroyed. I believe we will find that the redness is due to damaged capillaries."

"And my hair?" Hermione asked.

"Your hair was, indeed, melted by the curse. I don't believe that damnable woman planned it that way, however; it was a side effect of the curse. Had the curse hit you in the chest, which is apparently where she aimed, the damage would have radiated outward and your hair might not have been affected at all. I believe that the curse damaged the hair follicles. That's why new, undamaged hair has been unable to grow.

"We will need to conduct further animal tests, but I am convinced this is the answer."

"And a counter-curse?" Hermione asked.

"Alas, my dear, that is probably still some weeks away," Flitwick said sadly.

Hermione nodded and sat down heavily on the sofa.

"We'll start the animal tests tomorrow," Snape said.

"As soon as we confirm that this is the correct curse, I will begin working to counter it," Flitwick said.

He reached up and patted Hermione's hand. "I won't give up, Miss Granger."

"I know, Professor Flitwick," Hermione said. "I'm grateful for your help."

Flitwick turned back toward the hearth.

"The usual time, Severus?" he asked as he pulled a pinch of Floo powder from his pocket and threw it into the flames. "Flitwick's quarters!"

"I'll be there, Filius," Snape said. "Thank you and good night."

"Ta-ra," Flitwick said as he stepped into the fire and spun away.

After Flitwick left, Snape moved to sit beside Hermione on the sofa.

"You're not getting discouraged, are you?" he asked as he took her hand in his.

"I'm trying not to, Severus. I keep telling myself that nine months ago, I was still trudging to the Ministry library each night in a fruitless search for information. I was exhausted then exhausted physically, magically, and emotionally. I'm so much better now, mostly thanks to you." She smiled up at him.

"All you needed was a few good meals," Snape said.

"That took care of the physical exhaustion, yes," Hermione agreed. "Your suggestions about my glamour helped with the magical exhaustion. And telling my parents and Harry and Ron about my injury was the biggest step I could have made toward restoring my emotional equilibrium."

"You needed their support," Snape said.

"I don't know how much longer I would have been able to go on without your help, though I'm still not sure why you even bothered that day in Grant and Cutler."

Snape felt a small prick in the area of his mind he vaguely recognised as his conscience. Now was the time to 'come clean' and tell her about the promise he had made to Albus. He opened his mouth as though to speak and then closed it again without saying a word.

If she discovered that he had helped her only because he'd had no choice, she would be hurt unnecessarily. At least that's what he told himself. He couldn't admit, not even to himself, that losing her respect would bother him.

"I couldn't just leave you there in that condition," he said at last. "Even I am not that heartless a bastard."

Liar! His mind screamed at him.

Hermione just smiled at him, and then she kissed him with a tenderness he knew he didn't deserve.

Snape returned the kiss, and when they broke apart, he held her close and wondered, not for the first time, why his life always had to be so fucking *complicated*.

The next day, Hermione stood next to Professor Flitwick and watched as Snape cast the modified curse at yet another *Stupefied* rat.

"*Subtergum fundo!*" Snape said as he aimed his wand at the rat. His wand emitted a wavering beam of pale orange light. When it struck the unconscious rat, the rat's skin began to move and shift.

When they examined the animal, there was no mistaking the similarities between its injury and Hermione's.

Snape next cast the curse on a ferret. The result was the same.

"We have a couple of Nogtails," Snape said. "They're the largest test animals we have right now. Do you want to try one of them?"

"I don't think we need to," Flitwick said. "I would rather save them for testing the counter-curse."

"I agree," Snape said.

"What do you think, Miss Granger?" Snape asked, turning to Hermione.

Hermione was leaning over the injured ferret, poking at the lumpy-looking flesh.

"This even feels like my injury," she said. "The curse light looked like the one Bellatrix cast, as well."

She straightened and turned toward the two wizards with a wide grin on her face.

"You did it, Professor Flitwick!" she exclaimed, and then she ran to him, dropping to her knees and throwing her arms around him in a fierce hug.

"Thank you, thank you so much," she said, blinking back tears.

"Oh, my dear," Flitwick managed to squeak out. "I've only recreated the curse. The counter-curse will be a much bigger challenge."

Hermione sat back on her heels, releasing the diminutive wizard.

"I know you can do it, sir. I just know it!"

"I hope I can justify your faith in me," he replied.

Weeks passed. The new term started at Hogwarts, and Hermione and Snape were unable to see each other as often as they would have liked. Snape had managed to make it into London the last weekend in September. They'd had dinner again at *Le Café du Marché*. On that night, when they danced, Snape made no effort to hide the effect her nearness had on him. Hermione had smiled at him in an artlessly seductive way that had him groaning.

They had made plans to meet in Hogsmeade near the end of October, but things had become busy at Hogwarts, and Snape simply couldn't get away. They wrote back and forth on a regular basis, however.

Hermione saw Harry and Ron nearly every week. They would knock on her back door on a Friday or a Saturday night carrying pizza boxes and beer, and the three friends would sit up half the night catching up on their lives.

On this Friday night, right before Halloween, they were doing just that.

Harry was nearly bouncing up and down on the sofa in excitement.

"What's with you?" Hermione asked as she put out paper plates and napkins.

"I'm getting married!" Harry burst out.

"Well, you've been engaged for years. It's about time you decided to finally do it," Hermione teased.

"Well, it wasn't my idea to wait so long," Harry grumbled.

Hermione had been a bit surprised to discover that it had been Ginny, not Harry, who had been putting off the wedding. Now that she had finished her medi-witch training and had secured a position at St. Mungo's, Ginny was ready to settle down.

"She says we're going to wait a few years for babies, though," Harry said. "She wants a chance to establish her career first."

"That seems like a good idea," Hermione said.

"Ron's not ready to settle down, yet, though," Harry said as he gave Ron a friendly punch on the arm.

"So many witches, so little time," Ron intoned solemnly, and the three friends burst into laughter.

"What about you, Hermione?" Ron asked when they had their mirth under control. "When are you going to find a nice wizard and start having babies?"

Hermione felt herself flush and hoped that her friends wouldn't notice. She hadn't told them about her relationship with Snape.

"I ... I don't think I'll ever marry," she said.

"I've ruined you for any other man, haven't I?" Ron asked with a leer.

"In your dreams, you wanker," Hermione replied with a smile.

"Then why would you say you'll never get married?" Ron asked. "Even I expect to get married eventually. You'll fall in love someday, too."

Hermione blushed again, and this time Harry noticed.

"You've already fallen in love, haven't you?" Harry asked.

"Don't be ridiculous," Hermione replied, but she wouldn't meet his eye.

"What's the matter with him, then, if you haven't told your best mates?" Ron asked.

"Is he a Muggle?" Harry asked.

"He's not already married, is he?" Ron asked, horrified.

"Would you two just stop?" Hermione said in her bossiest voice. "I'm not going to discuss this with you."

She still wouldn't meet Harry's eye.

"Fuck it all, Hermione!" Harry shouted as he got to his feet and started pacing. "You've gone and fallen in love with the greasy git, haven't you?"

"Snape?" Ron sputtered. "You're in love with Severus Snape?"

"I'll kill the fucking bastard," Harry said, as he stormed towards the door. "I knew he was up to no good."

"Where are you going, Harry?" Ron shouted. He jumped to his feet and grabbed Harry's arm.

"I'm going to Hogwarts," Harry said. "I'm going to kill the bastard for taking advantage of her."

"He hasn't 'taken advantage' of me," Hermione said. "Would you listen to yourself, Harry? You sound demented!"

She turned to Ron. "Can't you talk some sense into him?"

"It's her business, Harry," Ron said. "Didn't we talk about this at Christmas?"

Harry turned and faced Hermione again. "You said you weren't having a ... a personal relationship with him."

"At the time, I wasn't," Hermione said. "Things changed during the summer holidays."

"That's why he was acting so strangely, isn't it?"

"We'd had a ... a misunderstanding. We talked about it the day you and Ron went back to work. He came here to bring me to Hogwarts, and we straightened things out."

Harry snorted. "How can you let him touch you?"

"He doesn't ... I mean, we haven't ..." Hermione blushed again.

"Oy, that's more than I need to know," Ron said.

Harry turned to Ron. "It's not funny, Ron."

"It's her business, Harry," Ron repeated. "Now, let's sit down and finish our beer."

Harry sat and picked up his bottle of beer. He took a sip and then turned back to Hermione. She'd also sat back down and had picked up her bottle, though she just held it and didn't drink from it.

"Does he love you, Hermione?" Harry asked.

Hermione twisted the bottle in her hands.

"I don't know. When we first realised that there was something between us, we decided to take things slowly, and we have. I'm not even sure if what I feel for him is love."

"I watched your face when you were talking about him. You love him," Harry said with a sigh. He took another swig from his bottle.

"I'm sorry I acted like such an arse," he said.

"It's a good job you didn't go charging off to Hogwarts," Ron said as he drank from his own bottle. "I'd hate to have to tell Ginny that her fiancé's dangly bits are now hanging from his ears."

"Yeah, well ... I guess I overreacted," Harry admitted.

"It's not that I don't appreciate your being willing to charge off to defend my honour," Hermione said, "but I think I'm old enough to take care of myself."

"I know," he said. "And if it had been anyone else ..."

"Don't say it, Harry ..." Hermione's voice rose in warning.

"All right, all right," Harry grumbled. "He's a hero; he's a paragon; he's a veritable god among wizards."

"And he can cook!" Hermione added, trying to lighten the mood.

Ron laughed, and even Harry smiled at that comment.

"I'll respect your wishes, Hermione," he said a moment later. "I'll even be polite to him. I still think you could do much better than him, but if he makes you happy, I'll accept it."

"Thank you, Harry," Hermione said, reaching over to give him a fierce hug.

He returned the hug and smiled down at her, and things were all right between them again.

Eight

Chapter 8 of 10

Hermione Granger has been absent from the wizarding world for more than five years. When Severus Snape runs into her in a Muggle bookstore, he discovers why. An old promise made to Albus Dumbledore prompts Snape to offer his help to his former student.

Author's Notes: This was written for the HG/SS holiday exchange on Live Journal. This was the prompt I chose: #71. Fic: Post-war Hermione and Severus are both doomed to spend Xmas alone until they run into each other in Diagon Alley or London. How, why, and what happens next is up to you. Happy ending, please. Any rating. This prompt was submitted by GinnyWeasley31, and the story is dedicated to her.

Disclaimer: All publicly recognisable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. The author is in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended.

Special thanks to my beta reader, JuJuJenn. And thanks to Illyria who did some Brit-picking for me. Any errors, however, are mine alone.

Eight

Two days after the Halloween feast, Filius Flitwick's head appeared in Snape's fire.

"I must talk to you immediately, Severus," Flitwick said. "May I come through?"

"Of course, Filius," Snape replied. He pushed aside the pile of first-year essays he'd been grading and got to his feet as Flitwick stepped out onto the hearth.

"Drink?" Snape asked, holding up a decanter of brandy.

"Yes, and make sure you pour one for yourself. We actually have something to drink to tonight!"

Snape set the decanter down and spun to face the tiny wizard.

"You've done it?" Snape asked. "You've created the counter-curse?"

"I have finished all the theoretical and linguistic work," Flitwick corrected. "We must still test it on our animal specimens. I am confident, however, that the counter-curse will work.

"I sent my notes and formulae to two different colleagues keeping the entire discussion hypothetical, of course. Working independently of each other, each of them reached the same conclusion I did."

"How soon will you be able to begin the animal testing?" Snape asked. He turned back to the table with the decanter and poured brandy into two glasses.

"We will need to cast the curse on several animals, including both the Nogtails. Then we will need to allow them to heal completely before we attempt the counter-curse."

Snape handed one of the glasses to Flitwick.

"Will the fact that Miss Granger's injury is more than six years old make it more difficult to repair the damage?"

"I hope not. That's why we need to wait until the test animals are completely healed before we make the attempt. Miss Granger may have thicker scar tissue, perhaps even some adhesions. I would like to try to reproduce her injury as exactly as possible. I know that we can make a vast improvement in her appearance, but I don't know if we will be able to repair all the damage.

"Excellent brandy, Severus," Flitwick added as he sipped the amber liquid.

"I will cast the curse tomorrow morning before classes," Snape said as he sipped his own brandy. "Hagrid will be pleased that we are, at last, going to make an attempt to cure his 'wee beasties', rather than just sacrifice them as we've been doing for the last few months."

"If Hagrid knew that it was Miss Granger we were attempting to help, he wouldn't be so reluctant. He's always had a soft spot for her."

"Indeed," Snape said. He wondered what Filius would think if he knew that Snape, too, had developed a 'soft spot' for Hermione?

The following morning, Snape made his way to the remote spot in the Forbidden Forest where the test animals were caged.

Flitwick was already there, as was Hagrid.

"You didn't need to be here, Filius," Snape said.

"I thought I could help by casting the Stunning Spell for you. You're going to need to cast the curse at least twenty times. You'll be exhausted when you're done."

"I appreciate your consideration," Snape said.

Flitwick picked out ten of the largest, healthiest looking rats and, one at a time, he *stupefied* them. Snape then cast the skin melting curse on each of them. They repeated the process with ten ferrets and both the Nogtails.

Then Hagrid brought out six hairless rabbits.

"I've been takin' care of 'em since their mum got killed," Hagrid said.

"We don't need to use your pets, Hagrid," Snape assured him.

"Iffen' me bunnies will help Hermione, then I want you ter use 'em," Hagrid said.

Snape didn't ask Hagrid how he knew that Hermione was the one they were trying to help. Although large and lumbering, and occasionally indiscreet, Hagrid wasn't stupid. Like Filius, Hagrid had probably put the clues together and arrived at the logical answer.

"Thank you, Hagrid," Flitwick piped up. "Having a hairless animal to work with will actually be a help."

Flitwick cast the Stunning Spell on each of the rabbits. By the time the last one fell over unconscious, there were huge tears rolling down Hagrid's cheeks and into his beard.

"Go on and do it quick, afore I change me mind," Hagrid said to Snape as he blew his nose into a spotted handkerchief.

Snape cast the curse six more times and then tucked his wand back into his sleeve.

"I hope I shall *never* have to hear the words '*subtergum fundo*' again," he said with vehemence.

"Go on back to the castle and have some breakfast, Severus," Flitwick insisted. "I'll stay behind and discuss the care of the animals with Hagrid."

Snape nodded and walked away.

Four weeks later, Flitwick was once again in Snape's quarters, sharing a brandy with him. He had just returned from the makeshift animal hospital, which Hagrid was running deep in the Forbidden Forest, and had determined that the test animals had healed enough to attempt the counter-curse.

"It's not really a counter-curse," Flitwick explained. "It's actually a brand new charm that mimics the old curse."

"I'm not sure I understand," Snape said.

"In my notes, I refer to the curse Bellatrix modified as a Masking Curse Magically Activated Subdermal Kinesis. What I have created is, for want of a better definition, a Remasking Charm Redistribution of Magically Activated Subdermal Kinesis.

"We will basically cast the same curse Bellatrix Lestrange cast, though the wording is a bit different, and the charm light is amber, rather than orange. The beam can be

focused, quite precisely, with the wand. This will result in the subdermal tissue melting, or, rather, re-melting. The distinction is that we will control the melt. We will redistribute the melted subdermal tissue back into its proper place, reshaping it as we go. Then we will smooth the epidermis back over it."

"It sounds very much like the Muggle plastic surgery Miss Granger's mother asked her to consider," Snape said.

"Don't those Muggle doctors use knives?" Flitwick asked with a shudder.

"In some cases, yes, but there is also a relatively new device being used these days called a laser. It works by focusing a beam of high-intensity light."

"Yes, well, there is one other element of the charm that no Muggle doctor could ever reproduce, and that is *intent*. The Unforgivables are only effective if the caster has the intent to cause harm. Conversely, this charm is only effective if the caster has the intent to do good, or to help the person it is being cast upon."

"You have created the first of a whole new class of charms, Filius," Snape said. "You should call it a Commendable. Perhaps the Ministry will finally take notice and give you the recognition you deserve."

"You know that means nothing to me, Severus," Flitwick said. "Besides, I must keep a low profile for as long as that bastard Scrimgeour and that cow Umbridge hold positions of authority in the Ministry. If I ever decide to publish this, I will do so under an assumed name or through one of my untraceable intermediaries. More importantly, if I were to publish information on the Remasking Charm, I would also have to publish information on the original curse, and I believe that is better left to legend."

"You're probably right," Snape agreed. "Some megalomaniac will figure out how to use it and fancy himself the next Dark Lord."

Flitwick stood and placed his empty brandy glass on the side table.

"We'd best get some rest tonight, Severus. Tomorrow will be a trying day."

"I admit I'm a bit concerned. I'm not a medi-wizard and have nought but the most minimal of medical knowledge outside of the healing properties of potions. How will I know if I'm achieving the proper results?"

"You won't be casting the Remasking Charm, Severus," Flitwick said, "and neither will I, thank Merlin."

"Poppy?" Snape surmised.

Flitwick nodded. "I've been working with her for the last two weeks, explaining the charm and teaching her the incantations. She has a great deal of affection for Miss Granger, so she will have no problem forming the proper intent when the time comes. I will assist, but mostly I will be there to guide her through the proper procedures. She will be doing the actual reshaping of the subdermal tissue as she is familiar with anatomy."

"How will I be of help, then?" Snape asked.

"We have been using a Stunning Spell on our test animals. We need you find another way to keep the subject asleep and unable to feel pain for at least several hours. I had first thought we would be able to use a bewitched sleep, but that slows down the metabolism so much, the Remasking Charm would be ineffective."

Snape stroked his long nose with a slender forefinger as he considered the possible potions he could use.

"Sleeping Draught will put the subject to sleep, but there is a difference between being asleep and being unconscious. The draught may not cause a deep enough sleep to prevent the pain that will accompany the procedure. The Draught of Living Death may be necessary."

Flitwick sighed. "That is the conclusion I reached, as well."

"The dosage will have to be carefully regulated. As the subject ..." Snape jumped to his feet and began pacing.

"Fuck this, Filius; we are talking about *aperson*, not a bloody *test subject!*"

"Indeed, we are. The 'test subjects', however, are necessary for practising the charm. We will have just one opportunity with Miss Granger. We must get it right."

Snape stopped pacing and resumed his seat. "It will be very difficult to balance the proper dosage of the Draught of Living Death along with the healing potions and painkillers."

"We have ten rats, ten ferrets, two Noggails, and Hagrid's six hairless rabbits. I would rather we make our mistakes on the rats and ferrets. The Noggail's skin is most similar to human skin, thus we should use them to perfect our technique with the Remasking Charm. If at all possible, I would like to be able to return Hagrid's pets to him."

Snape smiled at that. "As would I."

"Is two days sufficient time for you to do the proper calculations and brew the potions?" Flitwick asked.

"I'll need to weigh the animals to calculate the dosages. The brewing won't take long; I have everything I need in my lab."

"Poppy and I have been using the Room of Requirement for our lessons. We will set up our makeshift operating room there, as well."

"Shall we say, Friday night for our first test?"

"I'll be ready."

It was a very trying time. Snape watched as the test animals twitched in pain when the dosages were too low or lapsed into coma and died when the dosages were too high.

He berated himself more harshly with each failure.

Flitwick reminded him that failure was only failure if one didn't learn from the experience. Snape would grumble and swear and go back to his lab to rework his calculations for the fifth, tenth, or twentieth time.

Poppy was also experiencing doubt. The first animal she cast the Remasking Charm on ended up looking worse than when she had started. She had thrown her wand down in disgust and declared that Filius would just have to find a *competent* matron to cast the charm.

Flitwick had reassured her, expressing his confidence in her abilities.

"It just takes practise, Poppy," he said, patting her consolingly on the back as she sat on a low stool in front of the fire.

It took nearly three weeks, but by the time the last ferret had been treated, both Snape and Madam Pomfrey were able to perform their tasks nearly perfectly.

The two Noggails were treated and, had they not been classified as moderately dangerous creatures by the Ministry of Magic, they could have been released back into the wild, none the worse for their experience. As it was, Hagrid decided to keep them, although he did build a special pen for them, far away from the castle's vegetable gardens.

The six hairless rabbits were returned to their pre-cursed state. Hagrid cried when Snape levitated the cage with the restored rabbits down to his hut.

"Lookit 'em!" he bawled. "They look like they never bin hurt." He poked a sausage-sized finger through the bars of the cage to stroke a hairless rump.

"Did you miss yer daddy?" he crooned.

"Madam Pomfrey did an exceptional job on them," Snape said.

"And they dinnit suffer none?"

"We made sure they didn't feel any pain," Snape assured him.

"I'm grateful ter yeh," Hagrid said.

"We are grateful to you for offering your pets for our experimentation. It was helpful to have them."

"Is Hermione goin' ter be all right, Professor?"

"In spite of our tests, there is a difference between animals and people. We are hopeful, however, that we can repair the damage Miss Granger suffered."

"I ain't never really seen what was done ter her, but I seen what my poor bunnies looked like. She was hurt bad, weren't she?"

"Indeed she was, Hagrid."

Hagrid sniffled again. "You'll fix her. I know yeh will."

"We shall give it our very best effort."

"We need to contact Miss Granger and get her here," Flitwick said over brandy that evening.

"The Christmas holidays start in five days," Snape said. "I will arrange for her to be here the day after the students leave. We can perform the procedure the next day."

"It will be a lovely Christmas present for her, won't it, Severus?"

"Let's hope so, Filius," Snape replied. "Let's hope so."

After Flitwick left, Snape sat down to write to Hermione to tell her that they were ready to attempt to repair her injury. It was then that he realised how fiercely he missed her and how fervently he desired to see her healed.

They had sent letters back and forth on a regular basis, but they had only seen each other once since the end of the summer holidays.

Now, the realisation that he would see her in just a few days caused a flutter of anticipation.

What would happen in her life once she was healed? Would their relationship move forward? The problem, he conceded, was that he wasn't sure what his feelings for her were.

He knew he desired her; that had not changed. He admired her courage and respected her intellect.

While not conventionally pretty, Hermione was certainly not unattractive. Once she was able to resume normal interactions with people, both magical and Muggle, she would attract the notice of any number of men. They would be men of her age and without his saturnine homeliness. He hoped she would be discerning enough not to fall for the first man who flattered her ego.

He felt protective of her. At that thought, he felt the tingle at the back of his mind that reminded him of the promise he'd made to Albus.

The idea of Hermione being used and cast aside caused a sudden, sharp pain he didn't immediately recognise.

He thought it the height of absurdity that his promise to Albus might force him to comfort her after some witless oaf broke her heart.

He dropped his quill as he came to a sudden decision.

He went to the hearth and threw in a pinch of Floo powder.

"Minerva McGonagall," he said.

"Is everything all right, Severus?" Minerva asked a few moments later. She was wearing a green tartan dressing gown, and her hair had been released from its usual bun, but was tidily secured in a hair net. "It's late. I was just getting ready to retire."

"I need to speak to Albus," Snape said.

"Now? Can't it wait till the morning?"

"If it could wait, I wouldn't have bothered you," Snape said.

Still she hesitated.

"Please, Minerva," Snape said.

In all the years she had known him, she had never seen such a pleading look on his face.

"Is this regarding Hermione Granger?" Minerva wanted to know.

"In a way, though not directly," Snape replied.

"Do you need me to be there?" she asked.

"No. I just need the password."

"The cat's meow," she said.

"Thank you, Minerva. I'm sorry to have disturbed you."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, thank you, I'm fine."

"You'll let me know if you need my help?" she persisted.

"Of course. I just need to clarify something with Albus."

"He'll be glad to see you. He misses you, you know," McGonagall said in a slightly chiding tone.

"Good night, Minerva," Snape said without commenting on her remark.

"Good night, Severus," she replied.

Snape pulled his head back out of the fire and closed the Floo connection.

Less than five minutes later, he was standing in front of the statue of the gargoyle that guarded the spiral staircase that led to the Head's office.

"The cat's meow," he intoned and wondered if being Headmaster or Headmistress automatically instilled the desire to have ridiculous passwords. If that was the case, he sincerely hoped he'd never be appointed Headmaster. (Though he was sure there was very little likelihood of *that* ever happening!)

The gargoyle leapt aside, and the wall behind it opened, revealing the stone staircase. Snape stepped onto the bottom step and rode the turning spiral staircase up until it deposited him outside the highly polished oak door that led into the Head's office.

He didn't bother with the knocker, but opened the door quietly and slipped inside.

As though sensing his presence, a wall sconce lit, bathing the room in a soft glow. Snape looked around at the portraits of the previous residents of this office. They all seemed to be slumbering in their portrait frames. He could hear their soft snores. He made his way to the newest portrait to find its way to these walls.

"Albus," Snape whispered. There was no response.

"Albus!" Snape called a little louder.

The likeness of Albus Dumbledore, which was slumped against the side of his frame, snorted a bit and opened one eye sleepily.

"Severus!" Dumbledore exclaimed as he straightened up and blinked.

"Keep it down, old man," Snape whispered. "I've no desire to have my business become the subject of rumour among this lot."

"Oh, we're old hands at keeping secrets," Dumbledore said with a smile.

Snape just snorted.

"It's good to see you, my boy," Dumbledore said.

Snape had to swallow the lump in his throat. Although his killing of Albus Dumbledore had been ordered and planned by Albus himself, Snape still carried a burden of guilt over it. Until now, he'd been unable to face the portrait of the man he'd been forced to kill.

"I ... I am sorry I have not been in to see you before now," Snape mumbled.

"I understand, dear boy. You are here now, however, so you must have something important to say."

"I have a favour to ask of you."

"As you can well imagine, being dead has diminished my powers somewhat, but I will do what I can," Albus said.

"You must release me from my promise to protect Potter and his friends," Snape said.

Dumbledore seemed surprised by the request.

"What promise?" he asked.

"Don't be obtuse, Albus," Snape hissed. "You know very well to which promise I am referring."

"Might I remind you, Severus, that it is in very poor form to castigate a dead man?"

Snape scowled. "Might I remind you that patience has never been one of my virtues?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "Yes, I seem to remember that. The only time you displayed any patience at all was when we were playing chess. I'm sorry we didn't get to finish that last game," he added, "even though I was on the verge of being checkmated."

"Weasley played the game out," Snape mumbled.

"Ronald Weasley?" Dumbledore asked.

"It's a long story. He ... he took over your game and actually managed to defeat me."

"He always was underrated as a strategist," Dumbledore said. "He turned out well, didn't he? It is gratifying to know that both he and Harry ended up as Aurors."

"As much as I would like to spend the next several hours engaged in idle gossip," Snape said with as much sarcasm as he could muster, "there are things I need to do."

"I'm not keeping you here, Severus. You are free to leave." He closed his eyes and rested his head against the side of the portrait frame.

"Albus, you meddlesome old fool, you have not released me from my promise, yet!" Snape said, poking a finger into Albus's painted chest.

Dumbledore lifted a lid to glare at Snape. "There is no promise to release," he said, and then he closed his eye again.

"Don't be daft!" Snape shouted, no longer concerned with waking the other portraits in the room.

"I am *dead*, Severus," Dumbledore said, opening both eyes and fixing Snape with a penetrating stare. "I am neither daft, *nor deaf*. Do not shout at me."

"You must release me from my promise. Please, Albus," Snape said.

"And I repeat: there is no promise to release. The promise was fulfilled the moment Tom Riddle was destroyed."

"That's not true," Snape insisted. "I have ... I have felt it. I have been acting under its influence for nearly a year."

"Explain," Dumbledore said, sitting up straight and no longer looking sleepy.

Snape told Dumbledore about meeting Hermione at the Muggle bookstore. He told him about injury she had received and how it had been sapping her magical energy. He related the details of the counter-curse that Flitwick had developed and the experiments they had done on the animals.

"We're ready to perform the Remasking Charm on Hermione ... Miss Granger," Snape said.

"It sounds like everything will come to a good end for her, then," Dumbledore said.

"We are hopeful," Snape said.

"Now, my boy, tell me the story behind the story," Dumbledore said.

Snape flushed. "I think I have come to ... *tocare* for Miss Granger."

"You *think* you care for her?" Dumbledore chided.

"That is why I need to be released from my promise; I need to be able to differentiate between my enforced obligation to her and any ... any feelings I might have for her."

"And I will tell you, yet again, that you were released from your promise when Voldemort fell."

"But I felt it!" Snape insisted. "I could sense that her magical energy was dangerously low. She was underweight and on the verge of collapse. I was about to let her walk away from me her welfare was no concern of mine, after all when I felt a ... a tingle."

"A tingle?" Dumbledore repeated. "This *tingle* reminded you of your promise?"

"You begin to understand my dilemma," Snape said.

"No, Severus. You continue to fail to understand that there is no dilemma."

"You speak in riddles, Albus," Snape said.

"I don't know how much plainer I can state the facts, my boy," Dumbledore said. "Do you remember your original promise to me?"

"As if I could ever forget it. I promised that I would aid Potter in his fight against the Dark Lord in any way I could, and that I would protect his life, even at the sacrifice of my own, until the Dark Lord was defeated or I was dead myself."

Dumbledore nodded. "After the incident with the troll during Harry's first year, I realised that he had formed a bond with Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger, and they with him. They would fight for him, and with him, and would follow him into whatever dangers he would face. I knew then that they needed to be brought under my and your protection, as well."

"That was when the promise was modified," Snape said. "I promised to aid and protect Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger in the same manner, and with the same diligence, as I would protect Mr. Potter."

"Yes," Dumbledore agreed. "You pledged to aid and protect all three of them 'until the Dark Lord was defeated'."

Snape scowled as he considered Albus's words.

"Then ... then what was the tingle?" he asked.

"Oh, Severus, my dear boy," Dumbledore said with a sad little smile, "the 'tingle' was not the result of some long-fulfilled promise; it was your own innate desire to help her."

"There is no promise? There is no magical obligation binding me to her?"

"None. Be assured that anything you think you feel for Miss Granger comes from the workings of your own heart and is not any of my doing, even if *I* am a meddling old fool."

Dumbledore smiled down on the man he had loved like a son, the man he had placed such an onerous burden upon, the man he had trusted with his life.

"Be happy, Severus," Dumbledore said in benediction. "I know you have trouble believing it, but you deserve to be happy."

Snape lifted a hand and touched the painted face of the man he had loved like a father, the man who had always believed in him, the man who had trusted him with his death.

"Thank you, Albus," Snape whispered.

Dumbledore nodded sleepily as his eyes drifted closed and his head bent to rest against the side of the portrait frame once again.

Snape slipped out of the room and returned to his quarters to finish his letter to Hermione.

Nine

Chapter 9 of 10

Hermione Granger has been absent from the wizarding world for more than five years. When Severus Snape runs into her in a Muggle bookstore, he discovers why. An old promise made to Albus Dumbledore prompts Snape to offer his help to his former student.

Disclaimer: All publicly recognisable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. The author is in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended.

Special thanks to my beta reader, JuJuJenn. And thanks to Illyria who did some Brit-picking for me. Any errors, however, are mine alone.

Nine

Minutes after the Hogwarts Express left Hogsmeade station carrying the students away for the Christmas holidays, Snape was knocking on Hermione's back door.

When she opened the door, Snape drank in the sight of her. He stepped inside and took her into his arms.

"I have missed you," he said in a husky whisper.

"And I have missed you," she replied.

He bent his head to hers and kissed her with an intensity that had been missing until that moment. His tongue traced her lips and dipped into the sweet moistness of her mouth, teasing and dancing with her own.

When they broke apart, they were both slightly breathless.

"Will you make love to me, Severus? Please?" Hermione whispered as she reached up to stroke his cheek.

Snape hesitated a moment. "I did not come here today expecting to make love to you. I didn't bring ..."

"I expected it," Hermione said, interrupting him. "Or, rather, I hoped for it. I've taken care of it."

"Clever witch," he murmured as he kissed the side of her neck.

"Now will you make love to me?"

"I know I should be noble and push you away," he replied, "but I'm a selfish bastard. I want you too much to be noble. I will take the gift you offer today and never regret it."

"Why would pushing me away be noble?"

Snape reached up and captured her hand in his.

"In a few days, you'll be whole and strong. You'll take your rightful place in the wizarding world. You'll meet other people, other ... men. They'll be young and handsome and they'll pursue you ..."

"And I'll send them on their way," Hermione insisted.

"I would like to believe that ..." he began.

"Are you calling me a liar?" she asked, pulling her hand from his.

"No. I'm saying that once you are healed, you may have a different perspective."

He stopped speaking and turned back toward the door.

"Maybe I'll be noble, after all," he muttered.

"I love you," Hermione said to his back.

Snape's shoulders stiffened, and he turned back to face her.

"What did you say?"

"I love you. I've loved you for weeks ... months."

"You are simply grateful for my help ..."

"Oh, please, Severus," she said in a sharp tone, "I'm grateful to Professor Flitwick for his help, but I haven't invited him to share my bed. I know the difference between love and gratitude."

He reached her in three quick steps and pulled her back into his arms. He kissed her forehead, her cheek, and the side of her neck.

"If you change your mind after the procedure, I will understand," he said.

Even as he said the words, he knew that if he lost her now, it would break him.

"I won't change my mind," she said as she returned his kisses.

Snape took her hands in his, holding them between their bodies.

"Hermione," he said, "I have no experience with love, especially the love between a man and a woman. I may never be able to say the words ..."

Hermione pulled her hand from his and placed two fingers over his lips.

"Hush. I don't need the words. Show me; just show me."

Snape kissed her fingertips and then her palm. He trailed his lips along the inside of her arm and then across her shoulder to the side of her neck. And then he kissed her lips. He cupped her face between his hands and kissed her again and again.

"I want you so much," he said between kisses, his voice low and husky with need.

"Oh, yes," she whispered back. Her eyes were closed as she concentrated on the feel of his lips on hers.

"Hermione, drop your glamour," he said.

Her eyes flew open. "Wha ...what did you say?"

His fingers continued to stroke her cheek, his lips grazing hers.

"Let your glamour go ... all of it."

She lifted a hand to her hair.

"Why would you want to see me like that?"

"I want you to know that I am making love to *you*."

"This is me," she insisted. "This is what I looked like ... before."

"Yes, it is. And it's what you'll look like again. And when you do, I'll make love to you again."

"I don't understand," Hermione said.

"In the unlikely event that the procedure doesn't work, I don't want you sending me away because you think I won't want you if you are ... damaged."

"I wouldn't ..."

"Yes, you would," Snape insisted. "It would be you going all noble, thinking you were sparing me."

He gave a sardonic little smile. "Typical Gryffindor behaviour," he added.

Hermione returned the small smile with one of her own, but she still hesitated.

"I want to be with *you*," Snape continued. "I want to make love with *you*. I don't give a bloody damn if your hair is long and bushy or short and frizzy, or whether you have hair at all. I don't care if your cheek is smooth and soft. I don't care if your eyelid sags or your lip droops. I don't care if one of your breasts is injured."

"I feel like a freak," she said.

Snape reached out again and touched her face. "You feel like a woman to me. A woman I care for. A woman I desire. Let it go, Hermione. Please."

Hermione looked at him and read the sincerity in his eyes. She closed her eyes and let her glamour fade.

Snape continued to stroke her face, even as he watched the veneer of her glamour disappear to be replaced by the reality of her ruined flesh.

"Thank you," he whispered.

He kissed the top of her head, his lips caressing the burnt and brittle patches of hair. He kissed her forehead and the sagging corner of her eye. He dragged his tongue along her cheek, feeling the grooves of flesh and the distorted, displaced tissue below the skin. His mouth covered hers, fitting over her damaged lip. His hands lifted to cup her breasts, his fingertips feeling the folds of skin through her blouse. He used his thumbs to tease her nipples into hard little points.

She moaned softly and wrapped her arms around him.

He lifted her into his arms and carried her out of the kitchen, through the parlour, and into her bedroom.

He set her on her feet and then he undressed her slowly, opening buttons and stroking and kissing each bit of skin as he exposed it.

When she was naked before him, she raised a hand to cover her breast.

"No," he said softly as he pushed her hand aside. "I want to see you ... all of you."

"I'm ..."

"Utterly desirable," he finished.

Hermione let her hand drop to her side.

"I ... I want to see *you*," she stammered, blushing slightly.

Snape stepped back and toed off his boots. He quickly stripped off his jeans and shirt and pushed his pants down his legs and stepped out of them. He watched her watching him and smiled slightly when he saw her eyes widen at the sight of his hardened cock jutting from the thatch of dark hair at his groin.

He led her to the bed and eased her down. He lay down beside her, turning to lie on his side, his head propped on one hand while his other hand stroked her breasts, her belly, and down to the juncture of her thighs.

"Utterly desirable," he repeated.

He slid a finger between her pussy lips, and she arched against his hand. She was already wet, and he used her own wetness to lubricate her clitoris. He stroked her softly.

"I ... I want to feel you inside me," she whispered as she reached out to touch him, her hand encircling his cock. She began to stroke him slowly.

Snape hissed sharply between clenched teeth.

"I won't last long," he warned. "Not this first time. Let me please you first."

He continued to lightly rub her clitoris.

"It doesn't matter," she said as she placed a hand over his to still his movements. "I need *you* this first time, not an orgasm. Please, Severus. I need to feel you. Please."

Unable to resist her pleas, Snape shifted and moved over her. She parted her legs and reached down between their bodies to grasp his cock and guide him.

He groaned as he slid into her and felt her wet heat envelop him.

"Oh, Hermione," he murmured as he began to thrust slowly.

He'd been right; he hadn't lasted long that first time. When they'd made love a second time, though, he'd allowed himself a moment of masculine pride at the sight of her body writhing under his, and the feel of her pussy clenching around him as she climaxed. Then his own orgasm had begun, and he'd felt nothing but pleasure as he emptied himself into her again.

Much later, they were back in the kitchen. Hermione was sitting at the kitchen table wearing a long, dark blue velvet dressing gown that zipped from hem to neck. She had restored the glamour on her hair, but left her face unhidden. Snape was moving from refrigerator to stove, preparing a small meal. He was wearing his jeans and a

broadcloth shirt open at the neck. His feet were bare.

Snape wasn't surprised to hear the knock on her back door. Potter and Weasley had known that he'd planned to come to Hermione's today to bring her back to Hogwarts. He'd expected that they would come by to offer their good wishes before she underwent the procedure that would, hopefully, repair the damage done to her by Bellatrix Lestrange.

Hermione got to her feet and moved to the door.

"I thought you two would show up," she said as she opened the door.

"Hey, Hermione," Harry said. Then he looked from Hermione to Snape, taking in her dishabille and his open shirt collar and bare feet. His eyes narrowed. He longed to rail at her, but, as both she and Ron had reminded him, she was a grown witch and capable of making her own decisions. He shook his head, but made no further comment.

Ron, however, had no such reticence.

"It's about time you two got down to business," he said. "I thought I'd have to get one of the twin's lust potions and put it in your tea."

"Ron!" Hermione exclaimed, blushing furiously.

Snape turned toward Ron, brandishing his wand. "Although it's been years, Weasley, I still remember how to cast the Langlock Spell. You will cease your prattle. And you will refrain from speculating about my ... our ... personal relationship. Am I understood?"

"Not much speculation about it, is there?" Ron asked with a grin.

"Weasley!" Snape growled and raised his wand again.

"All right, all right," Ron said, holding up his hands in mock surrender.

Then he turned to Hermione and muttered under his breath, "I thought you said he had a sense of humour?"

Hermione grinned. "He does."

Then she put her arms around Ron's waist and gave him a hug. "Thank you," she whispered.

"You look happy," Ron said, pulling back a bit and looking into her eyes. "That's all that matters."

Then he turned to Harry. "Isn't that right, mate?"

Harry looked from Hermione to Snape once more. He knew he would never understand what she saw in him. But, he also knew that if he didn't accept their relationship, he would lose her friendship and, quite possibly, Ron's as well. He realised that any lingering dislike he felt for Snape was not worth that price. He drew a deep breath, and then he stepped over to her and wrapped his own arms around her.

"Yes, that's all that matters," he agreed.

Snape cleared his throat, and the three of them turned toward him.

"Dinner is ready. Would you gentlemen care to join us?" he asked.

"We sort of ate already," Ron said.

Snape arched his brow. "Whose turn was it to cook?"

"Mine," Ron answered.

Snape turned to Harry. He had surmised the internal battle that Potter had fought. If Potter could make an effort for Hermione's sake, he could as well.

"In that case, Potter, I'm sure I won't have to repeat the invitation."

Harry grinned. "No, sir, you won't."

When dinner was finished, and the last cleaning charm had been cast, Snape sent the three of them into the parlour.

"I'll bring in some brandy," he said.

He took his time getting the glasses down and setting them out on a tray. He wanted to give them a bit of time alone. The three of them shared a special bond of friendship. He knew how important that friendship was to Hermione, and how much she had missed it when she had isolated herself from the two young men. He also knew that no matter what happened in their own relationship, he would always have to share a part of her with them. He decided he could handle that if it meant having her in his life.

He poured out the brandy and then carried the tray into the parlour.

Harry and Ron were sitting on the sofa. Hermione was in the matching chair to the side. When Snape came into the parlour, Hermione got to her feet. She took two of the glasses from the tray and handed them to Harry and Ron.

Then she took her glass, and Snape took his. He set the empty tray down on the coffee table.

"Sit, Severus," she said.

Ron budged over to the side of the sofa, and Snape assumed Hermione would sit between the two young men.

He sat in the chair Hermione had vacated.

Instead of sitting on the sofa, however, Hermione perched on the arm of Snape's chair. She draped her arm along the back of the chair, her hand resting lightly on his shoulder.

Ron took a sip of the brandy and made a face.

"Is there something wrong with your drink, Weasley?" Snape asked, feigning a look of innocence.

"It's fine," Ron said. "I'm just not used to the taste, I guess."

"Brandy is the after dinner drink of civilised society," Snape said.

"I think I'd prefer an uncivilised beer, then," Ron replied.

"I think it's lovely," Hermione said.

"Enjoy it, Miss Granger," Snape said. "The one is all you're getting."

"He calls you 'Miss Granger'?" Harry said. "That seems rather formal considering ... well, considering."

Hermione smiled. "He doesn't always call me Miss Granger, do you, Severus?" She lifted her hand from the back of the chair to tangle in the dark hair at the nape of his neck.

Snape reached up and captured her hand in his. He brought it down to rest against his chest. "Not always," he replied with a small smile.

Ron stood up, draining his brandy glass in two quick swallows.

"I think its time for us to go, Harry," he said.

Harry stood up, finishing his brandy as well.

"We'll see you at Hogwarts tomorrow, then," he said.

"There is no need for you to leave," Snape said politely, although he was actually quite looking forward to their departure.

"Yes, there is," Hermione countered. "I've already spent enough time with them tonight and not nearly enough time with you." She leaned over and gave Snape quick kiss.

"Please, Hermione," he muttered.

Ron grinned at Snape's discomfiture, and even Harry had to smile a little.

Hermione got up and walked over to where Harry and Ron were standing.

"I'll see you both tomorrow," she said. She opened her arms, and Harry and Ron stepped into them.

They hugged briefly, and then she stepped away.

"Good night, Professor Snape," Ron said with a small wave in Snape's direction.

"See you," Harry said.

"Good night, gentlemen," Snape said as he got to his feet to come and stand beside Hermione.

Harry and Ron stepped back, and then the two of them disappeared.

Hermione turned into Snape's arms.

"Alone at last," she said with a wicked-looking grin.

"I can see I shall have to instruct you in the fine art of subtlety, Miss Granger," he said.

"You can instruct me later, Professor Snape," she said as she drew his head down to hers.

"Much, much later," he agreed, just seconds before his lips covered hers.

They fell asleep in each other's arms and woke up twice during the night to make love before falling asleep again.

When the morning sun fell in dappled patterns across the bed, Hermione awoke to find Snape leaning back against the headboard, watching her sleep.

"Good morning," she murmured, holding a hand across her mouth, mindful of her morning breath.

"Good morning," Snape replied.

"Do you need to use the loo before I do?" she asked.

"I've used it already," he said. "I've been awake for a while. I found the toothbrush you left for me. Thank you."

"That's what comes of having parents who are dentists. Oral hygiene and all that." She fidgeted a bit.

"Go use the loo before you burst," Snape said.

"I'll be right back," she said as she pushed the covers aside and got to her feet. She grabbed her dressing gown from the foot of the bed and slipped into it as she made her way to the bathroom.

Hermione smiled as she entered the bathroom. Even if he hadn't told her he'd already used the loo, she would have known. The toilet seat had been left up, and the toothpaste tube had been squeezed from the middle, though he had replaced the cap.

A few minutes later, when Hermione opened the door to the bedroom, she saw that Snape had moved down under the covers and had fallen back asleep. She tiptoed back out the door and made her way to the kitchen.

When she heard the shower running forty-five minutes later, she put the coffee on.

Snape was scowling when he entered the kitchen.

"Where are my clothes, Miss Granger?" he asked. He had a towel wrapped around his narrow hips.

"Are you always so grumpy in the morning, Severus?" Hermione asked as she walked over to him and slipped her arms around his waist. "I haven't stolen your clothes. I washed them. They're in the dryer now."

"I could have used a cleaning charm on them," Snape said. "And, I am not grumpy."

Hermione gave a very Snape-like snort. "Cleaning charms are fine once in a while, but I generally prefer my clothes washed with soap and water," she said.

"How long will the drying cycle take?" he asked.

"About an hour, why?"

"I could simply Apparate back to my home and retrieve another set of clothing," he said.

"Or, we could go back to bed, and let the dryer do its work," Hermione suggested as she toyed with the knot on his towel.

Snape tugged the zipper on the front of her dressing gown down and slid his hand inside to cup her breast.

"Well, there is that," he said.

An hour later, Snape, wearing his freshly washed and dried clothing, was standing at the stove stirring a pot of porridge.

"No eggs this morning?" Hermione asked, coming up behind him and pressing her breasts against his back. Her hands wrapped around his waist and began to work at the button on his jeans.

"It's nearly noon, you wanton hussy," Snape said as he turned and wrapped his arms around her.

"That's not what you were calling me a few minutes ago," she said with a smile.

"Yes ... a few *minutes* ago. I'm not eighteen, woman. I need time to recuperate."

Hermione brushed her hands against the front of his jeans.

"You seem fully recuperated to me," she purred. "Take me back to bed, Severus."

"What about the porridge?" he asked.

"Bugger the porridge!"

Snape peered into the pot sitting on the stove. The porridge had congealed into an unappetising mass.

"*Evanesco*," he muttered, banishing the contents of the pot.

"So, what's for breakfast?" Hermione asked.

"Lunch," Snape answered as he rummaged through the refrigerator.

"So, what's for lunch?"

"You're having broth," Snape said. "I'm having at least three ham sandwiches and a large draught of Strengthening Solution."

"Broth? Just broth?"

"If you had let me prepare you a decent breakfast, instead of sexually assaulting me, you wouldn't be so hungry now."

"I wasn't hungry earlier, not for food, at least," she said with a smile.

"Well, it's too late now. Your stomach needs to be empty for the procedure tomorrow."

"Surely a paltry ham sandwich will have made its way out of my stomach by tomorrow morning."

"Broth," Snape repeated.

"You've been trying to get me to eat for a year; now that I'm finally hungry you're starving me," she grumbled.

"You'll not make me feel guilty," Snape insisted. "Your stomach must be empty. I won't have you vomiting and possibly aspirating your stomach contents."

Hermione blanched. "Suddenly, I'm not very hungry at all," she muttered.

"Broth?" Snape asked.

"Broth," she replied.

By the time they arrived at Hogwarts, it was nearly two o'clock. Harry and Ron were pacing around just outside the circle of stones that marked the Apparition area.

"There you are. We were about to send out a search party," Harry said.

"Sorry," Hermione said with a slight blush. "We were ... uh ..."

"Doing laundry," Snape interjected.

Ron guffawed loudly. "Well, that's a different name for it."

"You didn't have to wait here for us, you know," Hermione said.

"We were in the infirmary for a while," Ron said, "but Madam Pomfrey was driving us barmy."

"And Professor Flitwick isn't much better," Harry added.

As they stepped out of the stone circle, Snape turned to Hermione and cast the Disillusionment Charm on her.

"I'll be glad when I don't have to hide like this anymore," Hermione said.

"Once you are ensconced in the infirmary, I will remove the charm," Snape said. "Poppy and I will ward a private room for you. No one will even know you're there."

Although they had done their animal work in the Room of Requirement, Poppy had been insistent that Hermione be treated in the infirmary. Since the students were gone for the Christmas holidays, the infirmary was deserted.

"Why can't I stay in your quarters tonight?" Hermione asked as she came out of the loo wearing the hospital gown that Madam Pomfrey had provided.

"That would be most inappropriate, Miss Granger," Snape replied. "Besides, Poppy needs to run some tests, and I have to prepare the potions we need to render you unconscious for the procedure."

"I could help you with them," Hermione said as she climbed into the hospital bed.

"You would be a distraction," Snape insisted as he tucked the covers up under her chin. "You would be a pleasant distraction, to be sure, but a distraction just the same."

"Oh, Severus, you say the sweetest things," Hermione teased.

"Did you tell your parents about the procedure?" Snape asked, ignoring her comment.

"I told them I was going away for a few days. They're in France already, but my mum usually calls me a few times a week. I didn't want her getting my answering machine and becoming worried about me."

"Why didn't you tell them the truth?" Snape asked.

"My mum is still insisting I see a plastic surgeon. If ... if this doesn't work, I'm going to do it. I hope to be able to present her with *fait accompli* when they return from their holiday."

There was a knock on the door, and Snape walked over to open it.

Harry and Ron spilled into the room.

Ron brandished a deck of cards. "We thought we'd play a few games of Exploding Snap with you," he said. "It'll help pass the time."

"I should go work on my calculations," Snape said.

Snape hesitated, his hand still on the doorknob as he looked over at Hermione.

"Go on and kiss her goodbye, then," Ron said. "You know you want to."

He scowled at Ron, but moved over to stand beside the bed. He bent down rather stiffly and placed a kiss on her forehead. "I'll be back later."

He nodded at Harry and Ron and then left, closing the door behind him.

"I hope he does better than that when you're alone," Ron said as he pulled a chair over to the bed and began shuffling the cards.

"He's not comfortable with public displays of affection," she said.

"Thank God," Harry muttered as he sat on the other side of the bed.

Many hours later, Snape returned to Hermione's room. She was sitting up in bed with a book open on her lap.

"I thought your friends would still be here," he said as he came into the room. He closed the door and warded it so that they would not be disturbed.

"I sent them down to the kitchens to cadge a meal. I told them to go home after they ate. I can only play Exploding Snap for so long before I'm ready to explode myself."

Snape smiled at that. He went and sat next to the bed. He reached over and took Hermione's hand in his.

"Did Poppy do all her tests?" he asked.

"She did them as soon as Harry and Ron left. She says I'm in excellent health and should come through the procedure fine. I think she's more nervous about it than I am."

"Poppy is a very caring individual. She's not afraid of failing for her own sake, but for yours. She would feel responsible."

"Professor Flitwick explained everything to me. I know that there's a chance the procedure won't be one-hundred percent successful because my injury is so old. The scar tissue is deeper in some places and may be impossible to repair. I would never hold Madam Pomfrey responsible. There is only one person to blame for my condition, and she's already dead."

Snape drew a deep breath. "It will be painful, Hermione. Even with the pain potion and the healing potion, it will be painful."

"Because the injury is so deep, right?"

"Yes, that's what Filius believes."

"It was painful when it happened. I ... I was screaming with the pain."

"It's not too late to change your mind. You have become ... accustomed ... to your appearance, and you know it doesn't bother me."

"That would be letting Bellatrix Lestrange win. Isn't that what you told me?"

"Yes, but that was before I realised how much I care for you. Now, I want to spare you the pain."

"I'm tired of hiding, Severus. I miss my magic. I miss it much more than I ever dreamed I would. I want to return to the wizarding world."

"You could still return," he insisted.

"I have to return on my own terms. I'll never feel right if I don't go through with this, if I let her win. I can bear the pain."

"It's late," Snape said a moment later. "You should be sleeping."

"Madam Pomfrey left me something to help me fall asleep," Hermione said indicating the vial sitting on the table by her bed.

"Why haven't you taken it?" Snape asked.

"I knew you would come in to say goodnight to me. I wanted to see you."

Snape picked up the vial and handed it to her.

"Well, now you've seen me. Drink."

"Will you sit with me until I fall asleep?" she asked.

"Of course I will," he replied.

Hermione tipped the vial back and swallowed the contents.

"Did you make this?" she asked as she handed the empty vial to him.

"I make all of Poppy's potions," Snape said.

"I'm glad," she said. "I'm glad I'll be taking your potions tomorrow. I know they're the best." Her eyes drifted closed.

"Sleep, Hermione," Snape whispered.

"Kiss me goodnight," she said, forcing her eyes open.

Snape leaned over and placed a gentle kiss on her lips.

"I love you, Severus," she murmured in a low, sleepy voice.

Before he could reply, she was asleep.

Ten

Chapter 10 of 10

Hermione Granger has been absent from the wizarding world for more than five years. When Severus Snape runs into her in a Muggle bookstore, he discovers why. An old promise made to Albus Dumbledore prompts Snape to offer his help to his former student.

This was written for the HG/SS holiday exchange on Live Journal. This was the prompt I chose: #71. Fic: Post-war Hermione and Severus are both doomed to spend Xmas alone until they run into each other in Diagon Alley or London. How, why, and what happens next is up to you. Happy ending, please. Any rating. This prompt was submitted by GinnyWeasley31, and the story is dedicated to her.

Disclaimer: All publicly recognisable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. The author is in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended.

Special thanks to my beta reader, JuJuJenn. And thanks to Illyria who did some Brit-picking for me. Any errors, however, are mine alone.

Ten

When Hermione woke up, it was morning. She could see the sun shining in through the curtains. Before she could do more than throw the covers back, Madam Pomfrey bustled into the room.

"You're awake, Miss Granger," the matron said. "That's good. I was just coming in to rouse you. We're almost ready to begin. You need to go use the loo. Your bladder should be empty before we start since you'll probably be asleep for hours."

Hermione was quite happy to follow Madam Pomfrey's instructions and headed to the small bathroom.

"May I brush my teeth?" she asked.

"Yes, but don't swallow any water. Rinse and spit only."

When she came out, Madam Pomfrey handed her a clean gown.

"Put this on, dear, and then get back into bed. I have to run one final scan. I need to give your exact weight to Professor Snape so he can mix the potions we need in the proper proportions."

Poppy ran her scan and then left to give the results to Snape.

Ten minutes later, Snape entered her room carrying three vials. He put the vials down on the table next to the bed. Then, mindful that Poppy could enter the room at any moment, he leaned over and gave her a quick kiss.

"Good morning, Hermione," he said.

"You look terrible," Hermione said. "Didn't you sleep at all last night?"

"I spent most of the night going over my calculations."

"You should have slept."

"I'll sleep once the procedure is done."

Before Hermione could say any more, Madam Pomfrey was back.

"We're ready to begin, Severus," she said to Snape.

Snape nodded and reached to pick up the first vial.

"This is a healing potion," he explained to Hermione. "We'll get some of this into your system before we start the procedure."

Hermione obediently swallowed the contents, grimacing at the taste.

Snape handed her a second vial. "This is a pain killing potion. Although you won't feel anything during the procedure, you will when you awaken. By taking the pain killing potion now, we're getting a head start on the pain."

Hermione drank that potion, as well.

Snape picked up the last vial.

"This is the Draught of Living Death. It will render you unconscious in seconds. You will remain unconscious for approximately six hours. That will give Poppy and Filius plenty of time to work on repairing your injury."

Hermione clutched the vial tightly in her hand. Now that the final moment was at hand, she was struck with a sudden attack of nerves.

"Will ... will you be here when I wake up?" she asked in a tremulous voice.

"Where else would I be?" he asked.

And then, heedless of the fact that Poppy was still standing on the other side of the bed, he leaned down and kissed her. "I won't leave your side, I promise," he whispered.

Hermione smiled, lifted the vial to her lips, and drank.

The first thing Hermione became aware of was the pain. It surged through her body in agonising waves that blocked out the awareness of anything else. Her mind rebelled against having to endure such agony and retreated back down into the dark well of unconsciousness.

The next time she floated toward consciousness, the pain returned. Once again, she retreated.

She could hear voices. She tried to open her eyes, but the pain pushed against her. She opened her mouth to shriek out her agony, but if she made any sound, she couldn't hear it above the screaming in her own head.

The voices were back. They seemed to be coming from a great distance. She tried to focus her attention on the voices, trying to determine who they belonged to and what they were saying.

"Why hasn't she woken up?"

That sounds like Harry. What is Harry doing in my bedroom?

"Flitwick can't explain it. He says none of the test animals reacted this way."

That's definitely Ron's voice.

She wanted to hear more, but the pain was starting to bite into the edge of her brain. She let herself fall back down into the darkness.

"You'll be of no use to Miss Granger if you collapse from malnutrition and exhaustion." Hermione recognised Professor McGonagall's voice. "Poppy says you haven't eaten, you haven't slept, and you've barely been away from her side long enough to use the loo."

"I promised her I wouldn't leave her."

That sounds like Professor Snape. No, not Professor Snape anymore. Severus. Severus, the man I love.

"No one expected her to remain unconscious for so long."

"I'm not leaving her, Minerva. I promised to be here when she woke up, and I will be."

Poor Severus. He sounds exhausted.

"Severus ..."

"I promised to take care of her. I promised. Instead, I've ... I've put her into a coma."

He won't leave until I wake up. He promised. He's a man of honour. He'll keep his promise, even if it kills him.

"It's not your fault ..."

"Whose bloody fault is it, then? My calculations were obviously flawed."

He's blaming himself! He thinks I'm not waking up because he made a mistake!

"Both Filius and Poppy double-checked your calculations. They were spot-on."

"Then why hasn't she awakened?"

"Mr. Potter is going to call her parents if she's not awake by tonight."

Oh don't do that! Don't ruin their holiday!

"Severus ... perhaps she should be transferred to St. Mungo's."

No, please. I want to stay here with Severus.

"Go away, Minerva! Go away and leave us alone!"

Hermione heard the faint tap-tapping of heels as Professor McGonagall walked out of the room.

"I'm so sorry, Hermione," she heard him whisper.

Not your fault, Severus. Not you. It's the pain. It's so much worse than I ever dreamed it would be.

"I won't leave you. Minerva will have to cast The Imperius to make me leave you."

You're exhausted. You need to sleep.

Hermione felt the pain begin to gnaw at her. She wanted to pull back, to sink back into the peaceful, painless darkness.

I won't let the pain win! I won't!

Hermione reached deep inside herself to draw upon the courage and strength and magical energy she knew resided there. She was a witch! She was a Gryffindor! She had faced the Dark Lord and his minions and survived. She would not be beaten by a little pain. She would not retreat again!

"Severus," she whispered.

"Hermione!"

He jumped to his feet, rushing for the door.

"Poppy! Poppy! Come quickly! She's awake!"

Snape was shouting. She wanted to tell him to stop shouting. The pain was trying to drag her back down. She pushed it away.

"Severus."

"Yes, yes, I'm here," he said, coming back to sit by her bed. "Can you open your eyes?"

Hermione lifted lids that felt weighted with lead.

"You look like shite," she muttered.

Snape dropped his head into his hands and began to laugh.

Just then, Poppy bustled into the room.

"It's about time, Miss Granger," she said, but the tears sparkling on her lower lashes belied her brusqueness.

"Severus, move aside and let me examine her."

"No!" Hermione thought she had shouted, but it came out a strangled whisper. She moved her hand feebly, seeking out Severus's hand. When she found it, she wrapped her fingers around his and held on.

"Work around me, Poppy," Snape said. "I'm not moving."

Poppy sniffed, but worked around him. She ran her wand up and down over Hermione, muttering the diagnostic incantations.

"Her heart rate is a bit elevated," Poppy said.

"Dangerously so?" Snape asked sharply.

"No. I think she's still in a lot of pain."

Hermione tried to nod, but every movement caused the white-hot agony to intensify even more.

"If we give her a pain relieving potion, it may render her unconscious again," Poppy said.

"Prepare some cold compresses," Snape said. "Soak them in the herbal solution you use to ease muscle pulls and deep bruises."

"Excellent suggestion, Severus," Poppy said and hurried off to prepare the compresses.

She felt the chilled flannel touch her face. Then the soothing, aromatic scent of herbs drifted up her nose. The pain, which had been teasing at the edge of her mind, retreated a little.

"Nice," she managed to whisper.

"My own blend," Snape said as he watched Poppy place another compress across her shoulder and over her chest.

"Like the tea."

"Yes, like the tea," he agreed.

"How long?"

"How long have you been unconscious?"

"Yes. How long?"

"Two days," Snape said.

"I'm going to let you visit for a few minutes," Poppy said. "Then Miss Granger will need to rest."

"Of course, Poppy," Snape agreed.

When the matron had left the room, Hermione carefully turned her head to look at Snape.

"Did it work?"

"We should wait and have this discussion when you're more wide awake and in less pain," Snape said.

"The compresses are helping a lot," Hermione said. "The pain is manageable and I'm feeling quite wide awake. Now, did it work?"

"The damage was very deep ..." Snape began.

"I understand," she said, but she felt the absurd sting of tears behind her eyelids. All this pain, and it hadn't worked.

"Professor Flitwick must be disappointed. Tell him I'm sorry," she said in a voice thick with unshed tears.

"Will you let me finish, Miss Granger?" Snape said as he arched a brow at her.

"Sorry, Professor," she said.

"As I was saying, the damage was very deep. It took Poppy much longer to re-melt and re-distribute the subcutaneous tissue than we had thought it would take. This was especially true of the tissue on your breast. Poppy did as much as she could, but you will still have some scarring there."

"And my face?" Hermione asked in a hopeful tone.

"Your face is completely restored. There is some residual discolouration, but that should fade. Your eyelid no longer sags. Your lip no longer droops. Your shoulder, your

neck, and your upper chest are smooth and look perfectly normal. Your breast tissue was the most damaged and took the longest to repair. It took so long that it was necessary to administer another dose of the Draught of Living Death."

"You thought you gave me too much."

"I was beginning to believe that, yes. You were unconscious for so long."

"I actually sort of woke up a couple of times. Once I heard Harry and Ron talking. I wanted to wake up, but I was afraid of the pain. Then I heard you and Professor McGonagall talking."

"You heard us?"

"Yes. You were blaming yourself for my ... my coma. When I heard that, I knew I had to wake up. You were blaming yourself when it was my own cowardice keeping me unconscious. I'm sorry, Severus. I'm so sorry."

Snape had to swallow a couple of times before he could speak. He squeezed her hand gently, and then he raised it to his lips.

"You have nothing to apologise for, Hermione."

"I caused you needless anguish because I was afraid of a little pain."

"The mind is a tricky thing. You were protecting yourself. For that, I am grateful. I know what pain can do to a person's body. I know what it can do to a person's mind, as well. You could have ended up like the Longbottoms."

"I'm still sorry you felt responsible. You weren't, you know."

"There was plenty of blame to go around. Poppy has been nearly inconsolable. She felt she should have stopped the procedure when she saw how deep the damage was. Filius blames himself for not fine-tuning the Remasking Charm enough. We've all three of us been wallowing in doubt and self-blame."

"Well, you're to stop immediately."

Snape smiled. "I'll be sure to relay your orders to Poppy and Filius."

"What about my scalp and my hair?" Hermione asked.

Hermione lifted a hand to her head, but the healing compress covered it completely.

"You said that most people didn't think your hair was your best feature."

"I know you must think me silly to be so concerned over *hair*," she said.

"You seem to have perfected the minor glamour for your hair," Snape said.

"I suppose that's a good thing," Hermione said.

"It would be if you were ever going to need it again."

"If I were ever going to need it again?"

Snape smiled and kissed her hand again. "There was some follicle damage. Filius and Poppy worked together to restore the undamaged follicles, and then they actually transplanted some follicles from the other side of your scalp. Filius then cast a hair growth charm. You now have a full head of hair, although it is not quite as thick as it used to be. And you might want to refine your hairstyle a bit; hairdressing is definitely not one of Filius's many talents."

"No more bushy hair?" Hermione asked.

"Well, certainly not as bushy as it used to be," he said with a smile.

"When will I be able to see what I look like?"

"If you can curb your impatience, it would probably be better to wait until later. You still have some swelling and some bruising. The compresses will help, and in a few hours you will have a much better idea of your true appearance."

A knock at the door interrupted them before Hermione could raise an objection to being forced to wait.

"That's probably Potter and Weasley," Snape said. "Are you up to seeing them?"

"Just for a few minutes," Hermione said.

"Enter!" Snape said loudly, and the door swung open.

Harry and Ron rushed over to the bed.

"You're finally awake," Ron said.

"You had us worried, you know," Harry said.

"I'm sorry I worried you," Hermione said. She reached out her hand, and Harry bent over the bed to give her a gentle hug.

When it was Ron's turn, he gave her a grin. "What's with the turban, Hermione? Are you doing your Quirrell impression? It's Christmas, you know, not Halloween."

"Christmas? It's Christmas?" Hermione asked.

"Well, it's Christmas Eve, actually," Harry said. "Or it will be in a few hours. It's about two o'clock in the afternoon."

Hermione turned to Snape. "When you said I'd been unconscious for two days, I didn't actually connect that to the date. I thought I'd be home for Christmas Eve."

"Did you forget to send your aunt her Christmas present?" Snape asked with a smile. "I don't believe I'm up to Apparating to Wales tonight to deliver it."

"Wales? You couldn't Apparate across the room in your current state," Hermione said. "I posted it more than a week ago, and you still look like shite."

Harry and Ron laughed. "He hasn't left your bedside for more than two minutes at a go since Madam Pomfrey finished working on you," Ron said.

"You need to get some sleep, Severus," Hermione said.

"Watch out, Professor Snape," Harry said, "she's using her bossy voice on you."

"Actually, at this point I'm inclined to agree with her," Snape said. Then he yawned widely. "Excuse me."

Just then, Madam Pomfrey came into the room.

"Visiting hours are over for the nonce," she said.

"We just came in for a minute, Madam Pomfrey," Harry said. "We weren't going to stay."

"I'm going to change those compresses, Miss Granger, and then I want you to sleep for a few hours."

"But I've just woken up," Hermione protested.

"You need a *natural* sleep," Madam Pomfrey insisted.

Then she turned to Snape. "And you need to sleep as well, Severus."

"Yes, Poppy," Severus replied in a resigned tone that had both Harry and Ron grinning.

"I've prepared a bed for you in the room next door to this one. Go use it."

Snape got to his feet. He leaned over and gave Hermione a gentle kiss on the cheek not swathed in compresses.

"I'll be back at seven o'clock, Hermione. With Poppy's permission we'll have a light supper."

Snape turned to Madam Pomfrey who nodded.

"In the meantime," he said, turning back to Hermione, "you must rest, as well."

"I will, Severus."

Snape was swaying with exhaustion as he made his way to the door. Ron moved to his side and took his elbow.

"Let me give you a hand, sir," Ron said.

Snape glared for a moment, and it seemed he would shake off the help. Then he nodded.

"Thank you, Weasley," he said and let the younger wizard guide him out of the room.

"Harry, I need a favour before you go," Hermione said.

"What is it, Hermione?" Harry asked as Hermione motioned him to lean over her.

She whispered into his ear.

Harry smiled. "Where should I leave it?"

"Just put it in the drawer there," she said, indicating the small table by the side of the bed.

"I'll try not to disturb you when I come back."

"Thanks, Harry."

Harry nodded and then left the room.

Hermione slept deeply, but it was a normal, natural sleep, not one induced by potions or spells. When she woke up, she felt much better.

Madam Pomfrey must have had a monitoring spell on her because she entered Hermione's room only seconds after she woke up.

"How do you feel, Miss Granger?" Madam Pomfrey asked, passing her wand over Hermione.

"Better, Madam Pomfrey. The compresses have really helped with the pain. The herbs are very soothing."

"I can't believe I didn't think of that myself," Madam Pomfrey muttered.

"Severus told me that you were upset because you thought you had done something wrong," Hermione said.

"Oh, my dear," Madam Pomfrey said, blinking back tears, "I feared I had made a grave error in judgement. I ... I started thinking like a woman, instead of a nurse. I wanted to restore your breast. I should have stopped the procedure once I realised how deep the damage was. I risked your life ..."

"Please, Madam Pomfrey," Hermione interrupted. "I understand. I'm very grateful for what you did. Severus says my face, my neck, and my shoulder have been completely restored. And even my hair is better."

"I'm going to remove the compresses now. Would you like to see to see how everything looks?"

"Oh, please!" Hermione said.

Madam Pomfrey removed all the compresses and used a soft flannel to gently dry Hermione's skin. She helped her into a fresh gown, and then she used a soft bristled brush to smooth out Hermione's hair.

Hermione had to bite her lip to keep from crying out. Although not anywhere near as painful as it had been, her scalp was still very sensitive.

"I'm afraid Filius isn't much of a hair stylist," Madam Pomfrey said as she handed Hermione a hand mirror.

Hermione held the mirror on her lap, and then she drew a deep breath and raised it.

"Oh, my," was all Hermione could say as she looked in the mirror.

The hideous folds of lumpy tissue were gone. Her eyelid didn't sag. Her lip didn't droop and was as full and perfect as it had ever been. There was still a slight redness on her cheeks and forehead, but even if that never faded, with a little cosmetic help, it would barely be noticeable.

Her hair! Hermione touched her hair. It waved softly and fell from a side part down to her shoulders. It wasn't nearly as thick as it had been before her injury, but it also

wasn't as bushy.

Severus and Madam Pomfrey had been right about Professor Flitwick's hair styling skills. Her hair was uneven in length and the ends looked like they'd been chopped off with a pair of pruning shears.

"It's ... it's *beautiful*," Hermione said as she fingered the wavy locks.

"Filius will be pleased that you think so," Madam Pomfrey said.

"I'd hoped he'd stop by to see me," Hermione said. "I would like to thank him for all he's done for me."

"Oh, he'll show up eventually. He was very concerned about you. He didn't sleep much more than Severus did while you were unconscious. When you finally awakened, he was quite overcome. I gave him a sedative and sent him to bed," she said with a small smile.

"Now, would you like to see your breast?"

"Yes."

Madam Pomfrey carefully lifted Hermione's gown.

Hermione drew a deep breath and looked down.

The smooth skin that covered her chest and the top swell of her breast began to pucker a little about halfway to her nipple. The puckering was a little worse closer to her nipple, but it wasn't nearly as bad as it had been before the procedure.

"I'm sorry I couldn't do a better job of it," Madam Pomfrey said. Her bottom lip was trembling and there were tears glistening on her bottom lashes.

Hermione smoothed the hospital gown back down over herself. She reached out and took Madam Pomfrey's hand in hers.

"It's wonderful, Madam Pomfrey," Hermione declared. "I'll even be able to wear a swim suit, as long as it's a modest one. It looks so much better than it did before."

"I had hoped ... I mean, you are so young and you'll want to have a ... a relationship some day. Men can sometimes be ... immature ... when it comes to a woman's body."

"The only man whose opinion means anything has already seen me. My damaged breast didn't matter to him then, and it won't matter now," Hermione insisted.

Madam Pomfrey smiled. "He's a good man, Hermione. I've known him since he was a first-year. All elbows, knees, and attitude. It broke my heart to see the way his family abandoned him. And then he had to endure the Dark Lord's torture when he was spying for Albus." She nearly shuddered. "He deserves some happiness after all he's been through."

"I think so, too."

"Oh, I shouldn't be discussing this with you!"

"Quite right," drawled a voice from the doorway.

"Severus!" Madam Pomfrey squealed. Then she flushed. "I'm ... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been discussing your personal affairs with Miss Granger."

"You shouldn't be discussing them with anyone," Snape said. "As it happens, Hermione already knows a bit of my history, so you haven't let any of the skeletons out of my closet. I draw the line at you gossiping about me with Potter and Weasley, however."

"I would *never* ..."

Snape just arched his brow at her.

"Oh, go on with you," Madam Pomfrey said, finally catching the glint of amusement in Snape's eye.

"How is she, Poppy?" Snape asked.

"Hello," Hermione said, waving her hand. "I'm right here, you know. Why don't you just ask me?"

Snape turned. "I want a medical opinion, Miss Granger, not your optimistic posturings."

"Oh, I can see a few hours of sleep have sharpened your tongue," Hermione retorted.

"And yours, as well," he replied.

"I thought you two liked each other," Madam Pomfrey said with a small chuckle.

"We do. Now, how is she, Poppy?"

"She's doing very well. Her heart rate is back down to normal. There is no sign of infection, and there are no lingering effects from the Draught of Living Death. Her neural responses are completely normal, and she isn't having any memory problems, either. She is managing the pain without potions, though I will administer a weak pain killing potion and a low dose of a sleeping draught later. I want her to sleep through the night."

"How soon will I be able to leave the infirmary?" Hermione asked.

"If no problems arise, you may leave on Boxing Day," Madam Pomfrey said.

"Not tomorrow?" Hermione pleaded.

"You will remain here as long as Poppy thinks you should," Snape said in a firm voice.

"I was looking forward to something *French* for Christmas dinner," Hermione said with a smile.

"I will arrange for the house-elves to serve you *Potage des Poulet*," Snape said.

"Chicken soup? I'm getting chicken soup for Christmas dinner?"

"At least there will be some *poulet* in it. You could be drinking just broth, you know. You haven't eaten anything in three days. You need to let your digestive system adjust to food gradually. Isn't that right, Poppy?"

"Quite right. Tonight you'll have tea and toast only. As a matter of fact, it should be here any moment."

Even as she spoke, a house-elf popped in carrying a tray.

Snape took it from him and placed it across Hermione's lap. He lifted the cover off to reveal a pot of tea and a small plate with two pieces of toast on it.

"I'm going to leave you in Professor Snape's care for a while, Miss Granger," Madam Pomfrey said. "My own dinner awaits me."

"Thank you, Madam Pomfrey," Hermione said. "Thank you for everything."

"I'll be back around ten o'clock to settle you in for the night. If you need me before then, however, all you have to do is call my name."

"Enjoy your dinner, Poppy," Snape said. "I'll see to her until you return."

She nodded and then left the room, closing the door behind her.

By the time Madam Pomfrey had closed the door, Snape was leaning over Hermione.

"You look much better," he said, kissing her softly.

"So do you," she responded.

"It's amazing what a difference a shower and few hours sleep can make."

"I wouldn't know about the shower part," Hermione said. "Madam Pomfrey hasn't let me out of bed, except to use the loo. She says I'll be able to take a shower in the morning. I feel grubby."

"You don't look the least bit grubby," Snape assured her.

"Now drink your tea and eat your toast before they go stone cold."

"Aren't you going to eat anything?" Hermione asked as she picked up a piece of toast and took a bite.

"I had a rather more substantial meal than tea and toast when I woke up, but I had it in the kitchens. I didn't want to eat a large meal in front of you."

He watched her take a few more bites of the toast.

"That was very thoughtful of you," Hermione said, "though I doubt it would have bothered me. I thought I was ravenous, but after half a piece of toast, I'm full."

"Your appetite will return," he said as he lifted the tray off her lap and put it aside.

"Will your friends be coming by to see you this evening?" Snape asked as he sat on the chair beside her bed.

"No. They're going to the Burrow. They were going to come by, but I asked them not to."

"Why?"

"I told them I wanted to spend the evening with you."

"Potter must have been thrilled," Snape said.

"Harry has accepted our relationship," Hermione said. "Surely, you can see that."

Snape was thoughtful for a moment. "Yes, I can see that he is a lot less hostile than he used to be. I can even understand his attitude. He is protective of you."

"Yes, he is. He'll respect my wishes in this case, though, because he knows I've made up my mind."

"You have, have you?" Snape said.

"Yes. I love you, Severus. I want to be a part of your life for as long as you will allow me to be."

Snape took her hand in his.

"Will forever be long enough for you?" he asked.

"What?"

"Will you be a part of my life forever, Hermione?" he asked raising her hand to his lips and kissing it. "Will you marry me?"

Hermione blinked to hold back her tears.

"Yes, Severus, I will marry you," she said simply.

Snape leaned over and kissed her lips gently. Then he reached into his pocket and drew out a small velvet box.

"I know that a diamond is the traditional stone used for engagement rings, but I hope you will accept this instead," he said as he opened the box and handed it to her.

"It's beautiful," Hermione breathed as she gazed at the ring.

"Since ancient times, the ruby has been thought to have great magical powers. Its colour was believed to come from an undying flame. It was believed that possessing a ruby allowed one to move and live safely among one's enemies. It was thought to possess healing powers, such as the ability to stop bleeding. Albus was a firm believer in the ancient magicks. He carried this stone during his fight against Grindelwald. He gave it to me when I began working for the Order of the Phoenix."

"Oh, Severus ... I could never take this, then. It has been your talisman for years!"

"It has performed its magic for me. I worked for the Order right under the Dark Lord's nose and came through the war relatively unscathed. I spoke to Albus, and I know he would be happy to see you wearing it."

Snape swallowed hard as he remembered his conversation with Albus's portrait.

"The ruby stands for fidelity, and I will be faithful to you, Hermione. It also stands for joy and comfort. Those two things have been sadly lacking in my life, but I know that you will give me both. Will you wear my ring as a symbol of our betrothal?"

"How could I refuse such an eloquent and heartfelt proposal?" she asked.

Snape took the platinum band with the perfect ruby and slipped it on her finger.

"How did you know my size?" she asked.

"I asked your mum, of course," he said.

"My mum? You've talked to my mum about ... about us?"

"I sought your father's permission to propose to you, and he granted it. I would have proceeded without it, but for the sake of future familial peace, I'm glad he approved."

"When did you speak to them?"

"Four days before the Christmas holidays. I caught them packing for their trip to France. I had the stone set into this ring the next day."

"That was before we ... before we made love the first time."

"Our making love isn't what prompted my decision to propose to you. I had planned to ask you tonight before I even arrived on your doorstep that day. And I had planned to ask you tonight regardless of the outcome of your procedure," he assured her.

"I told you that day that I wasn't sure what love was, that I didn't know if I'd ever be able to speak the words ..."

"And I told you I didn't need the words," Hermione said. "I didn't need them then, and I don't need them now."

"I need to say them. When you were unconscious for so long, I was afraid I would never get the opportunity."

He paused a moment before he spoke again.

"I will never be effusive. It is not in my nature to spout poetry or sprinkle rose petals."

Hermione smiled at the mental image of Severus Snape sprinkling rose petals.

"I love you, Hermione."

"There, you've said it," Hermione said.

Snape blew out a sharp breath. "Yes, I've said it, and my knees are still shaking. I may never work up the courage to say it again."

"I will consider it an on-going declaration, then," Hermione said. "You'll let me know if you ever stop?"

She smiled up at him.

"I won't ever stop, but yes, if I do, I'll be sure to let you know." He smiled back at her.

"And you won't mind if I tell you that I love you? You won't get tired of hearing it?"

"Never."

Hermione raised her hand and wiggled her fingers, watching the candlelight reflect from the blood-red depths of the ruby.

"This makes my Christmas present to you seem rather insignificant in comparison," she said.

"Nothing from you could ever be insignificant," he replied.

"And you said you would never be effusive," she teased.

Hermione reached into the drawer in the small table by her bed and retrieved the box that Harry had placed there.

The box was wrapped in silver paper. A dark green ribbon wound around it and was tied in a simple bow on the top.

"My mum makes all these fancy bows," Hermione said as she handed him the box, "but I never quite got the knack of it."

"Something you can't do? That must be humbling," he said.

"Very."

Snape untied the ribbon, and the silver paper fell away from the box. He opened the lid and reached inside.

"*The Dashiell Hammett Omnibus*," Snape read.

"I looked through your bookshelves to make sure you didn't already have a copy," Hermione said.

"This is a very rare book. It certainly wasn't available at Grant and Cutler, or any other London booksellers."

"One of the advantages of having internet access," Hermione said with a smile. "I bought it on Amazon."

"I'm sure you're not referring to the river in South America."

"No."

"Thank you, Hermione," he said, leaning over to give her a kiss.

"You're welcome."

Snape put the box aside and began to leaf through the book.

"There's one more thing in the box," Hermione said.

"There is?" Snape said, picking the box up again and shaking it.

"Under the tissue paper," Hermione said.

Snape lifted out the tissue paper and then reached inside the box.

"You said you never had one," Hermione said. She was biting her bottom lip. Did he think it, and her, silly and juvenile?

Snape looked at Hermione, the woman he loved, the woman who had just agreed to become his wife, and he marvelled at the turn his life had taken.

She had remembered one remark, a remark he had made in passing a year before, and had acted to fulfil a childhood longing.

"Happy Christmas, Severus."

"Happy Christmas, Hermione," he said as he hugged her, the red woollen stocking clutched in his hand.

The End

Author's Note: I took a bit of literary licence with the meanings for a ruby. According to the Service Merchandise web page, the ruby stands for fidelity, contentment, and calmness. I thought contentment and calmness were close enough to comfort and joy to work for this story. Everything else I wrote about the purported properties of the ruby is correct.