

Memento Amori

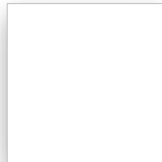
by Olethros

COMPLETE. A vicious attack leaves Hermione Granger unable to form new memories. Against all odds, she and Severus Snape must work together on a weapon that could destroy Voldemort. Yet how can she grow to trust him when her past is unknown and her present is forever uncertain? Together they learn that nothing is exactly as it seems and that hope remains in even the most desperate times. Post-HBP. Narrative structure and concept from Christopher Nolan's film Memento.

Catharsis

Chapter 1 of 17

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Disclaimer: If you recognize it, it belongs to Rowling and Nolan. I just take the characters out to play.

PLEASE READ THIS FIRST: You are about to read a story unlike any you have ever read before.

This plot bunny came to me as I was brushing my teeth one morning (c. August 20, 2006) and would not stop gnawing at my ankles until after I had typed the entire first chapter out in one sitting.

The format belongs wholly to Christopher Nolan's brilliant movie *Memento*. The gist is that the main character suffers brain trauma in such a way that he can remember everything up until the incident but for forever afterwards, he cannot form new memories and forgets everything after a specified length of time. He makes do with Polaroids, notes, and tattoos, but inevitably, some things slip through the cracks.

The movie is told backwards, so that the audience has as little idea of what's going on sometimes as the main character. This story shall follow a similar model as Hermione stumble through life, only able to remember 30 minutes of life at a time.

The first half of each chapter tells the story from the chronological beginning. The second half of each chapter tells the same story from the chronological end. In the very

last chapter, the storylines will merge together. Timestamps have been added to help you follow the timeline.

I am well aware that this structure invites confusion, but I implore you not to read the story in the "right" chronological order the first time through. The tale is structured in this way for a reason: so that you may feel all of Hermione's frustration and uncertainty of not knowing what happened in the past. So that you can be properly surprised when a later chapter reveals that what happened in an earlier chapter was not at all what it seemed. Also, the two halves of every chapter are almost always linked in some way.

The next time through, though, you are welcome to read in whatever order you like as that increases the chances of you picking out all the clues that I had an inordinate amount of fun scattering throughout the story.

Enjoy the ride, my friends. (and review, pretty please!)

For this first chapter I must warn you that there is **amajor character death**... but I must also reiterate my guarantee that very little is exactly as it seems in this story.

Teacher: "And so Lucifer, formerly the mightiest of angels, was expelled from heaven and cast down to hell..."

Student: "Do you think he could get banished from hell the same way? If he was good enough?"

Teacher: "Silly child, it doesn't work that way."

... A scene from my childhood

Chapter One

Catharsis

--Time Unknown--

The pain faded to a dull roar, with a pins-and-needles sensation like a limb returning from falling asleep.

A little rivulet of blood ran from her eye down the length of her nose. It tickled. She tried to lift her hand to scratch at it, but the pain seemed to concentrate in her wrist, and she gasped. The muscles and tendons in her appendage were non-responsive.

Her throat seized, and the wretched coughing fit that resulted prevented her from hearing the footsteps until they were right beside her head. She tried to turn to face them, but her neck felt like a boneless hinge. She settled for rolling her eyes in the general direction.

The person she saw did little to ease her discomfort. "Professor Snape," she rasped.

The dark man was silhouetted by leaping flames in a dark night with a perfection that would have outdone cheap Muggle horror films. He was nothing but a shape, carved from ragged ebony. Yet when he turned his dark eyes upon her, the pupils glistened in the darkness.

"Miss Granger..." Sibilant as ever, his voice felt like sandpaper upon her wounds. "What an unexpected displeasure it is to see you here."

Her body was too tired to feel outrage. She hated not being able to see his face properly. His voice was always unpleasant and unfeeling; his face...

The tip of his wand was a burning ember against her skin as it traced the curve of her cheek. At the slight pressure, her head flopped to the side on a limp neck, her ear pressed against the damp ground. She felt him step back, and then felt his footsteps halt a few feet away from her. Then blood trickled into her other ear, and the world fell silent but for the pounding of her heart.

His spell hit her between the third and fourth heartbeat, wrapping her in a charged cocoon of energy. She had opened her mouth to scream when the black wave of euphoria washed over her, and she was blissfully free of it all. It felt like heaven.

The pain when it came was unexpected and horrific.

The bubble of warmth was torn asunder, and then she was screaming louder than she ever had before. The pain hiccupped along with her breaths, hitting her in agonizing needle-like jabs that seemed to punch straight through her skull.

Somewhere close by, she imagined she heard the screams of another, but perhaps it was only the earth beneath her echoing her agony. The blackness had teeth and claws that tore away at her mind and would surely soon burst through her skull.

"Hermione!"

The cry came from a great distance away, and right as it reached her ears, it crystallized, stopped, then shattered as a great wind seemed to rush through her body, wrenching something away. After it was gone, there was only nothing.

Utter nothing.

--12:00-12:30am, November 1, 1998--

"... I love you."

She reeled, stumbling on unsteady feet. In the instant that it took for her mind to unfreeze itself, she had missed the slight movement of his hand.

An instant later, when she realized where his wand was pointing, it was already too late.

"Avada Kedavra!"

"Expelliarmus!"

Severus Snape flew backwards into the stone wall under the force of the curse. A nasty wound on his shoulder splattered the concrete with red. The sickly greenish glow surrounding him was swallowed by a brilliant silver haze and then...

He slumped over bonelessly. His head lolled to one side, his mouth slightly open.

His eyes were blank and black as sin, as if devoid of a soul.

In the sudden silence, she waited, watching, her mind racing to comprehend. Then, falling to her knees, Hermione let out a ragged breath like wind rattling through skeletal trees. Her wand fell from her fingers and clattered to the floor as she covered her mouth with her hand, pressing it against her face to contain the sobs that threatened to emerge.

Her other hand fisted around the bracelet on her right wrist, smudging the silver surface as she clenched until her knuckles were white.

She had been lying in his arms; he was holding her as if he never wished to let her go.

The winking silver of the bracelet was the first thing she saw when she opened her eyes again. She looked at it absently, hatefully.

She ripped the circlet from her wrist, ignoring the sudden emptiness that seemed to descend upon her being.

"In-incendio."

Her voice shook but her wand tip was unwavering as she watched the blue flames lick their way eagerly over the silver. The metal glowed, then softened under the heat. She let go when she felt blisters beginning to form on her fingers. The silver melted into a viscous puddle. She caught a faint whiff of burnt parchment. She brushed away the final traces of ash from the front of her robes, and then stopped herself because they were invisible upon the black fabric anyway.

As she lifted her hands away, she noticed a solitary scrap of something the size of a postage stamp stuck against her wrist. She lifted it off between finger and thumb and watched it enlarge to reveal a Polaroid photograph. She read *September 15, 1998* written across the back in smudged black Sharpie. She flipped the photo over.

The Polaroid shook in her trembling hands, but she did not drop it. She looked for a long time, and the edges of the photo began to bend under her clenching fingers. Hermione relaxed her grip with a growl of frustration and, after a moment of consideration, tucked the photo into a pocket of her robes.

She turned and left the room, searching among the many hallways and corridors in the rest of the building for the exit. It took her over an hour.

She opened a corrugated metal door and at last felt sunlight pouring in upon her face. She squinted against the light. The sensation didn't feel compatible with the darkness of the abandoned mill she had left behind.

She stumbled down the riverbank and splashed through the shallow, filthy water before climbing out the other side.

She walked through a small gate in the fence separating the town from the fields and grassland, letting the latch click shut behind her. She kept walking and did not look back.

--Time Unknown--

The sun was beginning to rise when she saw another person.

He was walking up the road the other way. As she drew nearer, a strong wind kicked up and the grasses of the fields around them bent and swayed like dancers.

The man wore the plain, faded clothes of a farmer. He froze upon seeing her and then broke into a sprint. He took her hands in his and as she gazed up at his wide eyes and concerned face, she let herself wonder for the briefest second when she had met him. His dark eyes looked familiar.

"Hello," she said. "My name is Hermione Granger. I graduated from Hogwarts Academy in 1998. Could you tell me what day it is?"

'FIN'

Next chapter: Hermione wakes up. A house dies dramatically, and what on earth is Snape up to?

Remember

Chapter 2 of 17

Hermione wakes up. A house dies dramatically, and what on earth is Snape up to?

A/N: I was recently informed that calling Hermione "Mione" is not canon, as it only occurred once when Ron had his mouth full. As I rather like that nickname, we shall imagine that they started calling Hermione that sometime during seventh year... Hermione, of course, was extremely irritated at first but secretly liked it. Also, if Hogwarts follows the normal British school calendar, their graduation would have taken place in late June, but for the sake of this story, I have pushed that time to the middle of May.

Chapter 2

Remember

--2:00-2:30pm, June 15, 1998--

"I have what?"

"Anterograde amnesia," said the Headmistress, calmly and slowly as if she were saying it for the first time. "In effect, you are unable to make new memories that last more than half an hour. It is primarily a Muggle malady, and we would have been clueless were it not for our liaison at a Muggle hospital." The latter half of her words was spoken with as much emotion as if she were dictating homework.

"Amnesia... I... what?" Hermione was puzzled by the Headmistress' behavior. Then as she fully processed her words, a realization struck her. "How long have I been here, Professor?"

Some of the lines on McGonagall's face softened. "I apologize, Miss Granger. Of course this must all be very new to you still. You have been with us for one week, ever since we discovered you collapsed at the front gate of Hogwarts."

A stab of pain, as searing as a sunbeam piercing a clouded sky, lanced Hermione's skull and she cried out in pain. Almost immediately, she felt two pairs of hands steadying her shaking shoulders, one of the hands placing a cold compress on her forehead. She recognized the voices that followed.

"Harry? Ron?"

Ron shot her a loopy, if pained, grin. "Yes, Hermione. It's still us." At her look of confusion, his face fell and she could almost see him cursing internally. "Sorry Hermione, I keep forgetting..."

"Just relax, Hermione. We're here," Harry said.

"Have you two been here for a week as well?"

"Waking and sleeping. We were worried we would never find out what happened to you."

"Which is why I must once again beg Miss Granger's attention." All three heads turned back to the Headmistress as she spoke. A quill materialized in her hand, hovering over a blank sheet of parchment. "When I mentioned where we found you, you had a... reaction. What is the last thing that you... remember?"

Hermione thought; it felt difficult, rather like swimming through a thick syrupy river. "I was on the Hogwarts Express after graduation. Harry and Ron had already left because their Auror training began before I could complete some final work on my research proposal. I was sitting in a compartment by myself looking out the window and then... I was here."

As Hermione looked around, she realized that "here" was the Hogwarts hospital ward. Curtains had been drawn around her bed and only Harry, Ron, and McGonagall were in the enclosure with her. She could easily imagine Madam Pomfrey outside sputtering with outrage at not being let in to see her patient.

"Is that all?" McGonagall asked quietly.

Hermione pursed her lips and frowned intently. "Yes," she said finally. "I'm sorry."

"Professor, if I may suggest something," said Harry. "Now that Hermione seems stable enough, would it help if I tried Legilimency on her? Dumbledore taught me some before... well, before."

McGonagall thought for a moment. "I don't see how it could hurt. Go ahead, Mr. Potter. And please... be careful."

Harry nodded and then smiled crookedly at Hermione. "Ready, Mione?" he asked. She nodded. "Just try your best to relax." He placed the tips of his fingers to her temples and looked directly into her eyes.

Hermione felt a jerk behind her skull that seemed to tip her into Harry's green eyes. His fingertips were pleasantly cool on her temples. She felt Harry exploring the memories of the past ten minutes before skirting past the edge of the gaping black chasm that connected to her last trip on the Hogwarts Express. Finally she felt him cautiously peer into blackness. At first there was nothing, as if there was truly nothing.

Then without warning, Hermione felt something in her head kick back against Harry's presence like a magical gut-punch. Colors flashed before her eyes like a kaleidoscope, and interspersed among the spectrum were images moving by so quickly they could have been imagined: a fiery explosion, an emerald green Dark Mark trailing smoke through the sky, a pair of glistening dark eyes...

Something red-hot shot to the edges of her skull and seemed to connect with Harry's fingertips. Hermione heard him cry out and felt him release her head. With a sudden lurch, she was blinking up at three concerned faces, though one also seemed to be in considerable pain.

"Harry! I'm sorry, I'm so..."

"Miss Granger, tell me everything that you saw. Now!"

Hermione told her, talking as fast as she could. As she reached the end of her brief description, she hesitated. "There was someone there. I think... I think it was Professor Snape."

The pain was gone from Harry's face in an instant. "WHAT?" he roared. "That great bloody bastard! Did he hurt you?"

"Mr. Potter!"

"Hermione, did he?"

"I..." she looked up at Harry's enraged face. Then, for the first time, she looked down at her hands, gasping when she saw her right wrist. One end jutted out at an unnatural angle, so that her right hand was bent slightly outwards when she laid it flat on the bed. She idly wondered what sort of injury would have resulted in that.

She shook her head, her thoughts a great muddle once more. "I don't know. I really don't know."

"Hermione." This time it was Ron who spoke. "Don't worry. We're going to figure this out. We'll be with you every step of the way."

She smiled up at him and squeezed his hand.

"Miss Granger," McGonagall said suddenly, her voice low with warning. "We are almost reaching the end of your half an hour. I must ask you this now: do you trust me?"

"With my life, Professor."

McGonagall raised one hand and the Quick Quotes quill disappeared. She lifted a sheet of parchment from her lap, the page completely filled with writing. "Then take this, Hermione. In ten seconds, this will be your only knowledge of what we have discovered this afternoon. Take it, and when you return, you must trust what it says."

Five...

Hermione took hold of the parchment, her eyes flying over the words.

Three...

Her gaze darted to Harry. To Ron.

Two...

Their eyes were filled with fear.

One...

--2:30-3:00pm, June 15, 1998--

"Is this your idea of a joke, Ron? It can't be June 15th. We just graduated in the middle of May! They are expecting me at the Institute of Advanced Magical Studies in a week's time," Hermione said, coughing slightly.

Ron let out a long, suffering sigh. "I'm sorry, Mione. I'm just no good at this. But I don't mind reminding you again that..."

Hermione turned to smile at Harry, who had just arrived to sit on the other side of the bed, and accepted his proffered glass of pumpkin juice. She took a sip before continuing as if he had not said anything. "And how can I have amnesia? I can remember you two just fine. I remember finding Slytherin's locket under a ratty sofa cushion in Grimmauld Place. I remember you two going off to Auror training."

Harry spoke. "Do you remember what you ate for lunch two hours ago?"

Hermione opened her mouth and then closed it again, confused that for once she had no answer to a question.

"Do you remember that you asked me to fetch you a glass of pumpkin juice because you had a cough?" Harry asked again, gently.

Hermione paled. "What time is it?" she asked quietly.

"2:40pm."

She shook her head furiously, her bushy curls flying. "There's no such thing... there's no disease that can make me forget things that I never remembered." Something made a crinkling sound in her hand, and she nearly dropped the sheet of parchment that she didn't remember to be holding. Her words trailed off as she began to read. The writing was not hers, but it was familiar, traditionally appearing in the margins of her Transfiguration homework. The time and date across the top placed the writing at forty minutes ago.

"Where's McGonagall?" Hermione asked, an edge of panic creeping into her voice.

"I'm right here, Miss Granger," an older voice replied. Hermione looked up in time to see her emerge from the other side of the curtains. The Headmistress' face was grim. "Miss Granger, do you remember why you were on the Hogwarts Express a full week before you needed to report to your place of study?"

She frowned. "Well, I suppose that I was going home to see my parents. Yes, I remember now, I got off at King's Cross and went to my house."

"Did your parents meet you at the house?"

"Yes, I took a taxi. How do you know this?" McGonagall did the unthinkable and lowered her eyes to her hands, not meeting her gaze. "Professor...?" Fear began to coil in the pit of her stomach.

"Miss Granger..." The Headmistress' voice cracked. "I am so sorry that we did not think to contact them sooner. We thought for so long that you had a wizarding malady and did not want to worry them, we did not think... Hermione, your parents... they're dead." Hermione had shrunk back against the pillows and was firmly shaking her head. "I'm so sorry." The shaking had spread to her shoulders and hands.

"The Muggle police reported it as...I believe they called it 'arson.' There was no Dark Mark, so the Aurors were not alerted. Hermione..." Hermione's entire body was shaking like a leaf. Harry had placed a comforting arm around her shoulders while Ron, looking nervous, gently patted her hand.

"Miss Granger, I need to know... who would have known that you were going home?"

Hermione was hiccoughing violently, each individual seizure feeling as if it were slamming her brain against the back of her skull. She heard the question, though. "With all due respect, Professor, everyone at Hogsmeade Station and on the Hogwarts Express." She looked rather ill after talking so much.

"It is not like the Death Eaters to strike a Muggle residence and leave no sign. Can you think of..."

"There was a Dark Mark. I saw it. I saw it."

"Unfortunately, Miss Granger, we can no longer rely on your memories."

"Professor..." It was Harry who spoke. He held a wizarding timepiece in his hand and looked at McGonagall pointedly. She nodded and gave her wand a small flick. A quill materialized in Hermione's hand. Her other hand still grasped the parchment firmly.

"Miss Granger..." McGonagall's voice was heart-wrenchingly gentle. "You must record what you have learned so far."

Hermione was no longer shaking and was stiller than a statue. A single tear appeared in one eye as if by magic and rolled down her cheek. Thirty seconds before 3:00pm, she felt Ron gently wrest the parchment and quill from her hands. The last thing she remembered hearing was the faint scratching of the quill.

--11:30pm-12:00am, October 31, 1998--

The house at Spinner's End was burning.

Hermione approached the cobbled street at a stumbling run, slightly off-balance from clutching her right wrist in a death grip. There was a small knot of people gathered at the foot of the path leading to the house, a ragged cluster of men in blue jeans and women in flannel. The dancing orange flames reflected off their hollowed-out faces like jack-o'-lanterns.

"Looks like that crazy bugger finally blew himself up in one of his experiments."

"He started seeing a lady friend a few months back. Probably threw off his concentration somewhat."

There were chuckles all around.

With a great rush of air, the bricks and timbers of Spinner's End imploded, as if a giant fist had closed around the house and squeezed. Then from the very center of the rubble, a column of white light shot into the sky, bringing up great plumes of smoke around it. It burned like God's pillar of fire.

There were screams and gasps and several smaller flashes of light from the onlookers. Hermione saw a couple passing a camera between them and jabbering excitedly about *The Sun* and a fortune. Her retinas burned from the imprint of the house's fiery death.

"SEVERUS!"

The people whirled around as the scream rent the night sky. Several were knocked off their feet as a bushy-haired hurricane tore its way up the path towards the conflagration.

"Severus!" Hermione screamed again as her feet slapped against cobblestones that grew steadily warmer till the ground was unbearably hot. Tears sprang to her eyes and she coughed, choking on the super-heated dust in the air.

The flames surged again, blowing out the remains of the front door. Hermione was lifted several inches off the ground and deposited roughly on scorched grass.

She lifted her head in time to see an apparition in white float from the wreckage. Severus Snape was surrounded by a white sphere of magical energy. Flames crept around the edges of the barrier but never penetrated it. Hermione stared up at him, her mouth slightly open. A grain of soot was scratching the corner of her left eye. Severus spread his arms out wide and dipped his dark, sleek head in a bow.

The memory surged across the yawning canyon of blackness, a burning ember branded into the nothingness and clinging stubbornly to her consciousness. Her eyes narrowed, her teeth bared in a hiss.

The shield surrounding Snape flickered and disappeared. He turned and ran as if a snarling werewolf were at his heels. With a sweep of her robes, Hermione ran after him.

She followed him into the dark entrance of the abandoned steel mill.

"*Lumos!*" she shouted. A ray of white light pierced the darkness.

Snape would be able to see it. Hermione didn't care.

She followed him through winding corridors and massive rooms with dark, hanging shadows suspended from the ceilings. They moved deeper into the building and deeper underground.

Snape suddenly took a sharp turn, ducking out of sight. Hermione raced around the corner and shouldered her way through a door that was swinging shut.

Bright light assaulted her from all sides, and Hermione started to throw up her hands to cover her eyes. Through the spots dancing in her vision, she saw the jet of blue light flying towards her face.

Hermione hit the ground on her stomach, at the same time swinging her wand arm around and in front of her head and casting the Jelly-Legs jinx.

Her vision cleared and she was treated to the triumphant sight of Severus Snape falling on his arse.

He groaned as his head connected with the concrete wall behind him. His wand fell from his hand. Hermione had followed him into an empty storeroom. Several collapsed cardboard boxes leaned against the opposite wall and four overhead lamps bathed the concrete room with white light. The space was smaller than the Potions classroom.

Petrificus Tot...

"*Expelliarmus!*"

Snape's wand flew from the floor beside his thigh into her left hand. Hermione realized that Snape had not even spoken the hex and therefore that she must have just read his thoughts.

"Tell me it was an invention, Severus! The vision, the torture, all of it. Tell me Harry was wrong!"

There was nasty laughter, echoing in her head. *Foolish little girl...*

No, he was *allowing* his thoughts to be read.

"*Comburo Cruris!*" Hermione screamed.

Snape hissed through clenched teeth. His hands went around his right thigh, then immediately leapt away, as they added to the agonizing sensation of plunging his leg in boiling oil. She watched him twitch and shudder, his fingers curling and uncurling, and she felt something in her gut clench.

Severus went limp and took deep gasping breaths as the curse was lifted.

It appears that little Miss Perfect was up to some naughty reading in the Restricted Section...

"*Viscus Premo!*" she hissed.

Snape's chest appeared to ripple as it compressed in upon itself. His hands clawed at his throat as he struggled to draw enough breath to scream.

"That was the spell that Vincent Crabbe hit me with in Hogsmeade so that I would finally *shut up*," Hermione spat. "Why, Snape? Why did you have to become like them? I *trusted* you."

She released the spell, and Snape massaged his throat with trembling fingers. "A regrettable error," he drawled.

Hermione saw red. A flick of her wand sent a slicing hex that struck Snape's shoulder. He jerked back but made no sound.

"I can understand the torture, Snape...you Death Eaters are sadistic bastards...but why the act? Why toy with the heart of *aspiring schoolgirl*? Not only does that seem below your sense of style; that requires *commitment*. Were you bored, perhaps? Dumbledore's death didn't shake us up enough, so you thought you would do better. I defended you to Harry, did you know? I told him that your loyalty was beyond doubt, and that without you, I had nothing."

The look on Snape's face was more pained than when he had been writhing under her curses. "You can't be serious," he said.

"Congratulations, Severus. You turned the brightest witch of her generation and the brains of the Golden Trio into a lovesick fool." Her wand trembled in her hand, its point hovering over the space between his eyes.

From his place on the floor, Snape massaged his chest with one hand, eyes glistening. "Well then, you finally have him at your mercy, Hermione. The bastard responsible for all your pain and misery... and then some. It must feel *nice*."

Moments passed. The tempo of her breathing slowed with each passing second of indecision. She looked at him huddled upon the floor like a crumpled black bird, and

something in her chest gave a great thud.

She lowered her wand. "No. It doesn't," she said.

"Don't tell me you're *afraid*." Snape's voice was mocking.

"*Shut up*," Hermione growled. Her next spell forced his eyes up to her face. "Are sarcasm and indifference the only weapons that you have left? You really haven't changed at all, Severus. But you will answer my question... *why*?"

The corner of his lip curled up. "Why not, Miss Granger? You said it yourself. It brings about a most *unparalleled* thrill to see how thoroughly I can break such a spirit."

Hermione didn't know what reaction he expected of her, but she knew that it was certainly not to throw her head back and laugh.

"More lies, Severus, more brilliantly-executed *pitiful* lies!" She laughed at his dumbstruck face. "But I want the truth, Severus. You no longer have the right to lie. Not since you pretended that you never made love to me."

She watched as every semblance of disinterest fell from his form like cracking glass and his eyes went wider than she thought possible.

For the first time in her life, Hermione saw Severus Snape look afraid.

"I thought that you were a bastard at first, that you had liked what you had taken and had had enough. But you kept on treating me like... like I would break if I were handled too roughly. Then I thought that I had done something wrong, that you were protecting me from God knows what in your own twisted, stupid fashion. But I don't buy that you did it to hurt me, no matter how many other reasons I have to kill you. You never used that night against me; you never whispered in my ear and dropped images into my mind at the moment when distraction would have meant defeat. In fact, you *never mentioned it again*." Hot tears were dripping down her cheeks, and Hermione blinked furiously, raising her wand back to his face. Then she lifted her left hand, holding his wand, as well.

"How did you know...?" He paused, frozen in realization. His eyes slid down to a point above her feet. "Oh."

"*Oh*? 'Oh' is what you say when you forget to pick up the milk at the grocer's. How could a sneaky bastard like you ever be so unbelievably stupid? A man like you does not overlook a *single* detail. And, God forbid, that was hardly a minor detail. *Why*, Snape?"

His eyes had slid even lower and were now staring at a rough patch of stone upon the ground between them.

Severus Snape, Death Eater, killer of Albus Dumbledore, and nasty, greasy git with a heart of stone, would not meet her eyes.

She grew even angrier. "What could have possibly distracted that great Slytherin mind so? Were you that horrified, Snape? Was I so completely awful that all you could think about was..."

"Was how I needed you more than life itself, you stupid girl," Snape hissed. His eyes were fixed once again upon her face with an intensity that made her knees shake. "All I could think about was how I wanted nothing more than to make love to you again and again, forever, and to let Voldemort take the world if only I could keep you with me. And God forbid if that made me forget just about everything else."

Her knees gave way completely, and she fell to the floor in front of him. Both wands dropped from her fingers. "Then why, Severus? Why in God's name are you doing this? Why... are you making *me do this*?"

"It's what you wanted," he whispered. "It's what you always told me that you wanted. It was true... mostly. I showed you what I had done to you and you forgave me. Your silly Gryffindor heart forgave me for destroying your mind and your life. But maybe you would not forgive me breaking that silly heart."

"So you did *this*? Because you thought I would care about revenge more than... more than you? Of all the... Severus, you are the most stupid, brainless fool I have ever known."

He still would not look at her. "It... it didn't start out as real. I had every conversation, every touch, every gesture carefully planned so that you would respond as I wanted. But something ate away at me, little by little, it was like a vicious *disease*, and before I knew it, I had..." He closed his eyes. "Our night together wasn't supposed to happen. I wanted your heart, your trust; that was all. I never wanted you to feel like I had taken advantage... in that way."

"Are you sorry that it did?" she asked softly.

He looked at her hard. "Never," he whispered.

Somehow her arms had found their way around his neck, and he had gathered her into his lap, holding her close.

"I forgive you for that, as well," she said.

"I don't deserve it," Snape muttered.

"We never do, but it is given nonetheless, as was my silly Gryffindor heart." She felt his arms wrap more tightly around her. "It still is... if you will have it...and if you promise *never* to do something stupid like that again."

His hands buried themselves in her hair. "Hermione, I... tell me, did Lucius manage to get himself killed during all that excitement?"

"No," Hermione said.

Severus gave a great sigh and nodded. "I see."

"But I..."

The skin underneath the bracelet tingled, signaling that time was running out. Severus felt it too and released her.

Hermione removed the quill from behind her ear and wrote slowly, painstakingly, forcing herself to leave nothing out.

"I'm sorry that I cursed you," she muttered when she was finished.

"It was much less than I deserved."

"What happens now?"

"What time is it, Hermione?"

She lifted her left hand. The plastic face of her wristwatch was cracked, but it still worked. "One minute until midnight."

Severus' arms tightened around her so fiercely that she gasped. "What happens now is that I hold you with me," he muttered. "That I tell you that at midnight I will be dead, because that was the promise I made so that our plan could succeed." Snape tightened his grip as Hermione began to struggle. "I will not let you burden yourself with that knowledge, Hermione, for I have already burdened you with enough for several lifetimes. All you need to know is that I love you, Hermione. Let your heart remember even if your mind cannot. My soul will always belong to you. I love you."

With a shove, Snape pushed her bodily away from him. Hermione found herself on her feet, stumbling to remain standing.

As she whirled around to face him, Severus placed the tip of his wand beneath his chin.

Combuo Cruris = "combuo" L. to burn + "cruris" L. leg

Viscus Premo = "viscus" L. flesh, entrails + "premo" L. to squeeze

Next chapter: Minerva gives Hermione the means to put those meticulous study habits to good use. After the Final Battle, Harry shows Hermione something she really didn't want to see.

Revelations

Chapter 3 of 17

Minerva gives Hermione the means to put those meticulous study habits to good use. After the Final Battle, Harry shows Hermione something she really didn't want to see.

A/N: I cannot remember which fanfic writer first came up with the idea of the Glamour Charm... I had to remind myself that it was not canon. Whoever it was, I tip my hat to you. Hats also go off to Michele and Southern_Witch, the awesomest betas a writer could ask for.

I had hoped to post through chapter 4 before Deathly Hallows came along and made all this hopelessly AU, but hopefully this will tide you over. And afterwards, I do hope you will continue reading, because even at the risk of sounding immodest I have one hell of a Final Battle scene for your consumption.

Chapter 3

Revelations

--4:00-4:30pm, June 17, 1998--

"An-anterograde amnesia."

"What was that, Mione?"

"I have... anterograde amnesia. I am unable to form new memories. I have had this condition ever since... that ride on the Hogwarts Express and after that..." Her face screwed up in consternation. "Why can I not remember what happened to cause this condition? And why can I now remember that I have this condition?"

Ron smiled sadly. "Your mind has been a mystery to me ever since the day we met."

Hermione bit her lip and did not respond. Ron, in a rare demonstration of intuition, gathered her in his arms and gently stroked her shoulder blade.

She was out of the hospital wing now. It was summertime, and therefore the regular dorms at Hogwarts were not furnished. Hermione was currently sitting on a forest green sofa in an elegant sitting room. From the steadily growing stack of parchment beside her, she learned that she was in Snape's quarters.

Perusing a few more sentences revealed that both Harry and Ron had gone into a rage ("In that murdering git's cave?" Ron had exclaimed incredulously) when McGonagall suggested that she lodge there until further notice. The Headmistress had quelled their arguments in mere moments. The quarters provided privacy, comfort, and immediate Floo access with her office in case Hermione needed assistance.

Snape had not been seen in the area at all since the day he had fled Hogwarts. In addition, the castle and all of its grounds had been charmed to sound an alarm in the Headmistress' office if they ever detected his presence.

"Your NEWT scores arrived, by the way, two weeks ago," Ron said suddenly.

"Oh?" Hermione tried to sound casual, but she couldn't help her voice coming out rather like a squeak. Her heart began to race in a way that was comforting and familiar.

"Yeah. Harry and I decided to exchange your scores for ours. Felt right surreal it did, us getting the highest scores that Hogwarts has seen in nearly thirty years."

Hermione laughed and slapped him playfully. "You didn't! I didn't!"

Ron grinned crookedly. "Yeah, you did," he said. "Surprised? I wasn't."

Hermione smiled gently. "Thanks, Ron," she replied.

"Thought that might cheer you up."

The moment stretched on. Had they somehow moved closer?

The flames in the fireplace flared green, and the Headmistress stepped through, brushing ash from her robes discreetly back into the hearth.

"Miss Granger. Mr. Weasley," she said, inclining her head to each of them in turn, although she appeared to frown at Ron. "I would like to speak with Miss Granger...in private."

Ron nodded and disentangled Hermione from his arms before taking his leave. Both women watched him go, and McGonagall turned to her with a pointed look.

Hermione sighed. "Don't worry, Professor. I do remember that we broke up last October. He just wants to be here for me as much as he can."

"Mr. Potter tells me that he has missed at least a week's worth of Auror training."

"Oh, that big idiot. He told me he was on leave."

"More importantly, Miss Granger, are you aware that he writes all of your notes for you?"

"His handwriting has become surprisingly legible since he took his NEWTs."

"Hermione," McGonagall's voice was gentle but firm. "Do you remember what you set out to do after graduation?"

She swallowed. "To continue my NEWT research. To develop a way to block or neutralize the Killing Curse." She caught on before McGonagall had a chance to speak. "Instead, I am sitting at Hogwarts like a recluse, depending on scraps of parchment to maintain any semblance of sanity. Headmistress... do you honestly think that I can continue my work now? As a veritable prisoner within my mind?"

"Do you believe that you can?"

"It seems impossible." The words tasted like greasy refuse in her mouth.

McGonagall let out a long breath. "I never imagined that I would ever hear you say that."

"This not a spell to memorize or a swish-and-flick to master, Professor," Hermione insisted. "This is my mind! It is the very thing I've trusted all my life and the only thing that makes me believe that I belong here."

McGonagall took Hermione's hand in hers. The Headmistress' grip was rather rigid, as if she were unaccustomed to such gestures. "Miss Granger, do you remember when you first received your wand? How did it feel?"

"Fascinating. Frightening. It took me a week before I could cast anything with confidence. At first, every spell felt like I was losing a bit of myself. It was such a concentrated effort, nothing like the accidental magic I had done before."

"And now you are the most adept witch of your age in the wizarding world. Please don't protest, Miss Granger. You know that I have never been prone to flattery." The hand around hers tightened. "And you are still the most adept witch of your age. You may feel as if things are hopeless now. But you don't know what you were like when we first found you. You could not remember a question five minutes after it was asked. You could not remember your own name. Now your mind is as formidable as it ever was. You simply need to learn to use a new wand."

McGonagall reached into her robes and removed a long, thin box. It was the same length as an Ollivander's box but only half the width.

Hermione opened it to reveal a quill, but never had a quill been fashioned from a feather as fine as this. "Is this...?" She lifted it into the light, and it gleamed red and orange like the sun. The tip bowed slightly from the movement before curling back up into place. "But I thought that Fawkes left after Dumbledore died?"

"He did," McGonagall said with a wistful expression. "But he came back to leave this feather and only for that reason. He wouldn't stay even for a lemon drop. Albus had fed those sweets to Fawkes as readily as he fed himself. You still have friends, Miss Granger, and we will not see you fail. I took the liberty of charming the quill with the, hem, legal version of what that ogre Umbridge used on Harry. You can write with it anywhere and have your words appear anywhere. No ink is ever required."

She wrote, "My name is Hermione Granger," in the air in front of her face and watched it appear on the parchment underneath Ron's most recent entry. The handwriting was hers.

Hermione cracked a smile. "I guess that's one thing I won't be forgetting. Could this be charmed as a Quick Quotes Quill? Considering how often I'll be writing with it, mightn't that be more convenient? I could reduce the size magically so that I won't look completely ridiculous with a quill following me everywhere."

"I'm afraid that won't work," McGonagall said. But she was smiling. "Quick Quotes are notoriously biased by the writer's emotions, as Rita Skeeter demonstrated."

"So I must trust my emotions not to influence this quill either. I must become the world's most impartial and perfect observer."

"If anyone were up the task, it would be you," McGonagall said.

"What about a Pensieve? Could I use one to store my memories for me?"

McGonagall sighed. "Unfortunately, Pensieve magic is very exacting. Only true memories can be placed inside, memories that have had a chance to settle for an extended period of time. We have already tried to do exactly as you now suggest, Miss Granger, but the thoughts were too insubstantial to be drawn from your head."

Hermione's reaction to this was merely grim. "There's no easy way then, is there?" She considered her new quill, stroking the soft feather gently. She continued in a soft voice, "Then again, I was never one to turn down a challenge. Thank you for the quill, Professor. It's beautiful."

"Minerva, please."

Hermione's eyes went wide as if such a degree of familiarity was unfathomable. Then she smiled. "I suppose that I had better write that down."

--4:30-5:00pm, June 17, 1998--

Hermione blinked at McGonagall in puzzlement. "I'm sorry, what was I just saying..." she looked down at the parchment, "...Minerva?"

For some reason, the Headmistress seemed unable to hold back a smile. "You were discussing your proposed research, Hermione. I believe that you had just finished explicating the overwhelming proof that the curse cannot be blocked."

"Correct. The Killing Curse works much like what the Muggles call a 'virus.' It feeds off the living force of a person, consuming until there is nothing left. That's why there is no counter-curse. The stronger the spell thrown in retaliation, the more the Killing Curse has from which to feed."

"As fascinating as that is, Hermione, do you realize what you just did?"

Hermione flushed and said, "No," in a small voice.

"You fooled just about everyone. You paused, looked at your notes, and carried right on with the conversation. Even a keen observer would not be able to tell that you had just lost the past half hour."

"It's getting easier. I recognize immediately that there is something missing, and it's always been second nature to look to my notes for answers. And... this will sound strange, but I can remember what I feel. Like right now, I didn't remember what we were talking about, but I remember feeling excited about explaining something. And I knew it must have been about schoolwork because I sensed that Harry and Ron would have been bored. The next step will be to miniaturize the writing and charm my eyes to read them at lightning speed. And something to carry my notes. I fear they will soon rival 'Hogwarts: A History' in thickness."

Minerva's smile was like the sun as she said, "It's good to have you back, Hermione. Do continue."

"So, 'Avada Kedavra' attacks a wizard's life force, which is encased within his soul and his body, until there is none left. What if there was a way then to take a literal snapshot of yourself and use it, after the curse had done its work, to rebuild your previous natural state of being? In other words, to create a memento of yourself. It wouldn't block the curse; it would just make its effects elastic; you snap back to life once the effects have run its course. A potion would probably be the most effective solution. It could incubate in a person's body indefinitely and be activated when needed. Many catalysts exist that could make the effects instantaneous once the Killing Curse has struck."

Minerva was suitably astonished. "Hermione, this is a revolutionary concept. If it works, it could turn the course of the war. It..."

"...is only a theory," Hermione warned. "I began thinking of it after a few observations of how durable pre-existing states of being are in the wizarding world. 'Reparo' returns things to their original unbroken state with a single wand flick. Stasis spells can control even the most volatile potion from reacting violently."

"Not to mention how difficult it is to maintain self-Transfiguration for any lengthy period of time," Minerva added. "Animagism is so strictly regulated precisely because it is an unnatural state of being and bloody difficult to maintain. Unfortunately, although it goes without saying that you have my assistance in every manner, it seems as if most of your labor shall consist of potions work."

"I assume that Hogwarts has not hired a new Potions master in my mental absence?"

"You are as adept as any Potions master, Hermione. Although it pains me to speak of it, Professor Snape always thought most highly of you. However, he would have eaten Bubotuber pus before he would have admitted as much. I believe he was always so hard on you because he resented how a subject that took him years to master came to you so easily."

"Then how, why, would he have ki..."

"Please don't say it, Hermione. I have no answer for you." Hermione could almost sense Minerva's mind shifting gears to a less volatile topic. "How have you even begun to research such a potion?"

"I was planning to do most of the work at the Institute under their guidance. Since a person's life force is bound within both the soul and the body, I started with the soul and began researching means to restore it to its natural state after it has been damaged. It's common knowledge that the soul is an entity separate from the body. And seeing as how Voldemort has managed to split his soul into seven parts with no loss of magical power, it appears to be the most resilient part of the body as well. Then after we found Slytherin's locket containing Voldemort's third Horcrux..."

The pain was so sudden, so powerful that Hermione found herself on the floor with no recollection of falling. The pain pulsed through her veins like some noxious drug, concentrating within her skull. Hermione curled herself into a foetal position...instinctively...as if she had felt this agony before.

Minerva was on her knees beside her, forcing a wad of cloth torn from her thick robes between her crashing teeth. Through the pain, the realization surged to the front of her mind. She gasped, "Minerva, go to the Room of Requirement. Think of how much you need to recover Hermione's locket and bring it back as soon as possible. You must not be seen."

It seemed like forever, but the clock said that no more than five minutes had passed when Minerva returned. The pain had also, mercifully, abated. Minerva held the locket in the palm of her hand, well away from her body. She tipped it into Hermione's waiting hands.

She sounded utterly astonished. "Hermione, is this really...? How on earth did you find it?"

Hermione laughed lightly. "Ron sat on it in Grimmauld Place. I was the one who remembered seeing it in one of the glass cabinets when we were cleaning, but Kreacher must have hidden it when he knew that we were looking."

She cradled her hands around the locket as if it were a precious jewel. "They were looking for you, weren't they? They must have thought that I was a fool enough to bring it home to study it. That's why they attacked after I had gotten off the Hogwarts Express. But I am a hard worker, not a fool. What did they do when they couldn't find you? I can't imagine that they asked nicely." Her slightly mad eyes rolled and fixed upon Minerva, demanding, unyielding.

The older woman swallowed. She said, "There was evidence of the administration of multiple Crucios when we found you. I saw no reason to distress you with the knowledge at the time."

Hermione was no longer listening after the first sentence. She was rocking back and forth, muttering to the locket. "They tortured me for this, they must have. But they didn't get you... Why is that? I'm not a strong person. I would not have lasted long. There were three weeks between the attack and when you brought me to the Hospital Wing. What happened then? Snape was with them! Surely he could have done it. He has never failed to meet a challenge as long as I've known him... A sn-sn-sniveling schoolgirl would have been nothing. And he has no Hogwarts master anymore who could stop him."

Her eyes snapped up to Minerva again. "Why did you not tell me? If they tortured me for this, surely they tried to find out other things."

The Headmistress shook her head. "It was days before you were in any shape to begin to tell us what happened. If they had discovered anything, they would have acted on it long before. More to the point, however, what secrets are left for you to tell?"

Hermione thought. The prophecy? Known extensively by both sides after last year. Dumbledore's Army? Gleefully publicized by Rita Skeeter (now a registered Animagus) after they had beat back a vicious Death Eater attack on Hogsmeade last September. The rest of the Death Eaters had escaped Azkaban, now a pile of rubble after Inferi had torn it apart. Knowledge of Death Eater plans? Gone with Snape.

For a moment, Hermione allowed herself to despair over how much had been lost with the erstwhile Potions master. How could Dumbledore have been so mistaken about

someone with whom he had entrusted so much?

"There is only this then," Hermione whispered to the locket in her hands. "Only a desperate theory that if Voldemort could break his soul apart, then we could somehow put one back together." She rocked back and forth for so long that Minerva feared that she had forgotten again.

"My parents... did they suffer?"

"No," Minerva said gently. "All the evidence says that they were killed instantly in the initial blast that destroyed your house."

Hermione bit her lip and nodded once in gratitude. "I guess that the Institute is out of the question then. I don't imagine that they will ever stop hunting me."

Minerva took a very deep breath as she said, "We were worried that this might happen and prepared in advance. We will begin to spread the rumor that Hermione Granger died several weeks after her disappearance. The doctors that diagnosed your malady were Obliviated. Ironic, I suppose. So you don't need to worry about people being suspicious when you explain your situation. In the meantime, we have a Glamour, wizarding papers, and a new wand for you. I have no intention of losing you, but Hermione Granger must never be seen in the wizarding world again."

Hermione was nodding absently at everything Minerva was saying. Her flailing mind locked in on the most intriguing piece of information. "Isn't an unregistered wand illegal?" she asked.

Minerva smirked. "I'd like to see them try to do anything about this one."

"Can I live in Cambridge? I've always found the city incredibly beautiful."

"Certainly. I will make all of your housing arrangements."

"Ron and Harry will insist on me staying at the Burrow at least one night before I disappear."

"Very well. Also, I suppose that I won't be able to talk you out of telling them everything, but please make sure not to be overheard."

Hermione grinned forcefully. "Not a problem, we'll use Muffliato. I-I'd also like to see my parents... their graves, I mean."

"I will give you the location where they are buried."

She had missed their funeral.

What must her parents' friends have thought when their only daughter had not shown up to say goodbye? Hermione hugged her knees to her chest tightly. She squeezed her eyes shut and allowed the grief to well up for five seconds before forcing it back down into the deepest mire of her soul, somewhere within the emptiness.

Hermione lifted her head; her eyes were clear. "Thank you," she said. She raised the phoenix feather quill into the air; it gleamed in the firelight. The clock over the mantel said two minutes until 5:00pm. "I will record everything now while there is still time."

The last thing Minerva saw as she stepped into the green flames of the fireplace was Hermione Granger waving her quill in the air like the conductor of an invisible orchestra. The movements of her hands were pained and heavy, a somber nocturne. Hermione hoped that she had recorded things well enough that later she would read them and be moved enough to weep.

--11:00-11:30pm, October 31, 1998--

Hermione could not find Harry. She was trying her hardest not to think about what had happened to Severus and what he could have done to make Harry react like... like *that*.

When Voldemort's soul had been blasted into nothingness, everyone had been thrown through the air, but she had not moved far and that did not explain why she could not find...

She heard a grunt, a hiss of something behind her. She whirled around.

"Incarcerous!"

Lucius Malfoy hit the ground hard, cracking the side of his head against a blackened tree stump. His wand fell from his fingers as thick ropes wrapped around his body.

Breathing hard, Hermione crept toward him, her wand held at the ready. She stopped as a faint moan escaped the bound wizard. After another few breaths, she confirmed that Malfoy was not faking. Blood trickled from the wound at his temple. His wand arm was bent at an angle that Hermione was certain had not been the result of his fall or her spell.

She took another two steps toward him until his rolling eyes could finally see her. He gazed at her steadily as pained breaths shuddered through his lungs. She waited for the cursing, the insults that were sure to come.

He squinted until his eyes were at last able to comprehend who he was seeing. At the same time, he realized that she was not about to kill him. Then Lucius Malfoy opened his mouth and began to laugh loudly. "Nothing! He will die for nothing!"

His eyes stared wildly at her, his pristine blond locks singed and streaked with dirt and ash from the battle. He began to keen like a rabid animal, laughing all the while.

"Nothing! Nothing!" he shrieked hysterically.

Hermione flinched. "*Silencio*," she whispered. Malfoy's lips continued to move even as no more sound emerged.

A "pop" of someone Apparating into existence beside her had her whirling around again, wand raised. She lowered her hand in relief as she realized that it was Harry.

But she couldn't help thinking that she had been mistaken as the figure stalked towards her in a furious, menacing, completely un-Harry manner. His hands gripped her shoulders roughly and shook her like a rag doll.

"Where is he, Hermione? *Where is Snape?*"

"I don't..."

"Don't protect him, Hermione. Not now. He doesn't deserve it after what he did to you!"

"Harry," she hissed. "What are you talking about? Did you not just see how he helped you kill Voldemort?"

His eyes grew wide. "You don't know, do you? That two-faced bastard never *told* you..."

"Harry, stop!"

"He's fucked you up marvelously, Hermione!" he spat, his eyes wild. "He has you willing to take a curse for him. And don't think I didn't notice your Patronus. Good God, Hermione, what else has he made you do?"

Her mind was a muddle, a screaming mess of confusion. "Harry, I don't...I don't know where he is."

"You will tell me...after I show you," Harry hissed. "Do you know what Snape did to me to make me ~~hate~~ enough to cast that curse?"

Before Hermione had time to pull away, Harry pressed his fingers to the sides of her temples and tilted her eyes up to meet his. There was great jerk as Hermione tumbled into green-tinted depths.

She fell into a silvery storm-ravaged ocean. As she bobbed up and down, she caught glimpses of images above the waves of darkness.

Herself, writhing on the ground in pain... light and awareness slowly leeching from her eyes... Snape holding out his wand, a strange hex upon his lips, his eyes alight with hideous delight... a sickly yellow light emanating from his wand... Voldemort cackling above her, her body still as death, bruised beyond recognition... "Leave her at the gates. As a parting gift." ...Snape bowing. "With pleasure, my Lord..."

Hermione slammed her arms down through the waves and kicked up with all her might...

Harry hit the ground on his back, thrown by the force with which Hermione had expelled him from her mind. He blinked, looking slightly dazed. "Hermione..."

The memory was a burning ember, branded into nothingness.

"Harry, don't... Oh, God, I think I'm going to..." Hermione placed one hand against a bush and retched violently. When the world had finished swimming before her eyes, she felt Harry's hands on her shoulders and his voice muttering a quiet *Scourgify* at the mess she had made on the grass.

"I'm sorry, Mione. I'm sorry. But I had to show you, I love you too much to keep it from you."

She shook her head, not even hearing him. "There must be some sort of mistake. Severus would never..."

"*Goddammit*, Hermione, can you hear yourself? He did this to you; he knows *exactly* how to keep you believing what he wants you to believe."

Hermione curled one hand loosely around her bracelet and shuddered. She closed her eyes and shook her head.

"We have to find him, Hermione," Harry said. "We have to make him *pay*."

Hermione shook her head more fiercely. "No."

Harry opened his mouth to reply, then fell silent when Hermione lifted her head. Her eyes were filled with anger vicious enough to make the Furies hesitate. *I will find him. I will make him pay. This is no longer your concern.*

"Hermione, no!" Harry grabbed her wrist roughly...there was a blinding flash of white...and he let go with a hiss of pain, his fingers red and blistered.

Hermione took a step back and drew her wand. "Voldemort's dead, Harry. Your job is done. Look after Malfoy, will you?"

She raised her wand, preparing to Apparate, hearing distant pops that most likely indicated the arrival of the Ministry. Late as usual. She glanced over at the bound blond wizard and saw that Malfoy's body was trembling with mirth, a broad grin upon his face. She turned away deliberately and Apparated.

Hermione reappeared in the shadow of a steel mill tower. She removed the quill from behind her ear and forced her hand to write, feeling as if she were rending blood from the air.

As she replaced the writing implement, a grinding roar filled the air, like the death throes of a massive metallic beast. The shadows in front of her suddenly darted away as a flickering orange light began to shine behind her. Hermione whirled around and gasped, for right before the blackness swallowed her mind, she saw it.

The house at Spinner's End was burning.

All of the notes about the project... were burning.

Next chapter: Hermione receives her new identity... and a surprise. The Final Battle: things burn, explode, and vaporize. And wands fly.

Wandless

Chapter 4 of 17

Hermione receives her new identity... and a surprise. The Final Battle: things burn, explode, and vaporize. And wands fly.

A/N: I had such an unbelievable amount of fun writing the second half of this chapter. I can't imagine what Rowling felt while writing her own Final Battle scene, but it felt exactly like writing one of those shoot-em-up action flicks, except a dozen times more interesting with magic. But I totally think that I thought up a better way to deal with the Dementors than Rowling. The second half of this chapter is somewhat violent, minor amount of blood-letting but with explosions and fire to spare.

Obviously AU now... no Deathly Hallows spoilers in this, though I may work some in for later chapters. However, I'm pretty sure for you Snape-fans that my ending is much more... satisfactory. That means that in the first chapter...erm, that is... my, isn't it a lovely day today?

Chapter 4

Wandless

--6:006:30pm, June 18, 1998--

"Bombarda!"

The pillow exploded in a cloud of white, downy snow, which slowly began to settle over the bed. Hermione waited until the feathers were tickling her nose before cleaning up the mess with a sweep of her wand.

For a moment, she tried to remember what could have upset her so; the adrenaline of her fury had carried over the half hour even when her memories had not.

She raised her wand again before setting it down and grabbing her Muggle alarm clock. Sometimes brute force was much more satisfying than magic. The alarm clock shattered against the opposite wall; bits of metal and plastic flew everywhere.

Hermione reached up to brush a strand of straight, black hair from her face and was surprised to discover the tears pouring from her dark eyes.

She sat on the bed, hugging her knees to her face as she let wave after wave of despair crash over her. She felt herself shuddering under the onslaught and let herself fall apart. Sobs racked her thin frame, and she slowly lost track of time.

Parchment rustled under her hand.

Hermione sniffed and gently wiped her eyes. She removed the quill from behind her ear and looked at the wizarding clock upon the wall.

She had one more minute.

She wrote: 6:006:30pm, June 18, 1998 Mental breakdown (not funny). Replace Mrs. Weasley's pillow. Move on.

Then she removed the Silencio over the room. She didn't remember casting the Silencing Charm, but she knew that if she had not, someone would have already come running at the sounds coming from her room.

There was a knock upon her door, and Harry poked his black-haired, tousled head inside. "Dinnertime, Cami!" he shouted loud enough for the whole house to hear. "I hope you're hungry."

She felt her stomach rumble and smiled. "Check."

--6:307:00pm, June 18, 1998--

Dinnertime was a surprisingly cheerful affair. It was a weekday evening, so only Mrs. Weasley was home.

The Weasley matriarch had been mildly disgruntled to learn that Harry had a new girlfriend. To her it didn't matter that Harry had called it quits with Ginny over a year ago; a part of her still hoped to have Harry as a son-in-law.

However, she had warmed to Camilla Elliot almost immediately, especially after she had been told of the girl's unfortunate condition. At dinnertime, she had taken it upon herself to remind Camilla to write down all of her favorite dishes so that she could cook them again the next time that she came to visit.

Hermione, while overjoyed that her new self would not lack Mrs. Weasley's friendship, wished several times over the course of the dinner that she could simply throw herself into the woman's arms and beg her to make everything go away.

Harry played his part perfectly. He offered to refill her plate every time it was empty and touched her hand from time to time, but no more than necessary to be believable. Sometimes she would catch him glancing at her rather wistfully. She imagined that with her new straight, impeccably layered black hair, slightly slanted eyes, and more angular face, she looked quite a bit like Cho Chang. Sadly, the Ravenclaw had perished in Hogsmeade.

Ron had been more than willing to take Harry's role, but even he realized how impossible such a situation would be. It was no secret to anyone, especially his mother, how fond he still was of Hermione. Once news of Hermione's "death" was spread, the presence of a new girlfriend would have been terribly suspicious and insensitive.

Truthfully, Harry wasn't a much better choice, considering the circumstances under which he had broken it off with Ginny. Hermione had called Harry six different kinds of a fool for weeks after the fact.

She was not looking forward to Ginny's reaction to Camilla Elliot.

Hermione was also having a difficult time being called a new name. It was not something she instinctively knew.

She had no proof of Camilla Elliot's existence other than a scrawled entry on parchment from 10:00-10:30am that morning. It described how Minerva had taken her into her office (after they had ducked around a madly squawking, disgruntled raven that seemed to have gotten lost on its way to the Owlery) and weaved a complex incantation that had changed her appearance to that of the fabricated persona of Camilla Elliot.

After much pleading on Hermione's part, Minerva had shown her how to remove the Glamour. She then gave her the strictest of warnings never to remove the Glamour in public and had watched like a hawk as Hermione wrote down every word.

There had been two objects on Minerva's desk: a scroll and a long, thin box. Minerva turned and picked up the scroll. "Here are your wizarding papers. Camilla Elliot graduated from Beauxbatons in the lower half of her class (Hermione had winced and Minerva had smiled 'well, we must create an entirely different personality,' she'd said). All her known relatives are deceased, and she moved to Cambridge to enjoy some time off before searching for a job."

Then Minerva picked up the box, which was the exact same size and shape as an Ollivander's case. "And this..." She proffered it to Hermione.

Hermione lifted the lid and gazed down at the most beautiful wand she had ever seen.

"200-year-old redwood, burnished to a dark shine. Twelve-and-one-half inches long, dragon heartstring core," Minerva said in a rapid clip, sounding almost exactly like the wandmaker. She smirked. "A popular combination for the intensely stubborn."

Hermione flushed and touched the polished handle of the wand. She drew back nearly immediately from the sparks of energy that had leapt from the wand to her skin. "Whose...?"

"Albus," said Minerva, her eyes slightly misty. "He created several unregistered wands for himself. One of them served him quite well... Grindelwald didn't stand a chance."

Hermione gaped. "Several unregistered wands? And he never told Harry? He knows that Harry can't fight Voldemort with his wand! If Harry had one of these, Voldemort would never expect it!"

"The same argument I made to Albus myself innumerable times," Minerva replied. "Yet he insisted that a wand would matter little in the final confrontation. I can't begin to comprehend what he intended, but neither is it my intention to question his wishes. However, I could not let this fine specimen go to waste, and I can think of no one who deserves it more than you, Hermione... I mean, Camilla."

Hermione took a deep breath and lifted the wand from its box. It was heavier and more rigid than her former wand of vine wood. She felt warm tendrils of power entwine their way up her arm as she lifted the wand to the light.

As her damaged wrist caused her hand to bend outwards, she had to aim just left of the target.

Back in the Burrow, Hermione glanced sideways at Harry sitting beside her. She had not told him about the wand, and she was beginning to wonder now if she had made the right decision.

For the last few years, Harry's behavior had unnerved her. Gone was the liveliness that she had once known to be replaced with a haunted look of unwanted maturity. And then there were those times that she had caught him gazing at her with his eyes full of pleading and desperation... reminding her of nothing more than a small child.

How could it be in the best interests of Fate to place the entire weight of the wizarding world on Harry's shoulders? And then to offer him no help at all? All those who could have guided him, his parents, Sirius, Dumbledore... were gone.

"HermCamilla?" Harry whispered.

She jumped, tensing up breathlessly as she looked around to see if anybody had overheard him almost calling her by that name. But Mrs. Weasley had left to wash up, leaving them alone.

"Are you okay, Cami?" Ron asked. "You spaced out there for a moment."

"Yeah," Hermione said. The she threw herself into Harry's arms.

"Ummm... Cami?" Harry patted her awkwardly, his glasses knocked askew by the force of her embrace.

"We're going to kill that bastard," Hermione whispered fiercely. "We're going to help you every step of the way so that you can kill that bastard for good."

She felt a hand on her shoulder and turned her head to see Ron standing behind them. "Damn right," he growled.

The shocked look in Harry's eyes slowly began to fade as he looked first at one of them and then the other. Then a smile that Hermione hadn't seen for over three years lit up his face.

"Thank you," he murmured and he hugged them fiercely.

--10:30-11:00pm, October 31, 1998--

There was chaos. No order, no reason.

For a brief, terrifying moment, Hermione was lost, clutching her bracelet and dodging hexes left and right. The last thing she had recorded was preparing to Portkey to Godric's Hollow with the rest of the Order. The Death Eaters must have surprised them.

But that made no sense. The only person who knew of the plan other than the Order and the DA was... Severus.

The rush of dread that she felt then was enough to propel her to her feet. Amycus Carrow lay unconscious next to her, and she idly wondered whether she had done it.

She heard pops of Apparition all around her as more and more Death Eaters arrived. Fortunately, so did Order members and the DA. She saw Bellatrix Lestrange creep up on Harry from behind.

"Harry!" she shouted, and she jerked her wand to the side.

Fueled by her panic, the redwood wand overreacted, and she saw Harry lifted as if by a giant hand and flung to one side as Lestrange's spell impacted harmlessly against a tree. Harry scrambled up from the dirt where Hermione's spell had deposited him, glasses smudged and askew and the front of his robes gaping open. As he got to his feet, the chain around his neck shifted, and everyone saw the golden surface of Slytherin's locket gleam in the moonlight.

In a surreal moment, fighting all around them stopped. Then the sudden silence was broken by fierce whispering.

Then... out from the ruins of the Potter house on the top of a hill, stepped two tall, imposing figures swathed in black. Severus Snape and Lord Voldemort looked down at the wizards poised to destroy each other.

Hermione was immediately struck by the similarities between the two men... if Voldemort could still be called a man. Both had regal, imperious expressions on their faces as if they owned the world below them. Both seemed to stand a bit taller than normal human beings.

Voldemort's flat, red eyes clashed with Severus' small, dark ones. Voldemort held his wand loosely in a white, scaly hand, whereas everything about Severus' rigid stance suggested control. Looking at one filled her soul with intense hatred while the other...

No, Hermione realized. They were entirely different beings.

"Potter carries something valuable to our Lord with him." Snape's voice boomed over the crowd. "You will not touch him."

Voldemort cackled harshly, his breath wheezing in and out between thin, cold lips. "Severusssss, keep an eye on young Potter. Kill the ressssst." And Voldemort lifted his hand up and up...

To Hermione's right, there was a sound like bones cracking. She turned and saw a great oak tree by her side being torn out of the ground by its roots.

She looked up and up... and she saw the giant holding the uprooted tree in his hands like a spear. He was a great, shaggy thing that wore a leather kilt that seemed to be

plaited with the feathers from an entire Hippogriff. Beside him, popping into existence to loom over the dumbstruck crowd like small hills, appeared at least eight other giants. The muscles in the shaggy giant's arms flexed.

"Ginny, get down!" She grabbed the red-haired girl, who had been staring at the giant in abject terror, and forced them both face-first into the ground.

The tree hit the ground a few feet in front of their heads, the roots spinning into the sky like broken fingers, sending clouds of dust into their faces. Through fits of coughing, Hermione heard Harry shouting.

"HAGRID! Hagrid, now!"

From the woods around Godric's Hollow burst at least half a dozen equally large giants, including one that she recognized as Grawp. And running beside them, looking like a midget in comparison, was Hagrid, who was roaring in laughter.

"Aye, we're 'ere, Harry!"

The two groups of giants met with a sound like mountains crashing together, and suddenly the battle grew a hundred times more frightening.

Hermione scrambled to her feet, hunching slightly as she ran. "Stay low to the ground!" she yelled at Ginny. She ducked under a low-swinging club as hexes once again began to fly thick and fast.

She saw Remus Lupin, moving faster than she had ever seen him move, dodging the swinging claws of a snarling Fenrir Greyback. There was Neville Longbottom, his left arm struck with a vicious Severing Charm and dangling from his shoulder by a sliver of muscle, holding his wand triumphantly over a fallen Bellatrix Lestrange. Minerva, her grey hair freed from its bun and flowing about her neck, hissed as she Transfigured a blond Death Eater into a cream puff. Ginny Weasley, fully recovered from her panic, with her red hair streaming out behind her like a flag, hit Antonin Dolohov with a hex that had him weeping and staggering like a blind man, colliding into trees. Countless other nameless faces merged into a frenetic blur, viciously attacking Order members and teenage DA soldiers alike.

Suddenly Hermione's head was jerked to one side as if she had been struck across the face.

Lucius Malfoy stood barely three feet away, his wand pointing at her and a victorious gleam in his eyes as he said, "Ah, Miss Granger, we meet again. It seems that Severus has no more need for you, so... *Crucio!*"

She had no time to think about the meaning behind his words or even to run before Malfoy's curse sped towards her, filling her vision with red sparkling light. At the last possible instant, the spell veered to the side and impacted a rock, sending bits of stone flying.

"*Reducto!*" Hermione screamed.

Although he wasn't blasted into pieces, Malfoy flew backwards, his arm cracking sickeningly against a tree trunk.

Hermione looked around, her eyes wildly searching for the one responsible for deflecting Malfoy's curse. They lit upon Severus, standing mere feet away from Harry. Severus had his wand out, and as their eyes met, he nodded to her slightly. Harry seemed to look at Snape with slightly less hostility.

"*Enough!*"

Voldemort's hiss filled their heads as the world's most powerful Legilimens blasted out his thoughts for all to hear. Dodging hexes and running between tree-trunk thick legs of giants, Hermione didn't have time to think about what new evil Voldemort was summoning.

But then a great wave of despair washed over her. All around her, she saw Order and DA members falter, their wands trembling in their hands. Some began weeping. Even the Death Eaters turned pale. The giants, apparently not having emotion enough to care, continued raging around them.

Hermione looked up, her jaw going slack as she saw horde after horde of Dementors floating across the sky, forming "V"s in a horrendous parody of migratory birds.

She saw herself, writhing in agony underneath a curse. Bowing her head over a tombstone. Severus' face, bored and complacent, looking at her from across an empty bedroom.

"*Expecto Patronum!*"

A silver stag as large as a bear galloped past her, the wind from its passing rushing through her like an invigorating shower.

Waving her wand for the first time, feeling power that she'd never known tingling in her skin. Walking with Viktor into the Yule Ball, hearing awed and jealous whispers all around. Ron looking at her bashfully, holding a long-stemmed rose. Severus' hand touching her cheek, his face moving towards hers, her wide eyes and diamond-dusted dress reflected in his pupils...

"*Expecto Patronum!*" Hermione roared. A magnificent silvery snake erupted from her wand, floating its way up to join the stag, sending Dementors scattering as they attempted to dive down upon them.

Hermione stared at her Patronus, gaping, terrified. But it seemed that everybody was too busy casting their own Patronuses to notice hers.

One by one, silvery creatures floated past them and joined their brethren, uniting as a shield of good thoughts against the Dementors. But even from where she stood, Hermione could see that it was not enough. The Dementors had been breeding for nearly two years, and they were numerous enough to blot out the light from the moon.

Hermione heard a strangled cry, and she turned in time to see half a dozen Dementors pick up Ron, lifting him into the air above the trees.

"No..." she said. She took several stumbling steps toward him before despair overwhelmed her and forced her to her knees.

They can't take him. He has a family. He's getting married.

Hermione struggled to her feet, barely able to see through the dark, swirling mist. She gasped as a giant's foot stomped down inches to her left.

Where was Michele? She and Charlie were supposed to...

A screeching cry filled the sky like the Hogwarts Express at full speed. Through the mist burst two enormous dragons, a Hungarian Horntail and...

"Norbert!" Hagrid shouted joyfully.

Hagrid's baby Norwegian Ridgeback had grown into a 100-foot long behemoth. Both dragons were fitted with saddles, and their underbellies were plated with burnished red armor. Norbert's tail lashed fiercely, sending Dementors scattering and slashing one giant across the face. The great creature ran screaming for the trees.

Atop the Hungarian Horntail, Michele yelled, "Hold on, Ron!"

The beast surged towards the Dementors holding Ron. One of them was lowering its hood, tipping Ron's face up... Michele wasn't going to make it.

The Horntail arched its neck and expelled an enormous column of fire. The faces of the crowd below were lit with an orange glow as Dementors screamed in unearthly agony, robes and bone-dry limbs aflame. Around them, the giants panicked and ran as one into the woods, abandoning the battlefield.

Dementors fell from the sky like scraps of burnt parchment, and Ron was falling with them. The Horntail put on a burst of speed and dived, its great spiked tail swinging towards Ron.

There was an almighty gasp, just as if the crowd below were spectators at a Quidditch match. Ron's hand flashed forward and caught around one of the dragon's many spikes, swinging himself up onto the tail as easily as if he were riding a broom.

An enormous cheer went up from the Order. Ron clambered up the dragon's back until he could settle himself into the seat behind Michele. He wrapped his arms around her, and Hermione allowed herself to admire how beautiful they looked together.

"*Finish them!*" Voldemort's hissing had taken on an edge of panic. *Kill them all!*"

From above, Charlie gave a great laugh as he urged Norbert to dive.

"*GET DOWN!*"

Severus' voice filled all of their heads, and the Order and the DA all ducked as one. The Death Eaters did not, as Severus had apparently neglected to extend his warning to their minds.

Norbert screeched like a great eagle and spewed forth a column of fire bigger than himself, bigger than the world itself. Hermione coughed as fire scorched the air and ripped through the trees mere feet above their heads. Inhuman screaming began as Death Eaters were set aflame. Trees were burned to ragged stumps, and the last of the Dementors disappeared in an inferno of orange and red.

"Now, Potter!" Severus yelled, with his physical voice this time, loud enough for everyone to hear, including Voldemort. As Death Eaters frantically cast streams of water from their wands to douse their flaming robes, Harry ran through a cloud of ash and smoke and appeared... at last... alone before Voldemort.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" Harry screamed.

The shock of losing nearly his entire army and discovering that his most-trusted servant was a traitor would have been enough to destroy a lesser general. Voldemort was discomfited just long enough to allow Harry's hex, a sickly green jet of light, to impact his shoulder.

Voldemort stumbled. Hermione and the rest of the Order held their breaths.

Then Voldemort straightened up to his full height and glanced disdainfully at the smoldering hole in the shoulder of his robes. "Harry Potter..." he hissed. "You have trained for seven years to defeat me. Yet you still cannot summon enough hatred to do more than singe my clothing."

Harry's hand tightened around his wand, fury contorting his face.

"Then again," the Dark Lord hissed, "I have learned...in more ways than one...not to expect too much from *a child*. Dance, little Potter, *Crucio!*"

Harry jerked his wand to the side, and the curse swerved away. It had taken an enormous effort; Hermione could see Harry panting, and already, another jet of red light was streaking towards him.

Six curses later, Harry was visibly faltering. With a growl of frustration, Severus stepped forward and waved the next curse aside. "Stop wasting time, Potter! We did not all risk our lives tonight to see you *play*."

Harry's chest rose and fell with his heavy breathing. He seemed torn between dodging Voldemort's next curse and shouting at Snape.

"Do it your way, Potter," Snape said. "Pretend that he's *me*."

Before anyone had time to shout, Snape hissed something unintelligible and fired a spell at Harry. The curse was a jet of silvery, liquid light, as if Snape had hurled the contents of a Pensieve from his wand. It struck Harry in the back.

Three things happened at once. The Order raised their wands as one and aimed them at Snape. Hermione leapt in front of Severus, placing herself between him and the Order. But all of them faltered as Harry threw back his head and let out a scream like an animal in pain.

"NOOOO!"

Harry's eyes snapped open, and the only thing he could see before him was Voldemort, wand poised to cast another curse. Hermione saw Harry's face in the light of the blazing trees; it was full of unholy rage.

Then, in a sudden movement, Harry hurled his wand at Voldemort.

The dark wizard's eyes widened in surprise, and his wand halted in the middle of his curse; his arm moved to one side, intending to knock Harry's wand aside.

Wandless and defenseless, Harry Potter raised his right hand at Lord Voldemort.

"*AVADA KEDAVRA!*"

A brilliant jet of light, green as absinthe, shot out of Harry's palm and struck Voldemort squarely in his unprotected chest. Voldemort screamed, a broken sound, as if there were a million tortured souls encased within his body. For a brief instant, there was a brilliant silver haze surrounding his body. Then he fell to the ground, face-first, his wand rolling out of his limp hand.

A sickly greenish cloud rose into the air above the Dark Lord's body. In the next instant, three jets of identical hazy light shot from locations beyond the horizon to join with the original cloud. Harry stumbled forward, clawing at the chain around his neck as Slytherin's locket began vibrating and glowing. The chain broke and the locket hit the ground; another beam of ugly green light emitted from within, sailing through the air to join the growing cloud above Voldemort's fallen body.

Hermione, who was staring at the sight in bafflement, slowly began to understand. The portion of Voldemort's soul still in his body... the four remaining Horcruxes... they must all be together now... His soul was whole once again...

The soul-cloud twisted upon itself like a billowy snake and suddenly shot towards her with a sound like a shriek of rage. Her eyes fixated upon the cloud, imagining a gigantic set of jaws opening within, ready to swallow her whole.

Suddenly, she was shoved violently to one side. She picked herself up and saw Severus staring down at her with unfamiliar, hard eyes. He jeered, "Stand aside, Miss Granger. Your concern is neither welcome nor needed."

Time slowed to a crawl as she opened her mouth to scream, for she could see now that Voldemort's soul had been aimed towards Severus all along; she had merely been in the way. She saw Harry standing to one side, looking at Snape with absolute loathing. He was going to let Severus be consumed by Voldemort's tainted soul...

Then Harry lifted his fallen wand and pointed it at the sickly-green cloud.

"*Ayuna nakaq!*"

The words rolled off Harry's tongue with the whispered reverence of a prayer. The spell was not one she recognized, and the language sounded South American. Hermione wondered exactly what sort of training Harry had been receiving in Machu Picchu.

The spell emerged from his wand as a net of white light that wrapped around the soul-cloud. The beams of light drew tight, squeezing like long, thin fingers. The remnants of Voldemort began to glow blue, a color that grew brighter and bluer, until Hermione imagined it to be the color of the sky when the Earth had been born.

There was a blinding flash of white...the wizards left standing were knocked off their feet...then the light dissolved, leaving nothing behind, not even ash.

Hermione's breaths sounded loud and harsh in her ears. Silence had fallen upon Godric's Hollow. Every single eye was riveted upon the fallen form of Voldemort. This time, Hermione could see that he was truly gone. The body looked crumpled and empty, a shell of what had once been human.

His flat, red eyes were vacant and black.

Then one by one, Death Eaters dropped their wands to the ground. Lengths of wood hit the dirt like a shower of matchsticks.

Looking around, she saw that Severus was gone.

The air crackled with the sharp reports of a single pair of hands clapping. The clapping was joined by another and then another until full-throated cheers were ringing through the sky.

Lord Voldemort, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, Tom Riddle, scourge of the wizarding world for over thirty years, was dead. And it had all taken less than half an hour.

As her bracelet tingled against her wrist, Hermione removed her quill from behind her ear with dream-like slowness.

The first words she wrote were: *We did it.*

But as she looked around her...Ron and Michele embraced atop the Horntail like a fairytale couple upon a steed. Hagrid comforted a weeping Grawp, whose head was nearly entirely bare, his hair scorched away. Tonks fussed hysterically over Lupin, her hair changing shades every two seconds; Lupin had a bleeding slash over his eye that ran from his forehead to his cheek, and Hermione thought it would look quite fetching once it had healed. Luna laid a comforting hand on Neville's shoulder, waving her wand over his nearly severed arm, knitting the flesh and bone back together. Even Kingsley Shacklebolt swooped down upon a startled Minerva and planted an enthusiastic kiss on her lips.

She looked around her and suddenly felt unbearably empty and alone.

Ayuna nakaq = "aya/nuna" Quechua. soul, devil + "nakaq" Q. killer yes, in Quechua, "soul" and "devil" are the same word

Next chapter: Sunrises from two vastly different times. We finally find out the importance of Hermione's bracelet. Preparations for battle, when some things are said and others left unsaid, and someone discovers Hermione's secret.

As always, please review. It takes less than a minute, but the giddy feeling I get when a new review alert shows up in my inbox rivals what drinking Felix Felicis must be like. Yeah, I'm shameless.

Ouroboros

Chapter 5 of 17

Sunrises from two vastly different times. We finally find out the importance of Hermione's bracelet. Preparations for battle, when some things are said and others left unsaid, and someone discovers Hermione's secret.

A/N: After you guys have finished this chapter, be sure to check out my DH-inspired fic *More Than a Dream*. Without giving too much away, I think it'll make Snape fans rather happy.

Nerd points to anyone who can tell me how I got the number 479,001,600.

Chapter 5

Ouroboros

--8:008:30am, June 27, 1998--

Hermione loved to watch the sunrise. At least, she strongly suspected that she did.

In her time at Hogwarts, she usually studied so late into the night that she awoke fifteen minutes before breakfast began. Now, however, most mornings found her standing by her kitchen window overlooking the Cam at 6:00am with the sun well into the sky and an inexplicable feeling of contentment.

She figured that none of those precious moments ever made it onto her parchments either because words could never adequately describe the sight, and she preferred to experience her first Cambridge sunrise over and over... or because she had been so engrossed in watching that she had... well, forgotten.

It shocked her when she found out that even with every memory living on borrowed time, she still sometimes forgot to record properly. On her second day at the Burrow, she had tasted one of Mrs. Weasley's new recipes and declared it absolutely divine, only to have Harry look oddly at her and tell her that she had spoken the exact same words over the same dish last night. She must have judged "it was the most delicious thing I've ever tasted" to be a poor representation of the real experience.

It wasn't only the inadequacies of her memoirs that prevented her from recording as diligently as she probably should have. Hermione had finished studying seven years worth of subjects for the NEWTs three weeks early and had remembered all that material in perfect detail until the time came to take the tests. She had a good memory and had long since come to take it for granted.

Such an oversight almost had disastrous consequences one Saturday, a week after she had moved into her flat in Cambridge. She had had a visitor not long after breakfast.

Hermione was standing with her back to him, head bowed over something she held in her hands. A single tear fell from her eye, and she quickly wiped it away before it could drip.

"Camilla?"

His voice sounded very faint, and her hands began trembling uncontrollably.

"I'm sorry, I..." She cast her thoughts back and nearly screamed in frustration when she encountered nothing but blankness. "I... don't remember, Harry. You must have told me when you gave me this... W-who is it?"

The scrap of parchment in her hands said Knights Enham Cemetery".

Harry folded her hands gently in his. "It's your parents, Camilla. This is where they're buried. McGonagall found the address for you."

Hermione's lips seemed to have difficulty moving. "My parents... my parents." She threw herself into Harry's arms, sobbing uncontrollably. One of his hands patted her back gently, hesitantly.

"I'm sorry, Cami. I'm real sorry."

She scrunched her eyes shut, nodding absently. Harry would not understand. He could not understand the sheer terror she had felt, thinking that someone she had known had died, one of her closest friends perhaps, and that she had simply forgotten. "Never again," she whispered fiercely.

"Too right, Camilla." His voice rumbled where she was pressed against his chest. "We'll get them back for what they did to you. We'll never stop until we do." He drew back and steadied Hermione on her feet, briefly brushing a strand of black hair back behind her ear.

His eyes dropped from her suddenly. "Er... oh! I have something else for you. It wouldn't do for me to bring you nothing but bad news. Here..." He fumbled within his robes, eventually emerging with a small, silver bracelet in one hand and a sheet of parchment in the other.

"Found it in the git's quarters after you'd gone. McGonagall must have left it for you, and you forgot to pick it up. Frankly, I think she's brilliant. Don't think her artistic skills are at the level of her charms, though; her dragon looks rather like a worm."

Hermione smiled, which had obviously been the intended effect. Harry beamed. She held the bracelet up and considered the worm-like squiggle that could have been a dragon etched into the silver. The tail of the creature melted into wavy lines of a river that wrapped around the circumference of the bracelet until it reached the dragon's mouth, which in turn appeared to be drinking the water from the river.

"Why a dragon?" she asked.

"They represent courage, Camilla. They may be vicious, dangerous creatures, but they've got a fierce sense of pride and fight ferociously for what's their own."

"That was mostly a compliment, Harry. Thanks."

Harry grinned and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "I'll leave you to it. Mrs. Weasley gives me icy glares of death if I ever stay more than an hour at your place."

So he had visited before. She sighed. She really needed to become more detailed in her recordings.

Hermione smiled again, her heart twisting a little at his earnest attempts to comfort her. Harry paused before stepping into her fireplace, Floo powder trickling from one hand. "Cami, we're here for you. Always, okay?"

She nodded, tears pricking the backs of her eyes. "Go on home, Harry."

After he had disappeared in a roar of green flames, Hermione turned her attention to the parchment, which was filled with Minerva's neat script.

Miss Granger...

Hermione frowned.

Enclosed please find a gift that shall hopefully prove invaluable to you in the days to come.

Even with your new quill, the notes that you record from day-to-day will doubtless become too cumbersome to track and eventually too long to read through in less than half an hour. The charm on the bracelet will activate when you place it on your wand wrist and will recognize only you. Any notes that you have already written can be reduced and tucked underneath the band. Any future notes that you write with your special quill will be automatically stored within the bracelet. Touching the bracelet at any time with your left hand will enable you to recall everything you have previously recorded.

The bracelet will also tingle against your skin when two minutes of each half hour remain, allowing you ample time to record before you can no longer remember.

Consider this a small token of how much we are in your debt.

Hermione turned the silver bracelet over and over in her hands, admiring the brilliant sheen. She slipped the circlet over her hand slowly, feeling it settle perfectly in place against the knobby imperfection where her hand ended and her misshapen wrist began. A prickling sensation, not unpleasant, fluttered through her skin.

A flick of her wand reduced her considerable sheaf of parchment to the size and thickness of a poker chip, and she slid it into the space between the bracelet and her skin. The tiny object stayed, held by an invisible force. Then, slowly, she wrapped her left hand around the bracelet.

Words, words, words!

She gasped and drew her hand away. There had been no images, no sensations, only words.

During her time as a student, quite a few of her friends were convinced that she had lived in the Hogwarts library. That was not true. The most time she had ever spent continuously in the library was three days.

For a week after that ill-advised marathon, she saw pages from Bogram Boffert's "The 479,001,600 Combinations of Uses for Dragon Blood" on the insides of her eyelids every time she blinked. She had carefully restricted the length of time she spent in the library after that.

Her fingers slowly curled around the bracelet again, and this time she let the words invade her mind without resisting. Eventually the maelstrom of text stopped whirring, and she began to sift through the collection of memories that covered her mind like a blanket of snow.

Once she got the hang of it, it wasn't too difficult. Rather like reviewing the highlights of an engaging football game, except that she had no images and only the commentator's voice to guide her.

As a commentator for her life, Hermione realized that her voice was rather dry and uninspiring, a necessary sacrifice for the sake of impartiality.

She finished sifting through the jumble of her entries and withdrew, removing her hand from her silver bracelet. Looking at her watch, she was stunned to see that the entire process had taken mere seconds.

This could work. She would get faster at sifting through her memories each time. It was rather like remembering the spells and charms that she had learned after the onset of her condition. The right words were written in her notes; she merely had to convince her body that she knew how to use them.

It was much like the charm Minerva had taught her to apply and remove her Glamour. Even now she felt a tingle of uncertainty when she waved her wand over herself, though a perusal of her notes indicated she had spent over an hour practicing. She imagined it felt like throwing herself off a cliff after she had been told that she had wings but could neither see nor feel them.

She nearly jumped out of her skin as the bracelet seemed to hum against her wrist. A quick glance at the wall clock confirmed that two minutes remained before 8:30am.

She lifted her quill into the air and wrote, taking care to focus on every detail, down to the color of the shirt Harry had worn. She placed her hand experimentally over the bracelet and was happy to sense that the words had been recorded. Hermione smiled slightly. This would work.

For now though... she looked down at the slip of parchment. She had somewhere she needed to go. Tomorrow would be Sunday. The majority of the neighborhood would be at church in the morning, and her visit to the graveyard would hopefully go unnoticed. Unfortunately she was rather familiar with the cemetery in Knights Enham.

--6:006:30am, October 31, 1998--

Hermione was standing with her back to him, head bowed over something she held in her hands. A single tear appeared her eye, and she quickly wiped it away before it could drip.

"Miss Granger?"

His voice sounded very faint, and she bristled upon hearing it. She felt his body moving closer before leaning over to see what she held in her hands.

It was a Polaroid photo that showed a full-color bleed of the Cam at sunrise. The sky was a riot of blue, red, and orange color reflected in the calm water. A faint curtain of mist rose from the surface to be slowly burned away by the emerging sun. A single rower was sculling across the middle of the photo, his long, lean body frozen over the vessel as his oars splashed down into the water.

Hermione pressed her nose to the photo, as if the square of Muggle plastic held the scent of fresh morning dew. She drew away before tears could stain the photo.

She turned to Severus. "Hi," she said weakly. He was looking at her nervously, and after a moment of hesitation, he held out his arms tentatively, as if unsure if such was a proper action.

Hermione froze, something inside of her recoiling at the thought of drawing near him. How could he... after what he had done?

But the uncertainty in his eyes drew her in like a magnet. She sniffed and stepped into his arms, laying her head gently on his shoulder. He was warm and solid beneath her. She grimaced and tore herself away.

His dark brown eyes gazed at her curiously, breaking her heart. "What was that all about?"

Hermione closed her eyes so that she would not have to look at him. She gestured to the photograph instead. "I always knew I loved sunrises," she muttered. "It will never be real, but it's enough."

"Don't be ridiculous," Snape replied, his voice edged with an odd intensity.

She frowned before sliding the photograph underneath her bracelet. "Seeing as this is the last sunrise I'll see of this world, I thought it reasonable to record it. Who knows what the world will look like after tomorrow? Everything will have changed then."

Snape frowned. "You give Voldemort far too much credit. He has not changed the world as much as he might imagine, and a few years after his death, most of the world will have forgotten he existed."

"It will be different for you, though," she said softly. "You will be free."

His face was expressionless. "Yes."

Hermione thought he could have looked happier about it.

Then he smiled. "You look beautiful," he said. He stepped forward to kiss her.

At the last moment, she turned her face so that his lips landed on her cheek. Even then, a jolt ran down to the pit of her stomach at the touch. She pushed away from him and grabbed her bag.

"They're waiting for us at Grimmauld Place," she said brusquely. "I'll meet you there."

She Disapparated, leaving him alone in her kitchen.

--8:008:30am, October 31, 1998--

"Er, Hermione. Did you know that Ginny and I are, ah..."

"I know. And I'm happy for you two."

"You-you are?"

"Extremely. She never stopped loving you, you know."

Harry blushed. "I know. Ginny gave me quite an earful about how much of a prat I'd been. Listen, Mione, I've tried not to think about it, but I've got to ask. You and Snape basically *lived* together for three months. Did he ever..." He went a little green.

Her heart thudded heavily, just once. "No. We were never anything like that."

It was surprisingly easy to say.

The color returned to Harry's face. "Thank goodness." His eyes went hard. "If he lays so much as a finger on you, I'll kill him. Deal or no deal."

Hermione smiled weakly.

--5:005:30pm, October 31, 1998--

"Hermione?"

She turned and smiled at the Headmistress. "Yes, Minerva?"

"I wonder if I might inquire what Severus has done. You have been glaring daggers at him all afternoon."

She scoffed. "You know Professor Snape. He doesn't even need to *try*."

Minerva was looking at her thoughtfully, and Hermione began to feel uncomfortable. "You probably do not know, but Severus has never in his life shared his home, much less his lab, with anyone. He cares for you very deeply, Hermione, no matter what he may have done."

Hermione's mouth went dry, and she suddenly had to sit down.

Seeing her stricken face, Minerva smiled reassuringly. "I wouldn't worry that others would be able to guess. But I have known Severus for so long that it was impossible not to notice his changed behavior. I can't say that I could have predicted this, but you two do complement each other remarkably well."

"I... I thought we did," Hermione said miserably. The ability to finally confide in someone else about Severus almost made her cry. "But now... he's done something that I just can't understand, no matter how I think about it. Minerva, may I ask you an impertinent question?"

"I would be offended if you did not."

"How did you manage to forgive Severus for the Headmaster... what he did? Professor Dumbledore's loss was awful for us all, but for you, it was personal."

The older woman pursed her lips. "I reminded myself that for half his life, Severus has been forced to do things that make people think the worst of him. And even if his reasons aren't enough to make the hurt go away, it wasn't my place to insist that he could have made a different choice."

Minerva removed her spectacles and dabbed lightly at her eyes. "Also, Albus told me to forgive him, and I could deny him nothing."

Hermione nodded slowly, chewing her lip in thought.

"I don't expect you to decide immediately," Minerva said. "I have no doubt that whatever Severus did deserves the full measure of your ire. But I must remind you that we are going to war tonight. Can I trust that you won't let this get in the way of what must be done?"

"No," Hermione said with a knowing sigh. "I will fight by his side until the very end. Minerva... you won't tell anyone, will you?"

The Headmistress shook her head. "No, I daresay that's something they're not prepared to think about now, especially Harry."

--8:008:30pm, October 31, 1998--

They were sitting in the library. Hermione had been reading the same sentence in her book for nearly fifteen minutes.

"Hermione?"

She smiled. She could get used to being called that again. "Yes, Ginny?"

"What's it like? Being in a battle?" Ginny had not fought in Hogsmeade. She had been mysteriously locked inside her bedroom before the rest of the DA had left. Harry had later admitted to the deed, and Ginny had threatened to hex his bits off if he tried to do it again now. Despite her earlier bravado, the red-haired girl was now remarkably nervous.

Hermione thought for a moment. "Chaos," she said. "No order, no reason. Nothing at all like a wizard's duel. The only thing that you can do is to never forget what you're fighting for."

"A better future?" Ginny said.

"If you must," Hermione said. "But keep first and foremost in your mind the things that your enemies have done to you. They will show you no mercy, and the strength of your spells sometimes depends more on your hatred than your optimism."

Ginny looked at her thoughtfully. "Is that what this is about for you? Getting vengeance for what they did to you?"

Hermione nodded sharply. "I don't know if you can understand, Ginny, but it's hard for me to think about the future. My life, as it is, has become an endless sequence of *nows*. And the only thing I can think is that if...*when* this potion works on Voldemort, when I know that the one who did this to me is dead or captured, then maybe *maybe*, I can have some peace."

"Wow..." Ginny said. She seemed to be at a loss for words. "I'm... I'm sorry, Hermione."

She waved off her friend's concerns. "Don't worry about me. After tonight, things will be... very different either way."

"Then how can you stand this waiting?" Ginny jumped to her feet and began to pace back and forth. "What are we waiting for?"

Hermione closed her useless book. "Voldemort thinks that Harry will arrive at Godric's Hollow right before midnight to pay respects for the passing of the night that his parents died. We'll arrive there by Portkeys around 10:30 pm. Too early and it will look suspicious; the Death Eaters have many spies, and they will notice any notable deviations from our regular schedules."

As she finished, she noticed Ginny grinning at her. "What?"

"Nothing. It's just... I can always count on you for the best answer for everything. It's good to know you haven't changed that much, Hermione."

She made a grim face. "I wouldn't be that optimistic." *Had she really become nothing but someone seeking revenge?*

"You're still you, Hermione," Ginny insisted. "No matter what those bastards might have done."

She smiled. "Thank you, Gin. That means a lot."

The other girl coughed lightly. "Well, I have to make up for all those evil glares I gave you when I thought you were dating Harry."

--10:0010:30pm, October 31, 1998--

The entire Order and the DA stood or sat in armchairs in a circle in the study. Harry and Severus stood in the center. The arrangement looked oddly familiar to her.

Severus held something out to Harry that definitely looked familiar. "Slytherin's locket. One of Voldemort's remaining fragments of soul."

The majority of the room visibly shrank away from it. Harry let the locket fall into his palm. "I know what this is," he said. "But why are you giving it to me?"

"Voldemort has conveniently informed all of the Death Eaters of the locket's existence, and he has demanded in no uncertain terms that it be brought to him *undamaged*. By wearing this, Potter, it will ensure that you will save your energy for fighting Voldemort. No Death Eater will dare touch you."

Harry had a look on his face as if he were holding something poisonous in his hands. "Is that wise? Going against Voldemort while carrying a bit of him with me? Will the soul fragment be able to interfere with my magic?"

"Potter, you have carried a bit of Voldemort in you ever since he gave you that scar, and I daresay that has done nothing to weaken your desire to see him dead. What worries me more is your ability to summon the amount of hatred necessary to cast the Killing Curse."

"I have it. Voldemort is the most evil son of a..."

"Who nevertheless has done nothing to hurt you personally," Snape interrupted. "Yes, he is responsible for countless deaths, most of whom you weren't alive to know. The most direct attack he has made on you was to kill your parents, and you were far too young to remember."

"Maybe I'll just imagine that he's you then," Harry said with an ugly glare.

Hermione stiffened. Minerva bristled. "Mr. Potter..." she said warningly.

Harry seemed to deflate slightly. "Yeah, yeah, I know. We're going to work together." He placed the chain over his neck and settled Slytherin's locket against his chest.

Then he grasped his wand and looked around at the people in the room. His eyes locked on Ginny, Hermione, Ron...

He coughed nervously. "I'm really bad at this sort of thing, so I don't really have a speech or anything. All I have to say is... let's finish what we started."

A mighty roar went up around the room. Then there was much milling about as people split into groups of four or five. They would Portkey to separate locations in Godric's Hollow that had been scouted out as providing good cover.

Hermione finished writing with her quill and looked up to see her Portkey group. Harry. Ron. Ginny. Harry held out an empty plastic water bottle.

"Hermione... Granger."

Her eyes snapped up at Severus' voice. He had his own Portkey, as he would need to arrive far away from the rest of them. He had not bothered to keep his voice low, and nearly half the room had turned to look, bewildered.

"Be careful," he whispered. For a moment there was a look in his eyes that was warm and familiar. Then it was gone. "It would be terribly inconsiderate for you to get yourself killed before you see the results of your potion."

There was scattered grumbling and glares leveled at Severus before they turned away. Harry was looking at him very coldly. Hermione dropped her eyes to the Portkey, but she couldn't help feeling as if her heart was no longer as heavy.

"Ready, everyone!" Harry said. "The Portkeys will activate in three, two, one..."

Hermione touched the side of the water bottle. There was an almighty jerk behind her navel, and she was spinning, tumbling, through nothingness.

They hit the ground with a thud and groaned in unison. Then they got to their feet immediately, drawing their wands, when they realized that one of the voices was not their own.

Amicus Carrow, the pig-like Death Eater, waddled away from them slowly. He was not wearing Death Eater robes and looked utterly shocked to see them. He had apparently been scouting out the exact location where they had arrived.

"*Stupefy!*" Ginny screamed.

The jet of red light flew towards the little man, its path straight and true. But not before Amicus had touched his stubby forefinger to his Dark Mark, hissing words that they could not understand.

As Amicus hit the ground, unconscious, there came a series of pops around them one after another. Within thirty seconds, all around them were black-robed Death Eaters, more of them than they could count. They were not masked; they apparently had not had time to prepare. Also, they probably realized that concealing their identities no longer mattered.

There was a moment of deathly, unbearable silence. The moon came out from behind a cloud, bathing Godric's Hollow in silver.

With a mighty roar, everyone cast their spells at once.

"*Protego!*" Hermione shouted and watched streams of colored light bounce off her shield away from them. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Harry shoot a jet of red sparks up into the sky.

The final battle had begun.

A/N: Knights Enham is a real town in England, to the west of London. I was browsing photographs of cemeteries in England, and it was by far the most beautiful one represented.

Next chapter: An interlude and possibly the ultimate betrayal.

Interlude

Chapter 6 of 17

An interlude and possibly the ultimate betrayal.

A/N: For your information, 479,001,600 is 12! or the number of ways that the twelve uses for dragon blood could be combined in different orders. In other words, a book so pointless and dull that it should have been illegal to print.

A shorter chapter this time, but it will answer a question about Hermione's attack that many of you have probably been wondering. And the next chapter will be coming sooner than usual.

Hugs and kisses to my betas sshg316 and Southern_Witch_69.

Chapter 6

Interlude

--Time unknown--

She was dreaming.

It could be the only explanation for the fingers caressing her neck. It could be the only explanation of how she shivered from desire and not fear as the phantom fingers traced their way from her ear to her collarbone.

She reached back, above and behind her head. Her palm came to rest against a narrow, warm cheek with just a hint of rough stubble.

A sigh whispered across the edge of her hand. "We can't..."

She moved her hand across the face until it reached his mouth. Her little finger slipped between his lips, and she felt the warm breath of his gasp against the sensitive fingertip.

"Why not?" she whispered. "When we have so little time left?"

There was another sigh, this time sounding more like a whimper. Strong, thin fingers lifted her hand until he could kiss her palm and then the base of her wrist. "Hermione... what are you doing to me?"

She turned and lifted her eyes to the face that was swallowed by darkness. She kissed the mouth lightly. "Loving you."

"Don't say that," he said in a choked voice. "I will be gone in the morning. This phantasm whom you love now will fade to dust in the light of day. He doesn't know how to be this to you; he is afraid."

She caressed his brow, smoothing out his invisible frown in the darkness. "I would love him regardless."

He dipped his head, leaning into her touch. "That's exactly what I'm afraid of."

--4:00am, June 28, 1998--

Hermione awoke, disoriented and more than a little confused. Her head pounded as if a herd of Hippogriffs were prancing about in her skull.

The phantasm from her dream was fading into oblivion, but a disturbing air of familiarity tugged at her mind. She frowned and shook her head, dispersing some of the sand of sleep.

A weary glance over at her Muggle clock radio and a grope at her new silver bracelet (easily the best and most precious present she had ever received) revealed that she had three more hours before she needed to be anywhere.

Hermione rolled over and went back to sleep.

--8:008:30am, October 30, 1998--

Hermione woke up slowly, then more quickly once she felt the soreness in her lower abdomen and the shooting pains in her head that foretold a wicked hangover.

"Urrrgh..." she groaned.

"I did warn you that you might regret it in the morning," a disembodied voice spoke.

She clasped her bracelet and then rolled over, wincing at the soreness around her stomach. Severus Snape slowly came into focus. He was dressed for the day with his forbidding black robes and black vest impeccably buttoned to his throat. In his hands he held a glass of water and a small vial of cornflower blue liquid. On his face was a small smile of amusement.

Hermione sat up slowly, wincing when the bright sunlight hit her eyes. Looking down, she saw that her two-piece nightgown was rumpled, evidence of a fitful night's sleep. The buttons on her top did not line up properly. She was also in Spinner's End. In Severus' bed.

She groped at her bracelet again. The last thing she had recorded was her intention to give him a serious talking to.

She peered through the open door to the living area and saw the empty bottle of scotch whiskey and two glasses on a table. Next to the table was the couch on top of which she saw several rumpled sheets and a blanket.

The talking must not have gone very far; she had never reacted well to alcohol.

I must have passed out, and he let me take the bed. Oh gods, how embarrassing!

Nevertheless, she took the time to notice that Severus' bed was remarkably comfortable, and the sheets smelled crisp and new.

Hermione started when Severus made his way over to the side of the bed and set the glass down at her side. He poured several drops of the blue liquid into the water and stirred thoroughly.

He proffered the glass to her, the liquid inside the color of a summer sky. "Let that teach you to ever drink that much again."

Hermione never looked away from his eyes as she drank the potion. It tasted faintly of overripe strawberries and delicious cream. She frowned when she had emptied the glass. "That didn't taste like a hangover cure."

Snape scoffed. "As if I would use the common stuff brewed for the masses."

Had Snape just used the word "stuff"?

She smiled. "We must have had quite a celebration."

"The best in my life."

Her eyes snapped up to his, but his window to uncharacteristic honesty had closed well before she'd had time to react. "I, er, I'm sorry that you ended up sleeping on the couch."

He shrugged, though he looked slightly uncomfortable. "Think nothing of it."

She blinked, her vision beginning to clear and the headache fading, though not as fast as she had expected. The soreness in her lower abdomen remained. She swung her legs off the side of the bed. Her feet hit the floor, her body twisting, and she froze.

"Severus?" she asked, her tongue unnaturally awkward.

"What is it?" he replied, a hint of irritation in his voice.

"I feel..." She stopped, her eyes were riveted upon his long, slender fingers. She felt as if she had been Confounded. "Would you ever lie to me?" she asked.

"What exactly is that supposed to mean?" He sounded annoyed.

"I..." She paused, a rolling feeling of dread in her stomach making her wonder if she really wanted to know. She looked up at him, into his eyes and saw puzzlement and growing irritation. "Never mind," she muttered.

"Miss Granger, I assure you that I do not have the ability to read minds, whatever rumor may say to the contrary. Now, unless you wish to translate your vague ramblings into something intelligible, I suggest that we stop wasting time and review our plan for tomorrow night. That is, unless the amount of whiskey you downed last night has permanently addled your mind."

Hermione's mouth went dry. He had said worse things to her, but nothing had ever made her legs feel as if they would collapse under her. For a brief moment, she entertained the thought that she was mistaken. She was so confused that it was a distinct possibility.

"I... I have to go to the loo." Severus was a dark blur in the corner of her vision as she raced to the bathroom with stumbling steps. She forced herself to close the door quietly before falling to the floor, her back pressed up against the cold side of the tub.

She was breathing much too quickly. Hermione covered her face with her hands, her fingertips digging into the ridge of bone above her eyes as she concentrated on inhaling slowly through her nose.

In the end, there was nothing more that could be done to delay. She glanced over once at the closed door, as if the whitewashed wood held some merciful answer. Blinking sharply, she took a deep breath and hooked both thumbs under the waistband of her pyjama bottoms. Her legs wriggled about like snakes as she worked them and her knickers down over her hips to bunch on the floor by her ankles.

She had already seen, involuntarily, when she was shoving the nightgown down her legs, and the sudden tightness in her throat had made her light-headed. She forced herself to look again at the insides of her thighs, so that there could be no mistake.

A pungent, coppery scent assailed her nostrils as she lifted her head, staring into nothingness. For a moment, red-hot fury ripped through her so ruthlessly that she had trouble breathing. But then two tears traced silent tracks down her cheeks, and her anger was gone, a mere memory, as if knowing that it had frightened her.

She waited for more tears and realized that there were none left to shed. The chilling certainty had frozen her grief more surely than had the suspicious soreness in her lower abdomen, which had felt nothing like a stomachache. More surely even than the odd sensation that had filled her soul when she'd first opened her eyes this morning and had seen him there.

Her knuckles turned white as she buried her hand in her hair. Pain prickled throughout her scalp.

I hate whiskey.

"Are you nearly finished yet?"

Hermione flinched as the voice through the door struck her like a slap. She pulled herself to her feet and splashed some water on her thighs. She toweled herself dry, scrubbing her skin red and raw.

As she dressed, the sleeve of her robes caught upon the protruding edge of her bent wrist. She let go of the garment, eyes riveted upon the cloth snagged upon the imperfection of the twisted joint.

She couldn't remember what the Death Eaters had done to her, but it had surely been horrific beyond her wildest nightmares to have left such a mark.

Like an automaton, she removed her quill from behind her ear and forced herself to write.

Then she groped for the door blindly, pushing it open slowly like the door of a tomb.

Severus' bored, complacent face greeted her from the other side of the empty bedroom.

"At last," he said. "Would you like some breakfast before we begin, Miss Granger?"

They must have tortured her across the edge of insanity and used every method they could dredge up from their black souls to cause pain.

Yet the Death Eaters had not taken her virginity after all.

"Yes," Hermione whispered. She found herself unable to say anything else.

Later, as the blackness crept into her mind as she picked listlessly at a piece of toast, she welcomed it like the embrace of a lover.

Next chapter: Hermione's carelessness at the cemetery costs her dearly. Before the Final Battle, we find out why Hermione and Ron broke up, and Hermione forces Severus into a situation he'd hoped to avoid. Is that the scent of citrus upon the air?

Mori

Chapter 7 of 17

Hermione's carelessness at the cemetery costs her dearly. Before the Final Battle, we find out why Hermione and Ron broke up, and Hermione forces Severus into a situation he'd hoped to avoid. Is that the scent of citrus upon the air?

A/N: This chapter contains sexual content. Not anything truly explicit, but I doubt any of you would leave if it did, haha. In any case, you have been duly informed.

Chapter 7

Mori

--7:007:30am, June 28, 1998--

Hermione Apparated to the mouth of a small alley two blocks from the remains of her house. She was familiar with the graveyard to which Minerva had given her the address. Several grandparents and the odd aunt and uncle were buried there. Cousin Tony, who had died in a car crash when he was five years old, was in the center on the very top of a small hill, guarded over by a weeping stone angel. The graveyard was only four blocks from her former home, and she did not want to walk past the ruins.

She was also not wearing her Glamour. Camilla Elliot did not belong here.

Hermione whispered a Disillusionment Charm, and her skin tingled as she faded from view. She stepped onto the main sidewalk and began to walk. It was a beautiful summer morning. The leaves of the trees lining either side of the street were a sun-dappled mix of different shades of green. A hazy mist hung in the air.

As she crossed from the first block to the second, she caught the unseasonal scent of leaves burning from an unseen backyard. When she was younger and gangly limbed, her father would rake the fallen leaves in autumn from both yards of the house into a massive pile. He would then let her jump around in it to her heart's delight before they stood back as he set the leaves alight. They took a long time to burn, and when the pile was gone, her father would carry her slumbering form into the house, her face resting against his shirt that smelled of ash and wood smoke.

The graveyard appeared to her right, and she wiped her eyes gently so that she could properly see the latch on the entrance gate. It was locked. A quick Alohomora opened the padlock, and the gate swung open silently on well-oiled hinges. She closed the gate after her and set a privacy ward. Anybody, wizard or Muggle, passing by the graveyard would suddenly imagine themselves late for a pressing engagement and find their eyes drawn elsewhere. When she was finished, she dropped the Disillusionment Charm.

Hermione wore faded jeans and a baggy sweatshirt that had belonged to her mother. She had left her hair down, and it fell in bushy curtains around her face. She kept her eyes downcast, burying her hands in the pockets of her jeans as she shuffled amongst the gravestones, feeling it improper to raise her head.

Somewhere above her head, a raven cawed once into the silent sky.

Paul and Anne Granger had been successful dentists who had opened their own practice a few years before Hermione left for Hogwarts. As efficient, reasonable people, they had made legal arrangements in advance in case of their death. Their life insurance was good, and they would not want for pleasant resting place. Hermione idly wondered whom the money had gone to after the disappearance of their daughter.

The graves were located on the gentle slope of the hill, the tombstones carved from refined, austere black marble.

Paul and Anne Granger

Loving Parents

Cherished Friends

Talented Healers

Standing at the foot of the fresh mounds, Hermione suddenly felt very young.

"Hey, Mum... Hey, Dad. I'm sorry I wasn't able to see you until now." Her voice sounded small in the large graveyard.

"Minerva remember Professor McGonagall? found me a flat in Cambridge; you would like it. It overlooks the river. My neighbors are mainly retired professors who spend most of their days reading and walking along the river."

Her parents should have lived to grow old and to do the same...

She bit her lower lip to keep it from trembling. She could not say it, she would fall apart if she did, she could not...

The words tumbled out relentlessly, helplessly. "I'm sorry for what happened to you because of me. If I hadn't come home that day, if you hadn't let me go to Hogwarts in the first place..."

If. If. If...

Hermione fell to her knees. The grassy ground was gentle and soft. "I'm sorry I didn't visit more often, I'm sorry I spent so many summers away, I'm sorry that I didn't tell you more often how much I love you..." The tears pressed against the backs of her eyes, and she welcomed them, weeping freely.

"I don't know what I'm doing, Mum and Dad. I should be preparing for university, and you two should be reminding me to pack my toothbrush. Instead, I'm..." Hermione wiped her eyes.

"I'm scared," she confessed. "I don't know that I should keep doing this; it feels wrong somehow, the forces that I'm toying with. They're so powerful and so ancient. And if it works... I'll always wonder if I could have saved you."

She reached forward, her hand groping through her tear-blurred vision. Her palm fell upon the gravestone, the granite still gritty from the hammer and chisel. She was leaning forward, a position awkward and uncomfortable for her back, but the tombstone was firm and solid under her hand.

"It gives me a purpose, Mum and Dad. I... I lost everything, doing this project. If I could only finish it, I think I could finally wake up and not immediately despair..." Hermione breathed in deeply and found that her tears had dried. She smiled weakly. "Maybe I should have been a dentist after all."

The gravestone was silent, the etchings upon its surface keeping their own counsel. She tried to feel strength seeping into her from the loves of her life buried beneath her feet. Nothing so melodramatic happened, but perhaps the searing pain inside her chest was soothed a little.

Hermione pulled two dozen lilies from her pocket and enlarged them to full-size. They were her parents' favorite. She could have Transfigured wildflowers, but to do so would have felt like cheating. Instead she had scoured every single flower shop in Cambridge until she had found blossoms that matched her standards. She placed the bouquet between the mounds and arranged them carefully. Then she rose to her feet and bent over the gravestone, kissing the dusty top.

"Goodbye," she whispered.

When she turned to walk down the hill, the sun had burned most of the mist away, and her path was easy to see.

The black raven was startled from its tree and flew into the sky, cawing loudly.

When Hermione reached the gate, she paused and removed her quill from behind her ear. After enlarging it, she wrote carefully in the air. She omitted nothing.

She Apparated back to a small alley in Cambridge between a student hostel and an 11th century stone church. She wiped her eyes one last time and had turned to step out onto the street when a pair of arms grabbed her from behind and pulled her back into the alley.

Her primal scream was cut off by a ruthless hand clapped over her mouth, barely leaving room under her nose to breathe. She choked, her coughing muffled by her attacker's palm. His other arm felt like wiry steel and held her tightly against an equally rigid body.

Initially, Hermione was coughing and panicking too much to struggle properly, and when the initial fit had passed, the strangeness of her situation prevented her from immediately fighting. Her assailant had not spoken a word, nor was he attempting to move them elsewhere. He simply stood in place, and if not for the hand covering her mouth, his grip could have been nothing more than a tight embrace.

She did struggle then, twisting to see the face of her attacker. The arm around her waist tightened until the pressure was nearly painful, and she stopped. Although she could not see his face, something about the damp, mossy scent of his clothes was familiar. Still, he did not move.

What was he waiting for?

The bracelet on her wrist twinged, and she flinched. The arm around her waist shifted slightly.

With one minute remaining until 7:30, the hand covering her mouth pulled her head back until her body was bent over the arm around her waist in a crude parody of a dance. She jerked her head to the side when she felt the hot breath at her ear, and she heard him curse as he stepped back to avoid getting hit.

"Miss Granger, unless you feel like continuing this for another half hour, you would do well to follow my instructions. I wish to Apparate us to someplace where we can talk, and as it would do me no good to have you splinched, kindly stop flailing around. Do as I say, and you will not be harmed."

Snape. Oh, God, she was being kidnapped by Snape. That voice was unmistakable.

Murderer, murderer, murderer...

15 seconds...

"Well, Miss Granger?"

And Snape knew. He knew about her condition... How??

10 seconds...

He said he would not harm her, and in truth, he had not harmed her yet. The worst thing she could do would be to make him angry.

Hermione nodded against his palm. She felt him smirk behind her.

"Good girl. Apparate with me in 3... 2... 1..."

She turned with him and felt them disappear with a crack. Sometime during the half-second of being squeezed by incredible pressure and then physically reassembled at their destination, she felt her mind go blank.

--11:30pm12:00am, October 24, 1998--

Hermione had just replaced her quill behind her ear when Severus walked into the kitchen.

He nodded towards the dredges of her tea. "Have you decided to take up Divination after all?"

Hermione made a face and refilled her teacup. Then she summoned another cup and filled it up as well. Severus took the seat across the table from her and lifted the cup to his lips. "Thank you."

"I didn't think that Harry would let you out of his sight."

"In case you have forgotten, I'm currently wandless."

"Oh. Right." She *had* forgotten. Now, however, she wondered how she had missed the fact that her left arm was slightly heavier as her sleeve concealed two wands rather than one.

Silence fell as they sipped their tea. From the hallway, the grandfather clock ticked away. The ceiling creaked as someone walked over their heads. Hermione stared at the glare of the overhead light on the polished wooden table.

"Do you intend to sit here all night?"

Hermione looked up as Severus broke the silence. He had hardly touched his tea, and Hermione wondered how long he had been looking at her. She shrugged. "I have a lot to think about."

"Dare I ask what specifically?"

Her mind was still a jumbled mess from her conversation with Michele. She chose one of her less confusing worries. "We're still almost children, Severus. The DA, I mean. *I'm* still so young. How can we possibly be ready to fight?"

"Don't ever think that," Severus snapped with a surprising amount of vehemence. Then his face relaxed slightly. "You lot are not much younger than the original Order when they faced the Dark Lord for the first time. And you are also older than I was when I joined Voldemort, so you've already proven that you have more sense."

"Do I? Is it wrong of me to think only of destroying them? Of getting back at them for everything they've done to us? To me?"

He shrugged. "It's much easier to imagine the battle than the aftermath. Whatever that is."

An uneasy silence fell again. Hermione toyed with her teacup, shifting uncomfortably in her chair. "Have you noticed that this is much more difficult outside our lab?" she asked suddenly.

"What?"

"This." She motioned between the two of them. "We can usually talk for hours and hardly notice the time go by."

Snape looked uncomfortable. "In our lab I didn't have to worry that someone could burst in at any moment and hex me for poisoning your mind."

It was a weak excuse, and his shifting eyes told her that he knew it. Almost everyone had gone to bed or gone home. Grimmauld Place was silent. Nevertheless, Hermione waved her wand to lock and ward the door.

At this, Snape looked even more uncomfortable. "Miss Granger. You should go to bed."

"The night before the battle in Hogsmeade last September, Draco got completely pissed. And he kissed me."

"What was that fool doing drinking? He knew as well as the rest of you that something was going to happen the next day."

Hermione admired his ability to deflect any subject to his liking, but she wasn't going to let it go this time. "I think he knew that the future had become uncertain. If I were completely honest with myself, I wish that he had done it sooner."

"I gather that you did not inform Mr. Weasley of this particular development."

"Oh, we certainly didn't last much longer after that, but there was nothing to *develop*," Hermione snapped. "Draco died the next day. Anything that could have been was gone. And don't you dare say that you don't know what I'm getting at." She had seen his gaze begin to withdraw. "You know exactly what I'm talking about."

He gave a heavy sigh. "What do you want from me, Hermione?"

"Don't you see, Severus? We don't know if we'll ever have more than *now*. And I... I don't want to always wonder what we could have shared if I had possessed more courage."

Unlike most men, Severus Snape had never been someone who needed things spelled out for him. He was a master of subterfuge and was attuned to the most subtle signals. And Hermione wasn't being particularly subtle.

She saw his gaze go dark and fill with undeniable hunger. Her breath caught in her throat, and a slow, tingling warmth began to bloom in the pit of her stomach.

Then he scowled, his eyes flat and expressionless. "Whenever did you become so fatalistic?"

Hermione choked down an urge to scream. "Why are you being so difficult? Do you honestly think that's the only reason I would ask this of you? I suppose it's inconceivable that I just want to be with someone that I lo..."

"I would be very certain, Hermione, that you understand exactly what you're saying."

Being pissed off gave Hermione a remarkable amount of courage. "I do," she said, her voice was steady. "But I wonder if you can say the same about yourself."

She barely saw him move, but the next thing she knew, he had her pressed up against the wall next to the counter, his hands digging into her hips with bruising force and one leg insinuating itself between her thighs.

"Do you?" Severus hissed into her ear. "Do you really know what it is you want? Is it this? I know your wards are soundproof and well nigh unbreakable. I could take you against this wall right now, Hermione, and no one would be the wiser that you'd shagged the greasy, traitorous git. Is that what you want?"

Hermione could hardly breathe from his closeness. The fear she had felt when he had shoved her against the wall was fading under the force of something else... something wild and rampant that told her to seize him and make sure he did exactly as he had insinuated. It set her insides aflame with an intensity that she was afraid to understand. How could something so frightening feel so right... so *familiar*?

But she also noticed that despite his rough words, his voice trembled, and his hands were frozen upon her hips and did not move inwards. Taking a deep breath, Hermione wound her arms around his shoulders and discovered they were shaking as well. Severus flinched, as if noticing for the first time how close they were, and moved to draw back. She held him there with gentle pressure.

"No, not this," she said, never taking his eyes away from his. "But it's a damn sight better than your indifference."

With a hiss, his hands fell away from her hips, and he tore himself away from her. "You don't want to give yourself to me, Hermione," he said. "You may think you do, but I won't let you make that mistake."

He grabbed the doorknob and growled when her wards held fast.

He Disapparated, leaving her alone in the kitchen.

Hermione was torn between fury at Snape and sheer admiration that he had been able to Apparate without his wand. He could not have gone far, perhaps to another room in Grimmauld Place at best.

She nearly cried when she felt her bracelet tingling against her skin. Quelling the urge to race after him, Hermione removed her quill and slashed the air with wide, determined strokes.

Snape was a fool if he thought he could escape her so easily. And next time, she would remember to include an Anti-Apparition ward.

--4:004:30pm, October 28, 1998--

He was avoiding her. And, much to her indignation, successfully.

The Order had decided that the two of them would remain at Grimmauld Place for as long as possible, to keep them safe. Not to mention it would be easier for Harry to keep tabs on Snape's whereabouts. She never would have thought it possible to hide from someone within the same house for four days.

Hermione was going stir-crazy. Even without Snape's infuriating behavior, she would have gone mad without something to do. It was a drastic change to go from non-stop working and experimenting daily to... nothing. She was sure that she had read every book in the library twice over.

And there wasn't anyone to talk to. Hermione could now empathize with Sirius. Unlike them, the other Order members were not fugitives and had lives on the outside that they could not forsake.

--9:009:30pm, October 28, 1998--

She heard Harry bid Moody farewell in the study downstairs, telling the older man that he wanted to check on Hermione and make sure she was alright.

Hermione made sure that she was in bed extra-early that night, but not before Flooing Ginny and telling her that Harry was in Grimmauld Place and needed her help with something most urgently.

--7:308:00pm, October 29, 1998--

"You could have given me some warning. The last thing I needed to see was the Boy Wonder and Miss Weasley snogging like leeches in the drawing room."

"Ah, so that's where you have been hiding."

"I prefer to say that I had a lot to think about."

At least he wasn't going to deny everything. "And did you manage to reach any conclusions?" she asked carefully.

"That I am, as always, correct about everything."

"That's not enough for me, Severus."

"Certainly not. If you had it your way, you would demand a full ten feet of parchment detailing every specific reason and justification, but your know-it-all personality can only get you so far." The words would have stung more if he hadn't said them so quickly without once looking at her. "At the moment, Miss Granger, I would like to return to my lab, and loath as I am to admit it, that means that I must ask you to return my wand."

Hermione gazed steadily at him. Then she shrugged. "Very well, Severus."

She removed his long, black wand from her sleeve and held it out. He reached out to grasp it. The moment he touched the wand, she seized his wrist with her other hand and Disapparated both of them.

--8:008:30pm, October 29, 1998--

She had brought them to his bedroom at Spinner's End. It had taken him fifteen minutes to confirm that there was no possible way for him to leave.

After finally giving up his attempts to break through her wards, Severus seemed to realize that he was trapped in every way.

"I assure you, Miss Granger. There was no need for you to resort to such juvenile tactics just to get my attention," he sneered.

"And I assure you, *Severus*, that creating and placing wards in your own house that even you couldn't break was far from juvenile. In any case, you can hardly claim that this was unexpected."

"Indeed not. Your insatiable spirit will never quit at anything until you are satisfied in every way." With each word, the hostility had slowly faded from his voice.

Then he sighed deeply and set his wand aside. "Very well, Miss...Hermione, we will talk. But you will forgive me if I need some reinforcement first."

With that, he turned to a small table beside the wall and lifted a bottle from its surface. Hermione was surprised to see that it was not Firewhiskey but Muggle scotch.

Severus poured himself a shot. Then he summoned another glass and filled it up as well.

Hermione hated whiskey. Nevertheless, she lifted her glass with Severus and brought it to her lips. She grimaced, expecting her eyes to water, and was pleasantly surprised when the amber liquid slid down her throat as smoothly as water.

Severus had been watching her reaction with amusement. "Talisker 25 Year Single Malt. One of my few indulgences in life."

Hermione opened her mouth to compliment him on his taste when spicy warmth flooded through her nose and throat like a time-delayed explosion. Coughing, her face red, she said, "As much as I appreciate the gesture, I cannot bring myself to thank you."

Severus smirked and poured himself another shot. Then he settled himself into the only chair in the room. After some hesitation, Hermione sat on the edge of his bed about five feet away. She felt the springs squeak beneath her.

Although Severus had agreed to talk, he didn't seem inclined to do so anytime soon. Hermione decided that there was no point in beating around the bush. She only had twenty minutes left until the next half hour, and she was afraid that she wouldn't be able to work up the same amount of courage a second time.

"Much as my actions might indicate otherwise," she said, "I don't want to force you into anything that you don't want to do. If you don't... don't want me, I can accept that. But I think you owe me at least an explanation."

Her voice broke towards the end. Maybe she didn't have the courage she thought she did after all. She felt a wave of self-loathing as hot tears pricked the backs of her eyes. She groped for her glass and downed the entire contents, coughing as the liquid burned her seconds later.

Severus' hand came into view as he refilled her glass. She dared to look at him and gasped as she saw a hunger in his eyes that seemed familiar.

"Don't ever think that I don't want you, Hermione. That doesn't have anything to do with..." He trailed off and took a deep breath before swallowing a third shot. "I can't think of a single reason why I've deserved to have you trust me with your heart, but you have. You have shared my home, my lab, my temper... That is enough from you. That is more than I could have hoped for, and it's all that I ever intend *wanted*. I don't want you to do something that will cause you any pain in... in the end."

"Don't talk like that! You're going to survive this, you will... you will..." Any hope of holding back her tears was dashed as she felt them flow down her cheeks.

She flinched when callused fingers touched her face right underneath her eyes.

"Dearest..." His voice was suddenly right before her. She opened her eyes to see Severus on his knees before her, all semblance of distance forgotten. "Do not weep, not on my account."

"Stop..." she said weakly. "Stop talking like you matter so little. Not when you mean so much to me."

"Oh, Hermione. You would not say such things, not if you knew everything." His voice faded into a small gasp as she turned her head to kiss the sensitive skin of his palm. "But in the end, I cannot deny you anything. Ask of me what you will, Hermione, and I will do it. Consequences be damned."

She couldn't make herself speak the words. Her life for the past four interminable months had been nothing but dry, pitiful *goddamned* words.

So she dashed all words from her mind as she dragged them both to their feet and kissed him with everything she had. He tasted warm and comfortable, the spices from his whiskey sinking into her taste buds and making her feel faint.

Severus' arms came around her, holding her to him as if they had been made to never let go. The same arms lowered her ever so gently to the bed as his mouth moved from her lips to her neck. His spicy breath filled every crevice of her skin as his tongue danced along her pulse.

Hermione's eyes rolled back in her head as her world shrank to the sound of his breath in her ear and the feel of his hands against her clothes and then her flesh. And somewhere through the twisting mesh, she thought she saw a bright spot of something, something that filled her so completely that she would never need words to remember.

--9:009:30pm, October 29, 1998--

Hermione moaned as she came back down to earth, hearing a low voice crooning words that may have been tender or obscene... she couldn't tell. She kissed every part of his face, his neck, his shoulders, and she shivered at the butterfly-wing feeling of him going soft within her.

"I... I thought the first time was supposed to hurt," she said sheepishly.

Severus cocked his eyebrow just so, in a way that made her heart skip, and *he knew* it. "Who says that was your first time?" he growled into her ear. Her eyes widened, for she felt him twitch enthusiastically inside her. "This night is for *you* alone, Hermione. And until you tell me to stop, it will be my pleasure to make it your first time again, and again, and *again*."

Then he rose over her, his mouth moving from her breasts to her belly, lower and lower... and Hermione ceased to think for a long time.

--10:3011:00pm, October 29, 1998--

"Your eyes... they're not black. They're deep, rich brown. Like bitter chocolate."

He kissed her deeply and lifted her upper half to press against his chest, letting her feel his racing heart. He lowered his mouth to her ear.

"And yours," he whispered, "have bewitched me."

Hermione threw her head back and arched into him as his lips descended upon her neck.

--11:0011:30pm, October 29, 1998--

They lay together in the dark, facing each other. His hand caressed her from shoulder to hip, his feather-light touch raising gooseflesh on her heated skin.

Severus' hand crept around to her back, each long finger lingering over each bump of her spine, depressing them like frets upon an instrument. His hand moved up under the curve of her chin. He felt the pool of moisture under each eye and replaced his fingers with his mouth, kissing the salty tear tracks under her eyelashes.

Hermione held her quill in her hand, weeping. She could find nothing to write.

She reached up to wipe her tears away but found her arms wrapping around Severus instead. He enfolded her in his embrace and held her close.

Severus kissed her forehead gently. "Rest, dear heart. There is time enough to make new memories."

--Time Unknown--

She woke up once in the night, but it could have been merely a dream.

Severus Snape sat upon the bed, his body bent over her hand, which he clasped between his palms. His breathing seemed erratic as he pressed kisses to the backs of her palm and fingers, lingering upon the fleshy part where her thumb met her hand. He was whispering things that she could not hear as he continued to kiss her hand like a man kneeling before a goddess in adoration, in supplication.

When he looked over to her and saw that she was awake, his eyes were alight with something that took her breath away. He leaned over her, and her eyes closed. Her lips parted in anticipation.

Too late she felt the cool drops of liquid sliding down her throat. Her eyelids tried to snap open, but they suddenly felt unbearably heavy. Her head began to throb as if she had downed an absurd amount of alcohol. She made a small noise in her throat. Severus did kiss her then, crooning, "Sleep... sleep..." in between kisses.

She had grown accustomed to obeying his orders over the course of many years.

Hermione slept.

Sleep well, my love...

Reviews make my world go round.

Talisker 25 Year Single Malt Scotch is widely known as one of the finest whiskies available as well as one of the most expensive. How Snape managed to get a hold of one with his teacher's salary shall be left to the realm of magical imagination.

Next chapter: Hermione has a chat with Snape as well as Dumbledore through a most unexpected source. Old friends reunite in Grimmauld Place with mixed reactions.

Memory

Chapter 8 of 17

Hermione has a chat with Snape as well as Dumbledore through a most unexpected source. Old friends reunite in Grimmauld Place with mixed reactions.

A/N: Every word of this chapter was written before DH came out, but I swear that some sentences could have been taken straight from the creator's mouth. So... some spoilers for DH lie within?

Chapter 8

Memory

--7:308:00am, June 28, 1998--

She was in some sort of laboratory; stone tables and shelves of glasses and vials filled the walls around her.

Hermione scrambled towards a corner, shaking like a leaf. Only after she had her back pressed against an empty wall did she remember her wand. She pulled it from her sleeve, fumbled it between her fingers before finally grasping it firmly and lifting it towards her opponent.

Severus Snape gazed back at her. His wand arm rested at his side.

Hermione stared back at him down the length of her wand, her body refusing to relax from its fighting stance, even though it was more than obvious that the man was making no immediate attempt to attack.

A wave of shame washed over her. She had panicked. She had come back to herself to find a murderer and traitor alone with her in the same room, and she had panicked.

Understandable, perhaps, but it still shamed her.

"I could have hexed you a dozen different ways by now, but I'm sure that you are aware of that."

Hermione gritted her teeth as a familiar infuriation she had felt countless times in his dungeon classroom overwhelmed her fear. She was sweating uncomfortably under her baggy sweatshirt. "What do you want?" she spat.

"Among other things, countryside property far away from this industrial filth. For now, I'll settle for a moment of your time."

Hermione edged along the length of the wall, keeping Snape in her sights. She saw a closed door behind him. "Is Voldemort waiting behind that?"

She thought she saw him flinch. "I want you to look at something for me, Miss Granger."

Hermione reached behind her with one hand. The wall was solid and reassuring. "What for?"

"So that you may know." Then he wrenched the door open. Hermione flinched, but behind the door there was only darkness and a flight of stairs going down.

"Once you are down the stairs, I will lift the Anti-Apparition wards, and you will be able to Apparate to Hogwarts. Go to McGonagall. Ask her for the memory of your Sorting and view it in Dumbledore's Pensieve. McGonagall will be able to place the memory in the Pensieve.

"In two hours, meet me at the gate of St. Benet's Church in Cambridge. At that time, if you are still so inclined, you may bring every Auror in the department with you."

Hermione scoffed. "Am I supposed to believe that you'll just let me walk out of here?"

"Yes," Snape said. "Be careful on the stairs; they can be slippery." And he stepped away from the door and sheathed his wand.

She gaped at him for a few seconds before realizing that he really was letting her go. She crept towards the door along the wall that was farthest from him, her wand always at the ready. Nothing about him moved except for his eyes, which followed her careful progress with what could only be amusement.

That insensitive git!

Hermione could feel herself breaking into a sweat under her thick clothing and wondered how the man could exude such an aura of menace without moving a muscle.

He has not harmed you thus far.

The bracelet tingled against her skin, and Hermione gritted her teeth. "How can you be so confident that I won't just tell McGonagall everything I know?"

Snape smirked, showing white, crooked teeth. "I have every confidence in your sense of curiosity, Miss Granger. You can't live with forever wondering if I was really telling

the truth. Also, as you do not know your current whereabouts, there is very little that you could tell the Headmistress."

Hermione glared at his impassive face but could say nothing in reply. Without ever taking her wand off of him, she backed out of the door and slammed it shut. Only then did she turn and run down the stairs, Apparating as soon as she reached the bottom landing.

She landed at the edge of the Forbidden Forest with thirty seconds to spare. Her wand was out, ready to perform the spell she needed. She paused.

She had the time either to complete the spell that would condemn Snape or to record Snape's request, but she could not do both. Breathing shallowly, she could sense the tendrils of magic left over from her Apparition fading away.

Letting out a scream of frustration, Hermione stowed her wand and took out her quill, slashing the air ferociously with it.

Snape kidnapped me. He did not hurt me, instead asking to meet me again at 9:30 at St. Benet's.

Hermione was tempted to leave it at that, but Snape had been right. Her damnable curiosity would never let this matter rest.

I am to use Dumbledore's Pensieve to view McGonagall's memory of our Sorting, which Snape claims to contain some valuable information. I think he means that it will somehow exonerate him, although he did not expressly say so. What other reason could he have for seeking me out?

Hermione put her quill away. She hoped desperately that Minerva was still asleep.

--8:008:30am, June 28, 1998--

"Pr-Minerva?"

Headmistress McGonagall looked up from her desk and then smiled broadly. "Camilla!" she exclaimed in a joyous whisper. "It's wonderful to see you. You look lovely," she finished as she set down her quill and came around the desk to grasp Hermione's hand in a warm greeting.

"Thank you," Hermione said. She had left the Glamour on, not willing to take the risk that someone might burst unexpectedly into the office. Her Glamour was also painfully more attractive than her own self, but that was hardly worth mentioning.

"Are you adapting to your new environment well?"

"Yes. I suspect that the city is even more beautiful than I remembered."

"Wonderful." McGonagall smiled at her, and her heart jerked in her chest. It was a smile like a proud mother might have given to her child. The Headmistress' voice grew quieter as she asked her next question. "Have you had the chance to visit your parents yet?"

"Yes. I... thank you for making it possible. It means so much to me."

"Think nothing of it, dear Camilla."

Hermione fidgeted, still feeling strange at being called a new name. "On my way home, I... Was attacked and taken hostage by a murderer and traitor. "I realized how much I value the memories of happier days. I wonder, if it's not too much to ask, if you could loan me your memory of my Sorting? I should very much like to watch it again."

As Minerva's eyes filled with tears, Hermione wondered if she had always been so good at lying.

"Of course, my dear," Minerva said. "You may have it. I daresay that I have memories of more Sortings than I can count to begrudge giving you yours."

Hermione watched with a sense of foreboding as the Headmistress placed her wand tip against her temple, drawing away a silvery strand of memory. A queasy feeling seized her stomach, and she resisted the urge to scream at McGonagall to return the memory where it belonged. The idea that others could give and take memories so freely left her nauseous.

The need to invent a story to let McGonagall lend her the use of Dumbledore's Pensieve was eliminated when the Headmistress opened a nearby black cabinet, revealing a stone basin. With a shake of her wand, the silver strand of memory fell into the liquid inside the basin, which glowed briefly upon receipt of the memory.

"I think that Albus would have been happy to loan the use of his Pensieve for this purpose, had he been here. Just touch the surface of the liquid to view the memory. You will be returned after the memory has ended, but feel free to use Finite Incantatem if you should wish to leave early. Take as much time as you need, Camilla." The Headmistress moved back to her desk, leaving her alone with the basin of memories.

Not that long. A little over ninety minutes now. Snape expects me to decide his fate in only ninety minutes.

With a deep breath, Hermione bent over the stone basin. She had never done this before, but Harry had told them of his experiences. She took a moment to notice the dancing reflections of the liquid light and smiled at its beauty. Then she thrust her face into the silvery fluid.

It was as if someone had flipped all the lights off instantaneously. And immediately afterwards, that someone had lifted her bodily and thrown her into the shallow basin, which seemed to have grown larger to accommodate her. She could not have fallen through that blackness for more than a second, but it felt like an eternity. She could never recall how it felt to lose her memories every half hour, but she imagined that the ice-cold sucking sensation of falling through the Pensieve would have come close.

Suddenly Hermione discovered that she was sitting down and was hearing muffled whoops of applause. She sighed in relief and opened her eyes.

And screamed.

She was staring through a gelatinous fluid with a gaping black hole in the center. As she watched, the black hole shifted left and right and shrank and expanded with lazy regularity. Beyond the viscous liquid, she could see blurry outlines of the Great Hall. She was...

She was staring through the inside of someone's eye.

Blind panic gave strength to her feet, and she surged upwards and leaped forward. The image of the Great Hall came into sudden focus, and the applause instantly increased in volume. Realizing what had just happened, Hermione's skin felt strangely tight. She fought the urge to scrub at it. Then slowly, she forced herself to turn around. Her gaze fell upon a familiar hooked nose, framed with fallow skin and greasy black hair. The tightness in her skin rapidly morphed into the sensation of spiders crawling over every inch of her body.

She had been sitting inside Snape, and the Potions master had been completely oblivious.

Hermione saw him sneak a chocolate truffle off a dish in front of him and conceal it in his mouth before resuming his glare at the student tables. She felt an unbidden smile tugging on the corner of her lips.

Then she had to skip quickly out of the way as McGonagall stepped into the place where she had been standing and unrolled a long sheet of parchment.

"When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted," she said, her magically amplified voice easily filling the massive hall.

Hermione fell silent as she listened to the familiar words and watched student after student take their place upon the worn stool. Her memory of this day was perfect, but sitting in the midst of it was quite something else.

"Finnigan, Seamus!"

As the sandy-haired 11-year-old Seamus sat down upon the stool, Hermione experienced a great shock. She had snuck a look at Flitwick's pocketwatch (her Muggle wristwatch was not functioning inside the Pensieve) and discovered that she was not losing her memories.

Over a half hour had passed since the Sorting had begun and she remembered.

Hermione barely had time to comprehend before she heard McGonagall's voice exclaim, "Granger, Hermione!"

She turned and began walking towards the stool by instinct only to be nearly run over by a 4-foot, bushy-haired hurricane. At first, all that she could see was the massive quantities of brown hair bobbing up and down as young Hermione ran. And she was running. She clambered onto the stool and jammed the hat eagerly onto her head. The tattered hat bounced up a little on her curls but managed to stay put.

Even though it felt slightly odd to be looking at her, Hermione couldn't help noticing the eager light in her younger self's eyes, half-hidden under thick bangs. Her rounded face was scrunched in concentration, and the edges of her large front teeth poked out a little from underneath her top lip.

"A beautiful sight indeed, Miss Granger."

Hermione whirled around. And stared. She shifted her gaze to the Head Table, and there he sat, right in the center as he had for six of her years at Hogwarts. And yet unmistakably, he was also standing right at her side...

"Professor Dumbledore."

The long-bearded wizard smiled at her and dipped his head slightly, looking at her over half-moon spectacles. Hermione hadn't known Dumbledore nearly as well as Harry had, but she still felt a pang within her heart as she looked upon that familiar wrinkled face. She could also see that the face had more wrinkles than his first-year counterpart sitting at the High Table. A glance downwards confirmed that his right hand was shriveled and blackened. He might have just stepped out of their sixth year into the Pensieve with her.

"Professor... how..." The impossible appearance of Dumbledore finally caught up with her.

The old man chuckled and tucked a few stray ends of his beard into his belt, using his withered right hand. Apparently, in not-quite-corporeal form, the hand offered no limitations in its usage. "Memories are curious things, Miss Granger. I consider them to be portions of your soul, able to be detached and examined at your leisure. I am nothing more or less than a remnant of myself."

"A piece of your soul, preserved beyond your death..." Hermione's voice was filled with awe. Glorious warmth swelled up in her chest, the kind that made her want to smile and laugh until she cried. "It is possible then to preserve the soul even though the body is dead... It works! And... you're living in Minerva's mind?"

"A most pleasant place to live," he replied cheerily. "Although she tends to think about catnip nearly as frequently as I did sweets."

Hermione was only half-listening. "It is possible to preserve the soul... I knew it! Oh Professor, I would love your advice. I've considered delayed-action incantations, non-linear Arithmancy..."

The not-dead portion of Dumbledore chuckled as he watched her eyes light up with the challenge of an unanswered question. "Much as it would please me for you to apply your formidable mind to the process, I fear that there are other, more dire tidings that I must impart to you."

Hermione swallowed, her joy at seeing Dumbledore slowly fading under her anxiety. "Snape...Professor Snape that is, sent me to view this memory. He... he knew that you were within it, didn't he?"

Dumbledore sighed gravely and motioned her to sit next to him on the edge of the dais. Hermione waited for "Jones, Megan!" to scurry past before lowering herself beside him.

"I regret very few things in my life, Hermione," said the former Headmaster without preamble. "But my greatest regret was what I allowed to happen to Severus Snape. You, he, and Tom Riddle are all very much alike... no, hear me out before you accuse me of being grim. All three of you had fantastic minds, eager to apply yourselves to every single unknown factor in the world, as if you could conquer the world with knowledge alone." He sighed. "In the end, I could not save any of you."

Hermione was at a loss for words, unaccustomed to see the great wizard so frail and... old. "Professor..."

"I suppose that little could be done for Tom. No matter what I did, I could never get through. And even as a boy, it was as if he knew what he was doing all along."

"But Severus... he will wholeheartedly deny what I am about to tell you. He had nothing to his advantage when he began at Hogwarts: scrawny, unattractive, and unpopular. He compensated by becoming the most brilliant mind I had seen in my entire career at Hogwarts, and I do not say that lightly. It came to nothing, though, as no matter how hard he tried, the golden Gryffindor boys were always the winners. I remember perfectly the look on his face when I refused to punish the boys that nearly killed him with a practical joke. It haunts me to this day; such a little thing at the time, but who knows how I could have changed his life had he not been forced to seek out one who could fully appreciate his mind and talents."

"Malfoy, Draco!"

Both of them turned to look as, true to memory, the Sorting Hat screamed "SLYTHERIN!" before it even touched the young blond head.

Dumbledore watched the scene as if in pain. "I, too, am susceptible to House prejudices, Hermione."

Hermione couldn't bear seeing the powerful wizard so weak. "Professor, please..."

Dumbledore seemed to shake himself and turned to face her again. "The only thing I regret about my sacrifice is that I was not there to save you."

"Sacrifice? What are you saying, Professor?" Hermione's voice was terribly quiet.

"I commanded Severus to sacrifice the only thing he still valued for the greater good. Though heaven knows I didn't deserve his respect."

"What are you saying? Why doesn't anything you say make sense? What are you doing here?" Hermione only realized that she was shouting when she saw her vision blur from tears.

She felt his hand lift her chin. Actually, in her form, she couldn't feel any physical sensations, but the idea of the touch was just as comforting. She took a deep shuddering breath and looked up.

"You must understand. It had to be done, Hermione. I begged him to."

"But... why?"

"Who do you think Voldemort trusts now above anyone else in the world?"

"No." She shook her head fiercely. "There could have been another way. There must have been another way."

"I was dying already, dear child. I was poisoned when trying to destroy the ring. I made a terrible mistake. The least I could do was to make my death useful."

"How can you think that? We have been blind without you."

"You did just fine in Hogsmeade in September." Dumbledore smiled proudly.

"Draco died, sir. He was fighting for us, and we couldn't save him. It's not enough," Hermione pleaded. "Anything we do... it's never enough. The enemy is always a step ahead of us, and we can never catch up."

"That is why you must trust Severus, dear child. I know that it is a hard thing to ask and even harder to ask that you tell no one else. His position cannot be compromised."

"I... not as hard as you may think, sir." Hermione watched "Potter, Harry!" walk nervously past her and sit down. "I never thought of him the same way as some of the others. I never had cause to... to hate him except for the thought of what he had done to you. If I chose to look past the awful things he said, he always struck me as... brave."

Dumbledore chuckled lightly. "Severus is many other things as well, but he certainly is brave. I wouldn't let his derision of Gryffindors fool you."

"Weasley, Ronald!"

Hermione let her hand brush young Ron's fiery red hair in a feather-light caress as he walked past.

"What do we do now?" she asked.

"You put the two greatest brains in the wizarding world together and work together to put an end to Voldemort once and for all."

"But Harry..."

"Harry is a boy, Hermione. Quickly growing into a very powerful wizard, but a boy all the same. He cannot do it alone."

Hermione chuckled lightly. "If Professor Snape and I don't kill each other in the process, it would be my pleasure to help in whatever way I can."

As if on cue, the entire Great Hall burst into applause as "Zabini, Blaise!" was sorted into Slytherin and the Sorting was finished for their year.

Hermione looked up at the first-year Dumbledore as he stood from his place at the High Table. He raised his arms and boomed, "Welcome, welcome to a new year at Hogwarts!"

"I will do everything I can," Hermione said. "For this. For them."

Dumbledore beamed, and some of his former twinkle returned to his tired eyes. "I'm glad to hear it. Take heart, Hermione. We will get through these dark times."

There was a collective cheer of approval as food suddenly appeared on all of the tables.

"Peppermint humbugs!" exclaimed Dumbledore with a misty-eyed look of longing. "I think, that rather than agonize ourselves by watching a feast that we cannot join, it is time to return you, Hermione."

She closed her eyes. "I will miss you."

"Well, that's kind of you to say so, but please know that you are always more than welcome to drop by."

Hermione opened her eyes and saw McGonagall looking back at her cheerfully from behind her desk.

"Enjoyed yourself, I hope? I recall that the feast that year was particularly delicious."

Tell no one else.

"I say, Camilla, are you feeling well? You look as if you've walked through a ghost."

She smiled back. "I'm quite alright, Minerva. Thank you for the memory."

"It was my pleasure," the Headmistress said, scooping the silvery strand from the Pensieve and depositing it within a crystal bottle.

Hermione took it from her as gently as a bird's egg, realizing that she was holding proof of a man's innocence in her hands.

--9:3010:00am, June 28, 1998--

It was typical of him, really.

Hermione had gone home and changed out of her baggy sweatshirt and faded jeans. She had been standing by the front gate of St. Benet's for approximately ten minutes. Snape had arrived about five minutes ago but had thus far chosen to keep his presence hidden, or so he thought. She nearly giggled as the black-clad wizard feigned an avid interest in a variety of loose-leaf teas in a store window.

He held himself differently from when he had been teaching at Hogwarts. Although his shoulders were still hunched against the gaze of others, purposely setting himself apart, his eyes were bright, as if he were privy to more knowledge than anyone would ever discover.

His entire existence has been a secret.

Much like her own now, she realized.

Really, Hermione, empathizing with Snape?

Some things had certainly changed.

Hermione jumped when she heard a throat being cleared beside her. Snape had seen her and was now leaning against the other side of the low wrought-iron gate. A familiar sardonic smirk appeared on his lips.

"Should I expect to be clapped in irons now by your gaggle of trigger-happy Gryffindors?"

Hermione nearly smiled. Some things would never change.

"Actually, I would be quite intrigued to hear your plans to thwart world domination by a megalomaniac reptilian wizard."

She had the wonderful experience of seeing his eyes widen for a millisecond with appreciative surprise. Snape made a small mock bow.

"My humble abode awaits."

--9:3010:00pm, October 24, 1998--

"Oh gods... *Hermione!*" Hermione nearly choked as Mrs. Weasley enveloped her in a bone-crushing hug. She hugged the Weasley matron back just as fiercely, smiling through her tears.

All around her were familiar faces: the entire Weasley family, Tonks, Lupin, Neville, Luna, the entire DA, more and more... They were smiling and clamoring to be the next to hug her or shake her hand.

She felt a gentle hand on her shoulder and turned to see Minerva McGonagall. Biting her lip, Hermione held out her hand to the tall, imposing Headmistress. Scoffing, Minerva pulled her into a tight hug.

"Your parents would have been proud of you," the older woman whispered over the top of her head.

Through her joyous haze, Hermione saw Harry out of the corner of her eye. The grim expression on his face reminded her that she was only half of the surprise for this night's meeting.

The other half would receive a much less friendly greeting.

--10:0010:30pm, October 24, 1998--

"Stand aside, Harry... Hermione. That scum isn't worth protecting," Moody growled.

Harry and Hermione stood firmly beside Severus Snape, holding out their wands at the former Auror.

"Hear me out. He's on our side," Harry said. Then he muttered, "Mostly."

The grizzled man snarled. "It's not right, bringing Death Eater filth back in here. I don't know what you're on about."

"What we are *on* about," Hermione said testily, "is exactly what we've been telling you about for the past fifteen minutes. Snape and I have been working tirelessly over the past few months to develop a potion that will destroy Voldemort for good."

Moody glared. "You may be pretty good at detailing what's been going on in your life, little girl. But don't you even imagine that you're good enough to know this traitorous scumbag at all."

"Do not insult my partner, Alastor," Snape said coldly. It was the first time he had spoken since appearing in the study at Grimmauld Place.

"She's too good for the likes of you!" the older man fairly screamed.

Snape's jaw tightened the tiniest fraction, and he folded his hands together. "I don't like you, Moody. And I don't expect to be liked in return. But I would also like to mention that I could have betrayed every single Order member a hundred times over, and yet you are all alive and well. In addition, if the memory, which all of you have seen, and Miss Granger and Potter's word aren't good enough to convince you, then I have nothing further to say to you."

There was silence for a long time after Snape had finished speaking. Hermione glanced anxiously from him to the tense Order members. Then, slowly, Moody lowered his wand. Warily, Harry and Hermione followed suit. The muffled sounds of the grandfather clock in the hall outside indicated twenty minutes past the hour.

In front of the silent group, Minerva McGonagall walked forward and held out her hand. "Severus Snape. As acting leader of the Order of the Phoenix and sponsor of Dumbledore's Army, I would like to welcome you back."

Snape stepped forward. He glanced over at Hermione, so quickly that no one but she could notice. Then he took another step forward and took McGonagall's hand.

--10:3011:00pm, October 24, 1998--

The entire Order and the DA stood or sat in armchairs in a circle in the study. Harry and Severus stood in the center.

"You can confirm that the final battle will take place in a week's time? How can you possibly know for sure?" Kingsley Shacklebolt asked.

"October 31st will be the 17th anniversary of my parents' deaths," Harry explained. "This is the first anniversary when I won't be protected at Hogwarts. Voldemort would think it delicious irony to kill me the same day that he killed my parents. And rumors have been spread for the past week and a half that I will be going to Godric's Hollow that night to pay my respects."

"And V-Voldemort is actually foolish enough to believe that you'll go there by yourself?" Neville Longbottom asked. The former pudgy boy had shot up in height to Ron's

eye level. His boyish features had sharpened, the softness in his face hollowed out.

"Perhaps not alone," Harry conceded, "but he'll be arrogant enough to believe that he could easily take out any protection I might have."

"He will bring all of the Death Eaters with him," Snape warned. "He will want all of them to see him triumph once and for all over Potter. I cannot stress enough the importance of the element of surprise. As long as Voldemort believes that Harry will be weakly protected, he will not bring any of his more *inhuman* supporters."

There was a nervous silence, and Hermione knew that everyone was thinking of the giants, the Dementors, the...

"I suppose it's been you who's been spreading the rumors then, Snape?" Moody asked. No longer outright hostile, Moody now instead regarded Snape with vicious annoyance.

"Not I," he said. "Someone much better known for boasting and gossiping. Lucius Malfoy will get the job done."

"And the potion?" asked Mr. Weasley.

"I administered the potion undetected to Voldemort several days ago."

"How did you manage that?" Moody sneered.

Snape raised a brow. "It is a little known fact that Voldemort enjoys regular afternoon tea to complement the taste of unicorn blood and snake venom."

There were scattered giggles around the room that died quickly as their owners realized the morbidity of the joke. Unseen, Hermione smiled.

"What I want to know," Remus Lupin commented, "is why the Death Eaters have not attacked preemptively? There has hardly been any activity since Hogsmeade. I find it hard to believe they spent this long collecting Voldemort's Horcruxes for safety, especially since he presumably *told* them where they were."

All eyes turned to Snape, who looked vaguely uncomfortable. "Voldemort was markedly upset over the loss of one of his most promising soldiers. He has since refused to instigate another confrontation without ample promise of its benefits."

"Draco Malfoy?" Ron asked.

A somber silence fell over the room at the mention of the young Slytherin.

"No," Snape said. "I speak of the one who was responsible for... Mr. Malfoy's death. Voldemort considered this soldier to be his most prized asset."

Another silence fell over the room, this time full of nervous energy. Now that Snape mentioned it, they all remembered the shadowy presence in Hogsmeade that had moved like lightning, killing and maiming before they could even draw breath to cast a spell.

"Good."

Heads turned towards Hermione as her voice broke the silence. "I'm glad that bastard is dead."

"Mione?" Harry placed a hand on her shoulder, and she realized that she was trembling. She saw Severus glaring at Harry's hand. He seemed to wage an inner war over whether or not to step to her side. He remained where he was.

"I... I think I'm going to get some rest," Hermione said, standing and brushing Harry's hand aside. The room silently watched her go.

--11:0011:30pm, October 24, 1998--

"Ron still loves you, you know."

Surprised, Hermione looked up from her cup of tea to see Ron's fiancée standing in the kitchen doorway.

Her name was Michele, and she was a dragon tamer. Ron had met her while visiting Charlie in Romania. She had the same fiery red hair as the Weasley family and a long, lithe body that would have seemed equally at home on a fashion runway as on the back of a spitting Horntail.

Hermione smiled. "I think you're mistaken."

Michele leaned against the countertop. "Oh, he would never tell you. It wouldn't be *manly* of him. But I remember the day that you disappeared. I barely knew Ron at the time, but he was an utter and complete wreck. He didn't eat or sleep for several days and nearly gave Percy a heart attack when he broke down his door at the Ministry, demanding that they expend all their resources looking for you."

"I... I had no idea."

"It's fine, Hermione. I know that Ron loves me like crazy. If he hadn't known that you were alive all this time, I might have worried. But I always knew that he wanted to get engaged so quickly because of what happened to you. He saw how quickly someone could be taken away from him, and he wanted to have as much time as he could with me before things could become even more uncertain."

Unsure what to do with this new knowledge, Hermione stared into her teacup as if it held all the answers to the universe.

Michele coughed lightly. "I, er, didn't tell you this to try and make you feel guilty. It's just that you more than anyone knows how precious time is. Given that there's only a week left... if there was ever a time to act, it's now. I've seen the way that *he* looks at you."

Hermione had trouble breathing for a moment. "I... I don't understand," she stammered.

The red-haired girl rolled her eyes, though she was smiling. "I know the idea probably feels strange, intimidating even, to be with someone like him, but you two have known each other for so long and have been through so much. And he's very obviously besotted with you."

Hermione still felt a little light-headed, but Michele didn't seem to be poised to demand Snape's head on a platter. "I didn't realize he would be so obvious," she muttered.

Michele grinned. "Well, Harry may be the Boy Who Lived, but he's also definitely your typical clueless male."

"Harry," Hermione said weakly.

"I know it didn't start out as real; your relationship, that is. But I think he's starting to see it that way."

"It's only because I look like Cho," Hermione snapped. "After a few days of un-Glamoured Hermione, he'll forget it entirely. Besides, as a typical clueless male, he manages to be completely blind to the fact that Ginny is still in love with him."

Michele shrugged. "If you say so," she said, turning to go. "But you give yourself far too little credit, Hermione."

"Michele..."

She had been about to reach for the doorknob and turned around. "Yes?"

"I..." *I'm scared. I don't know who I am anymore. I'm pretty sure that I'm in love with someone you wouldn't be nearly so nice about. I'm scared.*" Good night, Michele. And thank you."

The red-haired girl nodded and left.

Hermione resumed staring at her half-finished tea. *Harry... good grief, that's more than I can deal with right now.*

She took a sip from her cup and made a face. The tea was cold.

A/N: For those eagle-eyed readers who noticed... yes, for some reason Snape has white teeth. Just a little mystery that will be explained later.

Next chapter: Some surprising discoveries and revelations in Snape's laboratory at Spinner's End. Harry and Snape meet face-to-face.

Halfway

Chapter 9 of 17

Some surprising discoveries and revelations in Snape's laboratory at Spinner's End. Harry and Snape meet face-to-face.

A/N: In this chapter, I ignore Rowling's DH theories of wand ownership and etiquette.

Sorry for a bit longer time in between chapters. I've just moved across the country and am setting up in my new and gorgeous apartment. After a few drafts, I'm still not entirely happy with this chapter. I think there's too much dialogue and not enough action, but all the dialogue is quite important. And the eagle-eyed readers will realize that a very important mystery is elucidated here. So hopefully you'll bear with me until the action returns full force next chapter, hehe.

And it's been awhile since I've thanked my awesome betas, so all hail sshg316 and Southern_Witch_69!

Chapter 9

Halfway

--9:009:30am, June 29, 1998--

They stood in the cramped sitting room in Snape's house at Spinner's End. There was barely room enough to walk between the sparse furniture and the shelves overflowing with books.

"That," said Snape, pointing at the space between Hogwarts: A History and a collection of Shakespeare's sonnets, "leads to my living quarters. And that," he pointed between Paradise Lost and an enormous leather-bound copy of The Divine Comedy, "leads upstairs to the laboratory. That is the only entrance that you will ever need to use, do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," Hermione said, feeling slightly put out. As if she would poke around in his private space!

"Then come," he said. Snape walked to the shelf and stroked one finger down the spine of Milton and then up the spine of Dante. Hermione found that she couldn't tear her eyes away from his hands.

The shelf seemed to shimmer and then wobble as a doorway squeezed its way into existence. Snape opened the door, revealing a flight of stairs going up, and beckoned Hermione to follow him.

"Watch your step, the stairs can be unsteady. Normally, the wards on my laboratory are set to recognize only myself, but I have altered them to allow you access as well."

"Your laboratory... it's upstairs?"

"Indeed. Despite rumors to the contrary, the dungeons are not an ideal place for a potions lab. The fumes and heat that are created escape better from the top floor. You have already been here... although you may have been too preoccupied to notice at the time."

Hermione took an educated guess at the memory she did not recall. "Yesterday, I presume?"

Snape stopped at the top of the stairs and turned to look at her, his eyes calculating. "Very good," he said.

Was she imagining things, or had Snape just paid her a compliment?

He opened the door and light flooded the dark stairway. "This way. Touch nothing unless I give you permission, and do refrain from injuring yourself irreparably."

Hermione snorted silently. She had definitely been imagining things. She walked into the lab and stopped in her tracks, her mouth falling open.

"Oh..."

She wasn't surprised to see the several long tables composed of several different surfaces from metal to stone to various species of wood. Nor was she surprised at the

racks of ingredients in flasks and bottles of assorted sizes and shapes that covered nearly every inch of wall space. She noted the corner piled with impeccably clean cauldrons with familiar approval.

What she had not expected to see was the large metal Muggle refrigerator in one corner or the adjustable Bunsen burners evenly spaced along the long tables. Microscopes and magnifying glasses were stacked against the same wall as mortars and pestles.

From its perch next to a high window near the ceiling, a jet-black raven cawed at her.

"You appear surprised," Snape said blandly.

Hermione swallowed. "You could say that. I certainly didn't expect to see so much Muggle equipment in a potions lab. And especially not your potions lab."

"Because I am a bigoted, evil Slytherin, I suppose. You needn't bother protesting, Miss Granger," he said when she opened her mouth to do just that. "I expect no one to think otherwise. Here within my own home, however, I can freely admit that I have always found some Muggle methods to be far more efficient than magical. The refrigerator, for example, eliminates the need to expend energy maintaining extended Freezing Charms."

Hermione nodded slowly, her eyes still roving hungrily over every inch of the magnificent room. "It's beautiful."

Snape scowled. "Thank you," he managed.

--7:007:30pm, July 6, 1998--

Hermione was going to kill Severus Snape.

She had returned to herself, disoriented, to discover that she was standing in Market Square with no memory of where she had come from. She felt the tingling remnants of Apparition about her body, and she knew that she must have returned from Snape's house.

She looked at her Muggle wristwatch that she had picked up from a Cambridge street peddler. It was exactly 7pm, the time when he usually sent her home.

They had been working together for a week now, although they had not performed any actual brewing yet. Instead they had thrust themselves neck-deep into the equations and calculations needed for the initial potion base. Arithmancy was Hermione's strong suit, not Snape's, and he had shocked her when he had let her all but take charge without protest.

But they had hit a roadblock early on, so intimidating that it threatened the entire project. The simple fact was that there was no restorative powerful enough to bring a person back from death. The idea had been to create a potion that would take effect immediately before the Killing Curse struck, so that the soul could be restored to its pre-death state. Unfortunately there was nothing in the Wizarding World with such time-sensitive or predictive properties.

After hours of teeth-grinding frustration and at least one shouting match that both of them had been surprised to walk away from un-maimed, they had decided to focus upon the restorative aspects of the potion. A solution, they figured, would hopefully come to them in the process.

Needless to say, it was a thoroughly discouraging start. One week later, Hermione could still feel the tendrils of frustration remaining with her even as the past half hour of memories had disappeared.

But that wasn't why she was going to kill Snape.

No, the reason was because even after this week, after she had agreed to risk discovery by both friends and enemies alike, after she had become the only person, apparently, that Snape could talk to without fear of discovery...

After all this, Snape still would not divulge the location of his home.

Instead they met each day at 8:55am in a little alley off Market Square—a flat, cobble-stoned space that was the closest thing that Cambridge had to a town square. Hermione would shuffle uncomfortably as Snape perused his watch—she recognized it as one of those plastic Muggle contraptions that doubled as a stopwatch and had to hold back a smirk each time.

Then, about thirty seconds before 9am, he would take her arm for Side-Along Apparition. By the time she arrived in front of Spinner's End and they made their way up to the lab, she had forgotten what the outside of the house looked like. Similarly, he kept his anti-Apparition wards up until he let her go home each day a few seconds before 7pm.

Although she loathed his mistrust, she also knew that if anyone had an excuse for being paranoid as hell, it was Snape.

However, that did not explain how Snape knew that she lost her memories every half hour. Technically, he should know absolutely nothing about her situation. He could not have watched her at Hogwarts; the castle and its grounds had been charmed to sound an alarm in Minerva's office if they ever detected his presence, Polyjuiced or otherwise.

He could have spied on her easily enough in her Cambridge flat. Yet Harry and Ron, in the times they had visited, had assured her that her behavior was polished enough by now that it would have been impossible to guess the nature of her condition.

And then there was the issue of Snapespying on her at all.

Hermione huffed as she made her way up the path to her flat. It occurred to her just how little she knew truly about Severus Snape other than what Dumbledore's "ghost" had told her. She had not even considered—was trying not to think about—the other possible explanation for Snape knowing all about her condition.

Namely, that perhaps Snape had been there the night the Death Eaters had captured her and therefore knew exactly what had happened.

The door to her flat shook in its frame as she slammed it with a frightening amount of force. With a sweep of her wand, she removed the Glamour and became Hermione Granger again.

She did not believe it. But she would ask him and demand an answer. She would ask him and pay attention to every subtle expression in his face when he answered. Living on borrowed time had greatly improved her attention to detail.

--6:307:00pm, July 7, 1998--

"Severus Snape. Were you present the night the Death Eaters attacked my home?"

His silver knife veered off-course and mangled the gingerroot he had been slicing. He set the blade down on the cutting board, bracing himself with his hands over the table, elbows locked. When he finally lifted his eyes to meet hers, Hermione was stunned by the clarity and lack of guile in his gaze.

"I'll admit that I have been wondering when you would finally ask me." He kept his eyes locked with hers as he spoke, as if he knew that she was testing him. "No, Miss Granger. I was not there."

She looked at him. And looked. Then she nodded slightly and allowed herself to relax.

"You are wondering, though," Snape continued, "how I could otherwise know of your... condition, am I correct?"

Hermione nodded again.

"Death Eaters like to boast, Miss Granger. Especially when they think their deeds will impress someone who could help them advance."

She flinched nearly imperceptibly. "Is it true then? Your place in Vol..."

"Do not speak that name!"

Hermione scowled and continued, "... in, er, You-Know-Who's ranks is now fully secure?"

He paused, as if debating how much to tell her. "I am reasonably confident that there is no one else that the Dark Lord trusts more. Other than himself."

"I'm sure that Malfoy isn't too happy about that."

"No." His eyes narrowed. "No, he is not."

Drawn in by Snape's uncharacteristic display of honesty, Hermione blurted out her next words before she could help herself. "Then why didn't you come back to us?"

He looked as surprised as she that she had asked him so bluntly. Fortunately, he did not seem to be angry. "I do not feel there is a place any longer for me with the Order," he said at last.

"How can you think that? We have been blind without you."

She knew she was barging forward artlessly; this was confirmed as Snape scowled and retreated behind his familiar sneer. "Please don't mistake me for a moral and compassionate being, Miss Granger. Even assuming that I could show my face at Hogwarts without getting hexed in a thousand horrific ways, after Dumbledore..." He hesitated. "After the Astronomy Tower, I vowed never to serve another master again never again to obey orders without question, no matter how ridiculous, or cruel, or painful."

Hermione was working up her fair share of anger as well. "So I suppose you just tell Voldemort to shove off now whenever he asks you to do his bidding."

"Do not speak that name, Miss Granger." The sneer was back, having disappeared for a split second. "And that is precisely why I sought out your assistance."

"I don't follow. This potion is meant to be protection for us, not..."

"For all of your brilliant and exhaustive research, you've managed to overlook a glaringly obvious application of your proposed potion. Its purpose is to restore a person's natural state of being after being subject to the Killing Curse. You would be hard pressed to find a more unnatural state of being than the Dark Lord. If the potion is administered to him, and he is then hit with the Killing Curse..."

Hermione shook her head. "Even assuming that the most paranoid creature in history could be slipped the potion, he's protected himself against the curse in unimaginable ways. Most importantly his soul..."

"Is in pieces," Snape said, "stored within items that you have little or no chance of finding, not to mention the challenge of destroying them. As destroying the ring nearly killed Dumbledore, I shudder to think what would happen if one of the Golden Trio was idiotic enough to try destroying another Horcrux. But if the Dark Lord took your potion, it would activate when the Killing Curse hit him, and his soul will be restored... to its natural state."

"To its whole state," Hermione said, breathless. "Leaving him vulnerable."

"Leaving your precious Potter free to finish him off with the nasty hex of his choice. If his body is destroyed in the process, so much the better. The prophecy will be fulfilled, and everyone is satisfied."

Hermione frowned. "Then why do you need me? Why risk your position by seeking me out? Why not just help me indirectly and then wait until I completed the potion to steal some for yourself? You know I wouldn't remember it."

"That is positively Slytherin thinking from you," Snape said with something resembling a smile. "But I want the Dark Lord gone as much as you do. And as we are outside the walls of Hogwarts, I can freely admit that our work will proceed much faster with your valuable assistance. In addition, we would have needed to meet in person for me to deliver a key ingredient. Even though it's something you haven't yet realized that you need."

"And what would that be?"

"Unicorn blood, Miss Granger. Something the Dark Lord continues to consume in great quantities. Something that only his most-trusted Death Eater would have a chance to acquire."

"I can't possibly use unicorn blood in my potion. It's..."

"Wrong? Evil? It returns a being from the brink of death; it is exactly what you need. You should know by now that things are never so neat as good and evil."

"How funny that you should say that. For all of your redemptive aspirations, you continue to call him 'the Dark Lord.'"

"Old habits die hard, Miss Granger," he replied with a nasty smile.

"I believe that," she said, glaring at him so viciously that his smile began to fade. "I'll be watching you, Snape."

Just then her bracelet twinged against her skin, and she flinched in surprise.

Snape's eyes looked down to the silver encircling her wrist. Hermione shifted uncomfortably under his calculating gaze as she wrote in the air. Surely this had been one of the most enlightening half hours of her life.

When she was finished, he lifted his wand. "I will tell you the moment when you can Apparate back home."

Sometime during the past half hour, they had pulled down the wall of enforced civility that always existed between people who didn't know each other well enough to invite confrontation. So Hermione felt free to ask him outright, "Why don't you trust me enough to let me know where you live?"

Snape appeared just shy of irritated. "It is not an issue of trust, Miss Granger. If something should befall you, it is best that you honestly cannot lead them to me."

"Bullshit," she snapped back. "I've been in danger ever since I chose to sit in Harry's compartment that first day on the Hogwarts Express. This is no different."

"Miss Granger..."

"Besides, based on the amount of boasting that the Death Eaters did about me, I suspect they've already thrown their worst at me."

Snape pressed his lips together so tightly that they became one line. "Go home, Miss Granger," he said tightly. He waved his wand in a complicated pattern. "Watch your step on the stairs."

Hermione glared for another second before Apparating from the lab.

--7:007:30pm, July 7, 1998...

She arrived in Market Square five seconds after 7pm. This time she would perform the spell that she had not had a chance to finish on June 28th. Her wand was out in a split second, twisting and weaving in a complex incantation, sweeping up the tendrils of magic left behind from the Apparition.

She gave her wand one final flick.

A succession of ghostly images appeared out of the tip of her wand: the hulking shadow of a steel mill and its single tall, thin chimney, a labyrinth of twisting streets in its shadow, boarded and broken windows in a row of brick houses, and finally a cul-de-sac and the last house with a small path of beaten dirt leading to its front door...

She smiled.

--12:301:00pm, October 13, 1998--

"No freaking way, Camilla. Abso-fucking-lutely not."

Hermione sighed. She had *definitely* had this conversation already today.

"What if I told you that Se-Snape would also be unarmed?"

"I wouldn't believe a word that he said," Harry snapped.

"Then believe me," she replied. She lifted a wand out of her bag and held it out for him to see.

Harry nearly sent his chair skidding across her kitchen floor with the force of his recoil. He stood up. "Are you telling me that's...?"

"I am. And it is. This is Severus Snape's wand. He gave it to me as a gesture of good faith when I requested that the meeting would take place without violence. Now will you trust me?"

"I... I just... give me a minute, Cami." Harry fell back into his chair limply like a rag doll, looking shell-shocked.

She could understand his reaction. Although both of them had known they were wizards for a mere eight years, the relationship of a witch or wizard to their wand had been drummed into them from an early date. From the time he received it, a wizard's wand basically became an extension of himself. The only time a wand ever voluntarily changed hands was when a wizard bequeathed his old wand, and then usually only to a close relative. Ron had once told her that touching another boy's wand was more offensive than grabbing his bollocks.

Hermione felt an annoying blush creep into her cheeks and was glad that Harry could not possibly know the reason.

"I..." Harry still seemed to be having trouble believing what he was seeing. "Yes, I'll do it. Tell Snape that I agree to meet him unarmed."

He drew his wand from his sleeve and set it on the table, as far away from Snape's wand as possible.

Hermione let out a sigh of relief. Gently, she placed both wands in her bag and shut it. "Good. I'll let him know. We should go meet him in about five minutes."

Waving her wand, she cast a Patronus, whispering to it before sending it away. Both of them watched the silver otter paddle and float its way out of the room. When it was out of sight, Harry turned to Hermione again.

"So where exactly did you arrange for this meeting to take place?"

Hermione told him. Harry sputtered. "Are you joking?"

"Not at all. We required a non-threatening, neutral location."

"Well, *neutral* it certainly is, but how on earth are you ever going to convince Snape to set foot in there?"

"He's already there."

Harry whistled in admiration. "I guess I was wrong, Cami. I should be wondering what sort of spell you have *him* under."

Hermione smirked, but her heart felt strangely warm. "I'd certainly never tell."

They both stood up.

"Ready?" Hermione asked as she replaced the Glamour and became Camilla Elliot once more. Harry nodded. They Disapparated.

--1:001:30pm, October 13, 1998--

When they arrived, Severus Snape was already seated in a booth, resembling a gigantic inkblot against the red vinyl seat.

Harry and Snape both noticed each other at the same time and stiffened as if they had been Petrified. Hermione rolled her eyes and grabbed Harry's hand, dragging him over.

Snape glared daggers at them as they approached, weaving their way between running children and packed tables. It might have been her imagination, but it seemed as though most of Snape's glare was directed at their joined hands rather than at Harry himself.

They reached their table, and she released Harry's hand. She motioned that he should sit down. Harry slowly slid into the side of the booth opposite Snape. Then both men turned as one to look at her, awaiting her decision.

Hermione hesitated, and then she slid into the seat next to Severus. Harry grimaced. Snape smirked. Underneath the table, she felt Severus' knee lightly touch hers.

Having gained one small victory already, Snape conceded to speak first. "Potter," he said.

"Snape," Harry grunted after a beat.

"Excellent, we have demonstrated that we know each other's names," Hermione said. "I think that before we say anything further, we should ward ourselves against other ears."

Snape frowned. "I thought that no magic could be performed in this location."

"No magic with registered signatures," Hermione replied, and then she flicked her wand, whispering, *Muffliato*."

"And where exactly did you get your unregistered wand?" Harry asked after getting over his surprise.

Hermione hesitated and then said, "Professor Dumbledore."

Snape's face drew very tight at the mention of the name, and he closed his eyes. Harry sneered and opened his mouth to speak.

"Harry," Hermione said in a dangerous whisper. She had a pretty good idea of what he had been about to say to Snape. "If you finish that thought, I swear I will never speak to you again."

Harry looked stunned. Then he seemed to realize that she was deadly serious.

"You didn't tell me that you had one of Dumbledore's unregistered wands," he said instead.

Now it was Hermione's turn to look surprised. "I didn't think you knew about them... and that if you did, you might be angry."

"Because he didn't give me one? I was angry at first when I found out. I didn't understand, still don't... but Dumbledore absolutely insisted that when the final confrontation came, wands would be useless."

"And he was absolutely right," Snape said. "Even if your wands were not brothers, you could never hope to out-duel Voldemort. He is faster and smarter than anyone."

"Including you?" Harry sneered.

"Including me," Snape replied without missing a beat. "Don't look so shocked, Potter. Slytherins were never the ones who were too proud for their own good. Now before this turns into another round of insults that will do neither of us any good, do me the courtesy of hearing me out. You can go back to hating me afterwards."

Harry scowled, but he nodded. Hermione, who had been recording ever since she had cast *Muffliato*, nearly dropped her quill. She had been expecting at least a few more minutes of bickering.

"There are two reasons why any wand will be useless against the Dark Lord. First, as I have mentioned, he is a better duelist than anyone in the wizarding world. The only wizard who could possibly have bested him is... was Albus Dumbledore. Although you may never believe me, the Headmaster's death was a sacrifice that I never wished to accept, *Potter*." Snape glared at him for a moment. When it seemed that Harry was not about to offer a response, he continued. "The second reason that your wand will be useless is simply the fact that you will only be attacking one piece of the Dark Lord's soul. Every single member of the Order could throw the Killing Curse at him, and in the end, there would still be four more nasty pieces of soul remaining alive. And as there is no chance of you finding the rest of the Horcruxes..."

"We can and we will," Harry stated.

"Is that so?" Snape asked. "What do you think the Death Eaters have been doing for nearly a year's time when they could have been attacking you? They have collected every single remaining Horcrux, except for the locket that Miss Granger has, and the Dark Lord has locked them away somewhere that even I do not know. But I can assure you that they are now impossible to find."

"Nice to know you're so optimistic about our chances," Harry snapped.

"If I were not, I would hardly have spent the better part of three months working non-stop with Miss Granger on this project, the results of which we would like to present to you, as long as you will *kindly* stop interrupting."

Harry rolled his eyes in a way so similar to Severus that Hermione nearly laughed out loud.

"As I was saying," Snape said, "the reason Voldemort has been impossible to kill thus far is because his soul has been split into pieces. Fortunately for us, this state of being for a soul is very unnatural, and we have been able to develop a potion that will restore Voldemort's soul to its original, unbroken state, without needing to destroy or even find his remaining Horcruxes."

Both of them smiled as Harry audibly gasped. "Is that true? Camilla?"

She was about to speak, but Snape interrupted. "I should think," he said to Harry, "that there is no reason to use Miss Granger's false name here. We are perfectly safe from prying ears."

Harry opened his mouth to retort, then seemed to realize there was nothing to protest against. "Sorry, Cam-Hermione. I didn't think. I'd just gotten used to it, I suppose."

"I suppose that you believed Miss Granger had 'gotten used to it' as well? And perhaps you also *thought* that she enjoyed her role so much that there was no *possible* way that she could be someone else underneath the role she was forced to play." The sarcasm in Snape's voice could have peeled the vinyl from their booth.

"Stop it," Hermione said wearily. "Harry, it's alright, but yes... I do prefer being called Hermione when it's safe. It feels more... right. Now as I was about to say about the potion..."

She paused, suddenly realizing that she knew absolutely nothing about the potion. She blushed as Snape removed a thick-bound stack of parchment from his robes and set it before her. She turned to the last page, her eyes flying over the words. "Harry, do you remember the project that I was going to work on after I left Hogwarts?"

"Yeah... this is *that* project?"

"Yes. We discovered an alternative use for the resulting potion. When a person is restored after the Killing Curse, they are restored to their natural state. We didn't manage to keep the subject's body alive, but lab tests revealed a perfect record of preserving the subject's soul. Now, before you freak out, the lab subjects were, ah, rabbits."

Harry blinked. "You used the Killing Curse on bunnies?"

Snape winced. "If you simply must put it that way, Mr. Potter."

"Now," Hermione continued, flipping back and forth in the parchments as she spoke. "I won't bore you with the details, but we were able to confirm that the potion restores the untouched, natural version of the soul even in the case of contamination or manipulation. Once the potion is administered to Voldemort and he is struck with the Killing Curse, his soul will be restored to its original, whole state. Then you'll be able to finish him off with the nasty hex of your choosing. If his body is destroyed in the process, so much the better." Hermione laughed, "Those are your words, aren't they, Sev-Snape?"

Her heart hammered in her chest as she beheld Snape's stricken look and realized just how close she had come to calling him by the wrong name. Harry, fortunately, didn't seem to notice, preoccupied as he was by something else.

"Do you mean to say," he asked in a testy voice, "that *everything* about the project is written in that stack of parchment? That both of you write in it? And that it is kept separate from your regular notes, Hermione?"

"Yes," she said. "We thought that was the way we would work most efficiently together."

"Not really smart, though, is it? If anything happens to those notes or if they happen to get *altered* in any way, she would have no idea. She might forget everything about the project."

Hermione went slightly pale. Snape sneered. "You don't have much faith in your friend, do you, Potter?"

"That's not what I meant, and you *know* it! I just want to make this clear, Snape. I don't trust you, and I don't think I ever will... not completely. I'm willing to believe that you'll do everything in your power to help us kill Voldemort. I'll even admit that I might have been wrong to hate you for so many years when your actions, if not your words, seemed constantly directed towards protecting us. But the way everyone, including me, will always see you, no matter what else you do, is that Dumbledore's death is and will always be *your* fault."

Snape's jaw tightened the tiniest fraction. Hermione knew that was all that Harry would see.

Her eyes, however, had become attuned to the smallest, restrained responses that expressed Severus Snape's entire range of emotions. They remembered even when her memories did not. Her eyes saw the pain in his visage and the way his hands folded together to disguise the trembling in his fingers.

"There is no need to apologize for hating me, Potter," he said in a perfectly controlled drawl.

That had obviously not been the response that Harry had been expecting. He was silent for several long moments.

"Potter," Snape said. "We needn't belabor the fact that the two of us will never get along. But I also refuse to see my and Miss Granger's work go to waste. All I ask is that you ensure that I won't be attacked from both sides when the final battle occurs."

"And afterwards...?"

The question hung in the air like a lead weight.

"Let's worry about that when the time comes," Snape said lightly.

"You tell us how to put your potion to use, Snape, and we'll do it. You do everything in your power to help us and ~~we~~ *we* wear that Hermione will come to no harm, and I'll meet you halfway."

Snape gazed at him and then glanced quickly over to her. He nodded. "Agreed."

"In that case," Harry said. "I think it's time the Order met once again."

Next chapter: Hermione turns the tables on Snape and invites him to dinner. Hermione comes clean with Harry, and just where did Hermione manage to convince Snape to go for this meeting? Also, remember that catnip from chapter 8.

Armistice

Chapter 10 of 17

Hermione turns the tables on Snape and invites him to dinner. Hermione comes clean with Harry, and just where did Hermione manage to convince Snape to go for this meeting? Also, remember that catnip from chapter 8.

A/N: A more light-hearted chapter after all that angst. And did I mention that reviews make me inordinately happy? Just checking.

Chapter 10

Armistice

--7:308:00pm, July 7, 1998--

She was waiting for him in his Potions lab when he returned. She sat calmly in an armchair that she had Transfigured from an uncomfortable stool. The only sign of her

Careful vigil was the wand she held loosely but carefully trained upon entrance. As he walked in and saw her, she watched him freeze and was treated to the rare sight of Severus Snape in utter, flabbergasted shock.

A brown bag fell from his hand, and food spilled out onto the floor. Hermione recognized it as from a Pizza Hut, and she furiously bit back a laugh at the thought of the professor frequenting such a Muggle haven of grease and salt.

Instead, she smiled. It was not a nice smile. How quickly the tables were turned! "Do close your mouth, Professor." Damn. She still instinctively called him Professor. "Ask your questions. Then it's my turn."

"How, by Merlin's balls, did you get here?"

"I invented a useful little spell in seventh year when studying for NEWTs became too tedious. I called it 'Reverse Apparation.' It makes use of the remnants of magic left behind from Apparition to reconstruct the location from which I Disapparated. Best of all, there's no need to have a destination in mind."

"A little spell? You invented a...little spell?? You conniving... wench!"

"Now, now, that's not a question." She was enjoying this. Far too much.

"I believe that the next question you were going to ask would be 'why am I here'? And I'll answer that gladly. I'm sick of being used and pitied. I'm sick of Harry and Ron looking at me so sadly that I think I've died. I'm sick of restaurants charging me twice for the same meal because I don't remember paying for it. And I'm sick of you, who up until a week ago, I thought was the most treacherous piece of shit on the planet. And now you're deciding to prove to me how tearfully selfless you've been, and therefore I automatically owe you something. If you want forgiveness from Dumbledore, you march into Minerva's office and beg his portrait because that's all that's left of him now. If you want forgiveness from the Order, you bring us Voldemort's head on a platter. If you want forgiveness from me, you work with me as an equal to bring down His Dark Holiness and those bastards that stole my mind, and we'll call it even. Is that acceptable, Professor?"

Snape was no longer in a state of apoplexy. His features had relaxed into an expression that looked utterly alien on him, and she could swear that one corner of his mouth was struggling not to twitch. "And to think that a month ago, they considered you lost to the wizarding world," he muttered.

Hermione blinked. Severus Snape did not mutter. "Professor...?"

Snape Accio'd another stool wandlessly and sat down about three feet from Hermione. Her wand was now pointing at the floor.

"I think," he began, "if we are to undertake this agreement that you have so persuasively put forward, you should not continue to refer to me as your professor."

Hermione blinked again... carefully. Severus Snape did not give in. "Thank you... er, Snape, but you'll have to forgive me if I do slip from time to time. I find comfort in familiarity."

He raised an eyebrow. "What comfort can you possibly find in remembering me as your professor?"

Hermione shrugged and gave him the easy answer. "I learned some useful things."

He scoffed as if that were the most amusing thought in the world. "Indeed you did."

"Now then, Snape, could I persuade you to join me for dinner? It's the least I could do after ruining yours."

--11:30am12:00pm, October 10, 1998--

His reaction was everything that she had feared.

She saw when the dawning realization lit in his eyes, and the fury turned his face ugly.

"SNAPE?!"

Harry's wand was drawn in a second.

"It's not what you think, Harry..."

"What did he do, Camilla, bewitch you? Claim that he didn't really kill Dumbledore, that it really was all an elaborate ruse to boost his position in Voldemort's circle?"

Hermione gaped, astonished at how close to the truth he had come. Harry seemed to react to the look in her eyes. "I thought so," he sneered. "I'm a stubborn arse, Cami, not a fool. I have thought of every possible excuse that git could prepare, and guess what? None of them satisfy me!"

"Harry, no! That's not what happened. You must understand, Dumbledore wanted him to do it."

"Dumbledore begged him..."

"To kill him! Dumbledore knew he was dying; he told me so himself!" Hermione took advantage of Harry's momentary speechlessness to press onwards. "Please let me explain..." She told Harry everything she had seen in McGonagall's memory.

Harry was unexpectedly silent after her explanation. After a beat, he asked, "And where is the memory now?"

"I'll get it. I had Minerva lend me Dumbledore's Pensieve for the day because I knew I would need to show you. Just... put down your wand, okay?"

He lowered his wand slowly, his face still furious.

--12:301:00pm, October 10, 1998--

Harry lifted his head out of the Pensieve, gasping slightly. His eyes were haunted. Hermione placed a hand lightly on his shoulder. "Are you alright? Did you... did you talk to him?"

He looked absently at her. "Huh? Oh, I... yes. I just need a minute to think."

After a minute, he was scowling again, and his wand arm trembled. The conclusions he was drawing were definitely not to Hermione's liking.

"This is Dumbledore's Pensieve, right? And you saw the memory in here as well?"

"Yes. And before you say anything, I saw Minerva take the memory from her head. There's no way that Snape could have tampered with it beforehand." Yet Harry's face was still red from fury, and his hands clenched into fists.

"You think the only thing he could have tampered with was the memory itself? *Thatbastard*. As if Dumbledore wasn't enough, I'll *kill* him for what he's done to you!"

"Harry, you're not making any sense," Hermione pleaded.

"No," Harry seethed. "You wouldn't know anything about this, but I'm *sure* that he counted on that. Do you remember those disastrous Occlumency lessons? Well, the git had quite a few memories that he never wanted me to see; so guess where he put them away for safekeeping?"

Hermione's eyes widened, understanding creeping into her mind.

"That's right. *Dumbledore's Pensieve*."

"So you think that Se-Snape somehow... corrupted the Pensieve to fake Dumbledore's presence in the memory?"

"You know that I do," he said shortly.

"That's not possible."

"He's *guilty*, Camilla. *I saw him do it*"

"Harry," Hermione explained slowly, resisting the urge to snap at him. He couldn't be expected to know. "Pensieves are protected by extremely powerful magic. The devices, including any memories that are placed inside, can only be altered by the rightful owner of the Pensieve. Dumbledore must have made significant adjustments to give Snape permission to even temporarily store his own memories, let alone attempt to tamper with the Pensieve."

"Okay, okay," he grumbled, and Hermione stopped talking with a slight blush. She knew that she had been in "textbook mode" again.

"But I wasn't finished," said Harry. "There's something else. You said that the Dumbledore in the memory said that he was a remnant of his former self?"

"That's correct."

"Cami, how the bloody hell could Dumbledore know about your attack that happened *after* he was murdered?"

Hermione's mouth opened and closed for a few seconds.

"I..." She flailed, grasping instinctively for her bracelet. *Catnip*, she remembered with relief. "That piece of Dumbledore is still alive. He was living in McGonagall's head, with full access to her thoughts and memories, past and current."

"Oh, stop fishing. That's a stretch, even for the imagination."

"I'm not fishing!" Hermione snapped, growing increasingly angry at his pig-headedness. "*Think*, Harry, try and look past your hatred for the man and consider reasonable explanations."

"And I suppose you're an expert when it comes to memories, aren't you?"

Hermione saw Harry's eyes go wide before the words had finished escaping his mouth. He knew that he had gone too far, but that wasn't enough to stop the well of rage rising within her.

"*How dare you?*" she hissed.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to..."

"It's all I have." Her rage had fled quickly to be replaced with quiet despair, begging him to understand. "If I can't believe in what we Snape and I have accomplished together, if I can't believe in him... I have nothing."

"You have me, Cami. Always," Harry pleaded with unnatural earnestness. "You don't need *him*. Nobody needs him."

Her anger returned, fiercer than before. "Don't you ever say that again. He has done more for us than you will ever know."

"I just hate that he's managed to get you on his side now," he snapped.

"What do you want from me?" she seethed. "To betray him to you? That'd be alright wouldn't it, because *Snape* doesn't deserve the same consideration as other human beings."

Harry looked on the verge of shouting something harsh in return. With a monstrous effort, he restrained himself. "I can't speak for the git, but I would never ask that of you. I've always known you were loyal to me, and I can't imagine things otherwise. I will always trust *you*, Camilla."

"I... thank you, Harry. That means a lot to me."

He scoffed. "You should hardly be surprised. You've been with me since the beginning."

Silence fell and both of them shuffled awkwardly for a moment. Hermione cleared her throat. "So does this mean that you'll consider meeting him?"

Harry groaned. "Don't spring that on me yet. As a stubborn arse, I learn slowly."

Shaky grins appeared on both of their faces as they realized that despite everything, they always managed to remain friends.

"I just..." Harry paused, a shadow settling in his eyes. "It's hard to believe that a part of Dumbledore is still alive. He told me himself that no spell could bring back the dead. This... this situation is not the same. I know that. But..."

"The ones we love never really leave us, Harry."

His green eyes snapped up to her face, squinting in bemusement. "You sure that you don't have a bit of Dumbledore in you as well? I swear you sounded exactly like him just now."

She laughed. "No. But I'm flattered at the comparison." Her mood sobered then and she placed a hand on his collarbone, feeling Harry's heartbeat flutter under the bottom edge of her palm. "We have helped each other every step of the way. What Se-Snape and I have created could very well destroy Voldemort for good. Isn't that enough of an incentive?"

He gave a great sigh, and Hermione felt his chest rise and fall. "I'll meet him. But I'm doing it for you, Cami. Not him."

Hermione nodded. It was a start.

"And if I sense any funny business on his part, anything at all..."

Hermione placed her other hand on his other shoulder. "You let me worry about that."

--12:0012:30pm, October 13, 1998--

"No, Hermione. Absolutely not."

Hermione sighed. "Do you *know* how much Harry hates you?"

"And that is precisely why it would be suicide for me to appear before him without my wand."

"Did I hear what I thought I did? Did Severus Snape just admit that Harry Potter is perhaps not an inept dunderhead after all?"

"Don't be ridiculous. All I said is that Potter would pose a danger to an unarmed man."

Hermione bit her lip so that he would not see her smile.

"Are you truly that worried about what Potter might do to me?"

"What?"

"You bite your lip whenever you are nervous."

"I do?"

"Indeed. You would make a horrible spy."

"That may be so, but I'm not nearly offended enough not to notice that you're attempting to change the subject. Let me keep your wand during the meeting, Severus. Please."

He gave a long, suffering sigh. "Hermione, trust me when I say that I know*exactly* how angry Potter is at me. No matter how well you think you may have convinced him of my loyalty, the first thought when he sees me will be murder."

"Well then, I will just have to confiscate his wand as well."

"And how do you propose to do that? Potter is not nearly as logical and susceptible to reason as I am."

Hermione snorted. "I'll force him into a mutual agreement. I will tell him that I expect both of you to be unarmed, which is a reasonable arrangement. The meeting will also take place in a neutral location."

He narrowed his eyes. "Where?"

There was wicked gleam in Hermione's eyes as she replied, "McDonald's at Victoria Place."

Severus' face went pale as he swallowed deliberately. "I would ask if you were joking, but I fear that I already know the answer."

"Grease and salt are your friends, Severus."

"Even I have my limits." He was no longer pale and had instead turned a faint shade of green.

"The locale will prevent either of you from throwing any wandless magic.*Both* of you know that it is within the Muggle Prime Minister's direct jurisdiction, and any magic performed will have Ministry officials there in minutes."

"And what reason would Potter have to *not* call the law down upon my head?"

"Because he knows that I won't leave you."

Severus' jaw shifted under his skin. There was a look in his eyes that appeared just shy of disgust. Then it was gone. "Does he now?" he replied at last.

"Yes," Hermione said. "So you needn't worry that he won't behave."

He coughed lightly. "There was a much, ah, easier way that you could have confiscated my wand."

"Stolen it from you and then conveniently 'forgotten' where I had hidden it?"

"You considered it then."

"Considered it, yes. Seriously, no."

"I... thank you, Hermione."

She sniffed. "As if I could have successfully stolen something from a Slytherin."

Severus smiled. Hermione may not have recorded every gesture precisely, but she was reasonably certain that he had smiled more in the past three months than he had before in his entire life.

He pulled his wand from his voluminous sleeve and handed it to her, handle first. She reached out and grasped the end. Her palm was slightly damp, and her skin stuck to the slightly rougher handle. The handle was dark grey, complementing the rest of the polished jet-black wood.

"Black walnut with a unicorn hair core, fourteen-and-seven-eighths inches long."

Hermione's fingers curled around the handle and found the smooth depressions where his fingers would have rested most often. The wand was aged but well cared-for over the years.

It was also the longest one she had ever seen.

"Hermione, are you well? You look a little flushed."

The sound of his voice penetrated Hermione's racing thoughts of where *onearth* that thought and the accompanying insinuations had come from, and she blushed even brighter. "Nothing. I'm fine. Uh, I just... I'm honored that you have trusted me with this."

Severus tugged on her arm. Unprepared, Hermione stumbled and gasped as she fell against his chest. "Thank you for asking my permission," he said, running one hand through her curly, bushy hair.

Tingling from his sudden closeness, and with her mind still full of inappropriately graphic and erotic images, Hermione felt her hand rise instinctively to grasp the back of his neck and pull his face towards hers.

She heard Severus grunt in surprise as their lips met, but he wasted no time in kissing her back. Hermione felt feverish in her excitement as she took charge of the kiss, humming against his lips and dipping her tongue inside to taste him.

She also felt slightly strange, as she had never been the aggressor before. But then again, never before had it felt, as it did at this moment, *saïght*.

Next chapter: A series of vignettes as Hermione and Snape begin to work together, and just how did Snape get those white teeth in chapter 8?

Identity

Chapter 11 of 17

A series of vignettes as Hermione and Snape begin to work together, and just how did Snape get those white teeth in chapter 8?

A/N: I just wanted to clear something up: I have received many questions about whether Hermione ever regains the ability to make memories. As I hope is clear from the timestamps, the chronological "ending" of the story is already known... it was the second half of the first chapter. And while I have also said time and again that not everything is as it seems in that chapter, I hope it's apparent that Hermione remembers nothing. So will Hermione recover? Answer: not within the course of the story, but your imaginations can run wild about what happened after the "ending"... especially after these next two chapters.

In this chapter, there is an unintentional nod to PlaidPooka's "The Price of Madness." If you haven't read it, I highly recommend it!

Disclaimer: No bunnies were harmed in the course of this story.

Chapter 11

Identity

--10:3011:00am, July 9, 1998--

"How often does Voldemort summon you these days?"

"For the last time, Miss Granger, please refrain from using that name in my presence!"

"Well, I'm not calling him He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named," Hermione snapped back. "Bloody ridiculous if you ask me, considering that we're planning on killing him."

"I do not care for your singular annoyances," Snape hissed, turning a funny shade of purple. "You will not use that name in my home."

"You think I like hearing you call him the Dark Lord all the time?" Hermione replied testily. "Fine, fine, I'll call him 'Riddle.' Happy now?"

"Ecstatic."

--2:303:00pm, July 10, 1998--

They had progressed to the first stages of testing viable potion bases. Before Hermione even stepped up to the cauldron, she realized the problem.

Her distorted wrist forced her to hold the stirring rod at an awkward angle. As she dipped the rod into the simmering contents, the end scraped against the inner wall of the cauldron, scattering iron filings into the potion.

Wordlessly, Snape cleared the ruined potion base with a sweep of his wand. "Let me," he said, taking the rod from her hands.

Hermione's face grew hot, and she whirled upon him, daring him to mock her for being unable to do such a simple thing.

She was astonished to discover not a sliver of amusement upon his face.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

--9:009:30am, July 11, 1998--

"Professor, what are these?"

Snape shot her a glance that could have withered a cactus. His familiar, a midnight-black raven perched in a corner of the ceiling, cawed derisively, startling her before it returned to preening its feathers.

He motioned to the thick sheaf of parchment he had dropped upon the table. "These are for us to combine all our notes regarding this project. I trust that you would prefer to keep these separate from your notes detailing every second of your life. Years of experience as Head of House have taught me that peeking into a girl's personal diary

usually instigates a reaction that would put Vesuvius to shame."

Hermione couldn't help herself. She chuckled. "Certainly I will, Professor. I'll transfer over all the notes we've recorded thus far, as well. Thank you. This was most..." Considerate. "...thoughtful of you."

He snorted. "I wish to get this project over with as soon as possible, Miss Granger. A sentiment which I am sure that you share."

Hermione stared thoughtfully for a moment before nodding. It was the safe response. She couldn't tell him that she already treasured their time together most ardently. He was an impossible, insulting man whose presence still made her nervous despite their now mutual trust.

Yet beneath the unattractive exterior, Hermione had discovered glittering fragments of the man who had been able to lead a double life for nearly twenty years without going mad. She would catch him in an instance of intense concentration, when the menace would disappear from his scowl to be replaced by single-minded dedication to solving the problem before him.

Dumbledore had been right. She and Snape were far more alike than she ever would have admitted.

She had also seen the part of Snape that had given him the strength to go on after "The Dumbledore Incident." Snape had been summoned twice since they had begun working together. Each time, he had hissed in pain as he grabbed his forearm and grumbled about the Dark Lord continuing to use such irritating methods to call his most trusted servant. Yet beneath his complaining, Hermione caught the edge of fear.

Even now, nothing was certain.

Both times, he had returned several hours later, to toss aside his robe and mask the instant he reappeared in the lab. He then returned to his work in a foul mood that Hermione knew better than to disturb.

It surprised her somewhat that he was so unrestrained with his emotions at these times. The Professor Snape she had known was an enigmatic pestilence. This Severus Snape was afraid, angry, brilliant, accepting of her help, and once or twice, Hermione swore that she had seen him smile.

She reasoned that this was because she was with him for ten hours straight every day and that he had rarely in his life entertained company for such a length of time. And certainly no one, other than perhaps Dumbledore, had been around to see him leave and return from being Summoned. Hermione felt honored and more than a little nervous that she was one of the few people to ever see this side of Snape.

This Severus Snape had also given her life a purpose once again. He made it possible to continue working on the potion, because she knew that, despite his intolerable personality, he would support her every step of the way.

He was giving her the chance to create something worth remembering.

She couldn't tell him any of this, of course. She merely said, "I will do my best to make this a tolerable experience for both of us, sir."

--9:009:30am, July 20, 1998--

Hermione cursed as she stumbled on the stairs yet again. That stairway leading to the potions lab was a veritable bruise factory.

The fading marks on her legs were evidence that this had not been the first time she'd tripped on the steps.

There was a soft chuckle from somewhere above her head, and she looked up to see Snape holding out a hand to her.

His hand was warm and strong, his grip entirely foreign.

It was the first time he had ever initiated contact between them.

It must have been.

--6:006:30pm, July 31, 1998--

"Sir? I was wondering if I might leave a little early today."

Snape set a barrel of dung beetles on the lab table with an audible thunk. "For what reason?"

"It's Harry's birthday today. Ron and I were going to take him out to dinner."

Snape picked a beetle from the barrel, holding it by one leg as it squirmed in mid-air. Hermione rolled her eyes. Apparently satisfied, Snape tossed the creature back into the barrel. "So," he said, "Mr. Potter survives yet another year. I must commend him."

"They say that he's one of the best Aurors in the department," Hermione replied, feeling a sudden need to stand up for her friend.

Surprisingly, Snape did not scoff at her proclamation. "One should hope that to be the case, Miss Granger, if we are to have any hope of winning this war. And under what capacity will you be celebrating his natal day with him? I recall that Hermione Granger's obituary was published last month to much public mourning."

"I'm his girlfriend."

Snape raised both brows. "I beg your pardon?"

Hermione flushed and fidgeted, embarrassed for no clear reason. "Camilla Elliot, that is. That's the relationship with Harry that was created for her so that I would have a reason to stay in his company."

His expression was unreadable. He lowered his eyebrows. "I suppose that someone must bear the burden of being Saint Potter's companion. Thank goodness that a real woman did not have to be chosen to suffer genuinely."

Her mouth dropped open, and she struggled for a split second to formulate a suitably scathing response. Then she noticed that his delivery of the statement had been utterly dry and... "Professor...I do hope that you won't make a habit of telling jokes in public. Half the population of England might faint in shock."

This time, even Snape could not deny that his lips curved upwards in a genuine smile. "Go celebrate with your friends, Miss Granger." He frowned, thinking for a bit. "You can come in later than usual tomorrow. I predict that all three of you will be slightly worse for the wear by the end of the night."

Hermione smiled. "Thank you." She Apparated home.

--8:008:30am, August 1, 1998--

She knocked on his front door, hard, at 8:15am the next morning. The door swung open a few seconds later.

Hermione stared, her mouth half-open.

Severus Snape stood at the threshold in loose black trousers and a white shirt with flowing sleeves. Stubble dotted his chin and cheeks. He held a toothbrush in one hand. As she watched, a drop of water dripped from the end of the toothbrush and fell to the doorstep.

Snape's scowl was thunderous, made even worse by his haggard morning appearance. "I was expecting the postman."

Hermione worked her jaw up and down, words eventually coming out. "I... I, er..." Don't stare at his toothbrush. "...I was wondering if I could start work a little early today?"

His scowl did not dissipate. Hermione did not move, too horrified from trying not to laugh to be afraid of his temper.

"If you must," he replied at last. "You will forgive me if I don't join you right away. You seem to have caught me... unprepared."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." She darted through his sitting room after he stepped aside and up the stairs to the potions lab, stumbling slightly on the stairway.

Once she was sure that he was not following her, she removed her quill and began to write, in exquisite, excruciating detail.

Some moments were just too precious to be forgotten.

--10:0010:30am, August 1, 1998--

"When are you planning to tell me why you came here so early when by all rights you should be nursing a wicked hangover?"

Hermione clenched her jaw together. "Preferably never."

"Why merely 'preferably'?"

Hermione set down her quill and lowered her head to her hands. "Because I know that you won't take 'never' as an answer."

"True. Although my reaction to this rather childish display may be mitigated depending on the reason for your reticence."

Only Snape could say something like that and have someone take him seriously. "I'm afraid you'll think I'm being stupid."

"Tell me. You must, after all, pay your dues for seeing me before I was able to complete my morning toilette, a privilege that no one has had since my parents."

Hermione allowed herself to laugh. The last thing she would have expected was for Severus Snape to be able to make a joke at his own expense.

"I left the celebration right after dinner. I didn't feel much like pub-crawling with Harry and Ron. Or Ron's new girlfriend."

"Ah," Snape said. "You feel as if you have been replaced."

"No. Well... maybe a little. But that's not the problem. Ron and I went our separate ways months ago, and I rather like his girlfriend. They got on very well, all three of them, and I just couldn't stay... not as Camilla, not as the newcomer. I wanted to give both the boys a big hug and then realized that I couldn't. Camilla couldn't do that." She trailed off to see Snape's unchanged expression. "Yes, I know, it's silly. I knew what I was getting into from the beginning and..."

"And why, Miss Granger, did you feel that coming here would make you feel better?"

"I..." Hermione paused, choosing her words with care. "I know who I am here. I can do my work and not have to pretend to be someone else." She shook herself. "It doesn't matter. The sooner we can bring down these bastards, the sooner I won't have to worry about this anymore."

Snape was silent, but she was no longer worried that he would laugh at her.

"If you had been so perceptive during your time at Hogwarts," Snape said, "you and your friends would not have wasted so much time inventing stories about why I spent so much time in the Potions dungeons."

--11:30am12:00pm, October 1, 1998--

"Let me get this straight. You mean that... this creature is now Cicero?" The rabbit in question nibbled at the female's floppy ear and squeaked in dismay as she hopped away from him.

"Not in the classic sense of the term. But it now holds the deceased subject's soul. Observe its behavior. The same mannerisms, the same incessant chattering, the same infatuation with that one female. Before Cicero's death, this creature barely moved from the corner of the cage. Now it has assumed charge of the herd."

"Do rabbits herd?"

"Hermione, please," Snape said testily.

"The subject's changed behavior could very easily just be animal instincts for the, er, second-in-command to take charge when the leader of the herd has been killed."

"So quickly, Hermione? And by the former weakling? I doubt it."

"But... what happened to the soul that Cicero's replaced?"

"Destroyed, most likely. A single body cannot be home to two souls, not two complete souls at least. That would cause madness at best and immediate death at worst. This creature appears normal; it is simply someone else."

Hermione's head was beginning to hurt. "Is that... possible? I don't understand. Cicero is dead; we both saw it happen. His body is..."

*"Sit down, Hermione. Let me explain." His voice seemed to tremble unnaturally, and Hermione looked up. Shocked, she saw that his gaze was filled with unadulterated delight. *Snape? Happy?**

She sat.

Severus stood in front of her and crossed his arms. It felt exactly like they were back in the dungeons listening to one of his Potions lectures. But he had never appeared as excited in any of their classes. Who was she kidding, Snape never appeared excited. Ever.

"You are already well aware that the soul and the body are separate entities," Snape said. "The consequences of the Dementor's Kiss are proof enough that a body can survive without a soul. And if that were not enough, the Dark Lord was quite successful at splitting his soul into several pieces. Ideally, your potion would preserve the natural states of the body and the soul, allowing both to survive the Killing Curse. But it appears that we overestimated the resilience of the flesh. The soul, although properly re-formed, can no longer reside in the dead body and therefore searches for the closest compatible host. *Compatibility*, I assume, is determined by whatever the soul determines to be its closest match."

"Yes..." Hermione whispered, feeling her own excitement growing. "Not unlike Muggle cryonics. Life extension facilities have successfully frozen dozens of human subjects, but the process is not reversible. The organs and tissues would die if we tried to bring them back."

"Muggles are currently doing... *that*? Good grief, is there no end to their foolishness?"

"So what you're saying is that we solved half of what we had hoped," Hermione said, ignoring his derision of Muggles. "The physical body is too frail to be preserved by the restorative elements of our potion. But somehow we have been able to save his soul." The sheer ridiculousness of what she had just said overwhelmed her, and she disintegrated into a fit of giggles. Televangelists were nothing against the two of them!

"I fail to see what you find so amusing," Snape sniffed. "For all intents and purposes, we have succeeded. We are concerned with re-forming the Dark Lord's soul, not his body."

Hermione extended her hand towards the side of the cage. The rabbit who may or may not have been the new Cicero hopped over at once, chirruping happily and rubbing itself against her hand. She patted the creature's fur through the cage and glanced over uneasily at the limp body over on the far table.

"We will need to run further experiments," Snape said, "to confirm my hypothesis and to ensure that the soul can be restored to its original form in the event of any alterations."

"Of course, I know that," Hermione said absently. She continued to stroke the creature's fur. The eyes... red, curious *alive*. Could it really be that this creature was now home to another's soul? A soul that for all intents and purposes should have been dead?

"What do you think, little one?" Hermione whispered. "Would you like to live forever?"

A touch on her shoulder made her turn. Snape stood there, his eyes bright. "Hermione..." he said in a reverent whisper. "You have done a miraculous thing."

He cupped her cheek, and she felt warmth follow his fingertips from her jaw to her ear. Then he was kissing her.

--10:0010:30pm, October 7, 1998--

"Severus?"

"Yes?"

"After this is over... the potion, the war... what will you do?"

He scowled. "I prefer not to think about outcomes that are at best... uncertain."

"Humor me. Please?"

Severus leaned back from where he had been peering into the microscope. He rubbed his eyes with one hand. "After the war..." He paused. "After the war, the role that I play will no longer be needed. I would like nothing better than to walk away from everything. To cross the fence separating this wretched town from the fields and just walk..."

"...and never look back," Hermione finished, looking at him as if mesmerized. "For when the war is over, the world will no longer be ours to live in."

She fidgeted under Severus' suddenly sharp gaze.

"What makes you say that?" he asked in a soft voice.

Hermione laughed lightly. "Can you imagine how hard it is for me to think in terms of *future*? After this project is over... after we have finally destroyed Riddle and the Death Eaters... after I know the bastard who hurt me is dead... what more is left for me in the wizarding world?"

"A heroine's welcome," Severus replied almost snappishly. "The love and adulation of the masses. You, the young warrior presumed dead but instead survived to deliver the killing blow to an enemy who believed they had crushed her. Hermione Granger will be revered for all ages. Not to mention she'll have the boys and men fawning at her feet."

"For all ages' doesn't mean too much to me, does it?" Hermione retorted. "Besides, I thought I'd made it clear that there's only one man that I'm interested in. And if he ever fawns at my feet, I'll slap him."

Severus rewarded her with a flicker of a smile. Then he continued in a sober voice, "I would not have you underestimate how wonderful the world will be for you when the war is over."

"I would want you with me," Hermione said softly.

He clenched the microscope so tightly he nearly tore the base from its table. "I will forever be an outcast. I will never have a place in your world, Hermione, no matter what I do to make up for my transgressions. It doesn't work that way."

Hermione gazed at him, her hands itching to touch his face, to smooth away the lines of anguish between his eyes. "It's Camilla Elliot's world now. I'm not so sure Hermione Granger belongs here any longer," she said at last.

--8:309:00pm, October 8, 1998--

"Hermione, could I borrow Slytherin's locket from you?"

The question, asked in such a nonchalant manner, completely threw Hermione's concentration from the rather raunchy bit of *Canterbury Tales* (borrowed from his shelf) that she had been reading. They were sitting on her couch in her flat, each absorbed in reading material of their choice.

"Whatever for?"

"I would rather not say exactly. But it will be crucial to the project."

Hermione looked at him for a second and then laid her head against the back of the couch. "Still keeping secrets, Severus."

"You know that there are things that I will never tell you, Hermione."

"Don't try and change the subject," she snapped. "This isn't about dark secrets from your past. This is about our project *Ours*. What you and I have been working on nonstop together for over three months. Whatever it is that you need the locket for, you can tell me. And considering what I went through to get it, I think I doubly deserve to know."

She finished her speech to find Severus staring back at her with a slightly mystified expression that reminded her so much of Harry and Ron that she wanted to punch him.

"You're beautiful when you're angry," he said.

Hermione's mouth fell open. "If you think..." She stopped talking. She saw his smirk and realized that he didn't think at all that he'd be able to distract her this way, but he didn't care. With a great effort, she remained silent and glared. After a moment, his smirk faded, and he dipped his head, signaling surrender.

"I need the locket so that I can remove a portion of Voldemort's soul. It can be used in our test subjects to confirm whether contamination by another soul will be neutralized once the potion takes effect. In other words, to test whether this potion has the capability to restore something as twisted as the Horcruxes to their original state. I did not want to tell you as I knew you would... worry, considering what happened to the Headmaster when he destroyed the Horcrux in the ring."

"You're right, I would. But I would also recognize the necessity of doing so and also have faith that you would take every precaution. However, there's something even more important that I noticed from what you just said."

Snape seemed to be looking at her a little strangely. "What is that?"

"You called him 'Voldemort.' It's the first time you've ever called him that."

Snape raised a brow. "Am I to understand that you record conversations with that level of detail at all times?"

"I do, as you were so adamant about avoiding that name."

He snorted. "Well, as we are mere weeks from killing him, it felt strange to keep calling him a Lord."

Hermione smiled. That also marked the first time he had mentioned the future with anything resembling optimism. She nodded towards Snape's lap. "Reach under your seat cushion."

He slid his hand down between the cushions and searched around, eyes widening when his hands found something. He pulled the heavy golden locket and chain out from the depths of the sofa.

"Ingenious hiding place," Snape said.

--9:009:30am, October 9, 1998--

He held up a small glass vial as long as her little finger. It was filled with a smoky, iridescently green substance.

"That's a soul?"

"Just barely. You could call this the soul's veneer: its skin, if you will. Much less dangerous to manipulate than a soul fragment but will still serve our purposes."

"Are they all that color?"

"Astute observation. Genuine souls are invisible to the human eye. So in this case, the claim that Voldemort has a tainted soul can be taken quite literally."

"Should I even ask how you know so much about soul magic?"

"Voldemort's private library."

"Oh."

Snape shrugged. "I believe you mentioned your displeasure yesterday about keeping secrets from each other."

"I did," she said. "Thank you. Er, how do we go about... testing this?"

"I have already injected a small amount of this substance into our newest Cicero. The process required a combination of Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, and much as it pains me to admit this Divination, the details of which I am confident that even you will have no interest in knowing."

"Actually now I'm more interested in knowing just how much sleep you managed to get last night."

"Enough not to be a safety hazard in the lab. Now please observe the test subject and tell me if you notice any... deviations from its original behavior as a result of the contamination."

"Like what? The rabbit suddenly develops a raging desire to conquer large parts of England?"

Hermione gasped as she suddenly found herself spun around and being thoroughly kissed.

"What was that for?" she asked, after she had caught her breath after the unexpected, though not unpleasant, interruption.

"Do you have any idea how much sarcasm turns me on?" Severus replied, his eyes bright.

She wasn't sure what surprised her more: the fact that Snape had just used the term "turn me on" or the fact that he was admitting something so personal to her.

Hermione launched herself at him, fusing her mouth to his. She tangled her hands in his soft, limp hair, which really wasn't greasy anymore now that he was working in a lab with proper ventilation.

--9:3010:00am, October 9, 1998--

"You could have just *told* me that there was a spell that could tell you if a creature's soul had been tainted."

"And missed the sight of you filling out two feet of parchment on how a Voldemort-possessed rabbit was different from a regular rabbit? I think not."

--10:0010:30am, October 9, 1998--

"I think you bit me. My lip is still bleeding."

"You deserved it for not telling me. You also deserve this." She stepped forward and kissed him tenderly. "For very successfully keeping my mind off the more morbid side of what we're doing today."

--11:30am12:00pm, October 9, 1998--

Six black Havana rabbits lay dead. Six living rabbits still squatted in the cage, with one male nibbling at the ear of one increasingly confused female.

Snape held his wand over the male rabbit, observing the pure, untainted silver cloud surrounding the creature.

"Severus... do you know what this means?"

Severus Snape lowered his wand and stared at the sight with veritable thunderclouds above his brow. "Yes. We have succeeded beyond our wildest hopes," he muttered.

"No need to sound so excited about it."

"My pleasure has unfortunately been killed by the realization of what must happen next."

"And what is that?"

"You will have to go to Potter and convince him to work with me."

Her hand found his as she turned his head to face her with a finger under his chin. "To work with ~~us~~, Severus. We're all on the same side."

"You'll have a job convincing Potter of that," he grumbled. Despite his frown, his arm moved to wrap itself around her waist.

A/N: Anyone remember that raven from chapter 4 and chapter 7? Hmm, I think we know now how Snape knew when Hermione was returning from the cemetery.

Next chapter: Who was the farmer in chapter one? Hermione and Snape philosophize, and Hermione begins noticing some disturbing feelings for her former Potions professor. Snape deals with rabbits, and an apparent failure?

Truth

Chapter 12 of 17

Who was the farmer in chapter one? Hermione and Snape philosophize, and Hermione begins noticing some disturbing feelings for her former Potions professor. Snape deals with rabbits, and an apparent failure?

A/N: This chapter answers one big BIG question about chapter one. And I think that it'll make you rather happy. That said, do try and keep your reviews (and I love reviews, hint hint) spoiler-free!

And since it's been awhile, love and hugs go out to my super-betas sshg316 and Southern_Witch_69. Once again, no bunnies were harmed in this chapter. Really.

Chapter 12

Truth

--5:005:30pm, August 5, 1998--

They were sitting on a couch in her flat. Severus Snape's long, black shape stood out starkly against her cream-colored furniture and beige walls.

Their latest attempt that morning at the potion base a precarious blend of asphodel, Mandrake root, and scarab beetle wings had begun smoking ominously and soon filled the room with thick violet fumes.

Snape had grabbed her and nearly shoved her down the stairs before shutting the door firmly.

"The lab is self-fumigating," he explained. "But it would be a poor idea to return before tomorrow at the earliest."

They had decided to go out to lunch. Several bored-looking neighbors regarded them strangely as they passed. After a lunch of fish and chips Hermione had taken note of his love of greasy food they had decided that they would continue to work through their notes at her flat.

When they arrived, out of instinct, Hermione dropped the Glamour after she closed the door behind them. From her side, Snape gave a start as Hermione Granger's bushy brown hair, brown eyes, and slightly chubby face emerged from Camilla Elliot's dark and willowy form.

She then realized that this was the first time since the time he had abducted her that he had seen her as Hermione Granger.

"I find that I go slightly mad if I don't change back for at least part of each day," she explained.

Snape nodded. His dark eyes regarded her closely. "Let's get to work."

That brought them to where they were now.

Hermione set a tray containing a teapot and two cups of steaming Ceylon on the low table before them. Snape thanked her as he took a sip.

She shook her head as she considered the current scene. If anyone had told her a month ago that she would one day be taking tea with Severus Snape in her flat, she

would have politely directed them to St Mungo's and then called several mediwizards to make sure they got there safely.

She removed the quill from behind her ear and wrote, contemplatively, and, for the first time in a long time, with an inexplicably lighter heart.

--5:306:00pm, August 5, 1998--

"Whatever happened to that wretched cat of yours?"

"Crookshanks? Ah..." Hermione's expression turned into a grimace. "Do the Death Eaters recall the day that Peter Pettigrew disappeared from their ranks?"

"Unforgettable. The Dark Lord threw a tantrum that rivaled anything I'd seen since Potter's escape after the Triwizard Tournament." Snape's eyes went wide. "Do you mean to say that your cat..."

Hermione grinned. "He always was good at detecting dishonest creatures. It was the night before the Death Eaters attacked Hogsmeade; Pettigrew was probably spying on us or something..."

"Pettigrew was instructed to poison or otherwise incapacitate those closest to Potter so that they would not interfere with the attack."

Hermione turned slightly green.

"I knew nothing of his mission until after the fact," Snape said quietly.

Hermione looked at him. Then she nodded lightly. "I woke up that night to the sound of Crookshanks choking on something. By the time I lit my wand, the bastard... Pettigrew was in my bedroom, and Crookshanks had attacked. Pettigrew tried to... to transform back as he was... being eaten. They both died."

"I'm... sorry for your loss, Miss Granger."

Something about his voice sounded odd, and Hermione narrowed her eyes. "It's not funny!"

Severus Snape was trying desperately not to burst into laughter. Both corners of his mouth curled inexorably upwards, and even through her indignation, Hermione had to admit that it was a pleasant sight.

"You have to admit, Miss Granger. One could not have imagined a more appropriate end for Wormtail."

"True, that little bastard." Hermione scowled. "But be that as it may..."

"I did not mean to mock your grief, Miss Granger." The smile disappeared. "I am eternally grateful for your familiar's sacrifice and that Wormtail was not able to harm anyone."

Or you.

Could that possibly be what he meant to say? He had been looking at her most intently as he had spoken.

Hermione told her ridiculous imagination to hush.

--2:303:00pm, August 12, 1998--

"Miss Granger, I would like to suggest something."

"What is it?"

"When you are in my house, would you like to remove the Glamour? I've noticed that you are always more at ease in your natural form."

They had been back to her flat several times over the past week. Snape had claimed that it was easier for him to think away from the fumes of the potions lab, but Hermione had her suspicions otherwise. She had needed to replace her supply of Ceylon tea twice already.

She was taken aback. "Yes, that would be nice," she said quietly. "Thank you, sir."

Snape huffed. "The truth is, it has been disconcerting for me to watch an apparent stranger have free reign in my lab." The apparent brusqueness of his words was belied by the softness in his eyes.

--4:004:30pm, August 15, 1998--

"If you could be reborn as anybody in the world, who would it be?"

"I beg your pardon?"

Hermione motioned towards the simmering cauldron. "We have half an hour before we need to turn down the heat. I thought we could use the time to, ah, get to know each other better."

"By asking hypothetical questions to which the answers would serve no purpose whatsoever?"

She shrugged. "It was always a big hit in primary school."

"A farmer." She looked up at him in surprise. He considered for a moment, as if he had surprised himself with his frankness, and then he continued. "I would be a farmer living far away from this industrial filth. With miles of nothing but my own land around me: no pesky neighbors, no noisy students, and a small laboratory to dabble in experiments that strike my fancy." He smirked at her slightly stunned expression. "Now, I believe it is your turn."

"That sounds... rather nice, actually." Hermione imagined Snape far away from the drab grayness of Spinner's End.

She imagined him standing alone in windswept fields, making a living with nothing that was not created and maintained by his own hands. It was surprisingly easy to picture.

Compared to him, her fantasy sounded remarkably material. "I would want to... sing opera. I know... it's not something anyone would ever expect me to have interest in. My parents took me to see 'The Magic Flute' when I was young, and I never forgot how beautiful the Queen of the Night's voice was. To me, it was the model of what a singer should be. Since then I've always wanted to be able to do something, anything, so well that people would look to me as the model for guidance." She blushed. "You've

probably noticed this."

"I would have had no idea," Snape drawled.

Hermione scowled at him but couldn't bring herself to be truly upset.

"That was most... enlightening, Miss Granger," Snape continued. "But a poor attempt at uncovering my deepest, darkest secrets."

There was an edge to his voice that warned Hermione of things that she probably didn't want to know about. She cracked a grin. "Don't be silly, half an hour isn't nearly enough time for that. Over dinner, perhaps."

--7:007:30pm, August 18, 1998--

"Miss Granger, why have you eaten dinner here every night for the past week?"

Her heart twisted, then relaxed. If he had been irritated by her presence, he would surely have told her. Instead, his question was asked out of genuine curiosity.

"Because your cooking is infinitely superior to mine. And you despise cleaning charms, which I don't mind doing at all, so it seems a fair trade."

"Surely the other two members of the Golden Trio would be happy to keep you from starvation."

"Ron has his girlfriend. They'll probably be engaged by the end of this month. Harry is... He's different. He spends all his time reading every book on defensive spells and hexes he can get his hands on. And when I do visit him, he looks at me as if he's seeing a ghost."

"As Hermione or as Camilla?"

"Both."

Snape grunted noncommittally.

Ten seconds before 7:30pm, she realized that he had just said her name for the first time. She nearly scratched her hand with the speed at which she yanked her quill from behind her ear.

It had sounded too nice on his lips to be forgotten.

--7:007:30pm, August 19, 1998--

"Did your parents leave you this house?" Hermione asked over dinner.

Severus' lips thinned to an almost-invisible line. "They didn't 'leave' it so much as they never bothered to make arrangements before they died, and I was the only surviving heir."

"It's quite nice." She continued through his look of surprise. "The location could use some work... Okay, there are a million other cities in which I would rather live, but there is room for your books and a wonderful space for your lab."

"I trust you were going to ask about my parents next," Snape retorted, and Hermione flinched at his sudden coldness. "Or were you merely going to inquire as to whether they popped me out of a cauldron? I'm sorry to disappoint, but neither of them had an ounce of skill for potions."

Snape's voice had grown icier with each word, and by the end, Hermione had shrank fully back into her chair. "No, I would never... no, sir."

"No, perhaps you would not ask." His shoulders dropped, and his anger seemed to dissipate. "But you and others have always wondered. And you will always have the desire to know."

The idea of Snape and a family seemed to be completely at odds with each other. Not because he was so acerbic that she could not imagine it, but because his personality had always indicated someone completely and utterly alone. It was hard to imagine that at one time, he had lived here with other people, eaten with them, conversed with them.

Rather like you are doing now.

"My mother birthed me when she was in her early twenties," Snape said. "Her marriage to my father was a... I believe the Muggles call it a 'shotgun marriage.' I am told that when she discovered she was pregnant, she went all the way to the Ministry of Magic, pleading with them to let her have an abortion. They refused; the birthrate of wizards, even of half-bloods, was dangerously low. So Eileen Prince and Tobias Snape were married."

He raised a brow when Hermione seemed to show no surprise at the names. "I knew," she confessed. "We figured out the 'Half-Blood Prince' thing."

"I see." Snape did not sound terribly surprised. "I never fooled myself into thinking they had a happy marriage. Or that I might have improved matters. Unlike many women, who at first despair about not being ready for children but move on to become excellent mothers in time, Eileen really wasn't ready for children. Nor do I think she ever would have been ready. She was intensely selfish and wanted the perfect life handed to her on a silver platter. I suppose it's obvious from where we are that it didn't turn out well."

"Tobias was... there, for lack of a better word. He was the most utterly boring person one could have ever known. If he wasn't at the mill, he was sitting at the table, maybe nursing a drink, usually just staring into space. And every once in awhile, he would slap his wife and son around, trying to use violence to prove that he was still a man. I know he resented us for being magical, for being able to do things that would always remain impossible for him."

It was an astonishingly long speech. At the end, Hermione realized that despite his defensiveness, he had wanted to say all of it, and he had wanted her to hear it. The realization almost brought tears to her eyes.

"Well," she said at last. "I think that you turned out rather well under the circumstances."

Snape blinked. Then he looked down, seeming to register for the first time the simple dinner spread out on the table between them. He looked back up at her, and for the briefest instance, she saw something in his gaze that made her heart skip.

Then he scowled. "Pass the tea, please," Snape said.

--8:008:30pm, August 25, 1998--

Snape threw off his mask and cloak, revealing the stoppered flask in his hands. The container was as big around as her head, and the outside was brushed with a gleaming coat of quicksilver.

Hermione stared in fascination. "Is that...?"

"Unicorn blood," he said. "It must be kept cold at all times." He crossed to the large, Muggle refrigerator in one corner of the lab and set the flask gently inside as if it were made of crystal.

She gulped. "Did everything go well? Were you seen by anyone?"

"If I had been," he said testily. "I would have returned in pieces."

Hermione went slightly pale. "At least we have the rarest ingredient now."

"Don't relax so soon, Miss Granger. We still need Chinese Fireball eggs and Runespoor venom. I needn't tell you how dangerous and difficult it will be to collect those."

--11:0011:30am, August 25, 1998--

Snape and Hermione held their breaths as the eye-dropperful of silver blood hit the simmering potion.

Their latest attempt at a potion base combined most of the ingredients of the Draught of Living Death along with essence of Mandrake root and sap from the bristlecone pine to aid its longevity.

The moment that the drops of unicorn blood had mixed entirely, Snape immediately turned the heat off.

Then they both backed away to the door. Snape placed one hand on the doorknob, and the other rested lightly on Hermione's waist, ready to get them both out if necessary.

The concoction gave a muffled belch and then was still. Hermione wrinkled her nose as a foul stench filled the air.

Snape grimaced. "It appears as though we have a working base."

--2:303:00pm, September 25, 1998--

It seemed that overnight she and Snape had suddenly been placed in charge of a small nursery. Day in and day out, the black rabbits watched them go about their business with disturbingly intelligent red eyes. They squeaked when they were hungry and defecated on a whim to show their annoyance. Granted they were much lower maintenance than a brace of children, but Snape began complaining within hours of their arrival.

"The largest rodent is staring at me."

"You did ask for the most intelligent species that could be found."

"Yet that does not mean that it should..."

"Try not to take this the wrong way, but between the two of us, I believe that you are the one that most resembles a possible predator. And they're lagomorphs, not rodents."

Hermione heard him mutter something under his breath that sounded extremely like "insufferable little know-it-all."

The largest lagomorph squeaked indignantly at Snape.

"Shut up, Cicero," Snape snarled.

--10:3011:00am, September 27, 1998--

"It was a *joke*," Snape said indignantly for the umpteenth time.

Hermione had formally dubbed the largest rabbit "Cicero," and the rabbit had already learned to respond to the name, much to Snape's chagrin.

"As if you should be encouraging it. Now the creature will feel even more obligated to make noise at all hours of the day."

Hermione effectively ignored him. "I won't tell anyone that it was your original idea," she said blithely.

That afternoon, Hermione found herself prying off the carapaces of an entire barrel of dung beetles and imagined, with no small amount of amused indignation, that she had just been assigned a detention.

--1:002:30pm, September 28, 1998--

"I think that Cicero fancies that female rabbit with the floppy ear."

"Oh, for goodness sake. The last thing we need is for them to start breeding like rabbits."

Silence.

"Um, Severus. They *are*..."

"I know, I *know*." Snape ground his sliver of Mandrake root too viciously and had to get another one. Hermione ducked her head quickly so that he wouldn't be further irritated by her smile.

--2:002:30pm, September 29, 1998--

Alvin flew in from a high window, flapping laboriously with a large brown-wrapped package clutched in his claws. He landed noisily on the table in front of Hermione, squawking as his wing brushed too close to a roaring Bunsen burner.

"That will teach you to land in the middle of our work," Snape chided. The raven glared at him and attacked the rope binding the package to his leg, clipping through it at last and flapping back up to his perch.

Severus unwrapped the package, hissing in pain as he touched the contents inside. Hermione was beside him at once. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. Freezing Charm on the contents." Snape appeared more irritated by her concern than the pain of his reddened fingertips. Hermione shrugged and turned her attention to the contents of the package.

There were six oval spheres bigger than Harry's golden egg from the Triwizard Tournament. They were a vivid crimson color speckled with gold and seemed to glow from within with a smoldering flame. Next to them was a frosted glass container shaped like a milk jug and filled with a clear liquid. The mouth of the glass jar was completely sealed with wax.

"What are...?"

"You have eyes and a brain, Hermione. You tell me."

"Both of the ingredients must be kept chilled to remain functional. The spheres have the shape and texture of eggs, and from what I've seen... yes, they're Chinese Fireball eggs. And the jar... the clarity and impeccable airtight seal indicate poison, possibly venom."

"Very good, Miss Granger," Snape said with a smirk. "And as even I don't expect you to be able to determine the specific species of origin, I can tell you that this is the venom from the Runespoor."

"Chinese Fireball eggs... *six* of them. And a full liter of Runespoor venom. Well, besides being the exact ingredients we need to finish our trial potion, these items are easily worth several thousand Galleons."

"Indeed."

"These are from one of your *suppliers*, I gather. Is he reliable?"

"Unerringly so. You might say that he has no choice otherwise." Snape lifted the package gingerly, mindful of his fingers, and placed it into the refrigerator. "Now that we have these ingredients, we should be able to begin live trials in two days time."

--9:3010:00am, October 1, 1998--

"What on earth is the matter?"

"Nothing."

"It is not nothing. You have done nothing but snarl responses to me since you arrived, and I refuse to believe that I could have done something to offend you this early in the day."

"It's none of your concern," she huffed.

"It is drawing my attention *away* from our preparations, and therefore *it is* my concern."

"I... I feel slightly horrible about casting Avada Kedavra on a bunny, okay? Go on and laugh at me."

Snape did not laugh. "You were fully aware of the fate of these creatures when you purchased them." Hermione glared and did not respond. Cicero chirruped softly and scratched at the wiring of the cage.

"Well," he said, "I suppose you might use this as motivation to make doubly sure that the potion works."

--11:0011:30am, October 1, 1998--

The quicksilver hit the surface of the brew and hissed in an angry flurry of bubbles as it spread its oily limbs across the surface of the liquid. The silver eventually sank into the mixture like thick tentacles, and the resulting potion turned a putrescent shade of purple.

Snape reached over and turned down the heat under the cauldron while stirring three times widdershins. At the end of the third stir, the nauseating color faded, and the potion became perfectly clear. Hermione attempted not to jump in excitement.

"It worked, Severus, it worked!" Snape gave her an exasperated glance, but she could see the corners of his mouth twitch.

He dipped a silver ladle into the mixture and drew it out filled to the brim with the clear liquid. He bent his nose to it and sniffed.

"Odorless," he muttered.

Then he tipped the entire contents of the ladle into his mouth.

"*Severus!*" Hermione cried.

Snape lowered the empty ladle to the table. "Tasteless as well," he said. His expression had not changed. He did not seem in danger of suddenly dropping dead from imbibing an untried potion.

"Severus, what the hell... that was remarkably *stupid* of you!"

His eyes were like flint as they trained upon her. "Hermione. What are the toxic elements in the potion?"

She swallowed. "Aconite. Asphodel. Runespoor venom. Quicksilver."

"Four of the deadliest substances known to man. Now tell me why taken together, the compounds become completely safe."

"The venom neutralizes the plant elements of the aconite and asphodel, and quicksilver when added at the very end binds to the poisons and encases them for future release. In doing so, it too becomes inert. I know this, Severus, I designed it, as I know you recall. However, no matter how confident we are in our calculations, real life is always..."

"Kindly do not lecture me, Miss Granger. I am not one to take chances."

Hermione opened her mouth to speak and then closed it, fuming and knowing that he would not understand.

"However, I do appreciate your concern," said Snape with a smirk.

"As unwanted as it apparently is," she muttered.

Snape frowned, then removed an eyedropper from his voluminous robes. "We shall test this now. Bring Cicero. If we must lose a test subject, I must admit that I will miss

that one the least."

"But... but..."

He raised an eyebrow. "Do you doubt the efficacy of our work?"

He was challenging her again. And it was working. Hermione felt the wrenching sensation in her chest fade under her indignation. She turned on her heel and marched over to the cage.

She expected a fight, some scratches at least. After all, surely semi-intelligent rabbits could sense when doom was approaching. Instead, Cicero hopped directly into her hands when she opened the cage door. He nuzzled the crook of her elbow, sniffing lightly. Hermione stroked the rabbit's soft ears.

Snape approached, holding out the eyedropper full of the clear potion. Cicero lunged towards it, his nose twitching and his red eyes blinking rapidly. Without even bothering to sniff, his mouth latched onto the end of the dropper and rapidly devoured its contents.

Snape pulled the empty dropper away and discarded it. "You would die gruesomely in the wild," he said to the rabbit. Cicero chirruped happily.

"Place the creature there." Snape indicated the lab table adjacent to the far wall. Hermione placed the squirming rabbit on the tabletop and backed away slowly. Cicero sniffed the unfamiliar terrain suspiciously.

Hermione waved her hand, and a Quick-Quotes Quill appeared above their notes. "Ready," she said flatly.

"No requiem mass?" Snape said from beside her elbow.

"I believe you mentioned something about thinking positively," she snapped.

"Indeed," he said. "*Avada Kedavra!*"

Hermione jumped. She couldn't help it. Not when those awful words were shouted mere centimeters from her ear.

The flash of green light streaked toward the rabbit and enveloped it in crackling energy. For a moment, Cicero appeared frozen in place, encased in a cocoon of green light. Then the cloud of green suddenly dissolved, there was brilliant glow of silver haze and...

Cicero shuddered once and collapsed in a limp bundle on the table.

Hermione brought her hands to her face to contain her choked dismay. She had accepted, no, *expected* that this might happen. After all, how many trials ever succeeded on the first test? But nothing could have prepared her for the reality of seeing that curse in action, the rushing finality of it. It had been bad enough when the false Moody had performed it on a spider. To see it performed on a creature that she had grown rather fond of had her trembling like a leaf.

"Potion failed its first field test." Snape was dictating to the Quick-Quotes Quill. "The extent of its effect appears to be a delay of subject death by not more than a few seconds."

She couldn't do it... She could never fight in pitched battle against Voldemort. Not if she had to watch her friends die like that. How had Harry dealt with seeing so much death so young?

"Miss Granger. Please confirm that the subject is deceased."

Death... death... she could not touch it. Please, don't ask it of her.

"*Hermione.*" Snape's voice was surprisingly gentle but also unyielding as steel. She looked up and saw the words reflected unmistakably in his eyes. *You signed up for this.*

Hermione swallowed hard and willed her hands to stop shaking. On the table, Cicero looked like a discarded fur muff. Were it not for his wide-open black eyes, she would have thought him to be sleeping. She picked up the animal in her hands and inspected it. The body was already growing cold.

"The s-subject is deceased."

"Are there any anomalies in its appearance?"

"I don't know how many variations of *dead* you think there are, Severus," she replied testily.

He did not smile. "I am certain that you don't want to know, Miss Granger."

Her insides turned cold. She was reminded of just how much about magic she did not know and how much was never spoken of in polite society. She forced her eyes back to the rabbit. In truth, Cicero's death had been painless.

Then she noticed something else. "Severus... his eyes."

"Yes?"

"They were red before. Now they're blank and black as sin. Even the pupils are gone." She shuddered. "Tell me this is not normal, Severus."

He frowned and walked over. The rabbit's head flopped on its limp neck as he tilted the face up to his gaze. "This is not normal," he said. His next words destroyed any sense of relief Hermione might have begun to feel.

"The creature's soul is gone."

A familiar indignant squeak came from the cage behind them.

A/N: Cicero was a great Roman orator, best known for, well... talking. Lots and lots of talking.

After this chapter, you should know what happened to Snape in chapter one. If it's not obvious, reread this chapter and the second half of chapter one again and look for similar, sometimes identical, phrases. If all else fails, remember this: the potion remains effective for an indefinite period of time.

Next chapter: Harry acts strangely; Hermione and Snape discuss religion and have an epiphany. Hermione runs into a familiar face at the Magical Menagerie.

Breakthrough

Chapter 13 of 17

Harry acts strangely; Hermione and Snape discuss religion and have an epiphany. Hermione runs into a familiar face at the Magical Menagerie.

A/N: The characters' opinions on religion are not necessarily those of the author.

Chapter 13

Breakthrough

--11:0011:30am, August 26, 1998--

Snape added a few drops of the potion base to the soil of one of the potted geraniums by his kitchen window.

"Herbology was my worst course at Hogwarts," he explained. "If this plant manages to survive, it will be a sure sign that we've done something right."

--8:309:00pm, August 29, 1998--

"How have you been, Cami?"

"Fine. Really fine, actually. I'm not just saying that."

"I'm glad to hear it." Harry gave her a broad smile. She cheered up to see him happy once more. Apparently his time as an Auror was doing him good. Not to mention that extended training routines in South America were giving him an enviable tan.

"So," Harry continued, "what have you been up to?"

The question was casual, but Hermione could hear the edge in his voice. What he was really asking was, "Why on earth have we seen barely anything of you for almost a month?"

Since being thrown together as a couple, Harry and Hermione had agreed to have dinner together at least once a week. Ron showed up sporadically.

"Working," she replied. "I can't tell you exactly how. Minerva recommended that I keep my resources a secret. But I can tell you that I'm working on the same project that I had intended to even before... before all this." It surprised her how easily lying came to her now.

Harry still looked a little suspicious. "You're sure that you're safe?"

"Yes," Hermione said. And in that moment, she knew that she truly believed it.

"Alright then, you don't have to worry that I'll give you a hard time about it. I know how much your work means to you. And if it works, gods, that'll be an unbelievable asset to our side."

"Yes."

"Cami?" Harry was looking at her oddly now across their table.

"Yes?"

"Does... this relationship still feel strange to you?"

She frowned. "Not terribly. I mean, it's the arrangement that made the most sense."

"The most sense, yes. That's what I thought at first, but I mean, I've honestly enjoyed all this time with you and..." He trailed off.

"Does this have something to do with Ron getting engaged?" she asked, feeling a sudden need to change the subject.

"Well, no, but... are you sure you're still okay with that?"

"Yes. I honestly could not be happier for him. I just hope Mrs. Weasley didn't give him too much hell about that, considering how soon it is after my, er, death."

"She was pretty awful about it for a day or two, but even she realized that we should take advantage of love when we could find it. Especially when we really don't know what's going to happen in the near future." Harry fixed her with a very odd look.

Love when we could find it...

No, that couldn't be why he was looking at her now like... like he used to look at Ginny.

Hermione set her silverware down very deliberately. "Harry, do you mind if I go home now? I don't feel much like pudding."

"Of course. You sure you're alright? Can I get you anything? I can also call you a mediwitch if you think..."

"I'm fine," she said, interrupting him.

Harry jumped up to pull back her chair as she stood to go. "So... next week then?" The eager puppy-dog expression in his eyes unnerved her.

Hermione made her quick way to the exit.

--10:0010:30pm, August 31, 1998--

They had finished dinner hours ago.

"Do wizards have religion, Professor?"

He looked up from his notes, appearing only mildly irritated at the non sequitor. This was a good sign. "With magic as such a visible and basic part of our lives, we never found the need for such frivolities," he replied.

"Oh. Well, I was just thinking..." She trailed off.

Snape let out a long-suffering sigh and set down his quill. "Pray tell me your thoughts, Miss Granger."

She shifted slightly under his scrutiny. But he appeared somewhat interested. "My parents were Catholic. They didn't practice, but they taught me everything that they believed. I was thinking about Jesus and how he would bring people back from the dead. If resurrection wasn't such a big deal back then, why is it believed to be impossible now, even with magic?"

"Surely you have heard of Ancient Magic. Most of it remains mysterious to this day."

"Could that Magic have allowed Christ himself to return from the dead?"

"That resurrection is debatable," he stated.

She bristled. "But..." Her defensiveness was instinctive. Hermione wasn't sure what she believed anymore, but lessons learned in childhood were hard to shake.

He held up his hand. "Please, Miss Granger, don't think of me as an ignorant heathen. My father was a Muggle, and he taught me quite a bit about your religion. Personally, I am mystified by the big fuss made over Christ's resurrection when, as you said, he and his disciples and the prophets before them resurrected people whenever the fancy struck them."

"Because Christ was God," she said. "And they managed to kill him."

"He believed himself to be a god and chose to act that way. Whether he actually was or not is of little consequence. He performed great deeds, proclaimed himself to be the Messiah, and commanded his followers to perform deeds in his name. And it was done. As I have spent the better part of my existence in the service of two wizards, both of whom believed themselves godlike and beyond reproach, you'll forgive me if I find the idea of Christ a little unappetizing. All I have to say is that the Muggles are fortunate that Christ seems to have been one of the good ones."

Hermione was stunned. A part of her was shocked by his callousness and another part was intrigued by his raw honesty. "What do you believe then, sir?"

Snape showed every sign of wanting to return to his work. He considered for so long that she feared that he would retreat to safety, declaring the entire conversation silly.

"I believe that what we see is all we have," Snape said. "All we have to depend on is us: humans, who are capable of both the greatest good and the deepest depravity. Having experienced them both, I am hard-pressed to decide which experience was the more painful. If there are gods, their ways are beyond our plane of existence, and they have no business toying with the ways and laws of this world."

"So practicing Dark Arts means screwing around with the natural order of things. Then what are we doing, Professor?" Hermione asked quietly. "What does that make us?"

Realization filled his eyes as he understood where her worry lay. His expression hardened. "Make no mistake, Miss Granger. We are hardly in the business of resurrection. We are taking away the godlike power that the Dark Lord thinks himself worthy to wield. We are restoring people to their natural state after something very wrong has been done to them. Rather like an anti-Portrait of Dorian Gray."

Hermione could have commented on Snape's sudden empathy or on his unexpected knowledge of Muggle literature. Instead her entire mind was focused upon a single word. "Portrait... picture... oh God, you're a genius!"

"What are you on about?" he asked, nervous in the face of such unexpected praise.

Moral quandaries were forgotten in an instant as Hermione's thoughts switched automatically to single-minded problem solving. She snatched the parchment that Snape had been writing upon from his startled hands and began writing furiously.

"A picture, sir. I can't believe that I didn't see it before! I used almost the exact same words to describe this project to Minerva." She shoved a handful of her flyaway hair behind her ear as her hand flew. "We have been searching fruitlessly for some ingredient that will serve the purpose of 'recording' a person's previous state of being. Yet there is nothing with such time sensitive properties. And healing ingredients are no good; they focus solely on the wounds, not the body. Nothing else that we searched for has been promising either... our needs are too specific."

"As we've known for over two months now," said Snape. "I don't understand your need to steal my notes to tell me that."

Hermione ignored his complaining with practiced ease. "We've been searching in the wrong place. What we are looking for is Muggle in origin. The Muggles have a type of camera called a Polaroid that develops a picture mere minutes after it is taken. It's fascinating really. A blank white card bleeds through with lines and colors until the perfectly rendered image appears. There's a special chemical in the Polaroid photo paper that makes it work. If we could get this chemical and charm it... make some minor adjustments, it could be just what we need!"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "You consider what needs to be done 'minor adjustments'?"

"Is it an idea worth pursuing or not?" she snapped.

He considered for a moment, and Hermione realized that she was holding her breath.

"I believe that your solution has merit," he said at last. "If you make the necessary arrangements, I will escort you to a Muggle library where we can do more suitable research into the matter."

Hermione gaped at him, stunned. He hadn't told her to look into it on her own. He was making time for her and would accompany her. He must really believe that she had stumbled upon a breakthrough. She couldn't stop the grin from spreading on her face.

"I'll do that, sir!" she exclaimed.

Snape winced. The quill began to fly across the parchment. After she had returned the parchment to him, she pulled the phoenix feather from behind her ear and turned to

her own notes.

"I suppose there is no way that you would consider not recording that silly discussion we had earlier?" he asked.

Hermione gave him a glare withering enough to be one of his own.

"I thought not," he said.

--11:0011:30am, September 24, 1998--

"Severus, I have some news for you."

"Good news or bad news?"

"Well, the bad news is that almost all of your geraniums in the window box are dead."

"And the good news?"

"One of them is still alive."

"The one we...?"

"Yes."

"And the untreated specimens in the lab?"

"Withering as we speak. While the treated specimens appear as healthy as they did on day one."

Hermione yelped in surprise as Severus picked her up and swung her in circles.

--2:002:30pm, September 24, 1998--

"It's only a trip to Diagon Alley, Hermione. And you know that I can't be seen there."

"It's not that. Can't... can't we just keep testing the potion on plants?"

"I will not be caught dead casting Avada Kedavra on a daisy."

Of course, there was no way she could refuse him after that.

--4:004:30pm, September 24, 1998--

When Hermione pushed open the door of the Magical Menagerie, she was immediately assaulted by a cacophony of screeches, hisses, and growls. The heads of all the non-animal beings in the shop turned to observe her entrance. Their gazes lingered a little longer than Hermione was accustomed to when in her old form.

Self-conscious, she lifted her head up a little higher and pretended to scrutinize a cage at her side. It held a bushy, gray squirrel that was cracking open smooth black stones between its jaws. As each stone broke in half, a glowing red jewel was revealed that the squirrel gobbled up happily. As if noticing Hermione's attention, the squirrel whirled around to face her and grinned cheekily, revealing a mouth full of fine-edged diamonds.

"Beautiful, isn't he?"

Hermione jumped a little. She turned her head to see a tall, blond man at her side, watching both her and the cage with amusement. He had a pleasant face. Hermione chuckled, a little nervously. "It looks as if it would be a rather expensive animal to care for. As well as a shameless show-off." She frowned as the squirrel tapped a black stone against its shining teeth and winked at her.

"A fine specimen," said the blond man, looking at the creature admirably.

Hermione nodded and moved over a few rows of cages. Several fruitless minutes later found her waiting in an interminably long line to speak to the proprietor. When she finally made it to the front of the line half an hour later, she was sweaty, irritable and covered with feathers from several varieties of birds in nearby cages.

However, the moment the proprietor a large red-haired man with a bushy mustache saw her, his eyes went wide, and he brushed aside a grumpy dwarf that had been in front of her.

"Out of the way, you! Can't you see this lovely lady was waiting? How can I help you?"

"Er..." Hermione paused, momentarily dumbstruck. She would have preferred the former owner, a bespectacled woman that reminded her of Minerva. "I'm looking for rabbits."

"We keep 'em in the back room, pretty doll. They're not displayed in the main shop because rabbits tend to defecate at an alarming rate, making the shop smell worse than it already does. Take your pick, we've got every fur color you could imagine: white, black, red, blue, rabbits breed like...well, you know." He looked extremely smug, as if he expected her to be impressed with his knowledge. Hermione could not wait to leave.

"I'll take a dozen of the most intelligent breed you have."

"Wait here just a moment." The red-haired man flashed a leering grin full of crooked teeth and disappeared into the backroom. Hermione shifted uncomfortably.

"The man is obviously too dim-witted to realize that he doesn't stand a chance with one as lovely as you."

Hermione turned and saw the blond man standing behind her in line. He was holding a bridle studded with gems the color of pale smoke. They were the same shade as his eyes. He noticed where she was looking and gestured to the bridle with a smile. "It's for my son's Aethonon. The old bridle was beginning to fray."

Hermione couldn't prevent her eyes from going wide with admiration. The blond man noticed and chuckled. "I know. The animal cost me a fortune, but my son loved it dearly. His mother and I purchased the winged horse when he got his Hogwarts letter."

"He is a very fortunate boy."

"Was. He died last year."

"Oh... oh, I'm so sorry."

The blond man shook his head with a sad smile. "He died bravely. They tell me he took down nearly three others in Hogsmeade before he was killed."

Hermione's breath froze in her throat as her mind filled with a sudden, screaming realization. She jumped nearly a foot in the air as something slammed onto the table at her side.

Turning, she was confronted by the twitching noses of twelve rabbits in a wire-frame cage. "Here you are, girl. A dozen sleek-coated black Havanas. 150 Galleons."

Hermione was so concerned with preventing her fingers from shaking as she reached for her money that she barely batted an eye at the extortionate price. Worse still, she saw the blond man's eyes regard her gold coins with an appreciative gleam.

She tossed the money on the counter and grasped the cage with both hands, dragging it off the countertop. Suddenly finding themselves dangling over empty space, a dozen semi-intelligent rabbits began squeaking and snorting in panic.

The blond man stepped forward. "Do you require some assistance, my dear?"

Hermione stared, mind-boggled and more than a little afraid at the sight of Lucius Malfoy for of course it was he, unrecognizable without his sneer and menacing aura extending a courteous hand towards a heavy cage full of squeaking, scrambling rabbits. She wondered if it was possible for her day to get any stranger.

"No," she said quickly. "I can redu..." *No, you foolish girl! You can't reduce living creatures; any true pure-blood would know that!* "I can manage," she finished.

Malfoy looked extremely reluctant, and for a heart-stopping moment, Hermione feared he would insist. Then he put down the bridle and undid the clasp on his cloak. "Here," he said, handing her the thick material. "Cover the cage with this. Animals become calmer when they can't see where they're going." Her eyes went even wider. "Think nothing of it. I have more cloaks at home than I know what to do with."

Hermione took Lucius Malfoy's wool and cashmere cloak, threw it over the cage of frantic rabbits, and fairly ran for the door.

Malfoy was right. The rabbits were calmer in the darkness of their covered cage.

--4:305:00pm, September 24, 1998--

Severus had asked her three times what was wrong when she'd returned, and she had brushed him off each time. Finally, he kicked her out of the lab, telling her that her strained nerves were a hazard that he was not willing to work with.

Within five minutes, Hermione was going stir-crazy. She browsed his bookshelves, chose several Muggle novels and then put them back, knowing that she couldn't possibly concentrate.

That left her standing by the window in the kitchen, staring at the healthy red geranium amongst the other half dozen wilted blossoms.

She had not been prepared to see that side of Lucius Malfoy. Truthfully, she had not been prepared to see him ever again, even under the safety of her Glamour.

But the experience of discovering Lucius Malfoy, the father and husband, and even being...*flirted* with by Lucius Malfoy, the gentleman, had been a bit too much to handle.

It had been much simpler to think of Malfoy as the one-dimensional villain. Then, if she should meet him on the battlefield, she would be frightened, but at least she would know what to do.

Then again, was she still naïve enough to believe that any person could be that simple? After all, look how his son turned out. She winced at the familiar pain in her chest that she always felt whenever she thought of Draco.

The skin on her wrist tingled underneath the bracelet, and she withdrew her quill. She knew that as the perfectly thorough scholar, she would write down every word of her ponderings.

She had just finished when a mighty shout from upstairs startled her. Heart pounding, she raced to the foot of the stairs, frightened at what could have happened.

"Hermione! Bring me some old newspapers for these infernal rabbits right now!"

Laughing in relief, she left to find what he needed.

--7:308:00pm, September 24, 1998--

"Are you going to tell me what had you so upset this afternoon?"

Hermione looked at him over her steak and kidney pie. "Will you ever let up until I do?"

"No. In addition, I intend to withhold your pudding until you confess."

"You wouldn't!"

Snape cocked an eyebrow in a way that made Hermione want to kiss and punch him at the same time.

"I... ran into Lucius Malfoy at the Magical Menagerie this afternoon."

Crack!

Snape hissed in pain as he gripped his fork so hard that it snapped in half in his fist. He waved off her concern as he muttered a quick healing charm and conjured a new utensil.

"I gather that he suspected nothing?" he asked calmly.

"No," she replied. She opened her mouth to inquire about his violent reaction, but one look into his eyes told her that it would be a pointless inquiry. "But it wasn't just meeting him. It was the experience of meeting him... while I was someone else. It reminded me again how this is the only place I can still be Hermione Granger."

"Obviously," he replied. "The rest of the world remains blissfully unaware of her continued existence."

Hermione winced. "Severus, please... don't."

"I'm so...." He sighed. "Hermione, please explain."

Had he been about to apologize? No, certainly not.

"The world *likes* Camilla Elliot. *Cami* has shopkeepers tripping over themselves to be of assistance. Cami has Harry Potter mooning over her like she's the Nimbus 3000, which feels really *weird* by the way...almost as weird as Lucius Malfoy *flirting* with me this afternoon. And that's because Cami is a pure-blood and irritatingly *beautiful*..."

Severus snorted, surprising her in the middle of her tirade. "Lucius will lose his head over every doll face that passes by. And I am honestly not overly surprised by Potter's

reaction, nauseating as it is. Over the course of our Occlumency fiasco, I was... made aware of his unsuccessful wooing of Miss Chang. In times of great peril, it is not abnormal for one to latch on to anything that reminds them of their simpler childhood. And as your Glamour resembles Miss Chang somewhat..."

"In other words, *Cami* is loved," Hermione grumbled.

Silence fell. When it became apparent that he was disinclined to respond, she huffed. "And what the hell kind of name is Camilla anyway? It sounds like something you would call a fluffy lapdog."

"Camilla..." said Severus. Hermione couldn't prevent the little shudder that went up her spine from the whispered reverence in how Snape spoke the name. "Camilla is the name of the greatest female warrior to have ever lived. She was an Amazon that single-handedly slaughtered an entire legion of Roman soldiers in the battle for Latium. Do you honestly think that Minerva would have chosen your new identity with anything but the utmost care?"

Hermione blinked. No matter how she considered that statement, it couldn't be taken as anything other than a staggering compliment. But then she remembered something else he had inadvertently revealed.

"How did you know that Minerva was responsible for my Glamour?" she asked.

"As the Headmistress has inherited her predecessor's tendre for foolhardy Gryffindors, I can hardly think of anyone else who would take up the task."

"You didn't answer my question."

"My logical process of elimination wasn't enough for that insatiably brilliant mind?"

"Severus, I do believe you are overcompensating for six years of nary a single compliment. You said you can 'hardly' think of anyone else."

He huffed through his nose like a whale surfacing for air.

Hermione touched the silver encircling her wrist. "Did you have something to do with this?"

"As if I would have any hand in designing something decorated with a deformed dragon."

"Actually, on second glance, it looks rather like a snake. And it is eating its own tail, an ancient symbol of re-generation. I can't imagine that Minerva would have ever chosen to use the snake as her symbol."

"Hmmm," Severus said.

"And the bracelet is imbued with an impossibly complex charm. It must have taken several days of spell-casting and more than a little foolish wand-waving."

"Mmm-hmm."

"Severus?"

He sighed. "Yes, Hermione?"

"Thank you."

His head swiveled to face her, his eyes looked intently into hers. "You're welcome," he said.

A/N: So what on earth is up with Lucius? Well, we definitely haven't seen the last of him; he's much too fun to neglect involving him in something dastardly.

Next chapter: A trip to the library of her dreams leads Hermione to a startling realization. Hermione and Severus learn about closeness.

Hesitation

Chapter 14 of 17

A trip to the library of her dreams leads Hermione to a startling realization. Hermione and Severus learn about closeness.

Chapter 14

Hesitation

--1:001:30pm, September 15, 1998--

"Give me a nice scowl, Professor."

"Miss Granger, please tell me that is not what I think..."

Flash!

Hermione grinned daringly at him as she removed the Polaroid photo from the camera. The faint etchings of his dark outline were already beginning to appear on the paper. She struggled not to laugh as she looked up at Snape's expression.

"Please, sir, it's for the sake of research." She flipped the photo over and wrote September 15, 1998 on the back with a black Sharpie.

"That, Miss Granger, is the only thing preventing me from blasting that electronic contraption out of its miserable existence."

She smirked at him and shook the Polaroid, willing for it to appear faster. She started when she felt his presence settle in closely behind her. For all of his annoyance, Snape seemed quite interested to observe this Muggle device in action.

Two pairs of eyes fixed eagerly on the photo as colors and lines bled into existence.

"Oh, look, I can see your scowl already."

"Very amusing. Why is my image so still?" Snape poked at the photo. Photo-Snape remained where he was and did not seem to mind the poke.

"This is a Muggle camera, remember? Personally, I prefer these sometimes. Wizarding photos always struck me as super-idealized images of the subject. Muggle photos just show you as you are."

Hermione gave the Polaroid a final shake and looked at it carefully. She had been careful to take it before Snape had been fully aware of what was happening. The result was that his ever-present scowl was absent, his face relaxed with dawning surprise. It made him look younger and less forbidding.

"Why didn't you tell me that I had soot on my cheek before you took this?"

"Heaven forbid, I think I've reached my astonishment threshold for the day. Severus Snape has descended to vanity?"

Snape scoffed, but she could have sworn that his dark eyes glittered in amusement. She saw him fumble within his pockets for a handkerchief.

"Let me," she said. Hermione reached up to the spot upon his cheek. He must have been working over a particularly messy flame that morning. The soot had dried into fine powder and brushed away with a single caress. His skin felt abnormally warm in the split second that her finger made contact.

She looked up. His eyes were no longer amused, and she held his gaze, seemingly unable to look away. Her fingers fidgeted, desperately seeking something to break the awkward moment. They seized upon the Polaroid, and she dropped her gaze and busied herself with reducing and tucking the photo underneath her bracelet.

When Hermione dared to look up again, she saw that Snape's gaze had returned to a neutral state. He raised an eyebrow when he saw where she had stored the photograph.

She smiled nervously, cursing the way the corners of her mouth seemed to tremble. "As I said, I'm preserving it for the sake of research."

"Ever the scholar, I see," he whispered. Then he turned slightly and offered her his arm. "Shall we?"

Hermione glanced down at his arm and took a deep breath. They were visiting the British Library as academic colleagues. It would be expected that they would be at ease around each other.

She threaded her hand through his arm. The crook of his elbow was warm underneath her touch. He nodded once, and she followed him inside.

What the bloody hell had just happened? she thought.

--1:302:00pm, September 15, 1998--

At first glance upon the two adjacent buildings, Hermione assumed the ornate red building adorned with multiple spires upon its roof to be the library. That particular building was actually the St. Pancras train station. Snape diverted her from that impressive piece of Victorian gothic architecture and pointed them instead to the sprawling, unattractive brick structure to its side.

As Hermione walked across the checkered lawn between the two hulking wings of the building, she felt as if she were walking between the paws of a headless sphinx that had sprawled its huge bulk across Euston Road.

When she commented on the remarkable ugliness of the building, Severus Snape merely smiled mysteriously. She felt her stomach twist in response and decided that she must have eaten something strange at lunch.

The main door closed with a whisper behind them, and Hermione was plunged into the reverent silence unique to libraries that she had come to love. She began to walk toward the reference desk, but Snape pulled her to the side.

"Come with me," he entreated when she looked at him quizzically.

They went down a wide corridor, turned a corner and...

Hermione gasped. They had reached a wall of giant, floor-to-ceiling windows. Through the windows, across a small chasm were rows and rows of bookshelves. They were stacked upon each other, climbing up out of sight and descending many levels below their feet. Hermione was reminded of looking at a nearby skyscraper from a high window, only all the windows were filled with nothing but books and more books...

"Oh my God..."

"Do try and keep your excitement at a reasonable level, Miss Granger."

She turned, intending to reply with a witty retort, only to discover Snape gazing at her with a strange softness in his eyes.

Taken aback, she forgot what she was originally going to say. "How... how high are we?"

Snape stepped to her side in front of the plate glass. "Fourteen stories, five of them below ground. Over 150 million items in every known Muggle language located on more than 625 kilometers of shelves."

She gaped at him. "Is that so?" Then she grinned. "Where would you like to start?"

"Excuse me, would you like some assistance?"

Hermione and Snape turned to regard the person who had spoken. With her round glasses, short and squat stature, and glaringly perky demeanor, she was the very antithesis of Madam Pince. She saw the corners of Snape's lips tighten and could tell that the woman had already managed to irritate him.

The librarian blinked at them from behind her glasses before focusing on Severus. "Sir?"

He looked as if he would rather swallow Bubotuber pus than to hold a willing conversation with the woman. "We are looking for information on Mu...er, cameras."

The blinking became more frequent. "Cameras... sir?"

His lips were now barely visible. "Yes, information on the use, construction, and development, if you would be so kind as to..."

"Film, SLR, or digital?"

Hermione diligently held back the laughter that had been threatening to emerge since the start of the conversation and came to his rescue. "The Polaroid camera, ma'am. In particular, the more scientific publications involving the invention of the camera and the chemical composition of its film paper."

"Science, technology, and business. This way," the woman rattled off before turning and marching briskly down the hall at a rapid clip.

Snape's shell of control that prevented himself from reaching for the woman's neck was so rigid that he seemed unable to move. She grabbed his forearm with an urgent "Come on!" and they were off.

Fifteen minutes later they were five floors below ground, wedged between two sliding bookshelves (which the pert librarian had neglected to separate fully), and Snape was reaching up to the top shelf to retrieve a book that was out of Hermione's reach.

"Insufferable woman," he groused.

Hermione grinned. "And just who are you referring to?"

He looked down at her, brows raised. "In this case, not you. As surprising as that may seem."

"Be still, my beating heart."

"For you, you insufferable bibliophile."

Snape handed the book to her; her first finger brushed against his as she took the volume from him. Inexplicably her heart began to race, and something shifted inside her mind. She was assaulted by a blinding clarity, as confusing as it was powerful.

They said that it took an instant to fall in love with someone. It had taken Hermione less than half an hour.

Deep in the dimly lit bowels of the largest library in all of England, wedged uncomfortably between two bookshelves and brushing fingers over light-sensitive Halides and Polarization, Hermione Granger had fallen irrefutably in love with Severus Snape. Every snarky, glowering, unattractive, irresistible inch of him.

A flutter of sensation spread from her heart through her limbs, tingling in her wrists and fingers. A moment later, she realized that it was not just her blood doing a furious dance through her veins. Her wrist was tingling underneath the silver bracelet.

Oh... fuck.

"Miss Granger?" She looked up into Snape's quizzical gaze and melted a little again. "I have a hard time believing that even you find that book's title a source of unbearable fascination."

Hermione smiled weakly at him. What the hell am I supposed to write?

She passed the book back to him and removed her quill from behind her ear. She paused. There was no way that she could record this in front of him. She wouldn't put it past him to be able to read words scribed in the air, no matter how sloppy or quick the writing. Giving him an apologetic look, she ducked out of the aisle and into an adjacent one.

She inscribed her journey to the library in the air, detailing her reactions to the wondrous contents within. Her hand hesitated over the final sentence.

For inexplicable reasons, I... now find Snape's company more than bearable.

Her hand hovered in the air, her quill poised as if searching for a notch in the air to dig into to find the strength to inscribe the next word. Her breathing sounded unbearably loud in her ears, and she felt herself growing lightheaded.

The nothingness was tugging at her mind, dragging her feet down the rocky, treacherous path she had begun climbing, beckoning her with promises of comfort and safety.

There were tears in her eyes as she let her hand fall to her side. The blackness closed around her, leaching into her eyes and caressing her mind.

Coward...

--2:002:30pm, September 15, 1998--

Coward...

The word rang condemnation in her mind.

Hermione gasped, looking around in terrified confusion. She had barely gotten her hand around the bracelet when...

"Miss Granger?"

She nearly jumped out of her skin when Snape's head appeared from around the end of the row of books. His shoulders and torso quickly followed. He had four Bible-thick books pressed up against his chest.

"I believe that these will encompass everything you could possibly want to know about Polaroids and film development. Shall we?"

Hermione took a deep breath, hoping her discomfiture was not as obvious as it felt. She tucked her hand through his proffered arm, and they walked towards the lift together.

"You must have done something right," she muttered. "Apparently my past self finds your company more than bearable."

He raised an eyebrow. "That is quite a lofty standard to live up to," he said as the doors slid closed.

The only free librarian at the check-out desk was a short, squat woman wearing round glasses and an unmistakably cheery smile. Hermione heard Snape groan softly.

"Have we met her before?" she whispered.

Snape ducked behind her and let her precede him to the desk.

The librarian shot a dazzlingly white grin at them. "Jolly good, you found what you were looking for! Library card, please?"

Oh bugger. A quick glance at Snape confirmed that he had not thought of this particular detail either.

"Oh goodness," said the librarian, reading their faces with unwelcome speed. "Here are some application forms then. Is your daughter of age, sir, or will you be filling them out for her?"

Snape went very still behind her.

The librarian looked confused for a moment and then seemed to brighten again. "Oh, of course, we'd be happy to offer you a special loan on these books for as long as you'd like," she chirruped. She quickly scanned each tome and dumped the lot into a bright red plastic bag with "British Public Library" printed across in big white letters.

As Snape took the bag in one hand and they moved towards the exit, Hermione found her voice again. "Professor... tell me you did not just..."

"They will hardly be missed," he replied in a tone that bordered on snappish. "The spines on these books are so tight, I doubt they've ever been opened."

"Sir, a wandless Imperio? That's illegal!" Not to mention impressive as hell.

He raised an eyebrow. "We got what we wanted, didn't we?"

Hermione sighed, recognizing a lost cause when she saw one. "Poor woman, all she thought about was to help us."

Snape snorted elegantly through his prodigious nose. "All she was thinking was how fortunate you were to take after your mother."

Hermione stared. Snape noticed and became visibly uncomfortable. "I apologize. I must have shocked you with the possibility that I possess a sense of humor."

Hermione grinned weakly and was quick to reassure him. But she couldn't help wondering why she had found his statement so decidedly unamusing.

--9:009:30am, September 20, 1998--

She was already hard at work when Snape arrived in the lab, running a hand through his mussed, limp hair.

One corner of the potions lab had become a veritable greenhouse, filled with potted peonies, daisies, tulips and all other manner of flora two of each species. One specimen of each type received several drops of the restorative potion base; the other did not. Other than that, none of the plants were cared for in any way.

For Severus and Hermione, both of whom had black thumbs, it was an ideal situation.

That morning, Hermione bent over twin birds of paradise, observing their health and color. She heard Snape shuffle his feet behind her and clear his throat.

"Should I apologize?"

She paused, then said, "You forget that I was the one that asked you to the night at the Opera."

"And do you regret it?"

She laid their communal stack of parchment down on the table. She turned to face him. "No."

He visibly relaxed, a motion that she suddenly found hopelessly endearing. He cleared his throat again. "It's been a long time since I've done any of... this."

"You've been doing fine thus far."

His smile was shaky, as if he were holding back a grimace. "I can't comprehend why or how you decided that...*this* was worth pursuing. I want to warn you in advance that I am not a nice..."

She held up her hand to forestall what would surely be an empty complaint. "Why don't we see what *this* is before we worry about the future?" She paused and then added. "That is... if you're willing?" As logical as she was, she was still as nervous as hell.

Snape smiled wanly. "I think I could do that."

"Um, Severus? Do you mind if I... well, I wanted to do it for the first time as... *as me*."

"Excuse me?" Snape looked utterly confused.

Hermione stepped up to him and laid a hand on his chest. Rising up on her tiptoes, she placed a gentle kiss on his lips.

When she stepped away, his face was tightly drawn as if in pain. "I'm sorry," she muttered. "That was rather forward and probably not welcome..."

"No," Snape interrupted. "It was... very pleasant. You simply surprised me, that is all. You did not ask me to apologize and neither shall I ever ask it of you."

Hermione smiled.

--3:003:30pm, September 21, 1998--

"Miss Granger."

"Hermione."

"Hermione... this will not be the last time that I ask you this."

"Go ahead."

"Why me? Why not someone your own age?"

"I had someone my own age. It didn't work."

"Mr. Weasley?"

"Made a much better friend than boyfriend. He is the most loyal and fun person that I've ever known, but he's also so scatter-brained sometimes that I want to throttle him. Plus, I won't deny that it's nice to talk about things other than Quidditch."

"Would you like to talk about some of those things tonight? Perhaps over dinner tonight in town?"

"That sounds amazing."

--7:30-8:00pm, September 21, 1998

"So."

"So..."

"What have you told your friends that you've been doing for the past three months?"

"Working."

"Of course."

"And, ah, are they well?"

"Ron got engaged a little while ago. Harry is in Machu Picchu, researching ancient Incan spells."

"That sounds... nice. And how are you?"

"The same as when we left half an hour ago."

"Oh, I see." Then, "Good."

"Severus?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm going to laugh extremely loudly right now and most likely draw the attention of everyone around us. I hope you won't be mortified."

Snape arched a single eyebrow, a gesture that was unmistakably him. It sent Hermione over the edge. She laughed at the sheer ridiculousness of the idea of first date jitters and the sight of Severus Snape attempting to make small talk. She laughed and laughed until tears flowed from her eyes. The ambient drone of the restaurant faltered and then swelled again. She wiped the tears from her eyes, her sides still aching.

Snape still had not lowered the eyebrow.

"Two orders of fish and chips?" he asked.

"Please."

--8:00-8:30pm, September 21, 1998

It was difficult, she realized, to go on a first date with someone you practically lived with.

They already took three meals a day together, sometimes more depending on how late their work ran. They were accustomed to each other's moods and knew instinctively when to speak animatedly and when to let the other stew in their thoughts. One time, they had caught themselves finishing each other's sentences, and Hermione had spent the rest of the half hour afraid to break the silence.

The truth was, they already did everything together except to sleep. And if there was one thing she knew that she wasn't ready for, it was that.

Except maybe the idea of sharing toothbrushes.

The thought made Hermione snort loudly through her sip of tea.

At least she knew he used a toothbrush.

--12:00-12:30am, September 22, 1998--

Hermione rolled over in her bed and buried her face in her pillow. She had been foolish enough to record her rambling thoughts over dinner, and now she couldn't sleep.

She knew she wasn't ready to sleep with him.

She knew it.

So how would she know when she was? *If* she was?

Her own experience was limited basically nonexistent if she were honest with herself but she knew that there were rules and guidelines about this sort of thing. And they all had to do with time.

After a little time a woman no longer started with surprise when his hand brushed hers. After a time she could begin to take a kiss for granted. After more time she could fall asleep in his arms and feel safe. After more time she could appear before him naked and know that he would not laugh. She could...

She had no time.

Every time for her was the first time once again, so how could she ever know how far they had come?

Love was one arena Hermione had discovered where words became utterly useless. They had certainly never helped her before. And yet... she and Severus seemed to do nothing *but* talk. And oh, they could go for hours at a time... talking of everything and nothing.

Hermione closed her eyes again and drifted back to sleep. She had the time to figure things out.

After all, it wasn't like she was in love with him.

A/N: Now where have we seen that Polaroid before? Flip back to chapter one to see, and have the hankies ready.

The "library within a library" at the British Library in London is one of the most amazing things I have seen, and I reacted the exact same way that Hermione did. It is officially called the "King's Library" and you can see a picture here: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:BritishLibraryInterior02.jpg>

Next chapter: Birthday surprises... both pleasant and nasty. The night at the opera.

Surprise

Chapter 15 of 17

Birthday surprises... both pleasant and nasty. The night at the opera.

A/N: Only three chapters left! Thanks to all of you who have stuck by me for so long, and thanks as well as to those just discovering this singular journey. This very long chapter is your present. Certain readers might recognize a subtle insertion from another fandom that involves a dark, ambiguous and disfigured man.

Chapter 15

Surprise

--11:0011:30pm, September 16, 1998--

"How, in Circe's name, did Muggles manage to fill several thousand pages with this..drivel?"

Hermione looked up, blinking with red-rimmed eyes. She was exhausted and close to a word coma. And unlike him, she didn't even remember a single excruciating detail of the past ten hours they had spent poring over the thick tomes from the British Library.

The books had been exhaustively technical. Thus far, they had gleaned some useful theories for the composition of the potion. They learned that the chemicals responsible for making a Polaroid photo bleed to life were encased in a capsule. The capsule was broken when it was squeezed through rollers and absorbed by the film.

Most of the chemicals involved were useless to their purpose. Halides ensured uniform saturation, and compounds were injected into the photo paper to prevent the colors from running. But they needed the actual chemical used to produce the time-delayed image... that also would not react violently with the other potions ingredients, particularly the unicorn blood...

"Quicksilver," Hermione said.

"What?" Snape said, standing up suddenly. The book in his lap fell to the floor with a brick-like thunk.

"Mercury. It's a key ingredient for film development. Toxic as well, but surely we can find a workaround. It's liquid at room temperature, but it is still solid metal at its elemental level. So with the right procedure, it can act as a 'container' for the restorative."

"Not to mention that it was frequently used to coat Muggle food containers to prevent spoilage," Snape added.

"How did you...?"

"My mother died of mercury poisoning," he said simply.

"I'm... I'm sorry."

He shrugged. "Don't be. She can finally fulfill her eternal desire to make her worthless, pathetic life have some meaning. Quicksilver is not a standard potions ingredient, but I still have some connections I can use to get us a good supply. I'll send Alvin."

"Is that his name?" Hermione inquired, as his black familiar flew down from the top of a bookshelf to land on Snape's shoulder. The raven cocked its head at her in a dead-on imitation of Snape-ish condescension.

"I have certainly told you so before," Snape said, frowning.

"Well, it seems that I forgot," Hermione snapped, suddenly angry. She turned back to the table and began picking up the heavy books from the floor. Somewhere behind her, she heard the flutter of wings as Alvin flew off on his errand.

Her skin tingled beneath the bracelet. Muttering a soft curse, Hermione removed the quill and began to write. Every word that she wrote seemed to mock her.

Choose us carefully, they jeered. In two minutes, we will be all you have.

Hermione made sure to write down the name of the stupid raven.

Thirty seconds before 11:30pm, she felt a soft tap on her shoulder.

"Miss Granger, I apologize. What I said was callous and unthinking."

She whirled to face him, disbelief etched into her face.

Snape smirked. "Surprised, Miss Granger?"

She nodded. Then she narrowed her eyes. "You don't intend to let me remember this, do you?"

"I do have a reputation to maintain, after all. And as it appears safe to do so at the moment, I will also admit that I was callous to make that remark about your teeth in your fourth year."

Hermione nearly smiled. "Then I also apologize... for setting your cloak on fire in first year."

His eyes went wide. "That was..."

A few seconds later, Hermione found herself laughing uproariously for reasons she could not remember. But she imagined that she would remember Snape's uncharacteristically warm smile forever.

--2:002:30pm, September 19, 1998--

"Miss Granger, what do you want?"

"Your volume of John Donne. I can't quite reach it."

Snape reached up to the top shelf and easily lifted it down before he continued, "I was referring to... your birthday, actually."

Hermione had to prevent her jaw from falling open. "How do you know that today's my birthday?" A dozen different explanations ran through her head, each more unlikely than the last.

"It was the date of the attack on Hogsmeade last year. You, Potter and Weasley appeared at the head of Dumbledore's army that night. You had a... tiara on your head proclaiming you to be the birthday princess. Needless to say, it was a memorable sight."

Ron had just placed that tiara on her head in the middle of her celebration in the common room. Hermione felt an ache in her chest as she remembered. Then the alarm had been raised. And Snape had been...

"I did not cause any deaths that night, Miss Granger," Snape said, once again appearing to read her thoughts. "But neither was I able to directly prevent any. I ask you to understand that."

"I do," she said softly. "I also understand now that it was you that distracted the Death Eaters by blowing up Quality Quidditch Supplies and giving our forces a chance to regroup. Not to mention incinerating most of the Inferi."

"I never liked that store anyway," he muttered.

"Neither did I."

Both of them smiled rather shakily at the other. Hermione fidgeted in the sudden silence in the living room. "You were asking what I wanted. Well, it wouldn't be something you could buy, it's something you could do. But I don't want to presume..."

Snape raised a brow. "Yes?"

In truth, she had intended to ask him this for days but had never found the right moment.

She felt the bracelet tingle against her skin.

At least, if she totally messed it up, she could ask again after 2:30pm. By then, she would have forgotten how embarrassed she was.

She cleared her throat. "Do you remember how I told you that I would have loved to be an opera singer?"

"You mean to say that you actually recorded that idiotic conversation?"

"Yes," she said. "The Paris Opera House happens to be hosting a production of Carmen tonight. My cross-country Apparition isn't too strong, and I was wondering if you could help me with that and maybe even perhaps... attend the performance with me?"

There, she had said it. She felt slightly queasy. She also felt odd that her plans for the night had not instinctively included Harry or Ron.

"I would be happy to."

"That's okay, I didn't..." Hermione stopped talking as her brain finally caught up with her babbling mouth. "You would?" she asked quietly.

He nodded, his gaze free of guile. "Miss Granger, it should not surprise you anymore to hear me say that I enjoy your company."

She smiled weakly. "It does surprise me. But I'm glad that you do. Be assured that the feeling is entirely mutual."

"What time shall I retrieve you from your flat?"

"The performance starts at 9, so 8:30?"

"I will be there," Snape said.

"Let me write that down." Hermione's smile expanded into a flat-out grin as she reached for her quill. She was so happy that she didn't even notice when the front door swung open into the sitting room.

"Severus? I must speak with you. I... oh. Oh dear."

For an eternal moment, Snape and Hermione froze in shocked terror as the tall figure of Lucius Malfoy appeared in the front doorway.

Hermione knew that she was not wearing her Glamour.

Then all three of them were on their feet, and both men had drawn their wands with a speed that made Hermione gasp. Before she could react, Snape's hand closed around her arm and jerked her roughly behind him, placing himself between her and Malfoy's wand.

Hermione felt light-headed. As the fear bubbled to the forefront of her mind, everything went black.

--6:006:30pm, September 19, 1998--

Hermione observed Severus... Well, she might as well call him Severus now, surreptitiously *Had we become that close at some point, close enough to be considered colleagues?*

She stabbed the rat spleen that she was currently draining perhaps a bit harder than necessary.

What could I know of becoming close anyway?

What was closeness other than a compendium of memories that, when examined, reminded you that there was much in common and much of value in another?

"Am I keeping you from something, Miss Granger?"

Hermione sheepishly looked away from the clock that she had been sneaking glances at for the past half hour.

"Well, Miss Granger?"

"It's my birthday today."

"I see. Well, I can confidently say that it will still be your birthday in one hour when you go home, whereupon you can celebrate to your silly heart's content."

"Actually," Hermione said, annoyed and nervous at the same time, "my silly heart was very much interested in the newest production of *Carmen* at the Paris Opera House. My cross-country Apparition isn't too strong, and I was wondering if you could help me with that and maybe even perhaps... attend the performance with me?"

She saw him pause, his glass stirring rod dangling loosely from his fingers. He actually seemed to consider it.

"Surely you jest," he said.

Hermione shrugged lightly. "It was just a thought," she said and turned away quickly before the tears could escape her eyes. She turned back to the asphodel root that she was grinding into powder. She picked up the pestle and put it down again.

"Is something the matter, Miss Granger?" Snape's said. She could almost feel his disembodied sneer smacking into her back.

"Yes," she snapped. "I've been here for too long. Have a good evening, Professor. I'm sure that you won't miss me until tomorrow."

Hermione grabbed her wand and was out the door before he could offer any protest. Her bracelet tingled against her wrist as she was stomping loudly down the stairs. She removed her quill from behind her ear without breaking her stride and proceeded to slash the air with the feather's tip. She made sure that "insufferable," "idiot," and "heartless" appeared in her account several times.

A sweep of her wand replaced her Glamour as she strode outside. The door slammed behind her, and, as she prepared to Apparate, she felt a prickling sensation on the back of her neck. Turning, she looked up and saw a gap in the curtains of the potions lab. Nothing was visible in the sliver of darkness, but she glared up at it for a few seconds before Disapparating.

--6:307:00pm, September 19, 1998--

Thirty seconds after reappearing in Cambridge, she reoriented herself as she was walking past Pembroke College.

Memories of the events of the past half hour saw her anger return. She turned and pushed open the door to Fitzbillies. She had a serious need for sugar, and the Chelsea buns in the window were too tempting not to resist.

Fifteen minutes later when she returned to her flat, Hermione's hands had stopped twitching, but the silly, sugary grin would not leave her face. The grin grew wider when she opened her door to find two owls perched outside on her window ledge. She recognized one of them as Hedwig.

Later, she realized that she shouldn't have torn open the letters with such excitement. There could have been only one reason they had sent owls and not come in person.

The letters had been short, albeit overflowing with excitement and well-wishes. They nevertheless were not addressed explicitly to her... There was too much risk that the owls might be intercepted.

They both conveyed regret that neither Harry nor Ron could be there for her birthday. Harry was in South America on a mysterious assignment that he was forbidden to discuss. Ron was a bit more talkative; his assignment had placed him in Romania, and he was spending his free time working with dragons with his fiancée and Charlie.

And everyone else believed Hermione Granger to be gone forever.

She had a good long cry, pausing only to record forcing herself not to write unkind words about her friends and reorient.

--7:007:30pm, September 19, 1998--

Which left her furious at Snape once more.

This was ridiculous. She certainly was not the first person to celebrate her 19th birthday alone. Her 18th birthday had provided enough excitement to last the rest of her life. That had been the day that Death Eaters had attacked Hogsmeade.

Tonight she would do something completely different. She was a girl after all, not just a witch, or a know-it-all, or a mental cripple limping through a suddenly much more dangerous world.

She waved her wand over her robes, replacing them with an outfit much more suitable to her intentions. She let down her hair as she strolled out the door. Her landlady did a double take as she walked past, and Hermione allowed herself a smile.

The club was called Ballare, but it was known to its clientele made up almost exclusively of Cambridge students as Cindy's. They played cheese: light-hearted tunes from the school days, boy band-heavy. The music put her at ease, as did the rich and ceaseless flow of Guinness from the tap.

When the first inebriated university boy stumbled into her, she grinned and danced close, not missing the way that his eyes rolled downwards to her chest appreciatively. His breath reeked of cheap wine, and his hands were clumsy. But it was a touch from a warm body, and it was a pleasant sensation to feel wanted.

The guy planted a slobbery kiss on her bare shoulder as the song came to an end. Hermione blew him a shameless kiss goodbye as she crossed to the other end of the floor.

She no longer needed to concern herself with her reputation. She would forget him in a few minutes.

--8:008:30pm, September 19, 1998--

Her mind didn't know how long she stayed there, but her body did. Slowly, she felt weariness in her limbs. The comforting neon fluorescents and the pulsing strobe lights began to grate her eyes. The female population of the club began to give her sidelong glares; she laughed heartily when she first noticed.

No one from her old world could have found her here. No one from her old world would have believed it if they had.

The next boy who approached her had apparently had much more to drink than she had consumed in her entire life. He was big, beefy and grinned a gap-toothed grin. Hermione's stomach twisted, and she fought the urge to retch.

He encircled her waist with only his forearms. "Oh, you're a fit bird for sure," he slurred.

She tried to pull away, but the world swam so much that she fell slack against the beefy arms. The fluorescent lights had darkened to night-drenched purples and blues, and the music was no longer light. Her heartbeat pounded in rhythm with the bass, and she felt the intruder's lips humming against her pulse as he kissed her neck. Hermione shuddered. The ogre misinterpreted her reaction.

She gasped as she felt his hips grind against hers, and her skin crawled as his hands wandered over her body.

"Stop..." she mumbled.

"Can't hear you, pet," he said lightly. "These are incredible knockers, by the way." He had one hand on the top curve of each breast, his thumbs brushing against the edge of her silk top that barely allowed her a modicum of modesty.

"The 'knockers,' as you so eloquently put it, belong to the lady, and I'm sure she would appreciate you keeping your filthy paws off of them."

Snape. Hermione was too relieved to feel mortified.

His intervention could not have been more perfect if he had planned everything in advance.

"Hey, this is a student club, old man."

Hermione groaned and waited for the explosion. It never came. Instead, after a few seconds, she felt the ogre's grip on her suddenly relax. She saw him stare straight ahead and then walk dazedly towards another group of girls.

She didn't even flinch when Snape's hand came to rest lightly on her shoulder. Instead, she muttered, "Imperio is an Unforgivable Curse, you know."

"I will be sure to keep that in mind next time," he clipped.

Hermione let herself be steered out of the club, groaning when she felt the bracelet tingle against her wrist. She fell against the rough stone of the side of the building as she reached for and missed the quill behind her ear.

"Let me..." Snape said, his hand moving forward.

Instinctively, white-hot panic cut through her inebriated haze like a sizzle of lightning. Her hand came up faster than she thought possible and seized Snape's wrist, squeezing hard enough to bruise.

"Don't. *Ever*. Touch. My. Quill."

She didn't realize that Snape had not wrenched his arm from her grip until her fingers began to ache. She released him at once and glanced nervously up at his face. With her shifting and sliding vision, she couldn't make out how furious he was.

Why did I react like that? It's not like he's ever attempted to take my quill before.

"I'm sor..."

"You're cold," he interrupted. "I will bring you your cloak and then return; I trust you will have reoriented yourself by then." Before Hermione could blink, he was gone. Without his presence, she realized just how cold the night had become. Her teeth chattered as she fumbled with her quill, transcribing what little she could remember of the past...she looked at her Muggle wristwatch...hour and a half.

--8:309:00pm, September 19, 1998--

She had just tucked the quill back behind her ear when she heard the crack of Snape's return. He handed her the promised cloak, and she took it from his hands with an acute sense of embarrassment. The cloak was made from thick black wool, and she felt warmer immediately. She was also reasonably sure that the garment belonged to him and not her.

Hermione looked up to see that Snape was handing her something else. It was a vial containing glowing sea foam-green liquid. "To bring you to your senses," he said shortly.

"Thank you," she muttered as she uncapped the vial and swallowed the contents. It tasted like iced peppermint. Almost immediately the heavy woolen feeling in her head lifted, and the nausea disappeared.

She handed the vial back to him, and silence fell. She heard the dull throb of music through the wall of Cindy's.

"How did you find me?" she asked.

He seemed to hesitate slightly. "I was passing through the area, and I heard several teenagers outside talking about a girl who had been working the entire club. They said she seemed to forget everyone after she met them. I figured that it could be no one else."

Hermione bit her lip. "Of course," she said. She wondered if she was sober enough now to Apparate back home with her last shred of dignity.

"I apologize," Snape said. "I should not have put it so crudely."

Snape... *apologizing?*

"I was, in fact, already looking for you, as I wanted to know if your invitation to the Opera still stood."

Hermione blinked. She was hearing things. "Are you certain that the Sober-Up Potion worked properly?"

She waited for his sneer and sarcastic retort. It never came; rather, he looked indulgently and...could it be?...*expectantly*, back at her.

"The offer still stands," she said at last, slowly, "if you truly wish to take it."

"I would be honored," Snape said. And then he held out his arm. After hesitating only a moment, she took it, managing not to flinch when he placed his other hand around her waist and drew her close. "Hold on," he said.

There was a split second of nothingness, then blackness exerting great pressure and colors rushing past her so fast that her eyes burned. Then the colors resolved themselves until only bronze and gold remained, and Hermione looked up at the majestic façade of the Opera Garnier bathed in the glow of the evening. Snape's hesitant voice snapped her out of her awed reverie.

"Ah... Miss Granger, you might want to transfigure something more, ah... appropriate."

Hermione looked down and blushed. With a wave of her wand, the leather mini-skirt and low-cut silken top were replaced with an elegant flowing burgundy dress. She took Snape's arm again and somehow managed not to die of embarrassment.

She also noticed that he was dressed in a well-cut suit and was, for once, without robes. Had he been wearing that when he had found her? Unsurprisingly, she didn't remember.

"Hmm," Snape said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He lifted his wand. "May I?"

Hermione nodded hesitantly, and he waved his wand over her dress, garnishing the fabric with a scattering of tiny diamonds that twinkled and caught the light at various angles. It looked good.

"Er, thanks," she said. *If this wasn't a date before, it sure as hell is now.*

--9:009:30pm, September 19, 1998--

They passed through one of the front entrances, and people were milling about in the foyer before the Grand Staircase. Every man and woman was dressed to the nines, and she was glad for the jewels that Snape had added to her gown.

Distracted by the beauty of the building, she tripped at the top of the staircase. Snape's arm tightened around her waist to steady her *When had his arm moved there?*

"Now, I believe that we are highly overdue in our box."

"B-box?"

He smirked again. "It is your birthday, after all." With that, they went up another flight of stairs and then all the way over to the left side of the auditorium. They finally reached a brown door with a circular window set into the very top. The box number appeared in gold-plated lettering right below.

Snape opened the door for her. "After you, my dear."

"Really, Severus, box 5? Take care, you might fool people into thinking that you're a romantic at heart."

"I'm shocked at your insinuation. This box was the most out-of-way place I could find that still afforded a comfortable view of the stage. The history was an added bonus. But if the Phantom of the Opera knows what's good for him, he'll stay out tonight."

They took their seats just as the lights began to dim.

"The opera lasts over two hours," Snape said. "Would you like me to fetch a copy of the libretto so that you remember what's happening?"

Hermione shook her head. "I know the whole thing by heart." She looked at him with bird-bright eyes, their slightly moist gleam visible in the rapidly fading light. "Thank you, Severus."

The next few hours were a whirl of sound and color. She did not record during the performance. That way, every half hour she felt once again the childlike glee of suddenly finding herself in a magical world of beauty.

She gave a rather unladylike growl when she realized that she had blanked out in the middle of the Toreador Song. She heard Snape chuckle next to her and was shocked to feel his hand settle over hers. It was not unpleasant, and she did not pull away.

Later, she came back to herself and was surprised to discover her hand resting in Severus', his thumb tracing circles upon the back of her palm.

He must have felt her stiffen because he moved his hand away. She reached for him and interlaced her fingers with his. They watched the rest of the performance in pleasant silence: Snape for the first time and Hermione for once out of many, immersed in the story of Carmen, the fiery gypsy whom men flocked to like flies and whom she unwittingly dragged down to their doom.

--11:30pm12:00am, September 19, 1998--

Afterwards, Snape placed the cloak back over her shoulders, and they walked out of the Opera House, engaged in a lively debate over the opera.

"But I thought this was your favorite show."

"It is. That doesn't mean that I am enamored with the characters, though. Carmen in particular really needed to grow up."

Snape scoffed. "You put too much responsibility on her shoulders. It was Don José who chose to degenerate into an obsessed lunatic."

They were outside now. Hermione could see the congealed mist of her breath upon the air. There was silence between them, and she fought not to squirm in discomfort. He had not taken her hand again.

They turned into the alley where they had appeared after their cross-country Apparition and stopped.

"Well, thank you once again." Hermione stuck out her hand. *Brilliant move, Hermione. Nostalgic for junior school dates?*

Her breath caught as Snape stepped forward to take her hand and then folded her arm in his once again. "Nonsense," he said. "I will see you safely home first."

"Oh... okay. Thank you."

She saw him concentrate and then after a familiar gut-twisting sensation, they were standing on the path before her building. She slipped her arm from his and stepped back awkwardly.

"Well... thank you." *Thank you, thank you. Now you're a broken record as well as an idiot.* "I had a wonderful time, and I really appreciate..."

"May I kiss you, Hermione?"

"Hnnrh..." she eloquently replied.

He offered her no reprieve, continuing to look at her expectantly as she wrestled with her tongue that seemed to have ceased functioning.

There wasn't merely expectance in his gaze. His black eyes held something else that she was sure she had never seen before. She had hoped, of course... but had never earnestly believed in its possibility.

She still had not answered when he reached forward to touch her cheek. The feather-light pressure from his callused fingers raised goosebumps along her jawline.

"Yes," she whispered.

His hand slid further up her face, his fingers caressing the outer edge of her ear before burying themselves in her Glamour's straight black hair. She felt the breath of his sigh against her cheek as he bent his head and gently touched his lips to hers. His lips were thin and warm as they brushed against hers once, twice... chastely... maddeningly.

He pulled away slightly after the second kiss but kept his head close, his warm breath fanning her cheeks, tinged with the sharp, aromatic scent of Firewhiskey.

Had he been drinking before he found me in Cindy's?

Hermione shivered uncontrollably and then opened her eyes, only to find him looking back at her.

Severus' hand was touching her cheek, his face moving towards hers, her wide eyes and diamond-dusted dress reflected in his pupils...

His head was so close that his eyes had merged into one. To her brain, which was currently running at a hundred miles per second, this seemed like the funniest thing in the world. She began to giggle. As the sounds escaped through her nose, Snape raised his eyebrows, making his giant Cyclops-eye bounce up and down, and she almost lost it. Instead of bursting out laughing, she lifted her hands to the back of his neck and pulled him into a harder kiss.

His other hand came down to cup her other cheek as he tilted her head backwards and returned her kiss. Hermione felt his chest bow inwards as he inhaled like the bellows of a great instrument. She opened her mouth instinctively under his to catch his breath upon his exhale.

She allowed herself to despair for a moment that this was happening to her Glamour, not her. There was something about this that felt so right, *so familiar*.

The bellows of his chest rumbled in its lower register against her breast, and his tongue darted out briefly to touch hers. Then she felt cold air hit her face as he drew back, pausing to brush a strand of her hair from her face.

"Oh, Hermione," he murmured. "I wish that you could see yourself right now. You look as if the stars themselves were shining from your eyes."

Her mouth opened and closed. Her hand crept forward, hesitated, and then laid itself against his cheek. Who would have ever believed that such a harsh, forbidding man could have skin so warm?

"What is this? Severus Snape does not wax romantic." Her voice trembled.

The aforementioned unromantic man turned his face into her hand, sending tingles up her spine as he kissed her palm. Her hand crept further along his face until it reached the hinge of his jaw. The joint bulged under her fingers as he clenched his teeth together.

Hermione opened her mouth to speak, her tongue oddly heavy in her mouth. "Severus..."

Frustratingly, blessedly, the bracelet sent a jolt through her skin then, and she flinched. The panic of time running out descended upon her, effectively suffocating the moment, and she dropped her hand. With a sigh, she reached up to her ear for her quill.

She gasped when his hand shot out and closed around her wrist. Her eyes narrowed as she tugged ineffectively against his hand. She looked up; his gaze was hard and unyielding and, she noted with some shock, filled with something akin to despair.

They stared at each other for an eternal moment. Then Snape released her wrist, and she felt a blast of chilly air where his fingers had once been. She saw him take a step back, and then another.

"Write what you must," he said. "Happy birthday, Hermione."

And then he Disapparated, leaving a very confused Hermione behind.

She waffled over what she would record for half of her remaining seconds.

Severus took me to the Opera and kissed me good night. And I liked it. A lot. Then he buggered off like he had a werewolf after him. I swear I will never understand that man.

A/N: This is it! The storylines have finally converged to the same day. Egads, what did Hermione forget between 2:30 and 6:00pm? Please don't kill me for the cliffhanger in the first half. Yet. And just to clarify, this Lucius encounter happens chronologically before Hermione's meeting of him in chapter 13... but she had her Glamour on in the Magical Menagerie.

For your reference, the major mysteries remaining to be solved are:

- 1) Why did Snape seem so adamant and/or act like he was forced to die in the "beginning"?
- 2) What the hell happened to make Hermione lose her memories and how was Snape involved?
- 3) Who is Snape's potions supplier?
- 4) Why, in the second half, does Snape always seem reluctant or disgusted with himself as he and Hermione grow closer?

Next chapter: What did Lucius want? The longest half hour of Hermione's life begins.

Vow

Chapter 16 of 17

The longest half hour of Hermione's life begins.

Chapter 16

Vow

--2:303:00pm, September 19, 1998--

Hermione found her nose pressed up against rough wool. The black fibers tickled her nose with the pleasant scent of damp moss and spearmint. The soothing smell seemed completely at odds with the heavy hammering of her heart and her mind full of sheer terror.

She felt pressure upon her right upper arm and looked down to find a hand gripping her flesh almost painfully. Her other hand was free, and she touched the bracelet upon her wrist lightly.

The last memory that she recalled: she had had a pleasant lunch with Snape where she had discovered his ardently denied passion for chocolate.

It was Snape now holding her in the death-grip, which didn't explain why she was so afraid, as he was clearly not about to harm...

"Well, well, well. This is certainly a most interesting situation."

The speaker was out of sight beyond her fortress of black wool, but the smooth, arrogant voice sent a rush of fear and dizzying hatred through her body. If possible, Snape's hand, the one not holding his wand upon the speaker, gripped her arm even more tightly.

"Granger..." the disembodied voice hissed. "You may as well come out from behind your black-robed savior. He'll hardly be able to convince me that it was not you that I saw." When neither of them moved, Hermione heard the sound of shifting feet and felt Snape slowly turn in response, always keeping her behind him.

She felt a different emotion rush through her as she felt him shield her with his body.

There was a sigh of haughty exasperation. "Honestly." A sudden burst of magic rippled through Snape's body, and Hermione cried out as a tongue of fire leapt from his form and sizzled through her chest. Snape's black form was jerked to the side and impacted a set of bookcases.

He was back on his feet before Hermione had time to blink, every muscle in his body tensed like a panther about to spring. Snape grit his teeth against the residual pain from the curse and hesitated when he saw that Malfoy now had his wand trained on Hermione.

"A wise decision, Severus," the blond wizard said. Then he turned to face Hermione. She took in the familiar haughty profile, high cheekbones, and sharp, cruel eyes. Her legs threatened to buckle underneath her. She pressed a trembling hand against the bookcase behind her, the rough edge of the wooden shelf digging into her palm.

Malfoy's eyes were bright as they raked over her body, like a rooster about to snap up a worm. "It is certainly most intriguing to see you looking so well, Miss Granger. As I recall, the last time that we met, you were squealing and groaning like a stuck pig... Isn't that so, Severus?"

Hermione felt light-headed as Malfoy's words and the insinuation behind them registered in her mind.

Malfoy's icy gaze slid over to where Snape hunched against the adjacent wall. The dark man's gaze remained riveted to the wand pointed at Hermione, and Malfoy sighed at his failure to provoke a reaction.

Taking a step towards her, Malfoy continued, "Now I can think of only two reasons why you would be in Severus' home. It is possible that he has kept you alive to have his wicked way with you, but I can't imagine that you've held his interest for this long. Which leads me to the second reason, which is that you are no friend, Severus."

"Let me explain, Lucius."

"Spare me your excuses. Will you honestly try to convince me that you have not betrayed the Dark Lord?" Malfoy took another step towards Hermione; the tip of his wand was inches from her face. Hermione pressed her other hand against the wall to hold herself upright.

"Not at all. I have every intention of killing the Dark Lord," Snape replied smoothly.

Malfoy stopped in his tracks. "I beg your pardon?" he hissed after a pause of nearly two seconds.

"I will explain, but forgive me for giving you the abbreviated version. I can see that you have no intention of lowering your wand, and your arm must be getting tired."

Malfoy snarled in an unrefined manner.

"I betrayed the Dark Lord over 17 years ago when I began to spy for Albus Dumbledore. After his death, I have continued to pass information to his army, taking advantage of my increased rank among the Death Eaters to obtain information that the Dark Lord holds most inviolate."

"Such honesty from a backstabber! A swell of mercy rises through my breast."

Hermione saw a smile appear on Snape's face, and through her shock, she realized that he was preparing to enjoy himself. "How many opportunities have I had to give you up, Lucius? How many times could I have let the fact that the Dark Lord has taken up residence in your Manor accidentally... slip? Masks are meaningless to a member of my status. I could have betrayed every single Death Eater a hundred times over."

Malfoy's expression of controlled fury did not change, but his wand arm lowered slightly. "Continue," he snapped.

"I want the Dark Lord gone for good, Lucius. The death of my colleagues has never been my desire."

"So we are still your colleagues?"

The corner of Snape's lip curled. "I never said 'friends,' Lucius."

A glimmer of pain, so quick that Hermione nearly missed it, flickered in the blond wizard's gaze. "Fair enough, Severus. But you still haven't told me why. From what I understand, the Dark Lord treated you in the same slavishly obliging way that Dumbledore did that brat Potter."

"You know as well as I do that particular honor belonged to another one of us," Snape replied cryptically. "The Dark Lord was nothing but a master, Lucius. With both him and the bearded fool gone, I would have been free for the first time in over 20 years. Is it difficult to believe that I was quite finished with being someone's servant?"

Malfoy sneered. "Not as difficult as it would be to believe that you were instead attempting to redeem yourself. I had my suspicions to that effect after seeing your rather ardent concern for this one." He jerked his wand in Hermione's direction.

Hermione's mind finally caught up to her nerves, and she wondered first, why Malfoy seemed so unconcerned by Snape's vendetta against Voldemort and second, why Malfoy had not yet harmed or even insulted her.

Snape scoffed. "You have already proven how quick you are to draw your wand first and ask questions later. I could hardly let you incapacitate her before our work is done."

"You honestly think that you could defeat the Dark Lord with the aide of this... this..." Malfoy's eyes evidenced an inexplicable struggle for the right word.

"Lucius..." Snape said. "Have you ever known me to fail in anything I set out to accomplish?"

The blond wizard's cold blue eyes narrowed. Finally, he seemed to come to a decision. "Your wands. Give them to me now. I don't think you are in any position to negotiate," he snapped as Snape hesitated.

After a beat, Snape uncurled his hand from around his wand and then glanced over and gave her a little nod. Heart pounding, Hermione pulled her wand from her sleeve. Malfoy rapidly Accio-ed both wands and made as if to pocket them. A muscle twitched in Snape's jaw, and Malfoy laughed. He set the wands down on the table between the armchair and sofa instead and stowed his own within his sleeve.

"I know how skilled you are at wandless magic, Severus. Needless to say, if you even so much as wink in my direction, your little bitch will die quite unpleasantly, do I make myself clear?"

"Get on with it, Lucius," Snape growled.

Malfoy's lip curled unpleasantly. "I will not deny that removing the Dark Lord will make my own life... considerably less stressful. He has not looked upon me favorably since the debacle at the Ministry, not to mention the actions of... of my son." A look of misery crossed his face. It was gone nearly as quickly, but for that brief second, Malfoy had looked weary and human.

"However," Malfoy continued, "you know as well as I do that once the Aurors begin rounding up Death Eaters, it is very unlikely that I will be able to talk myself out of Azkaban a second time."

"Lucius, once the war is over, I..."

"Although my sentimentality is touched by the fact that you might even consider pleading my case, I doubt very much that Potter will be forgiving enough to lend you any influence. No, I desire no place in the brave new world that Potter and his disciples will create."

"What is it you want then?"

"Has over 20 years of living by my side taught you nothing of Malfoy ambition? I want Tom Riddle's throne. I will take what remains of the Death Eaters and seek out a greater kingdom. I have sacrificed too much fighting for this miserable island. And in order for me to have the unquestioned loyalty of the Death Eaters, you must be eliminated. I will give you the victory you seek, Severus. And in return, you will give up your life."

Hermione looked frantically at Snape. His face betrayed no emotion.

"That seems unnecessarily harsh, old friend," Snape said.

"I wasn't aware that you had any choice at all," said Malfoy lightly. "I am now aware that you are the reason that Draco fled, and therefore, you are the reason that he is dead. It would please me equally as much to go to the Dark Lord now with my rather interesting discovery and watch you beg for death. At least on my terms, you have the chance to perish honorably in battle."

The silence stretched on. Hermione was no longer pressing herself against the wall for support. Her fear, she noticed, had fled in the face of a frantic, furious urgency to yell at Snape, to ask him why, why was he even considering such a thing? Perhaps she could shout loudly enough to distract Malfoy for enough time in order to...

"And if I do not fall in the battle?" asked Snape.

Malfoy chuckled lightly. "Make no mistake, friend. Your agreement will be binding."

At last, Hermione could speak. "No."

Snape stiffened. Malfoy's head snapped around to her like a striking cobra. His voice was equally deadly. "I beg your pardon?"

Hermione took a deep breath as she felt herself begin to shake. "I won't do it. You will need a Bonder, and I will not do it."

Malfoy's entire body seemed to thrum with energy, and for a moment, she was terrified that he would fly at her. Instead, he took a step backwards and leaned calmly against the threadbare arm of the sofa.

"I don't think you understand, foolish little Gryffindor. Anyone can be a Bonder. I can kill you and then find someone else. And before I do, I can make you feel sorry that you were ever born. Now, I would rather not go to such lengths, but the decision is entirely up to you. I'm sure I could make what happened the last time we met feel like a warming charm in comparison, even though it is Severus who truly has a special way with children."

Snape went slightly paler. Hermione felt like throwing up.

Miss Granger... say yes.

The voice insisted upon her mind, a loud, determined presence. She glared over at Snape. She had not known that a Legilimens could impress his thoughts upon another's mind.

It was an unpleasant but compelling sensation, like fingernails scraping lightly over her skin.

Bloody hell if I will, sir! she thought furiously back at him, knowing that he would hear her.

His voice returned, stern and unyielding. This is not your choice, Miss Granger. Don't make the mistake of believing it is.

But...

This project is just as important to me as it is to you. I have every right to decide that it is worth my life a hundred times over.

I can't believe this. I can't believe you...

Can't believe what, Miss Granger? You think I'm being a selfish bastard, don't you? DON'T YOU?!

"Yes!" she screamed.

Her throat was still vibrating when she realized that she had screamed out loud and that Malfoy was looking at her with an expression caught between amusement and triumph.

She opened her mouth to protest, to stop this horrific charade. Malfoy didn't know that she knew wandless magic. She could... Malfoy had withdrawn his wand from his sleeve with a magnificent flourish. He beckoned to Snape while walking up to her side, scooping up her wand from the rickety table as he did so.

"Join me in our little ceremony, Severus."

Snape moved across the sitting room like a shadow towards Malfoy. Both men were standing uncomfortably close to her.

Malfoy extended his right hand and let it hang in the air like a pale spider. Snape looked at it for a moment with flat, dead eyes. Then, without glancing at Hermione's stricken face, he clasped Malfoy's hand with his own. The knuckles on the hands of both men turned white.

Hermione flinched as she felt the tip of Malfoy's black wand dig into the hollow of her neck between her larynx and her jugular. Malfoy had not even looked at her, his eyes remaining riveted on Snape.

"I'm well aware, Severus, of the restrictions against holding your fellow Vow-maker at wandpoint," Lucius said in a calm, sibilant hiss. "Some rot or another about the unfairness of coercion. However, there are no such rules regarding the Bonder. So if you don't behave..."

Hermione expected Malfoy to dig his wand into her neck to emphasize his point and managed to muffle her whimper when he did so. Malfoy handed back her wand, handle-first. "If you would be so kind? No tricks, mind you. I will never believe that vast mind of yours would be unfamiliar with the ceremony," he said with a sneer.

As her brain was reeling from Malfoy's impossible backhanded compliment, she grasped her wand with her right hand and laid the tip on their linked hands.

Both men gazed at each other across their joined hands. Malfoy raised an eyebrow at Snape's frown. "Cheer up, Severus. This is the last promise to another you will ever have to make."

Hermione's hand jerked, and Snape lifted his left hand and placed it atop hers. His fingers were smooth and warm, like a serpent's skin, and they withdrew before Hermione even had time to be properly stunned. Were it not for the fact that Malfoy were currently looking at Snape as if he had thrust his hand into a particularly nasty bog, she would have thought that she had imagined his comforting touch.

"Severus Snape," intoned Lucius Malfoy. His voice had lost all trace of a sneer and was impeccably formal. "Will you do everything in your power to kill the Dark Lord, otherwise known as Tom Riddle?"

"I will," said Snape.

Hermione watched, fascinated, as a thin, red tongue of flame issued from her wand and wrapped around their hands. She felt as though a bit of warmth had seeped from her body.

"And will you refrain from directly harming me or any of our Death Eater brethren in the process?"

"I will," said Snape.

A second tongue of flame intertwined with the first.

"And should you fail to meet your end on the battlefield, will you, Severus Snape, die before midnight of that day has passed?"

Snape's tight jaw cracked open with visible force. "I will," he said.

A third tendril of flame snaked its way among the others to form a thick chain.

Triumph gleamed within Malfoy's eyes; he opened his mouth to finish the spell.

"Lucius Malfoy," said Snape suddenly. "Will you provide your aide whenever required so that we may complete our task?"

Malfoy looked as if he would like nothing more than to spit in Snape's face. "I will," he ground out after a beat of silence.

A tongue of brilliant golden flame shot out from Hermione's wand to entwine with its scarlet brethren. Scarlet and gold. Hermione had to bite back her insane urge to giggle at the sight of Malfoy and Snape decked out in Gryffindor colors.

The red and gold rope of light glowed brightly and began to hum faintly. Malfoy was glaring daggers at Snape, and Snape was staring back with a look that Hermione recognized too well. It was the same look that Harry or Ron got when they were about to do something that would utterly infuriate her.

The silence dragged on. Hermione thought she saw a drop of sweat form on Malfoy's high forehead.

"I accept your Vow," Snape drawled at last, managing to sound imperial and begrudging at the same time.

Hermione mentally edged away from the hurricane brewing on Malfoy's face.

"And I, yours," Lucius fairly spat.

A heavy silence fell again, and this time Hermione realized that she was the cause. She struggled to remember, praying that she recalled the words correctly.

"B-by this Unbreakable Vow, you are bound. Your promise holds you until duty fulfills it or death negates it."

The intertwined flames glowed brightly, a searing Cepheid of sharp, white light before suddenly dissolving away. Her body warmth that had seeped away with the tongues of flame rushed back into her all at once, and Hermione felt as if she had a stifling fever.

Snape sniffed. "Until death negates it.' Rather unnecessary, wouldn't you agree?"

Malfoy had dropped his wand from Hermione's throat, and his hand was clenching and unclenching around the length of wood. "Enjoyed your little show, didn't you, you conniving snake?"

Snape's eyes hardened. "You have my Vow, Lucius. Don't fool yourself into thinking you possess anything more."

Malfoy narrowed his eyes before apparently realizing that there wasn't much he could say. He made a show instead of brushing out his robes.

"Lucius, it would be of great assistance to us if you were to bring us half a dozen Chinese Fireball eggs and a liter of runespoor venom before the end of the month. I have an inkling that your channels shall be more... expedient than any that either of us know."

"I suppose it would be an exercise in futility to ask what possible use they could be? Very well, Severus. But keep in mind, I am not a patient man."

"You could join us, Lucius." Snape's voice was so soft that she might have imagined it.

Malfoy paused in the action of slipping his wand back in his sleeve. His prominent cheekbones twitched as his jaw worked under his skin. "I chose my side long ago, Severus," he said at last. "As did you. Nothing will change the fact that we are marked for life. We will never have a place in their world, and you're a fool if you believe otherwise. Just like Draco."

His cultured voice seemed to catch in his throat at the mention of his son. Before Snape could respond, Malfoy turned his sharp gaze to Hermione. "I do hope the... girl serves you well." Then he swept his robes about him and Disapparated.

"Well, that was certainly unexpected," said Hermione as her knees finally gave out from under her.

The expected painful connection with the floor did not occur. Instead, she found herself enfolded in the scent of moss and mint once again, with rough black wool scratchy upon the back of her neck.

"Why?" Hermione mumbled, her shock at the fact that he had bothered to catch her overwhelmed by a great surge of fury. "Why did you do it? Why did you agree, how could you, HOW?" She vaguely realized that she was screaming and her cheeks were moist.

"Why the bloody hell are you crying?" Snape snapped, although the way he continued to cradle her against his chest belied his harsh tone. "Do you honestly think that Malfoy could ever get me to agree to something I did not want?"

She gaped at him, staring at his sallow, rigid face hovering over hers through her wet lashes. "Your life, sir... it's your life."

"And it is a small price to pay. The likelihood of me surviving this war is slim to none. And barring my demise, an Unbreakable Vow is voided by the death of either of the Vow-makers. Lucius' chances are even more unlikely than mine. He's not half the duelist he purports to be. And now he is bound to assist us at our leisure, and with his help, we shall be sure to succeed."

He made sense. Of course he made sense. Then again, Snape was speaking in the same tone he used in the classroom when he was issuing instructions on the brewing of a particularly deadly potion, so he would have made sense no matter what he had said.

She shook her head, refusing to look at him.

"Hermione," he murmured, speaking her name like a caress. "You have given me more than I could have ever hoped for. You have shown me that there is at least one person in the world who does not find me despicable. At least until now. Merlin knows what you must think after Lucius' insinuations about me. And that has been enough for me. That is all I could want."

"Bullshit," she hissed through the tears running down her cheeks. "Tell me where Malfoy is. I'll kill him myself."

"Not only would that break my Vow not to harm him, but believe me when I say that your chance of success would be none," Snape said. "But I am honored that you are so ardent on my behalf."

"He did this to me. They did this to me!" she screamed. There was a sensation in her chest as if someone had just wrenched her open like a rusted gate. "They took my mind, Severus... They might as well have taken my life! And now he has taken you." Somehow her hands had found their way to his chest, her fingers digging into the wool of his robes.

Snape seemed not to mind. "And getting back at them, that would make you happy? That is what you want?"

Hermione nodded through her tears. "Isn't that what we have been working towards for all these weeks? To kill them? To destroy them once and for all? That's all I can remember to do. This project and... and you. You're all I have left," she whispered. She felt her cheeks burning the moment the words were out of her mouth, but she also knew that she could not honestly take them back. The silence fell upon them like a blanket.

"I would that you had something better," Snape said. It was barely a whisper, and his arms underneath her back were still. But for the fiery sincerity in his words, she would have thought him made of stone.

"I would that you had your justice," Snape said. His arms moved then, pulling her infinitesimally closer to his chest. "That you had your revenge, your resolution. I would like nothing more than to give that to you. What if you could know what had been done to you? Know who was responsible?"

Hermione turned her head into his chest, inhaling the blessedly familiar scent of moss and mint and willed her heart to stop its pounding.

"You should know, it was not Lucius."

"But just now he..." She paused, realizing with a bit of shock, "he didn't call me Mudblood. Not once."

"Do you want to see, Hermione? Do you want to see what happened that night and those three weeks afterwards before you were found at Hogwarts? The very first of many times that have since been lost from your memory?" Snape asked softly. At her brief silence, he immediately began speaking again. "Only if you truly desire to, I have done enough today to distress you."

"Yes," Hermione said. "I will. I must."

She felt him nod against the top of her head. Then he braced himself against the floor and pulled her up to a standing position. Once they were both standing, he took a step back and for the next few seconds, Hermione was treated to the rare image of Severus Snape fidgeting uncomfortably.

"I have no Pensieve," he said at last. "You are aware that casting the Killing Curse splits the caster's soul. This is also true of the other Unforgivables. Imperio, Crucio, as well as others that you do not have the misfortune to know... they rend the wizard's soul into pieces and, much like memories, they can be transferred from caster to victim. This memory was... gifted to me, if you will. I will allow you to view it through Legilimency, but I will warn you that it will be quite... unpleasant. Unlike a Pensieve memory, you will not be an impartial observer. You will view the memory through... the person's eyes and be subject to all of his emotions."

Hermione closed her eyes and breathed deeply. The subtle scent of Snape's robes floated into her lungs. She opened her eyes and looked directly into his. "I'm ready."

He reached out and rested the tips of his fingers against her temples. His fingertips felt cool and slightly calloused against her skin. As she stared into his dark orbs, she saw, for a second, an expression of immense sadness that made him look every one of his forty years.

"Hermione, you will never know how sorry I am," he murmured.

There was a great jerk from behind her navel as Hermione felt herself lifted bodily and thrown towards the dark pupils in Snape's eyes which expanded and expanded until they filled her vision.

Hermione tumbled into the blackness.

--3:003:30pm, September 19, 1998--

"Miss Granger! Are you alright?"

Hermione put her hand to her cut lip and winced. Her head throbbed. "What happened?" she asked.

She heard the sound of feet running towards her. "You fell on the stairs. I apologize, I should have reminded you again to be cautious. Are you hurt?"

Hermione wrapped one hand around her bracelet.

The last memory that she recalled: she had had a pleasant lunch with Snape where she had discovered his ardently denied passion for chocolate.

She smiled in memory as she used her other hand to touch her lips with a scratched finger. The swelling was going down. Oddly, it didn't hurt as much as it should have if she had banged her mouth against the stairs. "I'm alright," she said. She looked up to see his hand extended towards her. She took his hand and allowed him to pull her to her feet. His grip was strong and firm.

"Thank you, Severus."

He raised both eyebrows but didn't correct her. He held onto her hand all the way across the lab where he righted an overturned stool and had her sit. A tin of salve materialized from within his voluminous robes. He sat down next to her and rested her hands, palms up, upon his knees.

"You're wounded."

Hermione ducked her head shyly. "It's nothing," she muttered.

"Nonsense. Even the smallest trace of blood can contaminate a potion."

"Oh." So much for dreams of consideration and chivalry.

She started when she felt his hands smoothing the salve onto her palms and fingers. A pleasantly warm tingling sensation rushed through her hands as the cuts knit themselves together and the scars faded from view. His hand loomed into view, and she nearly flinched as he dabbed the salve onto her lip. She tasted peppermint and faint traces of salt from his skin. She imagined that his thumb lingered there for a bit longer than necessary. Finally, he stood back and bent over to check the top of her head. His touch was feather-light as he probed the bump and declared the skin unbroken.

"As good as new, Miss Granger," he said with a genuine, if strained, smile.

She opened her mouth to thank him, but he had turned away quite abruptly and was beginning to prepare ingredients for more trial runs of the potion. She watched him for a minute before the need to ask became too strong.

"Well?"

Snape turned around, a look of irritation plain on his face. "I beg your pardon?"

"Professor, I just called you 'Severus'."

Hermione didn't like the look on his face. Snape looked as if he were carefully considering each word in his vocabulary and testing its sharpness. "Indeed you did. Did you perhaps expect time to roll to a poetic halt?"

She stumbled over her words, shocked at his vitriol. "No, I just..."

"Apparently some time in the past you saw fit to consider me a colleague, an event that your mind apparently thought too trivial to record."

"I...you know I would never think that..."

"Miss Granger, I find myself allergic to inane conversation when there is more important work to be done. So if you have nothing further to say?"

Hermione sucked air rapidly in through her teeth to prevent herself from saying something that would have made their situation even more unbearable.

"Pass the titration valve, Severus," she snapped. She wasn't obligated to dissuade his most ardent attempts to act like a supercilious bastard.

Hermione cursed Snape silently when he handed her the piece of equipment without protest and an unmistakable smirk.

When her two-minute warning arrived, she removed her quill from behind her ear and gasped in dismay. At some point in the past, she must have grabbed too haphazardly

and nearly bent the tip of the vane in half. The feather quill drooped slightly, like a malformed question mark.

Hermione shook her head in disgust. *First tripping on the stairs and now this!* She really needed to be more careful.

They worked in uneasy silence for several hours, saying no more than to give terse instructions and to keep the ever-thickening pile of notes moving between the two of them.

A/N: Chapter 2 has a whole new meaning now doesn't it? And I guess we now know what Lucius was ranting about in chapter 3. I could never resist a good dose of delayed dramatic irony.

For those of you confused about the fact that the second half of the chapter seems to follow right after the first half... remember that viewing memories does not take up any real time. At least not in this story.

And finally, it's your last chance to review before the end! Please take just a little bit of time to let me know how you're enjoying the story. Or if you're not. And flames will be used to light Snape's cauldron.

Last chapter: The longest half hour of Hermione's life continues, and everything is finally revealed.

Unbreakable

Chapter 17 of 17

The longest half hour of Hermione's life continues, and everything is finally revealed.

For those of you just joining this story, **please** read the note at the beginning of chapter one so that you're not utterly confused. Final thanks and acknowledgments are at the end of this extremely long final chapter.

A/N: I have read countless stories where Snape drags himself back to Hogwarts broken and bleeding from some myriad of Unforgivables and torture. Although that makes for convenient drama, I always found it a bit unbelievable that Voldemort would casually curse his soldiers, particularly one as valuable as Snape, no matter how much he wanted to test their loyalty. There is no army in the world that can function with such an erratic commander. After all, isn't the Cruciatus Curse supposed to be the worst pain you can ever feel? So, while I have assumed that Death Eaters would show no mercy during an interrogation, the cursing of another Death Eater would be both rare and largely unacceptable.

Though you can probably guess, here's your warning that violence and general unpleasantness lie ahead. Some very nasty stuff happens. Snape isn't all that nice... though on the plus side, we finally get to see his POV, sort of. Consider yourself warned.

"Nothing I have seen in the world has supported your famous pronouncements that love is more powerful than any kind of magic."

Lord Voldemort

"I'm not scared of dying; I just don't want to. If I stop lying, I'll just disappoint you."

Robbie Williams

Chapter 17

Unbreakable

--Time Unknown--

Hermione found herself staring down into the dead, blank eyes of her father. She screamed and jumped back. Only she could make no sound, and when she tried to move, she felt something in her way, as if she were trapped between two walls. To her horror, she felt her lips splitting in a grin. Her black-booted foot pressed against Paul Granger's cheek, smudging it with dirt and twisting the head to the side.

She felt vomit rise in her throat and collect just behind her uvula. It could go no further, for her borrowed body flexed its vocal folds against her will and emitted a high-pitched giggle like a schoolboy. After giving the body a parting kick, he loped away with a gangly limbed gait. He moved towards a house whose outline slowly began to appear through a cloud of thick smoke.

He whoever he was lifted a hand to his face, squinting against the black smoke that blew against him. The faint outline of a house what remained after house resolved itself into a blazing wooden skeleton topped with broken roof beams that reached like steepled fingers into the sky. A gust of wind cleared a section of smoke momentarily, and Hermione saw that it was only late in the afternoon, that it was the smoke from the still-burning house that painted the sky as black as night.

Her surrogate body picked its way through the debris with a nearly delightful air, acting like nothing so much as a child in a playground. A swish of his wand caused the twisted carcass of a sapling to disintegrate into ash.

As she approached the path that would lead into her backyard, she began to hear other voices. They were indiscriminate but harsh and sharp, like the chattering of blue jays. Her body rounded the corner, and as she beheld the sight in the backyard, she nearly retched out her insides.

She Hermione Granger crouched upon her knees, her head hanging between her arms, her palms barely holding her body off the ground. She was wearing jeans and a white sweater that had a large tear across one shoulder, exposing a bra strap. As she watched, the memory of Hermione Granger vomited blood onto the grassy lawn.

Only then did she notice the half-circle of figures surrounding her other self. One of the shadowy figures turned to face her and her surrogate body, and she recognized him even through the mask: Antonin Dolohov, the man who had wounded her in the Department of Mysteries. She noticed more familiar figures within that circle: Bellatrix Lestrange, Augustus Rookwood, Walden Macnair, Nott, Mulciber, Avery, more that she did not know.

For a brief moment she felt an idiotic sort of pride that what appeared to be the entire Death Eaters' fighting elite had been assembled in her honor.

"You're late, Jonas," Dolohov growled at her, at her surrogate body, who must have been another Death Eater.

"It seems like you started the fun without me anyhow." Jonas, the mysterious Death Eater's voice was effortless, sneering, and slid through her vocal cords like sugary-sweet syrup. "This one doesn't look like she has much left."

Dolohov scoffed. "The only mark on her is where she banged her head when she was thrown by the explosion. We 'convinced' her to take a little potion to make sure she hadn't swallowed the Dark Lord's locket." Both turned to watch as Hermione spat another mouthful of blood onto the scorched grass, the contents of her stomach long since emptied. "Why waste our magical energy if there's a chance of getting it another way?"

She felt her chest rumble as Jonas sniggered. "You haven't looked everywhere yet, have you? I can think of places on her luscious body where she could be hiding it."

"You would enjoy that, wouldn't you?" It was a new voice that spoke then, sibilant and familiar.

"Mr. Malfoy," Jonas said with mock deference. "Yes, it would be an undeniable pleasure."

"How utterly brutish and unoriginal. Do you have no idea of who this is?"

"Of course I do. She's Potter's Mudblood friend. And I also know that she is female, and she is human. Therefore, why should we not exploit her most obvious weakness?"

Lucius' eyes glinted from behind his mask. "They told me that you had a mind that rivaled Bella's in perversion. I shall watch your career with great interest."

She felt Jonas' lips twist upwards into an unpleasant smile as Lucius stepped to one side. Hermione never thought the day would come when she would beg for Malfoy's protection.

Jonas walked forward, and the other Hermione Granger lifted her head slowly. Her eyes were streaked with red, and her face was ashen.

The Death Eater grinned. "I trust that you heard that pleasant exchange?" The other Hermione coughed, and her eyes rolled back in her head. Jonas knelt down and continued in a whisper, "You see, Mr. Malfoy believes me to be artless in my method. But little does he know that I plan to make you beg for it in the end. Crucio."

Mercifully, there was no pain; all of that fell upon her past self. Instead, Hermione's mind was assaulted by images and sounds, scenes from a life that was not her own flickering in the back of her mind like the shadows of Plato's Cave.

Flies as large as honeybees, buzzing through a rancid dumpster; pale reptilian fingers, cold as death, placing a wand into a chubby hand; the shrunken baby-face of Voldemort twisted in a terrible smile...

There was a sensation like having all the air sucked from her lungs, and Hermione gasped, blinking darkness from her vision. Her other self trembled upon her parents' lawn, spitting blood through her teeth. Her Death Eater twirled his wand between chubby fingers, a snicker escaping his throat.

"Where is the locket, Mudblood? Tell us and we might stop. Then again, I might not."

Jonas twirled his wand in his baby-smooth hand and watched his victim's twitches slow, then stop, then return with a steady tremble. And then he did it again.

Hermione felt Jonas' wand grow warm under the ferocity of the curse, and she beat against the prison-like walls of his mind, casting around for any emotion, anything that she could feel. She knew that casting the Cruciatus Curse required a considerable amount of raw hatred and desire to inflict pain. But she felt around the mind of the man and found only... curiosity. Only an insatiable desire to know, slow-burning and cold.

Hermione watched with horrified fascination as her limbs thrashed and bent underneath the pain. Her body jerked violently, and she heard a crack as she landed on her wrist. The Hermione staring through the eyes of her tormentor suddenly felt a twinge in her malformed right wrist.

When Jonas broke the curse, Hermione saw herself flop bonelessly to the ground, landing on top of her broken wrist without a sound, her mind too overwhelmed to process this additional pain.

She tried to scream then, wanted to scream more than she ever had in her life, because she knew that things had only just begun. Her mind did not remember what had happened this terrible day, but her body did, and it was shrinking away in horror from the scene before her eyes.

Jonas did not disappoint. Few wizards were capable of tossing out an Unforgivable more than three times in succession without becoming fatigued. Even Lestrangle and Crouch had help when they had tortured the Longbottoms into insanity.

How many Crucios did it take before one went insane?

Hermione saw herself thrash and scream over and over and felt that she must be quickly approaching that point.

In the summer after her fifth year, Hermione had taken a course in film theory, just for fun. One of their lessons consisted of analyzing the elements of good comedy. Excess is hilarious, the lecturer said. One Chihuahua barking at a chav was amusing. One hundred yapping Chihuahuas was side-splitting.

Light faded from the sky as afternoon turned into dusk, and the bright red splashes of her blood on the grass faded to black. She heard some of the Death Eaters standing around them begin to chuckle. Hermione felt Jonas' annoyance when Lucius Malfoy laughed outright after a particularly drawn-out Cruciatus.

"Jonas, once again you show us how much you lack in subtlety."

Jonas turned towards Malfoy as the older wizard stalked towards him. In the background, the Hermione on the ground moaned softly. The blond wizard looked past Jonas and raised a disdainful eyebrow.

"Is this how you do things? Beat their heads against the ground until their brains come spilling out, leaving you to plunder at your leisure?"

Hermione felt his shoulders shrug. "It appeared to be the path of least resistance," he said. And then he added as an afterthought, "Sir."

"Do you know who you remind me of, boy? Severus Snape. Oh, not as he is now, but how he was when I first encountered him: a scrawny, mal-proportioned youth with no greater desire than to make the world bend to his will. He had to make up for what he lacked in other areas, you understand? By the end of his years as a Hogwarts student, he could recite and cast any Dark Spell ever known and several that weren't."

Hermione felt Jonas swell under possibly the greatest praise that Malfoy would ever bestow. His smile began to falter as Malfoy's grin grew wider, like a shark about devour its prey.

"You certainly like to throw out Unforgivables, but you completely lack something that Severus had in spades. Even a dog can learn to walk on its hind legs if it tries enough times."

The wand twitched in Jonas' hand but remained pointed at the ground.

Malfoy raised an eyebrow. "You show admirable restraint for your age. Help me retain my good opinion of you and stand down."

Jonas glared at him for a long moment before stepping back with a curt bow. "Be my guest, sir."

As a diligent soldier, he proceeded to watch the ensuing scene with impeccable attention.

She saw Malfoy walk slowly over to the Hermione upon the ground. She had pulled herself back onto her knees, holding the greater part of her body off the ground but barely. Her hands trembled as they pressed into the ground as if she were kneeling in prayer. Her fingernails were bloody and streaked with green from clawing frantically at the grassy lawn around her.

"Hello again, Miss Granger. I don't believe that we've met since our encounter in Hogsmeade. I must say that those were some nasty hexes that you threw my way, quite unbecoming of a lady such as yourself. And I was nearly beginning to think that you were more than Mudblood filth. What have you to say for yourself?" It was amazing how the silver-tongued wizard could make those words sound like the most tender praise.

Hermione wheezed something at him, but no sound emerged. She had long since screamed herself hoarse. Malfoy seemed to take note of her predicament. "My apologies," he said. He lifted his wand. Hermione flinched instinctively, but he merely pointed his wand at her mouth and said, "Aguamenti."

A jet of water spouted from his wand and trickled past Hermione's cracked and bleeding lips. She swallowed and immediately coughed the water back out, the liquid tinged red from where she had bitten her tongue. Malfoy was a patient man and continued to trickle water into her mouth until she was properly hydrated. She saw herself reach out her hands towards Malfoy's hand, wanting more. One hand closed over his wrist and tugged feebly.

"Tsk tsk, Miss Granger," Malfoy chided as he firmly pushed her hand aside. "You mustn't be greedy. Now then, we can talk in a civilized manner." And with that, he swept his robes to one side and sat lightly on the bloodstained grass. He began to chuckle. "Didn't they always say that I bathed in the blood of children? Well, I imagine that this wasn't what they had in mind."

"What... do you want?" Hermione heard herself say in a trembling, pained voice. "Please... just tell me." She gasped in pain as, leaning towards Malfoy, she put pressure upon her broken wrist.

"Oh dear," said Malfoy. "It looks as if you're still a little worse for the wear. Nothing permanent, however. *Ristossis Reparo!*"

Hermione saw herself lift her healed wrist into the air and saw the gratitude shining in her eyes.

"What we want is very simple," Malfoy said. "You and your little friends have stolen something that belongs to the Dark Lord, and we very much want it back. Oh, I agree that some of us have been quite overzealous in their efforts to persuade you to return it, and you have my grudging admiration for withstanding the Cruciatus for longer than anyone in the history of wizardkind. But I trust that you understand our distress over the predicament."

Hermione, her eyes glazed over, nodded mutely.

"Excellent," Malfoy said brightly. Then he lowered his voice to a whisper that Jonas, by straining his ears, just barely heard. "And while it is beyond our mercy to return you to your friends, I have always believed in equal exchange. A quick death, Miss Granger; it will feel like falling asleep. I can do that. I can also let this..." Malfoy used the tip of his wand to prod a particularly sore place on her chest, and Hermione groaned in pain. "I can let this continue. All I ask for is one little piece of information."

Hermione wheezed and whimpered, closing her eyes.

"None of that," Malfoy said, his voice still soothing but slightly sharper now. "Let me help you, Hermione."

She nodded in submission, and Hermione, who was watching, screamed in helpless outrage. She could do nothing, though, as her other self opened her mouth to speak.

"I... I want..."

Malfoy moved closer, placing a hand on her wrist, "Yes, Hermione? Tell me."

"I want... dinner." She saw her mouth crack open in a grin as Malfoy's face filled with confusion. "And a movie. I'm not... the kind of girl who falls for anyone without at least... dinner and a movie." Then she laughed, the sound horrible and roughshod as it split the scorched air.

Malfoy's eyes narrowed like a snake's as he hissed and leapt to his feet, making a slashing motion downward with his wand. Hermione echoed the strangled scream that her other self emitted as her wrist shattered and exploded. She stared dumbly at the chips of bone poking out through her skin.

"You little bitch, how dare you forget who has the upper hand? We have you here at our mercy until you beg for death. Don't you ever forget who has the power!"

"Quite right, Lucius."

Hermione's blood ran cold, and her mind froze in disbelief as she heard the new voice speak from behind her. Don't turn around, she begged.

Jonas turned. She looked.

The unmistakable figure of Severus Snape stood at the edge of the circle, having just Apparated to the scene. A hush fell so quickly that Hermione's ears rang. Snape stepped forward, and Malfoy stiffened, rising to his full height and averting his eyes.

Jonas, however, did not look away, and Hermione was able to take in the sight with a twisted sense of awe. Severus Snape had always been a force of terror in the halls of Hogwarts. But there had always been something missing from his overbearing personality: a lack of credible malice as he took points away, as if he knew that he could do nothing to prevent other professors from adding them back; a slight restraint in his glare from the Head Table, knowing that the Headmaster watched at all times.

All manner of restraint and hesitation was gone now. This Severus Snape did not walk, he glided forward, a black-robed monolith of absolute power. Even Jonas remained silent. In her prison, Hermione despaired.

You said you were never here. You lied to me.

Snape stepped past Jonas, his back to him as he looked upon the girl lying prone upon the ground.

"Why was I not informed of this sooner?" he asked in a tone of voice that Hermione had never heard before. He barely whispered, yet the sound sent chills down her spine.

How many more things have you lied to me about?

"Sir," grunted Dolohov. "We believed it to be beyond your concern. You were tracking Potter and..."

"And doing so serves absolutely no purpose when the person responsible for coordinating his actions is lying here among the ruins of her house. Lucius..." The blond wizard's eyes darted over as the dark wizard turned his attention to him. "Physical violence was never your style. Who is responsible for this?"

"I am," Jonas said.

Snape's black eyes settled upon Jonas, and Hermione's heart jerked as she felt his eyes also upon her still can't take my eyes off of you, no matter how I might despise you.

Snape's voice, if possible, grew even colder. "You will speak when you are spoken to, boy."

Jonas tipped his head not quite low enough to be deferent. "I believed that I would be better suited to answer for myself."

Snape's lip curled in a sneer. "How long did you torture her?"

"Three hours, give or take a few minutes."

"Impossible. The Longbottoms went insane after one hour."

Hermione cursed the dark and the inability to see clearly into his eyes. He could not be emotionless; he could not stand there and feel nothing...

Jonas smiled. "I did it myself, so I'm pretty sure."

"As sure as you may be, the fact remains that you have done a remarkably stupid thing. Who do you think is the mind behind all of Potter's actions now that the old fool is gone? You have destroyed any hope that her mind could be put to use in our service. And it is also obvious that despite all your trouble, she has told you nothing."

"There's more than one way to hurt a sniveling schoolgirl..." Jonas snickered. "So many more." She felt his hand creep to his belt buckle.

A great rush of air escaped from Snape's mouth that might have been laughter. "Not only is that arguably impossible from your end, it would serve no purpose. The Mudblood has not talked after all this time, which means that she knows nothing of use. The obvious solution is to return her, wiping her memory so that she remembers nothing of tonight, and wait until she learns something of use. As I have said, this girl controls Potter. What is it, Jonas? You look as if you don't believe me. That would imply that you believe this Mudblood has resisted your very best efforts to make her talk, and... well, aren't you supposed to be the perfect soldier?"

A grinding sound filled her ears as Jonas bared his teeth at Snape in animalistic fury. He did not, however, disagree.

Snape smirked. The semi-circle of Death Eaters watched as he glided over to where Hermione lay flat upon her back, her pain-filled eyes staring into the night sky.

The girl's spine arched, and wretched coughs emerged from her throat as Snape neared.

"Intendos Auros," muttered Jonas, so softly that no one else could hear. The sounds of Snape's booted feet striking the ground suddenly grew louder. There was the scrunch of gravel as he stopped, looming over her fallen form.

Her own voice was much more distant. "...Snape," she heard herself say.

"Miss Granger," Snape hissed. Then he paused, his Adam's apple bobbing. "What an unexpected displeasure it is to see you here."

His wand trailed a path down her cheek, pushing her head to one side. Snape's breathing sounded unnaturally ragged in Jonas' ears, or it could have been the effect of the listening charm. Snape took several steps back and stopped. His body was angled in such a way that only Jonas had a clear line of sight to his face.

Only Jonas and Hermione saw the look of gut-wrenching sorrow she was too skeptical to call it compassion fill his gaze like a ray of sunlight piercing a deep, dark pool. Snape pointed his wand at her head.

"Oblivate," he said, sending a jet of silver light at her, his whisper filling her ears like a prayer.

"CRUCIO!"

Hermione screamed in surprise as she found herself surrounded in crackling red light. There was more hatred, more fury, in this curse than in any dark speech that had passed Jonas' lips before now. Hermione felt his mind shudder; then she was expelled from his body along with silvery tendrils of memory, traveling upon the curse, traveling towards....

The curse streaked toward Snape, and she was traveling inside, her world spackled with red sparks that connected and shivered around her. The world outside was a blur, and she felt the curse impact Snape between the shoulder blades.

And then her world exploded.

She was in Snape's body, in his head, in the ragged supernovas of his twisting nerves, in the tips of his fingers as they locked around his wand, unable to move from the pain. She saw flashes of her other self curling in upon herself, screaming until she had no voice left. For an eternal, excruciating moment, she felt her other self and Snape within her head at the same time, their essences bumping against each other and sliding apart like bars of soap floating in water.

"Hermione!"

She thought she heard it escape his lips, a shout with the brevity and intensity of brushing her hand against a burning stove.

There was a sun-bright explosion as two flashes of colored light, one red and one silver, collided like two dueling dragons. She felt something within her other self shudder and then disintegrate, leaving only emptiness behind.

Then she was looking through Snape's eyes as they snapped out of their pain-filled haze to see Malfoy and a Death Eater she did not recognize holding a young boy between them. The boy, he could not have been more than twelve years of age, cried out as Malfoy threw his weight onto his arm, snapping the bone.

Hermione screamed at them to stop. She could see the tears in the boy's blue eyes, and his skin was as pale as a ghost's. The Death Eater standing by Malfoy twisted the boy's broken arm viciously, sending him to his knees, and Hermione's blood boiled at the sight. However, the words the Death Eater spoke next froze her to her core.

"You're dead, Jonas," he hissed.

The boy's face screwed up, and Hermione saw that they had been tears of rage, not pain, in his eyes. Malfoy had broken his arm to make him drop his wand.

"He's a traitor!" the boy spat at Snape. "I saw the look on his face. He cares for the Mudblood bitch." The childish voice, which sounded effeminate on the man that Hermione had believed Jonas to be, was now the most horrifying sound she had ever heard.

"You cursed a superior officer, little Death Eater," Lucius hissed into his ear.

"And now you'll have to explain yourself to him," said the unknown Death Eater.

Jonas sneered. "I owe him nothing!"

"Not Severus." Lucius smirked, twirling the boy's wand in his fingers. "Him." Then all eyes, including Snape's, turned as one as Lord Voldemort stepped into the center of the circle.

He was barely three feet from Snape, and Hermione couldn't help squirming. The slanted red eyes turned onto her, and she had trouble breathing.

He can't see me, he can't see me...

She nearly melted from fright when she felt the cold tips of Voldemort's fingers touch Snape's...her...cheek. The fingers slipped downwards, in the direction of his throat, then changed course at the last moment, moving towards the center of the face. They touched his skin under his nose and came away with the tips glistening with blood.

"I trust you are not damaged irreparably, Severus."

Hermione felt Snape nod abruptly, coldly.

Behind Voldemort, Jonas sniffled, wiping his nose with his unbroken hand, and looking for all the world like a little boy who had just lost his favorite toy. On the ground, Hermione lay unmoving upon her back, eyes staring blankly upwards.

Voldemort turned slowly, with the ease and menace of a panther. At a gesture from him, Malfoy and the Death Eater released their hold on the boy. They did not return his wand.

"Jonas, Jonassss..." Voldemort's reptilian tongue lingered on the final syllable of the name languidly. "You disappoint me."

Jonas drew himself up to his full height of four feet, ten inches, including his straw-colored hair. "My Lord, you taught me..."

"I taught you to be the perfect soldier. And that involves respecting your superiors."

Jonas sniffed and frowned. "My arm really hurts."

Voldemort's eyes gleamed as if he were smiling. "Silence." He drew the tip of his wand down the boy's downy cheek, leaving a thin line of blood. "I suppose that it is somewhat poetic. When I pulled you from the trash heap as a babe, I had marvelous plans for you. If Dumbledore was going to build his perfect warrior from a toddler, it was only reasonable that I should do the same. And he thought I spent over ten years as a helpless cripple! You were to be my greatest warrior, Jonas. After all, there is nothing on earth crueler than children. But from trash you were born and to trash you have returned."

The boy's eyes, which had been slowly drifting closed as he drank in the praise, opened abruptly. "My Lord! Please let me explain. I saw his eyes as he prepared to curse the Mudblood. There was no hatred there, only compassion."

The smile in Voldemort's eyes grew into a nasty grin. "No, boy, it is you who does not understand. You cursed Severus Snape; you may as well have cursed me."

Jonas gritted his teeth together. "I did what I thought was proper, my Lord."

There was a chilling laugh from Voldemort. "And I too shall do what I think is proper. Severus!"

Snape's gaze moved from the boy to Voldemort smoothly like a camera changing focus. He made a slight bow. "Yes, my Lord."

"What satisfaction do you demand from our willful son?"

There was a silent pause that roared through Hermione's ears. "I demand the fate of the Mudblood."

"Such a curious and small price. Should I have listened to Jonas? Can it be true that you care for this witch?" Voldemort's cajoling tone was edged with ice.

Snape laughed lightly. "I demand the fate of the Mudblood in hopes that something still may be salvaged of her mind for our ends. For the injury and insult to my person, I demand the fate of Jonas."

The circle of Death Eaters seemed to shrink away, cringing in anticipation of Voldemort's reaction.

The Dark wizard's red, serpentine eyes narrowed. "Is it really necessary for you to kill him?" he said at last.

"Death would be too kind. The boy is a danger to everyone around him. He no longer knows his place. He killed Draco Malfoy in Hogsmeade last September, against your orders. He has turned his wand upon a Death Eater today."

Voldemort paused, long and calculating. "I expected as much from you, Severus," he replied. "You are, after all, a man who knows his values." He paused, pondering as wistfully as his flat, reptilian face would allow. "It is a shame to lose such an effective instrument."

There was a blinding white flash of magic, and both Malfoy and the other Death Eater released the boy with hisses of pain. The stench of scorched flesh filled the air. Hermione blinked and almost missed Snape's hand flying forward, wandless the smoke clearing to reveal the fair-haired boy suspended in a crackling sphere of energy, limbs splayed inelegantly in the posture of fleeing.

Jonas fell roughly to the ground when Snape released him. The Death Eaters tightened the circle. He got to his feet slowly, and as he turned his hard, blue eyes on Snape, he began to clap his good hand and broken hand together slowly, in mocking applause.

"You may take your secret to the grave, Snape. But I know... I know." The boy's voice, no longer light and jeering, sounded as if it were being scraped over sandpaper.

"It's a shame that you were never taught how to fear, Jonas. I don't think I'll enjoy this nearly as much as a result," drawled Snape. His voice was cold and reverberated like a death knell in Hermione's head.

The voice was emotionless, soulless. She found herself praying to whatever gods that existed that Snape's skills as an Occlumens must have merely blocked his feelings from even himself.

"Quirictusempra."

The spell was spoken as calmly as if he were reading off a list of Potions ingredients. Hermione had never heard it before. Apparently, neither had the Death Eaters, for they watched the sickly yellow curse arch towards the boy with an air of morbid curiosity.

The beam of odd yellow light struck Jonas square in the chest, and he grimaced, scratching at the spot. For a moment, Hermione imagined that Snape had struck him with an advanced version of the Tickling Charm.

Then Jonas began to laugh in short, sharp gasps, always scratching away at the spot on his chest. Five minutes later, the buttons on his thin linen shirt flew in every direction as his fingernails tore through the fabric and raked bloody gashes across his skin. His gasping had mutated into the guttural moans of a wounded animal.

"Cruciatus is a blunt instrument, boy," said Snape, his voice smooth as butter rum, his eyes alight with hideous delight. "It is always the same level of pain. The victim knows what to expect. It becomes... tiring."

Jonas dropped to one knee, keening as he clutched at his chest, a paroxysm of a small, shriveled man suffering a heart attack.

"I find it is much better to peel away their endurance layer by layer. A skilled wizard could continue this spell for hours, even days, as the victim begins to realize that the pain just gets worse, that it can always get worse... and that it will never stop getting worse, every second that it continues."

Jonas was on his back now, blood gurgling in his throat from where he had bitten through his tongue. He flailed his limbs like a madman one moment and curled into a foetal position the next.

Time ceased to have meaning and was marked only as the boy's gasping turned into screaming and finally into sobbing pleas for mercy. A dozen Death Eaters, their Dark Lord, and Hermione-through-Snape's-eyes watched as Jonas begged for his mother and his father, for mercy, and finally for death.

The boy didn't move anymore; he had broken his back, arching from the ground in spasms of pain. His eyes lolled in his head as his skin began to glow strangely. For a brief instant, his veins were imprinted clearly against translucent skin, a network of nerves glowing darkly like molten lava flowing through cracks in earth. Then the body burst into flames, a rancid inferno that blazed brighter than the sun before extinguishing in a puff of smoke, leaving only a pile of ash behind.

Snape's breaths were rapid and harsh in Hermione's ears. "Unfortunately, the body always gives out long before the mind breaks."

Within the circle, nobody spoke. The other Hermione remained as she was before, prone upon the ground, locked within her own personal hell and immune to the horrors around her.

Then Lucius Malfoy flicked away a spot of ash that had settled upon his sleeve. "See what I mean? That is style."

Without a word, Snape walked over to Hermione's body and reached down, his spidery fingers closing around her limp wrist. She wished she had a corporeal hand to slap him and scream for him to get his filthy hands off of her.

"Severus. Stop." Voldemort's voice sounded behind them, curt and clear. The reptilian wizard sounded almost joyful. "Just where did you learn that delightful little spell?"

Snape's shoulders rose and fell. Then he turned to face the dark wizard. He had not released Hermione's wrist. "I invented it back in my school days, my Lord. There was little else to do at Hogwarts."

"Quite advanced for a schoolboy's daydreamings." Snape was silent, his eyes fixed on a point about two inches in front of Voldemort's curled lip. "See that you never again keep anything that useful to yourself, Severus."

Snape nodded rigidly. "Never, my Lord."

"For example, would you care to enlighten us as to what you will do to the Mudblood?"

Snape looked down to where he was still holding her wrist. "The girl was hit with a complex combination of spells with promising results. It seems to have completely incapacitated her where several hours of the Cruciatus could not. I would like to properly analyze her symptoms and see if I might refine such a weapon against our enemies. This much we can salvage from this botched operation."

"Botched is right," Malfoy sniffed. "I would have liked to see how strong her singular mind truly was. What a pity that mind had to be wasted on one of her kind."

The assault came rapidly, unexpectedly. But Voldemort only lingered at the gates to Snape's mind, stroking the fine border separating him from Snape's deepest thoughts, a location that felt like bare millimeters from where Hermione shrank away, trembling. Then Voldemort withdrew and nodded. "Promise me that I will see the results of your endeavors in good time."

Snape inclined his head. "Yes, my Lord." Then he turned to the other Death Eaters. "Torch the house. Leave no Dark Mark in the sky; let the police think this a case of Muggle arson so that the Order will not be informed. It wouldn't do to put them on their guard."

And then the world disappeared before him, and Hermione let out a little scream as they were sucked into the vacuum of Apparition, reappearing before Spinner's End with the mill chimney on the horizon.

Snape muttered something under his breath, and Hermione's body lifted to hover several centimeters from the ground. He walked rapidly up the street and through his front door, guiding Hermione behind him like a floating sack.

Once the door was closed and warded behind him, he turned towards another door off the side of the main sitting area through which she caught a glimpse of a bedroom. Then he seemed to think better of it and instead flung Hermione's body onto the sofa in the middle of the room. The dusty springs squeaked as her body hit the cushions.

hard. Hermione heard herself moan softly.

Get me out of your filthy head, *she thought*. I don't want to see this. Please, please...

But he was backing away from the sofa, step after shuddering step. A lurid collage of every awful thing that the world contained seemed to surge through his mind, and Hermione nearly passed out from its intensity. Then Snape tore the Death Eater mask from his face and fell to his knees, retching violently over the ragged carpet.

Hermione felt his jaw tremble as his stomach emptied itself again and again until there was nothing left and he continued to dry heave with shuddering, gasping breaths.

He remained there, his forehead pressed against the hard floor as his breathing slowly grew deeper and calmer. It took a long time, long enough for Hermione to grow certain that she truly didn't know him at all.

Snape struggled halfway up and moved over to the side of the couch on his knees before taking her shattered wrist tenderly in his hand. He took a deep breath before murmuring a spell in a steady tone. Hermione's wrist went limp and rubbery in his grasp.

"Be thankful to that idiot Lockhart for teaching us that charm in your second year. Otherwise, I would be at quite a loss." The voice that had tortured a young boy to death mere minutes ago quavered under a watery smile as he held her wrist gently in his hand.

Without releasing her hand, he reached into the folds of his cloak and removed a small vial. Hermione recognized it as Skele-Gro. He pulled the cap off with his teeth and then tipped the steaming contents into her mouth, rubbing her throat gently to induce swallowing.

The girl on the sofa did not react except to close and reopen her eyes with painful slowness.

Her vision blurred, and Snape blinked rapidly, lifting a hand to wipe the moisture from his eyes.

There was the sound of a gasp from far away, and the scene began to fade. Snape, she realized, attempting to pull her out of his memory.

She mentally seized upon the nothingness before it had a chance to disappear from view. Contrary to her early desire to depart, she knew she would not leave now until she had seen everything. Feeling as if she were pulling a Hippogriff through a knothole, she dragged Spinner's End back into focus.

It was an indeterminate amount of time later. The couch had been transfigured into a cot, and Hermione's wrist that Snape held in his hand was no longer swollen. With his other hand, he bent finger by finger forward and backward, watching her face intently.

The scene blinked like a projector moving to the next image in a slideshow.

Hermione screamed, her good hand scrambling for purchase on the wall behind her, her wand hand dangling at one side, the hand bent unnaturally at her wrist that would never heal properly. He walked toward her, hands held out, wandless. "I'm a friend, Hermione. I'm a friend."

Her eyes bugged out from a mask of pure terror. "Who is she? Who are you talking to?"

His voice was impossibly gentle. "You, Hermione. It's you."

With a hiss, she brought her distorted right hand to her temple, rubbing forcefully. She opened her eyes again, her gaze darting around the enclosed room like a caged animal.

Her eyes lit upon the strange, dark wizard standing much too close. She shrank against the wall and began to scream piteously. "Where am I? Who are you? Don't hurt me, please..."

Blink.

Snape lifted his face from the sink and looked into the mirror. A skeletal horror looked back, its cheeks sunken and its eyes glowing dully like the smoldering remnants of a firework. He looked down, catching a handful of water with difficulty between his long, bony fingers and splashing it over his face.

By the time he shook the droplets from his eyes, he was standing before the large table in the well-lit lab, and Hermione realized he had Apparated within his own house. Erected before his eyes was a magnificent construction of glass and metal tubing; brightly colored liquids flowed through them into graduated beakers that looked as if they had been stolen from a Muggle chemistry class. Scattered all about the table were clippings of articles and tattered magazines that bore titles such as "The Search for an Alzheimer's Cure" and "The Truth About Amnesia."

It took Hermione several seconds to get over her shock enough to examine Snape's memories. He had spent a week reading through every book on memory charms he owned as well as the considerable collection in Malfoy's private library. Finding nothing even remotely similar to her condition, he had turned to Muggle publications. He had hit upon a promising solution at last, but it had required Muggle laboratory equipment.

She watched Snape bend over a small dancing flame beneath a glass beaker filled with clear liquid and adjust a knob until the flame blazed blue.

Blink.

Hermione wrinkled her face in distaste and pushed the empty beaker back into Snape's hands. She shuddered lightly and then was still. Her eyes rolled unnaturally and then focused on his face. "I feel as if I should be afraid of you, and yet I can't seem to scream. Why?"

Snape made the beaker disappear into the folds of his cloak. "I believe that your brain has grown weary of fear, even if you don't actively remember."

She snorted. "Remember. The last thing I remember is heading home on the Hogwarts Express." She stopped, and she could see her brain working furiously. "Then where... where is this?" Her eyes widened and she backed away. "What have you done to me?"

"Why are you so afraid, Hermione?"

"Do I have a reason not to be? It was always Harry and Ron rushing off into danger while I made excuses and held them back. I'm not the strong one. I never was."

*Snape stood up so fast that Hermione flinched. "Not the strong one? Don't you ever ever **think**... Shut up, Miss Granger, just shut up!"*

He swept out of the room and slammed the bedroom door behind him. Then he fell to his knees before the mattress, and for the first time, Hermione heard him weep.

Blink.

"What are you doing with a Muggle stopwatch?"

He looked down at the purple plastic atrocity in his hand and then back up at her. "Because I must be precise," he said simply.

"Precise about what?"

He glared at her steadily. "Much as it pains me to admit this, Hermione, you were never as irritating as you are now."

She huffed and swung her dangling feet from the edge of the cot. "Hermione. My name is Hermione," she repeated. "Why do I remember other people's names but not mine? And not yours?"

He never took his eyes from the stopwatch. "Trust me when I say that you are better off by not remembering me."

"I was hurt, wasn't I? By Death Eaters." She gestured to her wrist once again resting in a sling. "I can still feel the pain lingering in my body. Why am I here then?"

He did look up from the watch then. Hermione saw herself shiver as their gazes locked. "You are here because you were worth saving. Because people like you are the only reason I continue playing this miserable game."

Her eyes went wide and for a heart-stopping moment, there was a flicker of recognition in her eyes. "You were my professor," she said slowly, her eyes sliding briefly out of focus.

Snape's fingers dug into the arm of the chair until the wood cracked.

Hermione's lips moved. "You were my professor. You're a wizard. What..." She swayed as her eyes slid in and out of focus. Then she frowned. "What are you doing with a Muggle stopwatch?"

Snape's sigh of relief was released the same time he clicked off the stopwatch. The digits read "04:08:15." His thoughts rang through his mind, clear as spoken word.

She can remember over four minutes at a time now. She is recovering quickly. Too quickly. She must be returned.

Blink.

He stood over her as she slept, her body curled in a protective foetal position. The moonlight illuminated a stray curl tickling her cheek. He brushed it back behind her ear, his fingers lingering over her skin.

From somewhere outside his field of vision, a few notes of phoenix song floated through the air, humming with the warmth of honeybees. Snape raised his hand, and Fawkes came to land upon his outstretched arm.

Dark hair met crimson feathers as Snape bent his head to the creature, whispering words in a language that Hermione did not understand. He finished muttering, stroking one finger along one of the phoenix's long, beautiful tail feathers.

"Hogwarts," he whispered.

Fawkes stared hard at Snape with his small, beady eyes and seemed to nod. With a flurry of feathers, the phoenix flew out of a window and out of sight.

His other hand reached into his robes and emerged with a vial filled with oily black liquid. He tipped the contents into her slightly open mouth and then wrapped his spidery fingers around her unresisting wrists, jerking them roughly out from under her body.

Blink.

She blinked away the pins-and-needles feeling of emerging from the void of Apparition and looked into Voldemort's red eyes. Snape bowed to the dark wizard and gestured curtly to Hermione's body lying at their feet.

The body's eyes stared into nothingness. Her chest was still in death. She wore the torn white sweater and jeans she had worn on that fateful evening. Every single square inch of exposed skin was covered with dark bruises.

Voldemort laughed chillingly. "Why, Severus, I never believed you interested in that sort of thing."

Snape sniffed in disinterest. "The tests were singularly unsuccessful. I decided that she had outlived her usefulness; she fought back."

"Proud little Gryffindor! Well far be it from us to deprive Hogwarts of such a jewel. Leave her at the gates. As a parting gift."

Snape bowed. "With pleasure, my Lord."

Blink.

"Murderous bastard!"

Having just pushed open the main gate of Hogwarts, Snape whirled around, barely deflecting the vicious Severing Charm aimed at his arm.

Minerva McGonagall held her wand trained upon him, her matronly face contorted with fury until it resembled a grey-feathered bird of prey. "I didn't believe it when the wards told me you were here. I didn't believe you had the nerve to return. First Dumbledore, now Hermione?"

"Minerva..."

"Don't call me that!" she screamed, sending another curse flying that Snape easily deflected.

"Petrificus Totalus," he said, almost leisurely. McGonagall, still distracted by her anger, didn't have a chance.

"Now," said Snape, observing the rolling eyes of his infuriated and captive audience. "As much as I would like to explain all of my actions to you, Minerva, if only to prevent you from another pitiful attempt to hex me, I simply don't have the time. So pay attention. Miss Granger is not dead. The potion will wear off in about an hour, ample time for you to bring her unnoticed into the Hospital Wing and keep her hidden. I cannot stress how important it is that her presence remains secret. The Dark Lord believes her to be dead, and that continued belief is the only thing that will keep her alive."

He pointed his wand at the totem-like McGonagall. Finite Incantatem."

She stumbled but kept her wand affixed upon him. "The bruises, Snape?"

He smiled nastily. "You'd like to think so, wouldn't you? It would be convenient for you to think me a monster. They are part of a Glamour Charm, Minerva, and will vanish as soon as I am gone."

"You're not going anywhere," she hissed.

"Imperio Prodicto."

McGonagall's wand arm fell to her side, and her eyes seemed to glaze over. Snape removed a familiar silver bracelet from his robe. The freshly minted metal surface gleamed with the unmistakable etchings of a snake drinking from a flowing stream. With a whispered spell, he concealed the bracelet within an inner pocket of McGonagall's robes.

"You will wait until Miss Granger's condition has stabilized, and then you will find this bracelet on your person and give it to her, believing yourself to have made it. It will prove to be of immeasurable value to her."

McGonagall blinked several times and then nodded.

Snape looked down at the lifeless body at his feet, and Hermione felt a sudden surge of emotion through his mind that left her reeling.

Then he looked back up at McGonagall. "You will forget that I was here."

"Obliviate!"

The spell struck McGonagall the same time that Snape Disapparated, and everything was plunged into darkness.

The slideshow had ended.

--Still 2:303:00pm, September 19, 1998--

Hermione blinked away the last remaining tendrils of Snape's memory as she breathed deeply, feeling as if she had just surfaced from a deep pool.

Snape gently lifted his fingertips from her temples. "I'm sorry. I suppose I showed you more than you needed to know," he said, and his voice penetrated her shock long enough to break her heart.

"Severus..."

"Do you see now? There is no one left to avenge yourself upon other than myself. Can you blame me for treating death like a fair bargain?"

"No," Hermione shook her head, bewildered. "You saved me."

"I destroyed your mind, Hermione!! I'm the reason you are like this now... like a bird shorn of its wings... always doubting yourself and your abilities... always certain that you couldn't possibly be as courageous as your friends. You have said it yourself... getting back at the evil bastard is what you want; it would make you happy. Well, it would be my pleasure to give you that pleasure. All it will require is the death of a single despicable man."

"Why are you saying these things?" Hermione cried. "Why? Did you forget how much you risked for my sake, for all our sakes over the years? I have not. When the war is over..."

"When the war is over, I expect to be dead, and I'd rather not have it be because of my silly promise to Lucius. Spare me your anguish, Miss Granger. I do not deserve any hero's reward when peace comes. I have played a wretched game for 17 years, sitting at the right hand of two masters, bowing my head in supplication as each of them prided himself in my loyalty. Oh, it was a dangerous game, but a game nonetheless. I could not deny it was a thrill to walk on the edge of a knife, and I never did so out of a desire to save the world. Do not think that what I did to you is the only thing I have done to deserve death. You've seen what I can do, what I did do to a pleading child. When peace comes, it will no longer be my world to live in."

"I don't believe you," Hermione said obstinately. "You couldn't have done all the things you did for me... and all the things you've done since then, if you hadn't changed."

"You still believe in redemption, you silly girl?" Snape laughed; it was a wretched sound. "I did those things for the same reason I have done everything in my life. I'm Eileen's son through and through. I'm a selfish bastard who wanted his worthless, pathetic life to have some meaning, even if it meant doing thankless jobs for everyone in the world. Or protecting Lily Potter after she cut me out of her life. Or allowing myself to entertain the dream that there could have ever been anything between us that is untainted and good."

"And it would have truly been a dream to take you to Paris tonight, knowing that the person I respected most in the world was upon my arm. But dreams end, Hermione. Always. Even if Lucius had not arrived when he did, my fate would have caught up to me eventually. In the end, when the side of the Light triumphs, it is best that you feel nothing but contempt for me and everything I stand for. It's best that no one miss me in the slightest after I'm gone."

"I would miss you, Severus. I need you." Tears streamed down her face as she finally spoke the words she had felt for ages.

"You say that now," Snape said gently. But he had not masked his shock quickly enough that she hadn't seen it. "But as time passes, you will always remember me as the one who ruined you. Your Gryffindor conscience will force your quill to write the words. And you will hate me."

"Never."

"Oh, you will, Hermione, you will. One way or another, I will see to it that you hate me enough to do what you must."

She looked up in shock, seeing his face set into a statue-like grimace. "By all the gods why?"

"Because what was done to you was monstrous, and I, in a cowardly decision to wipe it from your mind, destroyed your life. It matters not that I wasn't directly responsible. I deserve to be punished for it. I deserve to be punished for so much."

"You're a bloody martyr, Severus. And... and stupid and an idiot as well, and I won't let you do this."

His hands caught hers fiercely as they reached for her quill, and Hermione heard a faint crack. *He broke the quill. Oh, gods, what will I do?*

"Why? Because you deserve your justice, and you deserve your revenge."

She was beating at his chest, then kicking his shins when his iron grip prevented her from landing any blows with her fists. "I'm not going to kill you, you stupid man! Can't you see that I've already forgiven you?"

"You would forgive me of this ... of the rape of your mind? That you would do so is beyond my comprehension. But there must be something that even a silly Gryffindor heart will not forgive. I cannot understand how I have come to be the object of your affections, but it will serve me well. You would not forgive such a gross betrayal in the

end." The intensity of his gaze nearly made her heart bleed, and when she looked back at him, she knew that he was serious.

Hermione shook her head furiously. "I may not be able to remember, but I'm not stupid. You can't just *pretend* to care for so long. I'll know. I'll know!"

"You forget, Miss Granger, that I am a consummate actor," he declared in a snide monotone that made her want to choke the life out of him.

"Fuck you, Severus Snape!" she screamed. She couldn't see his face through her tears, but his sudden stillness told her that she had said something very dangerous.

She felt him lifting her hands, raising them towards her face. He stepped closer, and he released her wrists, trapping her hands between their bodies. His own hands lifted to rest on either side of her head, squeezing her face just short of bruising the skin. His fingertips burned like censers on her cheeks.

He needn't have bothered restraining her hands; the force of his gaze burning into her eyes held her as immobile as his chest pressing up against her forearms. As his face filled her vision, she knew exactly what he was going to do, but that didn't prevent her from staring in disbelief as his lips descended upon hers.

Viktor had kissed her clumsily, with a gentleness that belied his rough exterior, as if he were afraid of hurting her. Ron had kissed her tenderly, with an ardent intensity that hinted of passion. The night before the attack on Hogsmeade, a drunken Draco Malfoy had given her a very sloppy but utterly exhilarating kiss, his apology a mumbled whisper as he passed out.

Severus Snape kissed her as if he were drawing the last breath of his life from her lips. He feasted upon her mouth like a starving man, and his gasping breaths filled her ears like crackling wildfire.

Hermione banged her shin against the armchair as she was backed roughly into the bookshelf. And then her arms were free to make their way up the length of his back to wind about his neck, dragging him closer.

They kissed violently, a wet battle of teeth, lips, and tongue. Severus loomed over her, bending her back until she felt the top of her head connect with a hard wooden edge of a shelf. She gasped in pain, seeing stars. He released her lips and pushed her head down until he could kiss the wound through her curls, his probing tongue soothing the rapidly swelling bump.

Hermione took advantage of his new position to latch onto his collarbone, planting open-mouthed kisses on his skin over to the hollow at the base of his neck. She felt his larynx vibrate with his groan.

From a distance, she also felt the telltale twinge of the bracelet on her wrist.

Severus gripped her head again and dragged her mouth back up to his. His kiss this time was sweeter, slower. Irresistible. Hermione relaxed and let him take control, gasping when his teeth nipped her bottom lip hard enough to draw blood.

"I'm sorry..." he whispered as he drew away. Hermione knew that he wasn't apologizing for her cut lip, and for a moment, she imagined that he had said something else *My love*.

"Tell me this is an act, Severus..."

"I could have kissed you forever," he whispered hoarsely. Something wet fell upon the tip of her nose, and she looked up, stunned, but he blinked and it was gone.

Staring into his eyes, she was helpless as her legs were kicked out from under her. Severus caught her easily and Apparated with her to the entrance of the potions lab. He dropped her unceremoniously at the top of the stairs. She landed in a heap, scratching her palms as she threw out her hands to break her fall.

"Miss Granger! Are you alright?"

Hermione put her hand to her cut lip and winced. Her head throbbed. "What happened?" she asked.

Finite Incantatem

In anticipation of the many groans and death threats for an epilogue, I really don't expect that I'll be writing one. This ending may seem very abrupt, but I thought it better to leave details of Snape and Hermione's new life following the scene in the field in chapter one up to your imaginations. In the end, it was the best ending Snape could have possibly hoped for, considering his impossible situations and the whole world's vendetta against him. But that's just my humble opinion, and the more different reactions from my readers the better. I like to think that I inspired you to think at least a little. :-)

I would like to thank first and foremost my two lovely betas without whom this story would have had copious extraneous commas and at least one gaping plot hole. Thank you sshg316 and Southern_Witch_69; your assistance, friendship, and encouragement have been invaluable and enormously appreciated.

I would also like to thank each and every one of my reviewers, especially those that stuck with this story from the beginning... you know who you are.

Finally, I would like to thank each and every one of my faithful readers. I would dearly like to know what you thought of my (overly?) ambitious endeavor. And as this is your last chance to tell me what you thought... please leave a review. I also encourage you to reread sections of this story now that you have all the chapters, as I had an inordinate amount of fun plugging in little clues and references throughout, from the seemingly-random appearances of Snape's raven to subtle hints of the growing SSHG relationship by the timestamps of scenes at Spinner's End extending later and later into the night.

And if after this, you are in the mood for lighter fare, I have also written two entertaining one-shots *More Than a Dream* and *Serpensortia* that can both be considered SSHG.

I'll leave you with this final lesson in bad Latin:

Intendos Auros = intendo (aim/extend) + auros (ear)

Quirictusempra = quirito (scream) + sempra (always)

Imperio Prodicto = impero (command) + prodicto (to delay)