

The Mortality Potion

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Hermione nervously glanced out her window for the fifth time that hour. She was sitting in a comfortable armchair in her living room, and she was nervous as could be.

She was often nervous these days, ever since Dumbledore died. A world without Dumbledore was to her synonymous with a world without safety, and it didn't help that her parents had left her alone for two weeks while they went to a conference in Glasgow.

She'd tried to convince them to stay, saying that all three of them were in danger ever since You-know- oh, all right, Voldemort, came back to power, especially her, and especially alone in their house for two weeks, but they seemed to think that there was nothing she couldn't do; after all, wasn't she the finest witch of their year? It didn't help when she explained that Voldemort was so much more powerful; they just assured her she was being modest. After all, hadn't her friend Harry survived him five times all ready? Surely she could do it if he could.

As soon as her parents left her, she'd written desperately to Harry and Ron to let her join them in Godric's Hollow, where they'd taken up residence for the time being. The Headquarters was not open to her; the adults had seemed even less willing to allow Harry, Ron, and herself into their secret society, now that Dumbledore had perished. The whole thing had been extraordinarily frustrating to her; after all, the three of them had done more resistance than most of the others. To be looked down upon, now, after all they'd done!

But Hedwig had come back with a long, angry letter from Ron, saying they were doing dangerous things and he would never forgive himself if something happened to her. She'd written back, much more angrily, that he'd never minded before they started dating and that he should stop playing the protective boyfriend and get her out of her solitude before something dangerous really did happen to her. Hedwig hadn't returned after that letter.

Hermione glanced out the window one last time and returned to her book. She was reading 1001 Nasty Jinxes to Try on Your Enemies, and she had to admit that some of the jinxes were very nasty indeed. After all, not having a tongue at all was so much nastier than having a tongue glued to the top of your mouth, like the one the Half-Blood Prince had been using. That is, Snape...

She was so worried and jumpy that when her doorbell rang, she jumped about three feet into the air and grasped at her wand frantically, flipping back through the book of jinxes hurriedly. It wasn't for another moment or two that she realized that if whoever was at her door had meant to harm her, she'd have half a dozen alarm charms ringing in her ear.

"Coming," she called to whoever was at the door and flung it open without even bothering to see who it was, stuffing her wand in her back pocket in case it was a Muggle.

Who she saw on her front porch, however, made her pull the wand back out of her pocket so fast it was a wonder her pants didn't rip.

"You," she cried, her eyes wide with fear.

"Yes," replied Severus Snape. "Yes, it's me."

He was lying on her front porch, bleeding out of many wounds and wearing an expression of pain on his face. Nonetheless, Hermione kept her wand pointed carefully at him.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, hoping she sounded braver than she felt.

"I thought that would be obvious to the meanest intellect," he replied scathingly. "I'm lying on your front porch, bleeding. Probably I need you to heal me."

"Why would I help you?" Hermione asked. "Oh my God, why am I standing here talking to you? Death Eaters are probably swooping down to kill me now! I should kill you!" She screwed up all her energy. "*Avada Kedavra!*" she cried, moving her wand like she'd seen countless other Death Eaters move theirs.

A flash of green light hit Snape in the chest, and he winced. "You stupid girl! Don't you know how much hate it takes to kill a man? Much more than you're even capable of." He pulled himself to his feet, clutching at his chest with one hand, and moved past her into the house.

Hermione was terrified by now. She raised her wand to jinx him, to hex him, to do something to stop his entrance into her home, but before she had a chance, he raised his own wand and waved it a few times, not bothering to mutter the spell aloud.

"Silly girl," he said, correctly reading the fear on her face as she found herself frozen and unable to speak. "Can't you see that I'm not here to hurt you? It's a very powerful enchantment you've placed on this house. My own home is not protected this well." Hermione tried not to allow her pride to swell to large he was, after all, a murderer. "Not that your protections could have stopped me if I'd wanted to kill you." She quickly deflated. "But if I'd been here to harm you, you would have found out about it, wouldn't you? I believe there were several alarm charms placed on the house. So clearly you're safe."

Hermione tried to speak, but found she was still bound. Snape, seeing that she only wanted to talk, and not harm him, removed the spell. "But, sir, why aren't you going to kill me? You killed Dumbledore, didn't you?"

To Hermione's surprise, Snape's eyes filled with tears. He glanced away from her, and when he glanced back, they were gone. "Yes, I killed Dumbledore."

That seemed to be the end of his statement, but Hermione wanted to hear more. No longer frightened of him, she moved closer to him and started to help him unclasp his filthy, bloody and wet cloak. "Why did you do it, sir?"

Snape's old sneer seemed to return to him. "That is a highly personal question, Miss Granger. But since I see you have gained Potter's curiosity from the inane amount of time you spend around him, I suppose I must answer for you to help me. Your beloved headmaster had been becoming weaker and weaker all year long. When he received information through me that the Dark Lord had commanded young Mr. Malfoy to kill him, Dumbledore made me swear to assist him if at all possible. After all, it would look suspicious to the Dark Lord if I was at Hogwarts all this time and never helped Draco in his mission. It was more important to Dumbledore that my position as a spy remain for the Order than him to continue on his life. He was weakened by the Dark Lord earlier in the summer; he knew his life was pretty much over.

"Unfortunately, it seems to have been a waste, because every time I have attempted to reach the remaining Order members, they have hexed me, and the Dark Lord, having expected Draco to fail, enabling him to kill the entire Malfoy family, was very displeased at Dumbledore's death. Therefore, here I am, waiting for you to heal me, suffering from several wounds from the dear old Cruciatius curse, not to mention a few of the Dark Lord's own invention. So, if my explanation has satisfied you, would you mind so very much helping me heal my wounds? They are cursed so that I cannot heal them myself."

Hermione, feeling a little remorseful, blushed a little and went back to unclasping Snape's cloak; in her concentration on the story, her fingers had fallen a little flat. "Erm, I've never healed any Cruciatius Curse wounds before. I'm not sure I know how..."

Snape sighed. "I've told Dumbledore a million times that basic healing charms should be taught to every single student that passes through the door. Flick your wand like this," he commanded, showing her the proper flick. His arms seemed deadened. "Then point it at me while saying the incantation, *Resurgum*. Got it?"

Hermione nodded once, nervous, but she did as Snape commanded. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, as if it took as much pain to get rid of it as was all ready there, but in a moment he opened his eyes again and slowly got to his feet. Hermione took a step backward, lowering his wand.

"There's one more wound I need you to heal," he said. "Once again, it's a cursed wound, and so I can't heal it myself."

He pulled off his outer robe, and Hermione took another half step back, not sure how much of his clothing he was going to take off. He unbuttoned his shirt, and Hermione let out a little gasp. A huge wound was slashed across his upper chest and was still bleeding profusely. Hermione rocked on her feet for a moment, and Snape reached out and grasped her around the wrist before she managed to fall.

"Miss Granger," Snape whispered, almost gently. "Please. I'm in a lot of pain. You're the only one who can help me. Will you please repeat the spell?"

Hermione nodded and muttered the word one more time with the flick he had shown her. She didn't want to look at his chest to see if she'd healed it properly, but she knew she'd have to. She hazarded a glance and was relieved to see he was all right. Snape flashed her a quick smile, and Hermione was dazzled he'd never smiled at her before; indeed, she'd never seen him do it before at all. It had been an almost predatorial smile, but at the same time she felt a swell of pride.

Snape started to pull his robes back on, but he stopped, one arm in and one arm out of his shirt. "Miss Granger, are you currently alone in this house?"

Hermione tensed up, afraid he was going to tell her there was someone else around. "I I thought so, sir..."

He pulled the other arm through the shirt, sneering. "Miss Granger, are you aware that the Dark Lord has returned to full power and is going to every length the eradicate the wizarding world from witches of Muggle birth?"

"Er," Hermione said. "Yes?"

"Then why," he hissed, his old Potions master self coming back, "are you alone in this house? Where are your friends Potter and Weasley?"

"They're currently in Godric's Hollow," Hermione said, not even thinking about concealing their location from Snape anymore.

"And why are you not with them?" he hissed.

A dark look crossed Hermione's face, though Snape started to button up his shirt, his long, thin fingers working quickly. "Ron seemed to think it would be too dangerous for me. He didn't seem to think I should be put through that."

"Miss Granger, you are in far more danger here! One of Dumbledore's last wishes was for you and the rest of the Golden Trio to remain safe! How are you respecting your revered headmaster's memory, remaining here alone?"

"It's not exactly my fault, sir! I tried to get the boys to let me go with them, but Ron was adamant. Then my parents left for some dentist's conference in Scotland, leaving me alone in this house. I tried to go to the headquarters, but I feel they would be more receptive of you rejoicing their ranks. I am just as terrified as you, sir, so I'd appreciate you not harping at me for something I can't help!"

Snape winced at Hermione's raised voice. Hermione instantly regretted it, remembering how beat up he had been when he'd arrived on her front step.

"Look," he said, taking a seat by her fire. "Why don't we help each other out. I need to make a certain potion for your friend Potter; right now the Dark Lord has too many enchantments on him for any curse to kill him, even if Potter does succeed in destroying all the Horcruxes, which I doubt he will. I need to make a potion to restore him to mortality, and I need a place to make it in. I also need you to give it to him because I doubt he'd accept anything from me.

Hermione snorted indelicately.

Snape continued as if he hadn't heard this outburst. "You need someone to stay with you and make sure you aren't murdered, as your fool of a boyfriend thinks he's protecting you by leaving you defenseless. We both get what we need. Is that all right with you, Miss Granger?"

Hermione shrugged. "Sure. But... Professor? If you're going to be living here, I'd really rather you didn't call me Miss Granger. It makes me feel like you're about to deduct points or assign detention."

A ghost of another smile appeared on Snape's lips. "Fine. Hermione. But you mustn't call me Professor, either, as I no longer am."

"Er, OK, Mr. Snape."

"Maybe we should just stick to 'sir.'"

Hermione really did smile.

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Hermione woke up the next morning to the sounds of a cauldron being set up in the living room. She entered it, still in her pajamas, to find Snape there, her Hogwarts trunk open beside him, beginning to boil water.

"I see you've finally awoken," Snape sneered. "I managed to find your potion-making materials on my own. I need you to owl to the apothecary to get the following ingredients." He handed her a list of ingredients, followed by a bag of gold. "I'm not sure where you'll get an owl, but that's not really my problem right now. It's yours."

If Hermione had any thought that things had changed between the two of them the night before, those thoughts quickly left her mind. She returned, muttering, to her bedroom. Hedwig had always managed to turn up when she needed him most, no matter whom the letter was delivered to, and she waited by her bedroom window after changing clothes. Sure enough, Hedwig appeared after only about ten or fifteen minutes.

"Hey, girl," Hermione said, opening the window to allow the owl in. She attached the order form to Hedwig's leg, copied over in case anyone would have recognized Snape's handwriting. "Be safe," she whispered to Hedwig, who bit her gently on the

hand to let her know she understood.

Fully dressed now, Hermione returned to the living room to see how Snape was getting along. He seemed to be fine with the ingredients she had for the time being, stirring them together with an ease that could only come from being a Potions master.

"Erm," Hermione said, as he glanced up at her with an irritated expression on his face. His hands continued to stir, clockwise, then counterclockwise, then clockwise... "I was just wondering if you needed any help, sir."

Snape stared at her so long and so hard that Hermione was regretting her decision to allow him to stay with her, let alone try to talk to him, when he nodded his head, once. "I don't need you now, but as soon as I add the Belladonna, the potion will become very draining to attend. I will probably need extensive care in the evenings. Have you sent off my order form?" he barked, as if he hadn't just as for extensive care.

"Yes, sir. I had them rush deliver, sir. It should be here later today."

Perhaps it was just because the strain of the double life was off of him, but he smiled at her again.

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The two of them had very little verbal contact over the next few days. Hermione, lonely with her parents and friends gone, spent most of her time reading in the living room with Snape. The two of them very rarely talked, and when they did, their conversations were abbreviated and often sarcastic on Snape's end. Hermione would bring Snape meals whenever she took her own, but he never bothered to notice that she was leaving them. Lunch and dinner would sit beside him all day long, but when Hermione would wake up the next day, empty plates would be next to the cauldron. The ingredients arrived from the apothecary the day after Hermione ordered them, and after a few days of slow simmering, Snape moved into the more intensive part of the potion.

Hermione was a little alarmed when it happened. She was sitting in her regular armchair, curled before the fire with Crookshanks in her lap, when Snape suddenly let out a cry and fainted in front of the cauldron.

Letting out a cry of her own, Hermione leapt out of the chair and hurried over to him. He was mumbling on the floor, and he'd never taught Hermione the way to awake a fainted person, so she ran into the bathroom and grabbed a washcloth and wet it before dashing back to his body. She lifted his head up and placed it in her lap before slowly dabbing his face with the washcloth. She couldn't help but notice that he looked very peaceful when he wasn't scowling and was kind of hoping he'd stay fainted for a while when he opened up his eyes and glared at her.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he hissed, pulling his head out of her lap and standing out. "When I asked you to provide me care, I was under the impression that you were a witch, and could do more than just wipe my face down with water."

Hermione felt stung. She'd woken him up, hadn't she? "You never taught me how to wake up a fainted person," she whispered back, not meeting his eye. "I only know how to wake up people when they've been knocked out through magical means. Fainting doesn't seem to fall under that category to me."

Snape started to snap back an incantation at her, but then he paused. "Actually, Miss Granger--"

Hermione made a noise.

"Actually, Hermione," he began again, inclining his head towards her. "most of the time wizards have invented ways to get around Muggle inconveniences like fainting fits. But I have to admit that your simple way did not give me the side effect of a headache, like it does when a competent mediwizard casts the spell, nor the side effect of tentacles sprouting from my head, as it does when an inferior witch performs it. So I think I will have to apologize for my previous harshness and thank you for your help."

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Ten minutes later, Hermione was back in her seat by the fire, trying to get her head around the fact that Snape had thanked her, when every single one of her alarm charms went off, loudly. She jumped about three feet and Snape swore loudly.

She started to stand up and pull out her wand, but before she had a chance, Snape had pointed his wand at her and murmured about seven or eight spells. She felt the familiar sensation of not being able to move or speak, and she also, moving her eyes down to look at her body, saw that she was invisible.

Snape ran from the room, wand out, and Hermione wanted to cry out to him and stop him. There was no point in him playing the hero right now, she thought to herself bitterly. Here she was, stuck in her house and worthless to the Order, while he was brewing a very complex and dangerous potion that would help Harry kill Voldemort. There was no way he'd be able to fend off all of the Death Eaters on his own....

There was a loud swearing at the front door, and Hermione heard a few loud cracks, as if powerful spells were being let off. She closed her eyes and waited for the sound of falling bodies to reach her ears. All she heard, however, was Snape yelling, "And STAY out!" before slamming the front door.

In a moment he came storming back into the living room, smelling a little singed and looking angrier than Hermione had ever seen him before. He impatiently waved his wand at the spot where Hermione was frozen, and she was able to move again.

"What happened, sir?" Hermione asked, returning to her seat, as she'd been half up and half down when he'd frozen her.

Snape snorted. "Some mangy Muggle boy thought it would be funny to throw a burning bag of feces on your front porch. Of course I naturally thought it was a curse of some sort, or otherwise a malignant package, so I hexed the boy and put out the flames, only to discover that while the boy did have malignant feelings towards this house, they had nothing to do with killing you. So I healed the boy and modified his memory, as well as the memory of the woman across the street, who was watering her plants." He still looked angry, but Hermione giggled.

"That would be Jake," Hermione told him. He didn't seem as amused as she did. "My parents are dentists, see, and most Muggle children don't enjoy going to the dentist. Jake especially doesn't. He pulls that prank about once every month or so. I didn't realize it would set off my alarms." She giggled again. Snape didn't seem to think it was funny at all.

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The potion continued to be very dangerous for Snape to prepare, and Hermione found herself dabbing at his face with a cool washcloth every night for the next seven nights. She couldn't help but think that Snape had a handsome face when he wasn't scowling or frowning; if only he were happier and less misused, she thought to herself. But he would always wake up with a scowl on his face.

Finally, on the seventh day, Snape stopped stirring the potion and sank into the armchair next to her by the fire.

"Is it done, sir?" Hermione asked, glancing at him, surprised. Most powerful potions required a lot more time than just a week and a half.

"Of course not, silly girl. It has to simmer for the next twenty-one days. Then I must add the last ingredient: fresh honeysuckle. I don't suppose there is any growing wild around here?"

Hermione shook her head.

"I was afraid of that."

"My parents are returning home in three days, sir. I should probably go owl them that you will be here when they return, so that they aren't frightened to find a grown wizard like yourself, as well as a potion of potentially deadly material, in their living room."

Snape waved his hand. "They've decided to stay in Glasgow for another month and a half. They believe that it was under your insistence, so they never bothered to call you. They're perfectly safe. I Apparated to their hotel room a few days ago and placed protective spells around it, so even if Death Eaters do decide to attack them, they will be protected."

Hermione blinked. "Oh. OK then."

Hermione got up then to go make dinner for the two of them, but to her surprise, Snape followed her.

"I'll do it," he said kindly as she began to pull out pots and pans. "Cooking and potions making go hand in hand, you know," he added, catching the look on her face.

Perfectly happy to let him do all the work, as she'd never really like cooking anyway, Hermione took a seat at the kitchen table to watch him work. It was actually a little sexy, she realized, to watch him move around the kitchen, chopping up vegetables with his long, slender fingers. She saw that he did nothing by magic, chopping everything up by hand. She realized that if he hadn't been her teacher for so long, she probably would have fallen in love with him right then.

After about half an hour of muttering around the kitchen, Snape returned to the kitchen table with Hermione, handing her a plate of pasta with a creamy cheese sauce.

"Miss Granger," he began, barking at her like he used to in class. She didn't respond, continuing to eat her meal. "Hermione," he began again, this time in a slightly softer tone. She glanced up at him.

"You are drastically unprepared for a conflict with the Dark Lord. That is, if your bumbling friends and the incompetent Order even allow you to assist them." He sneered. "I would like to begin teaching you Occlumency, if that is all right with you. Young Mr. Potter did not have the capabilities of perfecting the art of closing his mind, but then again, Potter is a fool. We will begin tomorrow," he said, giving her no time to refuse. Not that she would have.

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Hermione figured Snape would forget about his request, demand by the morning, wanting, instead, to fiddle with his potion, but by the time she crawled out of bed to pour herself a bowl of cereal and take a shower, Snape was all ready seated by her fireplace, reading a Muggle novel he'd pulled off her shelf.

"I see you've managed to pull yourself out of bed," he snapped at her. Hermione glanced at the clock. It was only nine thirty; she'd slept way later before. She supposed he was just antsy to get on to a new task and keep his mind off his exile.

When she returned to the living room, this time fully dressed, Snape slammed shut the book he'd been reading. She glanced at the title *Jane Eyre*. Hermione stifled a giggle. She'd always thought the earlier Mr. Rochester was remarkably like Snape.

"I suppose Potter has all ready explained to you how this works," he sneered, pulling his wand out of an interior pocket.

"Indeed, sir, plus I've read about it in several books," she explained.

"How very like you," he replied. "We will see how well they have prepared you.*Legilimens!*" he shrieked, and Hermione was suddenly dazzled by the

memories that flashed through her mind.

She was eleven, and Professor Dumbledore was coming to explain Hogwarts to her parents. She was six, and her father helped her build a sand castle on the beach. She was twelve and taking oh dear. She quickly tried to calm her mind, but it was too late. By the time she had properly emptied her mind, he all ready had seen it, that and so much more...

"Surprising," Snape muttered, and Hermione hung her head down. "I had thought that it was Potter that took the boomslang skin. I never would have suspected you... I suppose the fireworks were your idea, too?"

Even in though she knew she was in trouble, Hermione giggled. "Please, sir, do you really think Harry or Ron could have thought of that on their own? But I am very sorry, sir. Very," she added hurriedly. To her very great surprise, Snape cracked her another smile.

"That was very good for your first attempt. The fact that you blocked me at all, even after all those memories flew by, is extraordinary. We will try again."

Unfortunately, extraordinary or not, Hermione still had problems cutting Snape out of her mind before he could see any memories at all. He saw her failing at skiing when she was sixteen, he saw her fighting the troll her first year. He saw her ride a bicycle for the first time, and he saw her eating dinner with her father. He saw more embarrassing things too he caught her kissing Krum at the Yule Ball and Ron at the end of their sixth year.

A new memory was surfacing as Hermione attempted to fight him off for the fifth time. Each time it was getting harder because her defenses were down from the continued attacks. Snape, lying with his head in her lap, and Hermione not minding at all as she dabbed his face to revive him....

"I think that will be enough for right now," Snape said, hastily pulling out of her mind. She expected him to say something snide and sarcastic, about how a great wizard like him would never want a stupid Mudblood student like her, but he didn't say anything at all, instead offering her a bar of chocolate. "It will help with the dizzy feeling you're experiencing," he informed her, returning to the armchair and picking up Jane Eyre.

"Oh. Thank you, sir," Hermione replied, biting the chocolate. "For the lesson, too."

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Hermione had expected Snape to say something about what he had seen in her mind, or cancel their lessons, or something, but nothing of the sort happened for three days. He continued to assault her mind until she could repel him from the start, and then he made her do it five times in a row before offering her another smile and a bar of chocolate to get rid of the shakes.

That night, at dinner, he accosted her. "You are my student, Hermione," he informed her.

"Was your student," she corrected, confused at what he was alluding to. He hadn't mentioned what he had seen for so long that she assumed he'd forgotten or decided to misinterpret it.

"Either way, a relationship between the two of us would be most improper," he explained fiercely.

"Oh, sir," she began to tell him she wasn't really expecting anything from him.

"You are still a child," he hissed, ignoring her.

"I'm seventeen years old! I am definitely of age," she cut in, exasperated.

"You're only expressing these feelings because you've been shut up alone with only me for company."

"I didn't express anything! And trust me, it has nothing to do with the fact I'm alone. Do you really expect me to be that silly?"

"Besides, aren't you supposed to be Weasley's soul mate? Why don't you go back to your infantile boyfriend? I'm sure you're destined to be together, or some other such rot."

Hermione snorted. "Please. I'm only with him for the sex. Which isn't great. Do you really expect me to plan to stay with someone like Ron for the rest of my life? For Merlin's sake. I need someone with a little intelligence."

For the first time, Snape seemed to hear her. "You're only with Weasley for the sex?"

"Of course. Why else would I hang out with him? All he ever does is whine on about how you're such a prat, and how he's a horrible Quidditch player. It gets old pretty fast, trust me."

Snape seemed to need a moment to digest this. "And so you've just been using him?" He seemed genuinely taken aback.

Hermione shrugged. "I don't see why you're so upset. It's not like you wouldn't have done the same thing."

"Are you referring to my Death Eater past?" Snape snapped, suddenly angry.

Cringing, Hermione replied, "No, sir, I was merely referring to the fact that you are a Slytherin..."

Snape seemed to think that was all right.

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The two of them seemed to reach a kind of agreement after that. Neither one of them referred to the memory again, and the Occlumency lessons continued until Hermione was able to cut him out of her mind every day, from the beginning, for several days straight. He even began using wordless spells, but she was able to stop him before he could see any of her memories.

"I suppose that's the end of our lessons," Snape informed her stiffly after they had held an entire conversation on the merits of Charles Dickens while Snape attempted to rifle through her mind. "You seem to have mastered it. There is nothing more I can teach you."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" Hermione replied, smiling widely. "Do you think I'm prepared to go against Voldemort?"

Snape gritted his teeth at the name, and unconsciously rubbed his left arm, but replied, "The Dark Lord is a very skilled Legilimens. Much more skilled than I myself. It's hard to tell if you would be able to stand up against him, though I think you are as prepared as you ever will be."

He sank down into his armchair and rubbed his head. Hermione had the feeling that she distressed Snape sometimes.

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The two of them spent the next week, not exactly in companionable silence, but not in awkward silence either. Occasionally they would discuss the greater of the Muggle literature that Hermione had laying around her house, and at one point Snape even recommended one of his favorite witch authors, but for the most part they didn't talk.

Hermione found herself wondering what it would be like if Snape hadn't refused her, or at least if he hadn't found her memory, but she didn't dwell on it. While she did like Snape, and admired him greatly, she'd been rejected by so many that one more didn't really hurt.

Finally, Hermione woke up one morning to feel Snape shaking her gently on the shoulder. "Miss Granger," he whispered. "Miss er Hermione," he corrected, shaking her awake.

"Sir?" she replied groggily, glancing at the clock at her bedside. It was seven o'clock in the freaking morning.

"I must go collect honeysuckle for the final step of the potion. Do not open the door for anyone, including me. I know the spells that it takes to get through the enchantments, and I will be able to get through on my own. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Hermione mumbled, rolling over onto her side. Snape surprised her by covering up her exposed shoulder with the comforter before turning and leaving the room, before Apparating out of the room with a crack. She didn't have time to dwell on it, however, because she was all ready asleep again.

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When Hermione awoke, she was slightly upset to see Snape gone. She'd grown very used to his sarcastic comments, not to mention his tall, lean body occupying the chair next to her in the living room.

She was too distracted by his absence to get much of anything done, spending most of her time glancing, anxiously, out the window. She knew he'd said he'd Apparate in, but she couldn't help but glance up and down the street, as if watching for his walking figure.

When the alarm charms went off at around noon, Hermione was momentarily stunned. She didn't think that anyone would even think to bother her when Snape wasn't around to protect her. It wasn't until she heard someone swearing at the front door that she sprung to attention.

Her first priority was protecting the potion that Snape had been working so hard on. She whispered out a string of ancient spells she'd come across in her research, so that the only people who would be able to see or move the potion would be those that had worked on it and already knew its exact location.

The spells took time to utter, though, and so she hadn't gotten around to protecting herself when the living room door burst open and in flew Draco Malfoy.

"Malfoy!" Hermione exclaimed, holding her wand up defensively.

"*Expelliarmus*," Malfoy replied, Hermione's wand jumping out of her hand. He caught it deftly, and Hermione was suddenly very, very nervous indeed.

"Where is he?" Malfoy questioned her, pointing the wand at her heart.

"W-who?" Hermione stuttered, backing up until she hit the back wall.

"You know who. Where's Snape?"

"I don't know," Hermione answered truthfully. Snape hadn't mentioned where he was going to go to find fresh honeysuckle. Was it even in season? She couldn't think.

"Sure you do. *Crucio!*" Malfoy cried, as if to loosen her up.

Hermione felt intense, racking pain spread throughout her body, and she screamed before she could stop herself, falling to the floor and twitching as if thousands of volts of electricity were flowing through her body.

"Where is he?" Malfoy demanded, stopping the pain to question her again.

"I don't know!" Hermione told him again.

"Damn you!" Malfoy swore. He cast the same spell that Snape had used on her, so she couldn't move nor speak. Then he levitated her body and, grasping on her arm hard enough to make her cry out, had she been able to talk, he Disapparated her out of the living room.

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The next thing Hermione knew, she was inside a very dingy building. She could hear cars going by outside room she had been taken to, and it sounded to her like she was in the very heart of London.

"Did she tell you?" growled a man's voice on her right. She glanced over as far as she could, still not able to move, and saw that it was Macnair, the man who had been sent to kill Buckbeak.

"She was most resistant," Draco replied. "I tried torturing her, but she refused to give up his whereabouts. I thought that perhaps you could attempt Legilimency?"

Macnair nodded. "Indeed. The Dark Lord has been teaching me." He waved his wand, and Hermione could move again, but Draco was holding her closely so he couldn't escape. Macnair waved his wand one more time, and Hermione could feel him attempting to rifle through her mind for evidence of where Snape was, but she quickly shut him out.

"It's useless," Macnair sneered, immediately waving his wand to end the spell. "Snape has been teaching this one Occlumency. I would not have thought he would have sunk so far as to teach a Mudblood such as this the fine art of Occlumency. I see he has betrayed us well."

"Perhaps," said another voice to her left, which turned out to belong to a man who must have been Goyle's father. "Perhaps we could try torturing her some more? She is bound to crack eventually. Everyone does."

Macnair nodded, and Goyle waved his wand at her. "*Crucio!*" he shrieked, and Hermione felt the pain consuming her once more. All she wanted was to die. The pain was spreading farther now she could feel it all the way down to her toes, and oh, how it hurt it hurt so, so bad... She could feel herself losing it, and then "

"Stop!" cried Macnair. "If you continue any more, she will lose her mind, and then what use will she be to use? One more time, little girl. Where is Severus?"

"I'll never tell you," Hermione muttered, still in so much pain, even though the spell had been removed.

"Oh, but won't you?" Malfoy sneered, a trick he must have learned from Snape.

"Goyle the Veritaserum, please," Macnair commanded.

Goyle disappeared for a moment, but returned carrying a small vial of a liquid, which Hermione was able to identify as Veritaserum.

Macnair waved his wand once more, and Hermione suddenly felt very carefree.

"Why don't you drink this potion, Mudblood?" Macnair suggested. Hermione had the presence of mind to know that she was under the Imperius Curse, but she had never been as good at fighting it off as Harry had been. She felt herself reaching out to Macnair and taking the vial before drinking the entire bottle in one gulp.

"Where is Severus Snape?" Macnair demanded, releasing her from the Imperius Curse.

"I don't know," Hermione informed him one more time. She was glad Snape hadn't told her where he was going; it meant she couldn't give him up.

"She's telling the truth," Malfoy said a bit pointlessly, considering the fact that they had all seen her take the Veritaserum. "If she doesn't know where he is, though, I think she's a bit worthless, don't you?"

Hermione was a bit relieved that they hadn't asked her any questions about that. Honestly, didn't these boys know anything? Occlumency could counter the effects of Veritaserum as well as Legilimency. Hmph. Death Eaters.

"Indeed," Macnair responded, curling his upper lip. "May I do the honors?" he asked.

Malfoy held up a hand. "Please," he interjected. "It's been one of my dreams, for the past seven years, to kill Granger. Allow me."

Macnair shrugged. "What is it to me as long as the Mudblood dies?"

Malfoy released her, and Hermione started to run away from him, but Malfoy muttered, a bit lazily, *'Petrificus Totalus!'* Hermione had put enough people under the Full-Body Bind herself to know what would happen, even before the beam of purple light hit her.

Raising his wand one more time, Malfoy began to utter the last words Hermione knew she would ever hear *Avada* "

"Protego!" called another, equally familiar voice. The spell Malfoy had uttered bounced harmlessly off a large green beam, which circled around Hermione before evaporating.

Macnair, startled at first by Snape's appearance, suddenly realized what was going on. He muttered the Killing Curse, but Snape was too fast. He sent another green beam around himself, which caused Macnair's Killing Curse to bounce off, before sending the same curse back at Macnair. Too surprised to block it, Macnair dropped dead.

Goyle, smart enough to know that he would never beat Snape in wand to wand combat, took off running. Snape let him go before turning to Malfoy.

"Professor, sir, you know I never meant any harm "

"Shut up, if you know what's good for you," Snape commanded. Hermione had fallen to the floor, panting from the pain of her torture, and Snape scooped her up with one arm and Disapparated with her.

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Hermione was barely able to appreciate the brute strength that Snape possessed as he carried her through the house to her bedroom, where he gently lay her down on her bed.

"This is going to hurt a little," Snape informed her, pulling his wand out and performing the same spell he'd taught her, weeks ago.

'A little' proved to be a gross understatement, and Hermione bit her lip to stop the yell that tried to come up her throat. She grasped Snape's arm, which was lying next to her, so hard that her knuckles turned white. But the pain was gone as quickly as it came, and she let go, only to leave five half moon shaped indentations, where her nails had cut into his arm.

"We clearly aren't safe here anymore," Snape told her as soon as she let go of his arm. "I'm going to go complete the potion, and as soon as it's done, we need to go somewhere else."

Hermione nodded, and Snape disappeared out of her door without another word.

She gathered up a few of her belongings and was ready when Snape appeared at her door, half an hour later, holding a smoking flask of a clear, water-like substance. Hermione was shocked the potion had been a thick gray for the past twenty-one days.

"Ready?" Snape asked her, his face impassive. She nodded, and he clutched her arm, the two of them Disapparating to a place unknown to her.

She found herself at an old manor house, its stone walls covered in ivy.

"My familial home," Snape explained stiffly. "The Prince Manor. Nobody will think to find us here; I myself haven't been here for ages."

He set off up the front walk, Hermione running to keep up. Snape paused at the door, before muttering a few incantations. It eerily creaked open, and Snape ushered her in.

"It has enough enchantments to protect us," he explained. "There's an owl around here somewhere. Kindly send the potion to Potter. Make yourself at home," he ended gruffly, not meeting her eye, before striding off through a tapestry.

Hermione was baffled. He hadn't been that rude to her since since he was her professor. Everything about him his tone, his body posture, his lack of eye contact had suggested that he wanted nothing to do with her. She was hurt it hadn't been her fault that she'd been kidnapped. Malfoy had taken her by surprise!

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She did as he suggested, though. The owl he had mentioned found her as she wandered through a vast kitchen, empty except for a few pans and a good inch of dust. She attached the potion, with a short note, to its leg, and it flew off.

Hermione, not sure what she should do now, went off exploring the manor. She hadn't got far when she came to a large library, filled with books on every subject. On one of the shelves was the witch that Snape had recommended to her, and she removed one of the books from the shelf and settled into a large, dusty armchair by a fireplace that she lit.

Snape wandered in while she was reading. Hermione smiled nervously at him, but once he saw she was in there, he sighed huffily and quickly exited the way he'd come. Hermione had frowned, wondering just what it was that had made him so angry.

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Eventually she became very tired; she tried to find Snape, to ask him where she could sleep, but unable to do this she merely picked the closest bedroom and, after a quick cleaning spell, crawled between the sheets.

She had just fallen into the drowsy, heavy stage between consciousness and unconsciousness when she thought she heard the door open.

It jerked her slightly out of her doze, but the sleep was so heavy on her, she passed it off as part of a hazy dream she'd been having. When the bed on the other side of her indented with the weight of another, however, she sat up.

"Who's there?" she asked groggily, sweeping her hair out of her face.

"Hermione?" Snape asked beside her, looking as astonished as she felt. He was wearing only a pair of sleep pants, and Hermione glanced up and down his body before she finally realized who he was.

"Professor Snape! I mean, sir!" she yelped, jumping out of the bed.

Snape leapt out of the bed as well. "I didn't realize you were there. What are you doing here, anyway? This is my bedroom." He seemed to have regained his hard Potions master exterior.

Hermione blushed. "I'm sorry, sir. I I just wanted to get some rest, and I couldn't find you to ask where I should sleep, so I just... this was the closest..."

"You impudent girl! So you decided to sleep in what was clearly my bedroom?"

Hermione glanced around the room. There was nothing to suggest that the room was anything but a regular spare bedroom the walls were painted a light tan color, and

the floor was stone. There was nothing on the walls. Something inside of Hermione snapped.

"Well, excuse me, sir! I had to sleep somewhere, and since you've been very keen on avoiding me ever since Malfoy attempted to kill me, I had to do the best I could. I did the best I could with Malfoy, too. I hope you noticed that your precious potion was protected. I'm sorry you had to inconvenience yourself by coming to save me, but I think you ought to count yourself lucky that I didn't give up your location. I'm getting very tired of your snarky personality, sir!"

Snape seemed taken aback. Hermione doubted anyone had ever talked to him like that before, and she felt a bit of pride surging through her. Take that, Severus Snape.

"You think I'm angry at you for that?" Snape asked, a bit wounded. "Hermione, of course I'm not. I'm angry at myself."

Hermione was confused.

"I shouldn't have left you this morning. I should have made you come with me. There was nothing about that potion that I couldn't have redone. But if you had died..."

Hermione shifted uncomfortably under Snape's suddenly gentle gaze. "You have no idea the feeling that I felt when I returned to your home and the Dark Mark was over it."

Not knowing what to say, Hermione broke their gaze and looked at her feet. She heard Snape get off the bed, and suddenly his feet were in front of hers.

"I never should have refused you," Snape said silkily, his old self back. "These are dangerous times we're in. Who knows when I'll die? Who knows when you'll die? It could be any moment now. I intend to get what I want before I go, however," he added, taking her arm tightly in his grasp. He leaned forward and kissed her. She kissed him back.

"Yes, sir," she replied.