

Sanctuary

by minuet99

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Picking Up The Pieces

Chapter 1 of 2

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A/N: Many many thanks to my fabulous betas, Bambu & Subversa. Without them, I couldn't have done this. Further author's notes may be found at the end of the fic.

The prompt was thus: In fanfics, usually Hermione changes Severus, but I would like a fic in which Severus is the one who helps Hermione to cope with her after war depression and changes her. Both fall in love in the process, of course. Happy end, fluff, smut or angst...

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Severus Snape cocked his head to the side in confusion. He almost didn't recognize her. In fact, he had to do a double take and then a surreptitious third. He'd seen this woman several times over the last few weeks, each time in a different place. Today, it was in the wizarding version of a farmer's market. It was extremely crowded and displayed a multitude of different types of food and the accompanying smells. Each time, she had looked a little different, and yet somehow the same. Emaciated, forlorn, ragged and, most of all, lost. Today he finally realized exactly who she was and why he hadn't recognized her right away.

Hermione Granger had been hiding under a glamour which had begun to fade over time. It was patently obvious to him that her magical strength was severely weakened. Just why would the Know-It-All, best friend of Harry Potter, be so careless?

If she had still been his student, he wouldn't have cared a whit about her. She had always been that pesky student who persisted in annoying him in order to show off her knowledge. But it had been that persistence and tenacity which had paid off in the Final Battle against Voldemort. Voldemort had waited until well after Harry, Hermione, Ron and their classmates had graduated from Hogwarts before making any attempt at confrontation. That was to be his eventual downfall. Hermione had thrown herself into researching a method of bringing him down. She had researched extensively in both the wizarding and Muggle worlds, hoping to find an obscure solution that he would not be anticipating. Two years after their graduation, she had eventually found an ancient spell which cursed Voldemort into oblivion. Her hard work, dedication and creativity had earned her Snape's grudging respect, unbeknownst to her.

Snape had not participated in the Final Battle, much to his simultaneous relief and dismay. There were certain Death Eaters he would have enjoyed personally bringing down, but it was important that his duplicity was never to be discovered. It had been yet another promise Dumbledore had forced him to make before Snape killed him. Dumbledore, while being an extremely intelligent and irritating wizard, had been crafty in his ways. He had known exactly how to manipulate others to their eventual advantage, even if it was not quite obvious at the start.

Dumbledore had known he was dying since the beginning of the Golden Trio's sixth year at Hogwarts. Shortly before he had left on the mission to the cave, on that fateful night, he had sat Snape down and had a serious heart-to-heart with him, with great protestation and reluctance from the dark man of the dungeons. It was then that Dumbledore had asked him a series of favors, one of which was similar to the one he had just requested from Harry Potter...that Snape would follow any order given by

Dumbledore that evening, unconditionally. Dumbledore's final instruction to Snape prior to his departure was thus: "You can thank and honor me by helping someone else when they need it most, as I helped you that Halloween night many years ago. It won't be obvious when that time comes, but you will feel it in your heart. You will know that it is time for a debt to be repaid. It will be an event which will change your life." Dumbledore had a maddening way of being specific and vague at the same time.

It had been over a year since the end of the war, and Snape knew virtually nothing of the Final Battle nor of the aftermath. He had been living in near isolation ever since, not even taking any of the daily newspapers. He was a firm believer that none of them told the truth and therefore could not be relied upon for accurate information. Snape had been grudgingly exonerated by the Wizengamot, in absentia, once evidence clearing him of any wrongdoing had appeared mysteriously in the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts after the Final Battle. However, this did not mean people were exactly putting down welcome mats for him. In fact, a majority of wizarding society still acted like his dunderhead students had in school scurrying away from him. That or they annoyingly persisted in garnering his attention. He had tired of these reactions in public and had grudgingly resorted to using glamours on the rare occasions when he was required to leave his home.

He also did not speak with any of his past colleagues in the Order of the Phoenix save Minerva McGonagall, and he had spoken to her only once. They had merely discussed the possibility of his working again at Hogwarts which he turned down without hesitation. He much preferred his newfound isolation and privacy, working essentially for no one but himself. They had not spoken of anything else. She did not offer, and he did not ask. There was a small part of him that was curious to know the details of the outcome of the war, but he found that in this case that ignorance was bliss. He preferred not to know who had lived, who had died or who was imprisoned. He would rather not think about it at all.

However, something had compelled him to cross paths with this formerly mysterious woman these past few weeks. Dumbledore had also been in his thoughts more frequently as of late. Was this perhaps a sign? Was Hermione Granger, former Know-It-All of Hogwarts, his destined recipient of the repayment of his debt? Why would Dumbledore want *him* to help *her*?

His train of thought was stopped abruptly when the woman in question silently slid to the ground. Snape immediately rushed to her side, turning away any bystanders with a glare and accompanying body language. Resisting the urge to immediately cast a *Rennervate* spell, he instead felt for a pulse with his own fingers. Finding a weak, erratic beat only solidified his next plan of action. Knowing that his face wasn't exactly welcome at places like St. Mungo's, and also knowing next to nothing of Hermione's current situation, he did the next best thing: he Apparated them both to his house at Spinner's End.

He laid her gently on the worn-looking sofa in his sitting room. His next step was to conjure a blanket to lay across her body. He removed his glamour first, and then hers. He was startled to discover how frighteningly pale she was. Her skin was almost no different than his own in color. The glamour had not been hiding much of her true appearance, and he chastised himself silently for not recognizing her earlier. Her magical strength, or rather, lack thereof, was even more obvious. Her hair was dirty and more unkempt than usual. It had lost some of its bushy quality, but he wasn't sure whether to attribute that to her state of uncleanliness or to malnutrition. He scowled and unsheathed his wand.

He cast a cleaning spell on her entire body and a handful of simple diagnostic spells. He was no Poppy Pomfrey, but he was able to confirm some of his suspicions. She had not been eating much, if at all, and her body was crying out for vitamin replenishment. He set the wards in the room to let him know the moment she woke up and headed downstairs to his laboratory. Virtually on auto-pilot, he began to brew Calming Draught and various other potions including a vitamin replenishment potion. He hardly noticed his hands reaching for the necessary ingredients as most of his attention was focused on his own thoughts.

How had Hermione Granger, indirect Savior of the Wizarding World, come to be in this state? He knew little of her after the Final Battle. In fact, when he set his mind to it, he could not recall hearing much, if anything, about her. She had seemingly disappeared into the background. His memory of her at school recalled that she had been a lot like him when he was younger. Very much into books and studies, somewhat of an isolationist and uncomfortable with vast amounts of attention. His defense had been his biting wit and winning personality, hers had been to withdraw. But what had caused her to be in this state? It seemed highly unlike the Hermione he thought he knew eager-to-please, always wanting to prove herself.

He was so wrapped up in his musings that he did not notice the potion boiling over until it splattered noisily on the flame below. He cursed loudly and *evanesco'd* the potion. He'd ruined it. Angry at his own carelessness and inattention, he stormed over to the ingredients cupboard and pulled the bottles off the shelves swiftly and without his usual care. Why was he allowing that girl, *that woman*, upstairs to distract him so? He frowned and got back to work.

Snape had just finished bottling the last of the potions when the wards let him know Hermione was awake. A phrase from his father's Muggle relatives came to mind: time to face the music. Snape snorted to himself, pocketed the vials and headed up the stairs.

"You." It was a sentence in its own right, filled with scathing, imbued with exhaustion. It was worthy of his own lips, but it fell from hers.

Snape had not even made it inside the doorway.

"Yes, Miss Granger? What about me?" His voice held traces of amusement in addition to a little bit of the black-bat-of-the-dungeons.

"What am I doing here, Snape?" Her voice held no respect, nor did she include his former title of Professor. He was surprised at that, for he remembered that she was always correcting her two constant companions.

"You collapsed at the market today, you silly little girl. You *aren't* well." His snarky tone came out of habit, and he immediately regretted it. Her demeanor already had him on guard. This was not the Hermione Granger he remembered. This Hermione Granger seemed bitter and unhappy. And very angry.

"I didn't think you would care, *Professor*." She used his former title almost as an expletive.

Biting his tongue, he simply held out the handful of potions, the Calming Draught closest to her. She eyed them with great suspicion. He snorted softly at her reaction.

"I'm not going to poison you. They will begin to undo the damage to your health. I am going to the kitchen to make us some tea. Perhaps you will be more inclined to talk when I return." When she made no move to accept them, he took her hand in his and overturned it so it was palm up. He placed the vials into her hand and closed her fingers around them. "You have been neglecting to eat, Miss Granger. We must remedy that. Take them. Now."

Without waiting for a response, he swept off into the kitchen, leaving a bewildered and confused Hermione sitting on the sofa. Despite her own misgivings, she automatically followed her former teacher's order. Popping the top off the largest vial, she tipped her head back and poured the potion into her mouth, making an automatic face of revulsion at the extremely bitter taste.

When he returned, tray in hand, she looked as if she had not moved a centimeter. However, all four vials were littering the table in front of the sofa. And they were all empty. Snape smiled inwardly, and hoped that the Calming Draught had worked. The new Hermione Granger was disconcerting, to say the least.

"Would you care for some tea, Miss Granger?" Snape inquired politely. She stared at him incredulously for a moment and looked away towards the window. There was a barely perceptible nod that only his spy-sharpened eyes would have noticed. He smirked to himself. Whilst he was waiting for the tea to boil, he had made some decisions. He would try to resist some of his long-formed habits, such as his biting comments, until he could assess Hermione's situation. He was very much on his guard, and angering her did not seem like a wise idea.

He poured the tea with efficiency and placed a steaming cup within her reach. He nudged the pitcher of milk, bowl of sugar and the plate of lemon slices towards her. He added a slice of lemon to his tea and brought the cup to his lips. The silence was palpable. He took a scone from the plate on the tray and placed it in her lap, wrapped in a napkin.

She frowned at him and said, "I'm not hungry."

"For Merlin's sake, eat it anyway. Your body is crying out for proper nutrition. You must take better care of yourself." His tone brooked no refusal, and Hermione reluctantly

began to pick at the scone. Snape hid the quirk of his lips, which heralded a smile of triumph with his own scone.

He let her finish at least half of her scone before he attempted conversation again.

"Where are you staying these days, Miss Granger?"

Without warning, Hermione dropped her half-eaten scone in her lap and buried her face in her hands and burst into tears. Not quiet, fall-down-your-face tears but loud, wracking sobs. Snape cursed to himself and moved over to sit next to her. He wandlessly conjured a handkerchief and pressed it against her hands.

"I did not mean to bring up a sensitive subject. I was simply trying to make conversation."

This caused a renewal of tears, and Snape simply looked at her in puzzlement. He was used to the hormonal outbursts of the female occupants of his House at Hogwarts, but this somehow was different. He could not find any fault with anything he had said. He decided further conversation was not going to improve the situation and simply sat next to her, awkwardly patting her back a few times.

Finally, the sobs slowed down, and she was simply reduced to inelegant sniffing and the occasional hiccup. He wordlessly conjured another handkerchief and vanished the soiled one. There were a few more moments of silence before she opened her mouth.

"I don't want to talk about it," she muttered quietly.

"Obviously. I think that is a conversation best saved for a later time. Meanwhile, you may stay here if you wish. It is nothing much, but there is a spare bedroom which you may use. In fact, I might suggest that you go lie down for a nap. Your body and mind are overwhelmed at the moment. I shall wake you for dinner." He held up a hand, stalling her argument before it began. "Need I remind you, Miss Granger, that you must eat? You have lost some of your magical strength recently, and you must begin taking better care of yourself. Now, come."

He extended the hand toward her. She looked at him, straight in the eyes. He resisted the temptation to cast *Legilimens*. He knew that would only worsen the already delicate situation. Apparently finding what she was looking for in his eyes, she placed her hand in his. He drew her slowly into a standing position and wordlessly indicated that she should follow him. They silently climbed the stairs, and he showed her to the spare room.

It was small enough to be comforting but not so small that it would be considered claustrophobic. The room was soothing in its palette, warm browns and golds, mixed with a deep forest green. The full-sized bed was covered in beige sheets, a faded forest green comforter and accompanied by a few firm-looking pillows. Snape walked over to the bed and turned back the covers. She immediately climbed into the bed, her body appearing to win over her mind, and promptly fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow. It struck him as odd that she appeared to trust him enough to fall asleep in his presence. He pushed the thought to the side and pulled the comforter over her shoulders and tucked it in securely. He noticed how chilly the room was and cast a Warming Charm. He made a mental note to look through his mother's clothing to see if there were any that might fit her. Hermione's clothes were shabby and threadbare. They couldn't possibly be keeping her warm. His fingers automatically brushed back a lock of her hair which had fallen over her face, and he drew back as if he had been burned. What had prompted him to do that? He snarled at himself as he swept out of the room, distancing himself from the puzzlement of the woman who now occupied his spare bedroom.

Snape threw himself down in the chair at the wooden kitchen table. He wondered where this compulsion to help Hermione came from. Surely it couldn't be Dumbledore's request. Perhaps he should simply contact one of her friends and foist her off on them? Or was he simply so starved for companionship of any sort that he would keep her around? Or was it the challenge of trying to figure out the new Hermione Granger which kept him intrigued? He decided that he was better off not knowing at the time being.

Searching for distraction from his thoughts, he decided to start dinner. Unlike most of wizarding society, he preferred to make his meals by hand rather than letting magic do the work for him. He found the whole process comforting and a good outlet for his energies. An hour later, dusk had fallen and dinner was sitting on the table under simple Warming Charms. It was now time to wake his houseguest.

Hermione did not wake easily and came to the dinner table only after much persuasion on his part. She sat silently at the table and picked at her food. Snape sighed to himself, knowing that he was not in for an easy time. But he was now determined to figure out what was wrong with her. He did not feel comfortable letting her go off on her own - she was in no condition to fend for herself. He was certain that she would be extremely resistant to the idea and had planned many rebuttals. Much to his great surprise, she acquiesced to his official offer of a place to stay. She rose silently from the table and headed off without a word to 'her' bedroom.

Snape sighed with relief and set the dishes to washing themselves while he climbed the stairs to the attic in search of some more suitable clothing for Hermione. By the time he made it back downstairs with his findings, Hermione was out cold on top of the sheets and comforter. He renewed the already faded Warming Charm, picking up her far too light body, and placed her underneath the covers. Once she was comfortably ensconced, he used his wand to clothe her in warm nightwear, then extinguished all the candles save one by the bedside. He did not want her to awake in the middle of the night in an unfamiliar place.

Too tired to contemplate anything else or even indulge in a good book by the fire, he headed for his own bedroom. Located just down the hallway from the spare bedroom, the master bedroom was only slightly larger than its neighbor. His room was darker in color with deep navy blues and saturated greens. Paired with a faded, red-tinted wood, his room was far from representative of a typical Slytherin's house colors. His bed was his one luxury. Queen-sized and swathed in the most luxurious fabrics that his masculinity could withstand. The sheets were soft and inviting and his comforter hugged him in its soft warmth.

He sagged in relief on his bed. He had not been on guard so much since he had last faced the Dark Lord or any of his fellow Death Eaters. He did not recall being so exhausted then. He snorted to himself at the fact that this little girl, this *woman*, he corrected himself, had affected to him to the extent that she had and in so little time. He would give it no further thought tonight, he promised himself. Without further ado, he undressed and got under the covers.

A piercing scream woke him out of a sound sleep. Snape was instantly on his feet and wand in hand. He Summoned his dressing gown from the end of his bed and tied it around himself quickly.

"*Lumos*," he muttered and his wand tip ignited. He hurried down the hallway as the screams continued. They were less piercing but no less disturbing. He opened the door to Hermione's room to find her writhing in bed, the covers twisted all around her. Somehow she had shifted so much during the night that the covers were holding her down.

He went to her side immediately, trying to wake her. She shrieked in terror, flinching every time he attempted to touch her. 'This *isn't* working,' he thought to himself. It was time to resurrect a little of his schoolteacher persona because he was getting nowhere.

"Miss Granger! You must wake up. Immediately!" Snape commanded in his most authoritative voice. She continued to writhe, muttering and now sobbing. He repeated his command, this time louder and accompanied by a firm shake to her shoulder.

Her eyes flew open just as her hand lashed out at him. His reflexes were still as sharp as they had always been, and he managed to dodge the blow as well as catch the offending hand. Her eyes opened wider as awareness seeped in of where she was, who he was, and what she had almost done.

She gasped in horror, and her face crumpled in a fresh batch of tears. All the strength seemed to go out of her body. Snape had no other choice but to hold the distraught woman to his own body and rock her gently as one would do with an infant. He made shushing noises with his deep baritone voice and that seemed to soothe her. He paused only to Summon a vial of Dreamless Sleep and then coaxed her to swallow a dose. Eventually she fell asleep again, and he placed her under the now-untangled covers. He Summoned her wand and pocketed it. Her behavior was so erratic and her magical strength so weak that he doubted she would miss it. He would keep it until he was sure she would not do harm to herself or others.

He made a mental note to make more Dreamless Sleep Potion in the morning. He was well aware of the addictive properties of said potion, but perhaps he might be able to create a less concentrated form which would lessen her patently obvious night terrors. At least, until he was able to figure out their cause. Snape himself tossed and

turned for an hour or so, helplessly seeing a distraught Hermione Granger in the throes of a terrifying dream every time he closed his eyes. He swallowed a half dose of Dreamless Sleep himself and finally fell into a peaceful sleep.

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Hermione sat in the study, staring listlessly out of the dirt-streaked window. In fact, she had been doing that all day. Snape came sweeping up the stairs from his laboratory and noticed she was awake. He spoke before walking into the room. He had learned the hard way that Hermione startled easily. He was still surprised that he had been caught so off-guard, especially after that first night, when her fist had unexpectedly met his chin. Then again, Hermione was not known for being violent. It was then that he had decided that her rehabilitation was meant to be his personal repayment of Dumbledore's forgiveness.

"It is cold in here, Miss Granger. You should have a blanket on you. You are still not well."

Hermione said nothing. This, of course, was not uncommon these days. A far cry from her student days, Hermione was now a woman of few words. She'd probably said less than a half dozen sentences to him since she woke up the morning following her arrival.

Not really expecting a response, Snape simply frowned and held out his hand in the direction of the hallway. *'Accio blanket!'*

A grayish wool blanket flew out of the hall linen closet into his waiting hands. He wrapped it around Hermione's shoulders. She didn't even blink an eye.

Aside from the rather lively punch that morning when he had startled her in the hallway, Hermione had reverted to her eerily quiet, very withdrawn persona. Snape frowned again. He had offered her plenty of books to read. The Hermione Granger he remembered would have salivated at his library. He was quite proud of it; it had taken him most of his life to accumulate such a range of wizarding and Muggle books. Her eyes had shown none of the delight he had fully expected.

She seemed to just want to stare vacantly out of the window. Meals were painfully quiet. He was a wizard who enjoyed his solitude and he disliked unnecessary conversations, but sometimes the absolute silence was too much.

Snape left her to her own devices for now and settled himself in his darkly upholstered armchair. Deducing fairly accurately that she was depressed and having no real familiarity with the subject, Snape had traveled to the library in the nearby Muggle town (under the disguise of a glamour of course, and in proper Muggle clothing), and spent an afternoon researching depression as the Muggles understood it.

The wizarding world was advanced in many things, including medicine; but there were still concepts that they did not understand better than the Muggles. A Cheering Charm, for example, would help cheer her up, but it would have a temporary, false effect and would probably leave her feeling worse than before. He had read about many antidepressant drugs Muggles favored but also concluded that potions or their Muggle counterparts were probably not the way to go. There were far too many unpleasant side-effects that made them unappealing.

Taking her to a Muggle psychotherapist had also been out of the question. Even though Hermione had grown up in the Muggle world, he had not been confident of her mental state and did not know if she would disclose anything about the wizarding world inadvertently.

He had hit upon some helpful information. For example, encouraging the patient to keep a journal. Snape had then decided that if she did not want to talk to him, perhaps she would write out her feelings on parchment, and perhaps that would get her to open up. He snorted at the mere idea that he would be encouraging Hermione to open up to *him* of all people. He could only imagine what her reaction might be.

He had made a mental note to procure a journal for her use on the way home. He had also read that patience was key in helping someone cope with depression. He snorted softly to himself. He was not known for his patience, and he would have to work hard to bite down his usual acerbic responses.

At the end of his research, he had reached an educated guess at Hermione's affliction. From what he had observed over the last few weeks and from what he had read during the day, Snape concluded that Hermione was suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder combined with depression.

He had been surprised to discover that he, too, was a victim of this affliction, but had neither means nor a willingness to diagnose himself until now. 'At least we have something in common,' he had thought grimly. He had never attributed his frequent insomnia, night terrors or general distrust of others' motives to one singular condition. These were precisely the symptoms that Hermione had been displaying since her arrival at Spinner's End.

Group therapy was a suggested treatment, and he had realized that it was distinctly plausible that in order to get back the Hermione Granger he remembered, he might have to disclose some information about his own past, in a trade of sorts. He was *not* looking forward to that particular conversation. Snapes do not talk about their feelings with others. However, it might prove necessary to assist him in getting Hermione to verbalize her thoughts.

Back in the present, Snape smiled triumphantly to himself as he noted the journal he had purchased for her was sitting next to her, as well as a used quill and ink bottle. That meant that she *had* been writing in it, in theory. He had pointed out to her that he had specifically bought her an enchanted journal. He had left a note to that effect and left both for her to find on her bedside table.

Miss Granger

It has occurred to me that it is likely your uncharacteristic muteness and your subdued demeanor are due to recent traumatic events.

I am fully cognizant of your understandable reluctance to share your thoughts, especially with me.

However, internalizing everything is eventually detrimental to one's health: physical, mental, and emotional. Trust me in this; I have learnt the hard way.

If you are not ready to talk out loud, perhaps you will consider writing your thoughts in this journal. It is enchanted so that only the owner (and anyone else the owner deems worthy) can read what is written inside. If you were to accidentally leave it open, I would not be able to read a word without express magical permission.

-Severus Snape

It had taken him far too many drafts to write such a simple, informative letter. The first one was too cold and insulting, the second too concerned. He felt like some damned fool writing this letter. He was no longer in a position of authority over her, so he could not order her to use it. He did not want to sound overly concerned (he wasn't, was he?) either. He wrote two other drafts before actually 'sending' the fifth.

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Snape's already tenuous patience was quickly running out. Hermione had shown little improvement over the last few weeks. She did nothing but sit in the study and stare out the window. Theoretically, she was still writing in her journal. His only proof was the decreased level of ink in the inkwell and the occasional ink stain on her fingers at mealtimes. She was still incredibly jumpy and had continued in her uncanny state of silence. At least her nightmares seemed to be lessening in intensity. He left a dose of his derivative of Dreamless Sleep on her bedside table nightly. He could tell when she forgot to take her dose because she would still toss and turn and talk loudly in her sleep. Her pleas were panicked and usually referred to Harry or Ron, urging them to stop. But gone were the days of full-out screaming matches he'd overheard from his own room and which left him tossing and turning afterwards.

He was not expecting miracles, but he had hoped for some change in her demeanor. Perhaps more drastic action needed to be taken? A change of scenery, perhaps? They should not leave the house, as she was not strong enough, physically or mentally, to venture out in the world, Muggle or wizarding. He contemplated his next move as he dressed for the day.

Another option was to take her down to the laboratory with him. Hardly a place for a recuperating semi-invalid to be, but at least he could keep a better eye on her. And perhaps he could coax her into doing small tasks which would distract her from her thoughts. His mind was made up by the time he descended the stairs into the kitchen.

Hermione was already sitting at the table, listlessly playing with her porridge. Her color was slightly better, and she had wrapped one of his mother's hand-woven shawls around her shoulders for warmth.

"Hasn't anyone ever told you not to play with your food?" Snape said in a quiet, slightly playful voice. The spoon immediately clattered to the table when Hermione started at his presence. Porridge splattered on the well-worn table. Hermione looked down at the table in distress, not wanting to meet his eyes. A muttered *Evanescio* from his lips and the spilled porridge disappeared without a trace.

Snape cleared his throat in the uncomfortable silence that ensued. "I am sorry, Miss Granger. I was simply trying to make a joke. I did not mean to startle you."

Hermione stared at him in surprise and then nodded her head minutely. She opened her mouth slightly as if to say something, then reconsidered and shut it once again.

Disappointed that she was not going to speak, he prepared his own breakfast, including a steaming mug of coffee. He silently offered her a cup which she refused with a shake of her head. *Probably a good idea*, he thought. *Stimulants are not a wise idea in her condition.* Judging by her reactions, Snape decided that perhaps today would be a good day to try something new.

"Miss Granger, I require your... company as well as your assistance in my laboratory this morning." Snape inwardly cursed at himself as the words flew out of his mouth. That was not how he'd planned to word it. He sounded like his former professorial self. He tried to recover, "What I mean to say is..."

"All right." If he had been any other man, he would have visibly jumped at the words which came out of her mouth. He had not expected a verbal response from her. Instead, he merely inclined his head and let the barest hint of a smile creep onto his face.

"Excellent. Join me in about a half hour." He swept out of the room without waiting for a response. He immediately headed down to his lab to prepare for the day. Since the fall of Voldemort, he had provided a few apothecaries in Diagon Alley with potions via owl-post. Despite the overwhelming evidence in his own Potions classes at Hogwarts, it still surprised him to know how many people were incapable of brewing their own basic potions. That or they were simply too lazy to do so. However, it did provide him with a modest income. He also still supplied Hogwarts with medicinal potions. McGonagall was one of his staunchest supporters, but not even she could convince him to return to Hogwarts. He loathed teaching. Correction, he loathed teaching dunderheads who had no understanding of the art and beauty of a carefully crafted potion. Nor did they comprehend the danger that could occur with one minor mis-step in the process.

A shadow in his doorway brought him out of his reminiscing. "I am... pleased you could join me, Miss Granger." Snape spoke quietly. He was still unaccustomed to saying 'nice' things. It had been so much easier for sarcasm and insults to roll off his tongue. He hoped that the hesitation did not cancel out the sincerity of his words.

He explained his situation, noting the surprise in her eyes. It pleased him to see how comfortable she was in the lab. A small smile graced her face as she took in his laboratory. Aside from his own bedroom, the lab was perhaps the most well-kept room in the house. The walls were a darkened wood, giving the lab a slightly spooky feel. The tables and countertops were made of marble which had been sealed with a Protective Charm. None of them matched as he had salvaged them from various sources, but they were all meticulously well-kept. His laboratory was no match for his Potions classroom at Hogwarts, but it served its purpose well. He hid his response to her reactions to the laboratory, instead continuing with the small tour of his facilities, and then set her to work on a simple boil cure potion.

She worked silently and efficiently; it very much reminded him of Potions class back at Hogwarts. In a timely fashion, she had the potion cooled, sieved and bottled in the vials he had provided. Noiselessly as a cat, she moved over to watch him work at his workstation.

He had just finished a Blood-Replenishing Potion and had moved on to an experimental variation of wound cleaning draught. Hermione watched him wordlessly but with some interest. Instead of the usual purple, this variation was a light green. He had added aloe vera because of its healing properties. He was actually wondering why it had not been included in the first place. Some of these potions had been created in medieval times and had not been improved on in ages. He spoke these thoughts aloud, mostly to himself but partially for her benefit.

Her chin in her hands, her elbows on the table, she watched him without a word until he had set the cauldron to cool. He met her eyes briefly and inclined his head slightly towards the stairwell. She nodded in agreement and rose from her stool, following him dutifully up the stairs.

They continued in that pattern for a week. She would join him after breakfast, and he would set her to work on a potion or two. As she had the first day, she would walk to his side of the laboratory, perching herself on a wooden stool, and would watch him experiment once she was finished. Yesterday, she had even participated. She still did not speak, but she had brought over an ingredient unasked and placed it quietly in front of him. He had noted with gratification that it showed creative thinking. That act alone had encouraged him. Perhaps this had been a good idea after all.

And then everything changed.

It seemed like any other morning, but something was different and he did not notice until it was too late. She was working on a variant of the Pepperup Potion. The deviation was slight and simply allowed a flavor additive to improve the taste. She had added too much cinnamon, and it reacted poorly with the black beetle wings and caused the potion to emit noxious fumes and boil over dangerously.

"What in Merlin's name were you thinking? Were you not paying attention? Or are you such a dunderhead that you did not realize the gravity of your error?" Snape thundered at her, looming over her threateningly while simultaneously brandishing his wand to vanish the contents of the cauldron and lower the flame.

Hermione's eyes opened wide in shock and her mouth opened to protest. She stood there for a moment gaping at him like the proverbial goldfish, but nothing came out. Her mouth snapped closed at the same time she spun around quickly and fled the laboratory. He heard a door slam in the distance.

Snape slumped down on the nearest stool and put his head in his hands. He had completely lost control and acted without thinking. Between his scathing words and intimidating body language, he was sure that whatever meager progress they had made since he had brought her to Spinner's End had been lost in those precious few seconds when his mind and his body became disconnected.

A sputtering from his own cauldron broke him out of his thoughts and he quickly salvaged what he could of his own potion. As it was cooling, he surveyed her workspace. He returned the few jars of unused ingredients to the cupboard. In doing so, he realized that some of the more common ingredients were depleted.

It was time to do some harvesting. This was the perfect olive branch to extend. It would get them out of the house, and frankly, what woman did not enjoy a garden? Plus, he did not feel comfortable leaving her alone at the moment. It would take great persuasion in order for her to come with him, but he was not a Slytherin for nothing. Perhaps he should give her some room to herself, for he was positive that his face was not the one she wanted to see at this precise moment.

Two days passed before morning found a reluctant Hermione at the breakfast table scowling into her toast and eggs. He had spent an exhaustive hour-and-a-half apologizing (but not in those precise words) and convincing her to join him outside this morning. He did not tell her exactly for what purpose but indicated to her that under no circumstances would he be leaving her to her own devices, alone in the house. He knew that deep down, no matter what, Hermione's innate inquisitiveness would win out past any other emotions that were running around in her head.

Thus, Snape felt oddly triumphant for the first time in weeks. He ate his eggs and toast with relative gusto. He set the dishes into the sink and set a cleaning spell to work on them. "It's time," Snape intoned. Hermione looked up at him for the first time during the meal and blinked at him. "You will want a shawl; the breeze has a chill at this time of year. Bring a basket as well. I will meet you here in five minutes."

Four minutes later, both were appropriately attired for the outdoors and had baskets in hand. He indicated for her to walk beside him. They headed back to the rear of the house and out the back door. They were faced with a rather unremarkable modest stretch of land, fenced in by a seven-foot tall weathered wooden fence. Hermione looked

up at him as if to say, "What next?" He unsheathed his wand and she braced herself for Side-Along Apparition. Instead, he waved it around in a deceptively simple pattern.

"*Ostendo planto venenum*," he intoned in his richly mysterious voice. The air in front of them appeared to shimmer and glow. Colors seemed to become unnaturally potent, and they swirled around the witch and wizard in chaotic patterns. When the colors normalized, Hermione and Snape were now standing in a lush garden. The rich, earthy smell of the garden combined with the heady scents of the various herbs and flowers nearly overwhelmed them initially but dissipated as they acclimated to the virtual change in location. Hermione's jaw dropped open.

"I don't think we're in Kansas anymore," Hermione muttered sarcastically, mostly to herself. Snape heard her and snorted in response. He did comprehend the Muggle reference. He was pleased by her reaction she had spoken for the first time in two days. Hermione had looked at him in great surprise when he snorted. He merely quirked an eyebrow at her.

"Don't look so surprised, Miss Granger. I *do* have a sense of humor, and I was raised in a partially Muggle household." He paused to gauge her reaction and then continued when he was satisfied, "Welcome to my garden." He swept his hand in a demonstrative arc as he began describing the area to her. "Over here, you will find herbs which can only be found in the wizarding world. Be careful as some of the plants will fight back. On this side of the garden," indicating the left-hand side where a plethora of various types of greenery thrived, "you will find plants that are mostly found in the Muggle world and which are useful in potions. In the back is the kitchen garden. I much prefer to consume home-grown food. And over by the bench are my mother's flowers. I have no use for most of them, but I have kept them around because they are aesthetically and aromatically pleasing."

It was Hermione's turn to snort. "Only you could describe flowers in that fashion," she muttered while looking around in awe.

"We are here because of your...," he paused; tact was required here, a concept still foreign to him without effort. "We are here because my supplies are running low downstairs. Some of these ingredients must be harvested fresh while others must be dried before their use. I will begin over here. If you would begin with dandelions, ginger and knotgrass, I shall harvest from some of the more stubborn plants."

Hermione nodded in acceptance and walked over to the section he indicated.

Snape sighed inwardly with relief; this had started out much easier than he anticipated. Puzzled by her ever-changing reactions, but not wanting to look a gift horse in the mouth, he began harvesting from the plants where his stock was most depleted. His focus began drifting after a while. His vision strayed to *her* side of the garden.

Hermione had already finished with the knotgrass and the dandelions and was presently working on the ginger. She had just paused in digging up another rhizome when her eyes met his. She had obviously been sweating and had absentmindedly wiped her face with her hand. Her face was charmingly smudged with dirt. He was so disconcerted about being caught watching her that he neglected to pay attention to the plant he was currently working on.

The Ferocious Fern, a relative of the aptly named Whomping Willow, had valuable seeds which had to be harvested at certain times in their maturation cycle. However, the plant did not take kindly to seed harvesting and retaliated with ferocious slaps of its tendrils which left the victim slightly itchy for a few hours, not to mention that the vines were stronger than they looked. Harvesting required intense concentration, something Snape was sorely lacking at the moment.

The Ferocious Fern, having become fed up with Snape's interference, chose that particular moment to retaliate. Its vines unfurled with blinding speed and wrapped themselves firmly around his arms, causing him to lose his balance and to collapse awkwardly further into the plant, all limbs askew.

His dignity was severely bruised, not to mention his body, and a cruel retort was poised on his lips when he realised what her reaction was to his situation. She was doubled over, not in pain but in silent, hysterical laughter. Finally, she managed a lungful of air and the laughter bubbled forth. It was an absolutely joyously magical sound, and he immediately resolved to coax that particular reaction out of her more often, hopefully without further injury to his dignity.

Hermione was flat on her back, shaking with laughter, ginger roots falling out of her basket with every twitch of her body. Finally, she managed to catch enough air to speak.

"I'm very sorry for laughing at you, sir. But I must admit that you had the most wonderful look of surprise on your face when the Fern grabbed you," Hermione said, wiping tears out of her eyes with the corner of her shawl.

"Why, Miss Granger, I do believe those are more words than you've said to me in a month. The proverbial cat hasn't gotten your tongue after all." He held up his now disentangled hand to stop her protest and Summoned his wand to finish the job. "I do not mean to insult you at every turn. Forgive me, for it is in my nature." He paused yet again and corrected himself, "My cynicism has been a part of my life for longer than I care to admit. My apologies."

Her jaw dropped open. "Forgive me; did I just hear Professor Snape *apologize*?"

He thought it useless to point out that he had apologized to her shortly after he rescued her from the market, but she probably did not recall a majority of that particular time.

Instead, he decided to make light of it and flashed her a small but wicked smile. "Repeat it and I shall deny it," he said jokingly.

She smirked back and stuck out her tongue at him as a petulant child would. He chuckled at her immature, but charming, reaction and they both got back to work.

This was a good day indeed.

Why hadn't he thought of bringing her out here earlier? If he had known that it would have earned this reaction, then he would have brought her here long ago. It was worth every minute of the quasi-silent treatment to see her smile again. This was the Miss Granger he remembered, albeit older and wiser.

They worked for several more minutes before he felt the need to speak again. "You seem quite content here, Miss Granger. I should have brought you out here sooner," he commented lightly, mostly to himself as they moved onto the next harvesting task.

"I am," she said simply. Her posture became more rigid as she pondered what next to say. The tension became thicker and thicker with every passing moment. Then she finally drew a deep breath and spoke again. "I always loved Professor Sprout's Herbology classes at Hogwarts. There was something very soothing about actually physically digging into the dirt and getting to interact with various species of plants, most of which were new to me. Whenever I couldn't concentrate on my homework or just wanted to be alone, I would walk down to the greenhouses. No one ever seemed to go there except for classes or for detention. Sometimes I would just seek the silence of that area or the distraction of the physical labor."

Hermione paused once more before continuing. "My mother had a garden when I was younger. I spent many a summer day outside playing around in the sunshine, watching her tend to her plants."

"It sounds like a pleasant time. Perhaps I could take you to visit her when you are a little...," Snape let his comment die unfinished on his lips as he saw Hermione's face darken and tears begin to form. Her lower lip began to tremble slightly, and she bit in an attempt to prevent the inevitable.

Suddenly, she stood up, her carefully harvested plants falling out of her basket which had been in her lap, and fled into the house. Snape slumped over slightly in defeat. What was that Muggle saying, 'one step forward, two steps back'? He grimaced. If that was the case, how much recovery would it take from this latest gaffe? He was not sure if he knew what else to do. He was most definitely out of his element. He lost himself in his thoughts as he pondered his next move.

Soft footsteps interrupted his musings. She had returned, her eyes red and puffy from her tears and her breathing hitching occasionally, betraying her otherwise calm exterior. She silently walked over to her basket and carefully restored its spilled contents. She quietly finished her task under Snape's watchful eye. Wisely, Snape did not attempt any further conversation that afternoon. He needed to assess the situation and time to plan. Having a female around ... an emotionally distraught female ... was more exhausting than he had ever imagined.

Dinner was a mostly silent affair. Hermione refused to meet his eyes the entire evening. They both retired to their rooms earlier than normal, for the silence was nearly unbearable. Snape lay awake in his bed for hours, hearing the return of Hermione's night terrors and feeling responsible for them. His frustration was slowly increasing. How was he to help her?

The next week passed by fairly unremarkably. Hermione still came to the lab with him in the mornings and to the garden in the afternoons. However, she was back to her mute self. Her eyes showed the return of dark circles, and she looked paler than before. She was more careful in the lab, and she was far more reserved than she had been before. She was still an efficient worker, the only eerie reminder of her former self.

Snape had started leaving her alone in the lab, trusting her to work effectively on her own while he put his next plan in action. He had noticed that Hermione, after completing her required task in the gardens, would inevitably wander over to his mother's flowers and sit amongst them, lovingly pulling up the few weeds which escaped the spells designed to keep them away. Sometimes, she would just sit there, enjoying the warmth of the sunshine or simply watching the creatures interacting in the garden. She seemed extremely content to sit there for ages.

Because of this, he had been working on clearing a small plot and preparing it for both Muggle and magical plants, whatever she wished to grow. Today, her plot was finally finished and he could introduce her new corner of the garden. A few flicks of his wand and it was hidden underneath a Disillusionment Charm.

Pleased with his handiwork, he performed a Cleansing Charm and headed inside. He entered the kitchen, expecting to prepare lunch. He was not anticipating Hermione being in the kitchen already nor for her to have lunch already prepared. She wordlessly handed him a delicious looking salad, made from greens harvested from the garden, with a fresh-from-the-oven roll on the side. He ate ravenously, having worked up an appetite in the garden, and had second helpings. He was wiping his mouth with his napkin when he decided to speak.

"A truly delectable meal, Miss Granger. Did you make the dressing yourself?" She nodded shyly in response. She was as unused to receiving praise from him as he was giving it to her. He stood and cleared his dishes to the sink. He motioned towards the gardens and she nodded in agreement. Upon their arrival in the garden, Hermione immediately went to work on her delegated tasks. He had originally meant to present her with the gift at the end of their garden time, but he simply could not wait any longer. His attention kept straying to the currently invisible plot.

Hermione had been hard at work harvesting lovage when Snape noiselessly walked over and watched her without a word. She was so absorbed in her work that she did not notice him until she began to stand up. She started so abruptly that she teetered and would have fallen if not for his strong arms and quick reflexes. He unconsciously held her for a moment longer than was polite and then released her abruptly when he realized what he was doing. He set her upright, stepped away and cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"Forgive me; I did not mean to startle you. I have something to show you." Snape took her basket and set it on the ground. He motioned for her to follow him and she dutifully did so. They walked over to a non-descript section of the garden near his mother's flowers and stopped. Hermione's look of puzzlement morphed into one of confusion as Snape waved his wand to cancel the Disillusionment Charm.

"I have noticed how much you enjoy sitting amongst the flowers, and how you curtail the growth of the weeds which stubbornly exist despite the charms to prevent them. You seem more at peace here than anywhere else in my home. I thought perhaps you might enjoy a section of the garden to call your own. You may cultivate whatever you wish here."

Hermione appeared stunned for a moment and tears formed in her eyes. Snape inwardly panicked at the sight of the formation of moisture. Why wasn't she happy with this? What had he done wrong? Then a smile crept onto her lips. She sniffed delicately and beamed at him, the first time since that first fateful day in the garden.

"I am incredibly touched. That was very sweet..." Hermione grimaced slightly and corrected herself, "thoughtful of you."

Snape smirked slightly; he knew exactly what she had originally had tried to say. No one would ever attribute the word 'sweet' to Severus Snape. "I will provide you with a catalogue; you may pick whatever suits your fancy. There is a distributor who owes me a favor."

Hermione nodded at him and then seemed to contemplate something. "I do have one question for you. How do so many different varieties of plants coexist here? I notice several species which are not indigenous to England and should not be able to flourish here." Hermione's face showed inquisitiveness combined with puzzlement, an echo of her former student self.

Snape smirked at her and decided that he could risk a small, light-hearted jab. "Are you a witch or aren't you, Miss Granger?"

Hermione frowned, her lower lip bitten in thought. Her brow furrowed for a moment before she looked up at him again. "Well, obviously magic would be involved, but what specifically? I suppose the soil could be transfigured to suit different plant requirements and..."

Snape interrupted her gently. "Your thinking is too complex. They are simply magical mini-environments. Just a basic variation on the charms that were at work in Pomona Sprout's greenhouses."

Hermione smiled at him in response. "Of course. Thank you again. I really do appreciate it."

Pleased that his gamble had worked to his advantage, he worked with her on harvesting from the more stubborn plants. Hermione kept stealing glances at him when she thought he wasn't looking. Snape was doing the same. Occasionally those glances would coincide, and they'd both immediately look down at the plant as if it was the most interesting plant in the world. Afterwards, they returned to the laboratory to begin preparing the ingredients for storage. Feeling slightly awkward, he resorted to his familiar professorial mode.

"Most Muggle plants such as the ginger can be stored in multiple forms: dried or under a stasis charm to stay fresh. Some other herbs can be dried magically without being detrimental to their potency. Others must dry naturally and slowly over time or else they will lose their efficaciousness," Snape explained as they laid out the various herbs and plants on the lab tables.

Hermione quickly sorted her piles into what she thought fit in the specified categories. Upon being shown her groupings, Snape approved.

"Very good. Proceed. I shall begin preparing dinner." Snape headed upstairs quickly in order to hide what was a very uncharacteristic smile. Finally, the Hermione Granger he knew had emerged. Hopefully, this was a permanent step in the right direction.

A/N *Ostendo planto venenum is me twisting Latin (most likely improperly) to mean 'reveal potions garden'

A New Beginning?

Hermione Granger has not borne the effects of war well. Severus Snape encounters her at a farmer's market when she collapses and takes her back to his home. What happens next?

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Hermione was still abnormally quiet and reserved everywhere but when she was out in the garden. Snape supposed it was because she might be able to lose herself in the environment and forget whatever problems that were contributing to her current condition. Hermione had spent the last few days preparing the garden for her seed orders. They were both in the garden harvesting for potions ingredients as usual.

There had been a comfortable silence for a majority of the afternoon when Hermione suddenly spoke up. "You're not the professor I knew. You're different somehow."

Snape smirked a little. "So are you, Miss Granger."

She made a small noise of agreement. "A lot has happened since Hogwarts."

"Indeed," Snape agreed casually. He realized that he had a rare opportunity to see if she might open up. "Care to share what I have missed?"

Hermione swallowed and looked down into her basket. She bit her lip in concentration, and Snape noticed she had tensed up. She focused on the dirt that she was slowly releasing from her hand, creating little puffs of dry silt when the bigger clumps hit the ground. He was prepared to retract his comment when she opened her mouth to speak.

"I don't know where to start," she admitted. "There's so much to say. And... none of it is easy to admit."

A tear slid down her cheek as she appeared to ponder her next statement. Snape set down his basket and moved to sit close to her. "Begin with the beginning," he said simply.

"I've lost almost everyone I consider family. Because of the war with Volde..., " Snape cringed automatically when she began to say Voldemort's name. "...the Dark Lord." Snape's Mark had thankfully disappeared without major repercussions upon Voldemort's death, but the name still sent shivers down his spine. "How much do you know of the Final Battle? I know that you did not fight on either side. Professor McGonagall told us that it was unlikely you would be able to actively participate."

Snape nodded. "It was a promise I made to the headmaster before..." Snape paused. It was still quite painful for him to speak of the act he had been forced to commit against the only man he had ever wanted to call Father. He swallowed thickly and spoke. "I know next to nothing of what transpired. I only know that you were personally involved in bringing the Dark Lord down. I know you found the spell which cursed him to his absolute death." He paused again. "I also know that we lost far too many."

Hermione nodded in understanding and continued, "Then you were probably unaware that the Dark Lord tried to get our attention by... by...murdering my parents. He sent Death Eaters to attack my childhood home before the Order could get them into a safe house. We'd known for awhile they were a possible target, given my friendships. But my parents stubbornly refused to leave their practice and go into hiding. We were on our way to try to convince them again when we heard..." Hermione trailed off as she recalled the event. She sniffled but did not cry. Instead, she pounded the dirt with violence which betrayed her feelings.

"I had no idea that you had lost your parents," he said simply. Words were inadequate at the moment. Suddenly a few of the pieces of her puzzle seemed to fall into place; such as her bursting into tears on that first fateful day, and later, when he suggested taking her for a visit. He felt remorse for causing her past pain but tried to push it away. It was such an unfamiliar concept to him.

"Losing my parents was bad enough. But I lost my friends too. Neville. And Ron," she paused and sniffled. Snape understood, or so he thought.

"You lost more than a friend, then, with Mr. Weasley, perhaps. Were you two not romantically involved?"

Hermione laughed while simultaneously choking slightly on her tears. "No, Ron and I were never lovers. He was very much interested, but by the time he admitted it, my feelings were more sisterly than romantic. We agreed to stay friends." Her face darkened. "Most of his family is gone as well, only Molly, Arthur, Fred and Ginny are alive. They're not the same. The last I heard, Molly spends most of the day weeping over her lost children. Professor McGonagall was severely wounded; she now walks only with the assistance of a cane. She said that it would take a lot more than that to take her down. She doesn't like to talk about it, so I'm not exactly sure what happened. Professor Lupin was killed by Greyback in the Final Battle..."

Snape was saddened by that fact. They had never been friends, but Lupin was one of the Marauders who had not delighted in torturing him during their school years. He, like Hermione, had earned the Potion master's grudging respect over the years. They had proven themselves to be unlike the others.

Hermione continued, "...but it was Harry that really impacted me."

Snape looked at her in puzzlement. "What happened to Mr. Potter? Is he not in some elite position within the Ministry for all of his good deeds done for the wizarding world, yet again?" Snape couldn't help but let a little sarcasm into his tone. He still begrudged James, and some of his now-diluted malice was aimed towards the son.

Hermione looked at him slightly stricken. "Harry died. About a month after the Final Battle, he suddenly fell ill. The Healers at St. Mungo's couldn't work out what was wrong with him. Their best guess was that either he was hit with a stray curse that lay previously undetected or that his condition was somehow related to the death of the Dark Lord."

Snape didn't know exactly what to say except, "I'm sorry for your loss. Potter did not deserve to miss out on the world he helped to save."

Hermione gave him a tearful smile. "After Harry died, I felt so alone. I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to live in the wizarding world anymore. I couldn't connect anything positive with it. We worked so hard to bring the Dark Lord down, and he still managed to take away almost everything I loved."

Hermione looked down and spoke the final sentence almost inaudibly to her lap. Snape could see the tension creep back through her body. As quickly as her talkative mood had appeared, it seemed to dissipate without warning. Snape was puzzled; he did not understand if this mood switch was due to her depression or to the mysteries of the female mind, or perhaps both?

Snape realized that he would not get any further information from her tonight. He was unsure what to do next. He did not feel comfortable leaving her alone after such an emotional confession. However, there were still a few plants to be harvested. He stood hesitantly and brushed off his robes. He made quick work of the remaining harvesting, and it was only just heading towards sunset when he motioned for her to follow him inside.

Hermione walked listlessly behind him and headed lethargically towards the couch in the study. She curled up on the couch, huddled under what Snape jokingly referred to as her blanket. She remained there until dinner was ready, and Snape nearly had to carry her to the table. She picked at her food, but still managed to eat a respectable amount.

Snape frowned at her while he held out his hand and said, "*Accio Snape's Dreamless Sleep Potion.*" A vial flew up the stairs from the lab and into his waiting hand. He pressed the vial into her hand.

"Take this tonight. It is a far more potent version than you have been taking. You should not dream tonight. You have relived enough this evening." Hermione looked at him warily and nodded at the same time. She stood from her chair and disappeared down the hallway, up the stairs and into her room.

Snape slumped in relief and headed for the study. He Summoned the bottle of Firewhisky and a glass, and poured a healthy measure into the tumbler. The potent liquor burned on its way down his throat, but he was thankful for the reminder that he was alive. He had not expected such an emotional confession from her. He had not known the extent of pain she had gone through. He had lived through so much that he was nearly numb to it. She only recently understood what wizardkind could do when they turned to the Dark Arts. He knew that she was well-read in wizarding history, but there was nothing compared to actually living through the horrors of the war. Nothing could have prepared her for the trauma, and it was no wonder that she withdrew to the extent that she had. Snape's reaction had been to become reclusive and numb himself to the horrors.

It almost physically pained him to see her so destroyed by these last few years. He had not felt compassion like this towards any witch in a very long time. It was a completely foreign feeling to him and one he desperately wanted to ignore. For the first time in ages, he felt the urge to talk to someone who understood, who would listen. He needed to unburden himself and he needed advice. Snape desperately wished to converse with Dumbledore's portrait but was not ready to face McGonagall in person yet. He knew that she understood and supported him, but it did not make it any easier.

Disconcerted by the many thoughts whirling around in his mind, Snape poured himself another measure of Firewhisky. He spent many hours that evening staring into the fire and thinking about all that had transpired in the recent months, even years.

~*~*~

The next morning found a slightly grumpy and sleep-deprived Snape and a subdued Hermione at the table. Back to their mutual moments of silence, they worked in the lab and then headed out to the garden once the day's completed potions were sent via owl-post. A decent amount of time passed before Snape found himself settling down closer to Hermione.

"I suspect you might be feeling slightly... vulnerable because of your confession yesterday afternoon. I am... grateful that you felt comfortable enough with me to unburden yourself in that manner. I, too, know how it is to lose a family and those you care for." Hermione looked at him sharply, her unspoken question in her eyes.

"No, the Dark Lord did not take them from me. My father took care of that quite efficiently all on his own." Snape laughed bitterly. "You see, Miss Granger, I am not the pure-blood that you think. I, like your late friend Mr. Potter and the Dark Lord himself, am a half-blood."

"Actually, I did know that. I researched you..."

Snape interrupted her with a small laugh. "...in the library, of course. I should have guessed. But there is much you do not know. My mother saw fit to conceal her magical identity when she met my father. She lived a completely Muggle life until I was seven. That is when my magic chose to make itself known. She was forced to confess that she was a witch. Understandably, my father was shocked beyond all belief. However, his response was to overindulge in alcohol and drugs and to become abusive towards my mother and later, myself. We were forced to flee and live in seclusion here. He couldn't hurt either of us here. Or so we believed. Somehow, he tracked us down while I was away at Hogwarts. I wasn't there to protect her. I failed her..." Snape trailed off, dazed by his own admission.

Hermione was momentarily speechless. Snape could see that she was clearly unnerved by this wealth of new information and especially that it was of a very personal nature. She seemed to consider her next words carefully and settled on, "I had no idea."

They both sat there uncomfortably for a moment. He hadn't meant to admit so much about his childhood. It had simply poured out as if something had been unstopped inside him. He felt extremely vulnerable and exposed. Not knowing what to say nor feeling as if he could look her in the eye, he hurriedly got up and retreated to the opposite side of the garden.

Unbeknownst to him, Hermione's eyes filled with tears on his behalf. He only became aware of it when her sniffing became audible to him from across the garden. Trying desperately to ignore it, he attempted to absorb himself entirely into his work. Finally, growling in frustration, he threw down his harvested ingredients and prepared to storm into the house.

It was her light voice, laced with pain, which stopped him in his tracks. "Please, don't leave. I know how hard that was for you to divulge. Trust me. Look at me, Professor," she implored.

Snape shook his head minutely. He couldn't...he couldn't look at her right now. He needed to be alone...away from her and as fast as possible.

Her small hand grabbed at his arm, and he angrily tried to pull away. "I did not give you leave to touch me!" he snarled. He wrenched himself away from her with more violence than was necessary. His anger was clouding his judgment, and he swept into the house, leaving an extremely distraught Hermione Granger in his wake.

He Summoned the Firewhisky from the study on his way up to his bedroom the one room that he could call solely his own...where he could not be disturbed. He jabbed his wand angrily in the air as he spoke the incantations necessary to lock the door and soundproof the room. Snape practically threw himself into his well-worn but very comfortable armchair by the fire, causing Firewhisky to slop out of the bottle and onto his clothing. He cursed inventively and stared daggers at the fire.

He felt so many feelings at once it was hard to separate them. He was still in shock that he had allowed himself to be so exposed and vulnerable, especially in front of ~~her~~ Merlin, he needed another drink. He slumped back into his chair and poured himself shot-after-shot until the bottle was empty. Each shot was thrown back after his mind drifted to the woman he had abandoned in the garden. The potent liquor had just begun to catch up with him when he finished the bottle. Not finding another in the vicinity, he cursed again.

With startling clarity, he sat up straight in shock. Damn it! He was turning into his ~~father~~. A drunk who was selfishly drowning his sorrows in alcohol. He was supposed to be redeeming himself by helping to heal Hermione, not damaging her further. He cringed; how much damage had he done? He howled in frustration and hurled the bottle into the fire, resulting in only a mildly satisfying crash.

Why did she plague him so? Why hadn't he gotten rid of her long ago? Why had he brought her here in the first place?

"Because I asked you to."

Snape nearly jumped a mile when he heard his former mentor's voice.

"You can't be here. You're dead. I... I killed you. You're simply a Firewhisky-induced hallucination," Snape said, dismissing Dumbledore's presence airily.

"Perhaps, but I am *your* hallucination, one from *your* own mind." Faux Dumbledore's voice held traces of amusement. He offered Snape a lemon drop and Snape scowled at him.

"Fine, then. Exist if you wish. What do you want of me?"

"You seek answers to your questions, and very good ones, they are."

Snape snorted. Somehow his mind had conjured an incredibly realistic facsimile of Dumbledore. He was still maddening.

Dumbledore continued without missing a beat. "Why did you bring her here in the first place?" Dumbledore Conjured one of his comfortable chintz armchairs and settled himself happily across from the scowling Potions master.

"I brought her here because *you*. Told. Me. To." Snape bit off each word as if it were distasteful.

"Just how did I do that? I've been dead for awhile now. And I know you haven't been back to Hogwarts to visit my portrait," Dumbledore said innocently.

"You told me the night that I... that you... died... that I should do unto another what you had done unto me. That I would know when it was the appropriate time. And that it would change my life forever," Snape said, less sourly than before.

"Hasn't it though? Would you have willingly approached Miss Granger on your own?" Snape snorted. "Exactly. You wouldn't have. Perhaps fate has brought her into your life."

"Or perhaps you did, you interfering fool." Snape scowled at him, only causing the faux Dumbledore chuckle merrily.

"How will you ever know, my dear boy?" His eyes sparkled with amusement and feigned innocence.

"Are you quite sure you weren't a Slytherin?" Snape muttered dejectedly, sinking further into his chair.

"Now aren't you grateful that she is again a presence in your life? True, you may not have envisioned your life as thus, but it is what it is. And might some of your anger stem from your perhaps more than professional feelings towards the young woman down the hall?"

Snape hissed as he drew himself out of his chair, and began pacing rapidly. His companion chuckled. "Your silence speaks volumes, my boy. Is it so far-fetched for you to have begun to have feelings for Hermione Granger? She has been living here for several weeks, and neither of you have had any contact with the outside world, except via owl post," Dumbledore pointed out.

"I am twenty years her senior. I was her professor, for Merlin's sake! I eventually hurt those whom I become close to. Shall I go on? Oh wait. How could I forget? She's *depressed*. She's emotionally damaged and vulnerable from living through more hell than anyone ever should have at her age," Snape said angrily.

"The same could be said about you at her age, my boy. You sought a purpose in your life when you were lost and unfortunately it was with Tom Riddle. She has perhaps been luckier than you in that she has found her stability without the Dark Arts."

Snape grudgingly agreed. "Perhaps you are correct."

"Indeed. And is it so far-fetched for you to believe that she might have feelings in return? Hermione is a smart woman. Yes, my boy, *a woman*. She is far from the little girl you knew as your student. She's lived through incredible horror and tragedy. She was already far more mature than others her own chronological age when she was in school. Deep down, under all those layers of hurt and pain, is an intelligent woman whose unquenchable thirst for knowledge equals only the thirst of the person I am sitting in front of. And deep down, *you* know this. After all, I am only a figment of your imagination."

Snape digested all the information the facsimile of Dumbledore had just laid out in front of him. Maybe he did have a point. Snape frowned.

"Well, I think you're on the right track now. And I think you've answered some of your own questions. You might not realize it yet, but you have. It is not as ridiculous as it might seem. You have lived far too much of your life alone. It is time for you to seek companionship. You two are more suitable than you are willing to admit. You have already sought her companionship, you welcomed her into your home, and she has flourished here. For now, I think my work here is done. Come visit me at Hogwarts, my boy. I shall be waiting for you." The facsimile of Dumbledore patted Snape on his shoulder as he stood to leave. He walked over to the door, as if to exit and paused. Dumbledore turned back and looked at Snape. "You did the right thing before. Do the right thing now." And with that last tidbit of vague advice, the faux Dumbledore vanished before his eyes.

If Snape had been any other man, he would have broken down in tears of confusion and exhaustion. Instead, he got ready for bed. Worn out from the day's events, physical and emotional, Snape found himself not needing Dreamless Sleep Potion for the first time since Hermione Granger walked back into his life.

~*~*~

Snape had feared for Hermione's emotional state the following morning. He had seemingly abandoned an already emotionally distraught woman to selfishly contemplate his own feelings. Not one to easily admit his wrongdoing, he had risen early and prepared a breakfast that he hoped she would appreciate. It had been his subtle or not-so-subtle way of apologizing for his actions.

He had been slightly surprised that their emotional day had not caused any setbacks in her progress of coping with her depression.

They had fallen into their familiar work patterns as if that afternoon had never occurred. They had never expressly discussed the mealtime situation, but had fallen into an easy pattern. Hermione, who was usually first to wake, would make breakfast and have coffee and hot water brewing by the time Snape came down to the kitchen. Snape would organize dinner. Lunch and afternoon tea was prepared by whoever was finished with their task first.

The silences which permeated the daytime were of a different sort. There was still tension, and he spent a majority of his day observing her when he knew that she was absorbed in her own work. He had a sneaking suspicion she might be doing the same. The thought had simultaneously intrigued him and caused him to panic. They had conversations periodically throughout the day. However, those had been mostly pertinent to the task at hand or simple requests. Both of them had appeared constantly on guard, neither in a hurry to repeat their emotional day in the garden.

The arrival of her seed order had caused great joy in Hermione's life. Her face had lit up with excitement when the owl arrived carrying the paper-wrapped package. She had greeted the owl with such great enthusiasm that it pecked her mildly for her impatience. She had given the beautiful brown owl an extra treat, pocketed the packets and got immediately back to work with an extra burst of energy. Snape had never seen Hermione work so fast. Yet she was not sloppy with her work it was as precise as ever. The potion had barely cooled when she had bottled it and flown up the stairs so quickly he almost swore she had Disapparated.

Eventually, she would require his assistance. Hermione, since her arrival at Spinner's End, had never asked for her wand nor had she attempted to perform magic. Her magic had been severely depleted when she had collapsed, and though she had since gained some strength back, she was still not up to par. He suspected that innately Hermione had known she was not ready to be performing magic whilst her moods and body were so far out of balance.

Snape had joined her shortly after completing his own potions and cleaning up the lab. She wouldn't let him see the names on the seed packets, but she had allowed him to watch her plant the seeds. She had grinned at him when she was finished, and he surprised himself by wanting to return it in full. He had instead settled for a Snape-like quirk of the lips and a raising of his eyebrow.

That particular day had been three weeks ago. Since then, they had felt increasingly more comfortable in each other's presence and their conversations had become more amiable. Hermione had finally begun exploring Snape's library. It seemed that whatever shell she had been hiding in had thinned significantly. She was distinctly more approachable and less moody than she had been when she had first come to his house.

Having been wholly absorbed in the overhaul of the vegetable garden and the omnipresent need to harvest potions ingredients, he had neglected to check the progress of the plants in 'her' plot. After satisfactorily completing the tasks that he had set himself, he wandered over to where she was sitting. Had she grown her seeds in Muggle soil, her plants would have not progressed to the stages that they had. He had thoughtfully provided her with magically altered soil which had mild growth accelerant charms infused in it. He had seen no need for her to have to wait long for results from her hard work.

"An interesting choice of plants," he intoned from above her.

She looked up and him and smiled as he moved to sit on a nearby rock. The smells from the herbs nearly overpowered the scents from the flowers. Purple blooms topped a strong stalk and created a thin border of purple fluffiness. Sizeable green leaves alternated down a sturdy stem, topped with miniscule white flowers. A few, tightly furled leaves were waiting to spread out and enjoy the sunshine. Over in the far corner, long, thin green leaves sprouted out from a base as if they were arms of a firecracker.

"I didn't choose the seeds for their practicality. I chose plants that reminded me of my family and of my friends. I chose lavender because it is one of my favorite scents. My

mother always smelt of lavender. It reminds me of reading books with her. I chose basil and coriander because my father loved cooking more than anything else in the world. He never used a recipe book or measuring utensils. These were some of his favorite spices. And these," she indicated the flowers bordering the other plants in her plot, "remind me of my friends. They're my favorite flower."

Snape was surprised that she was able to speak of her parents without more than a slight waver in her voice. Hadn't it been just yesterday that she promptly burst into hysterics when any allusion to her family entered into the conversation?

"I do not recognize the plant. What is it?" he said truthfully. He was woefully unfamiliar with plants that were not used in potions. He indicated the shorter plants with lush green leaves topped with brightly variegated blooms with wide, rounded petals.

"*Viola Wittrockiana* is the botanical name for the plant, but most people know them as pansies," she informed him. He snorted in response.

"A name with an unfortunate connotation for such an aesthetically pleasing flower," he observed wryly.

"Agreed," she said heartily. He smirked as he observed her color choices.

"How very Gryffindor of you," he remarked as he singled out the red and gold colored flower.

She grinned cheekily at him. "I simply couldn't resist counteracting the overwhelming Slytherin presence in this garden. This one I chose because it reminded me of Harry because of its simultaneous simplicity and complexity. There's more than meets the eye with this one," she explained as she pointed out a deep purple bloom with a hint of yellow at its center. "This one reminded me of Ron," she pointed to a maroon flower with a large yellow patch in the center. "This one reminded me of Dumbledore." Her finger indicated a purple, lavender and black one. She hesitated for a moment. She pointed out several different color choices, bypassing one in favor of others while explaining which person or persons were represented in her garden.

"And this one?" he prompted her, nodding towards the black one. She looked down at her dirt-stained hands and mumbled something nearly incoherently.

"Pardon me, but I did not catch what you were saying," Snape remarked. Hermione sighed and raised her head slightly.

"This one is not actually black. If you look really closely, you can see hints of purple, blue and red," Hermione explained without actually answering his question.

"Why did you choose that particular color? It is certainly darker than any other flower that you have chosen. You seem to have chosen to surround yourself with vibrant colors, why choose such an opposing color?" Snape was truly puzzled. Hermione sighed deeply.

"I chose it because it reminded me of you," she said, mostly to her hands, but loudly enough for him to hear.

Snape was stunned. Was it truly possible that she did indeed care for him? She still did not look at him, choosing to look elsewhere. Her body language seemed to indicate that it was possible, but he had to know for sure. Hesitatingly, he reached his hand towards her face and tilted her chin.

Her face showed an exterior calm, but her eyes spoke volumes. She whispered something underneath her breath and his brow furrowed in confusion.

"I cannot hear you when you speak at that particular decibel level," he pointed out.

"You can use Legilimency if you want," she whispered shakily.

Snape was pleased at her willingness to open her mind to his. He blinked at her. She nodded in affirmation. He made sure he had solid eye contact and took a deep breath. "*Legilimens*."

He was surprised at what he found when he delved into her mind. Her mind was just as chaotic as he had expected, considering all the emotional trauma she had been through. Bits of her childhood flashed in front of him: her first encounter with magic, receiving her Hogwarts letter, her first ride on the Hogwarts Express. He felt the elation of performing her first bit of magic, her disappointment when she was treated poorly by some of her classmates, her subsequent eagerness to prove herself.

While it was an illuminating look into her past, that wasn't why he had entered her mind. It wasn't hard to find her most recent memories. He steered away from the darker memories which contained all of the pain of the Final Battle and the fallout thereafter. He felt her pain as she attended funeral-after-funeral of her schoolmates and members of the Order. He experienced her despair as she lost interest in the wizarding world and subsequently lost interest in life.

She had been fired from her Muggle job when she began to lose track of time and did not show up for work. She had become a vagrant after realizing that she could no longer live in her parent's home surrounded by reminders of her now painful past. She left everything behind and began wandering from place-to-place, surviving on whatever she could find. The Muggles had homeless shelters which she took advantage of in the beginning. Once the government started to try to help her, Hermione had fled and tried to survive on her own. He had not realized how close she had been to inadvertently ending her own life through personal neglect and lack of desire to live in either world.

Simultaneously saddened and thankful that he had happened upon her that day in the marketplace, Snape moved on to the part of her mind he most devoutly wished to see. He found himself seemingly looking at his reflection, but in fact, it was how she viewed him through her own eyes. He felt her initial anger and confusion of that first day. He experienced the whole gamut of emotions she had experienced in those first few weeks, ranging from despair to brief flashes of happiness to the first stirrings of comfort. He was pleased to note that she had felt more relaxed towards him earlier than he had originally perceived in his own mind. He felt her eventual thankfulness for his assistance in breaking her out of the depression which had taken over her life.

He watched as her opinion of him changed from grudging respect to outright curiosity to piqued interest in her own reaction to his unfortunate encounter with the Ferocious Fern. Somehow, that event had been a turning point in both of their minds. He was shocked and surprised to discover that she indeed harbored an attraction to him. She had been puzzling on it almost as long as he had and to a much greater extent.

He had seen enough, he decided. He released her chin and sat back, trying to absorb everything he had seen.

Hermione sat there, silently awaiting his reaction with widely opened, slightly panicked eyes.

"I had no idea that...that you felt that way towards me," he said carefully.

Hermione blinked at him. "Please don't be angry with me. It's probably inappropriate, but I couldn't keep it from you anymore. It wouldn't be right. I've been trying desperately to hide it. I thought I was horribly transparent..."

Snape held up his hand to stop her rambling confession.

"Why ever would I be angry with you, you silly little girl?" Snape said wryly. "I was simply surprised to discover...that you felt the same way... that I do for you." Snape watched her carefully to gauge her reaction.

Hermione's eyes opened wider and then she smiled. "I'll have you know I am not a silly little girl."

Snape agreed. "You are most definitely not a girl. You are a woman. A woman who has lived through far more tragedy than any one person should experience in a lifetime. A far cry from the student I once taught."

"Perhaps. I did say that the Dark Lord took away *almost* everyone I loved." The unspoken "Everyone but you," was clearly communicated by her eyes.

Hermione smiled at him as she scooted closer. Snape allowed her to settle her head on his shoulder as she leaned into the side of his body. They silently contemplated the emotional events which had transpired that day. Both were surprisingly complacent with the change in their relationship; it felt so *natural*. It was Snape who finally broke the thought-filled silence.

"I am the broken one. I never expected to be the one to help heal another," Snape said simply.

Hermione raised her head to look at him. She took one of his hands and placed it in hers and squeezed it. He returned her squeeze gently and gazed at her. She took her other hand and touched his face. She tilted it towards hers and, after a moment's contemplation, kissed him delicately on his lips. Snape was momentarily surprised, and a brief moment passed before he returned the kiss. When they broke apart, he smiled and pulled her a little closer into his side and wrapped his arm around her.

For the first time in a long while, Snape felt at peace with life, in his mother's garden with one of the last people he had ever expected to be a part of his life.

A/N :The Ferocious Fern is my own invention.

The link to see the pansies is here: <http://www.iciclepansy.com/colors.htm>

First one indicated: Fire and Ice

Snape: Clear Black

Harry: Clear Purple

Ron: Skippy XL Red-Gold

Dumbledore: Icicle Denim

I'd also think she would've put Purple Slash and Autumn Sun in her garden