

Anthem

by emmeline33

After rescuing Severus from what should have been a fatal snakebite, Hermione throws herself headlong into managing his care and finishing her schooling. As she discovers, however, helping another person heal is infinitely easier than healing herself. As the Golden Trio—and Severus—move toward the one-year mark of post-Voldemort life, it becomes painfully obvious that there is no way to go back to normal. New feelings are confusing to all involved, and lives careen from carefully planned paths.

If I Should Fall From Grace

Chapter 1 of 11

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I owe a witch's debt to the lovely Angel Mischa for being such an extraordinary beta (with extraordinary patience)!

Surely, it was almost over. Cold was creeping inexorably upon him, from his extremities, which twitched uncontrollably, to his torso. He was freezing not from external cold, but from the ebb of life force. The light faded away and blazed again with longer and longer intervals. Death was claiming its territory.

Severus summoned his voice with what was certainly his last breath.

"Look-at-me..." he rasped, and he was staring straight into the eyes he had so studiously avoided for years: Lily's eyes, his ultimate comfort and most exquisite torment. A deep, impenetrable fog overtook everything. He saw no more.

He had a sense of moving forward, as if he were trying to sleep on a train. He tried to open his eyes, but all was black. He could hear a multitude of voices swirling inside of his head, disembodied and frightful.

"You have been a good and faithful servant."

"Severus, please!"

"Nagini, dinner!"

A strange hissing noise...

"Avada Kedavra!"

"I regret it."

"Severus..."

The fog was swirling, making him dizzy. He saw, then, eyes. Eyes and voices, all he could make out. Red eyes, sad blue eyes. Oh, those haunted and lovely green eyes...

"Professor? Stay with me." The fog began to dissipate, taking with it the voices, and the eyes, and the numbness that had stolen over his body. His limbs convulsed with pain.

Opening his eyes, he was overwhelmed with bright, white light. Then, eyes, again, dark brown eyes... vaguely familiar eyes, but whose exactly?

Eyes and a voice. "Professor Snape, stay with me! Listen to me! That's right, sir. Stay with me. I know it hurts... but we'll help you." He tried to focus his eyes upon the light, upon the eyes, but the fog was encroaching again; he wanted the fog, wanted the numbness it brought. The voice began again. "Come on, Professor. I'm going to see you through, but you need to stay with me. Hold my hand, sir, it's going to be all right."

Dimly, he was aware of a small, warm hand holding his own cold fingers, and even though following the voice meant more pain, and the fog brought numbness, he was strangely compelled to follow the clear, confident voice back toward awareness.

A Pair of Brown Eyes

Chapter 2 of 11

Severus awakes from horrific dreams at St. Mungo's. Hermione recalls Nagini's attack and is given an unwelcome warning.

Severus ran as hard as he could through the pelting rain. His legs tired, but he dared not stop. He had to get as far away as he could. He had not seen the precipice before him...he skidded to a halt mere centimeters short of the edge. The skin on the back of his neck tingled with dread. He turned his back to the edge of the cliff, peering into the darkness and rain. He could see nothing, but some hideously sibilant noise seemed to grow louder and louder. Soon, he could no longer hear the wind or the rain for the hiss. Danger drew closer. Something was lunging at him. Defenseless, he lurched in fear. Toppling backwards over the precipice, the last thing he saw was a pair of reptilian eyes, glowing red. He fell through the darkness.

Suddenly, he was no longer falling, though it didn't seem as if he had landed, either. He must be somewhere else because he could sense light beyond his closed eyes. He heard before he could see.

"She's been here every day, dear girl," said a feminine voice.

Wherever it was, there were people about. Was that safe? Did they know he was there?

"Aye, the little dear's slept here more nights than I could count. Still, don't she say she's no kin to the bloke? Seems more'n a bit odd that she'd care so much..."

"Calliope..." the first voice admonished.

Who were these people? He tried to move his arms to no avail. Likewise, his legs refused to do his bidding. Was he paralyzed? Or was he under some sort of enchantment?

"Between you 'n me, Maire," the witch named Calliope continued in conspiratorial tones, "don't know why anyone'd care what happened to this-un. Not after the things you be hearin' about 'im."

"Enough, Calliope! The sleepers still have their hearing!" said Maire sharply. "Besides, it is not our place to decide guilt. We're *Healers*."

Panic assailed him. No one knew he was here, paralyzed. They couldn't see him, they couldn't hear him. He had to find a way to communicate...

Undeterred, Calliope continued. "Still. More'n a bit strange, this...what do you reckon he's done to the girl? She hardly leaves his side. Oh!" she gasped. "You don't suppose he's gone and Imperiused her? Given her some type of potion, or somethin'? Not much of a looker, that one... maybe that was the only way he could get a sweet, young witch to..."

Maire's voice thundered. "That will be quite enough! This wizard is our patient, and you will kindly stop spinning these lurid tales. If I could presume upon you to change his bed-pan and have done with it..."

Severus wondered where he was and with whom. He felt himself levitating gently, and he forced himself to open his eyes. He gasped. Wracking pain blossomed with every movement. He felt his arms and legs twitch.

"Sweet Merlin!" Calliope cried. "Maire, help me!" As if from a great distance, Severus felt himself being lowered gently to the bed. He looked up into the bewildered faces of two witches, both of them elderly, both of them clad in lime-green robes. One of them was now pressing a bottle to his lips and tipping it backwards. The potion seared his dry throat, but he began to feel his body relaxing as the pain ebbed away.

"W... w..." he began, but his voice failed him. The two witches continued to bustle around him, Summoning potions, casting diagnostic spells.

"Wa..." he stammered weakly.

With great effort, he reached feebly for the Healer nearest him, managing to graze her arm with his hand.

As if through a tunnel, a kindly, old face peered down at him. Whatever they had given him had stopped the agonizing convulsions, but he was very thirsty. Trying to speak, his parched lips smacked unintelligibly. The light was fading. He needed water...

"Here you go, now, Mr. Snape, Sir." The old Healer was holding a cup to his lips. He drank gratefully and enthusiastically, dribbling water down his chin. All too soon, the cup was empty.

"More," he rasped. Again, the Healer held the cup to his lips, and again he drank, sating himself.

"That's right, be a good lad and drink your water," the Healer crooned. He felt safe with her.

Distantly, he heard the other Healer calling out anxiously. "Maire! Does he need more Blood-Replenishing Potion?"

The Healer named Maire continued to gaze upon him kindly. "No, Calliope, I believe Mr. Snape is almost ready to rejoin us." She was whispering words of encouragement to him, soothing words, but the tunnel through which he was staring at her was closing. Before he knew it, the light was gone and he heard no more.

A new voice echoed distantly through the darkness. Severus' heartbeat quickened...it was a voice he had heard before. A sweet voice...

"He has now been here for two months. I am a bit concerned about decubitus ulcers..." The voice was growing closer. Opening his eyes, Severus could dimly see two feminine forms at his feet, again through a tunnel.

"I understand, Miss Granger. I assure you we have taken extra care...St. Mungo's has an excellent regimen for preventing bed sores." He recognized Maire's voice. "See, he's not really sleeping upon the mattress, but levitating ever so slightly above it with a special air-cushioning charm."

"Excellent. And do you turn him frequently to prevent lividity?" the familiar voice was asking, but he did not hear Maire's reply. The voices of the two women...he was certain he knew the younger of the two, though he was hard-pressed to say from where...were calm and intelligent and caring, and he felt safe for the first time in years. He drifted back into a dreamless sleep.

He didn't know how long he had slept, but something was direly wrong. His extremities began to tingle, and soon the tingle gave way to grinding pain. His muscles were contracting uncontrollably, his arms stiffening at his sides. He felt as if he were going through rigor mortis while he was yet alive. He wanted to scream out for someone, but his mouth wouldn't open...even his jaws were clamping painfully. Paralyzed within the darkness, Severus heard a voice he knew, a voice he despised and feared.

"You have been a good and faithful servant."

He had to scream, he had to run, but he was stuck. An awful, inhuman hissing sound was ordering his death. He had to try... had to scream...

Light flooded his vision. He heard someone crying out in fear and pain, a fear and pain that inhabited his own being. Then, he was looking into a pair of dark brown eyes. Suddenly, he knew that the screams were his own.

"It's all right, Professor, you're safe. I'm here. Hold my hand now, sir, that's right. I'm right here." He felt small hands enclosing his and looked questioningly into the brown eyes. The pain was unbearable. He wanted to stop screaming, but the pain was getting the better of him. A vial was being pressed to his lips.

"Mr. Snape, listen to me. I'm giving you a pain potion. Come on, open up for

Maire...that's my boy...drink up!" He opened his lips, and a thick, warm liquid was trickling down his throat. Immediately, the pain began to edge away. Once again, he slept.

Severus opened his eyes and looked around him. He was uncertain of his location. Was he alive, even yet? He knew that he shouldn't be...

This place was like nothing he had ever envisioned in his musings upon the after-life. He had always hoped for nothingness, yet here he was, in some annoyingly bright room, with pain beginning to tingle in his fingertips and toes. Hell, perhaps? Yes, he could imagine Hell being like this. He must seek out his long-dead, Muggle father and let him know that he had been right about one thing, at least.

"Ahh!" he groaned. The tingle had fulminated into spasms of agony. "Auggh!" He wanted to twist, thrash, fight against the overwhelming anguish. He was drowning in his pain. He closed his eyes tightly, screwing his face up against the intensity.

"Open your eyes, sir." No. He could not. He dared not.

"I know it's hard, but you have to look at me." He sensed someone near him, felt someone's breath in his face as he struggled.

"Here, sir, take my hand..." The lovely voice. The voice of his angel. Severus obeyed without question. He had to. The hand he held was massaging his palm with a firm and comforting pressure, and strangely, the pain, though it did not cease altogether, was becoming more manageable.

"Look at me, sir," the strong, kind voice was commanding, and Severus looked into the face that was poised so near his own. Whose eyes were those? The question teased him without actually tormenting him. Perhaps his father was right about angels as well. Perhaps angels even came to you in Hell, just to mitigate your suffering ever so slightly...

"Breathe with me now." The creature to which the voice belonged was breathing calmly, in through her nose and out through her mouth, slowly and steadily. Her eyes were anchoring him, pulling him towards terra firma.

His breathing, initially shallow and ragged, gradually became more modulated. He could feel himself surmounting the pain, working with it instead of struggling against it. He felt otherworldly, as if nothing existed except him, and his pain, and the kind eyes guiding him over it.

A sense of serenity began to fill him. He accepted the pain, using his breath, depending upon the voice to help him ride its swells and troughs. The waves were lengthening now and flattening, losing their intensity. He felt himself relaxing more and more...

Something began nagging at his brain...

He had something to do, something important. His muscles contracted tensely, and the pain began to surge once more. No, ignore it. He had a mission...

He arched his back in agony, grinding his teeth. He had to remain alert. Much depended upon his mission, he had to remember...

"Sir! Stay with me! Work with it!" he heard the blessed voice saying, but it was far away, so very far away.

The voice, the pain, the breathing were all unimportant. If he were alive, he must accomplish his task. If he were dead, he could demand answers; were answers not what everyone sought after death? If only he could remember the questions, the all important questions...

The anguish was unbearable. He was stretched between the mental torment and the physical pain as if upon a torture rack. A stabbing pain shot through his torso just as he remembered...

A name...

"P... Po...tt...t...-er" he gasped. "Po...tt..." He was gripping his angel by the wrists, staring into her brown eyes, willing her to understand.

Her brow, which had been furrowed with concern, relaxed visibly, and she smiled. No, he thought. No, this is serious... she must understand...

She leaned close to him, placing her hands on his shoulder. Her lips barely touched his ear.

"He made it, sir. Harry Potter made it. Vol...I mean, the Dark Lord...he is dead.

Har...Potter...defeated him. You succeeded."

Severus relaxed then, giving himself over to this... creature, this angel... to her ministrations. She was massaging his arms and shoulders, and her touch chased the physical pain from his limbs just as surely as her words had chased the torments from his mind. He couldn't remember the significance of the name...Potter...or what his mission had been. But his angel had assured him that it had been accomplished. He could rest. A smile spread sleepily over his face as he looked up at her. She smiled back at him. Funny, she didn't look like the angels in his father's church...

Never mind. No one but an angel would answer his questions, soothe his aches, return his smiles. He was firmly convinced of that.

Hermione slumped into her chair, spent by her efforts. She peered at the man now calmly sleeping and dared give in to optimism. She felt a burden lift itself from her exhausted frame. Finally, after nearly two months, it seemed that Severus Snape was going to make it. Furthermore, it seemed as if he would not be consigned to the fate of the "sleepers," as St. Mungo's coma patients were known. To the contrary, it seemed that he was becoming more and more aware.

She shuddered as she remembered watching him in the Shrieking Shack, just a few meters away as the ghastly serpent struck him. Then, the helplessness she had felt as she watched the blood pour from his neck. She had thought him dead; they all had. Something had told her, though, that she should try to save him. Through her horror and disgust, she remembered that the same snake had struck both Arthur Weasley and Harry, and she had healed one of them completely.

Snape, though, had lost far more blood than Harry, and while Arthur's case was remarkably similar, he had almost been lost, even with St. Mungo's considerable resources. Of all the deaths and injuries she had witnessed, Nagini's attack upon Snape had been the most traumatic. Never before had she seen such a cold and ruthless display of power.

After the war, she, Harry, and Ron had collapsed in Gryffindor Tower. The three young warriors had felt a kinship unlike any they had ever known as powerful waves of grief, elation, and exhaustion had threatened to sweep them all away. Ron had broken the silence first.

"Snape..." he had said in amazement. "Snape was looking after you all that time."

Harry had swallowed hard. "Yeah. All this time... I never knew... never got to thank him..."

His green eyes had filled with tears, not only for Snape, Ron and Hermione had understood, but for all of his lost father figures. Though he had defeated Voldemort, he had lost Sirius, Remus, Fred, and Dumbledore...and Snape, the most unlikely father of all.

It had been then that Hermione had told Harry and Ron of how she had doubled back to the Shrieking Shack to tend to Snape, casting life-saving spells to replenish his blood and spreading dittany on his wounds, and how she had then Mobilicorpused him to the makeshift hospital at the Hog's Head. Recalling Harry's expression of joy, she smiled to herself.

"Blimey, 'Mione." Ron had glowed. "You did all of that before you came to help me with..." Ron's voice broke had broken, and his face had contorted at that first memory of his brother's body, which Hermione and Molly had tenderly moved and cleaned. Hermione had embraced her friend, allowing him to sob unabashedly upon her shoulder as they had grieved Fred Weasley together.

Harry had looked on grimly. After some moments, he had cautiously interrupted the silence. "Uh, Hermione?" he had asked softly. "Is he... I mean Snape... is he OK now?"

Hermione remembered how Harry's question had startled her. "Bugger!" she had cried. "I left him in the Hog's Head... there were house-elves helping him... I need to check in on him again!"

Beneath Harry's invisibility cloak, the three weary friends had walked to the Hog's Head. The shabby saloon was full of wounded fighters, but the trio had been intent upon finding one man. Harry's eyes had widened with fear as they had stared down at the Potions master.

He had looked like a corpse with his pallid skin and almost undetectable respirations. Hermione had pressed her ear to his chest and faintly, just faintly, heard his heart beating. Dutifully, she had taken his pulse and counted his respirations before calling a weary-looking house-elf to her for questioning. True to their word, the house-elves had followed Hermione's instructions faithfully, giving him various potions at hourly intervals. Then she herself had spread more dittany over the bite marks on his neck.

The three heroes had then made the rounds through all the wounded, congratulating them and thanking them for their sacrifices while encouraging their healing. It had been an exhausting day.

From that point on, she and Harry had taken it in turns to look in upon Snape, carefully monitoring his progress. After two days, they had decided that he had stabilized enough to be transferred to St. Mungo's. At some point, Harry had spoken directly to Kingsley Shacklebolt and secured Snape's pardon and reward.

"Miss Granger?" A gentle, old voice interrupted Hermione's reverie. Hermione looked up into a compassionate pair of hazel eyes.

"Yes, Healer Glamorgan?" she answered.

"Please, call me Maire." She smiled understandingly at Hermione. Hermione reciprocated wearily.

"Maire. Yes. Uhm." Hermione cleared her throat. "He awoke again, and he was in terrible pain, but I used the massage and breathing techniques we discussed, and he's sleeping again." She frowned slightly. "I didn't know what to do... I wanted to call for help, but he was watching me so intently... as if he needed me to stay right where I was..."

"I assure you, he did need you," Maire broke in. "The numbing potions we've used are already losing their efficacy. In addition, he is at great risk for becoming addicted to the potions...I witnessed the loss of many great wizards to such afflictions during the First War." Maire's lips thinned. "Our friend here faces quite enough of a challenge to be going on with. No, you offered him the best comfort under the circumstances."

Hermione sighed in relief. "I was so afraid I had done the wrong thing..."

Maire laughed lightly. "Of course you were. Have you considered becoming a Healer?" her eyes twinkled. "You are quite gifted, actually... I speak for all of St. Mungo's when I say that your presence at Mr. Snape's side has been a godsend.

"However..." Maire knelt and looked at Hermione closely.

"Miss Granger, you have been here every day and almost every night. I know, also, that you are researching Mr. Snape's case and studying for your N.E.W.T.s."

Hermione squirmed and squared her shoulders. She knew what was coming next. She had been lectured before about exhausting herself, and she had never listened. She was not going to be brushed aside. "Well," she started to protest, but Maire had turned a quelling look upon her.

"You'll be no good to Mr. Snape if you collapse from exhaustion, Miss Granger," Maire intoned. "If you intend to continue caring for Mr. Snape, you must consider it to be a race of endurance rather than speed. He has sustained a particularly grave injury, a rare case. We don't yet know the full extent of his injury or how he will recover from it."

Hermione's optimism flagged. The weariness that she had held at bay for so long threatened to overwhelm her. Moreover, she was dreading the day when Professor Snape would no longer need her assistance, a day left for her to structure for herself. Maire peered at her knowingly.

"Miss Granger..."

Hermione bit her lip and twisted her hands.

After a long pause, Maire continued. "I've rarely seen such a gifted young witch. You have an unparalleled talent for healing and..." the old witch smiled wryly, "research. I

myself became a Healer under such circumstances. In the aftermath of the First War. With Grindelwald."

Maire blinked hard. "That war didn't last as long as this one did, not here in Britain. But there was a need, and those of us who were able stepped forward. We were young and scarred; we enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to heal the wounds of the wizarding world. We wore ourselves out. Many excellent Healers simply gave out."

Hermione looked into Maire's unflinching gaze. She felt uncomfortably transparent, almost as she had as a student when Dumbledore or Professor Snape looked at her. She didn't quite know what she would have to hide from the elder witch, but she definitely felt like hiding...

"Listen to Maire, girl." The edge that had slipped into the Healer's voice caused Hermione to sit up straight and alert. "I know what you're doing. I've done it myself."

Done what, Hermione wondered.

"War exacts a heavy toll. You can easily immerse yourself in caring for others while avoiding your own thoughts." Hermione's stomach lurched uncomfortably. She had a sense of dams being breeched within her mind. Chaos threatened to spill over her.

Maire continued staring at her. At once kind and stern, her voice continued to breach Hermione's defenses. "Mr. Snape has a very, very long way to go before he is what I would call 'well.' Even if his wounds were miraculously healed, he would still suffer the enormity of what he has experienced."

Enormity... Hermione batted the word away as if it were an insect that annoyed her. She did not want to consider the enormity of what Snape had experienced. Much less did she want to consider the enormity of her own experiences in the war. She fiddled uncomfortably with the hem of her sleeve as Maire went on.

"I don't presume to know why you care for this man so much. Obviously, however, you do care for him. And if you plan on being involved in his convalescence, you must accept that healing must happen on many levels...for each of you."

Maire's face relaxed and she stood straight. "Get some rest now, dear girl. I didn't come out of retirement to treat otherwise healthy young witches for exhaustion."

Hermione, suddenly reminded of Professor McGonagall, smiled involuntarily.

"I'll have Calliope bring a tray of sandwiches and tea round for you," Maire said. She conjured a small but comfortable looking camp bed. "Sleep. I'm watching out for your friend." She winked at Hermione as she walked around the curtain, leaving her to push the beckoning enormity away.

AN Many thanks to Angel Mischa, my gifted beta, and to amsev for helping me correct my errors. This chapter shares a title with a Pogues song, which also deals with post-war themes.

Bounded in a Nutshell

Chapter 3 of 11

At Ron's urging, Hermione decides to spend a nice night with friends. It quickly becomes obvious that life simply isn't the same since the war.

Chapter 2

Bounded in a Nutshell

Hermione decided to take the Tube home that night. Despite the heaviness of her book bag and the weariness of her limbs, she preferred riding to Apparating to Grimmauld Place. She had not been able to shake the fear of Apparating to the house since the war, and every attempt she made was accompanied by anxiety. The endeavor had become so taxing that she had begun to fear she might splinch herself one evening. Furthermore, she longed to be alone with her reflections before joining her friends.

For two months, she had spent a significant part of every day...with the exception of the time she took to fetch her parents from Australia...watching over Severus Snape and monitoring his care. She had researched his case so extensively that she could recite every note on his chart verbatim. In the process, she had become deeply invested in his prognosis.

Her housemates regarded her devotion to Snape ambivalently. Harry was relieved that she had saved him, and eager to proffer his thanks and apologies to the man, questioned her nightly. Ron had found her vigilance noble and selfless for the first fortnight, but had since decided that it proved a lack of mental fortitude; "bloody obsessive," he had grumbled just that morning.

Finally, she had some happy news to relay to them. It did appear, at least, that he was going to regain consciousness, and the wound had stopped weeping blood. Nonetheless, she found herself in the throes of a deep and unnamable melancholy.

Hermione had always taken refuge in juggling a multitude of daunting tasks. Left to its own devices, her mind became a swirling eddy of self-doubt and anxiety, but given a variety of tasks to organize and manage, it was a well-directed stream of energy. Unlike Ron and Harry, who had embraced the unstructured days following the war, Hermione found herself restless and unsettled.

She had focused at first upon retrieving her parents and restoring their memories. When she had discharged that task more ably than she had expected, she turned her attentions to Professor Snape.

He had needed attention. Severus Snape's condition proved to be complex and unknowable, much like the man himself. First, there was the matter of blood loss. Hermione herself had urged the Healers to investigate transfusions, enhancing the Muggle methods with magic. The experiment worked, to everyone's awe. Unfortunately, the bite continued to open and bleed, sometimes after having stayed closed for 48 hours.

To further complicate matters, the potions that countered the neurological effects of Nagini's bite compounded the bleeding. While a certain potion might allow the seizures and tremors to abate, it might also thin his blood and invite hemorrhage. The Healers had been frustrated and weary. None had offered hope.

Hermione, though, encouraged by Harry, had insisted that the Healers pursue every avenue open to them. This had frequently meant long nights of research and note taking, showing his attendants the avenues where they only saw dead ends. Finally, he had been upgraded from critical care to serious care. The Healers, who had at first resented Hermione's relentless questions and challenges, came to regard her with fondness and respect.

Despite the improvement, Hermione stayed. She stayed because she did not only want the man to live, but to regain consciousness. She stayed because she felt that the wizarding world had wronged him for 18 years. She stayed because she was accustomed to untying Gordian knots for her best friend, and her best friend desperately wanted the man to live. Most importantly, though, she stayed because the specter of idle, empty days terrified her.

Hermione was jolted from her reverie by the train lurching to a stop. A young skinhead cursed at her as she fell against him. Mumbling her apologies, she made her way out of the Underground and greeted the dying light.

"Filth! Mudblood! Spawn of blood traitors, here in the home of my ancestors!"

"Hey, 'Mione, you're home!" Ron shouted over the painting. He embraced and kissed her enthusiastically.

"Whoa, Ron, let me put my bags down at least!" Hermione laughed wearily. "Let a girl get through the door and shut that damned portrait up!"

"Stain of humanity! Soiling the purity of my home! Rubbish..."

The strident shrieks died away as Hermione pulled the portrait's heavy, velvet curtains closed.

Ron chuckled. "Is this place mental or what? Do you reckon we'll ever get used to the old bat caterwauling like that?"

"Oh, dear, Ronald, I fear you've mixed your metaphors...unlike cats, bats do not caterwaul," Hermione lectured, wagging her finger at him with mock exasperation.

"Hey! You sound just like you did our first year," he groaned teasingly. "Speaking of bats, how's Snape?"

"Ronald!"

"I'm just asking..."

"Professor Snape is doing... better," she answered icily. "I, however, am horrified that you'd even think of calling that man names! After all he went through! After all he did for Harry! How spiteful and ungrateful can you be, Ronald?" Her voice grew shrill and strident, surprising both her and Ron.

"Hey, Hermione, I'm sorry. You're right. Just habit, I suppose. I won't call him a bat any more." Ron looked at Hermione contritely.

She clapped her hand to her forehead and looked at him in confusion. "Look, Ron, I'm sorry. I know you're used to calling him that... but..." She trailed off.

"Long day?" Ron asked almost timidly.

The corner of her mouth turned upward slightly. "Long two months. Please, just do me a favor. Show Professor Snape some respect. He's suffered so much. And we would all probably be dead if he hadn't been helping us."

"Blimey, Hermione, I know that. It's just habit, OK?" Ron looked at her and smiled. "You know what you need?"

"Besides the chance to sit down and rest my feet, you mean?" she asked warily. It seemed people were always telling her what she needed these days.

"You need a night out and a good drink. Come on! It'll be fun," he pushed, noticing her skeptical expression. "We've all got war stipends from the Ministry, and I want to take my girl out."

Hermione tried to brush aside her growing irritation with Ron, but it crept into her voice anyway. "Ron, that stipend is to reimburse us for the education we lost when we were fighting! You cannot go blowing it on 'nights out' and frivolity! You should be studying, trying to get ahead!"

Ron's features hardened almost instantly. Looking at him, Hermione knew she had crossed a line.

"Don't you dare lecture me about how I spend my money and my time. We lived in a bleeding tent for almost a year, eating food we foraged and wondering when it was all going to crash down. I lost..." Ron gulped and squinted, and Hermione knew he was willing away two months' worth of unshed tears. She felt a twinge of regret.

"I'm not *frivolous*, Hermione," he spat. "And I'm not irresponsible, or stupid, or any of the other things you seem to think I am. But I've had a long, hard go of it this last year, and I'm going to take one night to go out and let someone else pour my drinks while I relax and act like my life isn't completely mental." He stared down at her angrily before he turned towards the coat rack. "You can come or not, suit yourself."

Shame flooded Hermione's mind. She couldn't say exactly why she wanted...*needed*...to control their lives the way she did. It was not a conscious decision so much as a fear that the edges of the universe would fray and ultimately tear if she didn't manage to keep herself...along with Ron and Harry...on the path to some goal. "Ron, wait. I'll come. You're absolutely right. I'd like to go out," she called out to him, even as she became aware of the fact that it would be nothing more than a penitential activity on her part.

He turned and smiled. "Great! Let's Floo the Burrow and see if Harry and Gin want to come with us. Diagon Alley?" Hermione nodded, smiling feebly.

Soon, Ron and Hermione were standing in the Leaky Cauldron, and Ron and Harry were bellowing their greetings to each other. As they took their seats in the old, run-down pub, Hermione felt a brief thrill at the thought of a leisurely time with her best friends. She smiled warmly at Ginny, who was holding Harry's hand.

Tom, the Leaky Cauldron's barman, shuffled to their table with a wide, slack smile. "Welcome, Mr. Potter, welcome! What can I get you?" he asked eagerly.

"Hi, Tom!" Harry grinned. "Well, let's see, I'm guessing Ron'll have a shot of Ogden's..." Ron grinned and nodded. "Spiced wine for Hermione, a butterbeer for our under-aged witch..." Ginny giggled and elbowed him. "That leaves Grimalkin and Paddock's Best Ale for me." Harry turned to look at everyone questioningly. "Did I call it right?"

"Yeah, mate, perfect!" Ron laughed.

Hermione smiled. "If you'd applied that same skill of deduction when we were in school, I wouldn't have had to do your essays for six years," she scolded good-naturedly.

"Yes, Professor," Harry said with mock contrition. "Please don't deduct house points."

"That's my girl, ever the swot!" Ron laughed, pulling her to him. Hermione punched him lightly on the arm and laughed along.

"Thanks, Tom, that'll do for now," Harry said, and the barman shuffled off again.

Everything was just like normal. Except, it wasn't.

Harry's smile, Hermione noticed, was a little too wide. Although he and Ginny held hands, there was plenty of space between them. Ginny, like Harry, smiled brightly, but sat a bit too erectly. Ron guffawed loudly at every joke, leaning into Hermione's space and squeezing her around the waist ever so often. To the outside world, they appeared to be two young couples celebrating a night off. To Hermione, however, they looked like four nervous actors who had over-rehearsed their parts.

Hermione shook the feeling off. *Look at it like a school assignment*, she thought. *You've been assigned the project of enjoying your life. Apply yourself, Hermione.*

She smiled weakly. She could do this. She could perform, especially with the whispering, peeking audience the group had naturally gathered in the pub. Soon, she was

laughing as heartily as her friends, giving the occasional nod of greeting to an awed onlooker. At some point, Ron naturally announced he was hungry, and plates of Cornish pasties, fish, and mushy peas were passed around.

As the night wore on, the laughter grew louder in direct proportion to Hermione's anxiety. "Oi, Tom!" Ron called out raucously. "How about another Ogden's?" Tom grinned and nodded. Ron looked at Hermione. "J'u want one, 'Mione?"

She felt herself bristle anew. "No, Ronald, I do not want one. Don't you think *you've* drunk quite enough for both of us?"

The smile that had so animated Ron's face froze as his eyes widened. "Get off it, Hermione, not tonight. Let's have some fun, OK?" He scowled darkly.

"Fun, Ron? Making a spectacle of yourself, waking up with a hangover tomorrow, what part of that is fun? Please, enlighten me," Hermione spat. The bitterness that she felt...that she heard in her own voice...alarmed her.

Harry looked down, and Ginny looked from Hermione to Ron and back again. As Hermione read the discomfort written across her friends' faces, she felt a jagged stab of guilt. Then, the guilt was gone, swallowed up in resentment.

Why, she wondered, do they always put me in the position of taking care of them if they're just going to resent me for it?

"Seems to me you might want to at least *graduate* before you decide to start grading us, Professor," Ron growled, exploiting Hermione's well-known Achilles' heel. "You've been spending too much time with Snape lately. You don't know how to have fun any more. Oh, wait," he said, as if he had just remembered something. "You never learned *how* to have fun, did you, Hermione? I bet you lied about your boggart in Fifth Year. I'll bet it wasn't a failed test. I'll bet that when the examiner opened that box a gaggle of people laughing and enjoying themselves jumped out."

Harry coughed as Grimalkin and Paddock's Best sprayed from his nose. Ginny bit her lip and quaked silently.

"Can't you just see it?" Ron laughed as Hermione burned with fury.

"They open the box, and these people pop up with drinks and noisemakers, and poor Hermione runs screaming." Everyone laughed openly...everyone except Hermione, who sat quietly. Looking around, she noticed that a fair number of the Leaky Cauldron's patrons were staring and laughing as well.

Anger boiled over within her. "Oh, very nice, *Ronald*," she sneered. "I'll bet you've been practicing that little joke for days. You must be very *proud* of yourself for remembering such a long sentence." Her voice echoed shrilly, embarrassing her.

Ginny and Harry gawked at her in surprise. "It was only a joke, Hermione," Ginny said quietly.

"Yeah, since when do you remember *Hermione* taking a joke?" Ron laughed bitterly.

"Take it easy, Ron," Harry started.

"But why, Harry?" Hermione's voice quavered. She felt like a runaway train. "Ron's best jokes are always at my expense. Such untapped talent! But I suppose he has to distinguish himself *somehow*, after all."

Ron rose sharply. "Guess you'd like to see yourself home, Hermione," he said roughly. Fury contorted his reddened features.

Rising to face him, Hermione all but shouted, "I never asked you to see me home, Ron, and I'll only do so when I wish to be splinched."

Ron's fists clenched at his sides, and he pursed his lips. Turning angrily, he strode out of the pub. Several emotions warred within her: shame at provoking him, sadness at their inability to relate, and finally, a dark thrill of pleasure at having been able to antagonize him. Sickened, she ran to the lavatory.

She gripped the sides of the pedestal sink and leaned over. Her eyes burned and watered. *What is wrong with me?* she wondered. Replaying her altercation with Ron, she felt a deep sense of shame. Ron always looked after her solicitously. He loved her, she knew. She loved him, too. *So why can't I stop antagonizing him?*

Hermione leaned forward and placed her forehead against the lavatory mirror. She had never thought of herself as a spiteful person, but the proof was irrefutable. She had goaded and provoked Ron when all he had wanted was to show her a good time. He had lost so much more than she had during the war. At the thought of Fred, Hermione choked and began to cry softly. *Why can't I be fair to Ron?* she wondered.

She jumped when she heard the lavatory door open quietly. "Hermione?" a soft voice queried. Hermione stood up straight and tried to wipe her tears away.

"Hey, Ginny, I'm sorry," she started. Ginny lingered at the partially opened door uncertainly for a moment before closing the distance between herself and Hermione. She put a tentative hand on her friend's shoulder.

"Hermione, Ron didn't mean anything by it," Ginny said gently.

Hermione sniffed and looked at Ginny. "Oh, Gin, I know. I do. It's not Ron. I'm just tired and... and..." She searched futilely for an adequate word. Ginny looked at her understandingly.

"Hermione, I know things have been hard, but they'll get back to normal," Ginny murmured. "Please, please, though, let up on Ron a little bit. He's trying so hard, and he's missing Fred so much."

Hermione put her hands over her face and turned around. "Oh, Ginny, I know he does. I do, too, and I am so sorry. I've ruined everyone's night. I swear I don't know what has got into me." She winced when she heard Ginny's feet shift on the floor, imagining her friend leaving her in disgust.

She was surprised to find herself enfolded in a warm embrace. Ginny patted her soothingly. "It's OK, Hermione. Things will get back to normal. We'll all sort ourselves out."

"I suppose so," Hermione mumbled, attempting to smile at her friend.

"Now, Harry'll have a team of Aurors searching for us if we stay in here all night," Ginny said briskly. "So come on, Granger, make yourself presentable."

Hermione laughed weakly. "I don't know if I can! Look at me, I'm a mess." Her image in the mirror confirmed her statement. Her eyes were swollen and red, and tears were drying in streaks upon her cheeks.

"You *are* a mess," Ginny agreed, "but we'll make a decent-looking woman out of you. I'm assuming you *don't* want to go out of here with your face all splotchy?" Hermione shook her head dumbly.

"I thought not. *Aufero Rubor!*" Ginny intoned, waving her wand in a circular motion before Hermione's face.

Hermione surveyed herself in the mirror. Miraculously, her eyes were clear, and the red splotches on her cheeks were gone. "You have to teach me that spell, Ginny," she giggled. "That's dead useful."

Ginny shrugged. "Yeah, well, if you have to be the only girl in the Weasley Clan, you have to learn some creative spell-work. Come on now, let's get out of this nasty old loo."

Hermione looked around and shuddered. No one could call the Leaky Cauldron's lavatory clean on the best of days, but tonight it seemed to have outdone itself. They walked arm in arm to the pub's wall where Harry waited.

"G'bye, Mr. Potter! Do come back!" Tom called after the three friends as they exited through the wall. Stumbling into the bustle of Diagon Alley, Hermione was astonished to see Ron leaning against a lamppost.

He looked at her sheepishly. "Sorry, 'Mione. I shouldn't have teased you like that," he offered meekly.

Hermione flushed guiltily. "No, Ron, I'm sorry. It's not my business how much you drink or how much you spend. I don't know what came over me."

Ron gave her a crooked grin. "If you weren't always looking after me, I wouldn't know it was you. I'd think someone had gone and Polyjuiced themselves. I'd call the Aurors."

Hermione laughed as a fleeting sense of normality fluttered within her. She offered Ron her arm, and they walked down wizarding London's main thoroughfare behind Harry and Ginny. This was how life was supposed to be.

The feeling was short-lived. Ron and Hermione almost bumped into Harry as he stopped short, gawking at the storefront formerly occupied by Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor. "No one wastes any time around here, do they?" Harry muttered bitterly.

Hermione, Ron, and Ginny stood silently as Harry stared into the blackened windows. Just beneath a memorial poster featuring Fortescue's smiling countenance, an advertisement blinked garishly. "Coming Soon! Jingly Sickle's Wizarding Arcade!" it proclaimed.

Hermione remembered eating at Florean Fortescue's with Harry and Ron at the beginning of their third year. She recalled the fatherly interest the shop's titular owner had taken in Harry and how the man's disappearance had so unsettled her friend. A familiar malaise overthrew the fledgling sense of comfort she had felt and enthroned itself in her mind.

Ginny slipped an understanding arm around Harry's shoulder as Ron and Hermione moved forward to surround their friend. Harry narrowed his eyes as he considered the darkened storefront.

"Shame about Fortescue," Ron said brusquely. "He was a good guy." Hermione and Ginny nodded mutely. Harry resolutely turned his back upon the abandoned ice cream parlor, and Ron, Hermione, and Ginny followed him down the alley.

Hermione knew that the quiet moment in front of Florean Fortescue's had been their own private valediction to childhood and its comforts, to a time when ice cream and the company of friends made everything right. Walking away, she knew that there was no such thing as "back to normal." They had all been initiated into a terrifying, new reality, and the world they had once known lay in ashes behind them.

Author's Notes: Thanks to Angel Mischa for her phenomenal talent as a beta. Thanks to all who have left encouraging reviews. You are, as they say, the "cat's pajama's!" The title of this chapter comes from Hamlet: "I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself the king of infinite space were it not but that I had bad dreams."

King of Infinite Space

Chapter 4 of 11

While Severus wrestles with terrifying dreams and gaping holes in his memories, the most innocent words—the word 'friend', for instance—evoke bitterness and conflict, and even the touch of an angel becomes suspect.

Chapter 3

King of Infinite Space

Severus felt his throat constrict as he bounded up the stone stairs. He reached a door, and his stomach churned.

Don't open it, said a voice in his head.

"No choice," he groaned.

Numb fingers fumbled with the door's handle. He turned it, trembling as he pushed the heavy, wooden door open. Open air and night skies greeted him.

There is still time. Turn around. Go back.

"I can't..." he pleaded.

Someone whimpered his name. "Severus..."

Grief and horror wound themselves around his chest, threatening to suffocate him. The hour was upon him. He had to act...

"Severus, please!" a weak, old voice implored.

He could not afford to indulge his emotions. The task was extremely important...

A hoarse, disembodied laugh grated in his ears. His father's voice, ragged and whisky-stained, bellowed in the darkness.

"Weakling!" the man cackled, and Severus strained to see him. "I knew you didn't have it in you!"

Severus quaked with terror and fury. He raised his wand. It was required of him...

He pointed his wand, holding it steady, taking aim...

He could not see his target, but it didn't matter.

All of his fear, disgust, and rage seeped out in his voice.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" he shouted.

He cried out in shock as he fell over the side of the tower.

Severus jerked awake, his father's drunken laughter still echoing distantly in his ears. He was momentarily blinded as his eyes adjusted to the bright light, and his mouth was filled with a metallic taste.

His head ached terribly. Turning his head slightly to the right, he saw a pitcher of water perched upon a small table.

"*Accio water!*" he murmured. His voice was hardly more than a whisper. The pitcher did not budge.

"*Accio water!*" he croaked again. The pitcher remained firmly planted upon the table.

"*Accio...*" he gasped again and again to no avail. Desperately thirsty, he reached out. His arm flopped uselessly, and he could not control his hand at all. He cursed inwardly.

Try again, he thought. He succeeded in raising his right arm. He swung it clumsily toward the pitcher, which he managed to brush with his fingers before his arm fell to his side again. He panted with exhaustion.

His whole body ached with thirst.

He contemplated his dilemma. Clearly, his voice was not strong enough for the Summoning charm to work, and he was not coordinated enough to reach the pitcher on his own.

Marshalling his resolve, he tried once more to lift his arm. This time, he reached the pitcher and was actually able to touch it. Just as he felt a small thrill of victory, however, his fingers jerked involuntarily. The pitcher was dashed to the floor.

The tinkle of breaking glass was met by a series of small crashing noises to his left. He slowly and painfully turned his head toward the sound. At first, he saw nothing but an empty bed. As he lowered his eyes, though, he saw a girl with wildly disheveled brown hair scrambling to retrieve an array of fallen books, parchments, and quills.

Even with her face obscured by her hair, she reminded him of someone. He wished she would look up. Maybe then he would be able to see her face and connect it with some vital memory. The lack of recall, combined with his limited range of motion, unnerved him dreadfully.

Finally, she lifted her face.

"Professor Snape! You're awake!" She rose hastily and moved to his side. He was gratified to see coffee-colored eyes staring at him with concern. He remembered those eyes. He had nothing to fear.

"Are you OK?" she asked worriedly. "I fell asleep and I heard a crash."

"Thirsty," he croaked. He watched as her eyes left his to survey the fallen pitcher. Her face flushed as she evanesced the water and glass.

"I am so sorry, Professor Snape. *Accio glass!*" she called, and a tumbler zoomed across the room.

She caught it neatly in one hand. "*Aguamenti!*" she called.

She filled the glass and pressed it to his lips. "Here you go. Slowly, now," she admonished.

He drained the cup gratefully. She poured another, which he likewise quaffed, and another. Finally sated, he looked into her eyes appreciatively. She smiled.

"Are you in any pain?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Can you tell me where?" she pressed.

"Everywhere," he whispered harshly. "Headache."

She nodded understandingly. "The Healers left you a Headache Potion. Just a second..." She trailed off as she reached into a pocket. "Ah! Here we go."

She uncorked a small, brown vial and lifted it to his mouth. Slipping one arm beneath him, she raised his head and poured the potion down his throat.

She smiled apologetically as she lowered him. "I wish I could give you a stronger potion, but this is the only one that's appropriate. It should alleviate some of the pain, though." She watched him expectantly.

The potion had no immediate effect. Severus groaned in frustration and shut his eyes tightly. The headache seemed to get worse, if anything.

Then, slowly, the pain diminished. Without actually ceasing, it lessened in intensity. He opened his eyes and offered his helper a weary half-smile, which, for reasons he could not fathom, she met with a fluttering look of bemusement before smiling in return.

"Are you hungry?" she asked. "You must be. The Healers said you could eat once you awoke. Could you try to eat a bit?"

"Yes," he croaked.

She picked up a heavy piece of parchment from the bedside table, squinting as she read. "Roasted chicken," she murmured to herself. "No, I shouldn't think so, not just yet. Too heavy." She twisted her lips as she thought.

"Hmm. Poached fish... better than chicken, I suppose, but no... oh, yes, perfect!"

She looked pleased. "Broth and poached egg, please," she called out, and immediately, a small tureen, a bowl, and a spoon appeared on the table.

"All right, Professor. Let's prop you up so you can eat." She conjured extra pillows and fluffed them before lifting his head and shoulders gingerly.

"Adjust bed, please!" she called. "Raise head!"

The bed immediately complied, and he found himself sitting almost upright. The soreness of his limbs and the headache that still faintly nagged made comfort impossible.

Nonetheless, he felt a deep sense of security and reassurance, which he could only attribute to the young woman's presence. He watched contentedly as she opened the tureen and ladled broth into the bowl.

She lifted a spoon to his mouth. "Wait..." he whispered. She paused with the spoon poised in mid-air.

"Am I..." he started weakly. "Am I... dead?"

He was rewarded with one of the girl's wide smiles. "No, Professor. You're not dead. You are in St. Mungo's recovering from a snakebite."

Severus shivered violently. The image...a hideous serpent, twisting in a cage of stars, its venomous fangs poised to strike...sprang unbidden to his mind. For a moment, nothing else existed. He shrank back against the bed.

The young woman pushed the spoon gently against his lips, breaking the memory's spell. He slurped the broth inelegantly, wetting his chin and chest. She dabbed his mouth and his chest with a cloth napkin with a deft economy of motion he admired.

"Who are you?" he whispered.

Her brow furrowed ever so slightly before she smiled wanly. "I'm Hermione Granger, sir."

"Are we... are you..." he floundered.

She blushed slightly. "I was once your student at Hogwarts."

"Why..." he gasped, tired from the effort speech required. "Why... are..."

She interrupted him mercifully. "I'm here because I want you to get better. Consider me a friend."

Friend.

Severus pondered the word, flinching inwardly. It came to him pleasantly, but left him queasy, a sweet beginning with a bitter aftertaste *Friend*.

There was so much more he wanted to ask the brown-eyed girl...Hermione Granger...but he was tired. For now, it was enough that she was here. He sat in silence as she fed him, appreciating her nearness and the nourishment of the broth as its warmth spread through his body.

The spoon scraped against the bottom of the tureen as Hermione brought the last bit of soup up for him to sip.

"Do you want more?" she inquired.

"No," he murmured. A comfortable fullness settled in his stomach.

"Are you sore?" she asked. He nodded dumbly, wondering how she knew.

"Of course you are. You haven't moved in a very long time. Here, let's see what we can do for you." He watched her face, spellbound as she placed her hands softly on his temples. She began to describe circles with her fingers as she applied a gentle pressure. The remnants of his headache melted away beneath her hands.

Her hands moved over his scalp in a calming rhythm. He sighed in contentment and sank into his pillows. Had he ever been touched in such a manner? He could not recall, but he doubted it. Her touch was a lullaby, a perfect invocation of everything good on earth and in heaven. He closed his eyes in satisfaction.

Hermione Granger, Hermione Granger... he thought over and over, trying to recall her significance to his life. The compulsion to know, however, faded as her hands smoothed away his tension. *Hermione Granger... My friend...*

She moved her hands along his neck, easing the tension that knotted the muscles. He opened his eyes as she began kneading his shoulders. He took in her scent...a subtle combination of honey and rose...and traced the curve of her cheek, her chin, and her neck with his eyes. Just before he slipped off to sleep, he wondered what could have made the raised, pink scar that stretched across the pale and delicate skin of her throat.

"You're my best friend, Severus."

Severus felt a surge of joy. He looked around. The sun shone through the leaves, casting an ethereal, green glow over everything he saw. The river babbled happily a few meters away. Today was the best day of his life...

"We'll always be best friends, won't we, Severus?" He felt a small hand in his and wanted to laugh.

Say yes. Say, "I'll love you forever." Say, "I'm happy."

Severus couldn't see his companion, though he felt her hand in his. *Her* hand. In *his*. She was holding his hand, and it was the best day of his life.

He grasped the hand. He opened his mouth, opened it to say the words that would allow the enchanted day to last.

His tongue refused to work. His mouth would not open. To his horror, he saw the river swelling, spilling over its banks. Before he could run, it was upon them. He frantically gripped the hand holding his. The river roared.

The churning water swept them away, and his hand slipped. He realized that the frothing rapids were pulling him away from the only person who had ever touched him with tenderness. His friend.

"Severus, please!" she cried out.

He floundered desperately as her voice grew more and more distant. "Severus!"

He could no longer hear her when the water washed over him.

He awoke with a gasp.

"Hello, Mr. Snape. It's so very good to see you awake."

Severus heaved as he tried to shake off the residue of his dream. Green eyes peered into his...kindly eyes, but not the eyes he wanted to see. He glared and glanced around the room.

"Sorry, Mr. Snape, but I sent your Miss Granger off to the tea room," the green-eyed Healer said amusedly. "She needs to get some food in her if she's going sit with you for such long hours." Her eyes crinkled at the corners as she smiled at him.

"How long?" Severus asked.

"Let's see," said the old Healer. "You have been in here for about, oh, two and a half months.

"And your Miss Granger has been here every day except for one week at the very beginning. You are very fortunate to have such a friend."

His Miss Granger. *His friend*. Severus felt odd. He was fairly certain that there had been very few people whom he could classify as *his* anything...much less his *friend*. He felt a peculiar turn in his stomach and knew both terror and elation.

The old Healer eyed him appraisingly. "Mr. Snape, let's have a look at you," she said as she waved her wand over him.

She murmured a series of incantations and assessed the shimmer that hovered over his form. "Take my hand, dear," she commanded.

He lifted his arm. Although it felt stronger, he still could not seem to control it properly. His attempt to open his hand was greeted by a creaking pain, and he grimaced sharply.

"Very good, Mr. Snape," the Healer encouraged. "We shouldn't hope for too much right away. You've been asleep for so long."

Dejection settled over him, erasing the elation he had begun to feel. He was at the mercy of others, unable to control his own body. It had lain motionless for so many weeks that it seemed simply incapable of moving. An image of the old, abandoned mills of his youth sprang suddenly to his mind. *I've begun to rust in place*, he thought bitterly.

"Don't look like that now," the Healer gently chided. "I said we shouldn't hope for too much right away. That doesn't mean we shouldn't hope at all."

She picked up his forearm and massaged it strongly, moving her hands along its length until she reached his hand. She opened each finger individually before pressing her thumb to his palm.

It hurt terribly. He scowled and bit his lip. "I know," the Healer said sympathetically. "It's going to be painful, but this is how we get you moving again."

She stopped manipulating the muscles and tendons in his hand, and he was grateful. "Now, try to make a fist, dear," she ordered.

Severus observed the Healer silently for several instants before he acquiesced. She had an air of authority, which seemed to arise from a natural affinity for her role. He appreciated the way she met his gaze, neither flinching nor posturing. She did not evoke the same state of contentment that he felt with Miss Granger. Nonetheless, he felt secure with her.

The Healer did not seem to mind that he did not obey her order immediately. She continued to study him calmly and steadily. With great effort, he attempted to straighten his fingers. He gasped in pain. His fingers felt as if they were breaking with the movement.

Giving no indication that she had found his reaction unusual, the Healer murmured a spell and waved her wand over his hand. The pain abated. "This will get better," she said reassuringly. "I know some charms that will help the flexibility return to your hands. I see no signs of permanent muscle or nerve damage. They're simply stiff. You will exercise them..."

She broke off to address the glare that Severus was leveling at her. "You will exercise regularly," she continued, "*if* you want to regain your previous range of motion. You are not a child, Mr. Snape, and I shall not bother to threaten or cajole you. The matter is quite simple. You will either exercise...and regain full use of your hands...or you may choose not to exercise and allow them to atrophy. The choice is yours."

Severus considered her words. The way she looked at him, the way she spoke, reminded him of someone else. There was something achingly familiar about her ability to convey authority without perceivably changing her demeanor or tone. She commanded respect by sheer virtue. A confusing sense of bereavement settled in his stomach, and he began to tremble. He feared that he would sob unabashedly. The grief was a bewildering and chaotic force without a memory to which he could fasten it, and it angered him.

He could tell that the Healer perceived his distress, but thankfully, she neither cloyed nor fussed. She simply continued to look at him kindly as she held his hand. In her eyes, to his amazement, he saw compassion unpolluted by pity. He was grateful for her silent presence as they gazed at each other.

When she finally spoke, he allowed her low and gentle voice to penetrate his mind. "I know you have suffered terribly, Mr. Snape. I'm sure there are many things that don't make sense for you right now."

He broke her gaze, focusing on the patterns of the curtains that surrounded his bed. She continued, "It will take time for everything to fall in place. You will remember what you need to remember, and you will heal what needs healing when the time is right."

She leaned closer to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "When you are ready, truly ready, your memories and your feelings will come back to you. Bit by bit. They'll come to you when you are strong enough to accept them."

Severus looked at her once more. A weariness seemed to have come over her, and her eyes were misted. Nevertheless, she exuded a conviction that heartened him.

She sat up straight and removed her hand from his shoulder. "Goodness, where are my manners?" she chuckled. "It's unfair that I know your name when you don't know mine. I'm Maire Glamorgan, and I'm a Healer here at St. Mungo's." She shook his hand.

"We've spent quite a bit of time together already, and we shall spend a lot more time together, so call me by my first name. Please. It would be more natural, to my way of thinking."

Severus found the introduction pleasing. He tried out her name.

"Maire." He smiled to himself, finding relief in addressing someone as an equal.

"That's right. Now, about your hands..." She trailed off and began to mold his hand once more.

With stoic determination, Severus gave himself over to her attention. He submitted to Maire's direction and endured the pain resolutely. The stiffness of his hands diminished significantly, and he could now lightly grasp the small objects Maire conjured. The pain edged away into mere discomfort. Severus yawned.

Maire squeezed his shoulder affectionately. "Well, my boy, you are coming along nicely. I think you've had enough exercise for a bit. You should get some rest now." She stood and winked at him. "Call my name if you need anything."

She turned and walked away. Severus was asleep before she had slipped beyond the curtain.

Severus was running under a star-lit sky. A girl giggled ahead. "Come on, Sev. Hurry up!" she called.

He laughed hoarsely and ran clumsily after her. Finally, she stopped, and Severus caught up to her. They stood a long time, catching their breath and laughing. Severus' heart beat wildly as he gazed at the crescent moon mirrored in the lake. He was conscious of the girl moving closer to him, and he flushed, hoping she could not hear the insistent tattoo of his heart.

A dainty hand grasped his, and he felt that his heart would burst. "Dance with me, Sev," she said, and he almost groaned aloud at the thrill of her nearness. She placed one of his hands on her waist and then put her own hand on his shoulder. She leaned close...so close her hair brushed his cheek...and he inhaled her fragrance. She smelled

of flowers and moss. She smelled... green.

Severus gulped as trepidation vied with the want in his heart. "Come *on*," she giggled. "I didn't break curfew just to see the moon."

His feet felt as if they were made of concrete as he attempted to lead her in a waltz. She laughed and took over, and he conceded happily. He would follow her lead forever because she herself was the path to bliss.

She lifted her face to him, and he stared down into her eyes. Brown eyes. He was dancing with Miss Granger, but she wasn't just Miss Granger...she was someone else, too, someone important. Someone he loved...

She smiled up at him, pure delight shining in her face. He whirled around and around, taking pleasure in following her movements.

Then, something changed.

He didn't know how it happened... Her smile didn't change visibly, but it was no longer a smile of delight. It now seemed threatening, maniacal. Fear started to gnaw at Severus' heart. She continued to lead him, but they were no longer waltzing. She spun him round, faster and faster, until the stars blurred into silvery traces overhead. Severus felt queasy. She laughed, and the sound brought him no joy.

His feet left the ground, and a blinding mist enveloped him. Severus could no longer see her. He wanted to stop, but he knew that if he did he would be propelled into endless space. A roaring sound filled his ears.

"Wake up, lambykins!"

Severus bolted upright. He panted, desperately trying to regain his breath. A short, plump, grey-haired witch simpered at him. "Time to wake up, now!" she wheedled.

Severus glowered as she landed a series of sharp, staccato pats on his forearm. "It's time for your medicine, lambykins," she coaxed. Her voice had a high-pitched, treacle-like quality.

She produced a vial and pressed it to Severus' mouth insistently. He pursed his lips and pulled away, scowling angrily.

Her lips thinned, and her brow furrowed in irritation. Still, though, her voice cajoled childishly. "Oh, don't be naughty, now. Be a good little bloke and open up."

Severus jerked away beyond her reach. "What is it?" he demanded harshly.

She laughed, rather unpleasantly, Severus thought, and wagged her finger at him. "Now, now, I shan't poison you. I'd get fired, you see." She laughed at her own joke as Severus seethed. "Open up for Calliope, love."

"What is it?" Severus demanded again.

The witch narrowed her beady eyes. "It's nothin' that'll hurt you. So open your mouth and drink up." Her voice cracked and lost its syrupy tone.

"Who are you?" Severus insisted angrily.

She drew herself up indignantly. "I'm a Healer. Now, drink." She pushed the vial against his lips forcefully.

Severus raised his right arm and knocked the Healer's arm away, feeling a moment's satisfaction as her features displayed fear. "Tell me what it is," he growled harshly.

The Healer adjusted her face and smiled obsequiously. "Now, lambykins," she urged. "Be a good little lad. Calliope has a nice little Limber-Up Potion for you."

Severus narrowed his eyes and stared belligerently at the Healer as he opened his mouth. He drained the thick, bitter potion. A warm sensation immediately flooded his extremities, and he was pleased to find that he could flex his fingers easily without pain. Nonetheless, he continued to glare at the annoying Healer, who was now grinning triumphantly.

"There, there now, you see? Calliope's not goin' to hurt you, lambykins."

"Do not call me lambykins," Severus snarled fiercely.

Calliope smirked knowingly. "Oh, yes, sir, I'll not call you lambykins again. We can't have your little witch gettin' jealous. I'm sure she's the only one to be callin' you lambykins. Bet she whispers it in your ear, like."

The Healer's oblique mention of Miss Granger fanned Severus' fury. He clinched his jaw and balled his hands into fists. The old witch provoked him further by chuckling and winking, giving every indication that she enjoyed Severus' discomfort.

She lowered her voice and leaned closer to him as she continued. "Oh, come on now, what wizard your age wouldn't want a young witch like that? You should be proud, that's what you should be."

Revulsion washed over him as the scrap of a memory floated through his mind.

"You don't suppose he's gone and Imperiused her? Given her some type of potion, or somethin'? Not much of a looker, that one..."

The witch named Calliope rambled on. "She's right devoted to you, too. It's so romantic, her savin' your life an' all. You'll have such stories to tell the grandkids."

Saved my life?

Severus' eyes widened.

Calliope caught her breath as she took in Severus' expression, and her face registered surprise. "I, ah, thought you knew," she stuttered.

Severus froze in astonishment. *How?* he wondered. *Why?*

A thousand questions bubbled up within him: Had she really been his student? How well had he known her? What could possibly motivate her to save his life? The lack of details frustrated him terribly, especially since he had come to depend so much upon Miss Granger.

Calliope stammered and wrung her hands in bemusement. "Well, now, I didn't mean... well, ah, I thought..."

Her voice snapped Severus out of his contemplation. "Get out!" he barked roughly.

Calliope wasted no time disappearing around the curtain. Severus lay back against his pillows, holding his hands to his aching temples. He had a lot to think about, and he did not even know where to start.

Author's Notes

As always, I owe a great deal to Angel Mischa and her extraordinary beta work and encouragement. I also thank those who have reviewed and those who have marked this story as a favorite. You make writing so much more gratifying, and I appreciate your kindness and support.

I keep forgetting to say it, but if anyone was in doubt...

I own none of these characters except for Maire and Calliope, and since they aren't exactly cash-cows, I am making no money from the writing of this story.

Bad Dreams

Chapter 5 of 11

Hermione struggles to answer Severus' questions, and learns that he has received some interesting mail. In the meantime, Ron is planning a surprise.

Bad Dreams

Hermione's dry eyes scanned her Arithmancy text for what seemed like the hundredth time. Nothing she had read had made its way to her mind, and she had exhausted both her mental and physical reserves. Her head nodded forward.

Someone cackled maniacally in her ear.

"Let's see how muddy her blood really is..."

Her head snapped back, and she opened her eyes, her heart pounding violently in her chest. She rubbed her eyes and looked around, thankful to find herself in St. Mungo's tea room surrounded by other people.

She took a sip of tea and winced. Cold. She tapped the paper cup with her wand and muttered a warming spell. She drank deeply, savoring the bitter, tannin aftertaste.

A voice from behind her made her jump. "I hoped I would find you here."

Hermione blotted spilled tea from the front of her robes as she spun around. "Oh, Maire. Hi." She smiled wearily at the Healer.

It suddenly occurred to her to wonder why Maire had sought her out. "Is Professor Snape all right?" she asked in alarm.

Maire smiled. "He's quite well. I believe he's putting Healer Millar through her paces right about now."

Hermione raised one brow questioningly. "Is he giving her a hard time?"

Maire laughed mischievously. "No harder than she deserves. I believe he took exception to her use of the term 'lambykins'."

Hermione laughed out loud. "She called Professor Snape *'lambykins'*? I'm sure he just loved that."

"As I said, he seemed to take exception to it." Maire's eyes twinkled merrily.

"Oh, well, at least he's getting back to himself," Hermione giggled.

"It would seem so. At least, he's out of the proverbial woods." The Healer frowned thoughtfully. "He still faces some daunting struggles. I'm not sure just how much of his memory he has regained."

Hermione sighed and looked down. Snape had never been her favorite professor, just as she had never been his favorite pupil. Nevertheless, a part of her wished fervently that she could see him once more as the towering menace he had been. She found it difficult to reconcile that image with the vulnerable, friendless patient that lay in his bed now.

"Were you aware that he has been receiving owls for the last week?" Maire asked.

Hermione looked up alertly and narrowed her eyes. "What kind of owls?" she asked suspiciously.

"Why don't you come and see after visiting hours," Maire said significantly and walked away.

Hermione trembled with exhaustion and anxiety as she gathered her books from the table. She reduced all of them and placed them in a tiny handbag, then walked pensively down the corridor toward Snape's ward. She tried to imagine just who would owl the professor. Each successive conjecture was more disquieting the last.

When she pulled the privacy curtain aside, she was surprised to see Professor Snape sitting upright and staring sullenly into space. "Good evening," she offered in what she hoped was a balance between false cheer and raw nervousness.

Snape slowly turned his head toward her, and she was immediately pierced by the censure she saw within his eyes. "You weren't here when I woke up," he growled reproachfully.

Hermione looked down guiltily. "I'm really sorry. I just had to get something to eat and get some studying done. Are you all right?"

"The last Healer they sent was a dunderhead."

Hermione raised her eyebrows and grinned knowingly. "There now, *lambykins*, don't call the nice Healer a dunderhead."

Snape shot her a dangerous look. His lips disappeared into a thin line, and he crossed his arms over his chest. Hermione fought the urge to laugh. For an instant, he looked like a petulant child.

She immediately felt ashamed. The professor's tenuous health had forced him into a position of defenselessness. Of course, he would find it offensive to be patronized.

She hesitantly walked to his bedside. "May I sit?" she murmured softly.

He grunted and nodded perfunctorily. Obviously, he was still irritated over her absence earlier. She opened her mouth to apologize, but stared dumbly instead when she noticed the tiny smile that twisted his thin lips and the faint blush that had mounted his cheeks. For a moment, he seemed almost... timid. Shy. She blinked, and the image was gone; she wondered if she had imagined it.

She sat carefully on the edge of the bed, wishing that her chair had not been removed. She couldn't imagine that the Potions master enjoyed such familiarity, especially after his reaction to Healer Millar.

"Are your hands hurting again?" she asked quietly.

He shook his head.

"Did they give you the Limber-Up Potion?"

He nodded and held out his right hand, opening it slowly and closing it again.

Hermione smiled. "I'm glad. I tried to keep them from getting too stiff when you were sleeping..."

She broke off sharply when she noticed him peering fixedly at her. His black eyes shimmered inscrutably, and she resisted the urge to squirm. She held his gaze quietly and uncomfortably.

After many long moments, he shifted. "You..." he began. She cringed involuntarily. She did not want to make assumptions about the source of Snape's discomfiture, although she could guess.

"The snake... I should have died... You," he rasped, and Hermione knew he was trying to summon the right words, words that would make sense without leaving him bare.

The professor blinked several times and looked at his hands before turning his face once again to Hermione's. He hesitated before he finally managed to whisper, "Why didn't I die?"

Hermione knew that he had wrenched the words out with great effort. Heaviness settled over her, and she slumped, unable to look at him. She twisted her hands in her lap.

They sat in silent contemplation. She understood that the simplicity of his question..."Why didn't I die?"...belied the complexity of the answers he sought.

Finally, she lifted her eyes to his. She said the only words she could think to say.

"I didn't want you to die."

A tumult of emotion passed over Snape's face as they regarded each other. Hermione's eyes began to sting. She bowed her head quickly and pressed her tongue to her palate, attempting to stem the tears.

"I owe you," Snape said softly.

Hermione winced at the bitterness that colored his words. Impulsively, she took his hand in her own. "You owe me nothing," she said lowly.

Snape looked off distantly, his features contorted by emotions Hermione could not fathom. After many long moments, he closed his fingers over hers. Hands entwined, they sat wordlessly.

Hermione startled when the curtains rustled. "Visiting hours are over now, Miss Granger," Maire said quietly.

Hermione sniffed and wiped away the tears that had gathered in her eyes. She cautiously removed her hand from Snape's, then pulled his covers up over his sleeping form. She turned hesitantly to face Maire, feeling as if she had been caught behaving inappropriately.

Maire looked down at her knowingly. "There's nothing unseemly about comforting those who need it, Miss Granger," she said softly, "nor is there anything wrong with taking comfort."

Hermione shook off the flurry of emotions that alighted upon her. "So," she said wearily, "about these owls..."

Hermione panted as she tried to match Maire's seemingly leisurely pace. She was almost forced to run to keep up with the older woman. They descended several flights of stairs before Maire finally stopped in a dark, chilly room that Hermione guessed to be the basement. She blinked and tried to adjust to the dim light.

Glancing around, she noticed several packages and letters piled up along the walls. She wrinkled her nose in disgust as a moldy odor wound itself around her.

"Which ones belong to Professor Snape?" she asked.

Maire smiled ruefully. "All of them. Judging by the look on your face, you've smelled the flowers."

Hermione's eyes bugged. "Flowers?" she asked incredulously. "Someone sent him flowers?"

"Many someones, it seems. Here." Maire motioned towards the opposite wall.

Hermione gasped. There, ranged against the walls, were piles and piles of flowers. A few red, long-stem roses peeked from the piles, but the majority were lilies. Hermione shook her head in disbelief as she mentally catalogued the species: *Lilies of the Valley*; *Stargazer Lilies*; *Tiger Lilies*; *Calla Lilies*.

She grimaced as she imagined Snape's look of horrified surprise. She absent-mindedly took a bundle of Stargazers in her hand and almost dropped them in astonishment when the petals fluttered and began a chorus: "Roses are red, violets are blue, to Lily Potter you always were true," the lilies chanted in girlish singsong.

Hermione dropped the flowers disgustingly. If Snape hated receiving flowers...as he undoubtedly would...he would despise this.

She crinkled her nose contemptuously. "Are all the bouquets charmed to spout doggerel the moment they are touched?" she asked.

"No, thankfully," Maire replied. One corner of her mouth twitched upward. "They are not all charmed, although the most thoughtful admirers did place Ever-Fresh Charms on their bouquets. Regrettably, many lacked such foresight." She picked up a wilting bouquet of Calla lilies and vanished them. "The caretakers have already vanished scores of dead flowers. Of course, the ones that are dead when they arrive are disposed of immediately."

"People have sent him dead flowers, then," Hermione said flatly, and she turned away from the offensive floral heap. "What sort of letters has he received?"

"Here." Maire thrust a haphazard pile of letters into Hermione's arm. Hermione Summoned an empty crate and sat down, laying the bundle of mail at her feet. She gingerly

picked up the first one and eyed it warily. Her palms itched as she recalled the Bubotuber pus-infused missive she had received in her school days.

"All incoming mail is screened. Any letters appearing to contain dangerous substances are sent directly to the Ministry of Magic," Maire remarked, as if she had intuited Hermione's concern. "As to their language... well, that's a different story. We don't screen for written vitriol."

Hermione tore the envelope open and read to herself: "*Dear Severis Snape.*"

"Someone's already misspelled his name," she murmured, barely suppressing a grin as she continued.

"*You are truly a hero to wizards everywhere. Thank Merlin that Harry Potter had you to watch his back! I know I'm not Lily, but I could be your rose if you just gave me a chance...*"

Hermione vanished the letter. "Oh, yes, because inept metaphors are the way to a man's heart," she snorted. She picked up another.

"*To Severus Snape, St. Mungo's, Critical Care Ward*" the envelope read. She ripped open one end with her nail.

"*I don't care what anybody says about you,*" she read angrily. "*You are a TRAITER to the wizarding world, and somebody should hunt down a hungry dementor and feed it what's left of your sole.*"

Hermione rolled her eyes and muttered derisively, "I'm sure he would enjoy knowing that his enemies spell no better than his fans."

She picked up another and read in horrified silence:

"*Severus Snape, you are an evil man. No matter what else you have done, it is your fault that Harry Potter was left an orphan. In my opinion, the only good thing Voldemort ever did was setting that snake on you. Whoever bothered to save your sorry life should be packed off to Azkaban.*"

Hermione shivered. She thought of the man sleeping upstairs, of all he had seen and suffered. His youthful mistakes had doomed him to a life of loneliness before the war. Now, despite the fact that he had ensured Harry's triumph over Voldemort...at great cost to himself...he remained an object of scorn.

She skimmed quickly through the pile and organized them haphazardly, struck by the disparity of the sentiments they communicated. To her left side, a stack of letters proclaimed the undying love of their senders; an inordinate number of these contained marriage proposals. An equally large bundle to her right comprised diatribes against a man who had played his role as a Death Eater too well for his own good; a fair number of those contained actual threats. Clearly, Severus Snape had engendered strong, if wildly divergent, emotions amongst Britain's witches and wizards.

Hermione sighed as she gathered the few letters that expressed simple gratitude. She shrunk the bundle and placed them alongside her books in her small purse, then did the same with the bundle of threats. She waved her wand and vanished the love letters.

"You don't intend to save those?" asked Maire, raising one eyebrow.

"I've no doubt that Professor Snape will find them more disturbing than the death threats," Hermione answered. "I wouldn't save the spiteful ones, but I want the Aurors to take a look at them."

Maire looked around. "Mr. Snape's been quite the celebrity since the article in the *Prophet* a week ago."

Hermione whipped around sharply and faced Maire. "*What* article?" she demanded.

Maire reached into her robes and produced a small piece of parchment. With a wave of her wand, the parchment grew into a full-sized *Daily Prophet*, which she held out to Hermione.

Hermione snatched it away and gasped as she read the headline that stretched above Severus Snape's sneering visage: *Double Agent Fights for Life*.

She scanned the article perfunctorily, her mind whirring as she caught odd phrases:

"... remains under the shadow of Albus Dumbledore's death, although Potter has alleged that Dumbledore arranged his killing with Snape beforehand..."

"... reliability of Potter's statement has not been questioned or validated..."

Further down, a smaller headline announced: *Faithful Childhood Love Inspires Life of Intrigue, Sacrifice* Lily Potter, arrayed for her wedding, waved from a small photo, and a teenaged Snape sulked from another. Hermione's stomach turned as she read the article:

Severus Snape, former Headmaster of Hogwarts and quite possibly the most enigmatic figure in the war against Voldemort, was apparently in love with hero Harry Potter's mother, the Muggle-born Lily Potter (nee Evans). In his final encounter with the Dark Lord, Harry Potter tearfully recounted how Snape had been passing information to the Order of the Phoenix for years. It was then that the young fighter told the enraged Voldemort the story of the romance that led one of the dark wizard's most trusted Death Eaters to spy for Albus Dumbledore.

"*Evidently, he'd loved Lily Potter since before they came to Hogwarts,*" one awed spectator reported. "*He even loved her after she married James Potter, may he rest in peace.*"

One of Snape's close friends confirmed, "Oh, yes, he was quite taken with her. Went to pieces when she died, he did. That was when he swore upon his life to bring down Voldemort or die trying."

"What a bunch of rubbish," Hermione scoffed. "Harry wasn't tearful... and it wasn't a *romance*. And I'm sure Professor Snape would be quite interested to know who this 'close friend' of his is. Nothing but rot."

Maire nodded towards the paper. "There's a bit about you on page three."

Hermione's eyes grew large with disbelief. She flipped angrily to page three. Her own image blinked and looked up wearily from a photo taken just after the final battle. Above the picture were the words, *Hermione Granger, War Heroine, Hovers Anxiously at Spy's Bedside*.

"I can't believe this!" she screeched indignantly. She began to read out loud. "'Hermione Granger has maintained a near-constant vigil at Severus Snape's side since he was almost killed in the final battle. She has faithfully overseen her fellow veteran's care at every turn, inviting speculation as to the motivation for her devotion...' Of all the crazy innuendos... 'Raises the delicate subject of malfeasance on Snape's part, as he taught Miss Granger for years...' What in Merlin's name... bugger!" she sputtered.

Horror-stricken, she looked up at Maire. "When did this come out?"

"Last week," the witch replied seriously. She fixed a penetrating gaze upon the young girl. "Am I correct in assuming that you did not grant any interviews?"

"Absolutely not! Professor Snape is an extremely private man, and he deserves to have his privacy respected!" Hermione cried. "He'll find all of this speculation about his

life humiliating and intrusive. Not to mention the fact that his security has been compromised...he's received death threats, for Merlin's sake! How did this happen?"

Maire's brow furrowed, and she folded her hands in thought. "I confess that I'd hoped you *had* been interviewed," she said. "St. Mungo's has never released information about Mr. Snape to the press. We were unaware that anyone but you and Mr. Potter knew he was here. This likely means that one of St. Mungo's employees has breached Mr. Snape's confidentiality." She exhaled slowly. "I find that idea quite upsetting."

"So do I." Hermione shook her head in bewilderment. She looked at the byline under the article on page three. "*Rita Skeeter!*" she fumed. "I should have *known!*"

She shook with anger. "Look out for beetles in the hospital, Maire," she ground out.

"Beetles?"

"Yes, beetles. Particularly beetles with odd, green markings around their eyes."

She forgot her exhaustion as she bounded furiously up the stairs, leaving a baffled Maire in her wake.

Hermione was breathless by the time she reached the hospital's main level. The Welcome Witch called out to her, but in her indignation she neither heard nor answered. She made her way to the door with angry, powerful strides.

Someone grabbed her arm from behind and effectively arrested her progress. She whipped around furiously, wand in hand, and found herself face to face with Ron.

She shrieked in shock. "Ron! It's you!"

Ron observed her with an odd mixture of surprise and admiration. "Oi, Hermione, don't hex me."

"Then don't sneak up behind me, you git!" she huffed irritably.

Ron laughed. "Sneaking up on you, eh? That's what you call it when you run right past me? The Welcome Witch and I were both yelling at you to stop, but you were hell-bent for the door."

"I had other things on my mind," she shot back. "Besides, I wasn't expecting you."

Ron grinned. "Sorry, but I wanted to walk you home this evening. Oh, yeah, I wanted to give you these, too." He produced a handsome bouquet of roses from behind his back.

She gaped in amazement. "Well, I... uh... Wow! They're really beautiful, Ron!" she stuttered. She took the bouquet and smiled.

Ron's cheeks flushed. "I'm really proud of you, y'know. How you're taking care of Snape and everything. I don't tell you enough, but you're bloody amazing."

Hermione's mouth hung open as she looked up at Ron. She felt that she was seeing him properly for the first time. The feckless youth she had met years ago on the Hogwarts Express had somehow, before her very eyes, grown into a sincere and considerate man. Standing on tiptoe, she reached up and pecked him shyly on the lips.

Ron beamed when she laced her arm through his. "Let's go," she said brightly, pushing back the anxiety that simmered constantly within her.

"Gladly," he said warmly. Arm in arm, they stepped into the bustling, twilight street.

Author's Notes

I keep forgetting to say it... here goes... I do not own any of these characters except for Maire and Calliope, and since they don't exactly bring home the bacon, I make no money from the writing of this story.

Angel Mischa has been a thorough and thoughtful beta, and I am extremely grateful for all her help. I am likewise indebted to all who have taken time to read and review my story, as well as those who have added "Anthem" to their favorites. Thanks so much. It means a lot!

Dragon-ridden Days

Chapter 6 of 11

Kreacher and Ron conspire to surprise Hermione. Harry celebrates his first Voldemort-free birthday at the Burrow.

Dragon-ridden Days

"I swear, Kreacher's cooking just gets better and better," Ron said, reaching for a second serving. "This salmon's the best I've ever had."

Hermione raised one brow. "Better than your mum's?" she asked.

"Yeah, but don't tell her or anything," Ron pleaded, feigning a look of horror.

"Oh, yes, tell Molly Weasley that her baby boy prefers a house-elf's cooking to hers..." she laughed. "I think I'd rather find myself on the wrong end of a wand."

"You just *might* find yourself on the wrong end of a wand if you insult my mum's cooking to her face," Ron muttered.

Hermione smirked wickedly. "I could tell her tomorrow, you know. At Harry's birthday party."

Ron gulped and looked bashful. "I really hope you'll have other things to talk about," he mumbled, his mouth full of fish.

She wondered briefly what he was talking about, then shrugged it off. She took another helping of haricots verts. Admittedly, Kreacher's culinary expertise had grown

significantly since the war. Tonight's feast took the prize, however.

Before presenting the sumptuous fish, Kreacher had served them an assortment of delicate appetizers: asparagus spears wrapped in flaky phyllo, tiny herbed cheese tartlets, and marinated artichoke hearts had whet their appetite marvelously without dulling their appreciation for the main course.

Ron smiled at her and wiped his mouth carefully. She noticed with some amusement that he was trying valiantly to keep his elbows off the table.

"So!" he said cheerfully. "What had you so riled back at St. Mungo's?"

Hermione's latent rage over the *Prophet* articles and Snape's hate mail roared to life once more. She lost herself as she recounted the last events of the day, from the discovery of the flowers, to the spiteful letters, and finally, to the innuendo-laden articles that so infuriated her. She did not notice until she finished how quiet, how unusually attentive, Ron had become.

She looked up to find him staring at her with an unusual gleam in his eyes. An uncharacteristic flush spread over his face and neck.

Just as she opened her mouth to question him, Kreacher appeared with a loud pop.

He bowed deeply to Ron, then jerked his torso awkwardly at Hermione.

She fought the urge to smirk. Old habits die hard, she thought.

"Is master's friend liking the food?" Kreacher asked. "Is the miss liking the young master's dinner?"

Ron's blush deepened to a dark burgundy as he looked from Kreacher to Hermione and back again.

"Uh, the food is really good, Kreacher," Ron said. "Hermione likes it too, don't you, Hermione?"

Hermione eyed Ron quizzically. His entire affect was different. As she reflected, she realized that he had been behaving oddly all evening. She could not imagine what kind of collusion he had arranged with Kreacher, but the house-elf seemed to be just as tense as he.

"Hermione?" Ron ventured tentatively.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Yes, Kreacher, the food was excellent," she said enthusiastically. "Thank you so much for this lovely dinner."

Kreacher shifted from one foot to the other and turned to Ron again.

"Is young master wanting dessert now? Kreacher found a nice bottle of wine to go with the torte. Kreacher hopes it is to young master's liking."

"Yeah, Kreacher. Dessert would be great." Ron flashed Kreacher a crooked grin before the house-elf disappeared.

When he faced Hermione again, she was taken aback. He seemed to be steeling himself for something. He radiated determination.

Ron fidgeted nervously and cast his eyes downward. "Uh, 'Mione?" he began softly.

They both jumped when Kreacher reappeared with a loud crack. The elf eyed the pair cautiously as he set a rather large Sacher torte and a bottle of sparkling wine upon the table.

"Is Kreacher interrupting master and miss?" he squeaked. "Kreacher is not wanting to interrupt the master's nice dinner with miss! Kreacher is sorry, very sorry!"

Ron threw out an arm to restrain the elf, who was preparing to bang his head on the table. "Don't worry, Kreacher," Ron soothed through gritted teeth. "It's all right. You haven't *interrupted* anything. *Yet*," he finished sotto voce.

Hermione frowned as she observed their interaction. Ron and Kreacher had definitely been plotting.

Kreacher wasted no time disappearing, and Ron turned again to Hermione with an uncomfortable grin plastered on his face. The blush had receded; now his face was almost as pallid as Snape's.

"So, uh, Sacher torte, milady?" he offered nervously.

"Sure," she accepted, continuing to survey him warily.

Ron's hands shook as he cut the torte, grinning broadly the entire time.

The slender wedge of torte slipped as he lifted it, landing upside down on Hermione's plate. "Bugger-wanker-shit!" he cried, wringing his hands.

"It's OK, Ron, really..." Hermione started.

"No! Fuck all, it's not OK!" Ron shouted, his voice creeping higher and higher. "It was supposed to be perfect! The flavor comes from biting into each layer bit by bit. It's... ruined!"

Hermione bit her tongue to avoid laughing. The anxiety that swelled within her, combined with the hilarity of Ron's discourse on the proper enjoyment of Sacher tortes, was demanding release at all costs.

She squeaked as her laughter bubbled up past her defenses. Her body shook uncontrollably, and Ron looked at her in horror. Finally, she conceded defeat and doubled over.

As her laughter died down, she glimpsed the thwarted look on Ron's face. She sat up, chastened.

His hands hung, palms out, at his sides. He looked utterly helpless.

"It's chocolate, Ron. How could it not be good?" she said with a cheer she did not really feel.

"I wanted it to be perfect," Ron groaned, "for you. I wanted it to be perfect for you. Because... well, because... you're... perfect." His voice became a whisper as he finished, and he blushed lividly once again.

The simplicity, the utter guilelessness of his words, left Hermione feeling strangely naked and guilty. "Ron," she groaned tiredly, unable to think of anything else to say.

She watched as he poured himself a glass of sparkling wine and downed it swiftly. He belched loudly. "Sorry," he mumbled and poured her a glass.

She resisted the urge to down it just as he had. The bubbles fizzed riotously upon her tongue. She felt inexplicably old and tired and sad.

This is my life, she thought, surprised by the metaphor. *This is youth. Bursting bubbles that end in headaches.*

She swiftly derailed her morose train of thought. She knew how her face...her traitorously honest face...must appear to Ron. Not wanting to disappoint him more than she already had, she carefully trained her features into what she hoped was an expression of contentment.

Then she noticed.

Ron wasn't looking at her. He was lost in thought, gathering his resolve.

Screwing his courage to the sticking place

No.

No, No, No.

He was not...

... He was.

Fishing about in his pocket.

Before she knew it, he was kneeling clumsily before her with a tiny, velvet-covered box in his hand.

She began to quake as he opened the box, displaying a modest, marquis-cut diamond set in a platinum, goblin-wrought band.

"Hermione Granger, will you... I mean, *would* you... marry me?" he breathed.

He beamed. He thought she was crying with joy.

This is the way it's supposed to be, this is the way it's supposed to be, this is the way... her mind chanted helplessly. It was. It was her dream. Or it had been, in that happy world where she'd had school, and mischief with Ron and Harry, and ice cream, and a future...

She wanted this. She did, she really did. If she didn't, it was because something was direly wrong with her. What could be more natural than marrying your childhood sweetheart?

This is the way it's supposed to be.

"Yes," she whispered.

Her voice, brittle and unexpected, called down an avalanche, and she was swept away into cold inertia.

His eyes glistened as he stood up and pulled her into a crushing hug. Stunned by his proposal...and even more stunned by her own automatic acceptance...she woodenly opened her arms to the embrace.

Moments later, they stood outside Hermione's bedroom. Ron stared adoringly into her eyes. For a single moment, she was a year younger, reveling weak-kneed in the attentions of a boy she had loved since she was eleven.

He slipped his hand into hers, and she felt a tremor of anticipation. This was how it was always supposed to turn out. How she had always *wanted* it to turn out. His other hand reached up and caressed her face gently before he bowed his head and pressed his lips to hers.

This is how it's supposed to be.

The kiss...by no means their first...was tender and restrained. She had always enjoyed their kisses. They had made her feel special, desired. But the special feeling dissolved as something icy enfolded her, and she was millions of miles away...

Ron pulled away. Wordlessly, he pushed the door open and led her by the hand to the side of her bed. He leaned down and kissed her again, and this time, it was a deep, searching kiss. Their tongues intertwined and teased each other, and the icy sensation faded briefly as she melted into the familiar warmth of his embrace.

She felt it, then...his hardness, the inescapable evidence of his manhood...pressing against her abdomen. Her stomach churned and she was frozen again.

From worlds away she felt their bodies intertwine. Felt him unhooking her robes. Felt them sliding away from her skin.

Her body felt as if it belonged to someone else as he kissed her neck and shoulders. She stood rigidly as he took first one nipple and then the other gently into his mouth. He was laying her down, pressing against her, his hands roaming over her breasts, her thighs, her bottom.

She lay still as his lips and hands roved over her body *I should be enjoying this*, she thought. From her distant observation point, she felt him position himself at her opening and push gently.

The distance between her mind and her body evaporated in one sharp instant. She cried out in pain.

Bewildered and frightened, Ron stopped moving, and she read the confusion in his eyes. She looked away as he withdrew, trying to ignore his limply hanging member and its indictment of her performance.

"Hermione?" Ron whispered.

She began to cry silently.

"Oh, god, Hermione, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean... Shit, I'm a smeg-head."

Ron looked as if he, too, would cry, and Hermione hated herself.

"It's not you, Ron, I don't know why... I don't know..." she cried.

Ron lay beside her and gathered her gently in his arms. "It's OK, Hermione. It's painful the first time. I mean, that's what I've heard..."

He arose and retrieved her fallen robes and helped her dress. He lay down beside her and embraced her once more. "I'll stay right here as long as you want me to, Hermione. If you want me to go... if you hate me... I'll understand..."

"Don't go," Hermione whispered. She didn't hate him; she hated herself. His touch had severed the thin ligature that tethered her to terra firma, but she wanted him to stay and anchor her, wanted something warm and familiar to keep her from drowning in the icy fear she thrashed against. She wanted her friend.

As they lay together in the darkness, Hermione reflected on all the ways she had disappointed Ron, from breezing past him at St. Mungo's, to laughing as his carefully-planned dinner fell apart. Worst of all was her failure as a sexual partner. Long after Ron began to snore, she lay awake, going over her litany of guilt again and again.

A demonic cackle heralded her descent into a well-traveled world of nightmares.

"Be nice, little girl, and you won't get hurt... yet."

A door slammed, and a woman began to scream. Hermione jerked awake and leapt from the bed. She burst through the door, panting, wand outstretched.

Harry stepped into the light, arms extended over his head. "It's me, Hermione," he whispered.

Hermione trembled as the tension slipped out of her limbs. She looked backwards, knowing that Ron, too, would be awake, wand drawn. She could not count the times that this had happened since the war, the times they would be roused from their slumber by some small noise and descend into the hall, wands trained upon each other. No one even remarked about it any more.

"Are you OK, Hermione?" Harry asked worriedly.

"I'm fine, Harry," she answered tremulously, raking her shaking hands through her hair.

Harry did not look convinced. "Ron?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

"We're all fine here, mate," Ron responded groggily.

Harry looked slyly at Ron, then at Hermione. "Isn't that Hermione's room, Ron?" he asked.

Hermione felt the blood rise to her face. She looked down.

"Yeah," Ron snapped, effectively silencing Harry with a look. "So, where were you all night?"

Harry yawned. "The Burrow."

"With Ginny?" Ron asked pointedly.

"Yes, with Ginny... and George, and Bill, and Fleur, and your mom and your dad..." Harry droned.

Ron's eyes narrowed. "You had better treat my sister respectfully," he growled.

Harry looked at him with surprise. "I do. I thought I might give you two some time alone. Looks like you needed it."

Hermione bit her lip and knotted her fingers, boundlessly mortified.

"Mind your own damn business, Harry," Ron warned.

Harry's brow furrowed, and his mouth gaped in astonishment. "I was *trying* to mind my own business, Ron. That's why I was gone so long."

"Why the hell are you gone so long all the other nights, then?" Ron demanded.

Hermione slinked backwards toward her door. She knew Ron well enough to know that he was taking his frustration with her out on Harry. Another verse of her guilt-litany slipped into place.

Harry shook his head in chagrin. "Ron, don't start a fight with me tonight. I know neither of us wants an argument."

"Maybe I do," Ron huffed. "Maybe some things are worth fighting over."

"Good night, Ron," Harry said quietly. He began to walk away. "We'll talk or fight about whatever you want tomorrow." He looked over his shoulder and winked. "Nice ring, Hermione!" he called as he slipped through his bedroom door.

Hermione and Ron remained standing in the hall. Hermione knew that if she looked at him, she would see his anger and discomfort. She whispered weakly, "I'm sorry, Ron."

To her surprise, Ron wrapped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her gently to him. "Don't apologize," he said gruffly. "None of this is your fault."

She cautiously peeked up at him. To her great surprise, he smiled. "I'm happy, 'Mione," he murmured. "Very, very happy." He picked up her left hand and caressed her ring finger.

She stifled a wave of nausea as he held her close. "Don't worry, Hermione. I've heard the first time is hard for the girl. It'll get better. I won't be so daft next time. I'll make it better for you."

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut tightly and clung to him. She wanted so badly to tell him he was right. Maybe he was right. Maybe the icy bands that wrapped around her stomach would melt. Maybe if she worked harder, tried something different, she would enjoy what should be a natural expression of love between a woman and a man.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat quietly around the kitchen table. Hermione looked steadfastly at her plate, not wanting to meet the awkward glances the boys each cast occasionally in her direction. She knew Harry was trying to get the measure of what had happened with her and Ron, and she knew Ron would be looking at her with bemused adoration. She did not want to acknowledge either.

"Well!" Harry said cheerfully. "This afternoon at the Burrow!"

"Yeah, Harry, we're going," Ron mumbled around a mouth full of food. "Wouldn't wanna miss your first birthday as a free man."

"It's funny, in a way. I don't know how I'm going to live the rest of my life without Voldemort stalking me."

Harry laughed, but Hermione did not miss the note of uncertainty in his voice.

Ron snorted. "I think you'll manage."

Hermione glanced up at Harry. In his face, she recognized the same anxiety that plagued her. He seemed happy enough on the surface, but his eyes hinted at a wild and dangerous lack of direction. She studied him carefully for a moment, quick to avert her eyes before he could catch her. She could not decide whether their shared apprehension comforted her or merely heightened her disquiet.

She was struck forcefully by the realization that Harry had always accepted the constant danger posed by Voldemort...even as a child. The madman had been a snaking vine whose very existence depended upon the life he strove to destroy; it had been a most unusual symbiosis, and it occurred to her to wonder what might become of Harry now that he had shaken off the Dark wizard's strangling tentacles.

The reality into which Harry had been born belonged to all of them now, herself included. Their scars were just as indelibly imprinted upon them as the lightning streak that testified to Harry's childhood blight. The Dark Lord was gone, dead, yet he had managed to mark every single one of them; their lives, their bodies, even their minds would

always carry his taint.

The recognition made her physically ill. She pushed her plate away and made to leave.

"Hey, wait! Hermione, let's see the ring!" Harry called. She glanced at Ron, who glowed, predictably, with pride.

She turned around and walked slowly back to the table, holding out her hand for Harry's inspection.

"It's a beauty, Ron! Congratulations, best wishes, I don't know which I'm supposed to say," Harry laughed.

"I think congratulations go to the man and best wishes go to the woman," Hermione offered mechanically, unable to use their proper names.

"Of course you would know!" Harry exclaimed, rolling his eyes and grinning. "I'm really happy for both of you. Happy for me, too," he said and winked slyly.

"Why are you happy for you?" Ron challenged. "It's not like I'm sharing."

"Ron!" Hermione cried in embarrassment.

Harry just chuckled. "I've been waiting for you two numbskulls to get together since fourth year. Your fights were starting to wear me out."

Ron slipped behind Hermione and wrapped his arms around her waist. "Well, looks like we'll be fighting forever, now," he laughed.

Hermione smiled thinly and patted his arm.

"No more canaries and no more Won-Won, if you please," Harry admonished with mock severity. "Oh, Hermione, how's Snape?" he asked suddenly.

Harry's question broke through Hermione's fog and brought her earthward again.

"Well, actually, Harry," she started, "I really need to talk to you about that."

Harry listened attentively as she recounted the story of the article and the death-threats.

"I just hate that Skeeter woman!" she cried as she finished. "I haven't even told you what she wrote about me..." She broke off as she noticed Harry and Ron exchanging significant glances.

"Well, uh, you see, Hermione," Ron began reluctantly

Harry finished for him. "We read the whole bit in the *Prophet* last week."

Hermione's mouth fell open. "You read it..."

"Yeah, we read it. We just knew you were really stressed out and didn't want to make it worse for you," Harry stated evenly.

Ron made a face and hunched his shoulders, as if he were steeling himself against a blow. "We didn't want you to get mad," he mumbled apologetically.

"Well, I am mad! I'm going to have to go to the Burrow today and face your mother. And you know how she reads the *Prophet*! She's going to hate me! It's fourth year all over again," Hermione groaned.

"No, she won't," Ron said. "I've already talked to her about it. She doesn't believe a word of it. She's mad about it, as a matter of fact, because she's afraid it'll hurt your reputation."

Hermione just stared at him in appalled silence.

"Come on, Hermione," Harry said. "Since the war, everybody with half a brain knows to take the *Prophet* with a grain of salt. There's hardly anyone left who believes anything they print."

"Obviously," Hermione fumed, "there are people who take the *Prophet* **quite** seriously. The people who send death-threats to Professor Snape, for instance."

Harry became serious. "Kingsley is going to be at my party today. Talk to him about it," he urged.

"Can't you just talk to the Aurors, Harry?" Ron asked. "I mean, Shacklebolt's the Minister of Magic now."

"No, I think Snape's security should be one of the Ministry's highest priorities," Harry said firmly. "He'll put the Aurors on the case, but he needs to know. Talk to him, Hermione. I will, too," he finished.

Hermione looked at him gratefully. "I'll speak to him," she promised.

"Good." Harry pushed back his chair and stood up. "I'll be going now. I have some errands I need to run before the party. I'll see you two at the Burrow," he said as he pushed through the door.

Ron moved closer to Hermione. "Alone at last," he grinned. He placed his arms around her.

Hermione forced herself to smile at him.

The noonday sun shone brightly over the Burrow, gilding the quaint little house and its gardens with a cheerful glow. Hermione was staggered by nostalgia as she took it all in. She had spent almost every summer here since she was twelve. Part of her wanted desperately to belong here, in this homely little house with its gnome-ridden garden, full of people who loved her and whom she loved in return.

Another part of her couldn't help feeling that this was a lost Eden, a childhood paradise she was no longer innocent enough to inhabit. She strained against the frigid fingers that threatened to wrap themselves around her again, reminding herself that she did belong; her place was guaranteed by her engagement to Ron.

This is the way it's supposed to be, she reminded herself.

When Ron wrapped her hand in his, she smiled up at him resolutely. She would cause him no more pain.

"Let's announce our engagement today," Ron said excitedly.

Hermione channeled all her effort into smiling back at him. She measured her words carefully, reining in her unexplainable urge to pick a fight. "Really, Ron, it's Harry's day. Let's not take the spotlight away from him!" she laughed.

"Bollocks. Harry's got plenty of spotlight. It'll just add to the day. It's perfect, if you think about it," Ron countered. "I mean, the three of us are always going to be together now, and if Harry hadn't been the 'Chosen One,' we'd never have fallen in love. He'll be thrilled."

Hermione bit her lip as she strained against her emotions. "Well, Ron, how do you think your family will take it? I mean, so soon after the war..."

Ron rolled his eyes. "They'll be thrilled too. Come on, everybody's been so sad since the war. We'll be bringing them some happiness."

Hermione chafed at the thought of being put on display for the benefit of everyone else's happiness. She suddenly resented being here, resented Ron, resented everyone in the Burrow as well as Harry.

Her face must have reflected the mutiny within, for Ron looked at her pleadingly. "Please?" he begged, and she was reminded once again of a child.

"I just can't wait. I want everyone to know how much I love you."

Hermione sighed in exasperation. "Fine. Do it. But I know you, and I know that you're so eager to announce our engagement because you want to show your family that you can manage me."

"Of course I do!" Ron groaned. He grinned mischievously. "I want everyone to know that I'm not a git who can't appreciate a good witch."

"Anymore," Hermione parried somewhat waspishly.

"Well, yeah," Ron agreed. "So let's get on with it, my good witch."

Hermione smiled and leaned into Ron as they walked to the house, wondering if she looked the part of the doting fiancée. The bewildering sense of distance blunted her awareness once more.

Molly Weasley bustled frenetically around the kitchen, overseeing a flurry of tasks. On one countertop, knives minced scallions as if of their own accord. On another countertop, a rocking mezza luna chopped dill. Soup and sauces simmered away on the stovetop, each one stirred by its own unmanned spoon. In the midst of it all, Molly ran about, waving her wand as if she were conducting an orchestra.

Ron and Hermione watched from the threshold. "Let's see how long it'll take her to notice us," he murmured amusedly.

Hermione smiled in reply.

"Ginevra Weasley, get down here this instant!" Molly cried, ignorant of her son's presence in the doorway. "This food isn't going to cook itself, and you promised to help me!"

They heard the thunder of stomping feet above them. "**Alright!** Give me a minute to get my bed made, Mum!" came Ginny's exasperated voice.

Hermione smiled affectionately as she recalled Molly pressing her and Ginny into preparing for Bill's wedding. Had that only been a year ago? So much had changed. It seemed obscene that such a life-shattering year had been ushered in by a wedding.

"Look at that," Ron whispered. "She walked right past us and didn't even notice."

Sure enough, Molly had brushed right past the two of them without a single glance. Ginny thudded down the stairs and caught sight of Ron and Hermione. Ron held a finger to his lip and pointed at Molly, and Ginny smiled in complicity.

"Where is that brother of yours?" Molly wailed. "I am beginning to believe that he never learned to tell time. Hermione's usually on time, though... That blasted clock needs repairing. Ron's hand is pointing to 'home,' and he's nowhere to be seen... Eek!" Molly screeched as Ron slipped up behind her.

"What do you mean by sneaking up on me, young man?" Molly demanded. Ginny howled with laughter.

Ron affected a chastened expression, though his eyes shone with mischief. "Sorry, Mum, I couldn't resist. 'Mione's here, too."

"Hermione!" Molly cried, hugging the girl warmly. Hermione had never known anyone with such a thoroughly encompassing embrace. "Where have you been keeping yourself, love?"

"Uhm, well, I've been studying," Hermione stuttered, unsure of herself in the light of Molly's scrutiny.

"And taking care of Snape, too, I hear. Poor dear. You must be worn out. I just couldn't believe what that horrid woman wrote about you."

Hermione colored at the mention of Skeeter's article. "Uh," she began awkwardly, "well, I don't know..."

"Don't waste your time worrying over it, dear. Everyone knows it was nothing but rubbish. Anyone who knows you at all won't even think twice about it," Molly soothed, taking Hermione's hand in hers.

Her eyes flew open wide, and she brought the hand up to her face for inspection. "Now, what is this bauble you're wearing, Hermione?" she asked. "Is this what I think it is?"

Molly beamed. Hermione bit her lip nervously. "Well, what do you think it is?" she asked the witch.

"Did he do it? Did my baby boy... oh, my, is there a wedding to plan?"

Ron put his arm around Hermione's waist and pulled her to him possessively. "Yeah, Mum. That's right. I asked Hermione last night, and she said yes."

Ginny and Molly both squealed loudly, and Hermione found herself crushed between the two Weasley witches.

"Now what's all the ruckus down here?" came an amused male voice.

Hermione breathed gratefully as Ginny and Molly released her. Molly grabbed her and pulled her forward, thrusting her left hand into Mr. Weasley's face.

"Look at that, Mr. Weasley!" Molly crowed. "Just look at what our son gave his young woman!"

Hermione gulped and tried to smile as she looked into Arthur Weasley's face. The mist in his eyes and his concerned expression shocked her after Molly and Ginny's unabashed enthusiasm.

"It's lovely, Hermione, son," he said, maintaining unbroken eye contact with Hermione. She was seized by the impulse to fling her arms around the man and bury her face in his shoulder.

"Oh, Merlin, look at the time!" Molly shrieked. "It's only a quarter to one, and we've still got so much to do! Hermione, Ginny, do help me get the food laid out. Ron, Arthur, I'll need you to set up the tables outside. Come on now, let's get going!"

Ginny cast a sympathetic glance at Hermione and fell in line behind her mother. Ron shrugged and smiled, and kissed Hermione lightly on the lips as he exited. Arthur gave Hermione one last, searching look before he followed his son out into the garden.

Ron held steadfastly to Hermione's hand as the guests began trickling into the Burrow's gardens. Andromeda Tonks arrived first, quietly cradling baby Teddy in her arms.

Luna and Xenophilius Lovegood were next, Xeno looking old and chastened, and holding onto Luna's arm as if he were afraid she might disappear. Hermione watched as Luna gently removed her father's hand from her arm and made her way toward her and Ron. "Go on, Dad," Luna encouraged. "You may find some gnomes if you look hard enough."

Xeno smiled hesitantly. "By all means, Luna, do visit with your friends. Never mind me, my dear," he agreed, his voice reedy and tremulous. He shuffled away, scanning the ground carefully.

Luna's misty, slightly protuberant eyes examined Ron and Hermione curiously for a few moments. "Hello, Hermione," she murmured. "Hello, Ron."

"Good to see you, Luna," Ron said earnestly, clapping the girl on the back. Luna smiled faintly and continued to look at him, causing him to shift uncomfortably.

"I'm so glad you came, Luna," Hermione said, surprised by her own sincerity. She allowed Luna to peruse her openly and silently, taking the opportunity to study the other girl in turn. While Luna had fought the same war as Ron and herself, Luna had emerged strangely whole; there was a new strength about her, to be sure, and her eyes revealed a certain loss of innocence. She had managed nevertheless to retain her native gentleness.

At this realization, the ever-present lump in her throat expanded, and she gulped. Luna's spirit remained soft, yet indestructible while Hermione felt brittle and fragile. For the first time, she envied the ethereal young woman.

"I suppose I'll be going back to Hogwarts in September," Luna breathed. "Are you going, too? Or did you automatically get your NEWTs for defeating Voldemort?"

Ron rolled his eyes. "Hmph. I'm sitting my NEWTs in September, and I wouldn't go back to school if you paid me."

Hermione bit down on her irritation with Ron's statement. "I'll be going back, Luna, yes."

Luna smiled cheerfully. "Oh, good. I thought you might. I'll see you on the train, then."

"Sure," Hermione smiled. She watched as Luna walk towards Xeno's stooped form, a bewildering sense of emptiness growing within her.

One by one, they greeted Harry's many friends: Neville Longbottom, who laughed jovially and walked with a new self-assurance; Seamus Finnegan, along with his formidable mother; Dean Thomas; Lavender Brown; the Patil sisters.

Hermione was delighted to see many of her teachers, as well, among them Minerva McGonagall, Filius Flitwick, and Horace Slughorn. Seeing them outdoors, in the sunlight, brought memories of Quidditch tournaments. She thought wistfully of Professor Snape.

"Miss Granger, dear girl, I'm so happy to see you!" Professor McGonagall exclaimed. She grasped Hermione's hand warmly. "I have learned that you plan on returning to Hogwarts this fall. I must say I am delighted!"

Hermione felt a surge of gratitude for her teacher. "I couldn't miss it. Of course," she frowned, "there is the matter of Professor Snape."

Professor McGonagall's eyes teared and she sniffed. "Poor, dear Severus. I had heard that you were caring for him," she said shakily. "Poor boy. If I had only known..." Her voice broke.

"Yes, well," Hermione said thickly, "I'm the only one who visits him, and he seems to need my assistance. So, uhm, I need to speak with you about a way to schedule my classes around his care."

"You are aware that there are no more Time-turners to be had, Miss Granger?" McGonagall teased. "Of course, we can't make allowances for every student. Nevertheless, you have always been a competent pupil, and I've no doubt your professors will be glad to accommodate your schedule. And Hogwarts does owe Severus. The least we could do is lend him our star student."

"Thank you, Professor! I swear I'll see to all my classes."

"I have every confidence in you, Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall. "But do consider sitting some of your NEWTs in September or December! Especially Muggle Studies. You are, after all, Muggle-born."

"But, Professor!" Hermione protested. "I don't just want NEWTs. I want to finish Hogwarts properly! And I need to know about Muggles from a wizarding perspective." Ron groaned and she elbowed him.

"I wouldn't dream of withholding a 'proper' education from you! And did you, or did you not just finish fighting a war over the 'wizarding perspective' on Muggles? Really, Miss Granger, if you intend to work around caring for Professor Snape, you must amend your plan accordingly!" McGonagall finished tartly.

"I just don't want to jeopardize my grades!" Hermione pleaded.

Professor McGonagall's spine stiffened. "Miss Granger," she began in an affronted tone, "never once have I advised you to do anything that would jeopardize your grades. Nonetheless, you signed up for 11 NEWTs at the end of your sixth year, and you will not survive revising for those NEWTs and continuing to care for Severus."

"All right, Professor, if you think it's best," Hermione agreed reluctantly.

"Indeed I do. Now, do tell Professor Snape that he will always have a home at Hogwarts. I don't know where he intends to live after his stay at St. Mungo's, but as long as I am headmistress, he will have quarters at the castle." McGonagall's voice quivered, and she dabbed her eyes.

Hermione's head snapped up sharply. She had not considered what might happen when Professor Snape was discharged. Given his last experiences at Hogwarts, she seriously doubted he would welcome the idea of returning to live there.

Ron nudged her. "Aren't you forgetting something?" he asked with a smirk.

For a moment, she wondered what she could possibly have forgotten to tell Professor McGonagall. Then, she followed his eyes to her left hand and almost groaned audibly.

"Ron wanted to tell you something, Professor," she said shortly. Ron glared briefly at her before he turned to beam at Professor McGonagall.

"Well, Professor, Hermione and I are getting married," he said proudly.

Professor McGonagall looked from Ron to Hermione, gaping speechlessly.

"Well. Indeed... Quite the surprise... indeed..." she stuttered. "Oh, I hope the two of you will be very happy. Best wishes, my dear. And congratulations, Mr. Weasley! An award-winning match for Gryffindor!"

Ron grinned and blushed as Professor McGonagall embraced him and kissed his cheek, but Hermione had to wrestle her features into a happy expression. For reasons she could not work out, her teacher's enthusiasm provoked a swell of bitterness.

Ron wrapped his arm around her shoulder as Professor McGonagall made her way to the drinks. "Why wouldn't you tell her?" he asked petulantly.

"You've been doing such a good job of telling everybody, I thought I'd just let you continue," Hermione said with false sweetness.

"I can't help it, Hermione, I'm so happy about it," he said pleadingly, and as she took in his boyish countenance, her affection for him bloomed anew alongside her burgeoning guilt.

The Burrow was packed before long, filled with Harry's friends and well-wishers, but as she scanned the crowd, Hermione found no sign of the guest of honor himself.

"Where the bloody hell is that git?" Ron stormed exasperatedly. "It's *his* birthday party."

"He did mention running some errands."

"How long could it take to run any errands he might have?" Ron huffed. "He's got no responsibilities. Looks like he could show up on time for his own party."

"It's OK, Ron. He'll get here when he gets here."

Ron protested vigorously. "But I'm hungry! It's just after one, and I haven't eaten..."

"... Since noon," Hermione interrupted impatiently. "You're in no danger of fainting from starvation, Ronald." She looked over the teeming grounds of the Burrow, feeling unaccountably jumpy. Spotting Kingsley Shacklebolt in the crowd, she turned away from Ron. "I've got to see Shacklebolt. See you in a minute," she called over her shoulder, weaving through the growing mass of guests.

Shacklebolt was chatting with a very official-looking witch Hermione did not recognize when she finally cleared the space between them. "Ah, Miss Granger!" he grinned. "How very lovely to see you! Esmeralda, you've heard of Miss Hermione Granger, I am sure. Miss Granger, this is Esmeralda Pinkleton, the new Director of Magical Law Enforcement."

Esmeralda Pinkleton took Hermione's hand in both of her own. "Miss Granger," she gushed, "what an unparalleled joy it is to meet you. I've heard nothing but good things."

Hermione blushed and resisted the urge to fidget with the hem of her sleeve. "Thank you, Madam Pinkleton," she answered shyly.

"Oh, no, Miss Granger, thank *you*. On behalf of all the wizarding world. If you should ever desire a future in magical law enforcement, do Floo me." The witch pressed a business card into Hermione's palm and walked away.

"I believe you wanted to speak with me, Miss Granger?" Shacklebolt asked as he turned his full attention upon her. His voice rolled and rumbled like silk-covered muscle. Hermione found it both intimidating and comforting, and she mused that he probably owed most of his success to that voice.

"It's Professor Snape, Minister," she began.

"Kingsley, please," he stated with a wave of his hand.

"Oh, well, K...K...Kingsley," she stuttered, uncomfortable with the breach of formality. "He's been getting owls. See, some of them are very threatening."

"Mr. Potter informed me this morning that he had received death threats," Shacklebolt acknowledged.

"Yes. Well, here, you can see for yourself." Hermione reached into her beaded bag and retrieved the hate-filled stack of mail.

The Minister's face betrayed no thought as he perused the letters. "You were quite right to bring this to my attention," he said finally. "I suppose this avalanche of sentiment is owed to the article in the *Daily Prophet* last Sunday?"

Hermione's face reddened. "Yes. Rita Skeeter... she's an unregistered Animagus...a beetle, to be exact. I think she's used her transfigured form to get inside St. Mungo's. It wouldn't be the first time she's done something like that. And she has reason to get back at me..." She broke off abruptly, noticing Shacklebolt's amused expression. She realized that she'd given herself away and flushed a deeper shade of red.

"Say no more, Miss Granger," Kingsley Shacklebolt chuckled. "I have a feeling that this conversation should be continued at some point, but for today, let us enjoy the festivities. Severus' security is a matter of utmost priority to the Ministry. Rest assured, I shall fully investigate any threat made against him." He bowed slightly then and smiled warmly at her, and Hermione was reassured beyond measure.

Ron made his way to her just as an excited murmur rippled through the gathered throng. "He's here!" someone whispered. Hermione looked towards the Burrow's limits and saw Harry striding towards the crowd, an unusually solemn Ginny at his side. As he drew nearer, the crowd erupted into applause.

"Speech!" someone cried, and the entire group took up the chant. "Speech! Speech!"

Harry looked slightly ill as he made his way to the center of the group. "Thank you," he started nervously. "Thank you all for..."

Dean Thomas pushed Lavender Brown out of the way and pointed his wand at Harry's throat. "Excuse me, everybody. *Sonorous!*" he shouted, and everyone laughed.

"... coming. Ahem." Harry stammered, uncomfortable with his magically amplified voice. "As I was saying, thank you all for coming. I...I know that I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for all of you. And I'm grateful that you've supported me. I, well..." Harry raked his hands through his hair nervously. "I appreciate you all more than you could know."

"Uhm. Uh. Well, you see, eight years ago, I was an orphan. I had no family, no friends. And today, well, I can't believe you are all here, how you all stuck by me. There are two people, though, who have been like a brother and sister to me. Ron, Hermione, please?"

Hermione glanced sideways at Ron and noticed that he looked extraordinarily uncomfortable. She herself did not really want the attention, but Harry was motioning them forward, and everyone was looking. She took Ron's hand and led him to the clearing where Harry stood expectantly.

Harry embraced them both when they reached him. "Ron and Hermione have stuck by me and trusted me, even when they had no reason to," Harry said softly.

Hermione could not understand Ron's downcast eyes or his reticence in the face of admiration. Though he had rarely said so, she knew he had never liked living in Harry's shadow. Why he could not enjoy the attention now was anyone's guess.

Harry continued haltingly. "You guys were my first friends, my first family. I love you like you were my own brother and sister." Hermione noticed tears gathering in his eyes, and she felt a wave of tenderness for her friend as her own eyes began to sting.

"And," Harry grinned, "if anyone deserves to be happy, it's these two. So please give your best wishes to the future Mr. and Mrs. Hermione Granger!"

Ron grinned lopsidedly and waved as the crowd whistled and cheered crazily while Hermione hid her embarrassment behind a smile and a wave. Suddenly, the Burrow seemed too crowded, too noisy, too familiar.

She was being pulled, shoved, hugged, by nameless faces. She felt Ron place his arm around her shoulder, felt him lifting her left hand to show off the ring. She saw George grinning at her, a grin that didn't make it to his shadowed eyes. "Keep ickle Ronniekins in line," she heard him say.

Everyone wanted more, more, more of her, it seemed, and she felt hemmed in. Her throat tightened and her mouth went dry. She fumbled with the neck of her robes.

She heard Molly saying something about the birthday boy, and the mysterious, levitating item was unveiled to display a spectacularly sculpted cake representing a rising phoenix. Fireworks were going off then, and everyone was cheering; Hermione's heart beat wildly against her chest.

A silvery trace streaked past in her peripheral vision, and she could no longer control the panic. She pulled her hand from Ron's and fled, shoving moving bodies out of her way. She blindly, frantically ran for safety.

She realized, once she finally stopped running, that she had drawn her wand. She leaned against a tree, breathing heavily, and looked around. She had somehow fled to her favorite spot at the Burrow, a little, wooded area where a little stream warbled soothingly and the sunlight glimmered through the trees.

She sank to the ground, trying to catch up with herself. Her mouth was dry. She scooped water out of the brook with her cupped hand and drank. She couldn't explain what had happened, why she'd felt so panicked, panicked enough to ruin her best friend's birthday. She closed her eyes and lay her cheek against the rough bark of the tree.

"It looked like a Patronus, didn't it?"

Ron's voice caught her off guard. She turned slowly to see him standing somberly behind her. She looked down again and nodded. He sat beside her quietly.

"It should be a happy day, but it's too much like Bill and Fleur's wedding," he said, and she realized he was right. She understood, then, why she had emerged from the crowd with her wand drawn and why she had felt flutters of panic since the guests had begun to gather.

The realization was a relief. She breathed slowly and deliberately, grateful for Ron's presence and understanding. She lay back on the mossy ground and gazed peacefully at the dappled light.

Ron lay beside her and twined his fingers through hers. She sighed in contentment. During her summer stays at the Burrow, she had often found herself in this very spot, yearning to be there alone with Ron.

He turned on his side to look at her. "I love you, Hermione," he said hoarsely.

For the first time in months, she smiled genuinely. "I love you, too, Ron," she whispered, and it was the truth.

He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her closer. She stared into his eyes and plainly saw his desire for her. She breathed in his scent, the scent of Mrs. Weasley's washing powder and musk-tinged aftershave.

His lips met her in a chaste kiss, and her body was flooded with warmth. She closed her eyes and opened her mouth, welcoming his tongue with her own, savoring his taste. His hand at her waist stirred a longing deep within her, and she moaned.

She pressed against him. He deepened their kiss in reply, twining one hand through her hair to bring her closer. Suddenly, the rough stubble on Ron's chin abraded the tender skin of her cheek. Her stomach turned over violently, and she pushed away.

"Fuck, Ron, you have got to shave!" she shrieked.

Ron lay still, perplexed by the violent profanity of her outburst. The warmth she had felt in his arms slipped away as they regarded each other, and she nearly shivered with cold. She shut her eyes tightly and huddled against the tree.

She heard Ron push himself upright. When she looked up at him, his eyes were narrowed and his jaw was set. His voice, when it came, was quiet and hurtful. "I must really repulse you."

"Ron, no, you don't, it's not..."

"Not what, Hermione?" he asked roughly. "I thought that last night it was hard just because it was our first time. But I get it now, don't worry. I'll go; I don't want to make you sick."

"Ron, please, don't think that. I don't know what came over me, but it's not you, Ron, I swear, it's not... I don't know what happened," Hermione wailed.

"For fuck's sake, Hermione, don't you dare pull the 'it's not you, it's me' shit. I'm not as dumb as you like to think I am." He turned sharply and stamped off, leaving Hermione to call out after him.

"Ron! Please, Ron! *Ron!*"

Hermione's heart sank as she watched him disappear through the trees. She knew there was nothing she could say to explain her abrupt change of heart to him. She couldn't understand it herself.

She quickly turned her options over in her head. She could not deal with the crowd anymore, and she knew there was little chance of reconciling with Ron until he had cooled off.

Nevertheless, she felt obligated to explain her absence to Harry, and perhaps Mrs. Weasley. With trembling hands, she cast Ginny's *Aufero Rubor* spell on herself and crept out of her wooded sanctuary.

She was relieved to see Ginny and George talking quietly on the steps.

"Hey, Hermione!" George called. "Where's Ronniekins? He run you off already?"

"Uh, no. Uh, I need to do some things today, and I really hate to, but I, uhm, have to leave," Hermione stuttered.

"All right, Hermione," Ginny said gently, although she looked concerned.

"Oh, will you please tell Harry and your mum that I, uh, you know, that I'm sorry?"

George rolled his eyes and waved her away. "Don't worry about it. We'll pass your regrets on to the Birthday Boy, and to Mum, and to Ron, too."

Hermione flinched. She hadn't thought of Ron at all.

"So where are you off to, Hermione?" Ginny asked.

Hermione froze. She didn't know where she was going. She simply wanted to escape the Burrow, where she was required to smile incessantly, where everyone assumed that they knew who she was just because they knew who she'd been.

"Uh, well, like I said, I just have things to take care of," she explained awkwardly.

Ginny looked at her questioningly. "I see," she said, though it was clear that she didn't.

"Go on, Hermione," George said. "Don't worry. We'll make your apologies." His uncharacteristically serious expression told Hermione that he, at least, understood her need to escape.

"Thank you," she whispered, and she turned and fled before they could see the tears welling up in her eyes.

She was breathless by the time she reached the Burrow's boundaries. She gulped the air into her lungs and squeezed her eyes shut as she Disapparated. She realized, mid-Apparition, that she had no clear idea of where she intended to go.

When her feet settled, she was relieved to find she had not Splinched herself. She opened her eyes and laughed, almost hysterically, when she discovered her location. The world had indeed been turned on its ear when visiting Severus Snape at St. Mungo's felt more normal than celebrating with friends at the Burrow.

Author's Notes

1. Angel Mischa, my beta, has my heart-felt gratitude for her guidance and wicked-fast turnaround time (especially considering how busy she is).
2. Amsev and the other admins at TPP likewise have my gratitude. They have made posting to The Petulant Poetess enjoyable and easy. Southern Witch 69's unerring eye helped me get this chapter ready to post, and thus she deserves my humble thanks.
3. I am extremely grateful to all of my readers. Your thoughtful reviews have been nothing short of a delight, and I appreciate everyone who reads this story.
4. I realize some of you may be way turned off by the high R/H factor of this chapter. Never fear! It is in Potions Under Duress for a reason.

Cracks in Everything

Chapter 7 of 11

Severus witnesses a puzzling conversation between Hermione and Calliope. He learns of Hermione's engagement and begins to discover the complexities of his feelings for her.

Cracks in Everything

"Would you just...uh...try...umph...a little...harder?!"

"I *am* trying, foolish woman," Severus gasped breathlessly. "I do not know whether deafness or short-term memory loss is your problem, but I have already told you that *I am doing the best I can*." Severus stopped and leaned against a wall in the hallway. Perspiration dripped down his forehead and stung his eyes, but he was altogether too spent to brush it away.

The pink-faced Healer paused as well, huffing for breath. She glared briefly at Severus. "Now, now, don't be grouchy, lam..." She broke off sharply, rolling her eyes, upon noticing his thunderous expression.

She smiled sweetly and straightened her back. "You're Calliope's own little thundercloud, aren't you, Sevvypoo?" she cooed, the syrup of her voice laced with acid.

Severus flushed, and his eyes glittered. "My name is not 'Lambykins,' nor is it 'Sevvypoo,' nor any of the other ridiculous monikers you seem so hell-bent on attaching to me. Despite the fact that I must endure your company, I do not welcome your familiarity, so do me the courtesy of holding your damnable tongue!"

Calliope's mouth fell open briefly. Her eyes bugged, and a purple vein strained against the skin of her forehead. She pursed her lips and stretched them into a grimacing smile. "Now, now, little fellow, be nice to Calliope. We don't want our little lambykins to get another nasty Sedating potion, do we?" she said, winking and wagging her finger.

Severus' lip curled at the corner, and he narrowed his eyes angrily. "Do *not* threaten me," he growled, heartily regretting that he lacked the strength to throttle her then and there.

Calliope laughed lightly. "My, my, but you are a paranoid little wizard! Calliope wouldn't threaten her lambykins. I'm just *remindin'* you that I'm tryin' to help you. And right now, you need all the help you can get," she simpered.

Rage surged within him, its power making him tremble. It sang through his veins, demanding release that his body could not afford to give. His shaking hands formed useless fists. "**Do not call me names!**" he roared.

"That isn't such an unreasonable request."

Slowly and painfully, Severus turned towards the source of the quiet voice and was immediately torn between delight and mortification. Hermione Granger stood, solemn and pale, at the entrance to the ward. The dim light clung to her, creating an amber nimbus of her curls.

"Well, now, Miss Granger," Calliope began, "he's really just takin' this all too personally. It's just terms of affection, see."

The Granger girl frowned. "It doesn't seem very affectionate to call someone a name they find insulting."

Severus flinched. Humiliating enough was the fact that Miss Granger had happened upon him clad in the flimsy hospital gown. That she defended him as he cringed against the wall was even worse. Something about the situation seemed entirely too familiar.

Calliope's smile stretched tighter across her face. "Well, I'm tryin' to be friendly with the bloke, but he's fighting me all the time. I'm sure you know how he is," she laughed.

"I wouldn't know, honestly," Miss Granger replied. Her frown deepened. "I've never tried speaking to him as if he were a child." There was an uncharacteristic hoarseness in her voice.

The Healer's carefully arranged smile quivered, and for mere seconds, her eyes shone with venomous anger. She composed herself, though, and answered resignedly, "I suppose it's too much to ask for him to respect me the way he does the other Healers."

Miss Granger looked at Calliope thoughtfully. "Everyone wants to be respected. Professor Snape certainly deserves our respect for all he did in the war," she said gently.

The statement perplexed Severus. Although he remembered very little of the war, he certainly felt its residue, and the rage, distrust, and self-loathing that plagued him were incongruent with heroism. His mind stumbled over the disjointed snapshots of memory until he noticed the unusual interaction between Miss Granger and Calliope Millar.

The two women faced each other stonily. Miss Granger seemed to gaze intently just over Healer Millar's head while Healer Millar stared back warily.

"Hold still, Healer Millar," Miss Granger said in cautious tones. She walked towards Calliope with carefully measured steps, her gaze still fixed on something just over the Healer's head. "I think I see something in your hair."

Severus did not understand the import of Miss Granger's statement, but the flicker of anxiety in Calliope's eyes indicated its significance. He watched bemusedly as Miss Granger reached out and picked through Calliope's tight, iron-grey curls.

"I thought," said Miss Granger, "that I saw a bug in your hair."

The Healer shifted slightly. "A bug?" she laughed incredulously. "Merlin, Miss Granger, bugs in St. Mungo's?"

Miss Granger continued to sift through Healer Millar's hair. "A beetle, to be precise." She lowered her hand and looked directly into her eyes. "A very rare, illegal beetle."

"Well, now I've heard everything!" Healer Millar chortled, although she blanched appreciably. "Illegal beetles!"

Miss Granger smiled politely. "Oh, yes. Illegal. There is a particular species of beetle that causes serious damage everywhere it goes. And I've recently discovered that one such beetle has been on this ward."

Healer Millar inched away from Miss Granger slowly. "H... Here? On this ward?" she asked weakly.

"This very ward," Miss Granger replied. "Do be aware, won't you? Such a beetle could harm one of your patients, and I know how seriously you take your vocation. Healing is such a noble profession."

Severus did not miss the ghost of a smirk that played at the corner of the girl's mouth. He wondered at the apparent ease with which the demure Miss Granger menaced the witch, but he was disinclined to look a gift horse in the mouth.

The Healer fidgeted. "Goodness, look at the time!" she croaked with disingenuous cheer. "I had better get you back to your bed, er, ah, Professor Snape!"

She started towards him, but Miss Granger stepped between him and the advancing Healer. "Thanks, Healer Millar. But if it's all right with you, I can see Professor Snape back."

Severus noted the look of relief that washed over the Healer's beleaguered face. "Thank you, dear. Yes, yes, if you're quite sure, that'd be lovely," she said, even as she scurried away.

Miss Granger turned to him, smiling, when they were finally alone. "Well," she said softly, "shall we walk back to your bed?"

"We won't be walking anywhere," he said bitterly. "Despite what Healer Millar thinks, I can barely walk at all."

The blood rose in Miss Granger's face. "Healer Millar is an ignorant old cow," she said. "We'll get you back to bed. Here, lean on me."

Something about the girl's indignation warmed him. He draped his arm over her shoulders and allowed her to partially support him, leaning against the wall to keep his weight from overpowering her.

Severus' bed was mere meters from the corridor, a distance a man with two functional legs could have cleared in less than a minute. As it was, though, his left leg was weak and prone to tremors, while his right leg barely moved at all. He felt like a monster from some old, Muggle movie, grotesquely dragging his leg behind him. He winced as he recalled his father's words.

"He's a bad seed, Eileen. I'm telling you, the kid's some kind of goddamn monster."

He looked down at Miss Granger, at the film of sweat coating her face, and winced again. He imagined how he must appear to her, how weak and wretched she must find him. The rage and despair that swelled within him were almost strong enough to make him vomit.

He hated her.

He hated her for saving him when he clearly should have died. He hated her for seeing him as he was now, as helpless as a newborn kitten...a malformed kitten someone should have drowned before its eyes had ever opened. He hated her for her youth, and her wholeness, and her encouragement, and her strength. But most of all, he hated her for the yearning he felt for her presence, a yearning that swallowed up his instinct to preserve his pride.

He silently cursed both of them with every tedious step down the corridor. At last he fell upon his bed, thankful that the grueling parade was finished. As he recovered his breath, he observed Miss Granger carefully.

She had been unusually quiet ever since she had appeared on the ward. She was paler than normal, and her brown eyes were underscored by purple half-circles. Severus would have bet that she had been crying before she arrived, although he could see no signs of tears.

His eyes flickered over the neckline of her filmy robes, searching for the pink scar he had seen before. To his dismay, it had disappeared. He wondered if she had used some sort of spell or charmed product to conceal it. All in all, she seemed to have taken greater care with her appearance than usual.

"It was quite thoughtful of you to dress up for the evening's entertainment," he said sourly.

The hurt, startled look he saw on her face both shocked and thrilled him. He felt a guilty lurch in his stomach as he continued. "Tell me, Miss Granger, to what do I owe the honor of your present finery?"

She crossed her arms self-consciously and lowered her eyes. "I had a party to go to today," she murmured.

"A party," he sneered. "Why are you here when there are festivities to attend?" Something inside him screamed at him to stop, that he didn't want her to answer.

"I don't... I mean I... I wanted to be here," she whispered, and he heard the tears catching in her voice.

"You wanted to be here, hmm? Now, why would you want to be here, tending a sick man, a crippled man with no friends, when you obviously had better places to be?" he jabbed. "Did you come to do your good deed for the day, Miss Granger? You should know that there are others on this ward who deserve your charity far more than I."

She hugged herself more tightly and bit her lip. The tears glistened in the corners of her eyes, and he was torn between guilt and satisfaction.

"It's not like that, sir. It's not charity. I just wanted to be here; I wanted to see you," she said cautiously.

"You've seen me. Now, you may leave," he spat. His entire body became alert at the thought of her leaving. He didn't want her to leave, not really. He wanted her to stay and talk to him, talk to him about anything at all, to fuss over him and fetch his water and see to his comfort. Such comfort bore a heavy price, though, and his desire for it only increased the humiliation he had to endure to have it.

The tears slid down her cheeks. "Please don't make me go. I don't want to be at that party. I want to be here. I don't want to go anywhere else," she pleaded. "It's not for you, it's for me... I don't know why, I just need to be here."

Severus leaned back against his pillows, stunned into silence. He had not expected this. Her simple proclamation lanced his bitterness, leaving him weary as it drained away. He felt a sudden, inexplicable urge to take her in his arms and hold her against his chest.

She shifted uncomfortably as they looked at each other. One hand clenched and unclenched, and she brought it to her mouth absentmindedly.

A nail-biter, he thought. She realized what she was doing and hurriedly moved her hand away from her lips. Something on her finger caught the light and made it dance for a moment.

Severus frowned. "Come here, Miss Granger," he said roughly. She shuffled towards him like a small child awaiting punishment, and once again he wondered what sort of relationship they'd had prior to his convalescence. "Give me your hand," he directed.

She grimaced as if he had asked her to eat something unpalatable. She fisted her hand and pulled it closer to herself, and he could tell she was considering defying him. Finally, reluctantly, she assented.

He took her hand in his, examining the little diamond curiously. It felt as if a rock were lodged in his throat, a rock that had no right to be there at all. He traced the band delicately with his finger. He remembered how she had laced her fingers through his the day before and how bereft he had felt this morning when there were no cheerful brown eyes, no gentle hands to soothe him when he had awakened from his nightmares.

Disgusted, he dropped her hand. "Engaged, are you, Miss Granger?" he asked wearily.

She looked down and nodded.

"For how long?"

"Since last night," she choked. She bowed her head, and her tears dripped upon the sterile, white blanket.

He squinted, as if doing so would help him see her better. "Forgive my saying so, Miss Granger, but are engagements not usually regarded as happy occasions?" he asked.

"I suppose," she answered weakly.

"Then why aren't you at your party, grinning stupidly and flaunting that trifle on your finger for all and sundry to see?" he asked peevishly. She shrugged.

"The days of arranged marriages are over, Miss Granger, unless something has changed since I've been... indisposed," he said feebly. "Why marry when you are so obviously miserable?"

"It's complicated," she said defensively.

He sighed. "Life generally is," he muttered. She said nothing, just stood with her arms hanging by her side.

"Your fiancé must be an extraordinarily generous man to allow you to slip away to a sick man's bedside less than twenty-four hours after your engagement," he prodded.

Her face blossomed crimson. "We fought," she murmured.

"So soon? This is surely some sort of record," he said wryly. It occurred to him then to wonder whom it was she was marrying. Perhaps the man's identity would spark some vital memory for Severus, some link that would connect his present dealings with Miss Granger to the past.

"Do I know him?" he asked.

She almost smiled as she nodded.

"Were he and I friends?" he inquired.

"Not at all," she said, and her almost-smile expanded just a bit.

His stomach gave a tiny flip, and he felt the blood drain from his face. Had Miss Granger herself engendered an animosity between him and her fiancé? She had said that she had been his student. He faintly remembered teaching at Hogwarts, and he could not imagine entertaining romantic thoughts about a student. Admittedly, though, trying to put his memories together was rather like trying to rebuild a tea cup that had been smashed in a ship wreck; retrieving the pieces from the shifting waves was difficult enough, and fitting them together properly more difficult yet.

His mind whirled as he considered the unsettling possibilities. Would he have pursued a student? Would he have sunk so low? Alternately, had she developed some sort of schoolgirl crush on him? Perhaps her presence attested to some sort of obsession she had with him. She had told him that there had been no romance between them; she had told him to think of her as his friend. Still, that did not rule out the possibility that she had indulged an unhealthy affection for him. Quite possibly, she was only here to insinuate...or avenge...herself upon him in his weakness...

She interrupted his reverie, seeming to have interpreted his distress. "My... *fiancé* was one of your students as well. You had little patience for him, and he did not care for you. For that matter, you had little patience with me," she said shortly.

He peered at her closely one more time. She had about her an air of defeat, and he was ashamed of the way he had interrogated her. He had no desire to torment her further.

"I found your conversation with Healer Millar quite intriguing," he said, changing the subject.

She looked up sharply, thrusting her chin out sharply and crossing her arms in a pose of defiance. "Healer Millar..."

"...Is an ignorant old cow," Severus finished. "We've established that."

"I was only reminding Healer Millar that she has responsibilities and that she shouldn't waste so much time annoying you," she said primly.

Severus snorted. "I daresay that witch would find a way to annoy me if she were restricted to merely breathing in my presence. I enjoyed seeing you bait her so neatly."

Miss Granger's misty half-smile warmed him, and he was overcome with an unexpected zeal to coax the laughter out of her. He could have made it his own desperate,

personal quest had he not immediately remembered the fundamental inequity of their... *relationship*.

He scowled. Nothing would be gained from chasing after a young woman's smiles, particularly a young woman wearing another man's ring. Where had he learned *that* particular lesson?

Miss Granger looked at him worriedly and sat down on the bed, just the way she had the day before. She placed her hand over his. "Are you OK, sir?" she asked timidly.

He snatched his hand away from hers. "I'm fine," he snapped.

Her face, which had so recently begun to smile, fell dismally. He bowed his head, allowing his hair to obscure his face. He could feel Miss Granger's eyes searching him, trying to understand how she had offended him, before she finally looked away.

"Professor..." she began haltingly. Severus was relieved when a fresh-faced Healer peeked around the curtain and announced the end of visiting hours.

Miss Granger stood and looked at him beseechingly.

"Good evening, Miss Granger," he said heavily. "Congratulations on your engagement."

"Thank you, sir," she muttered and walked away.

Severus hated the giddy ascents and rapid plunges he experienced in Miss Granger's presence. As soon as he resolved to give himself over to the comfort she offered, he remembered that he was a monster, and a rather pitiful monster at that. He was earth-bound, fated to misery. She belonged to a completely different realm.

He had come to think of her as his only friend, but that wasn't exactly the truth. She had just said that he'd had little patience for her... *before*. Before that snake, before his long, fitful slumber, what had he been? All he had were his dreams, dreams of fangs and fire, and endless gauntlets to stumble through. He remembered mere fragments of his childhood, and he burned with shame for the creature he had been even then.

No, the serpent had not heralded the fall of Severus Snape's Eden. He had not been born into innocence. Original Sin, his Muggle grandmother had called it.

Hermione Granger, though...she was a living benediction. He knew she had suffered. The evidence was inscribed on her neck, beneath whatever glamours she had used to disguise it. Still, she was intact and upright, whereas he was fractured and warped. She, with her indestructible soul, deserved Eden, whatever pieces of it still existed.

Something heavy and immovable settled in Severus' chest. He knew that he had encountered such a soul before, and though he couldn't remember how, he knew without a doubt that he had seen to its destruction.

Orange flames danced wickedly, and some tortured beast howled in terror and pain. Severus wanted to find it and set it free, but he had to get away...

Someone was attacking him from behind, but he threw off the hexes with ease. Then he heard the earsplitting voice. "*Coward!*" it cried.

He turned to face his attacker.

A boy, no more than seventeen, stood snarling before him. "*Coward!*" the young man cried again.

"Don't call me that!" Severus howled.

"Coward!"

The scream that wrenched itself from Severus' gut was pure, primal wrath.

Suddenly, there was an entire chorus of voices. He picked out his father's wheezy, drunken voice and a familiar, drawling voice that curdled his blood.

"Coward! Coward!" they taunted. The hexes that flew from Severus' wand fell flat once they reached their targets, and the voices laughed and jeered louder.

Something fearsome screeched through the air, and he fled, the taunts of his tormentors ringing in his ears.

He awoke to a darkened room.

"Shh," someone soothed, and they placed a cool hand on his forehead.

"Miss Granger?" he barked in surprise.

"Shh. I had to sneak back in. Don't worry, I'm here now," Miss Granger murmured comfortingly.

She climbed into the bed and lay alongside him, and he stared in amazement as she brushed his hair away from his eyes. She placed her lips against his brow chastely.

"Why are you here?" he asked shakily.

"I need a place where I can be broken," she said sorrowfully, although a smile tempted her lips.

"You've come to the right place," he said acerbically.

"I know," she answered.

"There are few enough places to be whole."

"True," she said, "but you can be whole with me. We'll call it an even exchange for my brokenness." She wordlessly, wandlessly illuminated the candles beside his bed, and he could see her properly. Her eyes were dilated with longing.

"Do you want to see me?" she asked hesitantly.

"Yes," he answered. "I want to see all of you."

Her eyes misted over with nervous relief. She unhooked the clasp of her robes, allowing them to fall away and vanish. She knelt nakedly on the bed beside him.

"*All* of you," he insisted, placing his fingertips on her throat. She slowly raised her wand and pointed it at herself.

The glamour shimmered as it dissolved, and he saw the thin, pink line again. He placed his lips against the sacred scar, kissing it with reverent passion. She gasped in his arms.

He hungered for the taste of her, for the taste of something so whole that it begged to be broken. He sucked and nipped at her neck as she moaned and ground against him. The salt of her skin rejuvenated him, and he traced the contours of her collarbone and her sternum before running his tongue along the undersides of her breasts.

She arched her back, thrusting her small, perfect breasts towards him. Unable to resist, he took one rose-hued nipple into his mouth. He plied it with his tongue, relishing its taste. He sucked greedily, pulling most of her breast deep into his mouth.

He could not tell how much time passed as he suckled contentedly.

"Severus," she gasped gently, pulling him away gently, "I need you. All of you."

He knew he should tell her to leave. He should end things now before they went any further and he destroyed her...or she destroyed him.

He could not do it. He could not fix his resolve when every part of him screamed for the redemption he knew he would find in her touch.

He closed his eyes and lay expectantly as she peeled back his blankets and undressed him. He was ashamed of his nakedness. She would surely flee in revulsion once she saw the catalogue of scars his body had become.

He felt the cool air on his skin and heard her breath hitch. He opened his eyes to find her peering lovingly at him.

She traced the scar that ran diagonally across his chest, traced it adoringly with the tips of her fingers. She then touched each of his scars in turn, and he felt that they would miraculously disappear beneath her fingers.

She leaned close to him and kissed him lightly upon the lips. The warmth of her body soaked into his skin, and he felt safer than he had ever felt before. She opened her mouth to him. It was the kiss of life; it restored his body and renewed his soul. She tasted sweet and warm, and he felt that his breath would cease if she ever stopped kissing him.

She drew away and looked at him longingly. "Let me break, Severus," she begged tearfully.

He nodded, and she straddled him. They rocked together, and she wept with the ecstasy of their union, wept for both of them. Her eyes glazed over, and she fell forward.

"Severus," she sobbed. "Severus, Oh, Severus, I'm breaking. I'm breaking, oh my God, I'm breaking."

He held her tightly to him as she cried. He knew suddenly that she was not only Hermione Granger; she was every person he had ever loved and broken. She, who was everyone, was breaking herself, willingly, and she was going to give him all of the pieces so he could make himself whole.

Severus woke again, disappointed to find himself clothed and alone. He caught his breath and peered wistfully through the half-darkness of the ward. He could not decide which was harder: sleeping through the nightmares or waking from the pleasant dreams. He snorted bitterly. His enemies (and he was certain he had many) could rest easily; Severus Snape's own mind would torment him tirelessly.

A/N: I own nothing, no money is made... blah, blah, blah....

My beta, Angel Mischa, has been fabulous and deserves bundles of praise for doing such great beta work on top of all her real-life obligations. An extraordinary woman, if ever there was one, and an angel indeed.

Many thanks to the administrators, who have made posting here so enjoyable. And as always, thanks to those who have read and reviewed this story so far. Your encouragement has been wonderful, and I sincerely appreciate it.

Well and Truly

Chapter 8 of 11

Awkward silence for breakfast, an uneasy reunion at St. Mungo's, and a nasty surprise for Severus.

Well and Truly

Hermione walked stiffly through the halls of St. Mungo's, neither hearing nor seeing the people who brushed past her. The setting sun cast a funereal hue over the city as she stepped through the exit. Despite the summery warmth, she clutched her arms around herself as if fending off a chill.

Head bowed, she walked steadily ahead, as unstoppable and as unguided as a somnambulist. Her mind dizzied itself with incomplete thoughts.

Snape... Ron... party at the Burrow...

had to see Snape...

Ron wants me... did want me...

Snape doesn't want me at all... not now...

cried too much...

Apparated automatically... how...

Snape's angry with me... why...

I care... why... how...

She had neither tears nor voice left for the sob that wanted to escape from within her. Her body would no longer do her mind's bidding, and her mind had abandoned her body in turn. She felt like a ship whose crew had mutinied. It seemed she was only passing time before she sank.

She sniffed at the thought. It was most unlike her to allow for flights of fancy or silly analogies. Then again, she hadn't exactly been herself lately; the stinging bereavement she had felt when Snape had recoiled from her touch was evidence of that.

When her legs were finally too tired to go any further, she came to a lurching stop. The last light had faded from the sky as she had made her dazed promenade, and it was now completely dark. Her eyes darted from side to side in momentary panic before she realized that she stood on the patch of green across the street from number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

Nervousness displaced the relief, however, when she realized that Ron and Harry might both be home. She straightened her back and steeled herself as she ascended the front stairs.

"Loathsome, tainted carcass! Brutish, malodorous impostor! Violated! Corrupted!"

A shoe sailed through the hall and glanced off the shrieking portrait ineffectually. Ron's enraged voice rang through the foyer. "Shut the fuck up, you old hag!"

"Blood traitor! You dare accost me in my own home! I see your nose, but not the dog to which I shall throw it..."

Mrs. Black's affronted screech pierced Hermione's listlessness. She shook with fury as she flew at the portrait, flailing her fists angrily.

"You've been told to shut up! This isn't your house any more, you bigoted old shrew! Shut"...smack..."up"...smack..."now, do you hear?" she shrieked.

Mrs. Black cowered against the background, covering her face with her arms against Hermione's relentless assault.

"Abuse! Desecration! Maligned and brutishly manhandled in my own home!" she wailed piteously.

"I told you,"...smack..."this...isn't...your...home any more!" Hermione shouted.

Ron wrestled her away from the portrait and swiftly pulled the velvet curtains closed. "Merlin's balls, 'Mione, calm the hell down!" he huffed.

Hermione glared indignantly. "She deserves it! And were you or were you not the one who threw a shoe at the old bitch?"

Ron drew back in shock. "You know, I never heard you use words like 'bitch' before today. Come to think of it," he said, narrowing his eyes, "I never heard you use words like 'fuck' before today."

Hermione looked down, torn between shame and indignation. "I can't believe you, of all people, would have a problem with such language," she spat.

Ron clenched his jaw and crossed his arms. "It's not about your language, Hermione," he said impatiently. "Today was supposed to be a happy day. You said, just last night, that you would marry me. And today, you look at me like I'm some shit you stepped in."

His speech, she noticed, was slightly slurred. She sniffed the air between them. "Ronald, have you been drinking?" she asked exasperatedly.

He leaned down until their noses almost touched. The heady reek of firewhiskey saturated the air between them. "What the *fuck* if I have?" he demanded.

She reflexively took two steps back. "Ronald!"

He leaned closer. "It's a bit late to get offended by profanity,*Professor*," he sneered.

Hermione hunched her shoulders and backed away. For an instant, Ron seemed unrecognizable and threatening.

"What happened to you today?" he asked harshly.

"I, I...I really don't know," she stammered lamely. "I wanted to be with you, Ron, I really did, but..."

"But what?" he pressed on. "But I didn't *shave* properly? But I was disgusting? But you finally decided that I wasn't good enough for you to actually marry?"

She stamped her foot. "None of those things, Ron!" she screamed. "I can't explain what happened! Something about it scared me, freaked me out. I *said* I don't know why." A mean and petty feeling slithered over her. "I'm sorry to have disappointed you when you were clearly so anxious to get laid," she said nastily. "Is this what this is, Ron?" she held up her hand and gestured toward the ring. "Is this a 'get laid anytime pass'? Does it entitle you to shag me any damn time you feel like it?"

Ron's eyes drew up in surprise. "No!" he shouted. "This," he said, grabbing her hand roughly, "is an engagement ring. For the woman I love. And you..." he jabbed his finger at her pointedly, "... you took it. You said 'yes'. You said you loved me. I wasn't after a *shag*, Hermione. I wanted to *make love* to my fiancée. After all, I could get a shag from any number of places."

"Well, why don't you, then?" Hermione cried out. She trembled with the force of her anger and with the tears that beckoned but could not come.

Ron dropped her hand, and his mouth fell open. Hermione straightened up defiantly and looked away.

"Is that really what you mean, Hermione?" Ron whispered hesitantly. "Do you really want to... you know..."

Hermione crumbled. "No, Ron! Merlin, no!" she gasped. For the first time, she considered a life without Ron. It seemed incomprehensible, like an offense against natural law. What would she do, what would life be, without Ron and Harry? And surely, if she lost Ron, she'd lose Harry, as well.

"Where did you go today?" he asked in a threadbare voice. "I looked for you. I wanted to say sorry. George and Ginny just said you looked upset and left, but they wouldn't tell me where you went."

Hermione inhaled sharply. She recalled her surprise at having Apparated to St. Mungo's, then the tearful conversation she'd had with Professor Snape. She cast her eyes down and bit her lip like a child caught in some infraction against the rules.

"Hermione?" Ron pushed, his voice pleading.

"I went to see Professor Snape," she mumbled.

Ron's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Snape?" he asked incredulously. "You left Harry's party...you left me...to go to Snape?"

Hermione closed her eyes and pressed the knuckles of her fist to her forehead. "I just wanted to check on him. I didn't know where else to go. I just wanted to get away from that party."

"Snape." Ron said simply. "Snape. You *left* me to go see *Snape*." He looked at her closely. "Why, Hermione?"

Hermione shook her head. "I don't know, Ron. Like I said, I just wanted to get away from that party." She had no idea how to tell Ron that she felt more sure-footed as Snape's caretaker (or had, at least, until their last conversation) than she did as one-third of the so-called Trio of Heroes.

Ron shook his head sadly. "I never would've thought, Hermione... I mean, wow... it's like some kind of alternate universe." He grimaced, then swallowed, and stood very straight. "We're supposed to be happy," he stated emphatically.

Hermione bowed her head and covered her face in her hands. "I know, Ron. I know."

He pulled her to him suddenly and stooped to look in her eyes. "I love you, 'Mione," he whispered. She felt him shaking. "Please, 'Mione, please don't leave me. I love you so much," he murmured through tears. He cupped her face in his hands. "I'll do whatever you want. I'll wait as long as you want. Sex isn't that important. I can wait, I promise," he pleaded.

"I love you too, Ron," Hermione said quietly. Ron's arms encircled her, and he buried his face in her hair. Hermione envied the ease with which he wept. She felt that she might never cry again, as if she had exhausted her life's allotment of tears.

They clung silently to each other so tightly that their survival might have depended upon their embrace. They did not stir until Harry entered the foyer and closed the door softly behind him.

He stopped short when he noticed his two best friends entwined just in front of Mrs. Black's covered portrait. Ron and Hermione broke apart, and Harry looked from one to the other before excusing himself tactfully.

"It's getting late," Hermione said.

"Yeah," Ron agreed.

"See you in the morning?" Hermione asked thinly.

"Yeah, sure."

Ron looked at Hermione, his eyes full of sadness and hope, then trundled off to his room. Hermione stood forlornly for several minutes before she, too, made her way through the darkened house.

In the sacrosanct darkness of her room, Hermione pondered her conversation with Professor Snape. He had opened her up and laid her bare with little effort at all. Even without resorting to Legilimency, he had an unsettling ability to pierce her mental defenses.

She remembered holding Snape's hand as he questioned her about saving his life. That touch, that comfort had been so easy to offer. It had seemed so right. How could she possibly touch her professor, with whom she shared no bond of friendship or romance, a man with whom she had no past and no future, when she could not endure intimacy with the man she'd loved for eight years?

Professor Snape doesn't expect anything of you, said a voice within her. The realization left her ill.

She stared up at her darkened ceiling. She felt heavy and swollen with unshed tears.

Hermione watched helplessly as the dark-haired witch raised her wand yet again. She knew what was coming. She steeled herself against the inevitable pain.

"Play with me, little Mudblood!" the woman taunted. Her eyes gleamed with an insane glee. "Go ahead, resist!"

"You're...dead," Hermione breathed. "Saw...you...die..."

"You saw what you wanted to see, little girl," the woman sneered. "As you're about to find out, I'm very much alive."

A red stream of light flew from the witch's wand.

Hermione writhed in pain.

Someone else stood behind her. She felt him lean close, so close the stubble from his jaw chafed the smooth skin of her cheek.

The man snickered nastily in her ear.

Hermione awoke soaked with sweat, her sheets twisted around her.

"It was just a dream," she reassured herself, but her heart continued to hammer against her chest as if it were trying to escape. She shivered in the darkness. Adjusting her linens, she turned onto her side and stared out the window to await dawn's first pale brushstrokes.

Breakfast had become the most harrowing meal of the day at Grimmauld Place. Ron shoveled his bacon and eggs into his mouth with unprecedented gusto (even for Ron). Hermione suspected that he was keeping his mouth full to avoid talking to her. Harry, sensing the discord between his two best friends, kept his head down most of the time, anxious lest he find himself twixt and 'tween their equally redoubtable tempers.

Hermione fell back on her old standby, burying herself in a seventh year Charms text. Even Kreacher sensed the tension. He brought out platter after platter of food, keeping himself and his young charges busy, and he slinked against the wall as if he wished to be invisible.

The tension was interrupted by the whooshing entrance of a tawny, stately looking owl.

"Another Ministry owl," Ron said nonchalantly. The three of them had received so many Ministry owls since the end of the war that it was almost mundane.

Only Harry seemed excited at the prospect. He looked up eagerly, his green eyes alight with anticipation. "Hey, maybe it's from the Auror Academy! Maybe they've accepted my application already! Or," he said, suddenly serious, "maybe they've already turned me down..."

"Turn famous Harry Potter down for Auror training?" Ron laughed sneeringly. "Not bloody likely." He helped himself to a crumpet. "They're probably owling to ask you to teach Auror training."

Harry grinned. "Looks like we're counting our dragons before they hatch. Hey, Hermione," he called. Lost in her textbook, Hermione didn't notice the owl flapping insistently over her plate.

"Her...mi...one!" Ron and Harry called together.

"Huh? What? Oh!" she gasped as she looked up. She took the scroll from the owl, which clicked his beak reprovingly. She rewarded him with a generous morsel of bacon, and he exited with a supercilious whoosh.

"What is it, 'Mione?" Ron prodded impatiently. "Open it!"

"Yeah, Hermione, come on!" Harry echoed.

Hermione broke the seal and unrolled the parchment nervously.

"From the Office of Kingsley Shacklebolt," she read aloud.

"The Ministry of Magic requires your presence at a private hearing regarding the protection of Severus Snape. Please arrive at the Minister's office promptly at 10:17 am on Monday, the Tenth day of August, Nineteen-hundred and Ninety-eight.

Hermione smiled. True to his word, Shacklebolt had made Snape's security a top priority. She folded the parchment carefully and put it on the table.

"Kingsley got right on that," Harry said approvingly. "Wasn't it just yesterday that you talked to him?"

"Yes," Hermione said shortly. The memory of Saturday at the Burrow was still fresh and raw. Harry looked at her curiously but said nothing. Ron focused intently on his plate.

"I'm glad the Ministry is looking out for Snape," Harry finally said. "He's not the world's most likeable man..."

Ron snorted sarcastically. Both Harry and Hermione glared at him sharply.

"Like I said," Harry continued, "he's not going to win any popularity contests any time soon, but I reckon he's paid his debts. I'd like to think he has a chance at living a peaceful life."

Hermione nodded in agreement. "I hope Shacklebolt will make Rita Skeeter pay for compromising his security."

Ron snorted again. "Didn't you say some of those letters were marriage proposals? Seems to me he should be grateful for the publicity."

"Really, Ron," Hermione scolded, "he didn't ask for any of that."

Ron rolled his eyes and grinned lopsidedly. "Never look a gift horse in the mouth, that's what I say."

"That's the sort of thinking that got the Trojans in trouble," Hermione retorted irritably. "Besides, you shouldn't assume that Professor Snape is as attached to the idea of marriage as some other people."

Hermione could tell by Ron's curious look that he was trying to discern whether her last sentence had been a barb, and if so, if it had been aimed at him. Although she hadn't consciously intended to insult him, she took a certain measure of delight in witnessing his discomfort. Snape's haunted visage was burned into her mind, and Ron's callous words had inflamed the violently protective emotions she had begun to feel for him.

"Yeah, well," Ron finally answered, "I guess he's still too hung up on Harry's mum to care."

Harry's green eyes narrowed into a dangerous glower. "Watch it, Ron," he warned.

Chastened, Ron looked down at his plate. "Sorry, mate," he mumbled.

"Just watch how you speak about my mum, is all," Harry said gently. "All right, I am off for the day. You two have a good day. Oh, and try not to set off Mrs. Black any more than you have to. She's getting worse and worse, and you two attacking her last night didn't help matters. She was going on and on about it this morning. Kept saying something about Mudbloods and shoes."

"Barmy old cow," Ron groaned. "I'm telling you, you ought to call Bill in to see if he can break the curses on that damned portrait."

Harry frowned thoughtfully, then raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "Not a bad idea, that," he agreed. "I'll put that on my to-do list for the day. It would be nice to get rid of her." He rose to shake Ron's hand, then hugged Hermione. When she raised her eyes to his, she found his gaze locked on her face. She clearly saw the questions that were brewing in his mind...questions about Ron and her...just as clearly as she saw his ambivalence toward knowing the answers. She took comfort in that ambivalence.

She smiled at him, hoping to communicate strength and cheer. His own hesitant half-smile made it clear that she had communicated nothing of the sort.

"Have a good day, Harry," she said softly.

He squeezed her shoulder. "You too, Hermione. Bye, Ron."

"All right, Harry, see you later," Ron mumbled.

Harry slipped out, leaving Ron and Hermione alone with their awkwardness.

Hermione looked around, taking in the pots hanging on the wall, the dishes on the table, the open door of the pantry...anything to avoid looking directly at Ron. When she finally cast him a sideways glance, she found that he, too was avoiding eye contact.

The uncomfortable silence expanded and thickened between them. Awkward seconds evolved into unbearable moments, pushing them to an impasse. Hermione thought wistfully of Professor Snape, pale and vulnerable in his bed. She longed to see him again, to slip into the comfortable, responsible role she occupied with him at St. Mungo's.

Ron broke their impasse with the silence. "Uh, so, do you like the ring?" he asked timidly.

"Oh, yeah, it's really pretty, Ron!" Hermione breathed. "It was... well, it was a surprise."

"I just couldn't wait any more. It's gonna be great, 'Mione," Ron enthused.

Hermione swallowed uncomfortably. "Are you sure, Ron?" she asked. "I mean, is it really appropriate now, just after the war?"

"It's never been a better time," Ron replied, looking thoroughly convinced. "Think about it. Would we have got together without the war? Even though I've been in love with you for years? It's perfect. Voldemort thought he was going to take us all down, but he's dead, and things are better than ever. It's the best way to get even with the old bastard."

"I hardly think getting even with a dead man is a good reason to get engaged," Hermione snapped.

"That's not the only reason, Hermione! I love you. I don't want to waste any more time. I want to go ahead and settle down and have a normal life. We deserve it," Ron pleaded.

Acid stirred in Hermione's stomach; she felt an overpowering anger. "So how much did you pay for the ring, Ron?" she demanded.

Ron looked down at her sternly. "None of your business, Hermione."

"If we're going to get married, it most certainly is my business!" she said sharply. "We need to be on the same page financially, and I need to know how you paid for this!"

Ron looked stunned, and she could tell he was considering her words carefully. She felt an irrational burst of anger at this unexpected show of consideration. With a twinge of disgust, she realized that she had actually intended to goad him until he fought back.

"I used what was left of my stipend," he answered.

"Ron, I've told you, that stipend..."

"I *know*!" Ron boomed. "Don't say another word about it. I have a job now, anyway."

"When did you get a job?" Hermione asked stiffly.

"Last week. George is opening up the shop again, and..."

"The shop?" Hermione screeched. "You're working at your brother's joke shop?"

"Yeah, I am!" Ron thundered. "What's the problem? You wanted me to get a job, get a plan, and I did. So what the hell is your deal?"

"What the hell is your deal, Ronald?" Hermione prodded. "I thought you wanted to be an Auror. I thought you had ambitions."

"For Christ's sake, Hermione, get off it!" Ron shouted. "I'm tired right now of saving the world. I want a life. I want a home. I want a good job that pays well. But if that embarrasses you, if it's not good enough for you..."

"It doesn't embarrass me, Ron," Hermione protested furiously. "I just think you could do better. The joke shop... I mean... can that job really last forever? Won't you get bored?"

"I don't think so, Hermione. I think I've had enough excitement for one lifetime, and I just want to enjoy life again. You have no fucking idea of how humiliating it's always been, not being able to buy you a decent Christmas present, or to pay Harry back for the stuff he bought me. And... and... well..." Ron licked his lips nervously as he struggled for the right words.

His voice faded into a hoarse whisper. "I thought it would be nice to help out George, and I thought... I thought that it would be a good way to honor Fred."

Hermione covered her face in her hands and shook her head in shame. She despised herself for the way she had attacked Ron. She had always hated his lack of sensitivity, but she herself had just trampled his emotions as if they were insignificant.

"There was another reason," Ron murmured.

The gentle tone of his voice stunned Hermione, and she looked up at him questioningly.

"I wanted to have a steady income so you could go to university next year. You know. If you wanted."

"Oh," she whimpered. That was the last thing she would have expected Ron to say.

Stunned, she sank down into her chair. "I'm...sorry, Ron," she whispered hoarsely.

He knelt in front of her chair and pulled her into his arms. "It's all right, 'Mione," he soothed. "You didn't know."

But I should have, she thought guiltily.

Visiting hours had just begun when Hermione walked through the façade of Dowse and Purge, Ltd. "I'm here for Severus Snape, please," she said to the Welcome Witch, preparing to make her way to his ward the way she had done every day for the last three months. She had just turned to walk away when the Welcome Witch's voice caught her off guard.

"I'll need you to state your name and sign the log, please."

Hermione cocked her head to the side and stared dumbly at the apologetic-looking witch. "I'm sorry, Miss Granger," the Welcome Witch whispered. She looked around the reception area furtively and leaned closer to Hermione. "Some security protocols have been violated at St. Mungo's, so I have to keep a written record of all of Mr. Snape's visitors."

Hermione nodded and took the quill the Welcome Witch held out to her. "Hermione Granger," she said softly. She signed her name on a blank piece of parchment, and the date immediately appeared beside it. The Welcome Witch waved her wand over it, and the air in front of the exit glittered for a moment. As she passed through the shimmering, magical mist, Hermione smiled in approval; she found this level of security quite to her liking.

Her skin tingled as she stepped through the shimmering mist. She wondered if Kingsley or the Aurors had influenced St. Mungo's new policies or if Maire had filed a complaint. The idea pleased her...if it were true, it was evidence that she had retained a certain efficacy in this strange, new world... she was still Hermione Granger, Accomplisher of Important Tasks. Hope budded within her.

Little by little, though, anxiety replaced that nascent hope. During the course of Snape's treatment, she had begun to feel a sort of connection with him...she had even dared hope that they might become friends. His behavior last night, though, suggested that she was alone in her hope. She had lain awake most of the night puzzling over it.

She flexed her fingers as she recalled the way he had snatched his hand out of her grasp. Hermione did not like violating the boundaries of others, especially physical boundaries. It made her feel clumsy and inconsiderate. Furthermore, she had become deeply invested in Snape's recovery. If she had offended him in some way, if he no longer wanted her assistance or company...

The mere thought caused her to shiver. Her steps slowed as she drew closer to his place. She walked between the rows of beds where the seriously ill of St. Mungo's convalesced. Some lay in the preternatural tranquility of the comatose; others sat up feebly in their beds. All, it seemed to Hermione, had at least one person to sit beside them, if only to stroke their hands and murmur tearfully. She unconsciously pressed her hand to her heart where an empty, final feeling seemed to settle.

Snape had no visitors except for her; the realization pressed upon her with new poignancy. She thought grimly of the hateful letters she had passed on to Shackbolt. If he were to send her away, there would be no one to care for him, no one to plead his case with the weary Healers, no one to insist upon the respect that was his due. There would be not one person to stand between him and a world that was divided between those who despised him and those who pitied him. Suddenly, that seemed more important than squabbles with Ron or the constant hum of anxiety in her muscles, more important, even, than finishing school. It seemed more important than anything, including herself.

Finally, she stood before the curtains that surrounded his bed. Her hand trembled as she reached out to part the curtains. She hesitated. A part of her...a part she was only just now aware of and did not understand...wanted desperately to see Snape and hear his voice. Intimately connected to that part of her was another part that so strongly feared his rejection that she could have turned on the spot and fled.

A deep voice interrupted her vacillations. "You may enter, Miss Granger," Snape said softly from behind the curtains. She pulled the curtain aside, embarrassed at having been caught, and stepped timidly into the small space allotted to her professor.

He sat, head bowed, in a semi-reclined position upon his bed.

"How did you know..." she began.

"I know your footsteps," Snape replied quickly. He looked up at her briefly before allowing his hair to cover his face again. Hermione was surprised to notice that he was flushed and embarrassed.

"Sit, Miss Granger," Snape commanded. "Please," he amended.

He looked up in astonishment when she sat on the bed. She immediately regretted the decision and moved awkwardly to the chair.

He cleared his throat. "My memories, Miss Granger..." He broke off, and she understood that he was searching for the right words.

"My memories. They are scattered, incomplete. I am quite sorry, but I remember very little about you..."

She opened her mouth to assure him that it didn't matter, but he stopped her short. "Don't. I have... very vague memories. The snake... when I was bitten..." He swallowed hard and stared into her eyes intently. "You were there, weren't you? I am told you saved my life."

"Yes," she whispered.

"You have told me to consider you a friend, and you have told me that you were my pupil," he continued.

"Yes."

"What did I teach?" he asked, and the childlike openness of his question moved her.

"You taught Potions, sir," she replied. "Well, in my sixth year, you taught Defense Against the Dark Arts." The answer seemed to surprise him pleasantly.

"This is extraordinarily awkward to ask, Miss Granger, but given the fact that my memory is what it is, I am forced to ask it." His brow furrowed, and he looked down for a moment. "Was there anything...untoward about my, ah, relationship with you?"

Hermione stared at him uncomprehendingly for a moment. "Un-unto-toward, sir?" she stammered. She noticed the scarlet warmth suffusing his face and understood. Was that why he had seemed so embarrassed when she first arrived? Had he wondered whether she was a lover he had forgotten? The thought brought her to the brink of laughter but made her squirm as well.

"No, sir. You were my teacher. You called me an "insufferable know-it-all" one time. Another time, Draco Malfoy hexed me and made my front teeth grow down to my chin, and you said you saw no difference. You called me a silly girl more often than I can recall," she rushed.

His shoulders sank in relief. His face, though...his face betrayed another emotion. Surely, she thought with a jolt, he was not *disappointed*?

"I suppose," he said thickly, "I owe you an apology for having said those things to you."

Hermione's eyes widened. Professor Snape apologizing for anything was unthinkable. Ron was right, she decided. They had indeed entered some sort of alternate universe.

"Why, Miss Granger, if I made those dreadful comments, did you... why have you been here all this time?" Professor Snape asked.

She inhaled slowly as she considered his question. "It seemed to be the right thing to do," she said simply.

"Pity, in other words," Professor Snape sneered disgustedly.

"No!" she said hotly. "Not pity! None of us realized how much you had done for us all during the war. And even before the war, you saved my life and my friends' lives on numerous occasions. Without you, the war would have been lost. All of our suffering, all of our struggles... it would have meant *nothing* without you."

He stared in disbelief. "So you offered your company as an act of contrition for not having known," he said resentfully. "You are a veritable *saint*."

Hermione's eyes widened, and her heart thumped uncomfortably. "I know it's too little, too late, sir," she said remorsefully. "I am grateful to you. But you were a spy, and you played your part extremely well. Nobody knew. D-Dumbledore..." she stuttered awkwardly. Snape flinched visibly at the name.

"Dumbledore," she continued, "made certain that your allegiances were always suspect so that your cover would remain intact. I never knew, sir, I swear."

"I apologize, Miss Granger," he said hoarsely. "You must understand, though." He paused and closed his eyes. "My last complete memory is that of a serpent lunging toward my carotid artery. At best, my memories are fragmented. You are the only person who has ever come to visit me since I returned to my senses. I have no idea who you are. I have no idea what I might have been to you. From what you have said today, I was unfairly critical of you. Perhaps you can see how I might question your motivations."

Hermione looked at him, weighing his words carefully. Her knowledge of Professor Snape was limited and bifurcated: he was always either Professor Snape, Head of Slytherin and Bane of Gryffindor House, or he was Severus Snape, fragile amnesiac. She had come to think of him more and more as the latter. She had even developed a delicate affection for that persona. When he had spoken so bitterly, though, and questioned her motives, he had been every bit the irascible Potions master who loomed so large in her childhood memories. That man scared her. That man could easily dismiss her, and where would she be then?

Hermione grimaced guiltily. She could not expect Professor Snape to remain in this limbo forever. She thought of the other patients on the ward, those blessed others who could count on the unflinching love of their families. Snape had suffered alone, his sole companion a former student whose devotion was less than completely selfless. How could she so unfairly prefer this weak and uncertain man to the billowing, acerbic reality of Severus Snape?

They sat, each of them lost in their own reflections. Finally, Snape settled uncomfortably on his bed and cleared his throat.

"I should like to know, Miss Granger," he said tensely, "if you might know... what became of *mywand*?" The quiver that crept into his voice tugged at Hermione's emotions and sent a thrill of excitement through her. This, at least, was something she could give back to him.

She smiled. "I have it," she said. "I picked it up and asked the Ministry to put a trace on it, just in case anything happened to me."

Her smile widened as she watched him wrestle with his childlike eagerness. His eyes glittered hopefully, and his face flushed. He looked *happy*. He stretched out one trembling hand as Hermione reached into her sleeve to procure the birch wood wand. She had barely freed its length from its invisible sheath before he snatched it away impatiently. He held the wand with a tremulous reverence, his face aglow. It seemed to Hermione that she was watching the years peeling themselves away; he might have been eleven, receiving his wand from Ollivander for the first time.

He pointed the wand at the stack of books Hermione had set on the table. "*Accio* book!" he cried excitedly. Nothing happened. Hermione bit her lip to stem the flow of advice that so naturally wanted to spring from her mouth. Certainly, she reasoned, Severus Snape knew all about focus, intent, and proper wand technique.

"*Accio* book!" he called. "*Accio* book!" His face reddened, and the knuckles of his wand were white and strained.

"Perhaps you could try another spell, sir?" Hermione offered meekly. Snape looked through her as if she weren't completely there. He eyed his wand questioningly.

"Try to disarm me, Professor," Hermione volunteered, whipping out her own wand. This was one spell she knew he could never fail to produce. Snape slowly raised his wand once more and pointed it at her. He screwed up his face and gripped his wand tightly.

"*Expelliarmus!*" he shouted. Her wand remained motionless in her loosely fisted hand.

His wand quivered as he thrust it forward forcefully. "*Expelliarmus!*" he cried desperately. "*Ex-pell-i-armus!*" Hermione's wand did not even twitch in her hand. Alarms began to peal in her mind.

Snape's eyes went glassy, and his face lost its color. He began to tremble; Hermione fought against the panic rising in her gut.

"Lie down, sir," she commanded with a confidence she did not feel. He remained upright, staring blankly back at her.

Hermione quickly moved toward him and lowered the head of the bed while raising Snape's feet.

"Maire!" she cried, hoping frantically that the venerable Healer was on duty today. "Maire! Please, come quickly!"

The words had barely fled her lips when Hermione heard the curtains rustle. She whirled around and was relieved to find Maire standing just behind her.

"Professor Snape tried to use his wand," Hermione said breathlessly. "He couldn't do any magic at all, and he, he, well, he sort of went shocky!"

Maire moved swiftly to Snape's bedside, holding out her wand. "Mr. Snape!" she said. "Mr. Snape, do you hear me?" Snape made no movement; he simply stared into space as he continued to shake. Maire pulled his blankets around him and waved her wand over him as she assessed his vital signs. Hermione felt weak and sick as Snape twitched with increasing violence in his bed.

Maire Summoned bottle after bottle, pouring each in turn down Snape's throat. His back arched upward and his eyes rolled back, and his hands twisted themselves into claws. Foam oozed out of the corners of his mouth. His entire body gave one last, violent heave before his eyes closed and he fell limply against his bed. His face, while unnaturally pale, was calm once more.

"Wh-wha-what happened?" Hermione squeaked nervously.

"He went into shock, as you might have suspected. Then, he had a seizure," Maire answered calmly as she continued to check Snape over.

"A seizure?" Hermione's mouth felt unusually dry as she formed the words. "I thought...well, wasn't he *over* that?" she asked, half-pleading.

Maire turned toward her. "He was certainly doing much better," she answered. "This is the first seizure of this magnitude that he's had in a month. He's exerted himself much more than usual over the last few days, though, and he seems to be a bit overtaxed. However, as far as seizures go, this one wasn't so very terrible."

Hermione swallowed uncomfortably. "I shouldn't have given him his wand," she whispered. "I didn't know...I didn't think doing magic would *hurt* him..." Her legs wobbled dangerously.

Maire cleared the distance between them and placed a steadying arm around Hermione's shoulders. "Sit down, Miss Granger," she said kindly. "There you are. Listen to me." She knelt and looked Hermione directly in the eyes. "You did nothing wrong by returning Mr. Snape's wand. He simply suffered a shock, and his body was too overburdened to right itself." She Summoned tea and biscuits. "Here you are now," she said. "You seem a bit overtaxed yourself, I must say."

Hermione accepted the refreshment gratefully. She had eaten little at Grimmauld Place, and her hunger was asserting itself insistently. The tea seemed to suffuse her entire body with its warmth, reinvigorating and comforting her unexpectedly. Her mind began to clear as she ate, and her quivering limbs regained their strength.

Her mind could not stop replaying the horrific event. She had known something was amiss when Professor Snape had been unable to disarm her; that discovery had frightened her almost more than the seizure. Her research over the last few months had indicated that a person's magical reserves could be weakened by physical trauma, but most of the information had suggested that, while weak, the magic did indeed exist, waiting until its host was physically able to harness it. Nothing at all had suggested a complete lack of magical ability.

She looked at Maire questioningly. "Why," she asked shakily, "was Professor Snape unable to use his wand? I mean, nothing happened at all. It was... *scary*," she finished in a whisper.

Maire looked at her steadily as she considered her question. "I do not doubt that it was frightening, Miss Granger," she said solemnly. "By all accounts, Mr. Snape was an extraordinarily powerful wizard before his injury. It must have been unnerving to see him unable to manage a simple spell." Hermione nodded.

"I have placed various monitoring charms on him, though, and they indicate that his magical abilities remain unharmed. See?" She waved her wand widdershins over Snape's sleeping figure, forming an oval from his head to his toes. A faint, bluish glow encircled him.

"The blue hue lets me know that his magic is alive within him. He is simply unable to access it right now," Maire explained. "This should pass with time."

Hermione released the breath she had unconsciously been holding. "I am so glad. He would hate life without magic," she said.

Maire smiled understandingly. "You will find, Miss Granger, that the basic desire to live and thrive allows human beings to adjust magnificently to the most unimaginable circumstances. Your professor," she said, gesturing toward Snape, "obviously has a desire to live. Otherwise, we'd never have wrested him away from the brink of death."

Her words washed over Hermione and sank into her consciousness. Hermione had never considered that Snape might truly want, not only to live, but also to thrive. In fact, she had come to see his entire life up to now as a sort of protracted suicide. Despite all the odds favoring his early death, though, he had survived. For the first time, she allowed herself to consider the possibility that all her research, all of St. Mungo's expertise, might have failed if the man himself had not desired, however dimly, to live. She began to wonder what he might want to live *for*.

Hermione fumbled clumsily with her quill. Books and parchments crowded her lap and threatened to fall. She peeked anxiously at Snape. He had slept for just over two hours and had not stirred once. She thought of his face, so eager and childlike as he reached for his wand. She had never really seen him smile before then. Now, having seen it, she ached for it. Once again, she wondered what she would do if he commanded her to leave. She would *not* force her presence upon him, but she could not bear the thought of him waking to each lonely day with no one to care whether he smiled or not.

She couldn't bear the thought of a day without seeing him, whether he smiled or not.

The idea made her nauseously giddy.

Snape shifted and mumbled unintelligibly. Hermione watched fretfully, anxious lest he suffer another convulsion. His black eyes fluttered open and looked about the room before settling on her. He had sought her out, she realized with a lightheaded thrill. She rose hastily, unmindful of the books, parchments, and quills that crashed to the floor as she made her way to his bedside.

"Miss Granger," he croaked. She could hear his thirst in his voice.

She reached for the glass of water at his bedside and raised it to his lips. He drank gratefully, never removing his eyes from hers. He pushed the glass away and continued to stare at her.

"Miss Granger," he said again. She took his hand in hers and grasped it heartily, thankful that he was alive, that he was awake, that he knew her. He closed his fingers over her hand.

"My wand, Miss Granger," he asked, searching her face. She knew that he yearned for her to tell him that it had all been a dream, that his wand had worked perfectly, that one part of him had escaped the ravages of Nagini's venom. She was tempted to tell him exactly that. She twisted her hands, resisting the urge to bite her nails.

"It didn't work, Professor," she said quietly. He closed his eyes and tilted his head back. She wondered if he might cry.

"Maire says it's temporary," she added. He lifted his fingers to his temples and pressed. Thus he lay for many long, silent moments until the need to break the silence swelled unbearably within Hermione.

"Professor Snape?"

He neither moved nor spoke.

She cautiously placed her hand on his shoulder. "Professor Snape?" she asked again. "Professor, are you all right?"

Snape inhaled and exhaled slowly. He lowered his hands and turned his face toward her. His eyes, when he opened them, were flat, shuttered. Hermione imagined she could see his fear and disappointment straining against those shutters.

His voice was thin and measured when he spoke. "I am partially paralyzed and prone to seizures. I owe my life to a former student, whom I apparently tormented. I cannot perform a basic Summoning charm, nor it seems, any other spell. It would appear, Miss Granger, that I am well and truly fucked."

Hermione fervently wished that she could tell him it wasn't so, that it was but a matter of perspective and all would be well. Unfortunately, he had made his point quite clearly, and she had never been a particularly good liar.

******I do not own Hermione, Snape, Ron, Harry, Grimmauld Place, St. Mungo's, or anything else remotely connected to the Harry Potter Septology. No money has been made.******

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Corridors of Time

Chapter 9 of 11

Severus ponders his new reality, Hermione has an appointment, and Maire makes an announcement.



The Corridors of Time

Among the multitudes of indignities and inconveniences visited upon him at St. Mungo's, Severus loathed the sense of timelessness the most. There was not a clock to be seen, and the lack of natural light gave the days an endless, amorphous quality. He recalled the Creation narrative his Muggle grandmother had read to him: the Creator, having fashioned the world from a void, had divided the night and the day with a simple declaration: "Let there be light." Thus *time* was created, and this, according to Severus' grandmother, made the Creator the all-powerful God.

At St. Mungo's, it was the various Healers and administrators, who could be seen consulting their Very Important Watches with harried frequency, who divided the night from the day: *they* who decided when it was time for medicine, time for food, time for a walk to the loo; *they* who declared daily, "Let there be light," and when they were sated, "Let there be darkness."

It was a power that Severus envied and despised. It was a power he lived by, nonetheless.

Severus fought against the timelessness by listening. In the small hours of what he supposed was morning, when all was yet dark, he would hear the soft, padding footsteps of the janitors. Then, the first dim lights would illuminate the ward, and he would hear the doors of the ward opening and shutting for the Healers making their morning rounds. He knew which day it was by which footsteps he heard: sharp, staccato clicks meant that it was Healer Smyth's day; shuffling, hurried steps meant Healer Millar (although, thankfully, he had not heard those particular footsteps in some time); quiet, steady footfalls signified that Maire would be attending.

He would endure their questions and examinations for what he assumed was fifteen minutes, after which he would await the telltale sounds of the breakfast trolley as it trundled through the hall. After breakfast, he knew to adjust the despicable hospital gown and listen for the sullen footsteps of the Healers' Assistants who came to see him

to the loo and then to his bath.

When that particularly humiliating task had been discharged, Severus would lie in his bed with his eyes closed and listen carefully. He knew that at some point, after the HA was finished with him, he could count on hearing the oaken doors at the end of the hall creak open to admit visitors. It almost always felt like an eternity as he listened for brisk, determined steps to venture into the hall, steps that grew more and more hesitant as they reached his bed. He knew he would hear his privacy curtains slide slowly upon their track as his one and only visitor parted them diffidently.

Every day, Severus waged a futile battle with the expectancy that warmed his chest as he awaited those footsteps.

He did not want to be the object of a schoolgirl's pity. She had seen him at his most feeble, his absolute weakest, and he could not hide from her. Every time he heard her sturdy, resolute step in the corridor, he was possessed by the desire to rage at her until she was reduced to quivering nothingness before him. He wanted to drive her so far away that she would never again think to seek him out and accuse him silently with her warm, brown eyes or scorch him with her innocence.

But by the time her steps slowed into a timorous tiptoe just beyond his curtains, he longed to call out her name and bid her hurry. And by the time she pulled the curtains aside and peeked in anxiously, so clearly afraid of being sent away, he would release the breath he had not realized he was holding. Only then would he surrender to the joy of seeing the one, delicate filament that anchored him to a world beyond himself.

Today, he listened for the opening of the doors with a leaden feeling. He clutched his blanket around him to ward off the clamminess that crept upon him. When the doors swung open, he heard her rush onto the ward, heard her feet beating out their rhythm of youth and purpose and vitality. Today, of all days, she failed to hesitate halfway down the hall. Today, she just marched on. Severus trembled.

She stopped short when she reached his bed. Only then did she reveal the timidity Severus so relied upon. His heart seemed to stop as he waited for her to part the curtains. When her face appeared, flushed and excited, he could see her eyes shining with determination and energy. His heart raced once again.

He carefully arranged his features into a neutral expression. "Do come in, Miss Granger," he said, affecting nonchalance. She smiled shyly.

"You appear to be out of breath," he noted, taking in her appearance appreciatively. Her cheeks were uncommonly rosy, and her skin seemed to glow.

"Sorry, Professor Snape. I'm in a bit of a hurry. I have an appointment at 10:00 this morning," she rushed breathily.

Relief and disappointment struggled within him. "Oh?" he said casually. "Might I ask what time it is now?"

"It's 9:00, sir," she replied helpfully.

Less than an hour. He wondered if he could discover all that he needed to know in such little time. It seemed that he was asking for a lifetime of information; he supposed, as he thought of it, that he was.

"Yes. Well," he coughed, "thank you for visiting, Miss Granger. I hate to think I have detained you from more worthwhile pursuits." He tried...vainly, judging by Miss Granger's ill-concealed smirk...to infuse his words with sarcasm.

"I brought you some books," she said cheerfully. "I brought some Potions journals and some Muggle novels." She held the books forth with a nervous smile.

Severus accepted the books stiffly. He had been a Potions master, he knew. He could even recall some of the basic formulae for potion making. Without the use of magic, however, he had little hope of succeeding in that field again. The combination of Potions journals with Muggle novels seemed to be an insult cloaked in consideration.

"Thank you," he said hollowly. "In light of my peculiar condition, I suppose I should begin with the Muggle novels. It is quite *generous* of you to educate me about my new life."

Her face fell, and she looked down apologetically.

"I just thought you might be bored," she murmured. "I didn't know what books you might like." She bit her lip. "I just had a lot of Muggle books. I thought they'd be entertaining."

Miss Granger's embarrassment convinced Severus of the guilelessness of her intentions, but he could not bring himself to apologize.

"Of course," Severus mumbled. "I'm sure life as a Muggle will be quite *entertaining*."

Miss Granger smiled tensely as an uneasy silence swelled between them. Severus knew the clock was ticking. Within minutes, Miss Granger would be gone, on her way to her appointment, and he would be left alone with his nagging questions and faulty memories until she returned. It was tempting to allow what remained of their time to run itself down, to give himself one more day to revel in the torture of unanswered questions.

He grasped his forearm protectively as he pondered his questions. He vividly recalled the dreams of being branded by a madman. He recalled the revulsion and self-hatred he felt when, upon awaking, he found the hateful mark upon his arm, just where it had been in his dreams.

He was sometimes plagued by an overwhelming impulse to cut off the offending arm, to cleave the evidence of his treachery and distance himself from all he imagined it represented. Something told him, though, that this was no mere tattoo; this mark had been seared into his very soul.

He dreaded exposing Miss Granger's innocence to something so obviously tainted. He dreaded exposing his pollution to the excoriating light of her purity even more.

Still, he did not know how long it would take him to retrieve his lost memories, or how long it would take him to piece them all together. In one single, decisive moment, he channeled his desire for completeness into a point before it could be diffused amongst his warring emotions.

His voice sounded strange in his ears, as if it belonged to someone else, when he asked the dreadful question. "Miss Granger, do you recognize this mark?"

He rolled up his sleeve slowly and clumsily to show her the faded, mottled serpent writhing upon his arm. She drew back slightly and paled, then clasped her hands together tightly as she sought to regain composure.

"Yes," she said quietly.

"Well?" Severus snapped impatiently. "Our time is short. Please tell me what you know about it."

Miss Granger looked at him with wide eyes. He could not determine whether she was trying to decide what she saw or whether she was trying to decide what to say. She licked her lips.

"It's the Dark Mark," she said finally, her voice thick with false calm.

"And why is it on my arm, Miss Granger?" Severus demanded irritably.

She swallowed. "Lord Voldemort put it there."

Something within Severus had been waiting to hear that particular name. Every syllable thrilled and terrified him to his core, dividing him between the strange urge to hide and an even stranger sense of power and purpose. He could feel his blood pounding through his veins, could hear it thudding in his ears. Acid boiled in his stomach.

"So I was a Death Eater." The words seemed to have been coiled like a serpent in his gut, awaiting their chance to slither out of his mouth and strike. He trembled as he named himself.

"Yes," Miss Granger answered. Her eyes were large and round, as if they were trying to expand to take in the scope of the evil she saw.

Severus began to crumble. He regretted asking the question, regretted the compunction to name what he had been. He wanted nothing more than to fold himself up, over and over, until he was too small to find, too small to name.

"But you changed!" Miss Granger pleaded earnestly. She stepped toward him and leaned forward, her eyes shining with conviction. "You turned your back on Voldemort! You worked for D-Dum-ble-dore," she stammered self-consciously.

Dumbledore.

Miss Granger had tripped over that name before. It sparked something in Severus, something he would just as soon leave in the darkness. It was terrifying in the half-light of his memory.

He remembered the benevolent Headmaster of Hogwarts he had looked up to as a child and the formidable wizard who had held him in awe as an adult.

He had failed. He had betrayed Dumbledore. His body knew it, just as it had known he had belonged to Voldemort, for his fingers went suddenly numb and his lungs refused to surrender the breath he had just taken.

Miss Granger knew it, too.

"Dumbledore," he ground out. "Is he..."

Miss Granger's face twisted involuntarily. "He... well, in the war, he was... he died," she stuttered.

The coldness that had begun to creep upon Severus washed over him completely. Unable to either inhale or exhale, his lungs burned with trapped air.

He could barely make out Miss Granger's voice as she called to him over the icy waves. He distantly felt her warm hand slip over his.

"Professor Snape? Professor Snape!" she called, over and over, though he could hardly hear her at all. The line between them was going to snap. He was going to sink beneath this anguish, and not even she would be able to retrieve him from those depths.

"Professor, can you hear me?" she pleaded. She pulled desperately on his hand, as if the void that threatened were a physical force she could overcome with physical resistance.

He gasped and coughed as he surfaced. Miss Granger patted his hand soothingly. "You did all you could, Professor. Dumbledore was proud of you."

Severus could not reconcile Dumbledore's pride with the repellent mark on his arm. He had revered the man, had wanted to make him proud, just as he had wanted to make his father proud.

Why, then, had he ever taken that mark and all that it meant?

He sharply withdrew his hand from Miss Granger's grasp. She knew something about Dumbledore's death, something she didn't want to tell him.

"Tell me, Miss Granger," he wheezed. "How did Dumbledore die?"

She pursed her lips and swallowed, mulling over her answer.

"Uh, well, it was... well, it was at the beginning of the war. No, not really at the beginning," she babbled, "but, oh, the Ministry didn't really, up to then..."

Snape silenced her with an impatient wave of his hand. "How did he die, Miss Granger?" he growled.

She startled and raised a hand to her mouth. "There was an attack on Hogwarts," she said, her voice tiny and tremulous. "He... uhm... well, he had a plan..."

"Of course Dumbledore had a plan!" Severus boomed. "Albus Dumbledore always had a plan! So what the fuck in hell happened to him, Miss Granger?"

She began to shake.

He braced himself for her answer. Just as she opened her mouth, the curtains parted. Miss Granger gave an audible sigh of relief when Maire slipped in.

"Do pardon me, Mr. Snape. I shouldn't like to interrupt you, but I needed to speak to both you and Miss Granger," she said quietly. She studied both of them intently. Though he had been told that the area around his bed had been warded for privacy, he could not shake the thought that she knew every word that had passed between him and Miss Granger.

"Have you come to tell me that I am miraculously cured?" Severus asked caustically. "Or have you come to tell me that, impossible though it seems, my... *condition* is worse?"

Maire smiled placidly. "Things could always be worse, Mr. Snape."

Her unflappable calm and cheery tone brought his memories of Dumbledore to the front of his thoughts once more.

Dumbledore. Dead.

He shook off the thought as the cold waves of grief pushed against his mind again.

"Of course. I could be a paralyzed, amnesiac Squib," he retorted sourly.

"No one has called you a Squib, Mr. Snape. As I've explained already, your inability to channel your magic..."

"... Is an uncommon, but not unheard-of, after-effect of trauma, either physical or emotional, and should be reversed with a simple tincture of time," he quoted back to her in a singsong voice.

"I am so glad you understand!" she said. "I do not wish to intrude upon your visit any more than I absolutely must, so I shall get quickly to the point." Her smile faded into a thoughtful expression as she looked at Severus and Miss Granger.

"St. Mungo's has been very pleased with your progress, Mr. Snape," she said evenly. "The Board of Directors has decided that you should be able to finish convalescing at home."

Her words bored into Severus, creating an empty hole. Home. He didn't know that he'd ever truly been home.

"You are being released next week," Maire said solemnly. The smile in her eyes sunk beneath weariness.

"What do you mean?" Miss Granger shrieked. "He can't go home! He's yet to recover the movement in his leg, and he still has seizures, not to mention the fact that can't do magic. St. Mungo's can't release him just like that! He still needs constant care!"

Severus stiffened angrily as she enumerated his maladies.

"Do shut up, Miss Granger," he snapped. "Healer Glamorgan has my entire file at her service. No one needs you to outline it."

Miss Granger gaped at him, hurt and dumbfounded. Her inability to respond, to engage his anger, infuriated him all the more. His hands clinched. His muscles shook. Every fiber of his being strained against the impulse to throw something at her.

"I am aware of Mr. Snape's difficulties," Maire responded peaceably, "and I have informed the Board of his condition. They have deemed that he has healed sufficiently enough to be discharged."

"But he still needs care!" Miss Granger protested weakly.

"You are correct, Miss Granger," Maire countered. "The Board believes that he might receive more suitable care from a private nurse in his own home."

"You keep mentioning what the Board says," Miss Granger said irritably. "You're his Healer. What do you say?"

Maire blinked. "I have no say, Miss Granger," she said tiredly. "I have been informed that my presence is no longer required, and I am to go back into retirement."

"That's absurd!" Miss Granger gasped. "He's a war hero! He deserves adequate treatment until he is healed!"

"St. Mungo's believes that he has received adequate treatment. Please," Maire implored, "it is not within my power to override the Board's decision. I have made my recommendations, and they have arrived at a different opinion. You may, of course, lodge a protest with the Board."

"Trust me, I most certainly shall!" Miss Granger shouted.

"Miss Granger!" Severus barked. "Stop screeching this instant. I do not appreciate you speaking of me as if I am not even here. I may be an invalid and a *Squib*," he said bitterly, "but my intellect is intact, I assure you."

Tears welled in Miss Granger's eyes. Maire cocked her head to one side and looked at him thoughtfully.

"Your friend means well, Mr. Snape," she said. "She only wants to make certain that you have the care you deserve."

Severus eyed her stonily as she continued. "All that remains for me to do, Mr. Snape, before you and I are both ushered out of St. Mungo's hallowed halls, is to ascertain that you have adequate lodging awaiting you when you are discharged."

Despite her tranquil demeanor, Severus could see the anger and displeasure in her eyes. She had been kind to him, and he had come to regard her with esteem and something else that came close to affection. He would not miss St. Mungo's, but he did not look forward to losing one of the two people in his life who accorded him some small respect.

"Professor McGonagall has said that you would always have a place at Hogwarts," Miss Granger said shakily.

"No," Severus said quickly. Night after night, Hogwarts hosted his most vivid nightmares. He had no desire to see its stark reality.

"Hogwarts is listed in your files as your most recent residence, Mr. Snape," Maire said. "Have you another place to go?"

Miss Granger broke in. "My best friend has a house, and he'd be honored to have you stay, Professor."

"No!" Severus boomed. "Miss Granger, I do not require the charity of teenage dunderheads!"

"The fact remains, Mr. Snape," Maire countered, raising her voice slightly, "that you must have a verifiable address to be released to. It is my duty to assure that you are well-cared-for after your release."

Severus fixed her with a smoldering glare. "Well," he said after a long pause, "seeing as I must now live as a Muggle, I suggest that you abandon me to the tender mercies of the Muggle social welfare network." He smirked at Maire, whose eyes hardened perceptibly, and at Miss Granger, who gawked in horror. "I find such an idea infinitely preferable to living amongst dull-witted adolescents."

He felt a nauseating giddiness at the wounded look in Miss Granger's eyes.

His happiness died as her inborn obstinacy demonstrated itself anew. She turned to Maire, her eyes ablaze. "You just said that he had to have a verifiable address in order to be released," she pointed out combatively.

Maire met her rejoinder with a wry smile. "So I did."

"So, what happens if he doesn't have an address?" Miss Granger demanded excitedly. "What happens if he has nowhere to go, no one to care for him?"

"He would have to stay here," Maire replied impassively.

"So, he would have to stay here, and St. Mungo's would have to continue caring for him!" Miss Granger crowed triumphantly.

Maire smiled sympathetically. "St. Mungo's would have to keep him, Miss Granger," she said quietly. "But," she broke into Miss Granger's next outburst, "he would be kept on the Janus Thickey Ward. He would have room and board, but no further therapeutic interventions."

Severus' head throbbed. Life was bleak, indeed, when his options consisted of subsisting on the goodwill of teenagers or residing permanently amongst the broken and insane inmates of the Janus Thickey Ward.

Miss Granger stood rooted in place. Maire gazed at him apologetically. Every line in her face was delineated with perfect clarity. For the first time, Severus considered how old she must be. He looked between the two women, from the younger, whose life stretched out in seemingly endless miles before her, to the elder, whose journey was mostly complete. He had the absurd thought that he walked a narrow wire between the two of them. He closed his eyes to ward off the sudden sensation of vertigo.

He was the first to break the hushed gloom. "You have somewhere to be, Miss Granger," he said sharply.

She turned slowly to look at him with her large eyes, her features fixed and immobile.

She blinked and shook her head as if she were emerging from a stupor. "You're right," she said with a distant, high-pitched voice.

"I must go," she affirmed. Color flooded her face, and she bit her lip before she turned and fled through the curtains.

"Mr. Snape, I apologize again for this inconvenient interruption. I shall see you again in a few hours to oversee your physical therapy," Maire said softly. "I must go now. Please try to have a good morning."

Sullenly, defiantly, Severus stared hard into Maire's eyes. With no discernible uneasiness, she held his gaze. An understanding of sorts passed between them: she sincerely apologized for the discontinuation of his care; she wished the best for him; she would tolerate no intimidation by him, however. He saw all of this and more, and felt that she understood him mutually: understood that he hated depending on anybody, and was nevertheless dependent upon everybody; that he wanted to go home, but had no idea where home might be; that he was frightened and resentful of life without magic.

The unexpected insight...not only into Maire, but also into himself...would have ordinarily stoked his bitterness to greater heat. Instead, it disarmed and calmed him. The resentment and anxiety still buzzed within the recesses of his mind, but for the moment he ignored them and rested in the tranquil cocoon that Maire's understanding had wrapped around him.

She smiled at him kindly. "I must go, Mr. Snape. I'll see you soon."

He found himself returning her smile half-heartedly as he nodded. She slipped through his curtains, and he listened as her footsteps became fainter and fainter.

A combination of exhaustion...wrought no doubt by the morning's drama...and the ennui inherent in hospital life overcame Severus.

Home, home, home, he thought groggily. *Where is my home? Home is where the heart is, they say. Is the possession of one...heart or home...predicated upon the possession of the other?*

He drifted along with the babbling current of thought until it converged into a repetitious eddy and lulled him to sleep.

"It's time, Severus," Miss Granger whispered in his ear. He rolled over to face her, noticing the mischievous smirk that played on her lips.

"What of your appointment?" he quizzed. "I'm sure you have plenty of loud, well-intended outrage to unleash upon some poor soul."

Her laughter tinkled pleasantly.

"I've no intention of unleashing outrage," she answered. "I would, however, like to unleash some of this pent-up *energy*." She looked pointedly at his crotch where his erection strained against the thin fabric of his gown.

"You should leave, Miss Granger," he purred. "My therapy is set to commence some time in the very immediate future, and I doubt you'd like to be caught out."

"This is your therapy," she whispered seductively into his ear. She ran her fingers down his arm and along his hip, grazing him lightly with her nails. "Besides," she said, "it's not down to you to say what time it is."

Power and magic surged through Severus' muscles. He smirked. There was no need for her to know his power...yet. "Indeed?" he droned. "Am I to have no choices at all?"

"Choices," she murmured, appearing to consider his words. "Dumbledore said we always have choices. Our choices are what make us..." Her hands were slipping over his upper thigh, pushing up the hem of his gown bit by bit.

"So he did," Severus snapped.

Miss Granger affected demureness. "And I *choose* to spend my *time* seeing to your needs," she said sweetly. She lowered her head to his cock, which jutted desperately into the cold, hospital air. Her lips felt like heaven...

"No," he growled, yanking her up by her hair. "It's time *you* learned a lesson about toying with men." He pulled her to him and rolled her over in one neat maneuver, gratified by the trepidation and desire warring in her eyes. He stared into them piercingly.

He leaned in and nipped her earlobe. "Never," he said and trailed his tongue down her neck, "assume," he breathed against her collarbone, "that you know," his lips grazed the swell of her breast, "my *needs*." He bit down upon her nipple, and she arched into him. "Tell me about Dumbledore."

"I... can't..." she panted.

"Oh, but I think you can." His hands slid up the soft flesh of her inner thigh. She moaned.

"C-c-can't," she huffed helplessly.

"You can," he slipped his fingers into her warm, wet core, "and you will."

He pushed up her gown and thrust into her just as she disappeared.

He found himself in a playground. He knew the place well; he'd visited it many times before. He was drawn, as always, to the swings.

At first he couldn't see her. Perhaps she hadn't come today. Perhaps she had better things to do.

Then, from the corner of his eye, he saw the unmistakable, flame-like streak of her hair. He whipped around and watched. She was not to be seen. He waited. He saw another flash of auburn as she moved through the copse of trees beside the playground, and he sprinted after her.

He found her in the middle of the thicket, standing with her back to him. He stared for a while at her long, dark red hair, mesmerized by the way it caught and transformed the sunlight. She was like stained glass, something that somehow filtered and sanctified the beams into something cool and cleansing.

His stained-glass girl turned slowly to face him with a sad, little smile. He stared longingly into her green eyes and drank in her innocence. All thoughts of Miss Granger and her unnerving disappearance vanished.

She was a little girl, no older than nine or ten years old, yet he felt that he had known her forever. Her eyes glowed with recognition. If he could stay with her, he might be able to scrape the patina of his experience away and rediscover the innocence he had lost. He would slough off the dead layers of his existence and begin anew with a fresh skin.

Her quiet gaze suggested that she knew him, that she held his past in her unmarred hand. She would unlock the doors of his memory. He would forget Miss Granger, who would disappear at the most inconvenient times, and seek his answers with her.

He opened his mouth to say her name, but it would not come. It danced teasingly upon his tongue, something he ought to know, but would not allow itself to be uttered.

He could only speak one word.

"Dumbledore," he whispered.

Her eyes flickered. He stepped towards her excitedly. "Dumbledore," he said again. "What happened to Dumbledore?" She turned away.

"Don't leave!" he cried desperately. She kept walking, disappearing into the trees as he followed.

He found himself standing on a deserted cobblestone street. The red haired girl was nowhere to be seen.

He turned to take in his surroundings. A deserted row of houses seemed to stare at him through windows like dark, malevolent eyes. He felt an uneasy kinship with this place, a kinship he longed to sever. The hairs on his neck stood up as he backed slowly away.

He turned and found himself face to face with a scowling, sallow-skinned woman. It took him a moment to recognize his mother.

"Welcome home, Severus," she sneered. "We've been expecting you." Her mouth stretched open in a malignant grin, displaying rows of crooked, rotting teeth.

He awoke in a cold sweat, unable to dismiss the feeling that something was chasing him down, something that would not rest until it had devoured him completely.

Author's Notes

1. "Anthem" has been nominated for Best SS/HG Angst at The New Library! I thank everyone who nominated and seconded this story. It's an incredible, unexpected honor. Please stop by TNL to take a look at the nominations. There's a lot of great new talent represented. You can check it out here: http://community.livejournal.com/tnl_awards/

2. I haven't the words to adequately thank my beta, Angel Mischa. Regardless of her work at TNL and a slew of RL obligations, she got this chapter back to me with astounding swiftness.

3. To those of you who have read this story, reviewed it, and added it to your favourites...thank you. I am so thrilled that you've taken the time with my story when there are so many great ones out there.

Potent Circumstances

Chapter 10 of 11

Despite the nagging worries of how to care for Snape, life presses on. Hermione meets with the Minister, and two people are unpleasantly surprised with the outcome.



Potent Circumstances

He had done it. He had sent her away. Hermione walked slowly and numbly down the hall.

She had outworn her welcome at last. She scraped against the cold, hard edge of his voice as she recounted their exchange. Embarrassment flamed up within her, fueling an abrupt urge to escape.

She panted as she flew, floor by floor, to the entrance hall.

"Miss Granger, a word?"

Hermione whipped around to face Maire, her heart banging wildly against her ribs.

She advanced angrily.

"That-that-*decision* the Board reached was a load of nonsense!" she shouted. "I'll bet the real reason they're throwing him out is because of those articles. Somebody here violated his confidentiality very publicly, and now he's miraculously cured?"

"I haven't noticed Healer Millar here in a while," Hermione went on. "I suppose St. Mungo's would like to wash their hands of the rumors before they begin. And now they're sending Snape on his way, too. There's no way they could give him a clean bill of health in his state. They just don't want the publicity, and *you know it!*" Hermione cried.

Maire smiled wryly. "I imagine that mind of yours was both a joy and a trial for your teachers, Miss Granger," she said.

"Tell me I'm wrong!" Hermione challenged belligerently. "Just tell me I'm wrong, Maire!"

Maire shook her head. "Duty requires me to obey the Board, Miss Granger," she said quietly, "and decency demands that I speak the truth. I shall hold my tongue in this instance."

Hermione crossed her arms and drew up her shoulders. She knew that she should have long ago shed the illusion of childhood, the myth that there were competent, benevolent adults who could manage the world more wisely than she. She should have lost that illusion at age twelve when she realized that Dumbledore had blithely set Harry on his perilous quest with his father's Invisibility Cloak and an anonymous note. Nevertheless, it seemed that Maire's words had wrenched from her a final, vital shred

of her childhood.

"There are avenues for protesting such decisions, Miss Granger," Maire said softly, "but eventually, Mr. Snape will have to leave. He must have a place to live."

Hermione brought her hands up over her face. "I know," she murmured. "I know. I just don't know what to do about it. And," she whispered, "I don't think he ever wants to see me again."

Maire drew close to Hermione and put a comforting arm around her shoulders. "Did he say that, Miss Granger?" she asked. "I didn't hear him say anything of the sort."

Hermione sniffed. "You heard him. He told me to leave."

"He reminded you of an appointment you had," Maire corrected.

"He screamed at me!" Hermione countered indignantly.

Maire rubbed Hermione's arm soothingly. "Do you remember one of our first conversations, Miss Granger? I believe I told you Professor Snape had a lot of healing to do and that it wasn't all physical.

"Don't expect him to suddenly become happy with his circumstances. He has some daunting hurdles to clear. No one could face such obstacles with perfect equanimity."

Fragments of her conversations with Maire flitted through her memory: *"Even if his wounds were miraculously healed, he would still suffer the enormity of what he has experienced."*

Enormity.

The word that Hermione had so assiduously avoided slipped over her like a spider web, some loathsome, clinging thing she had walked through in the dark.

"Were you aware, Miss Granger, that all patients and their representatives have the right to request a copy of grievance procedures from any member of St. Mungo's staff? Any staff member at all." Maire's eyes sparkled.

Hermione grinned shrewdly. "So I suppose I could request them of you?" She almost giggled at the Healer's exaggerated, sideways glance. "Healer Glamorgan, may I please have a copy of St. Mungo's grievance procedures?"

Maire reached into her lime green robes. "If you must, Miss Granger," she said, feigning an air of resignation as she withdrew a sheaf of parchments. "The rules are the rules."

Hermione felt a surge of genuine fondness for Maire. "Thank you so much!" she breathed gratefully.

"Let's not have you late for your appointment," Maire responded with a wink. She turned on her heel and strode down the hall, full of dignity and quiet authority.

Hermione glanced at her watch: 9:55. Even if she Apparated straight to Shacklebolt's office, she'd have a hard time making the appointment on time. She took off at a run and did not stop until she burst through the exit doors.

She was breathless when she reached the Ministry's phone booth and procured her visitor's badge. She tapped her foot impatiently as the lift made its way down into the Ministry's bowels, and when the door of the lift opened on Shacklebolt's floor, she pushed through a crowd of irate witches and wizards and ran down the hall.

She sighed in relief when she reached an imposing mahogany door with the words "Kingsley Shacklebolt: Minister of Magic" engraved upon it in gold. She straightened her robes and ran a hand through her hair and pushed the heavy door open.

"Welcome, Miss Granger!" Kingsley Shacklebolt boomed. Hermione glanced around the office as she caught her breath.

Rita Skeeter sat smugly in a leather wingback chair. A haughty, well-dressed wizard sat on her right.

The wizard's eyes raked over Hermione appraisingly, and his lip curled with the slightest show of contempt. "I really must protest," he said. "Miss Granger should have enough respect for the new Minister and for these proceedings to arrive punctually."

Shacklebolt looked mildly amused. "Miss Granger is right on time, Mr. Smythwyck," he said with a glance towards the clock. "She was instructed to arrive at 10:17, not five minutes before." He faced the wizard directly. "And the new Minister is quite capable of demanding respect on his own."

Smythwyck's eyes widened imperceptibly. Hermione wondered if he had manipulated the previous Ministers more easily.

"Do sit, Miss Granger," Kingsley instructed. With a wave of his wand, another leather chair appeared. Hermione sat nervously.

"We are here today to investigate recent breaches in security protocol concerning Severus Snape. Present at this hearing are Hermione Jane Granger, caregiver to Severus Snape and guardian ad litem to the same, Rita Skeeter, reporter for the *Daily Prophet*, and Susurrus Smythwyck, publisher of the *Daily Prophet*.

"Due to the glut of cases facing the Winzengamot, as well as the immediacy of the threat the Ministry has perceived to Mr. Snape's security, I have called this hearing at my own discretion," began Shacklebolt.

"We are not here today to try anyone for a crime. You should all know, however, that what is disclosed in this hearing may be used to bring criminal charges, and the decisions reached in this hearing are binding."

To Hermione's annoyance, Rita Skeeter smirked openly at Shacklebolt and rolled her eyes. The Minister smiled imperturbably.

"The Ministry has also requested the presence of Mr. Abelard Tiffington," said Kingsley, nodding towards a tall, serious, middle-aged man to his left, "head of the Animagus Registration Department." Behind those garishly bejeweled spectacles, Rita Skeeter's eyes grew round. She hiccupped suddenly, and Hermione coughed to camouflage the laughter that spontaneously bubbled out of her.

Susurrus Smythwyck raised an elegantly manicured hand. "Respectfully, Minister, might you tell me how the *Daily Prophet* and this esteemed reporter," he began, gesturing towards Skeeter, "could possibly be connected to Severus Snape's security?"

"I thank you for bringing us directly to the heart of the matter, Mr. Smythwyck," Kingsley replied with a smile. "One of Miss Skeeter's articles was published in the *Daily Prophet* on Sunday, 25 July. The article made mention of Professor Severus Snape's role in the war."

"The *Daily Prophet* is in the business of reporting news and human interest stories. Mr. Snape's unique career fell under both of those categories," Mr. Smythwyck parried smoothly.

"I am aware of that," Kingsley replied. "However, the article mentioned Snape's convalescence at St. Mungo's. This information was supposed to have been kept under strict confidentiality, and its disclosure led to dire threats being sent to Mr. Snape.

"Take, for example, this letter." Kingsley opened a large dossier and withdrew a tattered letter. "Dear Professor Snape," he read aloud, "I am very glad that someone was

there to save your life the night that Voldemort went down..."

Mr. Smythwyck gestured impatiently. "I thought these letters contained threats. These sentiments sound more like a friendly greeting."

Kingsley smiled indulgently. "The writer goes on to clarify his sentiments: '... because I will be waiting outside of St. Mungo's to kill you with my bare hands, you sick, Death Eater bastard.'"

Hermione glanced quickly at Mr. Smythwyck and Rita Skeeter. Their disaffected stares drew a cold, hard fury up from somewhere deep within her. She wished bitterly that they could experience, for a single day, the torments that Professor Snape battled constantly. The two of them had lived comfortably during a war that had destroyed the innocent and the principled, while Severus Snape had been abandoned to his solitary anguish.

Smythwyck's voice broke into Hermione's ruminations. "That is certainly troubling, Minister, but should you not be investigating the writers of these letters? I fail to see how the *Prophet* could be held responsible for such threats."

For once, Shackbolt did not smile. "The Ministry has taken these threats quite seriously. So seriously, in fact, that we have already arrested three different people suspected of plotting to harm Mr. Snape. You may confidently leave the apprehension and prosecution of suspects to the Aurors and the Wizengamot, Mr. Smythwyck. We are here today to talk about you."

A faint stroke of scarlet brightened Mr. Smythwyck's pallid cheeks. "Severus Snape was a polarizing figure during the war. People were curious about him. The *Prophet* fed their curiosity. We provide a service, Minister," he said in clipped tones. "I don't see why Mr. Snape should be held in higher regard than any other veteran of this war."

Vultures perform a service too, Hermione thought viciously, but no one pays them.

"Severus Snape played a vital role in bringing down Lord Voldemort," Kingsley replied calmly. "As you pointed out, the public's view of him is polarized. We are obliged to protect him to the fullest extent."

"Severus Snape also murdered Albus Dumbledore," spat Smythwyck. "It's interesting copy."

Hermione erupted. "Professor Snape was cleared of all wrongdoing by the Ministry. And human suffering should never be reduced to 'interesting copy'!" she cried.

Rita Skeeter smirked and rolled her eyes. Smythwyck regarded her distantly, as if she were an annoying but ultimately harmless insect.

Kingsley smiled at her. "As Miss Granger pointed out, Mr. Snape was cleared of wrongdoing."

"The Ministry has worked to insure that all veterans of this war, *regardless of the side they took*, receive adequate protection. Even those we know to have served Voldemort. Until verdicts have been reached, we are obligated to prevent vigilantism from running rampant."

"A verdict was never reached in this case, Minister," Smythwyck said. His eyes glittered, and his lips curved upward. To Hermione, he resembled nothing so much as a giant, predatory bird that had just spied its prey. "A verdict was never reached because the Wizengamot never held a trial. You took it upon yourself to pardon Severus Snape without the benefit of a trial, on evidence the public knows little about. The public is very interested in Mr. Snape's case, Minister. They are curious about how he eluded a trial yet again."

"Not even the most *vigilant* of publishers," Kingsley said smilingly, "or reporters can know all the facts at any given time, Mr. Smythwyck."

Rita Skeeter looked up from inspecting her gaudily polished nails. "Oh, please. If this is about that drivel that Potter spouted, that's nothing but hearsay. It would never have stood in a court of law, and that poor child has a different hysteria every other day."

Hermione leapt from her chair. "You've always been after Harry, you horrid woman!" she shouted. "You've hounded him since he was fourteen years old. You haven't faced half of the horrors he has, and you still dare pass judgment on him, or on Snape?"

"Oh, yes, the poor Potter orphan," Skeeter replied in honeyed tones. "That young man has suffered atrocities that few of us could understand. No wonder he's somewhat...labile, shall we say?"

Hermione had the jarring thought that Rita Skeeter was the human embodiment of Muggle antifreeze: seemingly sweet and ultimately deadly. She grinned involuntarily as she realized that Skeeter's trademark quill was precisely the right color.

Skeeter's eyes hardened as she stared defiantly at Hermione.

"Miss Granger, Miss Skeeter," Kingsley admonished, "you are not to address each other. If you have evidence germane to this hearing, you are to address me respectfully."

"Yes, Minister," Hermione mumbled.

"Of course, Minister," Rita Skeeter chirped.

"Minister, we have yet to see how the *Prophet* brought any of this about. We have an *obligation* to provide information to the public. That is all we have done. Can we not, as you say, leave Mr. Snape's protection in the capable hands of the Aurors?" Smythwyck drawled.

"Very well, Mr. Smythwyck," Kingsley said, fixing his authoritative gaze upon the publisher. "Barring any further interruptions, I shall get directly to the very heart of the matter. Which, as far as you are concerned, is the evidence that the *Daily Prophet* obtained Mr. Snape's personal information...most particularly his location and his physical state...through illegal means."

"If that were the case," Mr. Smythwyck retorted angrily, "then perhaps a trial...with the option of legal counsel...would be a better avenue than a private hearing at the new Minister's discretion."

"You may have your day in court, if you so desire. I will warn you, though: disruptive or disrespectful behavior during these proceedings will earn you the same charge of contempt that it would in a full trial before the Wizengamot."

Mr. Smythwyck sat back in his chair, tight-lipped and pink-faced.

"Moving on now," Kingsley continued. "We have evidence that someone acting upon the *Prophet's* behest used illegal means to influence a St. Mungo's employee to breach Mr. Snape's protocol."

"And where, Minister, is this evidence?" Mr. Smythwyck insisted.

Shackbolt smiled and picked up a small, brass, trumpet-shaped device on his desk and spoke into it. "Delilah, please send in our guest."

"Yes, sir, Minister!" Delilah tilted invisibly from the trumpet.

Hermione smiled triumphantly when Healer Millar shuffled in. Her grey curls were wildly disheveled. Her eyes lit briefly upon Hermione, who stared back at her savagely.

"This is Calliope Millar. Mrs. Millar, please take a seat." Kingsley Summoned another chair, and Calliope sat nervously.

"Mrs. Millar, what is your profession?" Shacklebolt asked politely.

"I used to be a Healer," Calliope said bitterly, "at St. Mungo's." She glared pointedly at Rita Skeeter.

"Did you provide care for Severus Snape?" Shacklebolt inquired.

"Yes," she said stiffly.

"Are you still employed by St. Mungo's?"

"No," she quivered. A tear glistened in the old woman's eye.

"Why not?" Shacklebolt continued.

"I was fired," she mumbled.

"Why?"

"The Board believed I had violated the terms of my contract."

"How?" Kingsley prodded.

"By giving Mr. Snape's private information to Rita Skeeter."

"Had you done so?"

Calliope looked down shamefacedly. She sat quietly for a moment before she quietly responded, "Yes."

Dumbfounded, Hermione watched as Rita Skeeter's self-satisfied smirk expanded. She imagined the unscrupulous reporter plying Calliope with flattery, luring her to break one of the Healing profession's most sacrosanct codes. Skeeter had exploited the pitiful old gossip's weaknesses, never allowing her to believe that she might one day sit in dishonor as Skeeter looked on gleefully.

"So Millar provided Snape's information to Rita," Smythwyck said dismissively. "She broke her professional code, but neither Rita nor the *Prophet* is bound to that code. *We've* broken no law."

"If you interrupt these proceedings again, you will be charged with contempt, Mr. Smythwyck," Shacklebolt admonished.

"Mrs. Millar, did you contact Miss Skeeter with this information?" he went on.

"No!" Calliope shouted. "She approached me!" She glared venomously at Rita Skeeter, who stared back smugly.

"How did she approach you, Mrs. Millar?"

Calliope pursed her lips and looked down.

"Healer Millar?" Shacklebolt urged.

"She asked me if I was one of Mr. Snape's Healers," she whispered, "and I said yes before I even thought."

"Then, she asked me if I could give her any details about 'im: who was visitin' 'im, if he said anything, what 'is condition was." Her voice broke. "And I said no. I said that was confidential information."

She looked up with glistening eyes. "Then, she said she understood. She said she *appreciated* my professionalism," Calliope spat. "She asked if she could have me to tea and interview me about my life as a Healer." She sniffled loudly, and Shacklebolt passed her a handkerchief.

"I thought it'd be nice to be in the paper, so I went to her house for tea. She started off askin' me questions about my life, just general questions. Then she said that I was such an ethical person, such a professional Healer, and..." Her words were swallowed in sobs.

"Go on, Mrs. Millar," Shacklebolt encouraged her gently.

Calliope shut her eyes tightly, wringing out the tears that trembled upon her lashes. "And she asked me if I had ever broken any of the rules. She asked if I'd ever given a patient the wrong potion and then lied about it, or if I'd ever left anything off of a chart. And..." her voice rose, "...and..."

"Yes, Mrs. Millar?"

"And I said yes!" her voice crescendoed. "I couldn't stop talking. I told her everything she asked, and I couldn't c-con-t-t-trol myself!" She covered her face with her hands and wailed unabashedly.

"Minister, this... *woman*," Smythwyck interrupted disdainfully, "is clearly incapable of restraining her tongue. It is Rita's duty to get the facts, and Mrs. Millar complied freely."

"I did not!" Calliope snapped. "I would've never given that information away freely. She dosed my tea with Veritaserum, I know she did!"

Smythwyck stared aloofly at Calliope. "Your word against hers, *Healer* Miller," he sneered.

"Mr. Smythwyck, you have been warned. Please see my secretary when we are finished. She will apprise you of your fine," Shacklebolt said sternly.

Smythwyck's face turned a mottled purple as he bit back his protest. Shacklebolt met the man's glare with a distant, unruffled firmness before turning towards Calliope once more.

"Mrs. Millar, was that the last of your dealings with Rita Skeeter?" he asked.

"No," she whispered hoarsely. "She met me outside of St. Mungo's one day and showed me this parchment she had with everything I'd told her on it. She said she'd take it to the Board if I didn't give her the information she wanted on Mr. Snape."

"Did you?"

"Yes," Calliope murmured, "but that wasn't all. She showed me how she could turn into a beetle and told me she wanted to be there the next time I was on duty for Mr. Snape. She said she'd hide in my hair." She pointed a shaky finger at Hermione. "Ask Miss Granger there; she figured it out!"

Hermione snickered inwardly as she recalled the day she had so gleefully terrorized Calliope with insinuations about beetles. The exultant feeling was tempered, however,

by the memory of Snape huddling, weak and humiliated, against the wall at St. Mungo's that day. Anger at Calliope's treatment of Snape tugged her one way while pity for the broken old woman before her tugged another.

"Thank you for your time and your honesty, Mrs. Millar," Shacklebolt said politely. "You are dismissed now. Delilah will assist you on your way to the Aurory." Calliope stood and stared furiously at Rita Skeeter.

"Mrs. Millar?" the Minister called. "The Aurors are waiting for your statement." Calliope glanced up defiantly at Shacklebolt.

"Delilah!" Shacklebolt called into his trumpet. "Please come and escort Mrs. Millar to the Auror's Office."

A plump, dark-haired young woman in well-tailored robes entered through a side door. "Come with me, Mrs. Millar," she said gently.

Calliope stared at Delilah disappointedly. She glowered once more at Rita Skeeter before reluctantly shuffling out the door.

"Miss Granger? Can you corroborate Mrs. Millar's statement?" An undercurrent of amusement rippled in Shacklebolt's eyes.

"No," Hermione said. "Not strictly speaking, although I had guessed as much."

Rita Skeeter laughed and clapped her hands. "Little Miss Perfect can't even match her story! You have nothing on me, Kingsley!" she crowed.

Shacklebolt grinned. "I don't believe I've ever given you permission to use my first name, Miss Skeeter," he replied. "You may see Delilah at the end of this meeting. She will inform you of your fine."

"But-wha-but-" Skeeter sputtered.

"Contempt, Miss Skeeter," Shacklebolt said helpfully. "You were warned. Now, Miss Granger, do you have any information that would support Mrs. Millar's rather extravagant statement?" He looked at Hermione pointedly.

"Yes," Hermione said. "I discovered that Rita Skeeter is an unregistered Animagus about four years ago, during the last Triwizard Tournament. Right before Voldemort came back to full power."

"How did you come about this information?" Shacklebolt queried.

Hermione tugged nervously on her sleeve. "Well, nobody could figure out how the *Daily Prophet* was getting all the information they were embellishing about me and Harry before the Tournament. This horrid beetle kept turning up everywhere we went," she said disgustedly, "and I put one and two together."

"Did you ever find proof to support your guess?"

From the corner of her eye, Hermione watched Rita Skeeter blanch and shift slightly in her seat. "Yes," she answered confidently. She sat up straight and folded her hands in her lap, resisting the temptation to stare Rita down.

"I put her in a jar...with adequate ventilation and nourishment! And I kept her until she would admit it."

Kingsley peered at her intently. "How long did that take, Miss Granger?" he asked. Hermione could see the phantom of a smile at the corners of his lips.

She cleared her throat. "The better part of a month," she squeaked.

"Can you describe Miss Skeeter's supposed Animagus form?"

"Yes."

"Please record this, Mr. Tiffington," Shacklebolt commanded. The thin man on his left smiled for the first time. He produced a quill and parchment and eagerly awaited Hermione's words.

"She is a large beetle, about six centimeters in diameter, and she has yellowish-green marking around her eyes. They rather resemble her glasses," Hermione answered.

Shacklebolt looked at Rita Skeeter. "Is this true, Miss Skeeter?" he asked. "I should warn you, there is a penalty for perjuring yourself during these proceedings," he interposed as she made to respond. "And ascertaining perjury is a perfectly legal use of Veritaserum."

The last vestiges of arrogance drained from Skeeter's face. She swallowed hard. "Yes," she squawked.

"Are you getting this down, Tiffington?" Shacklebolt inquired.

"Yes, sir!" the man replied enthusiastically, causing the flap of skin under his chin...the only excess of flesh evident on his bony frame...to quiver comically. His quill worked its frenzied way across the parchment.

"You will see Mr. Tiffington before you leave today to determine the fines you have accrued since your first transfiguration," Shacklebolt informed the reporter. "He will have an Auror on hand to administer Veritaserum so that we may be assured of levying the proper fee." Rita Skeeter stared balefully at Tiffington.

"You will be happy to know, Miss Skeeter, that recent reforms have abolished the customary prison-term for failing to register as an Animagus," Shacklebolt said cheerfully. "You will dodge a stay in Azkaban. Provided, of course, that you pay your fines."

"But she, she, *she*," Skeeter blustered, jumping to her feet and gesticulating towards Hermione, "she imprisoned me! And she blackmailed me! That was false imprisonment!" she howled.

Hermione's stomach flipped over. She clasped her sweaty, clammy palms together in her lap as she awaited Shacklebolt's word.

"You have an amazing knowledge of the law, Miss Skeeter," Shacklebolt commented smilingly. Hermione's nails dug into the numb flesh of her hands.

"So I am rather surprised that you did not realize that Miss Granger is not accountable for any crimes she committed as a juvenile."

Hermione exhaled and shook in relief. Rita Skeeter's eyes goggled and her mouth hung agape.

"You are also under suspicion, Miss Skeeter, of using Veritaserum, which is a controlled substance, without legal clearance to do so," Shacklebolt continued. "I believe you admitted to using it on Bathilda Bagshot in an interview with the *Prophet* last year."

"That's not a legally binding statement!" Skeeter cried anxiously.

"I suppose not, but it does cast a pall of doubt over your actions. And, Mrs. Millar has accused you of using Veritaserum on her without her consent. I believe she has just given a sworn statement to the Aurors to that effect," Shacklebolt pressed on. "Since this is a crime, you will be tried before the Wizengamot if formal charges are made."

The blood drained from Rita Skeeter's face. Her attire took on an even more lurid hue against her ashen complexion.

Shacklebolt addressed Susurrus Smythwyck next. "As Miss Skeeter's employer, you stood to gain from her illegal Animagus status and her use of Veritaserum," he said coldly. "What did you know about this, Smythwyck?"

Smythwyck had visibly distanced himself from the distraught reporter, whom he now appraised scornfully.

"I assure you, Minister," he answered coolly, "The *Daily Prophet* does not endorse the acquisition of information through illegal means. Furthermore, Miss Skeeter is a freelance journalist. We are not, properly speaking, her employer." Rita Skeeter gawked at Smythwyck, her mouth opening and closing dumbly.

"Perhaps. That will be investigated," Shacklebolt answered back. "The *Daily Prophet* has enjoyed a long and privileged relationship with the Ministry of Magic. Under the circumstances, I find it necessary to reevaluate that relationship. Until we have investigated these matters to the fullest extent, your paper will no longer have the use of an expanded press pass at Ministry events."

Mr. Smythwyck stood angrily. "Your countrymen would find it interesting, no doubt, Shacklebolt," he said sharply, "that you intend to curtail freedom of information."

"Nothing prevents you from telling them so, Smythwyck," Shacklebolt returned smoothly. "I seem to recall, though, that your paper profited from the stranglehold the last regime placed upon the press. I am sure there are those who would remind our countrymen of that."

"You would *dare* taint the public's impression of my publication, Kingsley?" Smythwyck bit back icily.

"Not I," Shacklebolt chuckled. "There are publishers who will no doubt enjoy conveying that information in the new climate of freedom. You should stand down now, Smythwyck, if you would avoid accruing further fines."

"I believe that concludes our business here. Mr. Smythwyck, Miss Skeeter, please see Delilah on your way out. She will inform you of your fines for contempt. Miss Skeeter, please see Mr. Tiffington downstairs afterwards. The Aurors will soon contact you regarding the Veritaserum allegations. You are not to leave the country before then. I highly recommend setting your affairs in order."

Shacklebolt stood and looked at the people gathered before him. Hermione admired the ease with which he wore his authority. "You are dismissed!" he proclaimed. "Do have a nice day. Oh, Miss Skeeter, Mr. Smythwyck, Delilah's office is just through that door."

Rita Skeeter placed a quaking hand on Smythwyck's arm. "Susurrus..." she croaked brokenly. Smythwyck looked down on her coldly. He peeled her hand off of his arm, then pivoted sharply and exited. Clearly stung, Rita stared after him before she gathered herself and drifted out the door.

Hermione remained standing, dizzy from the pull of wildly disparate emotions. A newfound pity for Calliope, her relief at Shacklebolt's proclamation of her innocence, and her rather vicious pleasure at Smythwyck's and Skeeter's comeuppance vied with each other for dominance. She wondered what Snape would have said if he had been present and was immediately thankful that he had not had to hear his character dissected so carelessly.

Her reverie dissipated at the sound of Shacklebolt's deep, rumbling voice. "Miss Granger? Did you need something?"

She stared into the Minister's smiling face. "Professor Snape..." she murmured, "that letter that you read... it wasn't one of the ones I gave you."

"No," said Shacklebolt. "We intercepted that one the day we began monitoring his mail."

"It was really horrible," she whispered.

"Yes, it was."

"What's going to happen to him?" she asked.

"We are going to protect him, Miss Granger," Shacklebolt reassured her. He turned to his desk and shouldered his traveling cloak. Realizing that he was about to dismiss her, Hermione stepped towards him hastily.

"There is another thing," she said hurriedly. "I need to find out where Professor Snape lived when he wasn't at Hogwarts. He's being released, and he won't go back to Hogwarts or stay with Harry. There's no record of his address at St. Mungo's."

"Severus was always rather secretive on that point," Shacklebolt conceded. "I will have the matter investigated. In the meantime, I suggest you speak with Minerva McGonagall. She will have access to his employment records at Hogwarts. Wherever he goes, he will have every protection the Ministry can provide."

"Oh, right," Hermione said dazedly. "Right!" She felt as if the sun had broken through a dark, dense cloud in her mind.

"Thank you, Minister!" she cried, shaking his hand gratefully.

"I believe I gave *you* permission to use my first name, Miss Granger," Shacklebolt laughed.

Hermione smile shyly. "Thank you, Kingsley," she said awkwardly. "I suppose you should call me Hermione, then."

"Very well, Hermione. Enjoy what is left of your day. Please don't try to apprehend any unregistered Animagi on your way to lunch."

The laughter she shared with Shacklebolt reassured her. It seemed that something had been restored to her world, or perhaps something had been removed. She felt freer and lighter than she had in months as she made her way out of his office.

The stately mahogany door thudded behind her, and she stood alone in the vast hall. With a start she realized that this was the first time she had been inside the Ministry of Magic on legitimate business, the first time she would be leaving triumphant and unscathed. A chill spread over her body. She fled hastily down the hall.

A/N

I am extremely lucky to have the talented Angel Mischa as my beta. She has been a thoughtful and thorough beta, and I've enjoyed working with her enormously.

Thanks to all of you who have read and reviewed or added Anthem to your favorites. Your support has been really, really wonderful.

Thanks to everyone who nominated/seconded Anthem at TNL! I still can't believe it. Thanks so much!

Most Oft Where Most It Promises

Chapter 11 of 11

Hermione has a charming lunch. Ron has big news. Severus has physical therapy with a side of nightmares.

Most Oft Where Most It Promises

Hermione almost fell out of the phone booth. She choked, feeling as if she had just broken the surface of a deep, airless ocean. The trip to the Ministry had brought back many memories, none of them cheerful. *We were only children, she thought. We should not have been left to fight an adult's war. We should have been protected by the people we trusted. We were only children. We were only children...*

She sprinted into the relative safety of an abandoned alleyway and Disapparated, grateful to put some distance between herself and the Ministry.

The Leaky Cauldron teemed with witches and wizards who had lately decided that life, in and of itself, was cause for celebration. Although Hermione had recently come to dread crowds, she found the laughter and noise of conversation a welcome relief from the stately, menacing quiet of the Ministry.

"Oy, Hermione!"

Hermione peered through the crowd until she saw Ron's beaming face. She squeezed and pushed her way through the crowd until she reached him. As his face came into clearer focus, she could see the uncertainty in his eyes. She could tell he was trying to read her, trying to find in her demeanor some sign of how he should greet her. His perplexity grieved her. She regretted the mixed signals she had given him, but her emotions were as baffling to her as they were to him. She recalled the word Rita Skeeter had used against Harry...*labile*. Hermione winced. It might as easily describe her.

Ron looked surprised when she stepped closer and embraced him. His surprise melted into relief, though, and he wrapped his arms around her tightly. For a golden moment, they were all that they should have been: two old friends who had endured unspeakable trials together and who had finally found in each other an unshakeable love.

"Are you all right?" Ron asked. "You looked pale and shaky when I first saw you."

"I just left the Ministry." Hermione pulled back slightly and looked up at Ron. His eyes radiated concern.

"That hearing about Snape?" he asked.

"That's the one." Her indignation flared in her voice.

"What happened?"

"What if I tell you over lunch?" Hermione asked, forcing a smile.

Ron grinned back at her. "I like conversations over lunch."

"Would you mind terribly if we ate outside?" she asked. "After dividing my morning between St. Mungo's and the Ministry, I would prefer some fresh air."

Ron stepped back and looked at her, frowning a little the way Molly used to do when she looked the children over at the beginning of Christmas or summer holidays.

"I think you need some fresh air," Ron said gravely. "You're really pale these days, 'Mione."

"I suppose sunbathing opportunities are rare at St. Mungo's," Hermione joked.

Ron's frown deepened. "That's just it, Hermione. I mean, do you really have to be looking after Snape all the time? He has Healers..."

Hermione's resentful glare effectively silenced the rest of Ron's thoughts on the subject.

"Sorry," he grumbled. Hermione suspected that he regretted activating her outrage more than he regretted slighting Snape, but she held her tongue as they maneuvered through the Leaky Cauldron.

It was a relief to step through the wall and join the bustling energy of Diagon Alley. Ron's hand tentatively sought out hers. She twined her fingers through his, noticing the relief that softened the lines of his face.

They made their way down the alley in aimless serenity, all purpose cast aside as they savored the comfort of each other.

By the time Ron's hunger had reasserted itself, they had almost reached the corner of Knockturn Alley. They had wandered companionably, in uncommon disregard of the thinning crowds or the seedy surroundings. The little burst of post-war enterprise had not expanded this far down the alley. Most of the shops remained forlorn and shuttered, and if the surge of nascent businesses at their backs had seemed vulgar in the wake of the war, this decrepitude was unnerving.

"Let's go," Ron said gruffly. He turned swiftly, and had begun to steer her back into the crowd when a burst of yellow caught Hermione's eye.

A scattering of tables capped with yellow umbrellas broke through the dilapidation and disrepair, like desert flowers blooming amongst stone. A cheery yellow and white striped awning flapped in the breeze, the words "Au Pêché Mignon" blazoned across the stripes in red. Its merry little façade seemed to be an act of defiance against the dereliction that surrounded it. It was a spark of life in the midst of decay, and Hermione was immediately drawn towards it.

"Look, Ron," she said excitedly, tugging on his arm. "Let's try it. Please?" She looked up at him hopefully. Ron eyed the storefront doubtfully.

"Please?" Hermione repeated.

He relented with wordless reluctance. Hermione did not fail to notice the apparently casual way he slipped his hand in his pocket, no doubt to grip his wand.

The door of the shop opened as they walked towards it, allowing the enticing aroma of baking pastries to waft through the street. Ron's face brightened a little.

"Say, Hermione, what does "Aw Peach Mig-Non" mean, anyway?" he asked.

Hermione choked back a chuckle. "It's French for 'a little sin', the sin usually being of the victimless variety. The sin of gluttony, for example," she said, looking at Ron sideways.

"One of my all time favorites," Ron laughed.

The interior of the café was just as cheerful as the façade, with yellow tablecloths and vases of red poppies. A glass case showcased a delectable array of offerings; airy meringues, buttery croissants, and rustic tarts almost begged to be eaten.

The comforting ambience of the café drove all thoughts of outdoor dining out of Hermione's mind. Together, she and Ron drifted to a table in the rear, which was framed by a tall, arched window. Hermione peered through the glass into a cobble-paved courtyard, abloom with roses and flutterby bushes. A stone fountain bubbled in the center; Hermione could just barely hear its calming gurgle.

Menus appeared spontaneously as they sat, as did water glasses, a basket of bread, and dishes of olive oil and butter. Hermione felt the stirrings of appetite for the first time since she had come down from Gryffindor tower days after the Final Battle.

"Umm," Ron grunted through a mouth full of bread. "This place is brilliant."

Hermione grinned. Ron usually dismissed all French food as "fussy." She pondered the ease of their camaraderie...uncharacteristic, of late...and it seemed that a bright ray of optimism had cast its light over everything around them. He looked up from his menu and caught Hermione's smile. Seeing the warmth and happiness in his eyes, Hermione was suddenly reminded of everything that had ever drawn her to Ron. She reached across the table and took his hand.

A shadow fell over them. Hermione turned and found a pretty, dark-haired woman with placid features standing patiently.

"Welcome to Au Pêché Mignon," the woman said softly. "My name is Mignon. Shall I assist you in making a selection?"

Hermione's stomach rumbled. "I would actually like to go ahead and order," she replied hungrily.

"So would I," Ron murmured.

"Of course," Mignon answered.

Hermione ordered first. "I would like the leek tart with carrot soup and wild-yeast bread."

Mignon nodded and turned towards Ron.

"I'll have chicken pie and potato soup."

Hermione looked at the menu in puzzlement. She could find no mention of chicken pie, but Mignon simply took Ron's order serenely. She wondered if the menus were charmed to appeal to individual customers.

Their food arrived within minutes. Enticing, aromatic tendrils of steam curled upwards from the gorgeously presented plates, and Hermione felt a deep sense of satisfaction as she ate. The tension that had gathered in her muscles slowly ebbed away. She and Ron ate in near silence, and it seemed that nothing could be better than eating a delicious meal with the boy...no, the *man*...that one loved.

Ron broke the silence first. "So, how did things go with Kingsley today?"

Hermione rolled her eyes, hesitant to leave the comfortable bubble of satiety that had surrounded her so briefly.

"Rather well, actually," she replied, and immediately felt a flame of righteous satisfaction leap in her belly. "You would not believe..."

Ron listened intently as she recounted Rita Skeeter's disgrace with triumphant relish.

"Serves the old bitch right," he muttered.

Hermione laughed, then sobered when she recalled the words of the threat against Snape.

Even Ron paled and flinched when she haltingly repeated the words Kingsley had read:

"I will be waiting to kill you with my bare hands, you sick, Death Eater bastard."

"That's grim," Ron said gravely. He frowned. "I don't like this at all, Hermione."

"I know!" she exclaimed. "To attack an injured, defenseless man, when he has already suffered so much for the cause..."

Ron shook his head impatiently. "Snape isn't a fluffy bunny, 'Mione, and he isn't a house-elf," he said. "I don't think he deserved that threat, no," he said, forestalling her protest, "but he was too intelligent to expect anything else. What I don't like is you being in the middle of this."

Hermione sat up indignantly.

"Don't," Ron said. "I don't know why you care so much what happens to Snape, but then, I never got the thing about the house-elves, either. You are the kind of person who cares about justice and fairness, and I love that about you."

Hermione stared at him, speechless. This was a new, more open side of Ron, and she was unsure of how she felt about it.

"Snape knew what he was getting into when he agreed to spy for Dumbledore, which is a hell of a lot more than you can say for Harry, or you, or me," Ron continued. A note of bitterness crept into his voice.

Hermione almost rose from her chair, a thousand recriminations ready on her tongue.

Ron leaned across the table and stared into her eyes. "I'm not saying he shouldn't be treated better, now, Hermione," he said, anticipating her response. "I just don't want you putting yourself between Snape and somebody else's wand. Promise me, Hermione, that you won't do that. I can't lose someone else I love. Not for something the Aurors can handle themselves. *Promise me.*"

Hermione sat back in her seat, stunned. Ron's argument had actually been intelligent and well stated. Suddenly, it did seem unfair of her to take such a disinterested view of her own safety. Ron cared for her, loved her. For his sake, she had to balance her own safety with Snape's.

She looked into Ron's earnest blue eyes. "I promise," she answered weakly. He took her hand in his and smiled.

"How about dessert?" he asked, grinning. Hermione laughed.

They continued laughing together over a crème brûlée and café au lait. Hermione felt that she could stay at Au Pêché Mignon forever, with its delicious food and comforting ambience. As she looked about, she recognized the complicated charm work that had gone into the décor, including the trompe l'oeil window and gurgling fountain that had drawn her to this table.

Ron didn't seem to be particularly eager to leave either, she noticed, but whereas she had become increasingly more relaxed throughout their meal, he had become more and more jittery.

Finally, when the check had been paid and he still made no move towards the door, Hermione could no longer let it go.

"Ron, are you all right?" she asked gently.

"Oh, yeah, I'm great," he said, the nervousness of his smile belying his protest.

Hermione eyed him curiously, considering whether she should press the issue. Just as she started to interrogate him further, a Ministry owl sailed through Au Pêché Mignon straight at Ron. He took the scroll with shaking hands and looked at it briefly.

"Here," he said, thrusting it into her hands. "It's for you."

"Ron, what on earth..."

"Just read it, Hermione," he said tightly. His face was a mask of ill-concealed tension.

Hermione nervously unrolled the scroll.

"Dear Mr. Weasley," she read aloud, "We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted into the Ministry of Magic's Auror Training program, pending the completion of your NEWTs. You will report to the Aurory on September 1, 1998."

Hermione looked up in astonishment. Ron breathed deeply and smiled.

"What is this, Ron?" Hermione asked.

"You read it; you know what it said," he answered obliquely.

"But you said you didn't want..."

"Yeah, but after we talked about it, I realized that I should give it a go. I shouldn't give up on my ambitions just because of the war," he reasoned. "Besides, I want you to know how seriously I take our relationship. I want you to know how important you are to me, Hermione."

Hermione felt the old guilt and ambivalence edging in through the peaceful bubble she had enjoyed so briefly.

"I am proud of you, Ron," she said. "Are you sure this is what you want, though?"

"Absolutely," he said with conviction. She could not escape the feeling that his conviction had more to do with their relationship than with Auror training, though. He had put too much stock in her judgment, much more than was warranted, given her unpredictable mood changes and insecurities.

"Thank you so much for visiting," Mignon said warmly as they rose to leave, and Hermione could not help but return the woman's gentle smile. She resolved to return and ask her about the intricate charms at work in the café.

They ambled out of Au Pêché Mignon and silently reentered the bustle of the alley.

"Hey, look!" Ron said excitedly.

Hermione looked up to see scores of owls sweeping through Diagon Alley with thick rolls of parchment. People huddled around a newsstand, the entire crowd abuzz with whispers and gasps. Ron and Hermione pushed through the crowd curiously.

"Hey, mate, let's have a look," Ron said, pushing a portly man aside as they reached the front of the crowd.

The man's feeble protest barely registered with Hermione. She gaped in amazement. Rita Skeeter's animated visage graced the front page of a special edition of the *Daily Prophet*. Her lower lip trembled, and a solitary tear trickled down her cheek.

Hermione read the headline aloud: *"Disgraced: Failure to Register as Animagus and Illicit Use of Veritaserum Cast Shadow Over Rita Skeeter's Brilliant Career."*

She and Ron looked at each other in amazement. She continued reading.

Rita Skeeter, former Daily Prophet reporter and author of a controversial biography on Albus Dumbledore, reported to Aurors this morning after damaging allegations were made against her. Skeeter had apparently been an unregistered Animagus for years, a fact that gave her an advantage over her subjects. She is also charged with using Veritaserum illegally. Skeeter herself has bragged about her use of Veritaserum on her interviewees, including Bathilda Bagshot, who assisted her with her research on Albus Dumbledore.

Daily Prophet editor Susurrus Smythwyck expressed shock and dismay at the formerly esteemed reporter's dizzying fall from grace:

"This is a terrible blow, both personally and professionally," says Smythwyck. "The Daily Prophet is committed to the principles of ethical journalism, and to find that someone you trusted has violated those principles... well, there just aren't adequate words. Suffice it to say that I would have put an end to Ms. Skeeter's work at the Prophet years ago had I known the lengths to which she would go for her information."

Hermione snorted. "He's just washing his hands. He probably encouraged her to do those things to begin with."

Ron looked at her sideways. "Bloody hell! You work fast, Hermione," he chuckled.

"Too bad she couldn't have taken him down with her," she retorted.

"Give it time. You'll get him one day. For now, though, Rita Skeeter is going to have a hell of a time finding work."

"That is a consolation on so many fronts," Hermione responded with savage delight.

They pushed back through the crowd and made their way towards the Leaky Cauldron. Between Rita Skeeter's public humiliation and the charming lunch at Au Pêché Mignon, Hermione felt a deep sense of gratification. When they passed Flourish and Blotts, they stopped and watched as workers dismantled displays of *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore* and stripped Rita Skeeter's publicity posters from the windows.

Hermione smiled with vicious satisfaction. "This day gets better and better," she said under her breath. Ron laughed and hugged her closer.

Severus reclined listlessly on his side as Maire massaged his aching legs. His therapy session had thoroughly exhausted and frustrated him. His right leg remained stiff, and the sessions had become more and more draining.

What energy he had he poured into a wordless litany of hatred: he hated Hermione Granger for taking him under her wing. He hated himself for depending upon her. He hated his circumscribed world at St. Mungo's, and he hated more the fact that he had no idea how he would live when he was wheeled out the door. He hated the way the clock seemed to slow when his bushy-headed, do-gooder of an ex-pupil was away. He despised the way he reacted to the sound of her footsteps like some kind of puppy.

He could not remember what it felt like to be fully human. Perhaps he never had known.

The hatred surged until it warmed his belly and ate away at his listlessness. "I suppose you are planning to rebuke me for chasing away my one hanger-on," he snapped at Maire, unable to refrain from picking at sore spot left by Miss Granger.

She calmly continued her task without looking at him.

"You are a grown man. Miss Granger, as young as she is, is a grown woman. Your friendship with her does not fall under my purview, nor do your manners. Or lack thereof." She wordlessly began a diagnostics spell and looked at him with a smirk.

"Friendship," he sneered, annoyed that she would not rise to the bait of remonstrating him. "Why do you let her in here?"

"Why do you not tell her that you find her presence objectionable? Or, if telling her tête-à-tête seems indelicate, why not simply restrict her from your visitors list?" Maire asked. He could hear the mirth in her voice, and it irritated him.

"Mr. Snape, Miss Granger means well. Regardless of her youth, which can lead her towards overbearing or impetuous behavior at times, she cares for you," Maire said briskly.

And you don't see anyone else lining up to see you, do you, old chap Severus finished bitterly in his head. He turned away, scowling.

"There you go. A good sulk is probably exactly what you need right now," Maire snipped. "All in all, I should think it the most productive plan of action."

Severus looked around at her in surprise.

"Impressive, Healer," he snapped. "I would never have guessed that you had such a wellspring of sarcasm within you."

"A propensity for sarcasm is what one might call an occupational hazard," she said smilingly. "Not unlike that faced by instructors, Professor."

Snape smiled despite himself. He would miss Maire's friendly banter when it was time to go. He pushed the realization away as quickly as it arrived.

Maire finished her diagnostics with a flourish of her wand. "You are doing better by degrees, Mr. Snape."

Slow and painful degrees, Severus thought spitefully. The apparent loss of his magic tormented him.

Maire laid a soothing hand on his arm. "It will get better, Mr. Snape. I promise."

Her promise seemed to be a safe hiding place for him. He turned his face and burrowed into the pillow, hoping that she would not see the tears that formed in his eyes. An echo of knowledge rang through the hollowness within him, telling him that no one had ever promised him anything, never anything that he could actually take comfort in.

Maire patted his arm. "You are understandably exhausted," she said softly. "Sleep, Mr. Snape. These obstacles are not as insurmountable as they seem."

You aren't the one bereft of both memory and magic, depending on a virtual stranger to stand upright the thought, but could not summon the bitterness forward. The hollow space inside seemed to grow, displacing everything except for a childish grief that he could not will away.

He was glad when Maire extinguished the lights around his bed and slipped through the curtains.

He wept soundlessly into his pillow. He was nothing but human detritus now, nothing but a bit of rubble left behind by a war. He hadn't the wherewithal to take care of himself in even very basic ways. In mere days, he would be homeless. These things alone, though, did not account for this strange and mournful vulnerability.

His growing awareness illuminated the empty spaces in his soul, giving him glimpses of how little he had known of warmth, or friendship, or promises made in good faith. He wondered what was locked in his lost memories, wondered if he was safer in its absence. If he had a home, he was not sure he wanted to go back there.

.

"Promise me you'll write."

"I promise, Ma!" Severus rolled his eyes.

"You can use the school owls. Just write 'Mrs. Snape, Spinner's End' on the envelope."

"I know."

A tantalizing flash of auburn captured his eye. Reflexively, he started forward to chase after it.

His mother's eyes narrowed, and she caught him by the arm.

"Don't forget who you are, Severus," she said sharply. He winced. The little bit of Yorkshire that had crept into her voice during his parents' marriage slipped away, leaving naked a cold, clipped, almost aristocratic tone, the way a scabbard might slip away from a coldly lethal blade. He had learned to fear her during these times.

"Don't forget where you come from, and don't forget what you are," she warned him. Her fingers dug into the flesh of his upper arm. He fought against himself to keep from running after the red haired girl.

"Promise me," she said more harshly, gripping him even tighter.

"I promise," he said solemnly, meaning it.

Mostly.

Then he was finally free of his mother, free to board the train. He saw the little girl again, her red hair bouncing behind her as she slipped through the crowd.

He pushed through the passengers, trying to catch up to her. Always, she was just beyond him.

It seemed that he had followed her down the length of the train. The compartments now were empty, save for him. Finally, he saw her. She sat in the last compartment on the train, looking out the window with her back toward him.

He opened his mouth to speak her name, but could not utter a word.

The wheels of the train screeched on the rails. The cars lurched to a halt. He turned to look toward the front of the train...they could not be at Hogwarts, yet...and when he turned back around, the red haired girl was gone.

He ran through the deserted train, desperate to find her. She would tell him everything, would make everything all right.

Like the train, the platform was deserted. He could see his breath in the night air. How had they arrived so quickly, and why was it so cold?

He walked to the edge of the lake and boarded one of the boats. His heart pounded as he floated towards the castle. He had to find her. All was lost without her.

He was finally within the castle, unsure of how he had moved from the boat to the Great Hall so effortlessly.

She sat at a long table. His heart pounded as she looked up at him with her clear, green eyes. Just as he neared her, however, she cut her eyes to the dais. He saw the Sorting Hat on its cushion.

He did not want to do this, not now, not when she was so near, not when he wanted to look into her eyes and take her hands.

Her eyes flicked between him and the hat, and he understood. She was making him choose. This was something he had to do, even though he dreaded it, even though it felt that he was walking to his death as he mounted the dais.

He reluctantly placed the tattered hat on his head. "Slytherin!" it cried, and it sounded like an execution order. To his dismay, the little girl dashed out of the hall.

Severus threw the hat off of his head and fled into the darkened castle. Though he could hear her footsteps, he could not see her, could not even get a glimpse. He wheezed as he ascended the stairs through the castle.

Finally, though, he saw her again, saw that same infuriating spark of her hair. She was opening a door, she was slipping through ...

He froze as the door closed in his face.

"No," he whispered. "No, please. Don't make me go in there."

He remembered his mother, her voice imperious, demanding a promise of him.

"Don't forget who you are. Promise me."

Heart sick, he pulled the door open and stepped out onto the Astronomy tower. Because it was required of him. Because he had *promised*.

A cloaked and hooded form leaned against the parapet.

"So good to see you, Severus." An eerie, high-pitched voice issued from the hood. "I've been waiting for you."

Severus stared in horror and revulsion as a thin, cadaverous hand stretched out from the cloak.

Terror and fury welled up within. His wand was suddenly in his hand, and the words felt so right on his tongue...

"Avada Kedavra!" he called, and he was darkly pleased when the cloaked thing toppled backwards off the battlement.

He rushed to the edge of the wall. As he looked, though, the twisting heap of black became a red-haired girl, with the waxing moon reflected in her glassy, unseeing green eyes.

"No!" Severus screamed.

He flew down the stairs, mindless of his own safety. He was finally outside, and he saw her lying on the ground, her arms and legs bent at odd angles.

He rushed to her side and took her cold hand in his. She was changed, though; it was now Miss Granger's brown eyes that stared heedlessly up into the night sky.

"Miss Granger! No! Hermione! Miss Granger!"

Someone wrestled with him, trying to tear him away, but he resisted. "Miss Granger!"

She turned to him suddenly, alarmingly. "It's me, Professor Snape."

"Miss Granger!"

"It's me."

The arms holding him tightened.

"No!"

He twisted, and the light changed. "Miss Granger!" he cried forlornly as he struggled.

"It's me, Professor Snape. I'm right here," a soothing voice cooed.

The arms holding him were her arms, her warm and very real arms. They were at St. Mungo's, not Hogwarts, and her eyes shone with vitality and concern.

He grasped at her hands and wept as she held him against her frail body.

"Everything will work itself out," she whispered. "Everything will be all right. I promise."

I promise.

He clung to her, clung to her promise, with child-like trust, until his grief exhausted itself.

AN: Many thanks to the awesome-tastic Lariope for her amazing beta work! Any flaws you see are mine alone. She is a dream to work with! As always, all I own none of the canon characters, and no money has been made from this story. Trust me.

AN 2: Mignon appeared when I least expected her. She has her own story. Au Pêché Mignon is based on my own "happy place." The name can mean, as Hermione told

Ron, "a little sin," or it can be translated "a guilty pleasure."

AN3: Many thanks to the readers who have stuck with this, despite the long intervals between updates. I am grateful to each and every one of you. Hugs, roses, and chocolates to you all!