

On the Edge of the Night

by selinabl

One night at Grimmauld Place Hermione witnesses something that will change her perception of Severus Snape forever.

On the Edge of the Night

Chapter 1 of 12

One night at Grimmauld Place Hermione witnesses something that will change her perception of Severus Snape forever.

Disclaimer: I own nothing. Everything belongs to JK Rowling.

Author's note: The first chapter is as many of you will recognize during the OotP-chapter 'Christmas on the Closed Ward'. Most of the fic will follow the story line from book 5 to 7 in a behind-the-scenes kind of way. It was inspired by the lyric lines quoted below and by the idea that sometimes it only takes a single moment on the edge of the night to change it all...

Somehow.

My eternal gratitude belongs to Losille2000 for her beta magic.

"It's the terror of knowing

What this world is about

...

Insanity laughs

....

And love dares you to care for

The people on the edge of the night."

(Queen - Under Pressure)

The ancient wood of the staircase groaned quietly under her feet. Hermione took each step carefully and slowly, avoiding waking the portrait of Mrs Black. It would not do that her nightmare-induced insomnia disturbed the night's rest of the other sleeping inhabitants of Grimmauld Place, especially not on Christmas morning.

Hermione herself had awoken with a start around two o'clock, once again plagued by the vision of a hooded figure wearing a Death Eater mask, whose gloved hands were grasping for her...for the Mudblood. She cringed at the memory.

If the Order fails, they'll come for me; they'll come for all of us.

The insight became more evident to her heart with each day that passed since Harry's announcement of You-Know-Who's return. And with each night, her nightmares became more vivid; sleep was losing its comfort inch by inch.

Tonight, after what seemed an eternity of useless tossing and turning in her sheets, unable to find her way back to a blissful slumber, Hermione had decided to go down to the kitchen to comfort herself with a cup of hot chocolate and a well-known chapter of *Hogwarts: A History*. And now she was wandering through the semi-darkness of Headquarters, fiercely ignoring the obscure shadows the moonlight was casting on the walls. To use a candle on her way was beyond question since it would draw Kreacher's attention to her presence...the last thing she wanted right now.

While Hermione made her way through the corridor, she could already see the light that gleamed in the kitchen from afar. The house was obviously not quite as asleep as she had believed it to be. Who else could be roaming Grimmauld Place at this time of night? She proceeded silently, suddenly well aware of her fast-pounding heart. The kitchen door was slightly ajar. Hermione placed her right palm carefully on the cool wood, slowly pushing it open, widening her view into the room. She gasped in surprise. In front of her, the dark figure of her Potions professor was sitting on a chair, the upper part of his body leaning forward over the kitchen table with his head resting on his outstretched right arm while the other arm bent toward his face. Thick streaks of hair obscured his features, while the sound of his breathing was filling the silence of the room. Severus Snape had apparently fallen asleep over the kitchen table.

Strange.

What was he doing here at such an hour? Hermione bit her bottom lip while she drew nearer to the sleeping figure, warily avoiding any sound that could wake the man. Her eyes were travelling over the sight before her, searching for hints that would give away why the usually reserved and private man had fallen asleep in such a public place. A place he openly despised. Professor Snape must have been completely knackered....

Oh.

A cold knot of awareness formed in her stomach as her eyes fell on the heavy black robe and the Death Eater mask lying on the chair next to him, not so unlike the one she had seen in her nightmare earlier. He had been with You-Know-Who. He had worn this. He had been one of them. Shivers ran down her spine. Hermione grasped the back the chair for support, her chest feeling suddenly too tight to breathe.

Reason, Granger.

She forced her eyes shut, trying to control the panic that was coursing through her veins.

You know that Professor Snape went back on the Headmaster's orders.

He is Dumbledore's man.

Dumbledore's man.

Her mind repeated the words over and over again, and gradually her heartbeat slowed again, allowing her to regain her composure in stages.

It seemed like an eternity before Hermione felt able to face the sight of her sleeping professor. She was still standing next to him, her hand clasped around the backrest of the chair with panic-induced strength, while her eyes were glued on the Potions master. He hadn't moved an inch. Another chilly feeling grew in the pit of her stomach, foreboding. Something felt odd about this whole scene. It felt peculiar that her watchful professor was so sound asleep in the kitchen of his oldest childhood enemy.

Oh, my.

How could she have missed it at first sight?

They have Crucio-ed him....

Her professor was slightly trembling, hands cramped into fists. He was still in pain. Although Hermione hadn't witnessed the after-effects of a Cruciatius Curse before, she knew the symptoms.

Exhaustion.

Prolonged muscle pain.

Fever and ague.

Hallucinations.

She frowned. Was this the normal state he returned in? Why was he not with Madam Pomfrey? He must have known what he would have to suffer from after being cursed. He needed medical assistance. Evidently, he had chosen to come here. Why?

Use your brain, Granger.

Oh, of course. It's Christmas. Madam Pomfrey was not at Hogwarts during the school break, and maybe the Apparition distance had been too long in his state. But the Headmaster....

"Cold. So cold." A hoarse, needy murmur stopped her line of thought. The man in front of her was wincing in his sleep. No, not wincing...shaking.

Ague.

She needed to do something. Warmth. He needed warmth. Without hesitation she reached for the heavy black Death Eater robe, lying next to him. Carefully, she covered his body with the robe as effectively as possible without awakening him. Professor Snape would never allow himself to be observed in such a moment of weakness, at least not by the Gryffindor know-it-all. However, the man lying in front of her, trembling and unguarded, looked so unlike the Potions professor she knew, almost vulnerable.

As if on its own accord, her hand reached out and brushed a damp streak of hair from his face, her fingertips softly grazing his skin. He stirred, eyelids fluttering open. His fever-glazed black eyes found her hazel ones immediately.

Shit.

He was awake. Hermione felt the panic rising in her throat as she saw how the frown between his eyes deepened, even in his weakened state. She took a deep breath and steeled herself for his wrath about her intrusion of his privacy. But his reaction hit her more than any Bludger could have.

"Lily?"

One word, a question, spoken so softly and filled with so much hope that it made her heart clench in pain.

Lily?

Oh.

Different realisations dawned at the same time.

Hallucination.

Harry's mum.

He thinks I am Lily.

On mere impulse, Hermione placed her right hand on the Potions master's wrist, squeezing it gently. She could feel him relax under her touch, his glassy eyes never straying from hers.

"Lily?" he asked once again. It sounded more like a plea than a question.

How was she to do this? Hermione swallowed and gave him a small smile.

"I am right here, Pr... Severus. But I need to go to inform Professor Dumbledore of your return... and that you are hurt."

She hoped he had missed the tremble in her voice. His given name had barely left the tip of her tongue.

"Don't leave me," he demanded in a low voice, his frown deepening further.

Long, slender fingers moved to cover the small hand on his wrist, leading it away to cup his cheek. Hermione closed her eyes momentarily at the sensation. His skin was hot and sweaty due to the after-effects of the Unforgivable, but his touch was gentle and full of longing. It made her insides melt.

"I won't. All is well."

The lie burnt on her tongue. Nothing was well.

Lily Potter would never return, not to Professor Snape, not to Harry. Tears formed in her eyes. This wasn't right. She was not who he believed her to be. She had to go.

"I will leave now. I need to inform Professor Dumbledore and you need help, Severus," she said determinedly.

"But you will come back?" Glassy black eyes burned into hers, leaving no doubt about the unspoken 'to me' in his question.

The amount of hurt that filled these dark orbs was her undoing. Hermione knew it was madness, that it was a falsehood. He was her teacher and longed to hear these words from somebody else, but all she wanted in this moment was to ease this small piece of his pain that was in her power. He would only remember Lily afterwards. He would never know it was her. Swiftly and before her courage could leave her, she bent down, allowing her mouth to brush his brow in the barest of touches.

"Whenever you need me."

A whisper. A promise, sealed against his skin, causing her lips to tingle painfully as she withdrew them again.

Without giving him a chance to respond, she rushed from the kitchen, her legs barely carrying her on the way. Her mind was still in a daze as she flooded the Headmaster to fill him in on the situation. Unaware of the tears that were running down her cheeks, Hermione excused herself for not awaiting his arrival. And as she finally buried her face in pillow that night, she knew that she wanted to keep her promise.

Somehow.

A Different Kind of Pain

Chapter 2 of 12

One night at Grimmauld Place Hermione witnesses something that will change her perception of Severus Snape forever.

"Damn, it has to be here!"

Snape's eyes searched the hallway, looking for the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy. Deep down, he knew he was a fool to even come here. He should be lying in his bed, resting...

healing.

However, those sensible objections were dismissed instantly as Snape spotted the portrait in question at the end of the corridor. He limped forward, his right leg still numb due to the after-effects of the Cruciatus Curse. He swore under his breath. The Dark Lord had been in an exceptionally bad mood after Snape had informed him of Arthur Weasley's rescue.

His Lord's reaction to this news had followed an old tradition: blame the messenger.

Afterward, Snape had barely made it to Grimmauld Place without splinching himself into a thousand pieces.

Finally reaching the portrait, he stopped and turned to the opposite wall, running a shaky hand through his hair. His heart was pounding far too heavily in his chest for his

liking. Every fiber of his being needed to do this after last night. Snape closed his eyes.

Lily.

He knew she had been a fever-induced hallucination, but everything had felt so real.

Her touch. Her lips on his skin soft and gentle. To remember it was nearly unbearable, knowing that there was no chance he would ever feel it again.

Lily. Dead. Gone.

Snape exhaled slowly, before walking three times swiftly past the hidden entrance of the Room of Requirement. He entered it immediately as the door appeared in front of him, only casting a short glance along the deserted corridor on his way. It wouldn't do to be seen by Dumbledore right now.

Once inside, the sight of the object he had longed to see immediately greeted Snape. Relief flooded his chest. The Room of Requirement did its reputation justice. He approached the item that stood solitarily in the middle of the empty chamber, well hidden beneath a dark blue blanket. Long, trembling fingers ran lightly over the velvet fabric, sensing easily the inscription beneath. He knew the words all too well.

erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi I show not your face but your heart's desire.

It had been years since he had felt so desperate to look into the Mirror of Erised; in fact, not since Potter's first year. As the boy - a perfect resemblance of his father - had arrived at Hogwarts, it had been a shock to him to see that Potter had truly inherited those emerald green eyes - her beautiful eyes.

Lily's eyes.

They mocked him, day by day. With each look the boy gave him, everything came back to him, every memory he had so carefully buried in a corner of his soul.

In that first year, he had spent whole nights in front of the Mirror, savoring the intoxicating reflection and reminding himself of his vow. He would protect the insolent, undeserving boy at all costs - for her, for Lily.

Snape sighed, his right hand kneading his stiff neck.

Dumbledore had removed the enchanted item the instant he had found his Potions master mesmerized in front of it one night.

'You know, Severus,' he had said, 'men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen. I would not want to see you lose yourself in such a dreadful way.'

The old man had been right.

However, tonight the need that had driven him to come here was stronger than reason. Last night's hallucination had shaken him to the core. He had always assumed - no, hoped - that his feelings would fade slightly over time. But his hope had been proven wrong: Lily was still so deeply carved into his heart that she could summon such a bittersweet vision in a moment of weakness. And as if fate wanted to mock him, it felt as if the skin on his forehead still tingled from the touch of her lips.

It was ridiculous. He was ridiculous.

A ridiculous fool ensnared by an illusion his fever-clouded mind had created, so different from the real Lily; his Lily had never shown such compassion towards him - as much as he had wished her to do so. They had been friends, best friends until...

Snape swallowed, his fingertips once again trailing absently over the fabric-covered surface of the Mirror of Erised.

Nevertheless, it had been the unknown compassion he had felt in her touch and, most of all, the caring tenderness he had seen in her eyes yesterday that had undone him, even in his foggy state of mind.

Ignoring the wave of pain that shot through him, a final protest from his exhausted body, he dug his fingers deeper into the dark blue velvet, finally giving into the overwhelming need to see those feelings reflected in her eyes again. With a swift movement, he threw the blanket away, baring the surface of the Mirror to his eyes.

The moment he looked into it, he saw her.

Lily.

Beautiful as always, smiling, her eyes glittered with the same tenderness as last night. The sight made his heart clench in the most painful way.

Had pain ever been closer to pleasure?

And as she stepped up beside him, entwining her fingers in his, he was lost.

On mere impulse, Snape brought their supposed joined hands up to his mouth, his eyes fiercely fixed on the reflection, savoring the sight. As his lips met nothing but cool air, another wave of pain struck him - an ancient, different kind of pain, causing his already unsteady legs to give in ultimately.

He drew a sharp breath as his knees hit the stone floor. His hands rested on his thighs, supporting his trembling body. He kept his eyes firmly shut; his whole existence was reduced to breathing and struggling against the overwhelming nausea that rose in his stomach.

Madness.

This was nothing but sweet, self-destructive madness. He shouldn't have come here at all.

Snape didn't know how long he knelt in front of the Mirror of Erised in the end, unable to regain his composure and unaware of his surroundings.

His first link back to reality was the touch of a large, careful hand on his shoulder. Yet, he did not move or open his eyes. He didn't need to look to know it was the hand of Albus Dumbledore.

"Severus? Do you hear me?"

His sole answer was a curt nod from beneath the streaks of his greasy black hair.

Dumbledore sighed in relief as he withdrew his hand.

"I don't need to tell you that you are still far too weak for such an excursion, do I, Severus?"

Snape managed a rueful, cheerless laugh, before he met the piercing blue eyes of the Headmaster. He rose from the floor with shaky legs in a miserable attempt to preserve at least a small amount of his dignity.

Dumbledore observed him carefully over the top of his half moon glasses, his eyes devoid of their perpetual twinkling.

"What ever you wish to say, Albus, say it," Snape snapped, while his right hand rested against a pillar of the room for support.

"Severus, I do not claim to know why you have wished to look into the Mirror of Erised tonight, but I would like to remind you that the reflection does not show you the truth but your heart's deepest desire. Such things tend to change over time."

Snape remained silent, keeping his schooled face bare of any emotion.

Foolish hopes of a foolish old man with the only purpose to weaken his defenses, if he chose to indulge in their deceit.

A long time ago in a moment of pitiless clarity - Snape had realized that he had never been and would never be on the receiving end of the tenderness he longed for. This was as sure as the fact that he would not survive this war.

The Headmaster sighed once again, as he realized he wouldn't receive a response from his Potions master.

"I am going to retire for the night, Albus," Snape said coolly, already limping for the door. He cursed his shaking hands silently as they betrayed his still-weakened state.

"Severus, would you mind if I accompany you on your way?"

A frown crossed the Potions master's sweaty face. He turned around to meet the twinkling eyes of Albus Dumbledore.

"I am not an invalid, Albus."

"No, you are definitely not, Severus," the Headmaster said amusedly, while he approached him, "but I fear Miss Granger would be quite angry with me if I allow you to wander alone around the castle in such a state."

"Miss Granger?" Snape arched a questioning eyebrow.

It always comes down to one of your precious little Gryffindors, doesn't it, Albus?

"Yes, Miss Granger. She found you last night at Grimmauld Place, Severus. Didn't I mention that before? Never mind, the girl was rather worried for your wellbeing, I dare say."

Snape said nothing, pondering silently over this new piece of information while he limped beside Dumbledore. His stomach clenched into a single knot. The nausea and the pain started to return.

Granger.

He couldn't remember her. He had been alone in the kitchen, besides...

No.

"Well, she Flooed me and..."

Snape didn't hear the rest of Dumbledore's explanation. He had stopped in his tracks, leaning against the wall for strength as realization dawned.

"I need to inform Professor Dumbledore and you need help, Severus," Lily had said.

...Miss Granger... she found you last night at Grimmauld Place... she Flooed me ... she was rather worried for your wellbeing...

It had been her.

Running a hand over his face, he shook his head slightly in an attempt to clear his thoughts.

Granger. His humiliation was perfect.

And why was the damn ground swaying?

"Are you alright, Severus?"

From somewhere far away, Dumbledore's voice cut through the fog in his head, but he ignored the question and his blurring vision, willing his mind to continue the former line of thought.

The compassion. The caring. The tenderness.

It had all been her.

Suddenly and like through a clammy haze, he felt himself pant for air. His burning throat tightened with each breath he drew.

"Whenever you need me."

Her promise. Not Lily's.

Not Lily's...

And then he knew no more as darkness swallowed him whole.

Once again many thanks go to my lovely beta Losille2000. Thank you, my dear :-)

Oh, and reviews really feed my muse ;-))

One night at Grimmauld Place, Hermione witnesses something that will change her perception of Severus Snape forever.

Lying on her bed in the girls' dormitory, Hermione listened to Lavender's and Parvati's even and steady breathing. Her roommates were already sound asleep.

As you should be as well, Granger, she reminded herself, staring up at the bed canopy.

They had left Grimmauld Place early in the morning, and the journey on the Knight Bus had been tiring as had been tonight's knitting of elves' hats. Her fingers still felt a bit tense, but to know that the hats would be gone in the morning was the best reward for this little discomfort.

Tomorrow classes would start again, and the fact that she would have to face Professor Snape for the first time since the incident at Grimmauld Place made her stomach tingle with nervous anticipation.

Their brief encounter on the edge of the night had shifted her small universe irrevocably.

Like tasting from the bittersweet Tree of Knowledge, it had robbed her of her state of innocent ignorance. She would never be able to forget the sight of him—cursed, trembling, and hurt.

And tomorrow, she would sit in the Potions classroom, no longer oblivious to the fact that Professor Snape risked his life for the sake of the Order...for Harry...and had to act as if nothing was out of the ordinary...

Nothing out of the ordinary.

How utterly preposterous.

Hermione snorted quietly into the darkness.

Relief had flooded her as she had recognized that he was well again when she had caught a small glimpse of him during his short visit at Headquarters to schedule Harry's Occlumency lessons.

Well again, indeed.

Hermione sighed, rolling onto her side and giving her pillow an annoyed thump.

Professor Snape had already recovered so sufficiently that he was able to fight with Sirius...again. Each time, she was shaken by the amount of enmity that radiated between the two men. What could have possibly caused this wrath, this ... hatred?

Professor Snape knew Sirius since his schooldays, this she knew for sure, as he knew Harry's dad, Remus and...

Lily.

Professor Snape had spoken the name with such tender longing even a blind man would have known that he cared... no, loved this Lily wholeheartedly. The sound had filled Hermione's soul with some kind of unknown envy, leaving her for a rather selfish moment to wonder if Ron would ever say her name that way.

At Grimmauld Place, she had spontaneously assumed that her professor had been calling for Lily Potter, but later she wasn't sure anymore if she had drawn the right conclusion. Harry's mum was simply the only Lily she knew in the Wizarding world. Therefore it was most logical that she had thought of her first. But for Professor Snape's sake she sincerely hoped that her first guess was wrong; that this Lily was still among the living, even if his love for her was obviously an unfortunate and unrequited one.

Lily was by no means a rare given name, and Harry had told her that his mother and his father had been together since Hogwarts. There was no way that Professor Snape's feelings would fit into this. Maybe there had been another girl named Lily with whom he attended Hogwarts, or knew some other source. There were women among the Death Eaters as well...

Among the Death Eaters.

A female Death Eater. A possibility. A most logical answer.

"No," she whispered into the darkness, hugging her pillow a bit tighter, as if denying this possibility out loud would make it impossible.

Her heart felt unpleasantly heavy, filled with the sudden need to know for certain who Professor Snape's Lily was.

Hermione's forehead crinkled. She would have some research to do. Maybe Professor McGonagall would allow her to have a look into the school records. She only needed a good reason. Well, she had a good reason, but none that would count for her Head of House.

A presentable reason.

Stifling a yawn, Hermione snuggled into the sheets. She would find a reason for Professor McGonagall. She would figure out who this Lily was. And she would start tomorrow.

Tomorrow.

Merlin, help her.

She would hex him.

She would simply hex him into next week.

Yes, that would be a most satisfying punishment.

Hermione glared at her porridge, which had lost all appeal to her, silently counting the different ways to hex Ron for all eternity if he dared to eat another piece of black pudding.

Her stomach felt even more queasy with nervousness this morning. The gloomy look Professor Snape had worn at breakfast hadn't helped much either. She had dared a brief glance at him while he talked to Professor Dumbledore. Immediately a wave of sympathy had washed over her as she had seen the dark circles that wrapped his eyes. They stood out quite visibly against the pallor of his skin. He seemed to have not slept properly in days. Did the man ever rest?

"Hey 'Mione, you look a bit pale. Everything okay?" Ginny asked in a whisper as she leaned to her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"Oh, really?" Hermione asked in a tone she hoped sounded utterly surprised, shoving her porridge away.

"Yeah," Ginny confirmed, giving her shoulder a slight squeeze, which Hermione returned with a non-committal shrug of her own. From the corner of her eye she caught Ron grasping for the black pudding plate while he talked to Harry.

Eyes fixed on the surface of the table, Hermione gritted her teeth, recounting the ten characteristics of dragon's blood in an attempt to focus on something different than the new wave of queasiness Ron's choice of food had caused her.

"Do you know how long the Greasy Git will keep you tonight, mate?" she heard him ask as he threw another piece of black pudding into his mouth and ate it noisily. "I mean, Harry, Snape can't force you to spend the whole evening in the dungeons..."

However, Hermione never heard Harry's answer. Ron's words caused a bubble of boiling anger to erupt in her already tense stomach. How could he be such an ignorant prat? Didn't he know that Harry needed these Occlumency lessons with Professor Snape?

Dismissing her first impulse to scream, shake or knock some sense into Ron, Hermione felt herself rise from her seat, giving him a murderous glance.

"It is *Professor* Snape, Ronald," she said sweetly, a tone that would have left Dolores Umbridge green with envy. "And I would advise you to improve your table manners if you do not want to risk taking your breakfast alone one day. I'll see you in Potions, Harry.

Ron's jaw dropped unflatteringly, causing a certain amount of snickers around him while Hermione grasped her books, turning swiftly to leave. She allowed herself to raise her chin slightly as she made her way through the Great Hall, savoring the feeling that for a brief moment the balance of Justice's scales had been restored.

As she reached the door of the Potions classroom, Hermione stopped in her tracks. She exhaled deeply in a final attempt to brace herself for the inevitable, before pushing the door open with a swift movement. The room was already half-filled with students. Some were talking quietly while others made last attempts to finish their essays. Everything appeared as usual. It felt almost surreal as she placed her bag on her worktable.

"Uh... hello, Hermione," a voice said behind her.

She turned around and was greeted by Neville's friendly round face.

"Good morning, Neville." Hermione gave him a broad smile before she looked down to retrieve her copy of *Magical Draughts and Potions* from her bag.

"How..." she trailed off, biting her tongue. For thoughtless seconds she had been about to ask Neville how his Christmas had been, before remembering their heart-wrenching encounter at St. Mungo's. Another piece of bittersweet knowledge Christmas had brought her.

Feeling eternally grateful that her eyes were lowered to her bag right now, Hermione swallowed, knowing that her features would have betrayed her shock about her near lapse.

"How what?"

"Sorry Neville... I was momentarily distracted. How was your Potions essay?" she asked with feigned interest, eyes firmly directed on her bag while she pretended to search for something.

"I can have a look at it if you like."

There was a moment of silence, and Hermione was just about to turn around as somebody stepped up behind her.

"My, my, Miss Granger. That will be twenty-five points from Gryffindor, for helping Longbottom to cheat on his Potions essay."

The sudden sound of Professor Snape's cold voice left her rigid, her heart literally skipping a beat as she sensed the Potions master lean down.

"And another twenty-five points for being a nosy Gryffindor and not minding your own business, Miss Granger," he announced in a low, dangerous tone next to her ear.

Without giving her a chance to respond, he rushed away, releasing Hermione slowly from her stupor.

Sweet Merlin, where was the hole that would swallow her? Of all the horrible scenarios how their first meeting would pass, this was the worst imaginable.

Suddenly, her knees felt wobbly and Hermione flung herself on her chair, ignoring Neville's attempts to apologize and Pansy's giggles.

"See, that's what you get for defending the bastard, 'Mione," Harry hissed quietly as he slipped into his place next to her.

She opened her mouth to respond, trying to tell him that he was wrong, but her attempt was stopped as Professor Snape rose from his desk, stepping up in front of the class. Hermione dropped her gaze swiftly, suddenly feeling unable to meet those black eyes.

"Close your books," he ordered coolly, causing half of the students to whisper in bewilderment.

"I am well aware of the fact that most students in this class spend their free time during the Christmas break with rather mindless activities instead of revising the subject matters of the last term, as you should be doing for your OWLs. Therefore we will start this lesson with a revision before you will brew today's scheduled potion."

Eyes still glued firmly to her hands on the worktable, Hermione heard Ron mutter something like "nasty git" under his breath while, throughout the class, quiet groans erupted at Professor Snape's announcement.

"Let's begin with something simple. Who can name the two essential ingredients for the Draught of Peace? Mr. Longbottom perhaps," Professor Snape asked with a sneer.

Hermione squeezed her hands into small fists, forcing herself to refrain from raising one and suppressing the strong urge to snort at the description for this quite challenging question with the word *simple*.

Casting a quick glance at Neville and seeing him shake his head confirmed her suspicion that he would not be able to answer the question.

"Five points from Gryffindor. Mr. Malfoy would you be so kind to assist Mr. Longbottom in his ignorance."

"Certainly, sir," Malfoy said gleefully. "The two essential ingredients for the Draught of Peace are moonstone and hellebore."

"Thank you, Mr. Malfoy, ten points to Slytherin. The main ingredient of the Strengthening Solution then, Longbottom?"

Immediately Harry's hand was in the air and Hermione forced her own hand down again, silently wishing that Harry's willingness to answer a question would tempt Professor Snape to leave Neville alone.

"Five points from Gryffindor. Miss Parkinson, please enlighten your fellow classmates, so that even Mr. Longbottom has the small chance of passing his Potions OWLs."

The Slytherins snickered, and Neville seemed to shrink with each word further into his chair.

Anger. Indignation. Disappointment. Hermione could not name what finally urged her to lift her gaze to meet the sight of Professor Snape. Arms crossed in front of his chest and lips pressed into a thin angry line, he waited for Pansy to answer his question, an aura of frosty aloofness surrounding him.

The harsh Potions master in front of her was a million miles away from the man she had seen at Grimmauld Place a man to whom she had given a promise.

Whenever. Somehow.

A promise that appeared utterly ludicrous while she was left to watch how this man gave Neville another disdainful look. Certainly the question had been an easy and essential one, but how could he humiliate Neville like that?

How?

Meanwhile, Pansy answered proudly, "The main ingredient is salamander blood, sir."

"Excellent, ten points to Slytherin," Professor Snape said, his eyes already on Neville again.

"But maybe the noble house of Gryffindor has a more adequate knowledge in the field of love potions. Mr. Longbottom, pray tell, what is the strongest known love potion?"

Amortentia

Hermione blinked, her knuckles white with anger. Amortentia wasn't even OWL level. Neville had no chance to know the answer.

"With all due respect, sir, the question is unfair," she heard herself snap, the indignant protest leaving her mouth before her mind had even realized it. Instantly cold black eyes met her gaze.

Oh my.

"Miss Granger, I see you have finally decided to join us intellectually."

Professor Snape placed his hands on her table, leaning slightly forward in an obvious attempt to intimidate her. But the pure adrenalin that was coursing through her veins saved her from being sufficiently affected by his gesture.

"Miss Granger, may I ask you to illuminate me, why...in all your know-it-all wisdom...you have decided that this question is not adequate for Mr. Longbottom, before I have the pleasure to deduct at least twenty points for interrupting my class." A sneer curled his thin lips while those frighteningly emotionless eyes bored further into hers.

Seventy points in only half an hour.

Professor McGonagall would have her head for this; for an absurd moment, she was relieved that nobody could be expelled for losing house points. But nothing could save her from the icy feeling that crept into her heart.

In front of her, a mocking eyebrow rose, and Hermione realized that she was still staring at Professor Snape, her bottom lip trembling treacherously.

"I am waiting, Miss Granger."

She swallowed, angry tears forming in her eyes. She would say it. She had to say it, even if he would eat her alive afterwards. House points be damned.

"The answer to your question is Amortentia, Professor Snape, and Amortentia is a NEWT-level potion. It hasn't been covered in class up to now. Therefore, asking anybody in this room for the answer could be counted as unfair in my opinion."

The words came out in the most self-confident tone she could measure, but her voice still sounded disturbingly high-pitched. And then there was nothing but silence.

Dead silence.

Merlin, she was in the eye of a hurricane. But the hurricane never came.

For mere moments Hermione believed she could see something flash in the dark depths of Professor Snape's eyes, but he did not say anything; his face remained unreadable as always. After several seconds, he simply turned his back on her, moving with billowing robes to stand behind his desk. What the hell was he doing?

"Twenty points from Gryffindor for speaking in class without permission, Miss Granger," Professor Snape said coolly, causing several Slytherins to snicker with delight. But a sharp look from him silenced them immediately.

"And I will not tolerate any further interruptions today. You will now brew the Fever Reducing Solution by following the instructions on the board. You have one hour." Leaving no space or time for possible questions or objections, Professor Snape sat down at his desk, focusing on the pile of essays in front of him.

It took several minutes before Hermione was able to concentrate on her ingredients, and as she caught Harry's worried emerald eyes over her mandrake roots, she mouthed a silent *later*.

She had lost enough points for one day.

Scribbling a neat red 'Adequate' at the bottom of Miss Chang's Potions essay, Snape lifted his gaze slightly from his desk, scowling at the irritating Gryffindor in front of him.

It was easy to tell that Miss Granger was quite disturbed at the moment. Her bottom lip was already glowing in an unflattering angry shade of red, and tiny pink flushes graced her cheeks. A perfidious guilty feeling rose in his stomach, causing his quill to draw a particularly harsh line on Miss Abbott's parchment, as he tried to crush it ruthlessly.

Granger.

Seldom in his life had he felt more furious, exposed and humiliated as in the moment he had realized that it had been a student...this girl, of all people...to show him sympathy in a time of weakness. And while it still hurt to know that his heart had tricked him to believe she had been Lily, the wrath at Miss Granger's intrusion of his privacy had abated slightly over the Christmas break.

But when he had caught her this morning, looking at him, with an expression of sweet concern on her face as if he were one of those unfortunate house-elves, whom a gifted sock could free from his evil master's service, his anger had known no boundaries.

He didn't want her compassion and, most of all, he didn't deserve it.

He was not a house-elf in need or any other kind, misunderstood creature Hagrid would adopt. Hell, he was a Death Eater, somebody she should fear with all her heart...a fact Miss Granger's highly praised mind had obviously deemed insignificant in all its glory.

While knowing that this girl had chosen to show him kindness...despite the Dark Mark on his sullied left forearm...filled his soul with treacherous warmth, he would not allow for it to ever happen again.

It was a weakness. And the Dark Lord enjoyed weaknesses. He watched them, nursed them, and explored them, toyed with them only to thrust his venom into the most vulnerable spot in a useful moment.

The most vulnerable spot...

Snape swallowed.

It had been about time for the girl to learn not to waste her kindness on cursed souls like him; he would never become a pathetic, good-doing person like the miserable werewolf she called friend.

Casting a swift glance at the other upset Gryffindor in front of him, the guilty feeling stung once more. He had been unnecessarily harsh on Longbottom. The boy still cracked under pressure, and therefore he had simply been the perfect object of demonstration. These little Gryffindors were so easy to manipulate. Nothing would disgust Miss Granger more than openly displayed injustice toward one of her friends, and it would teach her with what kind of person she was dealing.

At least his little act had gone as predicted.

Almost.

He had anticipated Miss Granger's anger and indignation, but he hadn't been prepared for the plainly honest disappointment in her eyes. The girl had always worn her heart in those large hazel pools so unlike those sophisticated green ones he loved and would never see again...

Nevertheless, to know the caring tenderness her eyes had held for him, as unwelcome and undeserved as it had been, made the shift to their silent accusation even more painful. Eventually, they had rendered him unable to continue his act. He was a weak fool.

Gritting his teeth, Snape lowered his gaze to another inadequate essay. Would it always be a pair of Gryffindor eyes that tore at his soul?

"Time is up. You may bottle your potions now and place them on the desk before leaving."

Professor Snape's announcement caused Hermione to cast a concerned glance at Neville's potion: it was flashy red instead of the required yellow color. The liquid boiled merrily in its cauldron. He hadn't even dared to ask her for help. And the unhappy looks on Ron's and Harry's faces told her that they had not managed to brew the solution correctly either.

"We'll see you in Transfiguration, 'Mione," Harry called from the door, giving her a compassionate look.

Well aware that she had worked unusual slowly today, she nodded silently before turning to her own cauldron and filling a flask with the golden liquid she had managed to create. She sighed as she cast a silent *Evanesco*. Well, at least it was some shade of yellow.

Hermione stepped up in front of Professor Snape's desk with her flask in her hand.

However, the Potions master did not acknowledge her presence; his gaze lingered on Crabbe and Goyle, who were the last students to occupy the room obviously in an attempt to learn if their Head of House had any further punishment in store for her.

Intuitively, Hermione used those precious unobserved seconds to dare a closer look at Professor Snape while she placed her flask next to the others' samples on the desk. The thick black curtains of his hair obscured his profile from her view, but unconcealed tension radiated from his whole posture, even his hands were curled around the backrest of his chair.

It was an unusual gesture for him. Hermione's mind was torn between wondering why he would possibly search support from his chair and also admiring his long, slender fingers those fingers that had covered her hand so gently.

Don't be daft, Granger, not your hand Lily's hand.

"Mr. Crabbe, Mr. Goyle, I would advise you to leave now." Hermione winced. For the second time this day the sudden sound of his voice had caught her by surprise.

"Professor McGonagall will be most pleased to deduct a certain amount of Slytherin house points if you arrive late for her lesson," Professor Snape snapped, grasping for the potion samples and giving Hermione one last cold look before he left for his office.

Bugger. Transfiguration.

She had already lost seventy house points and she was late.

Oh, bugger.

Hermione rushed to her workplace, throwing the Potions kit and the books into her bag as several loud plops caught her attention. Next to her stood Neville's still heavily boiling potion, thick red fumes soaring from the cauldron. He had obviously forgotten to *Evanesco* it in a rush to get out of the room. Well, who would blame him after this disastrous start of term?

Hermione drew her wand from her pocket, already pointing it at the cauldron and preparing herself to stash the boiling mess away as she heard Professor Snape call her name. She sighed. What could he possibly want now?

But as she turned her head to meet his gaze, her heart stopped.

Something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

He was running her way with his wand drawn, an alarming expression on his face, eyes fixed on the cauldron in front of her.

Neville's cauldron.

No.

The instant her mind made the connection, her eyes were mesmerized by the now threateningly boiling liquid. Unknown panic glued her to the spot, rendering her body unable to follow her mind's terrified screams to move out of the danger zone.

From somewhere far away Hermione heard Professor Snape casting a shield charm and felt the strong pull of an arm around her waist in the moment Neville's cauldron exploded.

And then everything went dark.

A pair of fingers was pressed against her throat.

Somebody said her name, somebody next to her, who sounded ... concerned.

"Miss Granger?"

She knew that voice.

Professor Snape.

Oh.

Her memory of the last minutes returning, Hermione blinked several times in an attempt to open her eyes. Wincing at the sudden light, she closed them momentarily. Her head was throbbing slightly.

"Miss Granger, do you hear me?"

She nodded, slowly opening her eyes again. As her vision cleared, she found herself lying on the floor with her head propped up on something soft. Professor Snape knelt on one knee at her side, observing her intently. The usual worry line between his brows seemed to be carved even more deeply into his face, and there was a large smudge of grime covering his left cheek.

"How do you feel?"

Embarrassed, she thought ruefully, managing a shy thankful smile.

"A bit shaken, I fear, but unharmed." Her voice sounded surprisingly hoarse, as if it hadn't been used for a long time.

"How long have I been out?" Hermione asked as she tried to sit up, bringing herself face to face with Professor Snape.

"Mere seconds," he said, sounding infuriatingly detached. His face once more held an unfathomable expression, but as Hermione searched his gaze, the cold indifference had left the dark depths, baring a storm of nameless emotion to her eyes. For several heartbeats she was lost, drowning in a warm black surge.

In an abrupt movement, Professor Snape rose from the floor, holding his right hand out to her.

"Do you think you can manage to get up, Miss Granger?"

Hermione found herself nodding again, taking his offered palm. Long slender fingers came to rest on the back of her hand, pulling her upwards with a gentle force.

"Severus," Professor Dumbledore's voice echoed from the hallway, "the Bloody Baron informed me of an explosion in the dungeons. What has...," he broke off as he stepped into the door, beholding the scene in front of him.

"One of the dunderheads I am forced to teach has managed to leave me a rather explosive device, Albus." Professor Snape sneered without turning to the Headmaster; his eyes fixed on Hermione as she struggled to stand, not releasing her hand until she leaned against the next worktable. Her knees felt still rather wobbly.

"Is Miss Granger..."

"I am fine, Headmaster," Hermione assured quickly, searching the blue eyes of Albus Dumbledore, while the Potions master moved to bend over the remains of Neville's cauldron.

"Thanks to Professor Snape," she added gratefully. "He..."

But she never got to explain how Professor Snape saved her. A sweet and tiny cough from behind Professor Dumbledore interrupted her.

"Hem, hem."

"Dolores. What can we do for you on this wonderful morning?" the Headmaster asked cheerfully as he turned around to greet the toad-like face of Professor Umbridge.

"I heard from Mr. Filch there was an incident in the Potions classroom," she announced in the slow sweet tone Hermione had come to loathe. "I was just wondering if Professor Snape needed any help with his students."

For the second time today, Hermione waited for a blow that never came. Professor Snape straightened up slowly before answering Umbridge in a disturbingly calm voice.

"Professor Umbridge, I assure you regretfully, after fourteen years of teaching the art of potion making to incapable students, I know how to deal with an exploding cauldron quite well."

"Oh, yes, I see." Umbridge gave the explosion-induced chaos in the classroom a rather indignant sniff.

"Dolores, now that it is ensured that my Potions master is perfectly able to handle this little affair, why don't we discuss Cornelius' last letter in my office," Professor Dumbledore offered, already shuffling her into the hallway.

Her response to the Headmaster's proposal was already lost to Hermione as mere moments later the door of the classroom snapped shut.

"Evil old hag," Hermione muttered under her breath as she straightened her school robes.

"Pardon, Miss Granger?"

Oh hell.

Seeing the knowing smirk curling on the corners of his mouth, she flushed furiously. He had bloody well heard her.

"Umm ... nothing, sir."

"Very well then," he said nonchalantly before giving her a serious look.

"Miss Granger, I must ask you not to speak to anyone about this incident."

"But why..."

He held up a hand, his face hard as he spoke.

"Miss Granger, the Dark Lord cannot learn one way or another what has occurred here today. Do you understand?"

Hermione blanched. How could she have forgotten? He was a Death Eater. He was not supposed to protect her Harry Potter's friend, a *Sweet Merlin*.

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I suggest you go to see Madame Pomfrey now, Miss Granger. Despite your assurances of feeling well, I would like to avoid any complaints from your Head of House for not treating you with the necessary caution when I inform her about the reason for your absence today."

"Yes, sir."

She was clearly dismissed. Professor Snape was right; she should pay the matron a visit. Her legs still felt a bit unsteady. She felt unsteady.

While absently walking for the door, Hermione dared a brief glance back over her shoulder. Professor Snape was already bent over the remains of Neville's cauldron again, clearly trying to analyze what had caused the liquid to erupt in the end.

Seeing the icy coldness in his eyes today had hurt, like watching a hope die...

But then, for a brief moment, she had found him.

The man who loved Lily.

The man whom she had given a promise.

Hermione stopped in the door frame, placing a hand on the ancient wood before glancing back again. Her gaze lingered on the Potions master. If somebody would have told her months ago that this man evidently hid his heart...like the Dark Mark he was bearing...beneath the multiple layers of his frock coat, she would not have believed it. But she knew it better now.

"Professor Snape?"

His head snapped up, black eyes searching her gaze.

"Miss Granger?"

"Thank you," she said softly and vanished into the hallway, hiding the ridiculous blush that colored her cheeks.

Snape flung himself into the next armchair, closing his eyes as he leaned his head against the backrest.

Granger.

The girl had been white as a sheet as she had left for the Hospital Wing.

Foolish, foolish Gryffindor.

Why had she tried to vanish Longbottom's explosive leftovers herself instead of calling him? He couldn't even bring himself to blame her for the decision after today's events.

They were all fortunate that the cauldron had exploded at the beginning of his free period and not in an already half-filled classroom. And if he was honest with himself, the incident was as much his fault as Longbottom's. The boy wouldn't have made such disastrous mistakes without being robbed from Miss Granger's helping hand and having himself made a fool in front of his classmates.

Snape slumped forward, burying his head in his hands.

He had been the real fool today. He should have known better than to allow his anger to engage in this shortsighted act. And then he had been blind in his disgust at his own weakness not to go through with it. His guard had slipped. It was his fault. He should have seen the cauldron. He shouldn't have left his classroom without a second glance.

If Miss Granger or any other student had been hurt in his classroom ...

If she had... He swallowed.

Alone, my fault.

Like Lily.

But what had Miss Granger done? This foolish girl with her annoyingly soulful eyes had thanked him.

Simply thanked him. It was honest, lovely and completely unnerving, causing his miserable, undeserving heart to swell in his chest.

Merlin help him. He needed to control his emotions better, otherwise the Dark Lord would pull him apart like warm bread.

Author's note: Once again, my infinite thanks belong to Losille 2000, my lovely beta.

Next up: A presentable reason, the aftermath of Occlumency and something about the marks that bind us.

Reviews are *love* :o)

The Need to Know

One night at Grimmauld Place, Hermione witnesses something that will change her perception of Severus Snape forever.

Disclaimer: All rights belong to JK Rowling.

Author's note: Hugs and kudos to Losille for being the wonderful and patient beta she is and to AnnieTalbot for listening to my ramblings when I need it the most and lending me the indispensable second set of eyes for this chapter. Thank you, ladies, you are wonderful :o)

She was sure she would see the grain of Professor McGonagall's office door even in her sleep tonight. Ten minutes had been enough to burn it into her vision, ten minutes of staring at said door.

Well, it won't open until you knock, Granger, reminded the tiny voice in the back of her head. For the second time, Hermione raised her hand in a determined move, only to see it falter midair heartbeats later.

She bit her bottom lip, angry at her own hesitation. She had only half an hour before she was to meet Ron in the library to prepare another one of those useless essays Umbridge always assigned them. Hermione was convinced that Professor Umbridge's homework followed only one purpose: keep the students sufficiently busy so they don't have the time to question the sense of it all.

Lost your courage, eh, Granger, mocked the tiny, annoying voice as her eyes focussed on the door again.

Hermione sighed. Well, it wasn't the courage that deserted her, but her determination; if she knocked, if she stepped into the office to ask her Head of House for access to the school records, she would have made her decision. She would start her search for the identity of Professor Snape's Lily. But an awkward, nagging feeling made her wonder if she had the right to pry even further into the private life of the Potions master. A quite insistent part of her heart wanted...needed...this piece of information, needed to know...even more after today's event. Trying to keep her promise without knowing who Lily was felt like having to work with an Arithmancy formula without knowing the crucial variable.

After Madam Pomfrey had finally released her from her care, Hermione had chosen to spend the lunch break in the library, researching and plotting. It was quite clear that the only acceptable matter for her Head of House would be a reason that was somehow connected with her studies. However, since her schedule would not suddenly contain the topic "The Arithmetic of Hogwarts School Records", she had to come up with something extracurricular. A look into *Hogwarts, A History*, had revealed that all students were granted the option to do extra credit projects. This affirmed, Hermione had only needed to come up with a project that was based on data that only the school records could provide.

If she told anybody that it was Professor Binns who inspired her with the necessary topic, they would send her straight to St. Mungo's. But actually it had been Professor Binns and a statement he made during History of Magic today: Many social developments in the history of the Wizarding world are mirrored in a similar way in the Muggle world.

Hermione smiled pensively. Sometimes her Muggle parentage came in as a real favour. The idea had quickly grown in her mind.

It was flawless. It was perfect. And it would not only allow her access to the name of every witch who had walked these halls in the last fifty years, it would also accord her the possibility of earning back the house points her own foolishness had cost her today. Therefore, there was no real reason to hesitate. What was she waiting for? If she could keep an eye on Harry and knit elves' hats while preparing for her OWLs, then she had the time to do this small task as well.

Exhaling once more, Hermione straightened herself slightly before she finally knocked.

A brisk, "Come in!" floated immediately through the wood, and Hermione opened the door, silently praying she was doing the right thing.

"Miss Granger!" Professor McGonagall rose from the chair behind her desk as she greeted her, giving her a tight smile.

"Good evening, Professor," Hermione said as she closed the door behind her, feeling her resolve faltering under the beady gaze of her Head of House.

"Sit down, girl. I take it Mr Potter and Mr Weasley have already informed you about next week's assignment?"

"Oh...yes, they did, Professor."

Hermione took the chair opposite to her teacher. At least, Professor McGonagall had not mentioned the loss of house points so far, so she would be able to approach the subject on her own.

"Good, good. So, to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?"

"Well, I...I read in *Hogwarts, A History* that there is the possibility for students of every year to do extra credit projects and ... uh... I would like to do such a project in History of Magic, Professor."

"An extra credit project? What a splendid idea, Miss Granger, but won't this be a bit too much work with your OWLs coming? Such things are usually done by students in their fourth or sixth year."

Gritting her teeth slightly, Hermione straightened herself a bit. She had known that this objection would come; since her experience with the time-turner in her third year, Professor McGonagall was always annoyingly alert that she would not overdo herself.

"On the basis of the timetable I have made, I think the workload should be quite manageable. I have scheduled two hours per week for the basic research until the Easter break, so that it would not interfere with my regular studies and would be completed before the final revision phase. The analysis could be done in the free period after the exams. And..." She lowered her gaze, deciding to play her ace now. "... the project would allow me to earn a quite equal number of points to the ones I lost today."

"Nonsense, Miss Granger. As much as I appreciate your willingness to recompense your loss of points for our house, I would never expect you to redeem yourself for something Professor Snape called "ludicrously exemplary displays of Gryffindor behavior"."

He had what?

Not knowing if she should feel flattered or insulted, Hermione was struck speechless and the Transfiguration mistress gave her an amused look.

"Nevertheless, your approach toward the project sounds reasonable, Miss Granger. May I ask what is going to be the subject of your research?"

Her composure returning, Hermione allowed herself a small, proud smile.

"The project would research the development of the higher education of young witches in the last fifty years."

Leaning slightly forward, Professor McGonagall folded her hands on the surface of the desk, unconcealed interest glistening in her eyes. "Please elaborate, Miss Granger."

"Professor Binns said today that it has happened that social phenomena and trends in the Wizarding and Muggle society have occurred in similar ways, sometimes even parallel to each other. I think the rapidly declining custom of arranged marriages or the importance of blood purity as sign for superiority among certain groups or even whole societies are good examples for this thesis," Hermione paused, kneading her fingers nervously.

"And you think such a social similarity has occurred regarding the higher education of witches, Miss Granger?"

"Yes, I think that would be highly likely. In the Muggle world, it has been a quite common custom for a long time to provide women only with a basic education. Often families weren't willing to pay or deemed it not necessary for their daughters to pursue a higher education. Therefore, many left or were taken from school barely after their O-levels. But over the last decades, the number of women who pursue a higher education is increasing rapidly. Uh... well, and I would like to research if there is a trend that shows that the number of witches who take their NEWTs has increased over the last fifty years as well."

There was a moment of silence as Hermione had ended her explanation, and she had the faint opportunity to see how the single elements of her reasoning worked behind the forehead of Professor McGonagall.

Eventually, her Head of House removed her glasses, cleaning them with a tartan handkerchief.

"Well, you would certainly need access to the school records for this project..."

"Only to the registration lists for the OWL and NEWT exams, Professor, and not to any more individual-related data," Hermione broke in, anticipating Professor McGonagall's concern about the confidentiality of the more sensitive student data like blood status or the names of the parents.

"I was about to suggest exactly this possibility, before you interrupted me, Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall replied crisply.

Embarrassment rose hot in her cheeks. She had been so eager in her wish to counter any possible hurdle that she had not taken into account that her Head of House could be supportive of her project.

Maybe she wouldn't be if she knew the main purpose of this little endeavor.

A thought that struck her with remorse.

"I apologize, Professor."

"No need, Miss Granger. It's settled then. I will speak with the Headmaster about your project. He has to consent with my decision to provide you with the needed data."

"Certainly. Thank you, Professor."

They discussed a few more trivialities before Hermione finally bade her goodbye.

Once out of the office, she fell with her back flattened against the wall, closing her eyes and taking a deep, measured breath as her knees went weak.

She had deceived her teacher, her Head of House had purposely deceived her to violate the privacy of one of her professors.

And had done so for nothing but her selfish need to know.

But seldom had something felt so right.

Snape swore, his fist hitting the surface of the desk hard.

Dumbledore was a fool; a fool to think he could teach Potter Occlumency in his place. This would never work. The insolent boy would rather chew on the hem of the Dark Lord's robe before taking a piece of advice from him, let alone follow his instructions.

Placing both hands...curled into fists...onto the cool wood, Snape rested his weight on his knuckles as he leaned over the Pensieve, gazing at the silvery liquid. His face twisted in agony.

Oh, how he had tried to reason with Dumbledore, tried to convince him to teach Potter himself. But the Headmaster...in all his wisdom...had insisted upon it and, as always, had done so without sharing the reason for his persistence. Had the old man even known what kind of torturous task he had forced upon him? Snape bit back a heartfelt groan.

He may be able to extract the most miserable pieces of his own memory and could shield his emotions from Potter, but while probing the boy's mind, while looking into those emerald eyes, he had inevitably stumbled on the few, disgustingly precious visions of his parents. He had to see her, had to see his Lily, smiling, in the arms of another man. Insensible jealousy had raged in him for mere moments then, like a feral beast, eating at his soul.

Snape pressed his eyes shut, forcing his mind to focus on the growing ache in his knuckles.

Who was he to teach the boy to control his emotions when he himself had failed to do so twice in one day? Hadn't he told Potter that only fools wore their hearts proudly on their sleeves?

Only fools. And he was the greatest fool of all.

Snape opened his eyes, looking at the Pensieve beneath him. He had to return the item to the Headmaster tonight. Inside, shimmering peacefully, floated still more evidence of his folly, the last one of those three memories he had removed earlier. While he had already taken back the two worst moments of his youth, those two moments he had lost her, first her friendship and then everything, every hope with...

Lily. Dead. Gone.

My fault alone.

Snape deepened the pressure on his knuckles. Thick streaks of black hair fell forward, shielding his vision and leaving nothing to his eyes but the silver maelstrom beneath him. Dumbledore would already be waiting for his report on the lesson with Potter.

"Don't be too hard on the boy, Severus," the old man had told him as he had fetched the Pensieve.

Preserving precious Potter's fragile soul, his most important task, as always, while his own sanity was falling into pieces. Snape snorted, his gaze lingering accusingly on the lustrous substance in the stone basin.

The Crucio-induced hallucination of Lily haunted his dreams, and Miss Granger's presence in his classroom this morning had summoned the whole incident even more vividly to the surface of his mind; therefore it had been a prudent choice to remove this memory as well.

But while the removal of his old misdeeds felt like lifting a grey, crushing load from his shoulders, the preposterous event had left something behind that he refused to acknowledge as emptiness.

Emptiness. Utterly absurd.

Shaking his head, Snape brushed the thought away, reaching for his wand with a swift movement. He dipped the tip into the silvery liquid and was just about to scoop it out of the Pensieve when the now transparent, swirling surface caught his attention. He blinked. Blinked again.

It couldn't be.

The reflection allowed him a plain view down into the kitchen at Grimmauld Place, and Snape stared at the scene disbelievingly. Beside his memory-self, slumped over the kitchen table, stood not his vision of Lily but Miss Granger.

Granger. What the hell was this annoying girl doing in his memory? She wasn't supposed to be there.

Snape laid his wand down, clutching the edge of the stone basin with both hands as comprehension hit him. It was part of the magic of Pensieves not to show the person's personal view of a memory, but the reality. And in reality, Miss Granger had been the one at his side and not Lily. Lily had only been a part of his imagination.

Up to now...in an act of utmost self-protection...he had refrained from challenging the fine line between reality and imagination of his foggy memory. He had tried not to dwell on what the girl could have told her little friends, could have told Potter to have a laugh at his expense. But right here in front of him lay the answer to those questions he had not dared to ask, causing a sudden, burning need to contract his lungs. How much had he truly exposed himself in front of her? Or worse, *what* had he exposed?

Never tell, Dumbledore.

Snape swallowed. The Headmaster had kept his promise so far. But what if he himself had betrayed this secret...had disclosed it to Potter's little friend?

His whole existence consisted of a web of lies, half-verities and suspicions, fine-spun by two masters. There was nothing and nobody left for him to trust but his own judgement. However, even this last resort had betrayed him that night, but here...floating in this stone basin...was his chance to end all speculation, the chance to pursue the truth about the incident at Grimmauld Place...a truth his heart had neglected to share with him.

Overwhelming uncertainty suddenly drowned out what was left of prudence and reason. He needed to know. Without a second thought, Snape lowered his face into the silvery liquid.

His office dissolved immediately, and he fell...fell until he found himself standing behind his exhausted memory-self, still slumped forward over the kitchen table. He couldn't even remember how he had made it there. Seeing himself stir beneath the heavy black robe, he was sure the girl must have placed it around his shoulders. Even at his worst, he had always managed to free himself of every reminder of his Death Eater appearance.

His eyes traveled instantly to Miss Granger's fearful gaze as she withdrew her hand from his memory-self's face, frightened. But it was the girl's appearance that came as a little shock to him. A soft braid tamed her usually unruly mess of hair, and the light blue pyjamas she wore for the night could not hide the outlines of already womanly curves. Instinctively, he lowered his gaze to the floor, cursing quietly. He wasn't to see her in such informal, revealing attire. Shifting uncomfortably, he already considered leaving the memory as one word stabbed his heart.

"Lily?"

Pain...hot and burning...rushed through his veins as he was left to watch his memory-self raise his head with a doubting, but hopeful, expression. He hadn't assumed that he had really pronounced her name in his delirious state. In his right mind, he never dared to speak it. Thought it, yes, but spoken, never, not since...

Brushing the thought away, he searched the girl's face again. A kaleidoscope of different emotions played across those lovely young features until her gaze softened. He vaguely felt himself inhale sharply as a small, slender hand touched his memory-self's wrist. It had been one thing to acknowledge in the safeness of his dungeons that it had been Miss Granger who had reached out for him, but *seeing* her actually doing it...

"Lily?"

Snape gritted his teeth. How much more of this would his dignity have to endure? Desperation flickered over the girl's face. But instead of backing away, fleeing from this degrading situation, she gave his alter ego a smile. A small, warm smile that found her eyes. Nobody ever smiled at him like that; nobody, not even Narcissa at her most charming.

"I am right here, Pr... Severus. But I need to go to inform Professor Dumbledore of your return... and that you are hurt."

"Don't leave me."

Shame burned in his stomach at the plea he barely remembered and began to sear his soul as he saw his memory-hand enfold Miss Granger's small one, bringing it to his cheek. She hadn't flinched from his touch, not even for a moment, the persistent little Gryffindor.

"I won't. All is well."

A lie, certainly, and she had known it; the regret was glittering plainly in those large hazel pools that would never be able to hide falsehood from him.

"I will leave now. I need to inform Professor Dumbledore and you need help, Severus."

"But you will come back?"

He turned away. His throat tightened. He remembered the exchange, remembered it and the unthinkable thing the girl had done and dreaded to search her eyes again, but did it nevertheless. He found nothing but tenderness in her gaze as she bent down to brush her lips against his forehead, a tenderness that warmed him to the core. And as he thought he could risk breathing again, she proved him wrong once more.

"Whenever you need me."

Solely a whisper...soft and earnest...but it left his marrow tumbling. He had known those words, had known that it had been she who had spoken them. But actually *hearing* her say them, *seeing* her as she said them, forced him to acknowledge the one thing he hadn't known before. It hadn't been a childish assurance to escape his presence, an act of deceit, as he had believed it to be. She had meant it, truly meant every word of it.

And while his memory-self succumbed to the comfort of her words, long, pale fingers reached out, desiring nothing but to brush those tears away that fell freely down her cheeks, but found once again nothing but thin air. Leaving him to watch how she stumbled from the kitchen, fleeing into the dark hallway and out of his memory.

The scene dissolved, and Snape was thrown onto the floor of his office. Turning to sit upright, he leaned with back against his desk, closing his eyes. It had been Miss Granger. Everything. Everything he had remembered. Everything he had felt. Unbelievable but true, unfortunately.

And the girl...this annoyingly compassionate creature...she knew it all, had seen him, had seen his weakness and hadn't said a word about it, hadn't thrown it right into his face as he insulted her today.

He groaned quietly. His chest ached. His mind spun.

And his Mark burned.

Stumbling, Snape rushed into his chambers, the pain in his left forearm increasing rapidly. The bastard had something urgent for them tonight.

Damn.

Calm. He needed calm. He needed to empty himself of these treacherous emotions, but instead his mind was filled with vivid images of Miss Granger as if burned into his vision.

"Dobby," he gasped as he stepped into his bathroom, throwing ice-cold water into his face by the time the house-elf appeared with a loud pop.

"Professor Snape has called Dobby, sir?"

"Go to the Headmaster," Snape commanded, splashing another wave of water onto his face. "Tell him I had to leave."

The elf nodded, observing Snape with his enormous eyes as he seized his Death Eater robe, throwing it over himself.

"Dobby will tell Professor Dumbledore, sir. And Professor Snape must be careful, sir," he said solemnly before he Disapparated.

Snape paused for a moment, his eyes lingering on the deserted spot where the house-elf had stood seconds ago. A cheerless laugh caught in his throat. There were truly dark times coming when the house-elves started fearing for his safety.

Clutching the abhorrent mask in his left hand, Snape forced air into his lungs. Taking a few more measured breaths, he concentrated on his Occlumency shields.

Weak. Vulnerable. Far too vulnerable. Damn. But a short glance at his darkening Mark told him he couldn't keep the Dark Lord waiting any longer.

He slipped out of his quarters and into the darkness of the tunnel that would lead him directly to his Disapparation point.

Maybe splinching himself was worth a second thought tonight. But unfortunately, it was not an option.

"Severus," a quiet, hissing voice acknowledged Snape's arrival as he stepped through the heavy leaf door of the Scottish country estate the Dark Lord had deemed appropriate as residence. The real owners...Muggles...had been simply erased from the face of the earth.

"My Lord." With a few long strides, Snape moved forward, falling on one knee and bowing slightly in front of his supposed master.

Through the endless moments of silence that followed his greeting, nothing could be heard but the loud, rapid drumming of his heart while red, glowing eyes lingered on his head.

Forcing his breathing to remain even, Snape directed his concentration on his mental shields, dreading the Dark Lord's invasion of his mind.

But, to his surprise, the invasion never came. Only an unrecognizable shiver ran down his spine as a large, bony hand was laid on his head.

"Rise, my servant. Take your place beside your brother, Lucius."

Snape followed the order silently, moving next to Malfoy who sat left to the Dark Lord. His eyes traveled over the circle of hooded figures. Behind the iron mask, black eyes narrowed. Two empty chairs. Macnair and Nott were absent. This boded ill.

Meanwhile, the Dark Lord floated into the middle of attendant Death Eaters, observing his followers closely.

"I have called you, Death Eaters, because tonight will mark another step on my way to victory," he announced, his voice a high, gurgling sound. "Tonight the gates of Azkaban will finally open for our brothers and sisters who have been entombed there for far too long."

And I bet Macnair and Nott assisted a little with the opening, Snape thought acridly. And to make things worse, those two wouldn't be able to succeed without initial help from the Dementors. This meant those evil creatures were starting to cooperate with the Dark Lord. A sharp intake of breath next to him caught his attention, and Snape cast a swift glance at Malfoy. The blond wizard's breathing appeared shallow and rapid. Maybe the announced return of his sister-in-law wasn't all good news.

As if right on cue, the Dark Lord turned to them, eyeing Malfoy calculatingly.

"I dare assume that the Lestranges will be most welcomed in your home, my dear Lucius."

"Narcissa and I will be delighted to be their host, my Lord."

"I expected nothing less from you, Lucius. I think our dear Bella..."

"My Lord!"

Red eyes flashed dangerously at the interruption, but the Dark Lord did not turn around to the paltry, trembling figure that had spoken up.

"Wormtail. I hope for you, my unworthy servant, you have a very good reason for this disrespectful behavior."

"Forgive me, master." Wormtail lowered his gaze anxiously. "But they...they have arrived, master."

Every pair of eyes in the room was on the Dark wizard as he leaned his head into his neck, quietly and inexplicably slowly, one hand brushing over the hairless skull before he spread both arms to his sides in a triumphant gesture.

For moments, heavy with silence, he simply stood like this, before laughter, solely laughter...high and inhuman...erupted from beneath the lipless mouth, filling each corner of the room.

Struggling against the chill that crept beneath his skin, Snape clenched and unclenched his hands at his sides, hoping that for once the insolent boy at Hogwarts had followed his instructions so that he would not have to endure parts of this insanity as well.

As abruptly as the laughter had come, it had abated again. Red eyes, glowing feverishly, traveled over the assembled attendants until they stopped on the rat-like creature next to him.

"Then, Wormtail, I think it would be rude not to attend to my guests."

The dark wizard turned around, striding away, only the hem of his long black robe and Wormtail twirling behind him as he stretched one hand out for a dismissive wave, announcing without a glance backwards, "Death Eaters, you are allowed to remove yourselves from my presence."

Stepping out into the darkness that enfolded the grounds of the country estate, Snape was already about to Disapparate back to Hogwarts as a hand was placed firmly on his shoulder. In a rush of black fabric, he spun around and met the serious grey eyes of Lucius Malfoy.

"I need to talk to you, Severus."

Inclining his head slightly, Snape gave him a questioning look. Malfoy cast a quick, almost haunted glance over his shoulder before he answered, tension radiating in waves from his being.

"Alone."

"Your Manor, then?"

Malfoy gave him a curt nod, Disapparating away.

Snape frowned. His head was throbbing, calling finally for a few hours of rest, but sleep would have to wait. Such an urgent request for a late-night talk was highly unusual for the blond wizard.

Well, let's find out what you have on your mind, Lucius.

Drawing his wand, Snape concentrated, Disapparating with a quiet crack.

Reappearing in front of the gates of the Manor, he saw that Malfoy stood there as well, apparently waiting for him. Sharing a short glance, they both removed their masks and walked in silence up to the entrance door.

Leaving it to his host to cast an Alohomora, Snape stood aside as the wood swung open and a concerned female voice floated from inside.

"Lucius? Are you all right, love?"

Narcissa's graceful form emerged out of the darkness in the entrance hall, worry evident in her features. Snape remained in the shadows as Malfoy rushed forward to reassure his wife, drawing her into a short embrace.

"I am fine. I told you not to stay up and wait for me," he said quietly, brushing her cheek.

"See, I brought a guest."

"Oh."

And unfortunately I won't be the last one tonight, my dear Snape thought, and a frown crossed his face.

The announcement caused Narcissa immediately to find her composure again as she turned to the door, acknowledging Snape's presence.

"Severus," she said with one of those smiles that were never intended to reach her eyes. "It's good to see you again."

"Narcissa. What a pleasant surprise," he purred in return as he stepped up to the couple.

Black streaks of hair fell slightly forward as he took her hand for the imitation of a welcoming kiss.

They exchanged a few pleasantries before Malfoy led Snape into his study, gesturing for him to take a seat in one of the armchairs as he poured finest Scotch into two goblets. A Muggle liquor. Snape chuckled inwardly. Malfoy was finally losing his edge.

"I hope you don't mind sharing a toast with me, Severus?"

The addressed arched a graceful eyebrow.

"Of course not. To what do you wish to drink?"

"To friendship." Malfoy rose his glass. "May it survive the hardships of life."

Spoken like a true Hufflepuff, my dear Lucius.

Hiding a smirk, Snape lifted his glass as well. However, it would be foolish to believe that Malfoy would lower himself to such an emotional declaration without purpose.

"To friendship then."

They both took a sip of the scotch, and Snape savored the burning, but calming, sensation the liquid caused in his throat and stomach.

"How long have we known each other, Severus?"

"For nearly 25 years, I would think."

"And for as long we remain friends."

"Not quite so long, Lucius," Snape corrected him dryly, scowling at the goblet in his hand.

During his days at Hogwarts, Malfoy had been far too pompous to associate with somebody so much younger and poorer than himself, even though they had belonged to the same group of Slytherins. But surprisingly, something similar to real friendship had grown between them after Snape had joined the Death Eaters.

However, the night he had gone to Dumbledore, he had not only betrayed the Dark Lord, he had betrayed this friendship as well. In the years that followed the Dark Lord's demise, he had tried to ignore the knowledge that Malfoy had never broken with those old beliefs, like somebody would turn a blind eye to an old friend's bad habit.

During their occasional meetings, they had both carefully avoided all-too-slippery issues of the past. But as his Mark had become clearer and he had learnt that Malfoy had been responsible for the incident at the Quidditch World Cup, he had no longer been able to deny what he should have realized long ago...his friend would be his foe in the end.

"You are my oldest friend, Severus."

Snape eyed him questioningly, refraining from replying to his declaration.

"Bellatrix's return will change things, Severus. With her in my home and the task the Dark Lord has assigned me, my family will be even more exposed than we already are."

"Indeed."

"Draco... Narcissa. I fear for their safety."

"Surely the Dark Lord..."

Malfoy held up his hand, stopping him mid-sentence.

"Please don't, Severus. I wish to speak to my old friend and not to the fellow Death Eater right now."

"I apologise. Please go on."

Malfoy rolled his left sleeve up, revealing the Dark Mark. He held his arm out in front of Snape.

"I swore the same oath as you did, Severus, as I took the Mark, pledging my loyalty and unconditional obedience to the Dark Lord. And I believe strongly in his cause and the old ways."

And finally you reveal your true face, friend Snape thought bitterly.

"But there is another mark that binds me."

Malfoy murmured something quietly and around his left wrist appeared a blue cord, the one he had received from Narcissa during their bonding ceremony.

"I vowed to my wife and my son loyalty and protection as well. They are my life, Severus."

Heartbeats of silence followed Malfoy's statement. Snape felt his chest tighten as the implied consequences of those words sank in. He lowered his gaze, regarding the gold-brown liquid twirling in his goblet absently.

"And your vulnerable spot should you disappoint him."

Glass met wood forcefully and Snape knew without looking that Malfoy had drowned his Scotch at his conclusion.

It'll always be the ones we love the most, Lucius.

"Severus, I am dreading the day when the Dark Lord could use ... when I cannot..." Malfoy trailed off, a crack in his voice.

"I understand."

Snape took a large sip of his scotch as well, trying to wash the mouldy taste in his mouth away.

Narcissa.

Draco.

Always, when he had thought he had reached the final stage of hell, another trap door opened beneath him. And right now he was falling again.

If Malfoy failed the Dark Lord, it was highly likely that Snape had contributed in his failure: a failure that was essential to the Order, a failure that would cost the Malfoy family dearly. Hot waves of nausea, augmented with stinging guilt, washed over him.

"Severus, when this day comes, will you help me to keep them safe?"

Snape slumped forward in the armchair, curtains of black hair hiding his face as he squeezed his eyes shut. For moments he was back, back on that deserted hilltop, where he had knelt, pleading, so many years ago.

"Keep her...them...safe. Please."

"And what will you give me in return, Severus?"

"Anything."

But even anything had not been enough.

Lily. Dead. Gone.

His love for her meant nothing in the face of the Dark Lord, and this nothing had finally opened his eyes, brushing away the foolish juvenile desire for power and revenge that had clouded his judgment for so long. He had turned to Dumbledore in his desperation.

But Malfoy had not and never would. He had turned to him, to the false friend who had to betray him...even now.

Sometimes life had the cruelest sense of humor.

However, for now a grateful Lucius Malfoy was most useful for their cause. And grateful he would be.

Snape's head snapped up, night-dark eyes met foggy-grey ones in silent understanding.

"I will."

And he knew he would.

Somehow.

It was just before the dawn when Snape entered his empty quarters again. His report to Dumbledore had taken longer than usual. The old man still didn't trust him where Malfoy was concerned. And he probably wouldn't do so in his place.

Snape slumped on his bed, not bothering to remove his frock coat as he stretched out on the sheets, laying one forearm across his forehead. He had probably two hours of sleep left, three if he skipped breakfast, and too little time to use Dreamless Sleep and allow his aching body a period of undisturbed rest.

But as he closed his eyes, hoping that at least the nightmares would leave him alone this time, his mind was far too exhausted to fight the susurrus of a soft, female voice that found him and never left him alone until sleep finally claimed him.

He seldom slept so well.

Secrets to be Kept

Chapter 5 of 12

One night at Grimmauld Place, Hermione witnesses something that will change her perception of Severus Snape forever.

Disclaimer: All rights belong to J.K. Rowling.

Author's note: Once again, my heartfelt thanks belong to two lovely ladies for holding my hand and making my writing readable. Thank you so much, Annie and Losille :o)

Time seemed to fly for Hermione. While her days were filled with the usual classes, her evenings overflowed with responsibilities: Prefect duties, DA meetings, S.P.E.W. and every Tuesday what she called her "*Lily Project*".

Professor McGonagall had allowed her to work in the small room next to her office where the Deputy Headmistress filed everything that concerned Hogwarts paperwork. But so far, Hermione had made much slower progress in her search for Professor Snape's Lily than she had expected and hoped. Already on her first evening, she realized that she had to go over the records of each year individually and isolate the names of the witches who had taken their OWLs or NEWTs one by one. There was no way for her regardless of how much her heart had desired it to get a quick overview as to how many witches with the given name 'Lily' had attended Hogwarts in the last fifty years, not with over twenty stuffed folders full with registration forms. So January turned into February, and Hermione had not found an answer to the question that twisted her heart, brief and fierce, each time she caught sight of Professor Snape.

It was not that she saw more than usual of the aloof man besides Potions class and mealtimes in the Great Hall, not at all, but she had become more aware of his presence. Only once had she met him by surprise in the Owlery, on the morning after the disaster with Neville's cauldron, as she had left breakfast in the Great Hall early to send a letter to Skeeter to arrange Harry's interview for *The Quibbler*. It had been the same morning the *Prophet* had announced the mass breakout from Azkaban, and Professor Snape hadn't appeared for breakfast.

The amount of relief she had felt at the sudden sight of him, well and unhurt, as she stepped into the Owlery had caught her by surprise. Snape had already been on his way out and had only given her a stiff nod as they passed each other, but it had been enough to loosen the anxious knots that had held her stomach captive, and her heart had had a thing less to worry about for the day.

After all, worrying had unsurprisingly become a constant occupation of hers, as there was so much to worry about lately: Harry's dreams, Umbridge, Ron's unsuccessful attempts at Quidditch, her OWLs ...

Then, in those gloomy moments of the night, after awaking from another nightmare, there was the silent, desperate worry for her parents' safety; and unnoticed, the worry for Professor Snape had made it on her long list as well. Somehow.

Even now, on her way to Hogsmeade, while the cold February wind was blowing, harsh, into her face, she worried if she had made the right decision regarding Harry's interview. If only her plan would add up as she so desperately hoped a huge blow to Fudge's strategy to undermine Harry's credibility. It was time that the truth was finally published, and the fact that Skeeter the nosy and lying beetle would be the one to provide it to the wizarding public was a side effect that satisfied and amused Hermione immensely.

Reaching the edge of the village, she lifted the hood of her coat. The main street was already overflowing with Hogwarts students, most of them merry couples, huddled together, smiling. Like always on Valentine's Day.

Valentine's Day.

For a moment, her chest seemed to tighten as her thoughts wandered to Ron and his Quidditch training, and unacknowledged regret curved her lips into a small wistful smile.

There would be other Valentine's Days for them. *Perhaps.*

Hermione sighed, brushing the sentiment away like the tendril of hair the wind had loosened from her ponytail as she followed the main street into Hogsmeade. Around her, there were bigger things happening than a hopeless, unrequited crush on one of her best friends.

Hustling her way through the crowds, she recognized Luna walking toward her.

"Hi, Luna," Hermione greeted the younger girl as she came within earshot, Luna's appearance as unusual as ever. She wore a lime woollen hat on which dark green hobgoblins were chasing each other; it nearly covered her eyes while the ends of the matching scarf dragged through the snow on the ground.

"Hello, Hermione," she breathed, inclining her head slightly and holding the recent edition of *The Quibbler* to her chest. "Daddy is so excited to publish Harry's interview. He hasn't been this happy since they sighted Nargles in Azkaban two years ago."

It took every ounce of willpower for Hermione to master the sudden urge to explain that the existence of Nargles had never been confirmed by serious sources, but in the end she said, "I am really happy your dad agreed to this, Luna. It will help Harry a great deal to finally tell his version."

"Oh, the people will believe Harry," Luna said, smiling, teetering back and forth on her toes.

"I hope so, Luna, I really hope so," Hermione replied with a sigh. Glancing at her watch, she added, "I have one more errand to run before we meet Skeeter in the Three Broomsticks. See you in half an hour, Luna."

Before the blonde Ravenclaw could respond, Hermione had already hurried away, making her way toward the apothecary. She needed new Murtlap tentacles, since it was no longer only Harry Umbridge chose to torture with her vicious quill. She had seen at least two Gryffindor fourth-years and one tiny first-year this week who had tried to hide the cuts on the back of their hands; and she hoped that maybe as Prefect she would have the chance to approach them and offer help, but the small package of Murtlap tentacles she had bought out of sheer foresight before the term, as she had read about their powerful healing potential, was already used up.

With a determined stride, not wanting to waste unnecessary time, Hermione entered the store. The doorbell announced her arrival with a melodious sound, but as she beheld the man who turned at the sound, her breath hitched. Instead of Mr Jiggers, the friendly old owner of the apothecary, the frowning face of her Potions professor greeted her. Snape stood at the counter, clad in a long, black winter cloak; the collar was still turned up chin-high against the icy wind and gave his features an even more

grim expression than usual as he assessed her with cold, calculating eyes.

"Uh, hello, Professor Snape," Hermione said, unfathomable nervousness weaving a high-pitched note into her voice.

"Miss Granger. How unexpected," Snape sneered. "Dare I assume you are purchasing potions ingredients the legal way for once?"

Instantly, she blanched, his greeting striking her with the kind of silent panic that usually only the prospect of a broom ride could cause her. So he had known all those years it had been she who had taken the ingredients from his store.

"Don't look so shocked, Miss Granger. Did you honestly believe I hadn't realized it was you and your little friends who snuck into my storage room and stole two Galleons worth of ingredients after seeing you in the Hospital Wing afterwards?"

"No, sir." She shook her head, and her cheeks flushed with embarrassment as she stepped up next to Snape at the counter. In front of them, the door that led into the back rooms of the store was open, and Hermione hoped with all her heart that Mr. Jiggers would return soon from his inventory. Most likely, he was only away to fetch something for Professor Snape.

"I am not here for potions ingredients," she confessed quietly, her gaze still lingering on the open door.

"You are in the apothecary, Miss Granger. Do you take me for a fool? Pray tell, why are you here if not to buy potions ingredients?" he snarled.

Hermione turned and met his glare with one of her own, anger and indignation that he so openly mistrusted her words mingling in her chest.

"I have every right to purchase things in the apothecary without the need to account for it, sir," she said firmly. "But if you must know, Professor, I am in need of Murtlap tentacles."

The moment she had said the word 'Murtlap', Snape's gaze flew to her right hand and Hermione felt her stomach drop.

"You know." The realization spluttered from her mouth.

"Miss Granger "

"You know what she did to Harry... what she's doing with that quill." Appalled, she took a step backwards. How could he know and stand aside to allow it to happen?

Snape took a quick look around before he closed the distance between them, towering over her.

"Get a hold of yourself, foolish girl. Certainly, we know," he hissed.

We know. The Headmaster. The other teachers. They all knew. They knew what Umbridge was doing during her detentions and they did nothing to prevent it.

Hermione swallowed, staring into Snape's cold black eyes. "Why doesn't the headmaster "

"stop her?" he asked mockingly, completing her thought. "And what would you think he should do, Miss Granger? Report her to the Board of Governors, to the Minister perhaps?"

He considered her for a moment as if waiting for his words to sink in; and sink in they did, causing her stomach to lurch with nausea and awareness. The Ministry had installed Umbridge. She had Fudge's full support his trust. Dumbledore didn't stand a chance to do anything against her.

Hermione's gaze dropped to the floor. "Nothing. He should do nothing," she whispered, the words tasting as bitter as her surrender as she awaited his sneer, his ridicule for being such a fatuous Gryffindor.

However, her words were followed by nothing but merciful silence, and she already wondered if Snape had even heard her as a large hand closed around her right one.

Warm. Gentle. For a breathless moment, Hermione's heart lost its rhythm at the familiar sensation. Her eyes flew to the hand to those long, slender fingers that covered hers only to see Snape lift her hand slowly, scrutinizing the skin on the back.

"Obviously, you don't need the Murtlap for yourself, Miss Granger", he said coolly, letting go of her hand again and raising his gaze to hers. "Potter again, or is it Weasley this time?"

"What? Oh, no " she stammered, forcing herself to concentrate...*to breathe.*

"Well, Miss Granger?" Snape arched an eyebrow, waiting for her to answer.

Hermione heaved another breath, her left hand searching support from the counter before she finally shook her head sadly.

"It's not Harry, sir. Professor Umbridge has begun to use the quill on other students as well. Two fourth-years, from what I have seen and a first-year as well, but I fear there are more, sir."

"I see," he said, the frown between his brows deepening and after a moment of silence he added, "Miss Granger, there is a " But Snape stopped mid-sentence as footsteps echoed from the back room, drawing quickly nearer.

An instant later, Mr. Jiggers appeared in the doorway, his long white hair floating behind him as he approached the counter.

"Ah, Professor, you are quite lucky," he announced, waving a small grey box enthusiastically. "This is my last set of Ashwinder eggs. I could order another one from Diagon Alley if you "

"One set will be sufficient," Snape cut him off, scowling at the old man.

Hermione observed him place the eggs carefully in a bag, amazed by the pale pinkish smudges that formed on his cheeks as she forced her mind to catalogue the information she had just gained, brushing the first uninvited image of the man in front of her brewing ridiculous love potions away. But within seconds, another image of him helpless, hurt formed in her mind, sending ghost-like shivers down her spine as pieces of knowledge turned into realization. Ashwinder eggs, eaten whole, could ease even the worst spells of ague.

Ague.

Cruciatus.

Sweet Merlin, he needed those eggs to tend to the after-effects he suffered. A new wave of nausea washed over her, and suddenly she was back at his side at Grimmauld Place, hearing those words that wouldn't leave her alone. *Cold. So cold... Don't leave me.*

"Close your mouth, Miss Granger. It isn't very becoming to look like a fish, even for a Gryffindor know-it-all."

Literally, she winced as the insult jolted her from the memory, but before she had a chance to respond, he was gone.

As if he had never been there at all.

Hermione frowned. There is a.... What? What had he wanted to tell her?

"Missy, do you plan on just staring after the professor or is there something you wanted to buy as well?"

She hadn't the ghost of a chance to hide the treacherous blush that covered her cheeks as she turned to Mr. Jiggers. She hadn't meant to stare after Professor Snape, but apparently she had.

Quickly, she made her request.

"I need three bunches of Murtlap tentacles, Mr Jiggers. Do you have any?"

The old man gave her a curt nod and disappeared into his inventory again, frowning, leaving Hermione to wonder if it was just because she had asked for something so cheap as Murtlap.

Once alone in the shop, she took a swift look at her watch. There were only ten minutes left until she would meet with Harry, Luna, and Skeeter, and all her earlier worries returned to her stomach again, brushing every thought about the encounter with Professor Snape away and making her wish there was a spell to make Mr. Jiggers hurry up a bit.

"Maybe it would be wise for Minerva to speak with Harry and explain why we haven't interfered regarding Umbridge's detentions," Dumbledore said, signing the parchment lying before him.

Snape stood stiff in front of the headmaster's desk, hands clapped behind his back.

"I don't think this will be necessary, Albus," he objected, and the old man in front of him looked up from his parchments for the first time during his report on the incident in the Apothecary.

"In the past, Miss Granger has proven to be sensible enough not to provide Potter with information the boy isn't able to handle. I don't think she will share this newfound knowledge with him, given the fact that she realized that no other course of action was possible."

It was true; during his Occlumency lessons with Potter he had come across every precious memory the boy had tried to shield from him, and all this time, he had dreaded the moment he would find the vision of Miss Granger telling the boy about Grimmauld Place, about his Death Eater activities, about his weakness... *About Lily.*

But the moment hadn't come.

"Such praise from you, Severus, for a Gryffindor?" Blue eyes pierced him, calculating, and betrayed the amusement in the headmaster's words.

"For a student," Snape replied coolly, however, he had to fight the instinctive urge to raise his Occlumency shields in the face of the old man's intense gaze.

He was painfully aware that this particular student had occupied his thoughts a bit too regularly lately, but it was nearly impossible, after he had relived the incident in the Pensieve, not to be puzzled and captivated by her foolish promise and... *her tears.* Every smile the irritating girl wasted on him only reminded him of those tears, of the caring tenderness her eyes had held.

Today, in the short moment, he had thought she had been the one to suffer Umbridge's abuse, he had been unsettled by the rush of protectiveness he had felt toward the girl. It was foolish a ridiculous, troublesome sentiment but impossible to deny. Miss Granger's well-being had become important to him. Somehow.

Dumbledore continued to peer at him, even as he removed one of his lemon drops from its wrapper and popped it into his mouth.

"Said student is quite sensible, indeed, and I may add, quite perceptive as well, Severus," he said, only now bending over his parchments again. "Hagrid informed me earlier that our dear Miss Granger had a meeting with Mrs Skeeter in the Three Broomsticks today, together with Miss Lovegood and Harry."

Snape raised an eyebrow. It had been apparent last year that the girl despised Skeeter and her so-called journalism; she wouldn't have her meet Potter without a vital reason.

"I already contacted Xenophilius. Rita isn't working for the *Prophet* anymore, and it is obvious that his daughter was present for a reason today," Dumbledore said, his quill travelling over the parchments again. "It seems Miss Granger is planning to start something of a public campaign in Harry's favour, Severus. *The Quibbler* will publish an interview with him on Tom's return in its March edition."

"Lovegood will refrain from publishing it if you'd asked him to," Snape said, and with an after-thought, "especially when you tell him that the Dark Lord will not be amused about so much publicity at the moment. It will make the man and his daughter another target, Albus."

"I agree, Severus. Nevertheless, I think that Miss Granger's idea has some merit. It will strengthen Harry's self-confidence when people begin to believe his version of events, which is, as we both know, unfortunately the true one."

Snape snorted. "Being his father's son, Potter's self-confidence doesn't need any fostering."

Dumbledore smiled mildly. "I'd like to disagree on this point, Severus."

"So you support this interview?" Behind his back, Snape's hands clenched.

"I do."

"And the Ministry? They will think you have arranged it as a new ploy against Fudge."

"Most likely, they will, Severus. That's why I have asked you here tonight. My sources within the Ministry tell me that Cornelius is trying to secure the Boards' approval to have me removed from the school. And I think, once the interview is published, it will further his plan."

"And then? What are we supposed to do then, Albus?" Snape countered coolly, his knuckles were growing white with anger. He wasn't even willing to comprehend why the old man gambled with the possibility to be replaced as Headmaster... And for what reason? Only to pet precious Potter's ego.

"My presence here is dispensable for a while, Severus, if this scapegoat can placate Cornelius' fears. But you, Severus, you must stay at the school, even if this means cooperating with dear Dolores on a certain level. I need you to remain here as my eyes and ears until this charade comes to an end, especially as she holds you in high regard, thanks to Lucius."

Snape snorted. "And the students?"

"Will be safe."

"Safe?" The word tore through the barriers that had corralled his anger as easy a diamond through glass. Snape placed his hands on Dumbledore's desk, unconcerned about its parchment-filled state, leaning down to get the old man's full attention. His voice strained by cold fury. "I told you minutes ago that the woman has begun to use her quill on first-years. First-years, Albus! And now you tell me the students will be safe, once you are gone. They aren't even safe anymore while you are here."

"That's enough, Severus," Dumbledore thundered, rising from his chair.

"Albus " Snape tried again, but the old man held his hand up, stopping him mid-sentence.

"Thank you for your opinion, Severus. I will take it into consideration. That will be all for tonight"

"As you wish," Snape snapped, leaving the office in a flurry of black robes.

On Tuesday evening Hermione sat once more in the small room next to Professor McGonagall's office, her mind deeply buried in the different student files as she worked on her statistics:

McAllister, Ezelda NEWT Registration: 1975

Ollerton, Paulina NEWT Registration: 1975

Travers, Selene NEWT Registration: 1975

Travers... Hermione paused, laying her quill down. Something about the name sounded familiar to her, but she couldn't put her finger on it. She leaned back in her chair, lost in thoughts as a loud *pop* broke through the silence in the room. Hermione winced, a flash of adrenaline rushing through her veins.

"Hello Dobby," she exclaimed, surprised, as she saw the elf standing next to her desk, holding a small package in his hands. "What are you doing here?"

Dobby glanced carefully around, his eyes appearing even larger than usual, before he whispered, "I has something for Harry Potter's friend."

He handed her the parcel, but not without looking over his shoulder again. "Professor Snape told Dobby, I is only to give it to Harry Potter's friend when nobody sees."

"Professor Snape?" Hermione gave Dobby a surprised look as she took the item that was wrapped in light brown packing paper.

The elf nodded enthusiastically, and Hermione turned the parcel in her hands, a sudden fluttering in her stomach. *What could he possibly sent me? And why?*

Looking at Dobby again, she asked, "Did Professor Snape tell you why you should give me this, Dobby?"

"I is told Harry Potter's friend does know it all."

Hermione snorted quietly. That sounded like something he would say. Eyeing the small enigma in her hands curiously, she placed the parcel in front of her on the desk. Her heart pounded as she began to unwrap it carefully.

Inside, there was a black jar with a folded piece of parchment lying on its top. As apparently intended, she opened the parchment first. The neat, spidery handwriting was unmistakable.

Miss Granger,

The jar attached to this message contains marigold salve, abuzz with natural zinc and midnight honey. Used after easing a wound with Murtlap essence, the salve will prevent the affected skin from scarring.

For obvious reasons, I have to ask you not to reveal my involvement in this matter, Miss Granger.

S.S.

Hermione's eyes flew once more over the note, and with every word the pounding of her heart seemed to increase. Marigold salve that was what he had wanted to tell her in the apothecary. Their encounter had completely left her mind in these last days, but Professor Snape hadn't forgotten about it, and he must have recognized that the lines on the back Harry's hand had begun to scar over.

However, there was something else about this tiny piece of parchment, something more precious to her heart than all house points, all the praise he could have ever given her in the last five years, something that flooded her chest with dizzying warmth. He trusted her, trusted her to keep his involvement, his help a secret, a help that as small as it was could be dicey in the face of You-Know-Who.

Exhaling slowly, Hermione turned to Dobby again who was still standing next to her.

"Dobby, would you deliver a note to Professor Snape for me?"

The elf nodded again, his ears wagging slightly. Hermione tore a piece of the parchment before her away, her quill rushing over the material.

Thank you, Sir, a thousandfold. I'll put it to good use.

H.G.

She took a long look at the message. These few words would have to do. She didn't dare write more specific thanks for the fear that her message would somehow fall into the wrong hands. She folded the note, her fingers a little unsteady as she did and bent toward Dobby and held it out to him.

"Dobby, it is pivotal that you only give this to Professor Snape when the professor is alone. Do you understand?"

"I is knowing that. Dobby is keeping all of Professor Snape's secrets," he said earnestly and gave Hermione a slight offended look before disappearing with a quiet *pop*.

Hermione's brows furrowed as her eyes lingered on the now empty space next to her. If the sound of an Apparating house-elf could ever hold an indignant timbre, she was sure it would sound like Dobby's quiet *pop* had right now.

What other secrets has Professor Snape entrusted you with, Dobby?

Worrying her bottom lip, Hermione turned back to the student files before her and her eyes fell on a name, lurking from beneath sheets in front of her. *Evans, Lily.*

Curiously, she pulled the registration form forward. It was dated on 1st March 1977 and showed that Harry's mum had enrolled to take her NEWT-tests in no fewer than seven classes. For a moment, Hermione had to fight a wave of jealousy as she realized that Lily Evans hadn't settled for the easy ones like Care of Magical Creatures or Divination, but for Ancient Runes and Arithmancy beside Potions, Defence against the Dark Arts, Charms, Transfiguration and History of Magic.

Her eyes lingered unseeing on the parchment as she remembered Dobby's words, "*I is keeping all Professor Snape's secrets.*"

Lily... Do you know who Professor Snape's Lily is, Dobby? But even if he did, she would never tempt him to betray the trust Professor Snape obviously had in him.

Her eyes travelled over Lily Evan's registration form again, and another thought hit her. Hastily, Hermione browsed through the pile of paper on the table. Professor Snape and Harry's mum had been in the same year. Looking at her professor's form would reveal how much of each other they had seen during their last two years of Hogwarts.

Only after endless minutes she finally found it, her eyes hastening over the lines. And her breath caught.

No... oh, please no...

It couldn't be. Professor Snape had enrolled for the same seven subjects as Harry's mum and additionally for Herbology. Beside this one class, they had shared the same class schedule during their sixth and seventh year. They had seen each other every day.

They could have even been friends... *Friends.*

Slowly, the parchment fell from her numb fingers and Hermione rose from her chair, her whole body trembling slightly.

Cold. Suddenly, she felt so cold, so very cold. When had the room become a shell of ice? She hugged herself as she walked towards the single window of the small room.

Unseeing eyes stared through the windowpane, straying over the grounds of the castle.

An identical class schedule. It was a clue, nothing more. She had found nothing but a first piece of evidence. The rational part of her knew that. There were still years of school records left to survey, and even if she didn't find another Lily among Hogwarts' students, there was the small chance that she was a home-trained witch or had attended Beauxbatons or any other magical school for witches around the world...

So why wouldn't her heart believe in those possibilities anymore?

Reviews are *love* and keep the muse happy ;o))

The Best Of Memories

Chapter 6 of 12

One night at Grimmauld Place, Hermione witnesses something that will change her perception of Severus Snape forever.

Disclaimer: All rights belong to J.K. Rowling.

Author's note: And all my thanks belong to Annie Talbot and Losille for their wonderful hand-holding.

Snape paced his office with long strides, trying to diminish the slow burning anger searing the pit of his stomach. He needed to calm down before he could Floo the old man to return his Pensieve along with his latest report on Potter's progress in Occlumency.

Progress. Snape snorted, and the anger flared again. It would be a short report, short and simple and devastating as there was no progress; simply not an ounce of noticeable progress in over three unfortunate months. Instead, night after night the boy was advancing further into the Department of Mysteries, lured by the Dark Lord's invisible call.

The vulnerability of Potter's mind endangered everything: the Order, their cause. His position as spy and as a minor causality his life would be forfeit should the Dark Lord ever discover glimpses of his Occlumency lessons with the boy through their connection.

However, the boy hadn't even begun to comprehend that there were people out there who risked their necks to save his unworthy one.

Running a restless hand through his hair, Snape sank with his back flat against the cool stone wall of his office as he heard a familiar, impatient voice echoing through the oak of the door next to him.

"Vince, what the hell are you waiting for? Umbridge called us minutes ago."

Draco. The boy had to be standing just outside in the hallway. Snape moved closer to the ancient wood, his hand already on the door handle.

"I'm coming." Crabbe's grunt was almost swallowed by the loud thuds of his footfalls, resounding with the walls of the dungeons. Instinctively, Snape used the moment to push his office door slightly ajar. A second later a small group of Slytherins passed by, and his frown deepened. Umbridge was gathering her Inquisitorial Squad.

And once again, it was Draco's voice that commanded the group, "Hurry up, all of you. This time we'll get Potter, Weasel King and their Mudblood."

...their Mudblood. Snape's fingers curled tighter around the door handle, and for a moment, he squeezed his eyes shut. Hearing the fateful word, spoken with such contempt by a young man who had grown up under his wing, was disappointing, even hurtful. However, hearing it for the first time consciously with reference to a young woman who had shown him nothing but unconditional kindness stabbed into the ancient wound close to his heart that refused to heal.

Meanwhile outside Goyle rasped, "You're sure?" as he tried to keep up with the others.

"Yeah, Edgcombe finally spilled where they gather. We'll just need to catch them when..."

The rest of Draco's sentence was lost, as the group had eventually moved out of earshot, but he didn't need to hear more. It was plainly obvious to what Draco had referred. Cursing under his breath, he closed the door again. During several Occlumency lessons, when he had probed the boy's mind, he had found random scenes of

Potter teaching a bunch of students somewhere in the accursed castle not that the old man had ever found it necessary to interfere with this lunacy and he was certain that one of those students had been Marietta Edgecombe.

Damn you, Potter. Kneading his neck with one hand, Snape tried to collect his thoughts. He needed to warn the boy, needed to warn Miss Granger, and right now, he didn't even know where to find them. His only chance was that the Potter-besotted house-elf the headmaster had assigned him would know more about it.

"Dobby," he barked, and within seconds said house-elf appeared next to him with a quiet *pop*.

"Professor Snape has called Dobby, sir?"

"Dobby, do you know where Harry Potter is right now, where he teaches his friends?"

The elf took a step backwards, giving him a hesitant nod, "I is not telling Harry Potter's secrets, not even to Professor Snape, sir."

Snape suppressed a snort and crouched down, meeting the elf's eyes on equal level. "Dobby, you must go and warn Harry Potter. Professor Umbridge knows his secret. She is coming for him and his friends."

The urgency in his voice was plain, and in front of him, already large eyes widened fearfully. The elf nodded, and Snape added quickly, "And Dobby, you must not reveal that I sent you. That's an order. Do you hear me?" Another nod and within seconds another quiet *pop* filled the air. The elf was gone.

Heaving a breath, Snape turned towards the fireplace and threw a handful of Floo powder into the flames. "Headmaster's office," he called out, and a moment later, "Albus, are you there?"

"Ah, Severus." Dumbledore's head appeared in the flames. "I already expected..."

"Umbridge knows about Potter's teaching activities, Albus. At this moment, she and her pursuers are out to catch him," Snape said, trying to preserve the indifferent note in his voice.

The old man in front of him closed his eyes for a small eternity, looking every bit his 119 years, exhausted from carrying the weight of the world.

"I sent the elf to warn them," he added, observing the headmaster's pale, wrinkled face. "Although I can't guarantee it was in time."

"Thank you, Severus. I shall be prepared in any case," Dumbledore said, already retreating from the flames.

The flames flickered out, and a cheerless laugh caught in Snape's throat; an unpleasant sound echoing through the silence of his office as he leaned with outstretched arms against the mantelpiece.

Prepared? Not this time, Albus. By calling on Educational Decree Number Twenty-four, Fudge would have the boy expelled before the first light of day touched the horizon. This time, not even the old man would be able to prevent it, when Umbridge got hold of Potter... of Miss Granger.

The frown between Snape's brows deepened. No, not when, *if* Umbridge got hold of them... Maybe there was still a chance to keep the headmaster's precious little Gryffindors out of harm's way; maybe not everything was lost tonight.

With long, swift strides, he crossed the room, robes billowing behind him as rushed out of his office and into the dungeons.

"This isn't over yet, Granger. Do you hear me? Umbridge will learn that you were part of this," Pansy's angry voice haunted Hermione as she fled from the Prefects' bathroom, her knees weak with fear.

But she ran, ran so fast her lungs hurt, and she didn't dare to stop, not even for a moment, to catch a breath. Pansy, and probably the rest of the Inquisitorial Squad, would be right on her heels the moment she countered the Jelly-Legs Jinx. It had been sheer luck that Hermione had even been able to cast it in the first place.

Her eyes flew down the hallway. It seemed so long, so very long. If only she could make it to the staircase without being seen, from there on it would be only a short distance to the library on the fourth floor. Among the students there, she could vanish; there she would be safe.

Anxiously, she risked a glance over her shoulder, trying to make out if her head start had lasted, and it had; there was still no sign of Pansy. Relief quickened her steps as she passed the statue of Boris the Bewildered. She never saw the dark figure that had emerged from the depth of the hallway until she collided with something solid.

Hermione let out a startled yelp, and two large hands grasped her shoulders, preventing her from tumbling backwards. Confused, she glanced up and found the unreadable face of Severus Snape scowling down at her.

"I'm sorry, sir," she stammered, her heart leaping in her throat. "I didn't mean..."

"Silence," he hissed, touching one of the stony hands of Boris the Bewildered next to them with his wand. Immediately, the statue swung aside and revealed a small, pitch-black passage, and before Hermione truly realised it, Snape tightened his grasp on her upper arm and guided her, gently but insistently, inside the passage with him.

The darkness in the passage swallowed them, and a claustrophobic feeling constricted her chest as the massive statue behind them swung back in place.

Where are you taking me? She turned her head into Snape's direction, still blinded by darkness as she felt him withdraw his hand from her arm.

"Close your eyes, Miss Granger, it will be less painful if your sight adjusts slowly to the *Lumos Maxima* I need to cast." The harsh sound of his voice, so far closer to her ear as she had expected, made her wince. However, she followed his request, and a moment later, even through closed eyelids, the brightness of his spell surrounded her.

She blinked. Once. Twice, until the hallway in front of her took shape. It was long and narrow and even fully lit there appeared to be no end in sight, and Hermione realised that she had no idea where the eventual end could possibly be.

"Miss Granger," Snape began, turning to face her, cold black eyes meeting hers, "am I correct in assuming you are running from the Inquisitorial Squad?"

A demanding eyebrow rose, and Hermione felt her stomach drop. Of all the things running through her mind in these last moments, she hadn't braced herself for this question, for the fact that he knew.

"II, well, yes, sir."

His face darkened at her answer, but she couldn't tell if it was from disappointment or anger, and he granted her no opportunity to find out as he remained silent and turned to stride ahead, robes billowing behind him.

Hermione, however, remained rooted to the spot, her legs heavy and unable to move as if she had been *Stupefied*. It took a moment until Snape recognised she wasn't walking behind him and turned around, inclining his head and giving her an expectant look.

"Miss Granger, you would do well to follow me. Unless you don't want to get back to your Common Room tonight."

She blinked, waiting for his words to truly take form in her mind. Had he truly offered to take her to the Gryffindor Common Room, unseen by Umbridge and her myrmidons? He had.

"Oh certainly, sir," she exclaimed, hastening toward him, only to add a quiet, "Thank you," as she reached him.

"Don't thank me for keeping your reckless Gryffindor neck out of trouble, Miss Granger," he snarled, his voice filled with stinging indifference, "I am simply trying to spare the headmaster more hassle than Potter's capture will doubtlessly already cause him."

"She she caught Harry?" Hermione paled, clenching her hands into fists at her side, trying to repress the fear that began to claw at her heart.

Snape crossed his arms in front of his chest, giving her a cold, pointed look.

"So it appears, Miss Granger. I had the misfortune to encounter Professor Umbridge and Potter on their way to the headmaster's office."

Oh, Harry.

For a moment, she closed her eyes. "Were there other students, Professor?" The question was nothing but a strangled, helpless whisper.

"Other students, Miss Granger?" Snape mocked, but Hermione could have hardly cared less right now. "You mean the other *delinquents* beside yourself and Potter who so deliberately violated school rules tonight? It will please you to hear that, at least to my knowledge, Potter was the only capture of the Inquisitorial Squad so far, and those *others* you are referring to are back in their Common Rooms."

Cold black eyes still lingered on her face, chiding her silently, but Hermione couldn't hold back the sigh of relief. Ginny, Neville, Luna... *Ron*. They were safe, and it was so very obvious that, despite his unforgiving demeanour, Snape had somehow been involved in their escape... and if only *'to spare the headmaster more hassle'* as he had so detachedly put it before. She would question the others later on that.

However, her momentary respite from anxiety ceased like a flame in the icy wind as Snape spoke again.

"Surely I don't have to point out how undeservingly fortunate you and those *others* have been this evening, Miss Granger," he spat, his voice a blade of silken fury. "But it is your foolishness in particular that truly amazes me, Miss Granger. I had the impression that you, of all students, understood to what ends Dolores Umbridge will go to gain control over this school, and even more, how important it is for Potter to remain within the protection of these walls. However, obviously, I was mistaken, and although I don't know what will be the outcome of this evening for Potter, I can assure you that I will advise the headmaster that this little endeavour has consequences for you and your friends. Have I made myself clear, Miss Granger?"

"Yes, sir." She swallowed, the full weight of his disappointment suddenly heavy on her heart, and her gaze dropped, unable to endure the coldness in his eyes, knowing he was right, so very right, as her thoughts drifted to Harry Harry who was right now in the headmaster's office with Umbridge. If they all had been caught tonight if Harry were expelled...

She swallowed again, but the red-hot lump spreading in her throat wouldn't go away. *It's my entire fault. I asked him to teach us. I asked him to break the school rules.*

"Miss Granger?" She heard Snape say her name, even noted that somehow, every hint of fury was gone from his voice, but she couldn't answer, she couldn't speak, an invisible force tying her tongue like sweet molasses in her mouth.

She couldn't even tell if it was an eternity or two later that she felt a pair of large, warm hands on her upper arms and heard the ever-so-soft demand, "Miss Granger, look at me."

And she did, feeling very young and foolish as her eyes brimmed with tears, but the strangely concerned expression in those dark orbs facing her let her find her voice again.

"If they expel Harry... It was my idea, Professor, mine alone. I need to go and take the responsibility..."

"You will do no such thing, Miss Granger. The headmaster will find a way to save Potter from expulsion," Snape declared, before rolling his eyes and adding with an afflicted growl, "Trust me, he always does."

For a heartbeat, Hermione was nothing but stunned, until the mental image of all the times the headmaster had worked his way around Professor Snape where Harry had been concerned curved her mouth into a wobbly smile; a smile that Snape graced merely with a half-hearted glare as he let his hands sink again, confirming for Hermione that this had been just the reaction he had wanted to achieve.

Brushing the tears from her cheeks, the irony of his earlier demand hit her, and before she had a chance to truly think them through, words were already tumbling from her lips. "I already do that, Professor. Trust you, I mean."

A quiet, firm declaration, and as she searched his eyes, a little tentative and fearful, she found nothing but warmth, an all-consuming warmth that made her stomach tingle oddly until his gaze broke away.

"It's time to go, Miss Granger."

It truly was, and a moment later she walked beside him through the tunnel, regarding their surroundings curiously. Nothing but heavy cobwebs graced the dark stone walls...no torches, no suits of armour, not even portraits...and Hermione got the impression that nobody but ghosts had walked these halls for centuries.

"What kind of passage is this?"

"Miss Granger, according to Educational Decree Number Twenty-six, I am only allowed to provide you with potion-related information, as you should know by now." Snape smirked.

"And according to recent experience, I am quite good at keeping secrets, Professor, as you should know by now." She smiled.

"Indeed, that you are, Miss Granger, that you are," Snape murmured, more to himself than to her, Hermione thought, casting him a curious glance as he added with his usual sneer, "For the sake of stilling your insufferable curiosity, at least for tonight, Miss Granger, it's an emergency system, created by the founders themselves. It allows us to evacuate students from every place in the castle, should ever the need occur. Obviously, this hasn't been the case in recent centuries." He gestured toward a particular large cobweb in front of them that he needed to remove before they could pass. "There are hidden doorways on each floor, mostly next to the Common Rooms or classrooms, and they all lead to a main tunnel that ends outside on the grounds, close to the front gate."

A furrow grew between Hermione brows. "I have never heard of such a tunnel system before. Why is it not mentioned in *Hogwarts: A History*?"

"I would hope it is not mentioned in that particular book; only the heads of House and the headmaster are to know of its existence. Therefore, please, Miss Granger, refrain from mentioning it to the Weasley twins after tonight, or they will spend the next month trying to regain access to these halls." He gave her a feigned pained look that made her smile again.

"Not a single word will pass my lips, Professor," she reassured with a playful dramatic gesture, pressing a hand to her chest and was pleased to catch a glimpse of hardly concealed amusement tugging at the corner of his mouth.

They walked the rest of the way in mutual silence, and after some time, Hermione found herself standing outside the Gryffindor Common Room.

She drew breath to give the Fat Lady the current password but turned back once more, and her eyes flew to the man still standing in the shadows of the secret doorway. Upon meeting her gaze, he gave her a last stiff nod and vanished into the darkness again. For long moments, Hermione's eyes lingered unseeingly on the spot he had occupied, rubbing one hand unconsciously against her chest, where a peculiar, painful knot had begun to form, before she finally stepped inside.

It was later that night, when she was sitting on the settee in the Common Room, listening to Ron as he told how Snape's sudden appearance had distracted Crabbe and Goyle enough to miss the broom closet where he, Neville and Ginny were hiding, that Harry caught her gaze, and Hermione realised that fear and adrenaline had pushed something far, far from her mind tonight.

Only hours before the DA had been discovered and this whole catastrophe had broken loose, she had completed the research for her "*Lily Project*", right before the Easter holidays, exactly as she expected. Everything was as expected, except for one thing: in the last fifty years, there had never been another Lily at Hogwarts beside Harry's mum, and the painful awareness that had clouded her vision as she had written down the last name on her list returned, now as she was confronted with a particular pair of green eyes. She barely heard Ron's concluding remark, "First good deed in his life and the git did it unconsciously," as she rubbed her hurting chest again.

For the first time, the possibility of Professor Snape's Lily being some unknown, foreign witch among the Death Eaters appeared disturbingly desirable to her heart.

"Oh, come on 'Mione. We are done with studying for today," Ron claimed with a yawn, leaning with one shoulder against the bookshelf. "And Harry will be back from Snape soon."

The two of them had spent the last few hours in the library, while Harry attended another of his Occlumency lessons. Most of the time, Hermione had stood on a ladder, browsing through rows of potions literature with Ron at her side.

"I haven't found the book yet, Ron. The one I need for our essay," she said, biting her bottom lip as she tried to concentrate on her friend's question while placing the book she held back into the shelf.

"But you are right. At least one of us should be back in the Common Room when Harry returns. Particularly as it's his first lesson with Professor Snape since Professor Dumbledore has been gone," she said, turning to Ron; and momentarily her heart plummeted, as she was suddenly all too aware of his broad smile and those bright blue eyes that followed her steps watchful as she descended the stairs.

"So, let's go," Ron announced happily as her feet touched the ground again.

"Oh, well, yes no, damnit. Would you mind going ahead, Ron? I No, we really need this book to prepare the potions essay over the holidays."

"Whatever you say, 'Mione. See you in the Common Room, then." Ron shrugged and turned around, approaching the table where Neville was sitting. A moment later, she watched them leave the library together and had to fight the well-known feeling of regret from knotting her stomach as she turned back to the bookshelf in front of her.

Eyes travelling over the wall of books, Hermione sighed. Today, Snape had assigned them a quite challenging essay on the different usages of Phoenix Tears in healing potions. However, the standard work on the subject, *Merlin's Encyclopaedia of Most Potente Healing Potions* was nowhere to be found. Earlier, Madam Pince had presumed that maybe a student had misplaced the book, but the next regular listing would only take place after the Easter break. Thus Hermione had to go through the whole potions department of the library herself if she even wanted a chance to find it before the essay was due. Merlin alone knew how the other Gryffindors planned to write their essay without it.

Frowning, she regarded the shelf in front of her, trying to figure out where she had left off when Ron had demanded her attention. Her fingertips trailed lightly over the backs of different ancient tomes with the letter 'H' as a whole shelf filled with documentary volumes caught her eyes.

She knew she wouldn't have bothered to take a second look had the title '*Hogwarts Potions Projects*' combined with a range of dates not drawn her attention. The books covered over four decades of Potions projects, beginning with the year 1941 and ending with the edition of 1980, a time when Professor Snape had been a student himself at Hogwarts at least from 1971 to 1978, given the date on his NEWT registration form.

Curiously, Hermione withdrew a volume and thumbed through the pages, her brow furrowing in annoyance. She had never before heard of a Potions professor with the name Horace Slughorn, but obviously he was the one who had initiated this series that portrayed the students and their projects, which he had supervised. What a very self-aggrandising thing to do. Hermione couldn't even imagine Professor McGonagall organising something like that, only to trumpet her name on every page, and that Professor Snape had refused to indulge in this tradition as well was obvious as the series ended the year he had started teaching at Hogwarts.

Several minutes passed and year after year, student after student flew by. Hermione had already opened the edition of 1974 when a glimpse of one photo caught her attention. She turned back to the page and her breath hitched with surprise and shock, and she nearly dropped the book as her hands began to tremble frantically.

The beautiful girl in the moving photo alternated between smiling into camera and at the boy sitting next to her at a desk in the Potions classroom, while the boy scowled at Hermione in a very familiar way.

However, in the short moment when the girl turned to him, the scowl vanished and a painfully shy, small smile changed his features.

Unbelievably, Hermione's eyes flew to the caption at the bottom of the page, only to find, imprinted in black and white, the confirmation of something she had tried to deny... to ignore... to declare impossible for weeks now:

'The Different Qualities of Mandrake Roots'

Project by Lily Evans and Severus Snape,

Hogwarts 1974.

She blinked, and it took a moment, but then, merciless and inexorable, the truth between those lines fell like a knife straight into her heart and all other possibilities fell apart.

Harry's mum.

Lily.

The answer to all those painful questions was right in front of her, smiling at her, beautiful with her long red hair and those bright green eyes, and the love Professor Snape had felt and still felt for her was evident, captured in this photo forever.

Numbly, Hermione staggered backwards against the wall, pressing the book tightly to her chest as if it could shield her against the icy claws of cognition that seized her. There was no other Lily, there had never been one, not at Hogwarts, not among the Death Eaters, or at any other place in the world.

Lily was gone. Forever. Regardless of how much he needed... loved her. As even in this all-magical world, the greatest amount of love couldn't bring back the dead. And he was still here, in this castle, surrounded by years of memories and forced to teach her only son.

James' son.

Another man's son.

Maybe the son he had always wanted... Hermione bit the inside of her cheek, stifling the desperate sob that rose in her throat as something, located deep beneath her heart, cracked irrecoverably.

Slowly, her knees giving way, she slid down the wall and sank to the floor.

Glass shattered.

Falling to the floor in thousand pieces, like the remains of his last solace, the certitude that Potter's spawn would never know.

But, oh, the boy knew now. Thanks to his own thoughtlessness, the boy had seen, had watched how he had been ridiculed by his father, how he had hurt her, lost her.

Lost Lily.

With an agonised groan, Snape hurled a row of empty test tubes from his worktable. He should never have left the boy with the Pensieve unsupervised. He should have known that the impertinent boy wouldn't be able to resist. And now, he was fortunate that he had returned and found Potter before the scene in the Pensieve had shifted to the other memories buried in the stone basin, providing the boy with even more information to humiliate him behind his back: his guilt, his weakness. Potter wouldn't have waited a single minute to gloat and tell Miss Granger that her promise was stored, with all her trust and kindness, in the Pensieve of her greasy Potions professor like a forbidden treasure...

Snape forced his eyes shut, anger and humiliation coursing through his veins as he grasped the rim of his worktable with violent strength. To hell with Granger and her foolish promise, that had begun oh, ever so slowly to creep beneath his skin; and to hell with Potter and those beautiful emerald eyes that only reminded him of what he was missing... *Lily.*

Her presence. Her smile. Her laughter. Lost forever. *Forever.*

He gasped for air as the ancient pain curled once more around his heart, crushing it until there seemed to be nothing left but a pounding, empty shell. With one movement, he overthrew the working table. All around him, more glass shattered, and his hands still shook as he leaned against the next potions shelf.

He had long ago accepted that he was alone alone to face the things to come alone in this damned dungeon, among people who despised him alone between two masters. He would even be alone when the end came. It was his curse, his obligation and it was entirely his own damned fault.

My fault alone. And he could face this fate again tomorrow, but not tonight. Tonight it felt unbearable, now that Potter's insolent spawn had pried into the hole in his soul... But he wouldn't give the boy a second chance to repeat the deed. Not if he wanted to preserve what was left of his sanity.

Snape turned from the potions shelf, staggering towards his storeroom for a bottle of Calming Draught as his eyes fell on the Pensieve, still simmering on his desk like the Pandora's box of his past.

On Tuesday, Dumbledore had slipped through Fudge's fingers. He had been gone from the castle before Snape had been able to return the item to him, and in his last message, the headmaster had advised him explicitly to keep it safe and out of Umbridge's claws until his return. Oh, he would, even if he didn't need it anymore.

Or maybe... Snape drew a deep breath and approached his desk. Maybe there was another way beside potions to ease the pain, at least for tonight.

Carefully, he lifted the memories Potter had so mercilessly disturbed minutes ago from the Pensieve into a phial, placing them securely in his drawer; he wouldn't take them back not tonight.

He pulled up his wooden desk chair, settling into it and summoned his wand, concentrating as he placed the tip against his temple. And then, silvery-blue, fell strand after strand into the Pensieve until there were no good memories left. For a brief moment, his eyes drifted close again and a small smile touched his mouth as he lowered his face into the simmering liquid and fell.

A heartbeat later, he stood in the middle of the Entrance Hall, flurrying with departing and excited students, but he heard her voice nonetheless, heard her voice for the first time after what seemed to be aeons and spun around.

"Sev, we've got to hurry."

"I already told you, I am not going, Lily."

"Oh, come on, Sev."

Snape moved closer to his younger memory-self, his eyes devouring the sight of Lily beautiful and wonderfully alive. He swallowed. It was the winter of their fourth year. An innocent time when their paths hadn't been decided...

"No, I am not going home this time. Every year it gets worse." The younger Snape looked at the floor, dark curtains of hair falling forward, concealing his face. "He gets worse, Lily."

Lily stepped up to his younger memory-self, taking his hand in hers, and Snape felt his own twitch from the sight alone.

"Sev, you can come over and stay with us when your dad is in one of his moods again, I promised, remember? And your mum will be devastated if you don't come home for Christmas."

Two pairs of coal-black eyes were fixed on their joined hands, and the younger Snape nodded, absently, following Lily's gentle pull.

"So, let's get your trunk." She smiled at him as they walked towards the dungeons. "I know you are no coward, Sev."

And the scene changed.

Outside the Pensieve, next to Snape's still form, Dobby shook his head sadly, collecting the broken glass from the floor.

Reviews are *love*. Please let me know what you think. Love it? Hate it? More?

A Weakness Unforgiven

Chapter 7 of 12

One night at Grimmauld Place, Hermione witnesses something that will change her perception of Severus Snape forever.

The letters blurred in front of her, black and white dissolving into a sea of different shades of grey. Hermione sighed as she leaned back in the oak chair and pressed the heels of her hands against her burning eyes. It was late afternoon, and she had been in the library for hours revising for her Astronomy OWLs that evening.

When she let her hands sink again and looked around, a knowing smile touched her lips. Next to her, Ron had fallen asleep, his head pillowed on his arms. Carefully, she removed the green leaflet on a career as a dragon tamer he was still holding from his hand before her gaze travelled to Harry. He was sitting two places opposite to her. An open notebook, quills and a sea of Astronomy notes lay in front of him on the table, but his eyes lingered absently on the library window. He had appeared quiet and withdrawn during the Easter break, and his condition hadn't changed since. Thus, with only the Astronomy and History of Magic exams still to pass and the worst of their OWLs already over, Hermione became more and more worried that Harry wasn't simply suffering from the exam stress they all had experienced.

Her gaze lingered still on her friend's face as Harry momentarily flinched in pain and only seconds later, with a seemingly unconscious gesture, rubbed his forehead. Ghost-like fingers ran cold down her spine. This was the fourth time she had noticed him doing it today. The previous day, when for the first time she had realised how often his scar appeared to hurt, she had started to count. This wasn't supposed to happen. The Occlumency was supposed to shield him from You-Know-Who's emotions, but obviously it didn't, despite all his reassurances to the contrary. Hermione bit her bottom lip. He couldn't go on like that.

Harry was endangering himself and everyone else belonging to the Order if his thoughts were an open book to You-Know-Who. She needed to persuade him to ask Professor Snape to resume his Occlumency lessons. Even Sirius had told him to do so. But Harry? Harry hadn't. He probably never would. Hermione's brow furrowed at the thought. She didn't care how advanced Professor Snape thought him to be in order to practice Occlumency on his own. He wasn't, and if Harry continued to refuse to talk to Professor Snape, she would do it herself.

... talk to Professor Snape. She slumped forward and rested her elbows on the table, burying her head in her hands. She hadn't come face to face with her professor since her discovery in the library; she had been eternally grateful for that. Ever since she had found the photo of him and Lily, she felt as if she had beheaded a Hydra. While she may have found the answer for which she had so desperately searched, her mind spun now with new questions: questions she had no answers for and that twisted her heart in unknown ways. She had spent sleepless hours alone wondering if she needed to tell Harry about Professor Snape's love for his mum.

It had been one thing to keep the information from Harry while it was still a mere suspicion on her heart, but now, now that she knew, wasn't she obliged to tell him? However, every morning during breakfast, the look into her friend's tense face had let her decide otherwise.

There were so many missing pieces to this puzzle. What had Professor Snape and Harry's mum been to each other? Friends. That much was obvious... but lovers? And if they had been lovers, for how long and what would it change now? In the last five years, Hermione had seen Harry draw so much strength and comfort from his parents' memory, so much that it even shaped his Patronus. In some way they had been with him in the fight against Quirrell, and they had been with him in the graveyard last year when he faced You-Know-Who; Hermione was certain that they would be with him in the next inescapable confrontation with the dark wizard.

No, she would never have the heart to cast the slightest shadow over this memory by telling Harry about a love that, unrequited or not, was buried deep in the past, a love she should never have disturbed. But she had. She had opened this Pandora's Box, and now all those new questions haunted her like a punishment. Yet, among all those questions, there was one that settled with an undeniable heaviness on her breast from time to time.

How, in the name of all that was sacred, was it ever possible that Professor Snape joined You-Know-Who if he had loved Lily, had loved a Muggle-born witch with all his heart? Hermione had no answer, no explanation to solve this paradox and keep it from tightening her chest whenever her eyes met the Potions master's face. And every time, the bitter angle of his mouth only reminded her how the smile he had given Lily had changed his features had changed him.

Hermione sighed and lifted her head again. A moment later, Harry turned his head and caught her gaze, yawning. "How about dinner? I don't think I can read another line without something to eat. You?"

"Starving, actually." She cast him a wry smile as she gestured towards Ron's sleeping form. "I guess we should wake him, then."

"Yeah, we better do," said Harry, grinning, as he collected the notes in front of him. "He would never forgive us if we allow him to miss dinner."

Hermione placed her right hand gently on Ron's shoulder. However, the light squeeze she gave him wasn't enough to wake her sleeping friend. It was merely rewarded with a deep growl of protest. Hermione smiled and leaned forward, bringing her lips close to Ron's ear.

Gentle words to finally rouse him from his slumber had already formed on her lips when the nutmeg-like scent of Ron's hair teased her senses. Her heart plummeted painfully, a feeling that was all too familiar by now. She swallowed, but no sound would come from her dry mouth. A moment later, she felt Ron stir beneath her hand and withdrew it silently, waiting for him to wake up on his own.

Several minutes later, the trio entered the Great Hall, where the sight of an abandoned seat next to the toad-faced Headmistress tightened Hermione's chest with a different kind of pain.

Snape didn't spare a second glance at the delicate female hand that placed the glass of Firewhisky on the antique table in front of him and bided his time until the waitress retreated. Only when the fireside lounge was finally deserted did he look up and meet the grey eyes of Lucius Malfoy. Even in the warm light of flaring flames, they preserved an icy expression.

"So, why I am truly here, Lucius?" Snape asked. "Obviously, you haven't asked me to come all the way from Hogwarts on such short notice to merely share a drink with an old friend."

Malfoy's owl, with a request to meet him at his wizarding society tonight, had reached him only hours ago, something that happened only when it was truly important. However, instead of answering Snape's question, the blond wizard seized his glass of Firewhisky and emptied it with a single gulp.

Placing the goblet on the table again, he leaned back in the armchair. "Our Lord paid me a late visit last night, Severus. He is confident he has found the solution to acquiring the prophecy."

Snape cast Malfoy an unimpressed look over the rim of his glass as he sipped at the liquor, ignoring the sudden flicker of foreboding in his chest. Several equally devastating scenarios could result from this development; and he decided that he would prefer not to be confronted with either one of them while he waited for Malfoy to continue his report. Time passed, yet the blond wizard remained silent, his gaze lingering on the flaring flames in the fireplace.

Eventually, Snape said, "This is excellent news, Lucius, but I don't see why they require my presence tonight. Certainly, our Lord wishes to introduce us to his new plan

himself the next time he summons us."

"Certainly, Severus, and there will be a summoning very soon. However " Malfoy turned to face him, "the Dark Lord wants you not to answer his next call. He has decided that, in the unlikely case that the plan should fail, he does not wish to compromise your important position at Hogwarts as well."

This time, it was Snape who emptied his glass with a single gulp.

"Well," he drawled, turning the empty crystal goblet between his palms, "one would be believe our Lord still doesn't trust me." It was more of a statement than a question, but Malfoy took it on nevertheless.

"At least not completely, my friend, and " his delicate mouth twitched with obvious distaste, "our dear Bellatrix does her utmost that it remains this way."

Snape leaned back in the armchair and crossed his arms in front of his chest, thankful that the gesture hid the slight trembling of his hands. "I wish I could say I am surprised."

"She is actually convinced you gave Dumbledore the information that the Dark Lord pursues the prophecy," said Malfoy, waving a hand dismissively.

Snape snorted. "As if *that* wasn't easy for the old fool to deduce after the incident with the Unspeakable at the Department of Mysteries."

"Exactly my notion. What was his name again, ah yes, Bode. Well, that was unfortunate, and poor Avery has still to recover."

"Anyway," Malfoy went on as he reached for the empty goblets and refilled them, "I am confident I have discovered the considerable reason why our Lord is, well, a little edgy about your loyalty, Severus."

"A considerable reason, Lucius?" Snape asked, sneering. "You mean beside me staying for over sixteen years at Hogwarts after the Dark Lord's fall and not appearing at his side immediately when he called me and it was incontrovertible that his Lordship had returned?"

However, the blond wizard simply placed a goblet brimful with liquor in front of him and insisted when Snape made a declining gesture, "Drink it. You'll need it."

Eventually, Snape took the crystal and raised it in a mock toast. Yet even the burning liquid in his throat couldn't keep the cold breath of fear that seized his chest away.

"It seems," Malfoy went on when Snape placed the goblet down again, "his Lordship is concerned that he knows too little about your desires, my friend or as we should better call them, your weaknesses, Severus." Malfoy made a prominent pause and straightened himself in the chair before he added with a cold smile, "Well, apart from that unfortunate aberration for a certain witch of regrettable parentage you once harboured. Imagine my surprise, Severus, when his Lordship shared this piece of information with me before inquiring as to your recent taste in witches."

A simple statement, made almost casually; however, the words crushed what Snape thought to be left of his heart with the merciless strength of an iron claw. Suddenly, he felt cold. And tired. And lost. And it would be forever because he had lost her. Lost Lily. *Forever.*

And the Dark Lord remembered, remembered it all too well; his follower's weakness was unforgiven.

"What did you tell him, Lucius?" Snape asked, not able to keep the waver from his voice.

"Relax, Severus, I told him truthfully that, at least to my knowledge, you never wasted yourself on another Mudblood again. Actually, I don't care whom you desire or " Malfoy's mouth twitched once more with distaste, "love as long as you keep your hands of my wife."

"And it remains better this way, *friend.*" Snape cast the blond wizard a lethal look before he inquired, "Did your answer satisfy his Lordship?"

"For the moment it would appear so, but that doesn't solve your problem, Severus," Malfoy stated arrogantly. "Therefore, where was I? Ah yes, your weaknesses. Look at Greyback, or better, look at me. Severus, we are both perfect examples of how easy it is to rule a man if you know how to grant him his illicit desires or threaten his loved ones. And the Dark Lord has cultivated his abilities in both of those illustrious categories," the blond wizard carried on while he sipped at his liquor. "And now, tell me, friend, what weaknesses have you revealed to the Dark Lord since his return? Weaknesses he could use to ensure your obedience?"

Snape remained silent. Once, he wouldn't just have traded his life and loyalty for the one woman he loved. He would have sold his soul to keep her safe. Thus, the Dark Lord had been blind to the power he had held in his cold claws, and Snape had vowed he would never allow the mad man to have a second chance at acquiring it.

Malfoy gave him a cold smile. "None, obviously, which is fortunate, very fortunate for you, my friend. However, you will soon need to give him something, something of value, if you want to console his doubts."

"I don't see why " Snape tried to disagree, but Malfoy cut him off, a grave look on his face.

"Think, Severus, this time the Dark Lord may have been placated by my word, but what about the next time? He has already begun his search for your vulnerable spots, and you surely don't want him to think of other ways to test your loyalty in the meantime. An innocent Muggle family is always easily found. Or how about one of your Mudblood students?"

Snape swallowed imperceptibly. Malfoy was right. From time to time, the Dark Lord relished in playing with his followers, testing their loyalties. He had witnessed such revels before, and the victims, innocent Muggles mostly, could only hope for the mercy of a quick, painless death.

So far, he had been fortunate enough not to be subjected to providing such proof of loyalty. However, if the Dark Lord had begun to question his obedience, it was predictable that his luck would wear out soon. He had always braced himself for whenever the moment would come; he had even tried to discuss it with Dumbledore. Yet the old man had merely told him that there was no such thing as victory without sacrifice.

However, he had never thought... never prepared himself for the unholy possibility that the Dark Lord could test him with one of his own students.

A Muggle-born student. For a moment, Snape closed his eyes, fighting the sudden wave of nausea that rose, with every heartbeat, higher in his throat. Malfoy's suggestion had summoned the image of one particular Muggle-born student to the forefront of his mind; her hazel eyes were wide with terror while she stood in the middle of a circle of dark, hooded figures, who all waited for him to....

He swallowed. Once. Twice. Only decades of practised self-control kept him from leaping forward and demanding with his wand at the other wizard's throat to know if the Dark Lord had already mentioned such a plan.

Miss Granger would be the most logical choice, given her closeness to Potter... given his own past. And it would all be his fault.

My fault alone.

Snape leaned slowly back in his chair. "About the students... Did he tell you "

"No, but I heard Rodolphus suggest something similar," Malfoy admitted gravely. "However, as long as the Dark Lord isn't acting openly, I don't think he will risk such bold acts."

...but soon he will, Snape thought. It was all just a matter of time. The Order had to take preventive measures immediately *He* had to take preventive measures, had to find

a way to keep the girl safe. Somehow.

"Why are you telling me all this, Lucius?" Snape asked suspiciously; however, the part of his mind that was still capable of rational deductions already suspected why the blond wizard risked giving him this warning. It was a Slytherin worthy gamble. If Malfoy were successful in obtaining the prophecy, he would easily be forgiven should his master learn about their conversation. If he failed him, he had given Snape the means to rise in the Dark Lord's trust. A position from where it was far easier to protect Narcissa and Draco....

"Why?" The blond wizard laughed. "Severus, surely you can't blame an old friend for trying to ensure his Lordship holds you in highest regards?" Malfoy elaborated, his voice still laced with amusement. Only the solemn look in the grey eyes that pierced Snape conveyed the true meaning behind his words.

"It would seem I cannot."

Malfoy gave him an arrogant smile while he placed a small, cream-coloured card on the table and slid it with two elegant fingers towards the Potions master. Snape picked it up and glanced first at the card and then at the blond wizard with an askance look. The small item contained nothing but an address at the better end of Knockturn Alley in Malfoy's handwriting.

"Ask for Ivy. She owns the establishment. Well, that's not quite true. At the moment, I still own it, at least until she pays me that small credit back," Malfoy explained, obviously quite pleased with himself. "She will make sure that your visit will not go unnoticed. In fact, if someone would ask her, you have been a frequent visitor with a certain desire for, let's say, fair-haired witches from Europe, Half-blood at the least, certainly. The Dark Lord will have no doubts about your newfound taste for *worthier* women anymore, my friend."

Snape forced a knowing smirk to curl his lips. Malfoy had truly taken all possible precautions. A lifetime ago, during the apprenticeship the Dark Lord had arranged for him with Alexis Canterbury, the leading Potions Master in the field of the Dark Arts in wizarding Britain, he had tried for uncounted nights to erase the memory of Lily. He had tried to forget how she had stood vibrant with life and happiness in this foolish white Muggle dress next to Potter by succumbing to these kinds of false kisses. They had been futile attempts. In the morning, each of them had tasted as bitter as the bile on his tongue right now.

"Your thoughtfulness is appreciated, Lucius." Snape rose from the armchair, slipping the unimposing item into the pocket of his frockcoat. "However, as much as I enjoyed your company, I have to leave for Hogwarts again."

"Yes, certainly. I would never try to keep you away if the Headmistress requires your presence, my friend," said Malfoy with feigned amusement, rising as well.

Both men regarded each other for a long moment until Snape extended his hand, and Malfoy grasped it, sealing once more their unspoken alliance.

The night was warm and close when Snape stepped out into the street. He heaved several breaths, trying to squelch the nausea that was finally on the verge of overwhelming him. However, a few steps along the abandoned side street somewhere in London, he eventually lost the fight. The moment he pushed his hands into the pockets of his frockcoat, his fingers closed around Malfoy's card and, suddenly, all its implications seeped sickeningly like a poison beneath his skin.

With a few swift strides, he moved into the shadows of a house wall and emptied his stomach of the scarce content. He remained there for several minutes, leaning against the masonry with his head rested on his forearm while he waited for the burning in his raw throat to subside. He knew he needed to follow Lucius' advice and pay Ivy a visit. It was inevitable and needed to be done all too soon if he wanted to erase the Dark Lord's doubts. It was only a new stage of his private hell, one he would gladly take if it meant sparing more innocents lives... if it meant keeping the girl safe.

Yet, not tonight. Snape turned from the wall and drew his wand. Tonight, it was pivotal that he inform Dumbledore and the rest of the Order of the Dark Lord's plan to make another attempt to pursue the prophecy.

A second later, he Apparated in front of Grimmauld Place.

Snape stepped quietly through the front door of Headquarters, careful not to wake the portrait of Mrs Black, only to realise that someone else had already accomplished this task. In the hallway, the screaming of the old hag mixed with a multitude of angry voices could be heard from the other end of the hallway. Snape listened in for a moment. Nearly all the Order members had to be present. Silently, he approached the living room and leaned loosely against doorframe. Inside, assembled around the large wooden table, Black, Lupin, Tonks, Molly and Arthur were still lost in their heated discussion and oblivious to his arrival. A sneer curled his mouth. He would bet a month's worth of Galleons it was once again something concerning the insolent boy that had blown away the usual, unbearable harmony like a house of cards.

"I will not agree to this, Sirius!" Molly rose from her chair, her hands nervously collecting the dishes from the table.

"This is not for you to decide, Molly. Let Harry and his friends make the choice themselves."

Snape's lips thinned. Once again the universe revolved around the precious Potter.

"Sirius is right, Molly. They have a right to," the werewolf agreed.

"Molly, you must admit that " But whatever her husband had wanted to say was lost in the sound of the clattering china that was set forcefully on the table.

"No, Arthur, I must not. This is insanity. They are still children. I won't allow that they join the Order before graduation."

"Children?" Snape scoffed, alerting the others to his presence. "You are fooling yourself, Molly."

Five pairs of eyes turned to him, but it was Black who spoke first. "Snape, what an unpleasant surprise."

"Sirius!" Molly and Lupin scolded in unison, before Molly continued. "Severus, I can't understand how you can support this. Harry, Ron, Hermione, they aren't even of age."

"However, they aren't children any more either. They have hardly ever been children since they boarded the Hogwarts Express for the first time: Potter by fate, and your son and Miss Granger by association," Snape stated, his mind adding an unspoken '*Unfortunately*' to his last words.

"Severus has a point here, Molly," said Lupin. "Those three have faced more dangers in the last years than most of us. They have earned the right to decide if they want to be part of the Order, even if they aren't of age yet."

"Hear, hear." Black rose from his chair and leaned with his hands forward on the table. "One wouldn't assume such wisdom in this greasy head of yours, Snivellus. Especially not after you so freehandedly decided to stop Harry's Occlumency lessons. But that fit well into your master's plans, didn't it, *Snivellus*?"

Imperceptibly, Snape's fingers closed on his wand, ready to counter any attack Black might launch at him, when a large, restraining hand was placed briefly on his shoulder.

"I trust Severus, Sirius, as should you," said Dumbledore as he stepped into the doorway. A moment later, the old man turned towards Snape and met his gaze with piercing blue eyes. "Severus, I'd like to have a word in private. I hear Tom will soon summon his followers again."

Dumbledore clasped his wrinkled hands behind his back and turned towards the library window when Snape had finally finished his report on the meeting with the older Malfoy. "This is not good, Severus, not good at all. We have to double the nightly patrol for the Department of Mysteries, and I would ask you to Apparate Harry to

Grimmauld Place when the term ends next week. From there, I will take him to his aunt's house myself."

Snape's lips curled. "You think he will order Lucius to abduct the boy while he is on the train?"

"Unfortunately, I do." Dumbledore moved from the window and began to pace through the library, stroking his beard. "Tom will by now have come to realise that only he and Harry are able to retrieve the prophecy. However, this time he wants to know its full content before he risks revealing himself. Therefore, the only possibility is to have Harry remove it for him from the Hall of Prophecies. Yet, Harry is out of reach for him as long as he remains at Hogwarts or at Privet Drive. However, during that small window while he is on the Hogwarts Express, Harry lacks that sort of strong protection. It's the sole opportunity for Tom to act."

Snape rose from the armchair he had so far occupied and searched the old man's gaze. "If you think that's the Dark Lord's plan, Albus, than Potter's friends shouldn't be on the Hogwarts Express, either. The Dark Lord is well aware of their importance to Potter by now, and Lucius will have to present him something when he returns. If he cannot deliver the boy, why not avoid the Dark Lord's anger and deliver him the perfect bait to lure Potter out of safety?"

He was sure that if Malfoy were presented with a choice, he would never take the Weasley boy, a pure-blood, before the Dark Lord. And for the second time that evening, an image of the girl surrounded by Death Eaters relentlessly filled his mind. Snape shuddered.

Meanwhile, Dumbledore stepped up behind the armchair and placed his age-worn hands on the velvet backrest. "I agree, Severus. When Harry and his friends leave next week, I'll arrange for Remus and Alastor to meet you and our trio at the Apparation point at the side gate. After all, you cannot Disapparate the three of them all by yourself to Grimmauld Place."

Snape nodded, his rigid stance not giving away the strange mix of satisfaction and relief he felt knowing that Dumbledore would go along with his suggestion. Potter would team up with the werewolf anyway, and he had obtained the opportunity make sure the girl came home safely.

"It's settled then," Dumbledore declared cheerfully and walked around the armchair, next to the one Snape had occupied earlier, before he added like an afterthought, "And as for Lucius' advise, I think he is right; you should name for Tom something you supposedly desire, Severus. Becoming Headmaster of Hogwarts, for example, not that the castle wouldn't already recognise you as my rightful representative if it were necessary. You know that, don't you, Severus?"

"Albus "

"I am serious. It is a perfect opportunity to ensure the students' safety should Tom set his sights on Hogwarts some day," explained Dumbledore enthusiastically. He straightened his blue, sparkling robes and sat down, gesturing for Snape to do the same.

For a moment, the spy hesitated, scowling at the furniture, before he eventually took his seat. It was never a good sign when the old man invited him for a talk like this. Usually, he ended up with his soul raw and his innermost secrets pulled out into the open; right now, he had a very good idea what the older wizard wanted to talk about.

"Now, tell me what happened with Harry. I know you wouldn't cancel his lesson without something that had forced you to do so, Severus."

Snape scowled, his gaze fixing on some point far away. There was no lie, no excuse he could tell, to placate the old man. He had gone against the Headmaster's direct order. He had allowed that Potter's mind remain vulnerable to the Dark Lord. He knew that, yet there had been no other choice. Drawing a deep breath, he turned and met Dumbledore's gaze.

"Those eyes... her eyes," Snape faltered, shaking his head. "Those lessons bring about emotions they were grinding up my Occlumency shields, Albus. If I resume Potter's training, and would the Dark Lord decide, in all his wisdom, to summon me during one of the boy's lessons, my shields would be far too weak to protect my mind and my true alliance for two seconds."

Dumbledore nodded. "I understand." And for the first time, Snape hoped he truly did, that for once the old man trusted him enough. "Still, I would have wished you had consulted me first, Severus. I will complete Harry's training myself, once he is back in Little Whinging. With the progress you and he made, it should be safe for us all now," the elderly wizard carried on. "As long as Harry and Tom have such a large territorial distance between them, Tom won't be able to take control of Harry's mind. Otherwise he would already have done "

"Headmaster, headmaster!" Phineas Nigellus' voice called from the portrait frame on the other side of the library.

Dumbledore and Snape turned around immediately and approached the portrait. "What is it, Phineas?" the older wizard asked. "Has something happened?"

"It's Minerva, Headmaster. Several portraits in the Entrance Hall saw her being carried to the Hospital Wing. She was unconscious, Albus!"

Snape shared a quick, understanding glance with Dumbledore before he stormed out of the library.

It was going to be a long night.

Author's note: I apologise for the long, long delay. If RL had allowed it, I would have updated earlier, but it hasn't been possible. But I can assure that there will be regular updates from now on.

I owe a heartfelt thank you to potionsmistress23 who rearranged my commas and so much more.

The Vulnerable Spot

Chapter 8 of 12

One night at Grimmauld Place, Hermione witnesses something that will change her perception of Severus Snape forever.

Disclaimer: All rights belong to JKR.

Author's note: Once again, heartfelt thanks, hugs and squishes to potionsmistress23 for her wonderful beta-magic.

As in London, the night had been warm and close at Hogwarts, heating up the usually cool air in the castle, yet Hermione shivered in her sleep. The nightmare that held

her in its claws had covered her skin with cold sweat as her subconscious fought a futile fight.

Her world was immersed in inky darkness as unrecognizable shadows moved around her, whispering; only those eyes, those blood-red eyes, glowed in the endless night.

Nameless hands clutched her arms, coercing her limp body to stand.

"Tell me, Mudblood, where is Harry Potter? Where is he hiding?" The venomous voice cut through the fog of pain in her head.

"I... don't... know. Please... I don't "

" know!" The word fell from her lips in a desperate whisper as Hermione bolted upright out of her sleep. She blinked, once, twice, waiting for her surroundings to take shape. When she realized that she was still safely in the girls' dormitory in Gryffindor Tower, the young witch drew a deep breath, climbed out of her bed, and cast a quick glance around. She was relieved when she found her roommates still sound asleep.

The last thing she wanted right now was to be forced to give Lavender a full recount of her dream, which she and Parvati would certainly try to analyze.

As if there would be much to analyze. Hermione frowned and turned to the window next to her, recognizing that it was still before dawn. Hogwarts' grounds were immersed in twilight, covered with thick, white mist. She sighed, conceiving that she couldn't have slept more than two hours, as she had parted with Harry and Ron in the common room around three o'clock that night.

It's a miracle I slept at all.

When her eyes wandered absently over the luscious lawns, the full measure of last night's events came back to her, and she felt a lump rising in her throat. She had seldom felt so helpless, so utterly and completely helpless, as she had last night when she had been left to watch how her Head of House was attacked by the dastard superiority of Umbridge's myrmidons. And nothing had prepared her for the shock when, on her way down from the Astronomy Tower, she had to witness how they had carried her unconscious Transfiguration teacher back to the castle.

After all her time at Hogwarts, there was one thing Hermione would never have associated with her Head of House, something she would have thought too ridiculous to even consider: Minerva McGonagall being defenceless.

Yet, she has been. Hermione hugged herself for a moment, rubbing her arms against the sudden breath of coldness she felt as the memory of her stern, capable Head of House appearing so helpless, so vulnerable, and so old refused to leave her alone.

And suddenly, the uncertainty in her chest felt unbearable. She simply needed to know that Professor McGonagall was going to be all right, that her Transfiguration teacher wasn't that severely hurt... that the axes of her small universe were still in place.

She was already heading for the bathroom, when Hermione decided that, in her function as Prefect, she was entirely allowed to pay Madam Pomfrey a visit this morning.

Even before breakfast.

As Hermione closed the door quietly behind her half an hour later, her dormitory was still enfolded in silence. Last night's events had taken their toll on everybody in Gryffindor House. Therefore, as she descended the stairs to the common room, she was surprised to realize that the space wasn't as abandoned as she had expected.

"Ron! Neville! What are you two doing still here?" she exclaimed when she caught sight of the boys, half lying, half sitting on the large, comfortable couch in front of the fireplace.

"Gooh-ood morning, Hermio-one," Neville said with a yawn while Ron mumbled an inaudible greeting, taking a sudden interest in the extinct fireplace next to him.

"Good morning to you, too, Neville," Hermione said with a laugh, "although, well-rested looks different to me." It had been a light-hearted remark, without any second thought, but the uncomfortable look Neville gave her in return let Hermione realize that something in this scene in front of her wasn't right.

"Neville, you're okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, but " Neville began, but Ron cut him short.

"Neville! We agreed "

"What did you agree on, Ronald?" Hermione demanded, peering at her redheaded friend.

"Well done, mate," Ron accused before turning to meet Hermione's gaze. "Look, 'Mione, it's nothing, just Harry having another one of those dreams; we woke up from it."

"I see," Hermione said, casting Ron an annoyed glance. Why would he try to keep such information from her? They had promised each other to look after Harry...

She sighed, realizing that it would be irresponsible to postpone her conversation with Professor Snape about her friend's Occlumency lessons, even for another day. She would have to find a way to speak to him some time before her History of Magic OWL.

"Look, 'Mione, it's Harry's business. Even Snape thinks he can look after himself," said Ron with a shrug of his shoulders, disrupting her line of thought. "Anyway, what are you doing here already?"

"I'm going to the Hospital Wing. Maybe I can get some news on how Professor McGonagall's doing," said Hermione. "Want to come along?"

"Naaaah." Ron grimaced. "Neville and I are going to try to catch some more sleep here on the couch, right, mate?" Neville merely nodded, stifling another yawn.

"See you at breakfast, then," said Hermione, ignoring the subtle sting of disappointment in her heart.

A moment later she climbed through the portrait hole.

Like most of Gryffindor Tower, the rest of the castle appeared to be still asleep as well when Hermione descended the enchanted stairs. Only a portrait here and there waved at her while the ghosts and other magical inhabitants of Hogwarts were nowhere to be seen. Even the house-elves were obviously taking much-deserved rests, and Hermione pondered if she could ask Dobby later to deliver a message to Professor Snape for her. It wouldn't be advisable for her to approach him openly in the Great Hall; she couldn't risk giving the whole Slytherin table the impression that their Head of House was, to some extent, on friendly terms with her.

Hermione still hadn't met another soul on her way when she reached the third floor, the echo of her own footsteps the only sound as she walked down the abandoned hallway. She was only meters away from the large doors of the Hospital Wing when, suddenly, the ancient wood creaked.

Hermione stopped short, paralyzed by the unexpected sound. In front of her, the doors to Hospital Wing were pushed open, and a moment later, as if summoned by her thoughts, Hogwarts' Potions master stepped through.

He looked weary to the bone as he turned her way, his eyes once again wrapped by dark smudges, and the young witch felt a sudden rush of her all too familiar concern

for him.

The second her professor beheld her in the hallway, a frown settled on his face. "Miss Granger, may I inquire as to what you are doing here this early? Are you not feeling well?"

"No, I am fine, sir, thank you," said Hermione, casting him a small smile. "However, I had hoped that Madam Pomfrey could tell me how Professor McGonagall is feeling this morning."

Professor Snape arched an eyebrow. "And how would you come to know about your Head of House being in the Hospital Wing, Miss Granger?"

"Well, the Astronomy OWLs were held when the attack happened, sir." Hermione heaved her shoulders sadly. "There were so many Stunners, and some of us saw her being carried back to the castle..." She trailed off, a waver in her voice. "She's going to be all right again, isn't she, Professor?"

The Potions master cast an inconspicuous glance over her shoulder before he met her gaze, and Hermione suddenly knew, knew from the strange glistening in his dark eyes, that her Head of House was far from being all right.

"I am afraid it is not in my realm of possibility to tell you this, Miss Granger," he confessed, his voice soft, "Professor McGonagall hasn't regained conscious yet. Therefore, Madam Pomfrey decided to transfer her to St. Mungo's a few minutes ago. We will have to wait, Miss Granger."

"Oh." The word was a mere breath on her lips, so unlike the sudden storm of worry and anger seizing her stomach. Professor McGonagall... still unconscious... transferred to St. Mungo's...

Hermione drew a shaky breath, fighting for a calm that refused to arise; and as her eyes clouded with tears, she looked away, unwilling to allow her professor to see her cry oh-so-foolishly. Again. However, for a mere heartbeat, she thought she saw his long fingers reach out for her, but the vision was gone the moment the echo of distant footsteps filled the air.

"If there is nothing else with which you'd wish to make yourself a nuisance, Miss Granger, I suggest you return to your common room," Professor Snape said coolly. Only a moment later, the mask of indifference was perfectly in place again.

Without waiting for her response, he swept past Hermione, abandoning her in the hallway.

But there is, a voice in the back of her mind suddenly protested. There was something she had wanted to tell him. Hermione shook her head, trying to banish the worry for Professor McGonagall from her thoughts.

Harry.

How could she have forgotten? She wanted needed to tell Professor Snape about Harry. He had to know that Harry was still having those dreams. And she needed to do it soon because if she didn't, Harry would leave Hogwarts, would leave for the summer without being able to protect his mind from You-Know-Who's invasion; the Durselys would only notice if something was wrong with him when it was too late when Harry was lost.

Without any further hesitation, she called after him. "Professor Snape! Just a moment please."

Her professor stopped at the sound of her voice and turned around, favouring her with an expectantly raised eyebrow. "Yes, Miss Granger?"

Hermione closed the distance between them with a few swift steps. "Sir, I know it might strike you as an unusual request, given that I already took my Potions OWL, but there's a question regarding my last essay that only occurred to me this morning," she lied. "You left a comment referring to my description of the use of Phoenix Tears on non-magical wounds that I don't quite understand, I fear. And I wanted to ask if you could maybe explain it to me."

She cast her professor an apologetic smile while she looked straight into his dark eyes. For what seemed to be an eternity, those unfathomable depths narrowed dangerously. It was obvious Professor Snape knew that he hadn't left any kind of comment on her essay. He never had, not in five years. It was always just her grade at the bottom of the parchment.

Therefore, in a flash of inspiration, it had seemed to be the most promising way to signal to her perceptive professor that she needed to speak to him, needed to speak about something she couldn't express openly. And somehow, she simply knew that through the unspoken alliance they had formed in the last months, he would understand that he would trust her.

"My office, Miss Granger, in half an hour. Don't be late," her professor said imperiously. "And let's hope for the sake of Gryffindor's House points that your question is worth drawing upon my time."

A second later, he strode away with billowing black robes, and Hermione felt a smile touch her lips as her gaze followed him on the way.

Exactly half an hour after they had parted in the hallway, Hermione knocked on Professor Snape's office door.

"Come in!" his voice commanded from inside.

Hermione entered and found her professor standing at the workbench, his back turned to her.

"Close the door, Miss Granger."

Hermione grasped the handle and pushed the heavy oak door carefully closed before her gaze flew back to workbench; still her professor hadn't turned to face her. From the slight bow of his head, she could tell that he was examining something.

Using the unobserved moment to take a closer look at her surroundings, she waited. She hadn't been in Professor Snape's office since her second year. And even after all this time, its cold and gloomy atmosphere struck her. Her eyes traveled over the different shelves filled with glass jars, vials and boxes, and she realized that, contrary to the Potions classroom, this room lacked the comfort of daylight.

"Miss Granger, when you have stopped gawping all over my office, I would be delighted to hear what kind of issue you thought was important enough to draw unnecessary attention from uncounted eyes in this castle by visiting my office out of office hours or detentions."

"Of course. I apologize, sir. The reason I asked I need to talk to you about Harry's last Occlumency lesson, Professor," Hermione explained. "I wondered if " However, she never had a chance to finish her sentence, as suddenly, a loud thud followed by the forceful sound of cracking glass tore through the room.

Hermione stifled a shriek. Her eyes flew to her professor, who still stood unmoved from his workbench, yet his whole frame shook slightly. Something was wrong; very wrong.

She made a step forward, one hand instinctively reached out in concern. "Sir, are you "

However, the Potions master cut her off. "And what concretely did Potter share about his last Occlumency lesson with you, Miss Granger, that you felt the inane need to discuss the subject with me?" Despite the usual ridicule in his question, Snape's voice held, suddenly, a raw... vulnerable timbre. Hermione shivered involuntarily at the sound.

"I nothing, sir."

The words had barely left her lips, when Snape spun around. His black eyes flashed feverishly before he asked, "Nothing?"

"No, nothing," confirmed Hermione. "Well, nothing, except for the fact that you have ended them because he is now advanced enough."

"Ah yes, certainly, advanced enough," Snape said mockingly. He approached her with slow, calculated movements while he spoke, his black eyes assessing her with every further step.

Like a predator advancing on his prey, Hermione thought, and for the first time, she felt a flicker of fear rising in her chest.

"And that was all he told you, Miss Granger?" her professor inquired, his voice laced with venom and warning.

"Yes, sir," Hermione said firmly, "I don't know what you are "

"Silence, Granger!" Snape bellowed, taking another step toward her.

Instinctively, Hermione made several steps backwards, one hand searching blindly for the door. All her senses told her to leave, to flee from whatever had befallen her professor. However, before she even had the chance to reach the door, the ancient lock latched with an authoritative Snap! behind her.

"I haven't given you the permission to leave, Miss Granger. Not yet," Snape sneered, "Not before you have answered me satisfactorily. Therefore, I repeat myself one last time; was that all Potter told you, Miss Granger? That he was advanced enough?"

Hermione nodded, her throat feeling suddenly too tight to speak. This wasn't the professor she trusted, the professor who had not only protected her from exploding cauldrons and toad-faced headmistresses but from evils she might never know. And somewhere, in a far corner of her mind, she knew, knew all too well, that she had every right and reason to protest against his behavior, yet she had no words left.

Trying to force a rein on the panic that was on the verge of seizing her, she closed her eyes momentarily, shielding herself from her professor's cold glare. When she opened them again, her gaze caught a reflection on the floor. Dark. Glittering. It was a small trail of something, meandering through nearly the whole room, starting at Snape's workbench. In a split of a second, her eyes followed the peculiar path, and her heart clenched when she conceived its nature and its source.

Seemingly unbeknown to her professor, a slow yet steady flow of blood trickled through the clenched fingers of his right fist.

"Professor, your hand!" Hermione exclaimed, alarmed.

His gaze dropped, and she was left to watch how the Potions master raised his wand hand and forced his fingers slowly open all too slowly for her peace of mind. A moment later, his face contorted with pain, and small pieces of glass fell to the floor.

Hermione gasped, causing her professor's gaze to search hers. Their eyes locked, and she found nothing more of the feverish rage in those dark orbs that had him seemingly teetering on the brink of madness, only unconcealed shock and hurt. It was as if he had just realized what had happened in the last minutes; that in his rage, he had crushed a vial with bare hand, that he had threatened her, forced her to remain here with him...

"I apologize, Miss Granger, my behavior was uncalled for," Snape said with obviously feigned calm, breaking away from her gaze. Hermione heard the door unlock behind her. "You are free to leave, now."

"But your wand hand, sir," she protested, taking a step towards her professor. "May I help? I am quite good at healing "

"Out, Miss Granger!" Snape growled. "Now!" The warning was unmistakable.

For the split of a second, Hermione stared at her professor in silent shock before she fled from his office as fast as her legs could carry her, the heavy oak door clunking shut behind her.

Once out of his office, she stopped short. Her heart beat fast and furious like a rabbit's after the flight from the wolf as she leaned her forehead against the dungeon wall next to the door. Only the coolness of the masonry against her skin helped her to banish the dizzy feeling from her head. She needed to concentrate, to think.

However, as much as she wanted to, she felt unable to comprehend what had just happened. She had never seen her professor like this: so full of rage, so beside himself not since Sirius had escaped, not since he had believed Lily's supposed traitor to be spared from the Dementor's Kiss.

And now, all that rage and hurt just because she had mentioned Harry's Occlumency lessons...

She had long realized that teaching Harry Occlumency, that looking into those bright green eyes, must have been a horrible experience for Professor Snape, like a form of subtle torture. However, it was safe to assume that he had endured things far worse for the Order for Harry.

Things so far, far worse, only to keep Lily's son safe...

And he had done it without so much as a complaint.

Hermione drew back from the wall, her eyes straying back to the closed office door, and the peculiar painful knot in her chest clenched.

All this, the rage, the hurt had been about something far more complicated than awkward Occlumency lessons; they had run so much deeper ...

And she was sure, within that something lay the reason why Harry hadn't asked Professor Snape about resuming his lessons. But with the way the Potions master had reacted today, and how Harry had been evading her questions about his Occlumency, it was quite clear that both of them wouldn't tell her about it.

Yet, whatever vulnerable spot on her professor's soul her words had unconsciously touched today, she simply wished she knew knew and had the chance to find a way to take the pain away.

Somehow.

Snape slumped back against his workbench, running his unharmed left hand over his face.

"Damn it!" The curse on his lips was nothing more than an exhausted growl.

Poppy and he had been able to stabilize Minerva's condition just before dawn. It had been a hard fought fight, and he hadn't slept for one hour that night. In fact, he hadn't truly slept since Dumbledore had left the castle; last night's events combined with his general state of exhaustion had torn the scarce remains of his concentration and self-control finally to tatters, and this was the result. His gaze dropped to his injured hand. Fresh blood seeped in a constant flow from the open wound.

He was such a fool. In his blind rage, he had not only harmed himself but also threatened a student. Well, not simply a student, but Miss Granger...

Had it been any other student who had gambled with his patience this morning, he wouldn't have lost his temper. However, there was this peculiar something about her about the foolish girl who had decided, in all her wisdom, to bestow her trust and kindness upon him; that something crippled his defenses, reaching deep, deep

underneath his skin.

And it has to stop. Snape pressed his wounded wand hand into a tight fist and watched how the blood slowly spread through his fingers. Whatever it was about this girl that made him soso...

He shook his head. He had no words for it, yet it had to stop.

It shouldn't matter more to him if the girl lived or died than it mattered to him for any other student in his care. But it did.

Snape enforced the pressure on his fist.

He should have never allowed that her well-being, that her foolish promise, had become important that *she* had become important to him.

It was an unforgiveable weakness, and if the Dark Lord knew, knew that his already shady follower had not only developed a vulnerable spot that concerned a living, breathing human being, one within the reach of his claws, but that it turned out to be Harry Potter's Muggle-born friend... Merlin, the mad man would feed him her heart from a silver platter.

Therefore, the girl was simply not allowed to be important to him.

Yet, she is. Something caught in his throat at the realization.

When he had heard the words "Harry" and "Occlumency" from her lips, lightning white rage had exploded behind his eyes; it was rage spurred by the ancient pain in his chest and the unbearable realization that the girl knew, that the one person he had oh-so-foolishly allowed to become important to him knew what he had called Lily...

... and, with Lily, her as well.

During the Easter break, he'd been surprised that he hadn't caught any students snickering and calling him "Snivellus" behind his back. Usually, he was the first to know when a new rumour flurried high at Hogwarts. He knew only moments after an older student had fed the vampire nonsense about him to one of the first years.

However, not this time. And this lack of chatter among the student body had felt odd. Very odd. And it had made him wonder, when he had lain awake in the wee hours one morning, if Potter hadn't revealed the incident to the whole Gryffindor Tower as could have been expected, that maybe he had only confided to the Weasley boy and... Miss Granger.

It was in this moment that he had realized that the insolent boy wouldn't simply have the chance to ridicule him in front her, but that Potter would reveal to the girl, would quote to the one person whose promise he so unforgivably treasured...

Whenever you need me... I don't need help from filthy little Mudbloods like her.

Filthy little Mudbloods.

Like *her*.

He had long thought he had already lost everything because of those cursed, spiteful words, as he had lost her, lost Lily; but it was in those sleepless hours, when he had realized that, even after all this time, they were likely to cost him the one thing that had become a small light in his pitiful existence, the girl's undeserved trust and kindness, that present shame had mingled with the ancient pain in his chest and curled into an aching knot.

And todaytoday, this hazardous mixture of emotion had all broken free in a wild wave of rage when he had assumed that the girl was about to confront him with it that she truly knew.

However, she didn't. He had seen it in those accursed, soulful eyes the moment he had come to his senses again. There had been no disgust, no accusation, only unconcealed shock and compassion. And he was a fool that he hadn't seen it before, hadn't seen it an hour ago when they had met in the hallway in front of the Hospital Wing.

And still, the annoying girl had had the bravery to offer him her help. It was a mystery to him how, even after his inexcusable outburst, she still had shown concern about his injury had cared.

Foolish, foolish Gryffindor.

Snape shook his head and placed his wand close to his injured palm. It took some effort to cast the Healing Charm with his left hand, yet a moment later, the deep cut was vanished, and a bitter smile curled his thin lips.

No, you cannot help me, Miss Granger, there are wounds even your magic cannot heal.

Reviews are *love* :)

On the Other Side of Midnight

Chapter 9 of 12

One night at Grimmauld Place, Hermione witnesses something that will change her perception of Severus Snape forever.

Disclaimer: All rights belong to JKR. There is a small part of dialogue between Hermione and Harry taken directly from the chapter "The Department of Mysteries" of OotP as I needed the exchange from Hermione's POV. I marked those few words in italics. They, of course, as everything else are the property of JKR. I am merely a fangirl.

Author's note: Hugs and squishes to potionsmistress23 for her beta work. She was gracious and patient and picky and brilliant. Thank you :) Any remaining errors are

mine, and mine alone.

Snape took three, four steps in one. He nearly flew up the staircase towards the Headmaster's office, rushes of adrenaline forcing his body and mind to work. He would kill the imbecile, would kill him with bare hands, if he had left the house.

Well, given that the Dark Lord hadn't accomplished the task for him already, and Black lay dead somewhere deep down in the Department of Mysteries; and he would ensure that the insolent boy served detention for the whole forthcoming term. Potter would scrub cauldrons until the flesh peeled off his bones for getting himself caught, for suborning his fellow students to break into Umbridge's office, for exposing Miss Granger to her clutches...

Taking the next flight of steps, Snape shook his head briefly. That was another problem he would have to solve later. For now, he needed to find out if Black was at Grimmauld Place, and he needed a safe way to do that, one which in the unfavourable case that the imbecile was truly in the Dark Lord's hands, wouldn't give him away as well.

Therefore, using the two-way-mirror couldn't be considered safe any longer, as it was unclear who was currently in possession of Black's part of the mirror. Not for the life of him would he send a Patronus message to Grimmauld Place. Black and Lupin would immediately make the connection, would know what never should be known...

Snape reached the seventh floor of the castle and stopped short in front of the enormous gargoyle that guarded the entrance to Dumbledore's office. He regarded the stone statue sceptically, and for a moment, it felt as if the enormous stone eyes in front of him were doing the same to him while the old man's voice echoed in his mind.

...not that the castle wouldn't already recognize you as my rightful representative if it were necessary. You know that, don't you, Severus?

Snape drew a breath and cast a quick glance around. *Well, let's find out if you are right, Albus.*

"Chocolate fairy cakes," he said imperiously and waited for the stone statue to move. It took a long moment until a short, screeching sound filled the air around him, and the gargoyle slowly gave way. A smirk curled the Potions master's thin lips; at least he had not needed to pull out a sword from a stone and anvil.

He ascended the stairs swiftly, not waiting for the stone escalator to take him, while the statue behind him moved back to obstruct the entrance against anybody who might try to follow him. He entered the Headmaster's office a few moments later, black robes billowing behind him.

The room was bathed in the warm evening sun, and the air filled immediately with hushed voices when Snape stepped inside. Black eyes travelled over the ranks of portraits of the former Headmasters and Headmistresses, who watched him with unhidden surprise and interest, until they met the painted gaze of Phineas Nigellus Black.

"Good evening, Headmaster Snape," the portrait greeted him nonchalantly.

Snape held up a dismissive hand as he stepped up to the portrait. *"Professor Snape will do, Headmaster Black."*

He wouldn't risk the anger of the assembled dignitaries in front of him by claiming a title Phineas Nigellus had so easily and slyly attributed to a fellow member of Slytherin House.

"I am merely here as a representative of Albus Dumbledore to ask a favour of you, Headmaster Black."

A thin painted eyebrow rose. "Feeling modest today, are we? Certainly not a common trait in my House. Well then, what it is that you have come to ask me to do?" *Professor Snape?*

Phineas Nigellus let the title roll over his tongue with a mocking sweetness, but Snape kept his face blank.

"I need you to visit your other portrait at Grimmauld Place, Headmaster Black," he said evenly.

"And why would I do that?" Phineas Nigellus asked brusquely. "I have no intention of paying my worthless great-great-grandson a visit."

"Feel assured, Headmaster, I absolutely understand your sentiment," said Snape. "Unfortunately, however, that's exactly what I have to ask you to do, as I need you to relay a message to your great-great-grandson and confirm to me that he is at your family home right now."

The Slytherin rose from his painted chair, and Snape knew he was finally gaining ground.

"Has something happened to my great-great-grandson?"

"Well, that's what I am trying to find out hopefully with your help, Headmaster."

Phineas Nigellus twirled his black beard for a moment until he said with an appearance of generosity, "Very well, what message do you wish for me to deliver to my great-great-grandson?"

"Tell him, if he is there, that his godson had a dream of Padfoot being in the hands of the Dark Lord, and that he needs to stay where he is. I'll see to it," said Snape.

While the mentioning of the Dark Lord's name caused a new wave of whispers to hush along the portraits, Phineas Nigellus eyed him sceptically before he vanished without so much as a good bye.

Snape turned from the empty canvas, not willing to let the other ancient portraits observe him while he waited for the former Headmaster's return, and moved towards one of the large windows in the Headmaster's residence.

The sun had nearly vanished behind the Forbidden Forest, immersing the grounds in a golden glow. Everything appeared as if Hogwarts and its inhabitants were settling for a peaceful night.

Snape snorted quietly. If the boy were right, if the Dark Lord had captured Black and was holding him down in the Department of Mysteries, he wouldn't dare to predict how this night would end...

"Well, I don't know what you expected me to find, *Professor Snape*," Phineas Nigellus said lazily, not caring to announce his return and leaning against the frame of his portrait.

At the first sound of his voice, Snape spun around.

"Besides being in one of his less pleasant moods, my great-great-grandson appears to be in perfect health. He asked me to tell you..." Phineas Nigellus made a pregnant pause before he continued in a raw, angry voice that resembled the one of Sirius Black perfectly, "You better see to it, *Snivellus*. Because it's your fault alone that Harry is still having those dreams."

Snape exhaled imperceptibly. Black was still at Grimmauld Place. It had been a vision. Just a vision, nothing more. Relief swept through him like a cool wave.

"Thank you, Headmaster Black. Your effort is appreciated."

Phineas Nigellus merely sniffed in return, obviously displeased that Snape still chose not to inform him about the reasons behind his request, but the spy ignored the former

Headmaster's indignation and turned back to window.

His gaze travelled absently over the abandoned Quidditch pitch. It may have just been a vision that led Potter to believe that his godfather was in the Dark Lord's hands, but the question remained as to why the boy had even been subjected to such a chimera. It had been obvious that he honestly believed Black to be in danger. Could his vision be another glimpse into the Dark Lord's thoughts, a glimpse of what he was planning to do, what was going to come?

Snape closed his eyes for a moment, allowing his mind to consider the potentiality. He needed to talk to Potter as soon as possible about what exactly the boy had seen and to end the fear for his godfather. Well, given that Potter would believe him.

At that thought, Snape's eyes snapped open again. He was just about to turn away from the windowpane when his gaze caught on a movement on the large lawn in front of the forest. He frowned, black eyes narrowing. A group of three people was rapidly advancing towards the Forbidden Forest.

Snape grasped for the binoculars he knew were lying on the table next to him, a result of stepping one time too often into Albus Dumbledore's office only to find the old man standing in front of the window, observing the weekly Quidditch training with them.

A corner of his mouth twitched with amusement at the thought before he placed the binoculars in front of his eyes and searched for the figures moving on the ground...and tensed.

The little group in front of him that headed so determinedly towards the Forbidden Forest consisted of nobody less than Umbridge, Potter and Miss Granger; it was obvious that the girl was the one taking the lead in this endeavour.

"What the hell are you doing, you foolish girl?" Snape asked aloud, adjusting the depth of the glasses to allow him a closer look. When the vision finally focussed, he saw it, saw Umbridge's wand pointing straight at the girl, urging her to walk on and into the forest, and something cold twisted his heart.

Without another thought, he threw the binoculars aside and stormed from the Headmaster's office. On his way to the second floor, he passed a group of duelling students who shared confused looks when he didn't deduct a single House point. However, the Potions master didn't care, his mind racing, searching for explanations as to why Umbridge could force Potter and the girl to walk into the Forbidden Forest. He still hadn't found a single one when he entered Umbridge's office unceremoniously only a few moments later and was greeted by the surprised faces of Draco Malfoy and his associates, who were still holding the Weasley children, Longbottom and Miss Lovegood captive.

"Professor Snape." Draco spluttered his name.

Snape graced the boy with an imperious look, only to see his face lose its last remains of colour.

"Mr. Malfoy, I hope you have an acceptable explanation for why you are holding your fellow students detained in the Headmistress' office while she is obviously not here," he said coolly. "We wouldn't want Slytherin to lose a considerable amount of House points when it is so close to winning the House Cup this year, would we?"

"Headmistress Umbridge ordered us to stay here, sir, while Potter and Granger led her to Dumbledore's weapon," answered Draco dutifully.

"Led her to what, Mr. Malfoy?" snarled the Potions master.

But it was Millicent Bulstrode who answered him. "Dumbledore's weapon, Professor. Granger just confessed its existence to Headmistress Umbridge."

"Miss Granger did *what*?" he asked once more, anger and worry reducing his voice to a strangled whisper.

You foolish, foolish girl...

What in Merlin's name was she thinking? Umbridge would expel her the moment she realized Miss Granger had lied to her.

"She confessed that they've completed Dumbledore's weapon, sir." Draco seconded Bulstrode's words. "We were as surprised as you are to learn that such a weapon even existed, Professor."

"Yeah, needed Umbridge to threaten Potter with a Cruciatus for them to confess it," Crabbe added with a grunt, enforcing his grasp on Longbottom.

"Is that true? She threatened a student with the Cruciatus Curse?" asked Snape, grateful that he had his voice back under control, while his gaze travelled from one student to the other, only to see Potter's friends nod along with his Slytherins.

And he didn't miss the accusatory glance Draco cast Crabbe for letting that particular piece of information slip. The boy obviously understood full well that even his Head of House couldn't turn a blind eye to a student being threatened with an Unforgivable, even if that student was Harry Potter.

Oh, and he had no intention of doing something even close to that. On the contrary, together with Pomona and Filius, he would call the Aurors the moment the toad-faced hag set her foot into the castle again. The time of the Headmistress of Hogwarts was finally running out, and with so many witnesses, even Umbridge wouldn't be able to wriggle her way out of a long stay in Azkaban.

"Well, then," said Snape with feigned indifference, "I leave you and your companions to your task now, Mr. Malfoy, but I would ask you to inform me as soon as the Headmistress is back."

"Yes, sir."

Snape gave Draco a stiff nod and swept out of the room.

The moment Umbridge's office door closed behind him, the Potions master paused in his steps, remaining motionless in the middle of the hallway for a heartbeat, his mind dithering on how he should proceed.

It was pivotal that he inform the old man about the events of the last hour directly if they wanted take preventive measures to keep Potter safe and, presumably, Black out of the Dark Lord's claws. While Umbridge had threatened the boy with a Cruciatus Curse, his instincts told him that she wouldn't risk the possibility of Potter dying by her hand tonight.

Therefore, there wasn't the immediate need for him to follow the group into the Forbidden Forest, yet there was this something, this peculiar something in his chest that urged him to make sure the foolish girl was safe from Umbridge and any other harm the night in the woods might hold.

Snape's gaze dropped to the freshly healed skin of his right palm, and long fingers closed in determination. The nonsense had to stop. And it would stop now. He wouldn't allow the girl to distract him from the vow he had made, the vow to protect the undeserving, insolent boy from the Dark Lord at all cost for her. For Lily.

Determined not to waste even more time, Snape headed for the dungeons to contact Albus Dumbledore, and if something in his chest clenched on his way, he silenced it mercilessly.

"I agree with your thesis, Severus. Harry's vision could be a valuable glimpse into Tom's thoughts," Dumbledore said through Snape's piece of the two-way-mirror.

The Potions master sat in an armchair in his chambers, holding the item with one hand in front of him.

"Therefore, I fear, I cannot postpone telling Harry about the prophecy any longer," Dumbledore continued. "I need you to bring him to Grimmauld Place as soon as he returns from the forest, Severus."

"I will."

Dumbledore's reflection in the mirror nodded. "I'll ask Kingsley to come to Grimmauld Place tonight as well. We need to discuss how to proceed with the Ministry regarding the formal dismissal of our dear Dolores, now that she has finally given us an opportunity to call for it, and how to initiate my restoration."

Snape scowled. "It's about time, Albus. As I already told you, from tonight on, I would have been on probation as well, and I don't know how long I could have delayed her request for new Veritaserum."

"I know, Severus," said Dumbledore in a sigh; even through this small piece of glass, the Headmaster appeared weary to Snape. "Yet, I am hopeful that this unfortunate chapter will finally come to end over the next days."

"Unfortunate, indeed," said Snape with a sneer.

"I'll see you at Grimmauld Place, Severus," said the old man, his reflection slowly fading from mirror until the surface turned blank again.

Snape leaned back and rested his head against the cool leather of the armchair, a frown deep between his brows. Right to the beginning of his mirror-call, he had expressed his concern about Potter and Miss Granger being probably wandless in the Forbidden Forest. Yet, the Headmaster had been merely intrigued and amused by the girl's claim that she would show Umbridge his "weapon", and he had dismissed his spy's suggestion to follow them.

"You should have a little more faith in Miss Granger, Severus. I think our dear Dolores is in for a very big surprise," the old man had said, his eyes twinkling.

Snape snorted. As if he hadn't already enough faith in the annoying girl. However, for all he knew, she was freely risking expulsion or worse for Potter's sake.

Foolish, foolish Gryffindor.

He pinched the bridge of his nose before he rose from the armchair and walked to his desk, placing the two-way-mirror safely back into the drawer.

His fingers were still lingering on the handle when he felt a well-known spark of magic tingle on his left forearm, and awareness gripped him with iron claws. He was about to be summoned, and a heartbeat later, the surge of Dark magic already rushed through his veins, and his Mark burned.

Snape squeezed his eyes shut and drew a ragged breath.

No.

Not now.

This was the call he wasn't to answer, and not answering the Dark Lord's call would be painful. Very painful.

The one time he had ignored a Summoning, his supposed Master's magic had still been weakened from his return and the transition into his current form, and even then, disobeying the call of the Dark Mark had been agonizing.

However, ignoring the Summoning tonight would probably come close to the experience of a prolonged Cruciatus. Even so, the mad man had ordered him to ignore the call.

Of course. Snape felt a bitter laugh catch in his throat. It had to be a punishment not to join the Dark Lord's side, after all.

Though, the pain was the least that worried him right now. He would be a fool if he thought the Summoning and Potter's vision to be mere coincidences. The Dark Lord was setting his plan in motion, a plan the Order had still no single reliable evidence about. They were completely in the dark about what was going to happen...and when.

Therefore, the boy had to get to a safe place as soon as possible, and Snape knew, knew all too well from bitter experience, that over the course of the next minutes, the burning Mark on his forearm would weaken his magic so much that he would no longer be able to Apparate Potter to Grimmauld Place himself.

Determined, he yanked the drawer open again and seized once again the two-way-mirror to call the Headmaster.

"Albus Dumbledore!" he called urgently.

However, it took precious minutes for the Headmaster's reflection to appear in the mirror while the Dark magic in his spy's veins spread with every heartbeat, robbing him slowly of his senses.

"Severus, I didn't expect your call so soon." Dumbledore's voice eventually echoed through room.

"Damn it, Albus, I am summoned," Snape bit out. "I'll have to order the elf to take the boy to Grimmauld Place."

"I understand," said Dumbledore gravely, already vanishing from the mirror. "I'll be at Headquarters as soon as I can."

Snape threw the magical item with a clattering sound onto his desk.

"Dobby," he called through gritted teeth.

With a quiet *pop* his unusual ally appeared in the living room. "Professor Snape has called Dobby, sir?"

"Of course, I did," snapped the Potions master impatiently. "Dobby, you have to..." Snape broke off and leaned against his desk. He drew a deep breath, trying to resist the tempting call of blissful unconsciousness, the edges of his vision already clouding with darkness.

"I need... I need you to go to the Astronomy Tower and watch out for Harry Potter. He is in the Forbidden Forest with Miss Granger and the Headmistress. If... if you see him return from the forest, you have to inform me immediately. And, Dobby, if I am not able to, you have to Apparate him to Grimmauld Place. Do you understand me? Harry Potter is in grave danger. You need to Apparate Harry Potter and Miss Granger to Grimmauld Place."

"Dobby understands." The elf jumped on to the desk top next to Snape, looking at him with a determination in his great eyes the Potions master hadn't seen there before. "I is always keeping Harry Potter safe. And Dobby will feed himself to Fluffy if he does it wrong," the elf said, giving the Potions master a thoughtful look. "And I is keeping Professor Snape's friend safe, too."

The air filled with another quiet *pop*, and the elf was gone. Had the spy been in his right mind, he would have laughed, laughed bitterly at the irony of how easily this tiny creature had seen through him. However, even before the meaning of Dobby's last words had the chance to trickle through the thick haze of pain in Snape's mind, another wave of pain jolted through him and his world went dark.

Hermione's fingers curled deep into the invisible mane of her Thestral while the outlines of Hogwarts in the warm twilight of sundown became smaller and smaller beneath

her. She would have wished that it was only because of the height that the sight caused fear to rise red-hot in her throat. But she knew better.

Going to the Ministry was a mistake. Not telling a soul where they were going was a mistake. It was all a horrible mistake, and she knew it. She was deliberately making it, as there had been nothing she could have done to prevent it.

She swallowed, her gaze searching for Harry. He was flying at the head, leading the small group into the starless night ahead of them.

Harry.

He had been so certain that Sirius was in danger, so determined to save him, and so full of fear to lose the one person he had left of his family.

Nothing and nobody could have stopped him.

Therefore, going back to the castle, going back to let Professor Snape know what Harry had truly seen and have him inform the Order, like her mind had told her to do, had been impossible, as it would have meant letting her friends go to the Ministry alone...

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut, holding even closer to the magical being carrying her higher and higher into the sky.

It was all a mistake they were making. A grave and dangerous mistake. But she would not let Harry and Ron go to face Voldemort alone.

She could have never done that.

She would never do that.

Never.

The first thing he felt was the cold. The cold was everywhere. And then came the pain, the sharp pain in his head, every time he tried to open his eyes.

Snape groaned as he made another attempt to get up from the floor, propping himself up on one elbow.

He didn't know how long he had passed out. However, the flames in the fireplace had faded away, exposing his living room to the cool darkness of the dungeons, something the elves always saw to around twelve o'clock in the evening.

He ran an unsteady hand over his face, realizing he must have regained consciousness on the other side of midnight. A time by when the boy had to be already at Grimmauld Place.

If all has gone well...

The uncertainty that accompanied the sudden thought forced Snape to finally rise from the cold stone floor with unsteady legs.

"Dobby!" he called, his voice hoarse from disuse.

Momentarily, the elf appeared next to him, his head hanging, defeated. When he caught Snape's gaze, a tiny wail escaped him and he threw himself on the floor, banging his head against the stone.

Snape felt his throat tighten with foreboding and bent swiftly down to seize the tiny creature at the back of its maroon sweater, pulling Dobby up to look at him.

"Stop it, elf," he ordered. "Where is Harry Potter?"

Another wail filled the room. "Dobby is watching and watching, but no Harry Potter has come back. I only sees more of Harry Potter's friends going into the Forbidden Forest, but no Harry Potter coming back." The elf sighed, his ears drooping sadly. "No Harry Potter."

"More of Harry Potter's friends?" Snape asked, and Dobby nodded enthusiastically, his huge green eyes lightening up in the obvious hope that he had revealed at least some good news.

But Snape felt his breath hitch with realization.

No.

It couldn't be...

He stumbled back against his desk, his hands searching for the solidness of the wood beneath his fingers.

He didn't know how Potter had done it, but suddenly he knew, knew with an undeniable certainty that the insolent boy had gone to London, had gone to the Department of Mysteries...and, presumably, right into the Dark Lord's net, and Potter had taken his friends... had taken the foolish girl with him.

Pushing himself away from the desk, Snape yanked the drawer open once more, ignoring the elf who observed him with fearful eyes.

He grasped the mirror and called out, "Kingsley Shacklebolt."

Immediately, the Auror appeared in the reflection of the mirror.

"Snape, what's happened? Dumbledore told us you would be with Harry at Grimmauld Place by now." The loud, deep voice of the wizard resounded through the Potions master's chambers.

"Is the Headmaster already there?" Snape asked, ignoring the question.

"Not yet. But we expect him any minute," said Shacklebolt.

"Listen," said Snape, "Potter hasn't returned from the forest with Umbridge yet."

"Snape, where the hell is my godson?" called the upset voice of Sirius Black through the mirror, but the Potions master went on.

"Shacklebolt, I cannot confirm it but am confident that Potter and his friends left Hogwarts for the Ministry in a moment of supposed Gryffindor heroism, some time this evening. Probably, the boy still believes Black to be in the Dark Lord's hands."

"I understand." The Auror nodded. "We'll go to the Ministry and search for them."

"I'll do the same in the forest," said Snape.

"I'm coming with you, Kingsley," demanded Black somewhere in the background, and Snape's fingers curled tighter around the magical item in his hand.

"Black, don't be a fool, you can't go with them. It would be madness to walk freely into the Ministry; even at this time of the night, there will be guards, and somebody has to stay behind to inform Dumbledore when he arrives."

"Nobody asked for your opinion, Snivellus."

Snape closed his eyes for a moment, fighting for calm while a storm of angry voices broke out on the other side of the mirror.

"Sirius, listen..."

"No, Remus, he is my godson."

"Sirius, I understand how you feel, but you can't come with us."

"I'd like to see you stop me, Kingsley."

"Remus is right, Sirius."

"Sirius, please..."

"Don't know, what ya're all planning to do all evening, but I'll go and fetch the boy now." Moody's voice roared from somewhere far away, and Snape's eyes snapped open as he heard a door being slammed. A moment later, the mirror in his hand turned blank.

Swearing, the spy shoved the magical item into his pocket and headed out of his chambers and for the Forbidden Forest, hoping he would soon need it to inform the old man that it had all been a false alarm, and Potter and Miss Granger only were somewhere lost in the woods.

Hermione shuddered. For the first time since they had entered the church-high hall, filled with countless shelves of those dusty glass spheres, she truly felt it. The cold. The cold was suddenly everywhere. Even the light from the candle-brackets appeared chilly to her, now.

Sirius wasn't here. And somehow, Hermione knew, knew deep down, that he had never been here. Her gaze flew along the aisle where her friends stood. On both sides, the small path led to nothing but darkness.

Dangerous darkness.

Hermione drew a deep breath. "Harry?"

"What?" her black-haired friend snarled in return, but she could hear a fear similar to her own waver in his voice.

"I... I don't think Sirius is here." It was the truth, and it tasted painful and bitter on her tongue, yet not as painful and bitter as the telling silence afterwards. Harry knew. He knew that he had led them here, to this place and into possible danger...for nothing.

From far away, through the deafening sound of her own blood thrumming like thunder in her ears, Hermione heard Ron's claim about Harry's name being on one of those glass balls, and her gaze drifted to the shelf and to the dusty glass spheres next to the one her black-haired friend regarded.

For the first time, the similarity between those glass spheres and the crystal balls in Professor Trewlaney's office struck her, while her eyes strayed over those yellowish labels that seemed to accompany each one of them.

There were two others besides the one with Harry's name that held the inscription S.P.T. to A.P.W.B.D. One mentioned "The Dark Lord" together with Wormtail's names, the other held Professor Snape's name accompanied by a question mark.

Hermione's gaze lingered, mesmerized, on the peculiar items, and foreboding settled icily in her stomach. Whatever those glass spheres were, whatever they contained, they concerned two people she knew...even cared about.

From the corner of her eye, she caught sight of Harry's hand reaching for the ball in front of him.

"Harry, I don't think you should touch it," she said quickly and a bit harsher than she had wanted to, but fear wove a sharp edge into her voice.

"Why not? It's something to do with me, isn't it," her friend said, irritated.

However, a movement behind her let Hermione's attention drift away from Harry.

She turned around and froze. Before her eyes, only meters away, the hooded figure of a Death Eater emerged out of the darkness in the aisle...a sight as if taken from the darkest corners of her soul, and it paralyzed her with unknown fear.

For uncounted moments, she stood speechless, motionless, hoping for the impossible, for the ghost of a chance that the hooded figure in front of her was nothing more than Professor Snape in disguise, her professor who had come for them before Voldemort's myrmidons did.

It was only when she heard the cold, drawling voice of Lucius Malfoy ordering Harry to hand him the glass ball that she forced herself to turn around, finding Bellatrix Lestrange pointing her wand straight at her heart, and cognition crushed the small, impossible flicker of hope in her chest mercilessly.

Hermione swallowed. This was it, the one nightmare she couldn't wake up from, and even if Professor Snape were among those Death Eaters, he wouldn't be able to protect them, not without revealing himself as Dumbledore's man...and by that, risking his life.

The realization curled icily around her racing heart, and it skipped a beat, suddenly torn between wishing and fearing that her professor was somewhere out there in the darkness.

Snape forced his way through the darkness. He was already so deep in the Forbidden Forest that he was sure he would have found them by now if Potter and Miss Granger were still somewhere out there in the woods. And somewhere, deep down, he knew that they weren't here anymore, knew where they had gone and knew the danger Potter and the foolish girl were in right now...and it felt like a nightmare blending into reality.

When Potter had vanished in the maze almost a year ago, he had felt the anxiety, an anxiety that had turned into silent horror once his Mark had flared, only for it to become determination when he had returned to the Dark Lord's side two hours later. But never, never in over two decades had he felt that kind of mind-numbing fear, and it began to tear at his soul with wild, cold claws when, in front of him, a silvery-blue phoenix appeared out of the darkness of the woods, and he realized what it meant. The old man had found them.

The graceful creature batted its wings, landing gracefully in front of him, and then, the phoenix opened his beak, and he heard Dumbledore's voice, and the blood in his veins felt like ice.

"Harry is alive and safe, Severus. The prophecy is destroyed. However, we lost Sirius and have several injured students. Miss Granger is in a critical condition, I fear."

Remus and the others will Apparate them to the front gate immediately. I've already sent a Patronus message to inform Poppy. She'll need your help."

He closed his eyes, and for a long moment he felt nothing, nothing but the beast that was his fear swallowing him whole.

With trembling hands, he drew his wand, breathed in, breathed out, and breathed in again until he found the strength to Apparate back to the castle.

The moment he appeared on the luscious lawns, he saw the small battered group at the front gate in the twilight before dawn. He could have reached them within seconds. However, for an endless moment, he stood paralyzed, struck by a long forgotten terror at the sight of the werewolf carrying the lifeless form of a young woman in his arms.

And his heart... his helpless heart lurched with so much pain, he thought everything he had left of it would finally shatter into pieces.

It took every effort to banish the whirlwind of memories and emotions from his mind...his being, and even before he truly realized it his legs moved, and he headed towards the small group.

He reached the werewolf first and met Lupin's terrified gaze briefly before he drew a deep breath, and his eyes drifted to the lifeless girl the werewolf was holding.

Her skin was ashen, while two dark bruises on her face and the angry red of a large bloody cut that ran from her breastbone up to her throat stood out against her pallor. Quickly, his fingers searched for her pulse, and something in his chest clenched at the feel of the weak pounding beneath his fingertips.

Still there.

Alive.

She was alive.

"What happened?" he asked accusatorily, never looking away from the unconscious girl while he cast several diagnostic spells. Her magic was weak, so very weak, almost fading away.

"I don't know. She was cursed before we arrived," said Lupin, defeated.

"I'll take her from here," Snape commanded, meeting the werewolf's eyes again as he spread his arms, gesturing for Lupin to place the girl there. When he saw the flicker of doubt in the werewolf's amber eyes, he added, "Miss Granger needs to get the Hospital Wing as quickly as possible, Lupin. And you are in no condition to take her."

The werewolf nodded, obviously aware that he was as exhausted from the night's event as he appeared to Snape, and a second later, the unconscious girl rested safely in his arms, her limp form feeling far, far too fragile for his sanity.

Already turning to leave, a thought struck him and he barked, "Weasley, quick, what colour had the spell that hit her?"

However, it was Longbottom who answered, "Purple, sir, cast nonverbally. Looked like a flame."

Dolohov.

The name, the realization hit him like a fist, and for a second, the air in his lungs felt too solid, too heavy to breathe.

The girl had been cursed with a spell of Antonin's own creation, one that was designed to slowly poison the victim's magic; even if it was true what the boy said, and Dolohov had only cast the curse nonverbally, it still had the potential to claim the girl's life.

Snape swore and set out for the castle as fast as his legs carried him.

He reached the abandoned Entrance Hall within minutes and ascended the enchanted stairs towards the Hospital Wing. However, somewhere on his way, between the first floor and the second floor, he nearly stumbled and leaned for a moment against the wall to gather his strength, his gaze straying to the girl in his arms.

She was so pale, oh-so pale, and barely breathing. If the girl died... if she died, right here in his arms tonight...

Snape sucked in a breath and pushed himself from the wall, forcing his exhausted legs to move.

"Don't you dare, don't you even dare and try to die on me Miss Granger," he ordered, helplessly. Taking the next flight of stairs, his arms tightened around her limp form, holding her even closer to his chest. "Do you hear me, Hermione? Hold on; don't leave me. We are almost there... almost there."

Yet, there was no response, not even a slight stirring, no sign to placate the beast of fear that haunted him; the girl in his arms remained still.

After what seemed like an endless eternity, he reached the Hospital Wing. With a forceful kick of his right foot, he pushed the doors open, striding swiftly inside.

"Poppy!" Snape bellowed.

Immediately, the mediwitch was at his side. "What happened to her?"

"Dark curse. It's poisoning her magic," he said while he placed the unconscious girl on one of the hospital beds that stood more separated.

"Do you know how to counter..."

"Not yet." He cut off the question as he grasped the wrist of the girl's wand hand and pulled her sleeve up, finding what he had feared. A black line was spreading from her pulse point to her elbow. When he brushed the collar of her blouse aside, he saw similar fine dark lines fraying along the curse wound on her breastbone. If the thread from her pulse point spread further, if the poisoning went on, soon her inner organs would stop to function, and if it reached her heart...

Snape's lips thinned and he ran his wand once more over the curse wound.

It should be an easy task for him to remove a Dark curse of Dolohov's mediocre quality, yet the effect of removing the curse would be merely like removing the poisonous quill from a wound; the harm was already done, the curse had already affected the girl's magic, and he could only hope that the poisoning effect of the Dark magic could be stopped with the potions ingredients at his disposal.

"Poppy, I need all Phoenix tears you have in store. Quick. And tell Dobby to bring every bottle of Felix Felicis and my emergency kit from the lab, he'll know where to find them," he ordered, his worried gaze on Miss Granger's ashen face as he placed his palm on her forehead.

Cold. So cold. Almost like death.

Snape shook his head imperceptibly. He wouldn't allow for the girl to die, not today, not on his watch. Wasn't he supposed to be able to put a stopper in death after all?

From the corner of his eye, he saw the mediwitch vanish and heard how she drew the curtains next to the bed forward before casting a Silencing Spell on the small niche of the Hospital Wing.

He bent slightly over the girl's unconscious form and placed the tip of his wand close to the curse wound on her chest. The frown between his brows deepened as his mind

focussed on the counter-spell. As expected, Dolohov's curse broke at the first attempt.

While murmuring several incantations he hoped would slow the poisoning of the girl's magic, Snape threw a quick glance over his shoulder, waiting impatiently for the mediwitch's return.

But it was Lupin who emerged with his required resources, next to the hospital bed, only moments later.

"Poppy is tending to the other students," the werewolf explained, placing several bottles on the bedside cabinet.

Snape nodded briefly, never taking his eyes from the girl in front of him, monitoring the spread of dark line on her skin. "Hand me the Phoenix tears."

Lupin followed his order, and he took the bottle and uncorked it. His brows creased in concentration as he inclined the flask with the colourless liquid and dribbled several drops carefully into the wound on the girl's chest.

The effect was immediate but not as much as he had hoped for. The wound on the girl's breastbone closed within heartbeats, but while the spreading of dark path on her forearm appeared to come to a halt, the line and the Dark magic it carried refused to vanish, still affecting her body and magic.

The girl would have to fight those far-spread residues of darkness, would have to fight the last head of the monster all on her own, and all he could do was to provide her...unconscious as she was...with the magical substances to support this fight.

Frowning, Snape moved to the bedside cabinet, ignoring the fearful look the werewolf gave him. But Lupin knew better than to articulate the unspoken question out loud.

He unstopped the remaining flasks standing in front of him before he seized a larger bottle with Felix Felicis and emptied it in a single gulp.

His mind raced as his hands flew over the items on the cabinet. He needed to get more Phoenix tears into Miss Granger's blood cycle but, as fighting the Dark magic of the curse would be strength sapping for her body as well, he needed to provide her with something here, too.

Snape took a small bowl from his potions emergency kit and placed small slices of Mandrake roots inside, powdering them before he mixed the Mandrake powder with the remaining Phoenix tears at his disposal.

Grasping another bottle of Felix Felicis, he hesitated a moment before he poured the golden liquid into the small bowl as well. The mixture was a leap of faith in the combined strength of the single ingredients, nothing more. But it was all he had.

Snape seized the small bowl and turned around. "I need you to hold her upright, Lupin. She has to swallow this."

The werewolf nodded, lifted the girl carefully, and moved to sit behind her, supporting her limp upper body with his chest and resting her head on his shoulder.

For the first time, she stirred slightly, the healing effect of the Phoenix tears bringing her closer the realm of consciousness.

Carefully, Snape placed the bowl between her pale lips and inclined the small object. When the thick golden liquid began to flow into her mouth, his right hand moved to massage the girl's throat with soft pressure to initiate a swallowing reflex, and within seconds, he felt her larynx bounce beneath his fingers, once, twice, a third time, until she coughed and eventually swallowed the mixture from the bowl.

"Well done, Miss Granger."

At the sound of her name, her eyes fluttered open and, for the heartbeat of a moment, her glazed gaze focussed on him.

"You... are here... sir."

The words came out in nothing more than a weak whisper, yet to him they sounded like salvation, and he ignored the curious glance the werewolf cast him at the girl's unusual reaction to his presence.

"Astute as always, Miss Granger. Of course, I am here." *Whenever you need me, you foolish girl.*

However, she had already succumbed to Morpheus' call again before the words had truly left his lips.

"Is she going to be all right, Severus?" the werewolf asked, placing the girl back onto the propped-up pillow.

Snape frowned and grasped the girl's wrist. The black line had nearly crossed the crook of her right arm. "We'll have to wait, Lupin. Even with the combined help of the Phoenix tears, Mandrake roots and Felix Felicis in her blood, her body and magic still have to fight the residues of the curse on its own."

The werewolf's face fell and he closed his eyes, stricken. "Harry already lost Sirius tonight, I don't know how..." He trailed off, his voice cracking.

"You don't know how to tell Potter that his own recklessness not only led to the death of his godfather tonight but could cost his supposed best friend her life as well?" Snape scoffed, cold fury searing the pit of his stomach. "I am touched, Lupin, I really am."

Before the werewolf had a chance to respond, the girl stirred in her sheets with a painful groan.

Snape darted forward and placed his hand once more on her forehead. Her skin was glowing.

"It has begun," he stated. "She is fighting the Dark magic."

"Anything we can do for her?"

Snape sneered. "Nothing the likes of you could accomplish, Lupin. Go. Take care of your *precious* boy."

The werewolf threw him a cold glare. "As you wish, Severus."

Lupin turned to leave and Snape silently conjured a large bowl and a pile of towels from thin air, placing his wand at the edge of the round item. He cast a silent Aguamenti, and a fountain of water sprung from the tip of the wood before he placed the bowl aside. He was about to tear a towel into two pieces when the mediwitch appeared at his side.

"How is she?" Poppy asked, running her wand over the girl's unconscious form.

"She has begun to fight the curse's residues after I administered Phoenix tears and Mandrake roots. She is terribly weak and we need to keep her temperature down; I don't dare to cast a Cooling Charm as I don't know if it'll interfere with the Dark magic of the curse. So, I'm opting for the Muggle way," Snape said, grimacing.

Poppy nodded. "Let me lend you a hand," she said, already removing the girl's shoes and, with a swift wave of her wand, changing the girl's clothing into a hospital nightshirt.

"How are the others?" Snape asked as he wetted the first piece of towel and handed it to the mediwitch.

She cast him a rueful look before she wrapped the moist cloth around the girl's calf. "Better than I expected: broken ankles, scarred skin and cursed noses but, most of all, bruised egos. Nothing the proper potions and an extra amount of sleep couldn't cure."

Snape snorted and placed a cool piece of cloth around the girl's wrist, his gaze straying to her heated face, her brows creased in pain.

"Mr. Weasley has already asked for her," said the mediwitch, casting him a worried look.

Snape frowned and placed the last wet cloth on the girl's forehead. "Try to postpone the boy somehow."

Poppy nodded. "Is there anything else we can do for Miss Granger, Severus?"

"Nothing. Nothing, but wait," said Snape, not able to keep the bitter timbre from his voice as he conjured an armchair next to him. "I'll stay here until we can be sure she is out of danger."

"Anything I can do for you?" the mediwitch asked with a sympathetic look.

Snape shook his head and let himself fall onto the chair, his eyes lingering on the rays of light the early morning sun cast on the floor through the large hospital window behind Miss Granger's bed.

The only thing he wanted in that very moment was something he couldn't have, something he would have to wait for until the girl opened those annoying soulful eyes and looked at him again.

He didn't know how much time had passed until the mediwitch returned. When Poppy Pomfrey appeared at his side again, he was once more changing the cloth on the girl's forehead. Her temperature still refused to decline, and the small groans of pain that had accompanied her fight over what had to be hours pierced his ears...and his heart.

"Albus would like to speak with you," said Poppy softly.

Snape squeezed his eyes shut, fighting the rush of anger that jolted through him. "Poppy, would you please inform our omniscient Headmaster that if he wants so desperately to talk with me, he will have to leave that ivory tower of his, as I am quite busy at the moment. In fact, I am saving one of his students, as he should be fucking aware of by now."

Only when he had already finished his speech, he felt the old man's hand on his shoulder. His gaze flew up and met the Headmaster's tired, blue eyes.

"Although you appear to think otherwise, I am *fucking* aware, as you have so eloquently put it, Severus, that you are doing everything to save Miss Granger's life," Dumbledore said sadly, and the old man's gaze strayed to the girl. "How is she?"

"Well, Miss Granger has still to regain consciousness for more than a few seconds; she is extremely weak, her temperature is high, but not too high, considering the fact that she is fighting the Dark magic of a curse she was subjected to over an unknown timeframe. I would presume, if she doesn't develop a fever that could lead to a magically-induced coma in the next twelve hours, she will live, and if she is lucky, there will be no lingering side effects as well," Snape said with barely contained anger, and turned to the Headmaster, frowning. "So, Albus, you tell me, how Miss Granger is?"

Now, it was the old man at his side who closed his eyes for a long moment; Snape felt his anger oddly abate as he saw the dried trails of tears on the wrinkled face in front of him.

"I'd wish there was better news, Severus." Dumbledore sighed, defeated. "Especially as I have to ask you to accompany me for a few hours." And then, the old man looked at him again with those tired blue eyes that chilled him to the bone.

Snape gave him a curt nod. He knew that while he had allowed the fear for the girl to push every burning question regarding the events last night to a far corner of his mind during the last hours, it was essential and long about time he learned the details of the incident at the Department of Mysteries.

Dumbledore turned to the mediwitch. "Poppy, I need you to watch over Miss Granger while Severus is away."

"Of course, Headmaster."

Dumbledore nodded and moved to leave while Snape's gaze lingered on Miss Granger's pale face; for the first time in hours, it truly sank in how close he had come...and still was...to losing her...she who had given him with her trust and kindness, with every undeserved smile the only things bright in his world.

He swallowed, hard, but the bitter lump in his throat wouldn't go away, and he forced himself to look away and meet the mediwitch's gaze.

"If there is the slightest change for the worse in Miss Granger's condition, Poppy, I want you to send Dobby to fetch me. He'll know where to find me. I need you to..."

A motherly smile spread on Poppy Pomfrey's face while he spoke, one she hadn't given him since he had been a student, and she cut him short. "I will, Severus. Go now; Albus is already waiting for you."

Snape nodded and approached the Headmaster, who stood at the edge of the small hospital niche, watching him intently over the rim of his half-moon glasses.

He walked silently at the old man's side through the Hospital Wing when he met the murderous glare Potter gave him from across the room. The boy was sitting on the side of Weasley's bed, together with the red-head's sister, Longbottom and the Ravenclaw girl. And for the first time since the night's events, Snape felt the weight of those green eyes settled heavily on his heart.

He saw how the youngest Weasley followed the boy's gaze and turned around, recognizing the headmaster and him. Momentarily, she rose and approached them quickly.

"Headmaster, Professor Snape, is Hermione all right? Is she awake? Can we see her?"

The old man placed a wrinkled hand on the girl's shoulder. "Unfortunately, not yet, Miss Weasley. Some things take time, my dear. But Professor Snape here has done his utmost that our Miss Granger will soon be back in Gryffindor Tower."

The red-head's gaze flew to him, believing, hoping; and he as much as he tried, no snide remark to turn Miss Weasley away, to deny her the reassurance she was searching for on his tongue. Who was he to deny her hope when all he had left himself in this very moment was hope, hope that the old man's words were true, that he had really done his utmost, and the girl would live?

He swallowed, imperceptibly.

"I am quite confident, Miss Weasley, that Miss Granger will soon be well enough to make herself a nuisance again."

Without looking back, without waiting for the Gryffindor's response, he headed for the door, the lie tasting bittersweet on his tongue.

Snape leaned against banister of the enchanted stairs, arms crossed in front of his chest, when the old man caught up with him, waiting for Dumbledore to take the lead.

Quickly, they ascended the stairs to the Headmaster's office.

When they stepped inside, the spy cast a glance around before he asked quietly, "So, what has happened at the Ministry that was so important that it couldn't wait until the girl was out of danger, Albus?"

Dumbledore sighed and walked to one of the large windows of his office, his gaze seemingly lingering on something far, far away. "I probably should have told you earlier today, Severus, but I felt you had already enough on your shoulders with Miss Granger's life hanging by a thread."

Snape frowned, and worry, the ungracious herald of fear, seized his chest when the Headmaster turned around, looking suddenly exhausted and old, oh-so old.

"Tom has revealed himself last night, Severus. Kingsley and Remus will fill you in on the full details of the events, as I happened to be there only as the battle came to a close. However, as of now there is little hope that we can postpone a second war for much longer, I fear. That's why I need you at the Order meeting that's about to start at Grimmauld Place."

It took a long moment for Dumbledore's words to truly sink in, but then, he felt his world shift on its axis. It was too soon, all too soon; Potter wasn't prepared yet. Merlin, the boy wasn't even of age by now, let alone ready to defeat the Dark Lord.

"Severus." The old man calling his name drew his mind back to their conversation. "There is more; Lucius Malfoy led the attack at the Department of Mysteries...he is on his way to Azkaban right now. So, Tom lost his right hand last night."

Snape curled his fingers deep into the backrest of one of the velvet armchairs that occupied the Headmaster's office as he waited for the old man to go on, waited for what he knew what was about to come, waited for those words to open the trapdoor beneath him, sending him on a journey of no return, into a world of endless darkness.

"And once again, you already know what I must ask you to do, Severus; when the storm breaks the Order will need the information, and Tom would be suspicious if you not step up to claim Lucius' place as your rightful one."

The Dark Lord's right hand...

The final stage of hell.

The room seemed to spin around him, his heart beating far, far too slowly, but when his eyes fell closed, he saw her, saw her smile that reached her emerald green gaze, her gaze filled with caring tenderness, and he knew, for her, he could.

For Lily.

"Of course, Albus."

It was already after midnight when Snape entered the Hospital Wing again, exhausted. The Order meeting had been long and tiring, and most of all, it had been a waste of time.

They would need to wait to plan any substantial strategy until the Dark Lord summoned him again, something that was unlikely in the next days as the mad man always bided his time to gather his followers when his plans had experienced a setback. And this time, he hadn't just experienced a simple setback; this time, he had suffered a stunning defeat.

"Any changes, Poppy?" he asked when he saw the mediwitch approach him.

The mediwitch smiled. "Miss Granger has yet to wake up, but her magic is getting stronger, her temperature has begun to decline and the line on her forearm is fading. The worst is over, Severus."

Snape felt his breath catch with what he refused to admit was a silent sob of relief and looked away.

Only when a hand was placed softly on his upper arm, he turned and met the mediwitch's warm gaze. "You did great today, Severus. The girl would have been lost without you."

Snape gave her a curt nod and walked slowly to the secluded hospital niche, thankful that the mediwitch knew better than to follow him.

For an eternity or two, he simply stood next to the girl's bed, eyes lingering on her face, listening to her calm breathing before he turned to the bedside cabinet and took a cloth from the bowl with cool water.

He bent slightly forward and dabbed her heated forehead gently and wetted her lips with the small piece of fabric. For a moment, he thought...hoped...she would wake up, but when she didn't, he called quietly for Dobby and requested a book from his nightstand, settling himself into the armchair.

It was far into the night when he finally heard a stirring beneath the sheets and looked up from his book and rose from the chair. He waited at the bedside until her eyes fluttered slowly open and could see that she was still disorientated when she turned her head to him, struggling her way out of the haze of unconsciousness, but when her gaze met his, a soft smile touched her lips, and his chest filled with the strangest emotion.

Never before in his life had somebody awoken to his presence with a smile.

However, that small miracle of a smile faltered only heartbeats later when shadows of awareness crossed the girl's face, the memory of the night's events obviously returning, and fear crept into her hazel eyes.

"Ron? Harry?" she called in an anxious whisper, struggling to get up. "Where are they, Professor? Are they alright?"

Quickly, he placed a restraining hand on her shoulder, guiding her with soft pressure back onto the propped-up pillow.

"Mr. Weasley and Potter are safe and well, as are Miss Lovegood and Mr. Longbottom, Miss Granger, something we didn't dare to say about you until a few moments ago. Therefore, I must insist that you lie back and rest."

He watched her relax visibly as she followed his request and felt an unusual swell of pride, realizing that her worst fears could be calmed by his word alone.

"How do you feel, Miss Granger?"

"Drowsy and my chest itches." Her nose wrinkled slightly. "Otherwise I am fine, I believe, sir."

"I see," he said, handing her a bottle of Strengthening Potion mixed with several more drops of Phoenix tears and Felix Felicis as well as a dose of Dreamless Sleep. "You need to drink those."

"I see?" she asked, taking the bottles from him, and her brows creased with obvious confusion as she swallowed the draughts. "Does that mean something good or bad?"

Snape placed his palm gently on her forehead, biding his time. The girl's temperature had dropped remarkably, and he felt himself smile as he said, "You are safe and will

soon be well again, Miss Granger."

"Oh," she breathed, her large hazel eyes observing him thoughtfully.

And then, the girl surprised them both when she grasped the hand he had been about to remove from her forehead, and only after the moment of an incredulous heartbeat, he had convinced himself that it were merely the mixture of potions coursing through her system that guided her actions.

"And you? Are you safe and well, Professor?" she asked in a whisper, and he felt defenceless.

"I am."

She sighed, relieved, and turned his hand in hers and as if to convince herself of his words brushed her thumb over the healed skin of his palm, a gesture so gentle, so innocent, it stole the air from his lungs, rendering him unable to deny her the liberty she so freely took.

"I was so afraid," she said quietly, her eyes lingering on his hand. "I thought if you were there, Professor, if you were one of them, you might be forced to reveal your true alliance and endanger yourself as well because of our foolishness." She looked up and searched his gaze, her eyes sad and bright.

He swallowed, trying to keep his throat from tightening with the bittersweet mix of guilt and affection her words evoked.

"The Order saved you and your friends. I wasn't there. I couldn't be; but I would never have allowed... I would never have hurt..." he trailed off and looked away, dark curtains of hair falling forward as if they could hide the folly in those wishful words from her, words that had tumbled so carelessly from his lips.

The girl was right. He wouldn't have been able to protect her and her friends without giving his alliance away, without risking the cause... his vow.

And what if there had been a chance to keep his cover intact by merely saving Potter and leaving her behind? What would he have done then to keep her safe... to deserve the trust in those hazel eyes?

Nothing.

The word echoed through his mind, echoed through him until the icy breath of truth reached his heart, and he felt cold, so very cold, and the only warmth left was her small hand on his skin.

He didn't know how long it took until he found the courage in his heart to search the girl's gaze again; however, when he finally did, he had to realize that the potions had done their work and sleep had claimed her. Though, her small hand held still tightly on to his, and he felt unable to withdraw it, to deny himself the small comfort of her innocent touch.

Carefully, in the safeness of the half-light of the infirmary, he sat down on the edge of the bed and regarded the girl.

Her brown, unruly curls spilled over the pillow and framed her face; her pale, young face, still marked by fading bruises...the last reminders of the night's events. However, she would live, and she was safe...for now. A miracle, given that the girl had fought not less than half a dozen grown Death Eaters the night before.

Foolish little lioness.

The ghost of a smile danced around the corners of his mouth. Minerva would be so proud of her.

And, as if on its own accord, his hand strayed away from hers and reached out and long fingers brushed...in the barest of touch...a tedious curl gently from her forehead.

"Sleep, little lioness. You will need all your strength in the days to come."

The midday sun cast glittering circles through the windows of his office when Dumbledore emerged from the Pensieve and from the memory of a scene he had witnessed without being noticed several days earlier.

He waited for the witch next to him to lift her face from the stone basin as well before he searched her gaze, a thoughtful expression in his blue eyes.

"Minerva, I never thought...could my interpretation be wrong? I mean, we always wondered..." he broke off.

"Nonsense. There is no being wrong here, Albus. You forget that, in the end, it isn't fate, but the witch or the wizard who chooses. And as I've tried to tell you before, the choice hasn't been made."

Dumbledore nodded and closed the wing doors of the cabinet shielding the magical stone basin.

Had someone other than him decided to visit the infirmary during that night, he would have found his Potions master sitting at the beside of a young woman, silently watching over her like the guarding gargoyle in front of the Headmaster's office.

Severus had not left before the dawn.

I wrote and rewrote, pondered, struggled, and wibbled and wrote again, and the muse wanted the chapter just as it is...

Reviews are *love* :)

Truths Untold

Chapter 10 of 12

One night at Grimmauld Place, Hermione witnesses something that will change her perception of Severus Snape forever.

Disclaimer: All rights belong to JKR.

Author's note: My eternal thanks belong to potionsmistress23 for her beta magic. As always, this chapter wouldn't have been what it is without her. Any remaining errors are mine, and mine alone.

Her first attempt at opening her eyes was futile, as was the second. Her whole body, from her little toe to her eyelids, felt heavy... exhausted as if she had taken a walk of a thousand miles.

All around her, there were noises, voices whispering from afar, luring her into the state of waking. Yet, more uncounted minutes ticked by until the Hospital Wing took shape around her, and Hermione realized she wasn't alone.

On the footboard of her bed sat Dobby, observing her quietly while his bony legs dangled in the air.

"Good mo-orning, Dobby," she said, stifling a yawn.

Though, when she tried to sit up, there was a sharp jolt of pain to her chest. Hermione grimaced, lying back again. Instinctively, her gaze dropped to the hurting area. Her eyes grew wide with surprise when she saw the thin, silvery scar running from the upper part of her breastbone to her left shoulder; it was a scar that hadn't been there before, and she felt a rush of dread as she realized that it must be the visible remainder of a curse. Only Dark magic would leave such a mark on human skin.

She drew a quivering breath, closing her eyes as the memories of the events at the Department of Mysteries slowly came back to her.

Their way to the Ministry had led them straight into Voldemort's trap, and the expression of terror in Harry's green eyes, when he had realized it, had nearly been too much to bear.

There had been so many Death Eaters, waiting in the shadows for them. A safe escape had appeared impossible, and the last things she could remember, before her world had gone mercifully black, were Harry screaming her name and a flash of purple light. And right now, she didn't even dare and try to imagine how the Order had managed to rescue them.

But they had. Harry... Ron... they were safe and well.

All of us are safe.

She exhaled slowly, silencing her freshly flaring fear with the memory of Professor Snape's assuring words from last night.

Only when the mattress shifted slightly and she felt a presence next to her, she realized that Dobby had left his place on the footboard and looked up, meeting a pair of worried green eyes in front of her.

"Harry Potter's friend shall not sit up. Harry Potter's friend must rest. Dobby is to have an eye on that."

"I know, Dobby, thank you. Professor Snape already told me to. I only forgot about it for a moment," Hermione said, giving him a rueful smile.

Dobby shook his head, his small hands grasping the tie hanging around his neck tightly as he spoke once more. "Harry Potter's friend must NOT forget. Harry Potter's friend has been grievously injured."

Bat-like ears flapped sadly forward, and Hermione was left to watch as he sat down on the edge of the bed, muttering to himself in a quiet wailing voice. "Mustn't forget. Mustn't. Professor Snape, so very worried he was. Never eating, never sleeping. Dobby always asking, always trying."

Hermione blinked, feeling a sudden stab of guilt at the revelation. Her professor had already looked exhausted beyond words, even before their supposed feat of rescuing Sirius right from beneath You-Know-Who's non-existent nose, even before he had been forced to forgo sleep once more... because of her.

However, she was sure Dobby had never intended for her or anybody else to hear those words.

And her hand flew unconsciously to cover the silvery scar on her skin as her mind began to conceive the possible danger should Dobby accidentally unveil Professor Snape's concern for her to anybody else.

If Voldemort would learn that one of his Death Eaters had kept night watch at the beside of Harry Potter's Muggle-born friend...

Merlin, he should have never done that. Madame Pomfrey could have easily taken his place at her side.

But he had. Because he had been concerned for a student. *For her.*

And she had once again been nothing but a foolish, ungrateful Gryffindor who had stumbled into more trouble than she could handle.

Something in her chest constricted oddly at the realization. Hermione swallowed hard and reached out to lay a hand on Dobby's shoulder. She had to put his worries at rest. He could not again mutter them in such a quiet mantra for uncounted ears to hear.

At her touch, Dobby turned to her, and solicitous green eyes regarded her quietly.

"It's alright, Dobby, I promise I won't forget it again. And I promise I'll do my best and rest."

"Well, that's music to my ears." Startled, Hermione's gaze snapped up at the sudden sound of Madame Pomfrey's voice.

"Good morning, dear, how are you feeling? Dobby, would you please inform the Headmaster that Miss Granger is awake," the mediwitch said cheerfully as she scurried into the small niche of the Hospital Wing, her arms loaded with potions bottles in every possible colour. She gave Hermione a broad smile before turning to the bedside cabinet.

"Good morning, Madame Pomfrey," said Hermione, noticing that beside her, Dobby had already left without so much as a sound. "Well, so far, my whole body feels as if I have been forced to play a Quidditch match or two, and when I try to sit up my chest hurts. Apart from that, I am feeling quite acceptable, I guess."

"Well, well, that was to be expected," said the mediwitch, unstopping a bluish and a brownish bottle before she handed them to Hermione. "Drink the blue one first, dear. It should attenuate the pain you still experience, and then brown one with the Strengthening Solution. You'll have to drink some more of those during the day, but for now these two should do. Once you've eaten breakfast, I'll give you something to help you relax and sleep a bit more." Madame Pomfrey gestured towards the colourful collection on her bedside cabinet.

Hermione nodded and took the bottles, swallowing the potions like the mediwitch had told her to do. When she had emptied the blue flask and turned to put it on the cabinet, she noted that while the brown bottle was marked as Strengthening Solution, the label of the blue one held nothing but her name in Professor Snape's narrow handwriting.

Only my name... Her brows creased, and she brought the bottleneck close to her nose. The remains of the liquid had a slight golden colour, but it didn't smell like any potion she knew. She could clearly identify hints of mandrake roots in it, but she couldn't dispel the growing impression that the draught wasn't one of the usual concoctions her

professor prepared. But why would he need to brew something so uncommon?

"Madame Pomfrey?" she asked and looked up, searching the mediwitch's gaze.

"Yes, Miss Granger?" The older witch gave her a benevolent smile.

"I'm not sure... I can barely remember what happened to me at the Ministry, and I had not the chance to ask Professor Snape last night, but I know that I must have been hit by a curse: I have deduced as much. However, I'd like to know... could you tell me what curse hit me?"

The smile faded from Madame Pomfrey's face, and she sighed deeply. "I wish I could, Miss Granger, but I have never heard of a curse with such effects before. All I can tell you is that it was a very dark spell. It was threatening to poison your magic when Professor Snape brought you here."

"Professor Snape brought me here?" Hermione asked, taken aback. Hadn't he told her he hadn't been at the Department of Mysteries, so how could he have been the one to take her back to Hogwarts and to the Hospital Wing?

"That's what I said, Miss Granger," said the mediwitch tightly, obviously mistaking her astonished unease as aversion against that particular piece of information. "And it has been very fortunate that the professor was the one to bring you here. I wouldn't have been able to remove the curse and to counter its effects. You should be very thankful to Professor Snape."

"I'm sorry, Madam Pomfrey, I am thankful to Professor Snape. I never wanted to imply otherwise. It's only last night he said" she faltered, realizing that it would not be wise to share her professor's words. "Never mind, I simply was under the impression that someone else had brought my friends and me back home to Hogwarts."

"The impression is quite correct, Miss Granger, and that someone would be me," the voice of Albus Dumbledore announced kindly, even before the Headmaster appeared next to Madam Pomfrey. "But you have to forgive an old man for delegating the task of carrying you all the way from the Ministry to the Hospital Wing to much younger wizards than me when it turned out that using the magic of a levitation spell was neither advisable nor quick enough in your condition."

"Uhhello, Professor Dumbledore," Hermione said quietly.

"However, I take it that you must be feeling better when you are already back to asking questions, Miss Granger?" The Headmaster smiled brightly.

"A lot, actually."

"Well, that's wonderful news. Especially, as I know there are some people waiting at the other end of the Hospital Wing who are quite anxious to see you," the Headmaster said before he turned to the mediwitch. "Poppy, would you please give Miss Granger and me a moment?"

Madam Pomfrey nodded briefly, and Professor Dumbledore sat down on the edge of the bed and waited until she had left the Hospital niche before he turned and searched Hermione's gaze.

His blue eyes, that had twinkled merrily beneath the thick silvery brows only moments ago, held, suddenly, a grave expression, and she felt her fingers instinctively curl a bit deeper into the fabric of the bed sheet.

"You are probably wondering why I asked Madam Pomfrey to leave us alone, Miss Granger," said the Headmaster calmly. "Unfortunately, there are things you need to knowthings I need to prepare you for before I can allow you to finally reunite with your friends again. As it is, we all suffered a great loss during your rescue from the Ministry, Miss Granger."

For a moment, Hermione stared in silent horror at the elderly wizard in front of her while the implications behind those carefully chosen words sank in.

It couldn't be.

She shook her head in denial.

"I don't understand, Headmaster. Last night, hehe said Harry, Ron that my friends are safe... and he would not lie about that," she whispered, her gaze straying to her hands that held tightly onto a laboured part of her bed sheet as if it could protect her heart from shattering, should the Headmaster's answer prove Professor Snape's words wrong, should something have happened to Harry or...

...Ron.

"No, he would not, my dear girl. And your*friends* are safe, indeed." Dumbledore patted her hand gently, and for the instant of a heartbeat, Hermione wondered as she looked up and met the pair of blue eyes, that gazed so kindly at her, how he had known whom she had meant, but the thought was lost when the Headmaster continued.

"However, Professor Snape, like myself, falls sometimes victim to the habit of not answering questions to their full extent if the terrible truth would hurt the ones" Dumbledore paused for a moment and regarded her thoughtfully as if he had just realized something and needed to decide how to weigh his words. "Well, if it is in the best interest of the ones we wish to protect to leave some truths untold for a while. Knowing Severus as I do, Miss Granger, I would presume he did not want to risk upsetting you, when you needed nothing more than rest after being so severely injured. As your professor he cared more for your well being than your knowing of the full turn of events, dear girl."

Hermione only managed a nod in response, her mind whirling with the different pieces of information as she tried desperately to put them together.

If not one of her friends... who then?

Meanwhile, the Headmaster removed his glasses for a moment, pinching the bridge of his wrinkled nose. He drew a deep breath before he continued. "Unfortunately, however, the outcome of the events at the Ministry has been grim and grievous for all of us. And Professor Snape and I agreed this morning that it would be better if you learned about them from me rather than from your friends..."

In the following hour, most of Dumbledore's account of the happenings at the Department of Mysteries seemed to pass in a blur for Hermione, and she only sensed the silent tears for Sirius on her cheeks when the Headmaster proffered her a sparkling blue hanky.

However, later that day, when she met the broken look in Harry's green eyes for the first time, she felt deeply grateful that Dumbledore had chosen to prepare her for the terrible fact that her friend had lost the last remaining member of his family.

Harry never mentioned Sirius by name, not once while they spoke about the events at the Ministry, and Hermione merely brushed the angry tears away and squeezed his hand tightly when he told her that everything was just Professor Snape's fault. Simply everything.

She wished she could have told him he was right. She wished she could have for all the sadness she felt for her friend's loss eased his pain with such a simple lie cloaked in a few gentle words.

But she couldn't.

Not when she knew how the events of the night had unfolded, and it had been Bellatrix's curse that had hit Sirius and caused him to fall through the deathly archway.

Not when she knew that it had been *their* foolish decision to go to the Ministry on their own that had caused Sirius to leave the safety of Grimmauld Place in fear for his

godson.

And not with that bitter feeling of guilt tying her tongue because she knew, in a treacherous corner of her heart, something was contemptibly relieved that someone else hadn't even come close to the Veil that night.

Snape melted into the shadows behind a knight's armour in the dungeons when he spotted Draco in front of the Slytherin common room during his morning patrol. The boy was having a heated discussion with Crabbe and Goyle, and they were obviously about to part ways.

Snape had already planned to talk to the boy sometime today. He needed to know how the young Malfoy was dealing with the fallout of the events of the Ministry, and here was his chance to catch him alone.

When Draco's sidekicks eventually vanished behind the door to the common room, and the boy approached the dungeon hallway, Snape stepped out from behind the armour.

A moment later, Draco saw him and acknowledged his presence merely with a cold and half-heartedly spoken, "*Professor.*"

Snape decided to let the unusual, unfriendly act pass and gave the boy a curt nod. "Draco, I'd ask you to follow me: I'd like to have a word in my office."

"Really, I don't see why" Draco tried to protest, but Snape silenced him with a sharp look.

"Mr. Malfoy, for your sake, don't try me, and let me remind you that you are talking to your Head of House. Now, follow me," he ordered with a snarl, and the boy's pale face flushed with barely suppressed anger.

Snape threw him another warning glance before he turned around and strode ahead, and after a second, he heard Draco's footsteps following him through the dungeons.

A heavy silence hung between them when they entered his office a few minutes later. Snape walked to stand behind his desk, placing his fingertips against the cool wood, and more seconds trickled by while he regarded the boy, waiting for him to meet his eye.

Draco stood in the middle of his office, holding himself decidedly upright while he chose to look everywhere but at his Head of House. He looked sallow and tired... and lost; an unhappy, angry young man, who despite his distinguished and far more handsome appearance, reminded Snape painfully of his younger self in this very moment.

He was all too familiar with the whirlwind of emotions raging in a young man's head whose father had been imprisoned.

In those long-gone moments when the mixture of wrath and shame had taken hold of his younger self, he had been prepared to take down the world with bare hands. And unlike Draco, he had never held any respect for Tobias Snape, and he had been safe from the experience of having the esteemed family name thrown into the foul abyss that lingered behind the headlines of the Daily Prophet. The name of Snape had never been a respectable one even in the Muggle world.

Nevertheless, he couldn't spare the boy the discussion that lay ahead and that would place another weight on those narrow shoulders, not when he suspected what choice the Dark Lord had already waiting in the shadows for Draco.

"I know this is a difficult time, Draco" he said carefully, but at the first sound of his voice, the boy's head snapped towards him and the young Malfoy cut him off.

"Where have you been, *sir*?" he demanded, his hands fisted and white-knuckled. "Why haven't you been there to help Father?"

Because I am the false friend you shouldn't trust, the traitor.

The thought combined with the boy's implied accusation stung like a knife, but Snape forced himself to hold Draco's gaze.

He only allowed himself to swallow imperceptibly against the mouldy taste with which guilt seemed suddenly to flood his mouth before he said calmly, "Draco, the Dark Lord ordered me not to leave my position here at Hogwarts. Surely, your father has told you that one doesn't question his Lordship's decisions."

The boy snorted, his pale lips trembling with anger and desperation.

"No, he hasn't told me that, *sir*. But do you do you know what Father always told my mother when he was summoned? What he said when she asked him not to go, *sir*? No?!"

Draco laughed short and cheerless, and Snape felt something cold curl around his soul at the sound. "Oh, of course not. He told my mother that she didn't have to worry because if things turned bad *you* would have his back."

Snape squeezed his eyes briefly shut before he left his position behind the desk and approached the boy, trying to place his hands on the narrow shoulders, but Draco backed away.

"Draco, I know you are angry. But you must know that I would never willingly fail your father. Not if I have a choice. Yet, whatever it is you wish to think of me, I want you need you to understand something," he said insistently, searching the boy's gaze, and the broken look in those gray eyes closed the icy vice around his soul, so tight it ached to breath.

"There will be the expectation by some, even pressure maybe, that you take your father's place in the ranks of the Dark Lord. But his Lordship will not force you to take the Mark. He cannot. The Mark must be taken of your own free will for the binding magic to unfold, and not even your father chose to join the Dark Lord before graduation."

"You did, *sir*."

"I did."

Because I was young and foolish.

Because I had lost her. Lost Lily.

"So, why are you trying to advise me against it?" Once more, the accusation was plain in the boy's words, and it seemed to settle with the weight of a whole ocean of sorrow on his chest.

Because it was an unforgivable error... and it led to the worst mistake in my miserable life.

Taking the Dark Lord's Mark hadn't been the solution to a world that wasn't fair, and in the end, it had been the one he loved the most, the Dark Lord had forced to pay ...

Lily. Dead. Gone.

My fault alone.

But he couldn't tell that to Draco. He had already spoken too freely, said too much for it not to cause any damage should the Dark Lord choose to look into the boy's mind.

He couldn't risk telling the boy more, couldn't tell Draco what he needed to hear most in this very moment: the truth.

"Really? Did I, Mr. Malfoy?" Snape sneered coldly, escaping from the boy's probing gaze by walking back to his desk. "Well, if you think that to be my intention, it would be better if you choose to carefully reconsider my words. Furthermore, I would advise you to try and pay closer attention than you have apparently done right now should you ever be in the Dark Lord's presence in the near future. Like me, his Lordship does not appreciate being misunderstood."

He hated himself more with every spoken word, hated the greater cause that tied his tongue.

How could any good come from him being a spy for the Order when it forced him to fail a young man like Draco by leaving the truth untold?

He had barely reached the solid security of his desk when the boy spoke again.

"I shall do that, *Professor*. If you'll excuse me now, Mother is waiting at the front gate."

"Of course." He never turned back to watch the boy leave: only when the door fell shut behind Draco, he sank into his chair, burying his head in his hands.

Somehow, Hermione knew she was walking through a dream as she approached the beech tree at the lake, leaving Hogwarts behind her. She was barefooted and still wearing her hospital nightgown, but the summer sun seemed to warm every inch of her body.

Even from afar, she could already see Ron and Harry under the tree. Harry was sleeping with his head rested against the trunk while Ron was leaning backwards in the grass, propped up on his elbows. He was smiling about something.

She felt how her heart sped up at the sight and allowed her feet to walk a little faster, already waving to him. But after a moment, she realized something was odd. Very odd. No matter how far she went, she never reached him, and no matter how much she waved, he never waved back. He never saw her.

Ron doesn't see me...

Anxious, she tried to call for him, but no sound came from her mouth. And she was left to stand and watch how Neville, Ginny and Luna appeared and joined her two friends, how they talked with them, laughed with them while she was all alone, and suddenly, a fresh wind sprang up, and she felt cold and the dream changed...

She was standing in the Hall of Prophecies again. But this time she was alone, all alone in the gloomy room.

The only light left was the soft white glow of a single crystal ball in front of her, a small glimmer of hope in the endless darkness.

There was no label, no caption on the shelf, but with a literally dreamlike certainty, she somehow knew that this particular sphere and whatever it might contain concerned her. Without hesitation, she reached for it. However, the moment her fingertips made contact with the cool glass, the ball rolled away. In doing so, it seemed to shrink to a size even smaller than a Snitch and flew from the shelf when she made another attempt to seize it, hovering in the air like a firefly.

Undeterred, she tried once more to catch the tiny, gleaming object, but again, her hands found nothing but thin air. For a moment, she stood and watched how the flicker of light danced mockingly around her and felt her heart sink. But then, its dance stopped, and the gleam of light landed in the open palm of a large, pale hand that had emerged next to her out of the darkness. She spun around and met Professor Snape's unfathomable gaze.

She smiled at him and found the smile returned, ever so slightly, as he extended his hand with the grain of light to her, the warm glow reflecting in the endless black of his eyes.

An offer. An invitation. *Touch it. Take it. It's yours.*

Her heart leaped, and her gaze strayed to his palm. But the moment she reached out for it, she felt a breath of cold air and a drawling voice tore through her.

"Such a curious, little Mudblood. Has nobody taught you not to touch what isn't yours?"

She looked up, and her professor was gone. In his place stood now a masked Death Eater, holding the small light in his gloved hand.

She backed away, trying to protest, trying to explain that he was wrong, that the light did belong to her, but again no sound formed on her tongue.

For a moment, the Death Eater assessed her through the slits of his iron mask before he closed his hand, crushing the gleaming piece of crystal with the mere strength of his fingers. And as the last glimmer of light was extinguished, an abyss of darkness opened beneath her and she fell...

Hermione woke up with a start. From somewhere she heard a sob and realized it had to be her own as she sat up in her bed. The moon was casting a bluish twilight through the windows of the Hospital Wing, and like so often in the last months, everybody beside herself seemed to be fast asleep.

Hermione sighed, and her eyes fell on the open edition of Doyle's *The Sign of the Four*, she had been reading earlier and that now lay broad on her blanket. She reached for it and threw a glance at her bedside cabinet.

The bottle of Dreamless Sleep Madam Pomfrey had left there earlier for her stood still untouched on the wooden furniture, and it was easy to put the course of events together.

She had thought the reading would banish her memory of the Department of Mysteries from her mind, at least for a while, but she had become so absorbed in the book that she had forgotten to take the potion before sleep had claimed her.

With a forceful push, Hermione placed the book in the drawer of her bedside cabinet, angry that her own thoughtlessness had cost her a much needed night of undisturbed sleep, and reached for the potion bottle.

Once more, the white label held Professor Snape's well-known handwriting.

Lost in thoughts, she traced the neat black line with her fingertips, remembering how the dream-version of Professor Snape had been able to catch the light instead of her. And she wondered why the light whatever it had been had chosen to come to her professor.

Maybe because it was only for him to give...

The moment the thought entered her mind, Hermione dismissed the idea, shaking her head with a quiet snort.

She wouldn't even start with ridiculous nonsense of trying to analyze her dreams as if she were Lavender or Parvati.

It had been a nightmare. Period. Nothing more.

She emptied the potion bottle with a determined gulp and rested her head on her pillow, regarding the infirmary ceiling while she waited for Morpheus' arms to enfold her again.

The descending moon cast a cold twilight into the sumptuous bedroom, illuminating the mediocre copy of an Italian fresco that covered the ceiling, giving the figures an even more grotesque appearance.

Snape's gaze lingered for another moment on the tawdry painting he had been watching for the last hour before he sat up and rose from the bed, his right hand grasping his clothing from the floor on the way.

He heard a soft moan of protest accompanied with the rustling of satin sheets from the bed, but continued to button up his white shirt in silence. He was halfway through the row of buttons when he felt a presence behind him and tensed, smelling, once again, the faint scent of the poorly concocted Polyjuice Potion that had assaulted his senses during the whole evening.

"You know, you don't have to leave already," a saccharine voice told him while well-versed fingers sneaked beneath his shirt. "Ivy said you paid for the whole night."

An unpleasant frisson ran down his spine, and he focussed on the task of closing the last button.

"I don't have time for a whole night," he said stiffly, already donning the first sleeve of his frock coat.

At that, the hands were withdrawn, and the witch turned to stand before him, sneaking her arms around his neck. Soft waves of blonde hair framed her face when she graced him with a feigned hopeful look in her dark blue eyes that appeared to be as deep as the sea.

Snape remained unmoved in the embrace of her arms. Only for a moment, he allowed himself to wonder how this supposed perfect face would look without the disguise of a potion.

"But you are coming back, are you?" she asked, her lips brushing along his jaw line, the closest she would ever get to kissing him.

"It's been nice, you know." A lie whispered against his skin, and he had to suppress a snort.

Their coupling had been anything but nice. It had been short and awkward, as he had been unable to allow himself to indulge in the pleasure she had so freely offered. Oh, there had been a time he would have lost himself in her ministrations, drowned in the sea of those enticing, false kisses.

But not tonight. Not when he knew it was all a charade for the Dark Lord, and not even his body's desires were of his own choosing anymore.

However, it would be enough enough to set at rest the dark wizard's doubts. The mad man would never threaten another life because of him.

"I suppose."

His response earned him another one of those smiles that never reached her eyes, and he gave her a curt nod as a goodbye before he turned and headed for the door.

He exhaled briefly when he stepped into the hallway and walked towards the atrium of the large house Ivy had chosen for her business: the interior of the whole establishment with its dark marble floors, flamboyant frescoes and velvet curtains reminded him more of the caricature of a Roman estate than of the Wizarding brothel it was.

When he entered the hall-like room, it was dim-lit and seething with wizards who were, in one way or another, making arrangements for the night with one of the young witches. From the corner of his eyes, he recognized an all-too familiar face in the crowd. Yaxley was leaning against the marble pillar in a corner. He appeared to be talking to a voluptuous, dark-haired witch, but his gaze followed Snape as he crossed the room, and for an instant, Snape had to resist the urge of letting a triumphant smirk curl his lips. Tonight's mission was accomplished. The Dark Lord would soon learn of his follower's nightly desires.

He had nearly reached the exit door when he caught the gaze of the witch who had introduced herself as Ivy.

The moment she saw him, she cast him a smile over her shoulder, a smile so intimate that it would give everybody watching their exchange the impression they were old acquaintances.

He slowed his steps and waited for her to end the conversation with one of the guests. A few seconds later, she approached him.

Ivy's appearance was of the same potion-induced ageless beauty he had seen in all the witches she employed. Short black hair framed a fine-cut face that was graced with the same deep blue eyes he had seen before and a sensual mouth. A slender, cream-skinned leg showed through the long slit of her elegant, black robe.

Well, she must have an excellent source of Veela hair for her Polyjuice Potion, he thought, forcing an appreciative smirk to curl his lips.

It was one of the first lessons Master Canterbury had taught him during his Potions apprenticeship: the art of potion making was as well an art of creating illusions.

Of fame. Of beauty. And, of course, of love.

Oh, how easy it would once have been to end his agony and make Lily forget Potter with the help of a potion; how easy to let her believe she loved him instead.

But it would have never been *real*, never been true.

And he could have never done that to her. Not even in his darkest, selfish moments after he had rendered his soul to the Dark Lord.

Not to Lily.

Snape snapped out of his musing when he felt a hand being placed on the sleeve of his right forearm and met Ivy's deep blue eyes.

"Sev, you can't already be leaving us. We didn't even get the chance to share a glass," she said, just loud enough for anybody who took an interest in their conversation to hear it, unmistakable affection and familiarity resonating in her soft voice.

It was a flawless performance; it had been one from the moment he had stepped into her Wizarding brothel, and she had recognized him. Not for one second could somebody have assumed they had seen each other for the first time tonight. He would have to thank Lucius for that.

Snape bent down slightly and brought his mouth close to her ear, playing along with her act, well aware of the puckish eyes watching them from the nearby corner.

"Unfortunately, I have to, my dear. But I promise to make it up to you the next time," he said in a silky whisper while his nose was once more assaulted by the already familiar scent of mediocre Polyjuice Potion that lingered on her skin as well.

If he was lucky, there needn't be a next time.

She laughed delicately, the sound still floating through the air when she took his arm and accompanied him to the door.

It was only several, surreal minutes later that he Apparated in the shadows, close to the front gate of Hogwarts, and entered the secret passage that led him unseen into the castle.

When he reached the tunnel branch to the dungeons, his steps faltered for a moment. He felt in dire need for an extended shower to rid himself of the mixture of sweat, potions and falseness that seemed to cover every inch of his skin. And then, there was the report he had to give to the old man. Not immediately, but nonetheless before

he had even a chance to catch an hour of sleep.

However, his eyes strayed from the tunnel entrance to the dungeons to the main passage leading upstairs.

The day had been long and busy and had tied him mostly, besides his morning patrol in the dungeons and the following unfortunate talk with Draco, to his lab, until he had left for Knockturn Alley in the late evening.

With the heralds of war nearing, he had needed to fill his stores for the Order with all kinds of ingredients and potions, but first he had prepared over ten different healing draughts to ensure that the foolish girl in the Hospital Wing was safe from any kind of lingering effects the curse could have on her magic.

The foolish girl...

Poppy had assured him that Miss Granger was recovering greatly when she had picked the bottles up in his lab, but he hadn't had the chance to check on her himself during the day.

And now, standing at the crossway of the tunnel, he felt the peculiar something behind his sternum surge, urging him to go to the infirmary... to see her.

He knew it was a ridiculous sentiment, but somehow he wanted no, needed to see with his own eyes that she had remained safe and well after he had left her bedside around dawn. And while reason still wrestled with the foolish notion in chest, his long legs moved already, taking him up the stairs to the passage that ended close to the Hospital Wing.

Without so much as a sound, he slipped through the large, oak doors into the infirmary, his eyes adjusting easily to the moonlit room. When his gaze travelled through the semi-darkness, he noticed that the girl's bed had been moved so that it stood next to the one Weasley occupied.

Snape had to suppress a snort at the sight.

Of course, it wouldn't do for the two-thirds of Gryffindor's Golden Trio that resided in the infirmary to stay apart. At least, Potter hadn't demanded to camp in the Hospital Wing as well while his friends stayed here.

Brushing his unreasonable irritation at the thought aside, he moved to the girl's bedside and felt the last, persistent flicker of annoyance abate when he beheld her in the pale moonlight, snuggled deep into her covers, sleeping peacefully.

However, a short glance at the open bottle on her bedside cabinet, and the fresh smell of Dreamless Sleep it emitted, told him that she wasn't as safe from the nightmares as he would have wished.

Nevertheless, now there was the inkling of a smile playing around her mouth while the soft braid he knew so well from his memory of Grimmauld Place tamed, once again, her hair. The dark bruises that had marred her features only twenty-four hours ago had vanished completely.

Snape let his wand hover briefly in the air above her body, casting several necessary diagnostic spells to receive a final confirmation of her healing process.

The results proved far better than expected, and he put his wand away and exhaled a sigh, giving way to the swell of contentment that spread through him, knowing that his potions had obviously worked.

For uncounted minutes, Snape simply stood motionless at her bedside.

He was well aware that his need for coming here tonight had been satisfied. He knew he should leave and finally return to his chambers, but somehow he felt unable to turn his gaze from Miss Granger's sleeping face.

In all those years as a teacher, he had perfected his ability to simply overlook the visual appearance of his female students.

However, after all the exuberant and deceptive beauty he had been submitted to in the last hours, he couldn't help but recognize the grace of Miss Granger's slightly irregular features for the first time.

He hadn't seen it in all those hours he had spent in vigil at her bedside, but now, as if a veil had been lifted, there was no chance for his gaze not to be held captive by the dainty swing of her lips or those long brown lashes that cast soft shadows on her skin in the bluish twilight.

And his eyes drank it all in, savouring the sight like the most exquisite form of solace.

The solace of knowing that the girl his most unlikely protégée would not only live but that she would live to become the remarkable and lovely young woman he saw in front of him, and after tonight, she was as safe as she could ever be, given the times, her closeness to Potter ...

...and her preposterous importance to me.

The moment the thought entered his mind, he forced himself to look away. He had neither the right nor a reason to stay at her beside for another night. He wasn't her Head of House. And even his short visit tonight had been foolish and dangerous, if he was honest with himself.

He would not return; he could not allow anybody to see him slipping into the infirmary night after night and find him at her bedside. Neither the old man nor the Dark Lord would be forgiving if they learned of it.

The way back down to the dungeons appeared unusually long to him, but when he finally entered his chambers, he found Dumbledore bent over his living room table, one hand holding back his long white beard while he poured tea from a silvery pot into a cup with the other.

Snape leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed in front of his chest as he regarded him silently.

Putting down the teapot, Dumbledore looked up, smiling. "Ah, Severus, Fawkes saw you return to the castle some time earlier, and I thought you might not be averse to a good cup of Earl Grey and some company. When you didn't show for a while, I already feared I would have to enjoy the tea without you."

Snape frowned, considering the possibility that the old man knew that he had chosen to check on Miss Granger, even before reporting to him. However, he quickly dismissed the thought as paranoia. The old man wasn't as omniscient as he always liked to pretend.

"Really touching, Albus," said Snape with a sneer. "But first of all, I might not be averse to a long shower."

"Well, what are you waiting for then, Severus? I'll put the cosy on the teapot," Dumbledore said cheerfully, settling into one of Snape's armchairs.

"Of course," the spy said, rolling his eyes.

However, when he headed to the bathroom, he felt oddly comforted by the thought he would find the old man and not merely the silence of his living room upon his return, even when he knew that Dumbledore would only wait for him to hear if his visit at Ivy's had achieved their aim of furthering his chances to get back into the Dark Lord's good books.

Of course.

It was all for the sake of the greater cause, after all.

The Terror of Knowing

Chapter 11 of 12

One night at Grimmauld Place, Hermione witnesses something that will change her perception of Severus Snape forever.

Disclaimer: All rights belong to JKR.

Author's note: Two lovely ladies granted this chapter their beta-magic. Thank you so much, potionsmistress23 and Sempra.

Sitting on the edge of the hospital bed, blue-jeans clad legs dangling in the air, Hermione suppressed an afflicted sigh when Madam Pomfrey set out to explain, for probably the third time now, how the different potions in her bag had to be taken after she finally left the Hospital Wing, something she hoped would happen soon as, mentally, Hermione was already on her way to the library.

It was Friday evening, and the week of bed rest she had been forced to endure in the infirmary had felt like a mind-numbing eternity, an eternity the Hogwarts' mediwitch had chosen to prolong countless times.

Even Ron had been discharged before her. He had been allowed to leave the Hospital Wing early this morning, and Hermione had fiercely hoped to accompany him, but Madam Pomfrey had insisted on one more day of bed rest. Hermione had had no choice but to submit herself to several more hours of torturous idleness while her mind once again mulled over a thought that had plagued her ever since the Headmaster's revelations regarding the night at the Ministry. At a certain point during Professor Dumbledore's narrative, while she had listened to him and had looked into those seemingly omniscient blue eyes, something in the back of her mind had clicked.

She hadn't dared to tell Harry, yet, about the theory that had occurred to her, nor would she while it was merely a working hypothesis, for which she had no proof, but deep down, she was already convinced that the initials on the labels attached to the glass spheres in the Hall of Prophecy indicated to whom a prediction had been made, and there were not many wizards whose names would correspond to the initials A.P.W.B.D. It was, therefore, only logical to assume that Professor Dumbledore not only knew what Harry's destroyed prophecy had contained, something that she had feared was lost forever, but that he knew about the other prediction that concerned Professor Snape as well.

But if Professor Dumbledore truly was the wizard who had heard those prophecies, why would he not mention, when he had recounted to her the events at the Ministry, that Harry's wasn't lost forever, as they all believed it? Or had he told Harry already? And what about Professor Snape?

Hermione bit her bottom lip.

It was pointless to dwell on these questions before she had been able to consult various books from the Divination section to find unquestionable evidence for her suspicion.

While she would never admit it to anyone, during the last days, she would have gladly traded an early glimpse of her OWL results for a single glance at a book on the magical theory of prophecies.

Unfortunately, anything even resembling schoolwork had been strictly forbidden by Madam Pomfrey over the past week and now, when she was so close to laying her hands on the desired tomes, the school clock was drawing closer and closer to curfew.

"... and don't forget, you'll need to fetch another dose of those potions before getting on the Hogwarts Express on Monday morning, Miss Granger. And I would kindly ask you not to overdo it once you are back in Gryffindor Tower." The mediwitch emphasized her demand with a stern look.

"I promise, I won't," Hermione assured, resisting the urge to roll her eyes at the advice. After the last seven days, she felt as if she had rested enough for a lifetime.

"Very well."

"Can I leave now?" Hermione asked, the question somewhere between an impatient demand and a frustrated plea. The school clock indicated barely half an hour until curfew.

"Not yet, dear. The Headmaster has asked Professor Snape to have a look at you as well before we can finally discharge you," Madam Pomfrey declared with a sympathetic smile.

Hermione mouthed a silent "oh", and Madam Pomfrey patted her hand encouragingly in return.

"Don't worry, dear. It won't take long. You'll be back in your common room right before curfew," the mediwitch said before she retreated into her consulting room that adjoined the infirmary.

Hermione exhaled slowly, a warm puff of breath, but the effort to ease the sudden tightening of her stomach failed; her thwarted plan to visit the library tonight was long forgotten.

She hadn't seen Professor Snape since her first night in the infirmary, and every day, with every new, more alarming article in the *Daily Prophet*, the tide of worry in her chest had swelled. Catching a glimpse would have been enough to know he was alive. However, while his potions had always found their way onto her cabinet in the mornings, Professor Snape had not set a foot into the infirmary himself. After seven days of waiting, after seven days of gruesome newspaper reports, the worry for his well-being had solidified into an unpleasant tightness within her chest. Even more so, because his continuous absence had dispossessed her of the hope, one she had silently nourished, that a visit from him in the Hospital Wing would present her with the chance to apologize for her presumptuous behaviour during their last conversation.

It had taken nearly her entire first day in the infirmary to fully recollect the events of that night, and even though she had long known how the smallest of smiles was able to change Professor Snape's features, the memory of having such a shy yet honest smile directed at her, like the one he had given her when he had told her she would be well again, still sent a frisson of something warm and pleasant through her.

It was a feeling so different from the red-hot abashment that burnt high on her cheeks every time she dared to remember how, in one unthinkable act of Gryffindor

boldness, she had given in to the need to take her professor's hand.

She still couldn't comprehend where the sentiment had come from. It had simply been there, foolhardy and true. It had been the only way to silence the evil imp of fear gnawing at her heart that night. Although Professor Snape had neither been outright appalled nor rejected the gesture, she couldn't help but be apprehensive that, so shortly after their already disastrous discussion regarding Harry's Occlumency lessons, she had finally overstepped her bounds with that uninvited gesture of familiarity.

Hermione was still considering that unpleasant possibility, her gaze lingering unseeing on the floor, when she heard the sound of the large doors to the infirmary being pushed open, and her stomach dropped with an edgy constriction as if she had missed a step on the stairs.

Her eyes flew up, and only a moment later, she saw Professor Snape step through the entrance. He approached her hospital bed with long, swift strides, looking tired and gaunt like he so often did these days, but even so, the sight of him, alive and breathing, loosened the small knot of worry in her chest considerably.

"Miss Granger." The Potions master greeted her with a curt nod as he stepped up to her hospital bed, his face masked by the familiar expression of indifference.

"Professor Snape." She tried a small smile.

"Madam Pomfrey has already told you why I am here?" he asked coolly and without preliminaries.

Hermione nodded, her mouth suddenly dry.

"Good," he said, silently summoning his wand from his sleeve. "I need you to expose your right forearm, then, Miss Granger."

She rolled up the fabric of her dark blue t-shirt before proffering her forearm to him, pulse point turned to the ceiling.

Her professor's gaze drifted to the exposed piece of unblemished skin. Murmuring something, he pointed the tip of wand at her wrist while the long, slender fingers of his left hand came to rest on the lower side of her forearm, sending a warm and pleasant shudder through her that gave her heart a small twinge.

She barely heard herself draw in a sharp breath.

Immediately, the hand on her skin was withdrawn as if it had been burnt. Black eyes snapped up, and the already familiar ache in her chest made itself known when her gaze locked with Professor Snape's. A brief flicker of dismay in the dark depths betrayed the cold mask of indifference.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No! No, sir." She shook her head determinedly, hastily averting her face from him as she felt a treacherous blush rise in her cheeks. "Not at all."

It was mortifying.

She should have braced herself against the feel of his touch. But she hadn't, and once again, she had been defenceless against the sensation when he had placed his finger on her skin. Warm. Gentle. Caring. It had been a gesture so in contrast to the austere face he showed the world that it had left her breathless.

She closed her eyes for a moment, struggling to regain her composure, and when she looked at her professor again, she found him regarding her carefully.

"I'm fine, sir. Really. Please continue," she assured again, only to sense, with a twinge of guilt, the hesitation with which Professor Snape turned his wand back towards the inner side of her arm.

The tip of the magical wood floated only a breath above her skin, and her eyes followed the invisible path Professor Snape drew along her forearm, silent and mesmerized. Only when he reached the crook of her elbow did her professor meet her gaze again, probing her with his unfathomable, black eyes.

"Did you feel any pain during the examination, Miss Granger?"

"None, sir," she said, shaking her head.

"Well, then, I need to take a look at the area where the curse hit you, Miss Granger. Could you—" He faltered in voicing his request, and she saw a shadow of something uncertain, almost timid, cross his usually stern features as he gestured briefly with his wand towards her collarbone.

She realized the source of his unease immediately. The boat neck of her shirt was covering the scar the curse had left nearly completely, and it needed to be moved aside to allow him to examine the curse wound.

"Oh, of course," she said quickly, answering the request he had left unspoken. Turning her face slightly away, she pulled the neckline down about one or two inches, just enough to expose the region where the curse had marred her skin.

"You need to tell me immediately if you feel any discomfort, Miss Granger," Professor Snape said before he placed the tip of his wand close to the healed curse wound and leaned slightly down, in a posture not unlike that of a physician conducting an examination with a stethoscope.

She felt the magic of a non-verbal spell ghost briefly over her skin and caught her bottom lip between her teeth, forcing herself to remain still while her professor's wand followed the line of her scar from the area where her breastbone met her collarbone up to her shoulder.

After repeating the examination for a second time, Professor Snape removed his wand and cleared his throat, not meeting her eyes as he said, "It appears that all residues of Dark magic have been dissolved. Unfortunately, the slight scarring will remain. There was nothing I—" He paused, placing his wand back beneath the sleeve of his frock coat. "Anyway, you should not experience any lingering effects from the curse on your magic, Miss Granger."

"Thank you, Professor," Hermione said softly as she sought his gaze, hoping her eyes could convey the depth of her gratitude better than mere words could. "And I know there was nothing you could have done about the scarring, sir," she added carefully, and the smile playing around her mouth brightened when she saw how the harsh lines around his eyes softened in response. "I am aware that an injury caused by Dark magic always leaves a mark."

Professor Snape nodded, a wistful expression curling his lips. "Indeed, and one would wish that it remains the only—"

A sharp hiss disrupted his sentence suddenly, and he winced, clutching the wrist of his left forearm in front of his chest.

"Professor!" Hermione exclaimed quietly, one hand already reaching out to him, but the movement came to an abrupt halt and her hand hovered undecided above his left shoulder as she realized that she couldn't be sure if a touch would not increase the pain he experienced.

Slowly, Hermione drew her hand back, her fingers straying involuntarily to cover the mark on her breastbone as her gaze drifted from the agonized look on his face to the fabric-covered wrist he was holding.

She had known since last summer what was hidden beneath the layers of his frock coat; she had seen the brief outlines of the snake and the skull carved into his skin, but until now, she had never truly understood what it meant when the Dark Mark on Professor Snape's forearm burned.

It literally seared his skin – and his soul.

"It's all right."

Her eyes flew back to her professor's face when she heard him gasp the reassurance. A lie, of course, told only to ease her worry, and they both knew it.

How could anything be all right when he was in front of her, squeezing his eyes shut in pain because Voldemort had just called him? When he had to obey and follow the dark wizard's Summoning to keep Harry, to keep them all safe? When *he* wasn't safe?

But like Harry, her professor would never be safe again, as long as Voldemort remained undefeated.

And maybe not even then... The realization sent a cold shiver down her spine, and in a spark of rational thought, she wondered if those cold claws of cognition that seemed to seize her more and more often were merely signs of growing up too fast and too early, as they all did these days, or if crossing the line into adulthood was always marked by that strange terror of knowing what the world was about.

But as quickly as the thought had come, it was gone when her professor opened his eyes again, and her hazel ones met the dark abyss of his gaze in silent understanding.

"I have to go."

"I know." *And I wish you wouldn't.*

"The Headmaster needs to be informed immediately about my departure, Miss Granger," Professor Snape said, the urgency plain in his voice. "The password to his office is chocolate fairy cakes. I need you to do that for me, Miss Granger."

"Of course, sir."

There was an inkling of a nod from her professor, but when he turned to leave, her heart constricted at the thought of whom he was going to face.

"Professor?" she said quietly, his title only a whisper in the large the Hospital Wing, but it was enough for him to halt in his steps and search her gaze again.

"Please, be careful, Professor." It was a soft but insistent request, and she didn't even try to disguise the concern she knew must be clearly visibly on her face, and in the short moment her professor regarded her with an inscrutable expression in his night-dark gaze, time stood still, until one corner of his mouth quirked up in response.

"I shall try, Miss Granger."

A second later, he headed towards the large doors of the Hospital Wing, and when heavy oak eventually clunk shut behind him, Hermione drew an unsteady breath and slid from the edge of her bed onto the floor. She hastened from the infirmary and through the silent hallways of the castle up to the seventh floor, and it was mere minutes before she used the brass knocker on the Headmaster's office door and waited for Professor Dumbledore to call her in.

At his command, she opened the door and stepped through, and the familiar pair of benign blue eyes looked up from the paper-filled desk greeted her.

"Good evening, Miss Granger," said the Headmaster. "Please, come on in and close the door tightly. Unfortunately, Peeves has found himself a new avocation and has taken up eavesdropping from time to time."

Closing the door, she turned to find the Headmaster gazed at her.

"Miss Granger, is everything alright? You look quite pale, my dear girl. Please sit down and tell me what brings you to me."

"I-I am here because—" She trailed off, struggling for words, but every answer that began to form on her tongue appeared inadequate... wrong.

Behind the ancient desk, there no longer sat a benevolent, elderly wizard who watched over a school full of adolescents but the leader in a coming war, and now she was here to tell him that his spy, his soldier, had once more left for his dangerous mission deep behind hostile lines.

She swallowed, hard.

"Professor Dumbledore, I... Professor Snape... he has been summoned, sir. He asked me to inform you before he left."

The Headmaster sighed, stroking his silver beard. "Well, we knew it would have to happen soon. Thank you, Miss Granger. Please, do sit down. Would you care for a lemon drop – or maybe a tea?"

"Tea would be wonderful, sir," Hermione replied. Realizing she hadn't moved since stepping through the door, she sat down in one of the large, velvet armchairs in front of Professor Dumbledore's desk while the Headmaster called for Dobby.

"So, I take it you were present when Professor Snape was called?" the Headmaster asked once the house-elf had brought the tea set, his tone more curious than concerned while he poured steaming liquid into two cups and handed her one.

"Thank you, Headmaster. Yes, I was there, actually. Professor Snape was conducting a final check on my curse wound when it happened."

Dumbledore took the teacup from its saucer. "Ah, of course, he had told me he intended to do that before you were allowed to leave the Hospital Wing tonight."

And then Voldemort had called him... She could have laughed at the bitter absurdity of the situation. One moment, he was her professor, looking after an injury a Death Eater had given her, and in the other, he had to pose as one of them. Like he had been on the night at Grimmauld Place...

Hermione shivered, and her gaze dropped to the china cup in her hands, swirling with the golden-brown liquid.

It was futile. Not even the warmth from all the tea in the world could melt away the frosty numbness in her chest now that memories of her professor lying cursed – hurt over the kitchen table at Grimmauld Place – flooded her mind again.

Don't leave me...

... I won't. All is well.

But again, nothing was well, and suddenly a thought, a possibility, formed on her tongue, so foul that she feared she would suffocate if she tried to choke down the words.

"Is... is it possible that V-Voldemort will punish Professor Snape, I mean, for the failure at the Ministry?"

"No, Miss Granger. That is rather unlikely," Professor Dumbledore stated firmly.

There was an irritatingly calm, detached note in the Headmaster's voice that made Hermione look up sharply, and she felt a sudden anger crack through the walls of her composure.

Professor Dumbledore regarded her with what appeared to be curiosity as he took another sip from his teacup.

Not breaking away from those piercing blue eyes in front of her, Hermione placed her own cup aside, maybe a little more forcefully than necessary, the mere scent of tea suddenly unbearable to her.

"But Voldemort does it sometimes, doesn't he?" she pressed on, unwilling to let the topic go.

"Yes, unfortunately," the Headmaster conceded, and something akin to grief played across his features.

Hermione shook her head in disbelief. "But then, why... why do you allow Professor Snape to go back when each time he could be hurt or even... even worse..." She trailed off, realizing how foolish and even childish her question sounded.

If she was honest with herself, it was painfully obvious why Professor Dumbledore had asked Professor Snape to return to Voldemort's side a year ago. The Order needed the information her professor obtained. In an abstract way, she had long known that it was his spying that kept Harry, and all them, as safe as possible, but over the course of the last months, she had seen glimpses of what this spying entailed for her professor, and somehow, in this very moment, she simply wished that the elderly wizard behind the Headmaster's desk would tell her it was no longer necessary, that with all his experience and wisdom, he had found a way to keep Professor Snape safe as well.

But that wouldn't happen. That wasn't the way of the world she had come to know as dark and difficult.

Meanwhile, Professor Dumbledore had risen from behind his desk and walked towards Fawkes' golden perch, his wrinkled right hand stroking the feathers of the phoenix silently.

Minutes passed, in which her question hung unanswered and heavy between them, before Professor Dumbledore bent down to murmur something to Fawkes, causing the phoenix to raise himself in the air and fly out into the night through an opening in one of the large windows.

"Miss Granger, the decision to allow Professor Snape to fulfill his task is not one I make lightly," Professor Dumbledore said a moment later, looking at her with an earnest expression. "However, his spying is the only thing that stands between us and the soulless evil that is Lord Voldemort. That's why I have to ask it of him, and he knows that."

"I understand that, but I simply wish it wasn't be necessary," she murmured, heaving her shoulders.

The Headmaster nodded. "That, dear girl, I wish as well, and I do understand that this troubles you, given that you were present tonight when Professor Snape was called. However, as his position has become even more perilous, now that Tom has revealed himself, I have a request of you tonight, Miss Granger: if there is anything else in relation to Professor Snape's task on your mind besides concern for his well-being – and knowing you, I am sure there is – please, don't take those questions outside the safety of this office."

... because Voldemort has his eyes and ears even within the walls of Hogwarts. Hermione thought, frowning. It wasn't necessary for the Headmaster to acknowledge the bitter truth. She caught it between the lines, nonetheless. Even Hogwarts wasn't completely safe anymore, neither for Harry nor for Professor Snape.

"I won't, sir."

"Thank you, Miss Granger. It might not be possible for me to answer every question you ask to your full satisfaction, but I, in return, promise to try." The elderly wizard smiled at her.

Hermione bit her bottom lip, trying to decide which of all the questions the Headmaster's proposition had sent swirling through her mind she should ask first.

The prospect of Professor Dumbledore providing her with certain, important pieces of knowledge felt exciting... special even, and suddenly, she realized that this must be how Harry felt when he discussed things with the Headmaster alone.

"Well, Miss Granger?" Professor Dumbledore gazed kindly at her as he sat down behind his desk again, placing in his hands in his lap while he waited for her, but it took several more moments before she was finally able to decide on the first question.

"Professor Dumbledore, would you mind explaining what happens afterwards... I mean, after Professor Snape returns from a Summoning. How do you even know if he returns safely?"

"Well, on most occasions, Fawkes keeps watch for Severus, as he is right now. And for the rest, that depends, Miss Granger," the Headmaster explained. "In the preferable case, when Professor Snape returns early and unscathed, he gives me a basic report before we evaluate his memory of the events together in the Pensieve. But mostly, he returns just before dawn and gives me a brief report on everything of importance and the detailed evaluation of his memories is done as soon as our two schedules allow it. And of course, as you will quite remember from Christmas, dear girl, there are those unfortunate times when he returns in no shape to give me a report at all. Those are the times when I am forced to remove his memories and view them on my own to learn what has happened during the night."

"I understand." Hermione nodded, kneading her hands tightly as she tried to brush aside the images the Headmaster's answer evoked, concentrating on something else, something she had wanted to know for months now. "As you have already mentioned Christmas, Headmaster," she began, amazed at how calm her voice sounded when she felt so far from it. "Why did Voldemort... what was his reason for using the Cruciatus Curse on Professor Snape?"

"Well, Miss Granger, you will, of course, remember, because of Harry's dream, we were able to save Arthur Weasley's life just in time after he prevented another one of Tom's attempts to seize the prophecy before Christmas. Tom was, as you can probably imagine, most displeased about that and chose to blame Professor Snape for the failure."

"But if he blamed Professor Snape then, how can you be so sure that he won't blame him this time for the events at the Department of Mysteries?" Hermione countered, her earlier anger at the Headmaster flaring again.

"That is, Miss Granger, because this time it is undeniably Lucius Malfoy who failed Tom. Not only did he fail to seize the prophecy, but he also allowed it to be destroyed. Its desired content presumably forever lost to his master."

Presumably... How a single word can make such a difference, Hermione thought, remembering her earlier theory about the listener of the prophecy with the initials A.W.P.B.D. The Headmaster would not have worded his answer as carefully as he had, were he not the person who hid behind those letters. While the contents of Harry's prophecy did not fall under the topic Professor Dumbledore had offered to discuss, there was something she needed to know to confirm her suspicion beyond any doubt, something of equal importance to her.

"Miss Granger, I can see there is something else you wish to discuss. Please continue."

"Does Voldemort know there is also a prophecy about Professor Snape in the Department of Mysteries and that it was made to you, sir?"

The moment the words passed her lips, she realized voicing her suspicions might be a mistake. The pit of her stomach fell as Professor Dumbledore's face darkened, and she waited for his reaction.

The Headmaster bided his time by regarding her thoughtfully before he finally answered. "I would presume, Miss Granger, even if Tom had knowledge of a prophecy concerning one of his followers, he wouldn't deem it worth his time. In Tom's hubris, he believes none of his Death Eaters capable of defying him."

"But the prediction... it's relevant, isn't it, Professor?" she asked, her heart beating far too high in her throat. She had been right about the initials. Merlin, she had been right.

"Well, Miss Granger, that has yet to be seen. There is something that still needs to be decided, and I am convinced, for everything to play out in the most favourable way for our cause, this decision has to be made... without foreknowledge of the existence of a prophecy. In that light, it is an absolute imperative that no one else learns of the

prophecy, Miss Granger. I won't deny I am displeased with the little discovery you made in the Department of Mysteries but now that you know, I ask that you not speak of this with anyone. Do I have your word that you will tell no one?"

Uninvited, the Headmaster's words summoned the image of two familiar, yellowish labels to the front of Hermione's mind: the first, the one with Voldemort's and Harry's names on it, her friend's merely added after a question mark in brackets, the other with only her professor's name followed by a question mark; it was easy to imagine what the undecided thing was to which Professor Dumbledore had alluded.

The second person of concern was still unknown, and until the fates had thrown the dice, Professor Dumbledore had apparently decided that Professor Snape should remain in the dark about the prophecy's existence as well as its content, and now, he wanted her to comply with that decision.

Hermione's brow knitted at the thought. Why would the Headmaster keep such a crucial piece of knowledge from the Potions master, something that may affect his life most directly?

Because sometimes it is in the best interest of the ones we wish to protect to leave some truths untold for a while Professor Dumbledore's voice echoed in a distant part of her mind, and Hermione realized that the Headmaster, displeased as he was by her knowledge, could have easily asked her to take a Wand Oath to ensure his wish, but he hadn't.

Deciding that if he trusted her enough to merely ask for her word on the matter, she should trust his decision in return, for the time being.

"You have my word, Professor."

"Good," Professor Dumbledore exclaimed before his face became serious again. "One more thing, Miss Granger: I dare assume that you have deduced by now that I was the recipient of Harry's as well?"

Hermione nodded.

"I think you should know, then, that I have already relayed the prophecy's full content to Harry, but would advise you, my dear girl, to wait for him to come to you on his own to share this knowledge. I take it, he hasn't done that yet?"

"No, Headmaster, not yet."

"I thought not." Professor Dumbledore sighed. "The prophecy's content isn't the easiest knowledge to bear, and all the more, I'd ask you to be patient and let Harry decide for himself when he is prepared to reveal it to you, Miss Granger. And now, allow me to walk you back to your common room. It's already long past your curfew."

The Headmaster rose from his chair, and Hermione did so as well, realizing that her short moment of answers had come to a rather sudden end.

A few moments later, she was silently walking beside Professor Dumbledore to Gryffindor Tower, lost in thought. Once inside her common room, she quickly excused herself from her friends, unable to face a night of listening to the latest Quidditch news when her own evening had been so far from normality.

Once inside her dormitory, she curled into the niche of the large tower window beside her bed, from where she could see the front gate, and leaned her temple against the cool glass.

Before they had left his office, she had asked the Headmaster to inform her of Professor Snape's return. Professor Dumbledore had assured her—his anger with her obviously already diminishing—that he would let her know about the Potions master's well-being first thing in the morning. But now that she was all by herself, and a long night of uncertainty lay ahead, the prospect of being informed in the morning wasn't good enough.

Not anymore.

Not when she had seen her professor leave, and in a way, it felt as if she had been the one to allow him to walk straight into danger.

She would wait. Even if it wasn't very likely that Professor Snape would return through the front gate, it was worth a try. She simply had to see with her own eyes that he was safe. No matter how long it took. It was the closest she could come to being there for him tonight.

Somehow.

Somewhere in Scotland, thunder rolled. The sound tore through the silence hanging between the late gothic stonewalls in the spacious assembly room like a knife as Draco Malfoy kneeled in front of the Dark Lord.

The boy placed his exposed left forearm into the skeletal claw waiting for him, and the madman placed the tip of his wand against the untainted, pale skin; immediately, a snake of green light flashed forward and curled around Draco's forearm.

Standing among the circle of Death Eaters witnessing the scene, Snape drew a steady breath. He didn't know how the boy had managed to sneak out of the castle unnoticed to attend the Summoning, but about one thing he was absolutely certain: Narcissa had no idea about the decision her son was making tonight.

Draco had appeared only moments after he in front of the Scottish estate, his face grey and fear-stricken as if looking into an endless abyss as he had held on to the arm of his aunt, Bellatrix Lestrange. She had Apparated them both to the gathering, leading her nephew with unconcealed pride before the Dark Lord, like the literal lamb to slaughter.

The son's soul for the sins of the father...

Snape closed his eyes behind his iron mask. Bile rose in his stomach, and he thought the acid would burn a hole in his soul when the initiation began and he heard the boy seal his fate.

"Tell me, young Malfoy," asked the Dark Lord with obvious delight, "are you here of your own free will?"

"I-I am."

"And do you wish to serve me and only me... above all others?"

"I do."

"Then swear..."

"With... with this magical oath, I bind myself of my own free will under the Dark Mark as a faithful servant, and I swear that I shall render my unconditional obedience to Lord Voldemort."

Even through his closed eyelids, Snape could see the flash of light that would engrave the binding magic deep into the boy's skin... would end Draco's childhood, his innocence, once and forever.

He felt like screaming.

"Rise, Death Eater," ordered the quiet, hissing voice of his supposed master, and Snape forced his eyes open.

Draco was now standing in front of the Dark Lord. He was already clad in the heavy, black Death Eater robe when the madman pressed the iron mask onto his face, completing the initiation.

"Take your place beside your Aunt Bellatrix, Draco. She will teach you well."

When the boy turned around and walked towards his designated place, the Death Eater mask concealed the emotions on his face. But to someone who had known Draco since he was a small child, the unusual stiffness in his posture and the well-concealed clenching of his hands spoke of the young man's fear.

Once Draco had joined the circle of hooded figures assembled in the Scottish estate, the Dark Lord moved into the centre of the room and addressed his followers again.

"Death Eaters, the events at Ministry were a disappointing set-back, a failure caused by a few. But we will not waver; we will not slow down in our efforts. Our enemies will be crushed. Those within the Ministry who choose to defy us will be crushed. And those who poison our world with their tainted blood will be erased forever from our midst. The day is within our reach when the greatness of Lord Voldemort will decide the future of Wizarding Britain and of the Wizarding world. The Dementors, our natural allies, left the walls of Azkaban only hours ago. They will soon join us. My friends, some of you have already received your tasks, others will within the next days. I count on you to fulfil them well. My victory will be our victory. Now, leave, Death Eaters, leave to live up to your master's name."

Mere moments later, the gathering dissolved, and the first sounds of Death Eaters Disapparating from the grounds outside could be heard through the opening in the front door as Snape approached the large door.

It was then that he heard his name being called in a quiet, nearly affectionate tone. He paused, and something in his gut twisted nauseatingly as he turned around.

The Dark Lord was sitting on an ornate, oak chair on the other side of the room, large and heavy, resembling a throne, his bony fingers resting on the empty seat next to him.

On the right hand of the Dark Lord...

"Severus. My faithful Severus," his supposed master cooed in his high, clear voice.

Snape slowly removed his mask. "My Lord?"

"Come. Sit with me for a while."

"Gladly, my Lord."

The moment the madman voiced the request, he knew this was the chance the old man and he had waited for: the chance for him to claim Lucius' place in the inner circle. But still, between him and their goal lay the invisible abyss of the Dark Lord's distrust which he had to bridge with the coming conversation. He would have to tread with utmost caution.

Snape was about to take the first step towards his master when, in a moment beyond his control, Miss Granger's voice echoed in his mind.

Please, be careful, Professor...

... I shall try.

For an instant, his heart clenched with an elusive ache like it had hours ago in the Hospital wing, yet he accomplished the impossible and kept his face blank under the scrutiny of those glowing, red eyes, watching his every step as he crossed the room. Emptying himself of every emotion as he approached the Dark Lord, he pushed the memory behind his Occlumency shields where it was safe from the madman.

When Snape reached the spot where Draco had kneeled not even half an hour ago, he paused and searched the Dark Lord's gaze, silently confirming his permission to take the place beside the dark wizard.

His supposed master graced him with the inkling of a nod and removed his hand from the chair, placing it in his lap.

Snape sat down and waited, silent, for the Dark Lord to proceed and begin his interrogation.

"I am aware that the months since your belated return to my side have been difficult for you, Severus," the wizard said softly, not looking at Snape but at some unknown point ahead of him. "And I haven't always been even-handed in my decisions regarding you, Severus, I admit it."

Snape snorted inwardly but refrained from any outward response to the other wizard's admission.

"I regret that. I really do, Severus. *You* wouldn't have failed me like Lucius did, not my faithful and clever Severus."

"My Lord is too generous. It is merely my constant intent and my utmost desire to serve you—to please you, my Lord."

"Oh, I know that, Severus. You always did, except for... well, we shall not speak of it again."

"As you wish, my Lord," replied Snape, his face an impassive mask while the pain at the madman's nonchalant reference to the one he loved the most coiled cold and unbearable around his heart like a poisonous snake, and for a mere moment, he wished it would simply cease its beating.

Lily. Dead. Gone.

My fault alone.

"As I wish, indeed," the Dark Lord said, the travesty of a smile curling the pale, lipless mouth. "And what I wish is for you to take your rightful place at my side, Severus. What do you say? Will you accept the place in our circle as my most trusted servant?"

Immediately, when he had posed the question, the hairless skull next to Snape snapped around, and the Dark Lord's scarlet gaze fastened on him.

"With honour, my Lord," Snape said, bowing his head slightly.

A long, white finger was placed beneath his chin, lifting his face to his supposed master, and the blood-red eyes in front of him flashed for a moment.

"Than you shall have it, Severus. But remember well, I do not appreciate being disappointed."

Without any prior warning, Snape felt a sudden rush of magic behind his brow, strong, demanding, and he knew that any sign of resistance at the Dark Lord's invasion of his mind would be his death-knell.

The assembly room dissolved from his view, and he drowned in a surge of images and emotions as the madman took control of his mind, trusting silently that his mental shields would hold while he concentrated on the memories he knew would please the Dark Lord.

He was at Grimmauld Place... Black was telling him again that he would never believe him reformed, no matter how much the old fool insisted on it... Dumbledore was placing a hand on his shoulder, telling him he trusted him... and then the scene changed, and Potter was throwing him an accusing glance in the hospital wing after the events at the Ministry, the anguish of losing his godfather written plainly across his features...

He could sense how the Dark Lord relished in finding a memory of the old man, dried traces of tears on his face... the werewolf crying quietly against Tonk's shoulder, devastated beyond consolation at Black's demise... Molly and Shacklebolt shouting about something at each other while the old man tried to achieve silence... The flickers of lust on the night at Ivya's brothel were quickly dismissed.

He forced himself to remain calm as he felt how the madman was pushing deeper into his mind, searching for memories linked to stronger emotions, memories that were not so freely displayed, and something like a raw chuckle vibrated through the mental connection of their minds when a memory of Dumbledore came into view, looking tired and oh-so old... and then the memory of Lucius telling him not to answer his master's call was pulled forward, and he felt the Dark Lord linger on the scene and concentrated on the feigned feeling of confusion and disappointment... A moment later, he was in his office again, advising Draco not to question the Dark Lord's decisions when the boy accused him of failing his father. There was no chance to mask the guilt he had felt in this moment, but the Dark Lord brushed the scene aside... And then somehow, he was looking into Miss Granger's eyes once more, her hazel eyes glistening with tears as she stood in his office...

For a single heartbeat, the air in his lungs solidified. He had chosen not to hide the complete memory of his outburst with her behind his Occlumency shields. In fact, the exchange and his wild wave of rage towards the girl would appear useful if his supposed master inquired into his treatment of Potter's little friends.

But now that he was once more confronted with the intensity of emotion with which she had looked at him, he realized his mistake. His own emotions connected to the memory were unreasonably strong—Merlin, of course, they were—and in front of the Dark Lord, there was no justifiable explanation he could give for why Potter's Muggleborn friend should ever regard him with her heart literally shining in those damnable hazel eyes of hers.

Immediately, and before the madman had the chance to see the flaw in the scene before him, Snape forced another memory to spill forward from the depths of his mind, one he had been holding back, one he had prepared and hoped would be strong enough to lure the Dark Lord's attention away: He was in Dumbledore's office, standing in front of portrait of Phineas Nigellus, and the Slytherin was addressing him once more as Headmaster Snape... He focussed with all his strength on the feigned rush of greed and desire connected with the scene... *Headmaster Snape... Headmaster of Hogwarts... Headmaster...*

The mental connection broke.

"So, Headmaster of Hogwarts, is it, Severus?" The Dark Lord gave a malicious chuckle. "Well, then it should please you that I will soon be able to grant you your heart's desire."

Snape inclined his head with an appearance of detached curiosity. "My Lord?"

"Dumbledore will not, again, have the chance to stand before Potter, to protect the boy when I next face him. The old fool has to fall, as does Hogwarts. And once the school is under my command, the Ministry will soon follow."

"My Lord, as much as I support your reasoning," said Snape carefully, "Dumbledore is still a powerful wizard, and he is currently also the most highly protected person in the Wizarding world, besides Potter and the Minister himself. I dare assume, my Lord, you already have a plan of how to achieve—"

"It is not about *how* to do it, Severus," the madman interrupted him. "It is about *who* will do it, Severus. Yet, that is something we shall discuss at another time." The madman emitted something like a sigh and waved his hand dismissively. "That will be all for tonight, then, Severus."

"Of course." Snape rose from his chair and bowed slightly. "My Lord."

He had nearly crossed the assembly room when he heard his supposed master's voice again.

"Oh, and Severus?"

Snape turned around once more. "Yes, my Lord?"

"It would please me if you could take Wormtail with you to your home, at least while you are away from Hogwarts. I know he isn't the most capable fellow, but maybe he can prove useful with some minor tasks of your brewing. I will have no need of him, once I join Bellatrix at the Manor," his supposed master said, elbow resting on the arm of the oak chair as he regarded the sharp fingernails of his right hand.

"Of course, my Lord. I am sure I'll find something at my house to keep him occupied." Snape bowed once more before he finally stepped over the threshold of the Scottish estate and into the breaking dawn. He Disappeared mere seconds later.

Almost immediately as his feet touched the safe ground close to the front gate of Hogwarts, his legs failed him, his general state of exhaustion and the rush of emotion he had suppressed during the last hours bringing him to his knees, as though the hand of an invisible giant were forcing him down. He collapsed forward, into the tall grass that was still well concealed by the last, lingering shadows of the night, squeezing his eyes shut and heaving deep, shuddering breaths.

Snape only became aware of his surroundings again when he felt a slight nudge at his upper arm followed by a soft *"Ca-aw?"*

He looked up and found the old man's phoenix sitting next to him in the grass. Fawkes had inclined his bright-red head and was regarding him thoughtfully.

"Ca-aw?"

Snape reached out and buried, with a gentle caress, his still trembling hand in the soft feathers of the phoenix.

"Persistent like the old man, aren't you, Fawkes? Give me just another moment, and I'll be able to follow you back into the castle," he assured more confidently than he felt.

Fawkes nuzzled his palm with his head in return, and an instant later, a melodious sound filled the air around him, causing a strange, powerful sensation to swell in his weary heart.

Snape blinked, and it took lengthy moments for comprehension to take form, that the phoenix had chosen to sing for him.

"Thank you, my friend," Snape said, his hand caressing the phoenix's head once more when Fawkes ended his song.

With revived strength, he rose from the ground and walked past the winged boars of the front gate and strode towards the main entrance to the castle in the cool morning air. When Fawkes passed in the air above him, Snape allowed his gaze to follow the phoenix's graceful journey through the twilight of the dawn.

To his surprise, Fawkes didn't fly straight towards the Headmaster's office but circled around Gryffindor Tower several times, cawing quietly, before eventually heading for Dumbledore's residence, where he vanished through an opening in one of the large windows.

Absently, Snape halted in his steps as his eyes strayed back to Gryffindor Tower. For a moment, it had appeared as if Fawkes had wanted to alert somebody else besides the old man of his return.

He frowned when the thought caused that nameless but already familiar something in his chest to stir. There had been a kind of understanding in those hazel eyes, so far beyond the girl's years.

Something tender and caring... Shaking his head, Snape forced himself to resume his way to the castle.

There were important things that required his attention tonight. Quickening his steps, he crossed the threshold of Hogwarts, and it wasn't long until Snape entered the Headmaster's office for a lengthy report.

Hermione's right hand lingered on the cool glass of the windowpane as she watched how the dark figure of Hogwarts' Potions master vanished through the entrance door of the castle.

He had returned, and from what she could see, he was at least physically well.

And for a short, absurd moment, when he had paused and looked up towards Gryffindor Tower, she had almost dared to believe that he somehow knew she had waited for him to return.

It had been a fatuous thought, of course.

Slowly, her fingers slid down the windowpane, and Hermione stifled a yawn, a tired, wistful smile curving her mouth.

"Welcome home, Professor."

Reviews are love.

The Way of the World

Chapter 12 of 12

One night at Grimmauld Place, Hermione witnesses something that will change her perception of Severus Snape forever.

Disclaimer: All rights belong to JKR.

Author's note: Hugs and countless thanks to potionsmistress23 and Sempra for their beta-magic.

The Hogwarts Express clattered evenly over the rails, carrying its passengers further and further away from the Scottish Highlands. Stifling a yawn, Hermione lowered her edition of the *Daily Prophet* and threw a glance at her wristwatch. They probably had two hours until King's Cross, and a tired silence had finally fallen over the train. Even the steady flow of students passing their compartment had abated entirely.

On the bench opposite her, Ginny sat sleeping with her head resting on her brother's shoulder. Ron was also dozing while Neville had left the compartment in search of Luna some time ago. Only Harry was awake, on the bench to her left, his vacant gaze lingering on the landscape that flew by while his hands loosely held a worn photo album in his lap, the one Hagrid had gifted him as he had lain in the Hospital Wing after the encounter with Voldemort in his first year.

Hermione had seen Harry pull it from his bag probably half an hour ago when the conversation in their train compartment had quieted, yet she was sure he still hadn't opened it.

Abandoning the copy of the *Prophet* entirely, Hermione regarded her best friend, her brows knitting with worry.

He looked so pale, his green eyes red rimmed and glistening with unshed tears. His grief for Sirius was palpable, though Harry still refused to speak of his godfather.

She had tried repeatedly to talk to him about it, but every attempt had been rebuffed, and she wondered if she had even heard him say Sirius' name since the night at the Ministry. She thought not.

"Harry?" she asked quietly.

Her friend winced, the photo album slipping from his lap, but Hermione was quick enough to catch it.

Tired green eyes met hers. "Sorry."

"Don't be. I startled you." She tried a reassuring smile before her gaze drifted to the album in her hands, and she turned to hand it back to Harry. "Here. I think you were about to look at it."

"Thanks." Harry took the album from Hermione's grasp, his gaze resting on the tome for a moment before his hands closed carefully around it.

When he looked up again, there was a lost expression simmering in his green eyes that made her heart feel helpless and sore.

"Care to join me?" Harry asked.

Instinctively, Hermione reached for his wrist and squeezed it gently. "Gladly."

A small smile ghosted over her friend's pale face before he placed the album between them and opened it.

Only then, when she beheld the lone photo on the first page, did Hermione truly understand that she wouldn't just be looking at pictures of Harry's parents for the first time but also seeing more pictures of Lily.

Professor Snape's Lily, whispered a voice somewhere in the back of her mind, but she determinedly tried to silence it whilst turning her attention to the first photo.

It showed a black-haired man with a charming smile *James*. He was holding an infant version of Harry while Lily stood next to him and grasped her son's small hand,

caressing it lovingly.

Hermione felt herself smile involuntarily at the small family captured before her and inclined her head slightly to catch Harry's eyes.

He heaved his shoulders with a sigh. "Remus told me it was taken only days before they went into hiding."

Hermione nodded, a cold awareness winding around her chest. This was the last picture of Harry and his parents as a family alive, together... happy.

Slowly, her gaze drifted back to the photo.

Harry's dad looked far younger than she had expected and strikingly handsome. He was holding his son protectively.

As if he already knew about the things to come... Hermione sighed inwardly.

Even more startling was realising the truth in what so many had claimed before: in appearance, her friend was the spitting image of his father, but for those bright green eyes.

Lily's eyes.

Harry's mum was even more beautiful, more mature than in the picture Hermione had found in the library. Hermione blinked. It was as though, from the depths of the photo, those familiar green eyes were regarding her.

Merlin, she didn't dare imagine what Professor Snape must feel each time he looked at Harry. To see the woman he loved and the man she had chosen over him united in the boy before him...

Hermione was dimly aware of her right hand straying to her throat as Harry turned to the next page, her throat that felt suddenly so dry and oddly choked.

Lily and James were now younger. They were smiling, dancing in front of a fountain; bright autumn leaves twirled around them, and even now, it was almost tangible how much the two loved each other.

"That one is from their seventh year, a few weeks after they were named Head girl and Head boy. Well, at least that's what Remus said," Harry explained, his thumb brushing tenderly over the page. "Did you know they both held the positions at the same time?"

"No, I didn't," Hermione heard herself reply, unable to lift her gaze from the scene before her.

"Well, it's rather unusual because they were both in Gryffindor. Must have been real hard on the Slytherins at that time. Imagine the faces of Malfoy and his cohorts if you and Ron became Head students." Harry grinned.

"Hhmm." Hermione nodded absently.

Draco Malfoy's possible reaction could not have been further from her mind. All she could think about was how another Slytherin had dealt with the presence of the two Gryffindors.

For a moment, she closed her eyes with a slight, pained shake of her head. If seeing Lily and James in the Great Hall at that time had been anything like watching the happy couple in the picture before her, it must have felt unbearable for Professor Snape's younger self.

Harry was about to turn the page when Ron suddenly stirred in his seat with a quiet groan. "Are we there yet?"

Hermione and Harry both looked up, startled.

"Nope. No worries, mate, we'll wake you on time," Harry replied, a little too quickly, as he closed the album in his lap.

"We still have about two hours ahead," Hermione added, throwing Harry a concerned look that he evaded deliberately.

"Two hours? Merlin's pants, don't know why they do not simply find a way to Apparate the whole bloody train," Ron mumbled while he shifted in his seat and placed his head against Ginny's.

Only when she was sure he had drifted off again, Hermione turned to Harry.

Giving her a brief smile, he squeezed her hand lightly. "I think I'll try to get some sleep too."

"You do that. I'll go and stretch my legs for a moment," Hermione said, shifting her hand in his and returning the gesture.

She needed to be alone. Seeing pictures of Harry's parents, seeing how much her friend had already lost, forced her to realize once more what they all stood to lose in the coming confrontation with Voldemort.

Nobody was safe. *Not even the ones we love.*

"Just keep an eye out for Malfoy, will you?" Harry asked, nodding.

"I promise, and if he tries something, I still know how to punch him, remember?" Hermione said with a wink before she rose from the seat.

"As if I could forget that," Harry said, grinning before his face turned solemn again. "Oh, and, 'Mione, thank you for... well, you know."

"Anytime," Hermione replied softly before slipping from the compartment.

The corridor was deserted when she walked through the train carriage. The afternoon sun had already begun to descend, immersing the Hogwarts Express in a golden glow. From the glimpses she caught of the compartments she passed, it was obvious most students were using the final hours of their journey to get some more sleep. Tales had already been told, goodbyes for the summer long been said. The whole train seemed to be taking a short breath before the flurry of their arrival began.

However, Hermione knew better than to allow herself to be fooled by the almost surreal and peaceful quiet. Before their departure from Hogwarts, the Headmaster had informed a Prefect from each House that, for the first time, all four Heads of House as well as several Aurors were travelling on the train with them as a security measure against possible Death Eater or Dementor attacks.

When Hermione reached the end of the carriage, she pressed the handle of the connecting door and entered the next one, feeling far from ready to return to her friends' compartment. It was as deserted as the previous one.

Hermione slipped her hands into the front pockets of her jeans and walked onwards. With some luck the food trolley lady was still around. She wouldn't be averse to some chocolate frogs, right now.

However, by the time Hermione neared the end of the next carriage, the food trolley lady still had not shown herself. Hermione heaved her shoulders and sighed. Like every year, the fifth and last carriage ahead of her would be crowded with Slytherins. So, this was her inevitable point of return.

She was about to do exactly that when a compartment door was forcefully pushed open directly behind her and a low, angry voice echoed from inside.

"you stole Father's place at His side, not me. So, spare me your advice, *Professor*."

Hermione winced and turned just in time to see Draco Malfoy rush from the compartment, flushes of anger bright on his pale cheekbones as he headed towards her.

"Out of my way, Granger," he demanded with a low growl.

Hermione was barely able to step aside in the narrow corridor before Malfoy dashed past her, causing her to stumble against the train wall.

She felt a jolt of pain that briefly knocked the air out of her lungs as her back collided with the solidness behind her.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she leaned her head against the wall and drew a deep breath.

"Bloody idiot!" she cursed quietly.

"Tut-tut, Miss Granger, such rude language from an esteemed Gryffindor Prefect."

Startled, Hermione's eyes flew open at the sound of Professor Snape's cold, mocking voice. He stood, arms crossed over his chest, in front of the compartment Malfoy had just vacated with such haste.

"However, I see being a nuisance is becoming quite a habit of yours."

Hermione blinked, and within the spark of a moment, the words she had just overheard fell into place, like the pieces of a horrible puzzle.

Malfoy had been addressing Professor Snape only moments ago. Her professor had taken Mr. Malfoy's position in Voldemort's hierarchy of the Death Eaters, a position that meant more information for the Order... and more risk for him.

"Dear Merlin!" she exclaimed in a whisper, a hand flying to cover her mouth.

"Not quite, Miss Granger," Professor Snape said, smirking. "A word, if I may."

"Of course, sir."

Hermione curled her hands into small fists at her side and lowered her gaze, trying to quell the surge of helpless outrage that rose in her stomach. This wasn't right. He shouldn't have to place himself in an even more tenuous position for their sake.

She never spared a glance for the small group of first- and second-year Hufflepuffs that had stepped from their compartments to see what the flurry in the corridor was about when she approached him.

Professor Snape stepped aside, allowing her to enter the compartment, before sending the students back into their own with a harsh remark and closing the door behind him.

Hermione watched him wave his wand briefly along the door in what she suspected was a *Muffliato* charm, at least, to protect them from being overheard by any passers-by. When he finally turned, his dark eyes sharpened on her, cold and adamant, matching the sudden hardness in his jaw.

"You are probably already aware why I wanted to talk to you, Miss Granger," he sneered, "given Mr. Malfoy's rather foolish decision to break my *Muffliato* at such an unfortunate point in our discussion."

"So, is it true, then, what Draco said?" Hermione demanded, the words spilling from her lips in an enraged rush. "You took his father's place with Voldemort?"

Professor Snape flinched nearly imperceptibly before his features tightened, and his mouth twisted into a cruel snarl. "Of course, it is true. Tell me, Miss Granger, do you think allowing someone else to claim Lucius Malfoy's place would help the Order at all?"

"No, of course not," Hermione countered.

"Then spare me your Gryffindor-worthy display of self-righteous indignation for choosing not to make that mistake, Miss Granger. There is no place for childish sensibilities in this war."

The words were intended to hurt, and they did. Lashing out like a whip, they left a sore spot somewhere within Hermione's chest.

"I am not questioning your decision, sir. I..." She shook her head, casting her gaze down and away because it was difficult to focus when he was looking at her with such a scornful coldness. "It's the risk you are taking, Professor. The Headmaster told me your position has already become more perilous since the attack at the Ministry, and now, you are placing yourself even closer to...to *him*."

She hadn't intended for her voice to crack over the last word, and she hated how young and foolish it made her sound.

She paused briefly to force her voice back under control before raising her eyes to him. "Therefore, I hardly think it a childish sentiment that I worry about you, sir."

There was a long, unbearable moment of silence, once the words had passed her lips, but Professor Snape didn't evade her gaze, and Hermione felt her heart clench with a sharp ache when she saw how his throat jerked under a hard swallow.

"Miss Granger," he said at length, his voice thick, and somewhere beneath the sound of her name lay something defenceless.

"The risk *my* risk should be of no concern to you," he demanded softly, taking a step closer to her.

How can it be not when I saw you at Grimmauld Place? Hermione thought, looking up into his carefully guarded face.

"There are few of us who are not at greater risk these days, Miss Granger. It's something you cannot change. It's simply the way of the world, and I can only ask you, like I seem to do quite often as of late, to keep the information you have just learned to yourself."

"Certainly, Professor, that goes without saying," Hermione replied quickly, but her mind spun with uncounted objections she realized she had no right to voice.

"Thank you, Miss Granger," he said before adding a moment later, "Was there anyone else out there who could have heard Mr. Malfoy's illustrious proof of wisdom, somebody of whom I might not be aware yet?"

"No, sir. And I only overheard Draco because I was standing almost next to your compartment door when it was opened."

"I see." Her professor pinched the bridge of his nose. "That will be all, then, Miss Granger."

"Professor." Hermione gave him a brief nod, and he stepped aside to allow her to pass.

Her hand had already closed around the handle of the compartment door when she threw another glance over her shoulder and found him still looking at her. The moment their eyes met, they both knew her unspoken request.

"I assure you, Miss Granger, I shall continue to exercise utmost caution," he said, the inkling of a smile playing around his mouth. "But I ask that you do me the same courtesy by ignoring any Gryffindor tendencies and that you especially refrain from remaining outside after nightfall."

"I shall try, sir," she replied, a little shyly, giving him a small smile of her own before she broke away from his gaze to open the door.

There was a brief tickling of magic on her skin when the *Muffliato* charm broke, and she slipped outside. It didn't take long for her to arrive back at her own compartment door, and Hermione shook her head with sad amusement at the sight in front of her. Once again, her friends were peacefully asleep while she was not; even Harry had finally managed to drift off into a soft slumber.

Settling herself on the train bench, Hermione tipped her head back against the fabric of the seat, emitting a soft sigh when her eyes fell shut. And while the Hogwarts Express continued to clatter over the rails, she drifted into a shadowland where faceless ghosts whispered, chiding her for questioning the way of the world.

The train had entered King's Cross Station minutes ago, but the corridor outside his compartment still swelled with students eager to leave the carriages.

Snape folded his arms in front of him and leaned back in his seat, gazing through the compartment window. The platform was flurrying with students, their families and friends. Everything appeared to be the same merry gathering at the end of every school year. However, on closer inspection, many faces on the platform threw suspicious glances around them while others were marked with a kind of strained relief; and the embraces parents gave their children seemed a little tighter and to last a little longer than usual.

Beneath the surface, the Dark Lord's terror was already brewing its infectious mixture of agitation and fear.

Somewhere, slightly apart from the crowd, Snape recognised the lone figure of Narcissa Malfoy.

Lucius' wife was apparently waiting for their son, and like always, her appearance seemed to consist of nothing but cool elegance; however, this time, there was a strange stiffness visible in her posture, the telltale mark of apprehension.

So, *she knows already*, Snape thought, frowning.

The Dark Lord had only informed him of his plan for the boy in the wee hours of this morning. A scheme created as nothing more than a slow and nefarious punishment for Lucius's failure. Once his son failed their dark master, Snape knew it would fall to him to face the task of killing Albus Dumbledore.

In the end, there was nothing truly surprising about it. He had always suspected it would come down to this one day, and he had never nurtured any false illusions about the consequences should the Dark Lord ever give him the order.

He was the one expandable while the old man would never be.

However, before that final moment was upon him, he had to find a way to remove the Damocles' sword the Dark Lord had placed above Draco's head. Though, right now, he hadn't the faintest idea how to accomplish the goal. The old man had been far too absorbed in his examination of an old ring to give the problem enough consideration during his report this morning.

Slumping forward, Snape rested his elbows on his knees and rubbed his temples. He would have to think on the matter again before the next Order meeting at the Burrow the day after tomorrow.

Until he had agreed with the old man on a plan how to proceed with this new complication, he could not risk speaking to the boy again. Draco's earlier outburst would have done considerable damage to his position at Hogwarts and within in the Order had it been Potter or one of those foolish Aurors who had overheard the boy.

But instead, as if Fate were laughing in his face, he had found Miss Granger standing in that corridor, and the only price he had had to pay for Draco's indiscretion was having that peculiar something within his chest stirred and twisted by the girl's foolish declaration.

She worried about him. *What a ridiculous and extraordinary thing to say.*

Snape snorted quietly to himself, but his gaze drifted almost involuntarily over the platform in search of her.

The girl was standing, once again smiling, among a knot of people close to his compartment window. The small group consisted of Potter, Weasley and his family, the werewolf, Tonks, Moody and a couple in Muggle clothing that Snape didn't recognise.

They both had to be in their mid-fifties, and the man, the girl's father most certainly, wore a pair of neat, round glasses which gave him, with his lean figure and the thick white hair, an even more distinguished appearance. He laid an arm protectively around the girl's shoulders, one she repeatedly tried to brush off, while he listened to Arthur. The woman, undeniably the girl's mother from the look of her large, expressive eyes and the chin-length, curly brown hair, was laughing with the werewolf about something.

Both Grangers had apparently accepted her daughter's adopted world, but it was still a world they could know so little about and that now posed a direct threat to the girl's life. Would they consider keeping her from returning to Hogwarts once they learned from the Weasleys or from the girl herself about the Dark Lord's return? Even though he did not believe they would ever be able to keep the girl from anything she wanted to do, he, at least, wouldn't blame them if they tried.

If they tried to keep her safe...

Snape was lost in his observations when a crisp knock behind him interrupted his thoughts.

He spun to find Minerva McGonagall standing in the doorway, gazing at him over her square glasses in a very distinct impression of the old man.

"I meant to say my goodbye, Severus."

Snape rose from his seat. "Of course."

McGonagall gave him a curt nod and was already turning to leave when she paused mid-step and looked at him again.

Snape lifted an eyebrow in query.

"Severus, I... Poppy told me what you did... for Miss Granger... for me. It's really appreciated."

He gave her a curt nod, cursing inwardly when he saw his hand waving in an awkward gesture. "Don't mention it. As long as I don't have rumours spreading that I might award points to Gryffindor during the next term as well."

The snort of amusement that followed his remark still seemed to echo through the air long after McGonagall had left and Snape was alone in his compartment again.

When he turned back to the window, the small gathering outside had already dissolved, the number of students lingering on the platform steadily diminishing.

It was time.

He cast a silent Disillusionment charm on the compartment door and grasped a flask of Polyjuice Potion from the travelling bag he had brought with him.

He downed the liquid and placed the empty flask back before transfiguring the bag into a maroon-coloured briefcase. With another wave of his wand, he turned his black frock coat into a greyish tweed suit.

Grasping the briefcase, Snape threw a glance at his hand. Gone were his long, spidery fingers. The hand in front of him was now more muscular and smaller than his own, and even the skin held a light tan; the hand of a nameless Muggle: plain faced, brown haired and middle aged.

Pedestrian in every way. Snape shook his head briefly and left the compartment.

Stepping off the Hogwarts Express, he pulled a small, black book out of the inside pocket of his jacket and activated the Portus charm Shacklebolt had reluctantly agreed to place for him upon the object. The book glowed briefly, and the Potions master vanished instantly from Platform nine and three-quarters.

When his feet touched the ground again, the earth felt strangely cold beneath the soles of his boots. The rough North Sea blew harsh and unforgiving into his face as he turned to the small path leading to the gates of Azkaban prison.

The singular tower stood tall in the storm, dark and unmoveable, while the wind howled around him, like the pleas of the uncounted souls lost within these walls.

It took nearly a quarter of an hour for him to arrive at the massive, tree-high doors of the entrance, and he drew a deep breath before he grasped the door handle and knocked. More minutes ticked by before the narrow and barred viewing panel in front of him was torn open.

"State your name and business," a high voice demanded from inside.

"Nathaniel Savage, member of the Ministry Auror Office. I'm here to see Prisoner No. 537."

Snape held out the official visitor's permit with his alias on it. After tonight, he would owe not only one but two favours to Shacklebolt.

A wand was stuck through the iron bars, and Snape moved the parchment close to it. There was a brief golden glow, and the wand vanished again, the panel in the door slamming shut. Snape held his breath briefly until the gates of Azkaban opened for him with a low, tormented moan.

He entered and was greeted by a short and round wizard, whose shock of dark hair stood out in all directions. He had to belong to the group of low-ranking Ministry employees Fudge had sent in a near panic to guard Azkaban after the Dementors had joined the Dark Lord.

The small man looked him up and down with a pair of grey, puckish eyes. "It's quite late for a visit, Mr. Savage. I dare assume your business is of some urgency?"

"My business is of no concern to you. But you seem to have the advantage of me, Mister...?" Snape said, lifting a brown eyebrow imperiously.

The short wizard paled visibly. "Ah, certainly. Where are my manners? My name is Bimley, Alfred Bimley."

"Well, Mr. Bimley, now that we have established as much, I would request that you take me to see Prisoner No. 537. As you mentioned, it is already quite late, and I have other matters to attend tonight."

"Of course. Please, do follow me, Mr. Savage."

Snape walked behind the gnome-like Mr. Bimley through one of the narrow hallways of the tower. When they passed the first prison cells, he shivered involuntarily. Even though the Dementors had left the island days ago, it still felt as if their evil spirit lingered in the air, eating at the souls of the prisoners of Azkaban.

Somewhere in his mind, a thought whispered and wondered how Black had managed to survive in a place like this for over twelve years, but Snape brushed it away, scowling at himself in annoyance.

Several minutes later, and on the fifth floor, Bimley finally stopped in front of a worn, wooden door and announced, "Here we are, Mr. Savage. Here we are."

Snape merely nodded, his voice suddenly refusing to obey his command, while he waited for Bimley to finger the keys from his belt.

"Malfoy!" Bimley shouted when he had chosen a key and placed it into the lock. "You have a visitor from the Ministry."

Then the small wizard turned to Snape. "Take as much time as you need, Mr. Savage. I'll wait for you outside to take you back."

Snape gave another silent nod before stepped into the prison cell.

The room was dim, and his eyes needed several seconds to adjust to the wan light. The air felt cold and moist on his skin. A chill seeped into his very bones.

Beneath the sole window, on a Spartan cot with a chain around his hands and feet, sat Lucius Malfoy, clad in a shabby convict uniform, striped in black and white. He was bent forward with his elbows resting on his knees, his vacant gaze half hidden by matted blond hair. There appeared to be nothing left but a shadow of the wizard's former proud self, and Snape felt himself swallow against the putrid taste of pity that suddenly filled his mouth. Pity was the last thing the man in front of him needed right now.

"Whoever you are, you are wasting your time," Malfoy said in a hollow voice, not once raising his eyes to his visitor. "I told Scrimgeour already, I have nothing to say."

Snape briefly turned back to the closed door with Bimley waiting behind it and cast a non-verbal *Muffliato*.

"Well, that's reassuring to know, Lucius," he said with a feeble attempt at his usual smirk, knowing that Malfoy would recognize his voice immediately, "because I don't think Ivy would have appreciated the Ministry's sudden attention once you'd explained to Scrimgeour how you ensured the Dark Lord's faith in me."

As expected, his answer caused a pair of tired eyes to snap up, a flash of life suddenly inhabiting the gray while the blond wizard regarded his visitor suspiciously. After a long moment, his delicate brows furrowed in disbelief. "Severus?"

A brief nod from Snape caused Malfoy to rise abruptly from the cot. He threw a quick glance towards the door, hissing in a low voice, "What the hell are you doing here? It's far too dangerous. If you were discovered "

"I won't be," Snape declared with more confidence than he had allowed himself to feel so far. "And surely, you are not going to blame an old friend for trying to ensure you survive your stay in at least an acceptable condition?"

Malfoy gave a dry chuckle, obviously realizing that they had had the exchange before, even though their positions had been reversed at that time.

"It would seem, I cannot. Although I am not sure how you will achieve this goal, my friend, given current circumstances."

"I have my means," Snape assured as he approached Malfoy, closing the distance between them with two steps. He opened his briefcase and removed a wooden box about the size of a cigar case, holding it out to the blond wizard.

Malfoy took the box and opened it tentatively, revealing two rows of more than twenty small glass tubes.

"They contain potions you might find useful," explained Snape when Malfoy pulled one of the tubes from the box and threw him a questioning glance.

"The ones with the blue stoppers contain Dreamless Sleep, the violet ones Calming Draught and the green ones Strengthening Solution. You should always take the latter after you have need of one of the red ones. It's a very recent creation of mine. It will hopefully lessen the pain you experience with each Summoning you are unable to answer." Snape gave Malfoy a knowing look. "You are certainly aware there will be more in the future?"

"Unfortunately, I am. Thank you, Severus."

Snape cast his eyes away, busying himself by closing the briefcase. "Think nothing of it. Narcissa shall give me notice when you're running out of one of them."

"Severus?"

Snape looked up and found the other wizard gazing at him with a sudden pained expression. "You know of Draco's task?"

It wasn't truly a question, and Snape knew Malfoy would not want to hear vain reassurances from him. "I do."

Malfoy nodded, and Snape saw how the blond wizard's grasp on the small box tightened. "I have advised my wife to turn to you for help."

"I thought you would."

"Severus, you have to protect my son," Malfoy said, his voice faltering with a father's desperation. "I know our loyalties might not lie "

Swiftly, Snape held up a hand, causing Malfoy to pause mid-sentence. "I will protect him, Lucius. However, it won't be easy. The Dark Lord will watch my steps in the matter very closely, and Draco is more than a little angry with me." Snape lifted a brown eyebrow pointedly. "Your son believes I usurped his father's position."

For a fleeting moment, something close to a proud smile played around Malfoy's mouth. "It'll pass."

"It better."

"Give him time. He is still so young, Severus."

And so are the foolish girl and Potter... Snape closed his eyes briefly, drawing a breathe. "I know."

He could see Malfoy wanted to say more, but in that moment, Snape felt the two-way mirror in his pocket flare.

"Excuse me," he said quickly, turning away.

He hauled the magical item out of his jacket, and the reflection that appeared seconds later in the mirror sent a jolt of fear to his stomach.

"Albus?" The old man looked deathly pale, his eyes bloodshot and sunken deep into their sockets.

"Cursed. Need your help."

"I am on my way," Snape replied in a voice he didn't recognize as his own, so thick and rough with anxiety.

He shoved the mirror back into his pocket, and his legs were already carrying him towards the door when he threw a final glance at Malfoy.

"Go, Severus!" the blond wizard urged, still standing in front of his cot. "You have done your part here."

Snape gave a curt nod and vanished through the door.

It took several minutes, which stretched like an eternity, and a few vague excuses to Bimley about an emergency at the Ministry before he found himself outside the gates of Azkaban again.

Surrounded by nothing but the rough North Sea wind, he activated his Portkey back to Hogwarts, hoping against hope that he would reach Dumbledore in time.

The Headmaster's chamber was deathly silent.

Snape brushed a hand helplessly over his face and turned his gaze from Dumbledore's still form, lying on the bed in front of him. Why had the old fool tried to break the ring's curse on his own? *Why?*

He had barely managed to contain the unknown spell at all. He still had no idea what kind of dark curse he was dealing with. All he knew was that its containment alone had taken thrice the dose of the concoction he had needed to save the foolish girl. Yet unlike with her, this hard won victory would be short-lived.

The Potions master slumped forward in the armchair he had occupied for hours now and shook his head, a suffocating pain spreading behind his chest. For the first time since he had received Dumbledore's mirror call, his mind seemed able to grasp the unchangeable finality of the situation.

Dying

The old man was dying. Slowly but truly dying. There was no magic in the world to change that. And the only thing he was left with was to buy the Headmaster some more time, maybe a few months at best.

Months the old man would need to prepare the Order, the school, the Boy. Merlin, he would have to prepare the whole of bloody Wizarding Britain to fight the looming war without him, without the wizard who had defeated Grindelwald... without the only one whom the Dark Lord had ever feared.

It was unthinkable. The Order they had prepared for everything, but not for this. Not for Dumbeldore... Dead... Gone.

There was no plan.

And now, it was too late. Even until the inevitable happened, the restrictions the continued presence of the curse would inflict upon the old man's magical and physical strength, once he regained consciousness, would be considerable. Something that would have been too dangerous to discuss outside the safety of the Headmaster's office but, with the old man's addition of an insane scheme to make use of his imminent demise, was now impossible to discuss with anyone.

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose. It was a serious mistake not to inform at least select members of the Order. They needed to be prepared. The Dark Lord would not waste a second in taking both the school and the Ministry once the old man was gone.

He simply had to make Dumbledore see the flaw in his plan. The old man might not be willing to accept that the task he had delegated to him was too much to ask of anybody, but he had to understand that the far-reaching dangers of the scheme would outweigh the supposed benefits. It wasn't necessary for him to rise higher in the Dark Lord's favour in order to protect Potter, and they would find a different way to spare Draco's soul...

...and with his, mine. Snape exhaled a shaky breath and leaned his temple against the backrest, allowing his burning eyes to drift shut for a moment.

However, in the darkened silence of the Headmaster's room, it didn't take long before his exhausted body succumbed completely to the lure of blissful unconsciousness. In the end, he couldn't tell if it was hours or mere minutes later when he startled awake at the sound of a house-elf Disapparating.

The only difference in the room, when his gaze searched his surroundings, was the sight of a pair of calm blue eyes regarding him thoughtfully. The old man sat upright in his bed, propped up against several pillows, still wearing the cobalt-colored robe from the previous morning.

"You needn't have stayed, Severus," Dumbledore said with a smile, the kind one would give an obstinate child.

"Well, obviously, I did." Snape straightened himself, kneading his stiff neck with one hand as he tried to shake off the remains of his drowsiness. "I dare assume you are feeling better?"

"Like a house-elf after receiving his first pair of socks."

"I see," Snape replied while his gaze strayed to the tray Dobby had placed on the tea table. "Speaking of elves, the nuisance you have chosen to employ has apparently brought you some cold broth. It would be advisable that you drink some before you take another dose of the potion."

Snape took the small soup bowl from the tray and held it out for Dumbledore, waiting for the Headmaster to take it with his uninjured left hand.

"Thank you, Severus. Although, I dare say I would prefer a chocolate frog right now."

Snape gave a quiet snort and was about to lean back in the armchair when he saw how the Headmaster lifted the piece of china to his mouth with trembling, unsteady hands. For a moment, Snape froze, a stab of dread thrusting through the pit of his stomach.

"You needn't look so shocked, Severus," Dumbledore said with mild amusement, catching the Potions master's gaze over the rim of the soup bowl. "I'm merely dying. We all have to at some point; that's simply the way of the world."

"Oh, of course," Snape said, rolling his eyes. "Would it be more agreeable with you, Albus, if I try to keep such foolish notions for the truly horrific events? Gryffindor winning the House Cup for example?"

"Yes, indeed, that might prove to be acceptable, Severus," the old man agreed, chuckling softly.

Snape hid his own smile behind a twist of his lips before he lowered his gaze discreetly towards the floor, allowing the Headmaster the privacy to drink from the bowl of broth unobserved.

After a few moments, Snape heard the china being placed on what had to be the Headmaster's bedside table and looked up.

"Well, that was beneficial, indeed." Dumbledore dabbed his mouth with a bright blue handkerchief and took the potion bottles Snape proffered him.

When he had taken the draughts, the Headmaster turned carefully to sit on the edge of the bed before he rose. Claspings his hands behind his back, he began to walk slowly through the room.

"It is obvious," Dumbledore said at length, "I cannot ignore that my new situation will mean some readjustments, Severus."

Readjustments. Snape snorted inwardly at the old man's deliberate understatement of the gravity of the situation while he waited for him to elaborate on the point.

"In the months to come, it will be of utmost importance that I economise my time and strength," the Headmaster continued. "Therefore, it is necessary that I delegate some tasks under the pretence of other duties. I will consult with Kingsley and Minerva about it some time today. And surely you agree, Severus, that we limit nightly reports to events of urgency. Everything else can be discussed in the morning. And of course, I can't join you for a detailed evaluation of your Summons any longer."

"However," the old man went on, and Snape arched an eyebrow in query. "In every good Quidditch team, it takes the eyes of two Beaters to keep the other team members safe from the Bludgers. Therefore, I think it vital that somebody else takes my place to assist you in the matter."

"I would prefer not to..."

"This is not about your preferences, Severus, it is about necessity," Dumbledore thundered, a cold determination lying within his voice. The Headmaster's bedroom fell silent for a long moment afterwards.

"Although," the old man said eventually, his tone had already gentled again, "I do hope that you might not be completely averse to my decision to ask Miss Granger to assume the task."

"No! Absolutely not." Snape was already out of the armchair before the words had made their way past the sudden, peculiar tightening in his throat. He turned away from the curious gaze of the old man and approached the sole window of the room before he added with more calm than he was believed to possess, "I refuse to work with Miss Granger on this matter."

"You refuse, Severus? Well, that's surprising. Didn't you say yourself that the girl is sensible enough to handle such difficult information? We both know that Miss Granger has proven herself more than once to be very perceptive. She not only sees more than her peers, but she is also able to draw the necessary conclusions from her observations. She will be of tremendous help to you, Severus."

Snape folded his fingers tightly against his palms, and for a moment there was nothing in him but emptiness and the feeling of red-hot despair that wrenched through his stomach when he faced the Headmaster again.

"Albus, you... you know what happens during those Summons," he said haltingly, his voice dark and rough. "You cannot be in earnest about allowing a student any student to see such atrocities. Let Lupin do it. Even Moody. They are both more than capable of handling the things they'll see."

Dumbledore regarded him for a moment before he turned away and walked towards one of the bedroom windows.

Snape shook his head in silent denial, bracing himself for the sharp rebuke that was as sure to come as Potter's next detention. Only his heart wouldn't cease to beat loud and hard and helpless against his ribcage at the thought of the girl delving into the darkness that ruled his life.

To think that those hazel eyes would see him... kneeling in front of the Dark Lord... doing the madman's bidding, whatever it may be.

Whatever.

How would she look at him once she had seen what it entailed to be the Dark Lord's follower?

She would not, not with that trust, that caring tenderness bright in those damnable eyes of hers.

Not ever again.

And the old man knew this would happen.

By assigning the task to Miss Granger, by placing it in the girl's capable hands, Dumbledore was ensuring the girl would see him as the creature of the underworld he was.

What did the old man care for any possible regard she held, and would lose, for him?

It meant nothing on the chessboard of the far greater game.

It shouldn't matter if he lost it. But it did. Because, of all people, it was she who looked at him, not as a Death Eater, not a spy or a traitor or her heartless bastard of a Potions master, but simply someone worthy of her trust and concern.

And in those moments, when she looked at him like that, it felt as if he wasn't lost.

"Well, I agree, Severus," the Headmaster said at length, interrupting Snape's thoughts. "Alastor and Remus would be more than able to handle the task. However, as you know, they are already stretched thin by their obligations for the Order. And as for Miss Granger, I fear she, Harry and the young Mr. Weasley will soon have to face far worse."

"What Potter and his friends will or will not have to face is still a matter unknown to us both," Snape said, his voice hard and clipped. "Unless you have recently developed the gift of foresight, Albus."

"Very well, Severus." Dumbledore sighed like a deeply tired man. "I see it's rather unlikely that we'll agree on the point. So why don't we ask Miss Granger and allow her to make the choice herself?"

"She is a Gryffindor," Snape sneered, knowing he was fighting a hopeless battle. "What do you think she will do, Albus?"

"Nothing less than what is right to protect the ones she loves."

A cold, cheerless laugh made its way out of Snape. "Ah, yes, that's probably the kindest way of saying that she will foolishly decide to carry any burden for the treacherous illusion that it will keep safe the ones she loves."

"That might be something the two of you to have in common, Severus, don't you think?"

Snape stared, frozen, at Dumbledore. His chest hurt. There was suddenly no more air in his lungs, and he couldn't breathe because the old man's words twisted like a knife within his ribcage.

He was still struggling for air for his voice when a lynx Patronus leapt through the wall, immersing the room in a soft, silvery glow as it settled quietly next to Dumbledore's bed.

When the lynx opened his mouth, Shacklebolt's deep, calm voice resonated around them.

"Scrimgeour has endorsed the public's demand for Fudge's resignation, calling on the Wizengamot to constitute an inter-departmental committee. They are preparing to hold an investigation into the Minister's administration in the last year. You will be named as one of the main witnesses to the hearings in the next week, Albus. And, Albus... Tom has killed Amelia."

Snape turned to Dumbledore while Shacklebolt's voice faded from the room, shaking his head briefly, signalling he had no knowledge about the murder of Amelia Bones. The old man was stroking his beard with his uninjured hand thoughtfully.

"It's the end, Severus. It's beginning."

Reviews are *love*.