

Meetings at The Bedside

by veradee

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Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 4

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Many thanks to my beta, cherrypop, for catching my mistakes and introducing me to the finer details of the English language.

Meetings at The Bedside

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Voldemort is dead. Everything is fine.

These were the sentences Hermione repeated in her mind over and over again. But nothing was fine. For more than a fortnight now she had been sitting by Harry's bed in the hospital wing and he still hadn't woken up.

Three weeks ago, on the day of the leaving feast, Voldemort and his Death Eaters had attacked Hogwarts. Thanks to Professor Snape, the members of the Order had known about the attack in advance and had been prepared. Nevertheless, the fight had been bloody and had cost many lives. Hagrid, Professors Flitwick and Sprout, Ginny Weasley, Tonks, Mad-Eye Moody and many more were dead. Harry had managed to kill Voldemort, but had fallen into a coma afterwards and remained in this state since then.

The first couple of days he had been treated at St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. But due to the battle, which had left the wizarding world in a momentary state of chaos and repair, and the fact that Harry had no relatives apart from the Dursleys, some rules and traditions had been bent, and the doctors decided that he could be supervised just as well by Madam Pomfrey at Hogwarts, where at least he would be in the company of friends.

Each afternoon Hermione visited Harry and watched him breathing. That was all he did. He lay in his bed and his face was almost as white as the bed linen, his nightshirt and the surrounding walls. The only colour in the room came from a large picture that Hermione had hung up on the wall. It showed Harry, Ron and herself at the train station, when they had returned to Hogwarts for their seventh year.

She took Harry's hand and squeezed it. But he didn't squeeze back, didn't smile, didn't look at her. Hermione swallowed back her tears.

When she heard steps behind her, she turned around. Professor McGonagall approached the bed. Her eyes behind the square glasses seemed tired, and there were grey streaks in her black hair that had not been there three weeks before. Her tartan robe hung loosely around her body.

While the professors did not normally stay at Hogwarts during the summer break, they did so this time. Until the next school year, which would begin in about two months, they not only had to prepare their syllabi but also to find three new professors and restore the school building, which had suffered some damage during the fight.

"How is Professor Dumbledore?" Hermione asked her former Transfiguration teacher.

Headmaster Albus Dumbledore had also stayed in the hospital wing for the past three weeks. He and Harry were the only ones there now. All the others who had been injured during the fight with Voldemort had already been released. Dumbledore had not been injured, but the battle and the months of preparing for the fight had thoroughly exhausted him, so that he had to regain his strength.

Professor McGonagall smiled. "He is much better. Madam Pomfrey will release him in a week."

"That's wonderful news," Hermione said and turned back to Harry.

"Thank you, Miss Granger. And how is Mr Potter?"

"The same as before," Hermione answered in a flat voice and stared at Harry's pale hand, which she still held in her own.

"He will wake up again," said Professor McGonagall. She laid a bony hand on Hermione's shoulder. "But all we can do is wait. You can't help him, Miss Granger. You really should go home like the other students. I know your parents would be very happy if you came home."

Hermione shook her head. "No, I'm staying. I can't leave Harry alone. He needs me."

"It could be months or years. You can't stay here, just sitting at Mr Potter's bed. You have to think about your own future, Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall said. "You have achieved the highest NEWTs for the past 20 years. The outside world is waiting for you."

"Not yet. Harry is more important," Hermione insisted.

With a sigh, the Deputy Headmistress left the hospital wing.

Later, Hermione still sat at Harry's bed. She held the Daily Prophet in her hands and read aloud.

"Oliver Wood turned out to be the hero last night when the Chudley Cannons played the Marseille Mouches. The new Keeper of the English team managed to block several fierce attacks and prevent the Mouches' players from scoring. In the end, the Chudley Cannons won 190:10."

"Quidditch, Miss Granger?"

Hermione jumped, her bushy hair flying around her head, and looked behind her to see where the voice had come from.

Professor Snape stood a few feet away. Dressed in black as usual and with a scowl on his sallow face, he looked exactly as he had done on the day Hermione had seen him for the first time seven years ago.

The curtain at the other end of the hospital wing, behind which the Headmaster lay, fluttered.

"I didn't realise that you cared for sports," Snape said. His black eyes seemed to search her own brown ones.

"You are right, I don't. But Harry does."

"Potter, of course." He spat Harry's name as if he felt insulted that he had to pronounce it. His lips curled as he watched Harry. "Any progress?"

Hermione sucked in her breath. "Not yet, but thank you for your sympathy."

"You're welcome." Snape smirked and started to leave.

Realising that it had to be dinner time, Hermione rose, smoothed the dark school robes she still wore, and followed him out of the room. Her heels clicked on the floor.

At the door she turned to throw a final glance at Harry. "Bye, Harry. I'll be back tomorrow."

When she turned back, Snape had let go of the door and it almost hit her in the face. She gritted her teeth.

"Oh, Harry," Hermione said on the following afternoon and sighed. "What are we going to do with you? You just can't leave me alone." She twisted a strand of her long brown hair with her fingers.

Madam Pomfrey, the nurse, appeared at the bed, carrying a bowl of soup. Contrary to the Healers at St Mungo's, who wore lime-green robes, she was clad in light blue.

"Can I feed him, please?" Hermione asked and her eyes lit up. She couldn't do much for Harry, and therefore she cherished every little bit.

Madam Pomfrey nodded and handed the bowl to Hermione, who began to spoon the soup into Harry's mouth. Although he was in a coma, his swallowing reflex still worked.

"When will he wake up?" Hermione asked. She asked the same question every day.

"I don't know. We will have to be patient."

"Isn't there anything you can do for him? He's been lying here for three weeks now. I can't believe that there's no cure. Have you really tried everything?"

Madam Pomfrey patted Hermione's arm. "Everything will be alright, my dear. You'll see."

Hermione stared at her. "Nothing will be alright," she shouted. "Harry is in a coma and nobody knows whether he will ever wake up again. Many of our friends died in the battle and... and..." She choked.

"Miss Granger, there is no need to attack Madam Pomfrey. You can be assured that she is doing everything possible to help Potter."

Professor Snape's voice suddenly boomed through the hospital wing. The Potions master approached Harry's bed and stood beside the nurse. His brows were knit together and he shot a piercing look at Hermione.

"Let her be, Severus," Madam Pomfrey said. "She's upset about her best friend."

"That is no excuse for accusing you of not doing your job properly," Snape said in a dangerous voice, still looking at Hermione.

"I'm sorry, Madam Pomfrey," Hermione said, her head bowed. "Professor Snape is right. I know you're doing everything you can to help Harry."

"No need to worry, Miss Granger." Madam Pomfrey smiled at her, before she turned to address Professor Snape. "Did you visit the Headmaster?"

For another moment Snape glared at Hermione. "Yes, I did," he finally answered. "He seems to be quite chipper again, almost like old times."

"I'd always thought that the library was your favourite place at Hogwarts, Miss Granger," Professor Snape sneered two days later. "Did you decide you preferred the hospital wing?"

"I'm visiting Harry, as you very well know, Professor. Just as you are visiting the Headmaster," Hermione replied, holding his stare as he stood scowling a few feet away from her.

She turned back to Harry and picked up the book she had been reading aloud to him earlier.

She could hear that Snape didn't leave. Instead, he stepped nearer towards her.

"Why don't you go home, Miss Granger?" he snarled. "Your lessons are over. You've finished your NEWTs. What are you still doing here?"

Hermione turned back to him, her fingers almost painfully gripping the book. His eyes were glinting.

"As I said, I'm visiting Harry. I can't leave him alone now. He's my friend and he needs me."

For a fraction of a second, a shadow crossed over Snape's face. "I see," he said and left, his black robes billowing behind him.

Hermione sat at Harry's bed and watched him. His chest moved slowly up and down and his blank eyes stared at the ceiling. Instead of the white nightshirt he now wore a red jumper. Madam Pomfrey had not been too pleased about this, but Hermione had insisted that he would want on something more colourful and lively. She wasn't sure if it was for his benefit or her own.

She could hear low voices behind the curtain where Professor Dumbledore lay. Professor Snape had arrived a few minutes earlier to visit the Headmaster.

She looked at the photo on the wall. Ron stood in the middle and had his arms around Harry and herself.

"I received a letter from Ron today," she said. "He's well and would like to visit you, but his mother won't let him come. After having lost Ginny, she's insisting that he stays at the Burrow. He's written that he hopes he can come to see you in a couple of weeks."

She smiled at Harry's motionless figure and smoothed away a strand of hair that had fallen onto his forehead. "So, what are you going to do when Ron arrives? I bet he'd like to go to the Quidditch pitch with you to practise. Or maybe he'd prefer a game of chess? What do you think, Harry?"

She interrupted herself when she heard someone approaching, but didn't turn around. "Ron also says that he will bring you a large bag of Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans. Wouldn't you like that? Please, Harry. I really don't know what to do anymore. Please wake up."

"I always believed Potter to be a dunderhead, but even he won't fall for something as cheap as Every Flavour Beans." Professor Snape came into view. He glanced at Harry before his eyes darted to look at Hermione. "Was it your idea that Potter wears that red jumper?" It was impossible to miss the contempt in his voice.

"Yes, the white nightshirt was a bit depressing, don't you think?" Hermione asked, feeling quite bold.

"It's a ridiculous colour," he snapped and shot a piercing glare at her.

"Well, it certainly isn't Slytherin but I think it suits him." She looked at Snape and waited for a scathing reply but he only growled quietly. "Sir, why are you here?" she finally asked.

His eyes glittered when he answered her. "The Headmaster asked me to have a look. I'll tell him that Potter is much less troublesome at the moment than usual." His lips curled into an unpleasant smile.

Hermione clenched her hands together as she watched him returning to Dumbledore's bed.

"Now tell me, Miss Granger," Madam Hooch asked Hermione, when they were at dinner. "What are you planning to do in the future?"

Since only the remaining teachers and Hermione were now at Hogwarts, they all sat together at one table in the Great Hall.

Hermione bit back a sigh. "I haven't decided yet, Madam Hooch. At the moment I'm more interested in Harry getting better again." She poked at the shepherds pie on her plate.

"But Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall said, "surely you have thought about your career. With your high NEWTs results you could become a Transfiguration mistress or a Charms professor."

Professor Snape sneered.

"The past months have been a bit busy, you know." Even to Hermione's own ears her voice sounded a bit resigned. "I really didn't think about it that much."

With one exception, all the teachers shook their heads at her.

"You never have any advice for Miss Granger, Severus," Professor McGonagall said and looked at Snape. "What do you think? What should she do?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Does it really matter what I think? I'm sure she will marry Weasley or Potter, if he should wake up again, and become a doting wife and mother. They all do."

He sounded slightly bitter and Hermione regarded him more closely. His twisted smile was familiar but she detected an expression in his eyes that she couldn't decipher.

The Headmaster had finally been released from the hospital wing. Now Harry was the only patient there.

Hermione stood at the window beside his bed and looked out onto the Hogwarts grounds. The sun was shining and the daisies blossomed all over the grass.

"It's so beautiful outside, Harry, you should see for yourself. It must be the best summer we've had for years." She swallowed hard and went to the chair next to Harry's bed.

She had sat there for a long time, when the door to the hospital wing opened and Professor Snape came in. In his hands he held several vials.

He nodded his head in her direction as a way of greeting before he turned to Madam Pomfrey's office that was tucked in one corner of the ward. "Poppy?" he called out. "I brought you the Purple Sleeping Potion you asked me..."

"She's not here. She went to Hogsmeade with Madam Pince," Hermione interrupted him.

"Women," he muttered and set down the vials on a side table. "Certainly they are at Madam Puddifoot's, gossiping and eating cream puffs. That's all they can do."

Hermione suppressed a laugh, which caused him to shoot a menacing glance at her. She looked back at him levelly in return, waiting for a verbal reprimand that didn't come. "Professor Snape?"

"What?" he grunted.

"What did you mean by 'They all do,' last night at dinner?"

Snape studied her. His piercing look made her squirm on her chair. Just when she thought he wouldn't answer he did.

"I've been teaching here for 16 years now and almost all witches married shortly after they had finished school. Even the brightest ones didn't further their education." His unfathomable eyes still bored into hers. "I'm still waiting for one witch to see reason and do something worthwhile with her life," he said before he turned on his heels and left.

Hermione stared after him. Had there been a challenge in his voice?

Hermione had lost count on how many hours she had sat beside Harry's bed in the past four weeks. So far she had mostly talked to him, held his hand, fed him and read to him. Today she had decided to try something new and had brought a chess set with her. She wasn't any good at it but Harry rather liked playing, although he had always lost against Ron.

After a while she got stuck. It was her turn, but she just didn't know which piece she was supposed to move now. She stared at the board, lost in her thoughts.

"That's appalling, Miss Granger," Professor Snape's voice suddenly could be heard. "How could you be losing against Potter, whether he is awake or not?"

She ground her teeth before turning round to face her former Potions teacher.

Smirking, he loomed over her, looked down his hooked nose at the board and took her knight in his hand. Without hesitating he placed the piece on another square.

"Now, that is much better," he said as the knight hit one of Harry's pawns on the head.

Hermione concentrated on the game again and put forward one of Harry's other pawns. Her hand was poised above her bishop, when Snape clicked his tongue.

"Certainly not, Miss Granger," he said and moved her queen this time. His fingers brushed hers as he removed his hand.

She stiffened. "Thank you, Professor Snape," she said and kept staring at the chessboard.

Before she could make another move though, the door to the hospital wing flew open and Albus Dumbledore came in, a cheery vision in his long purple robe.

"Ah, Severus." The Headmaster beamed at Snape, when he had reached them. "Visiting Mr Potter, I see. Splendid."

"Yes," Snape snapped and a corner of his mouth twitched. "But I'll have to go now. I have to look after a potion that is in a critical state."

"Of course, Severus, I won't stop you," Dumbledore said, his eyes dancing merrily as Snape left the room. "So, Miss Granger, how is Mr Potter today?"

Hermione let her head hang. "Nothing has changed, sir. It still doesn't look as if he will wake up any time soon."

"Well, don't you worry too much about that," the Headmaster said. She ducked her head as he started patting it. "A sherbet lemon?" With his other hand he began to search his pockets.

"No, thank you, sir."

"Mr Potter is a strong wizard, you know. He will get better soon, then everything will be back to normal."

"Yes, of course," answered Hermione but her voice sounded rather subdued.

"Now, let's talk about a happier topic, Miss Granger." Dumbledore's eyes twinkled at her. "You still haven't told me what you plan to do in the future. We love having you here, but shouldn't you think about yourself and start an apprenticeship somewhere?"

Hermione exhaled audibly. "Eventually yes, but not now, sir. I really want to stay with Harry until he is OK again. I've already tried to explain it to the other professors."

The twinkle in his eyes diminished as he patted her again and shook his head. "So they've told me. What are we going to do with you?"

"Hello, Professor McGonagall," Hermione said, when the Transfiguration teacher came to visit Harry.

"Miss Granger, how are you and how is Mr Potter?"

"I'm fine, thank you, and Harry... well..." Hermione's voice trailed off.

Professor McGonagall sighed and sat down heavily on the bed next to Harry's. She regarded Hermione with a stern expression in her eyes. "I know that you don't want to leave Mr Potter but you have to."

Hermione shook her head.

"Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall's voice became exasperated. "You can visit him every weekend if you like, but you can't stay here any longer. Please think of yourself, go home to your parents and start an apprenticeship."

"No," Hermione whispered and avoided looking at her former teacher.

"I'm going to talk to the Headmaster about you, Miss Granger. Something must be done." With that, Professor McGonagall got up and started to leave the hospital wing. At the door she stopped and turned to Hermione. "I really don't understand you."

"Back in the library I see, Miss Granger." Hermione looked up from her book and saw Professor Snape standing on the other side of the table. "Tired of sitting by Potter's sickbed?"

She laid the quill that she had been using down on some parchments and took a deep breath before she answered him. "Not at all. I intend to visit him again in the afternoon." She kept her voice as cool as possible and looked him straight in the eyes.

He smirked. "And until then you read what? A book on how to treat coma patients?" Before she could say anything, he had taken the book out of her hands and read the title. "'Ancient Medical Potions from the Middle Ages.' Yes, I thought something like that."

"Is there something wrong with the book?" she asked, still watching him.

"No." He hesitated for a moment. "But you won't find anything in this book that might help Potter if that is what you are looking for."

"Then I will go on reading the next book, until I find one that will help Harry," Hermione said determinedly. "So far I've only read some of the books on medical potions. There are much more."

His eyebrows went up. "How many have you read?" His curiosity seemed real.

"Seventeen." She nodded at a high stack of books on the table. "I read every morning, but it's taking longer than I thought it would." She rubbed her nose with ink-stained fingers. "Some books are a bit complicated."

"I would think so," he said in a quiet voice. "After all, they are meant for Healers and Potions masters, not for students." He handed the book back to her. "Here, I don't want to stop you from accomplishing your task."

"Almost five weeks now, Madam Pomfrey, and Harry still hasn't woken up," Hermione complained, when the nurse came to look after her patient.

"He will," Madam Pomfrey reassured her, whilst she checked Harry's temperature. "It's difficult, I know, but you have to be patient."

Hermione sighed and Madam Pomfrey patted her arm.

"I'm afraid there is nothing you can do for Mr Potter at the moment. The professors are right. You really should think about starting an apprenticeship. I'm sure Mr Potter won't be happy when he wakes up again and realises that you spent the past weeks doing nothing but sitting here. He would want you to think of yourself."

"No, I'm staying," Hermione said. It took all of her self-restraint not to shout at the nurse.

"You could become a Healer, you know. Even if you can't help Mr Potter now, you might be able to help many other people in the future."

"Oh, please," whispered Hermione and closed her eyes. Opening them again, she looked at the nurse and said, "I just want to stay with Harry right now."

Before Madam Pomfrey could reply anything, the door flew open with a bang and Professor Snape came in. In his hands he held a large rack with vials, all filled with a yellowish substance.

"Here is the Pepper-Up Potion you wanted, Poppy." He set down the rack and looked sourly at the nurse. "I really don't know why you need so much of it. The students aren't even here."

Madam Pomfrey eyed him. "Thank you, Severus. I know I asked you about it, but I don't think I asked you for that much. And didn't I tell you that I would only need it for the next school year?"

When the Potions master scowled, she shot Hermione an amused look. With a grin she took the rack and carried it to her office.

Facing Harry again, Hermione heard Snape coming nearer and she turned to look at him.

He took a small book out of an inner pocket of his robes. "You might want to have a look at this book. It doesn't contain a cure for Potter, but you might find it enlightening nevertheless."

Hermione took the glossy item, which was obviously a Muggle book, from his hands. The title was printed in bold letters: 'In Another World - Awakened Coma Patients Relate Their Experiences.'

"Thank you," she said, not knowing what else to say.

"You're welcome," he replied, and abruptly left the hospital wing.

Annotations:

Exams at Hogwarts are held in the first week of June, and the students get their results about a week later. I assumed that there is no reason for the students to stay at the school after that and that therefore the leaving feast is at the end of the second week of June. Each school year starts on 1 September. The timeline of this story is based on these dates.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 4

Hermione just passed her final exam at Hogwarts. During the summer, she and Professor Snape gradually get to know

each other better, and learn to appreciate each other's company, when they repeatedly meet at Harry's sickbed after Harry defeats Voldemort.

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Hermione was exhausted. For the past four hours, she had stayed in the library and read another book on medical potions. Again it had been in vain. Now, she was on her way to the Great Hall for lunch.

Deep in her thoughts, she didn't see Professors Dumbledore and Snape, who were also headed for the Great Hall.

"Ah, Miss Granger," Dumbledore greeted her. "How are you? I hope you aren't spending too much time in the hospital wing and the library. You should look after your own health and go out more. After all, it's summer."

Hermione forced herself to smile at him. "Yes, sir." She thought she heard Snape snort.

"And, of course, it's always important to eat properly," the headmaster added, his eyes twinkling at her. "I assume you were on your way to lunch?"

She nodded and caught Snape sneering behind Dumbledore's back.

"Shall we go then?" the headmaster said and set off.

Snape and Hermione followed him. She trailed behind a few steps and before she reached the door to the Great Hall, Snape had already let it go so that it shut in her face. Hermione balled her hands into fists.

She sat at Harry's bedside. In her hand she held a novel by E M Forster, but she didn't read it to him. Instead, she looked at the picture on the wall and thought about happier times. Some tears started to silently roll down her cheeks.

She only realised that Professor Snape had come in when he spoke to her. "It seems that the headmaster was right. You spend too much time in the castle thinking too much, Miss Granger."

She looked at him through blurry eyes and gave a short laugh.

"Yes, you've understood me correctly. Go outside, Miss Granger, and enjoy the summer sun."

Hermione still stared at him.

Snape sighed and stepped closer, looking intently at her for a while, before he sighed again. "The last time I asked you, you didn't give me a sufficient answer, but perhaps you will do so now," he said in a low voice. "Why are you still here, Miss Granger? Why don't you go home?"

Hermione felt her blood pressure rising. A red haze appeared in front of her eyes. "What is it with you all?" she shouted. "Why do all of you want to get rid of me? I can't imagine that I actually disturb you that much." Now the tears freely ran down her cheeks.

"Miss Granger." His voice was icy. "No one, as you put it, wants to get rid of you." His dark eyes, which had bored into her hers, brightened slightly when he added in a softer tone, "Not even I."

"I'm sorry," she whispered and looked down at the floor.

When he held out a handkerchief, her head came up again. She hesitated, but eventually took it and dabbed her eyes with the white silky cloth.

Snape watched her, obviously waiting for her to say something.

Hermione worried her lower lip between her teeth, before she made up her mind. She inhaled deeply. "I can't leave him. I don't know why, but I just can't." She choked but managed not to cry again, as she grabbed Harry's hand and clutched it.

Snape sat down on the bed next to Harry's. "No one expects you to abandon your friend, Miss Granger. But you've sat at Potter's bedside each afternoon for several weeks now. The rest of the day, you spend in the library looking for a cure. You didn't have one day for yourself since the battle ended, am I correct?"

She nodded.

"But as much as it might pain you, if you are honest to yourself, you have to admit that you can't help him."

Her eyes narrowed. "You never..."

"Miss Granger," he said with a sigh, "let me continue."

She shut her mouth.

"No one knows if and when Potter will wake up again. And therefore, you have to think of your own future."

Hermione started to say something, but he cut her off, waving his hand at her.

"I know that the other professors have already talked to you, and I understand how annoying they can be." He smirked. "But as much as I hate to admit it, they are right."

"But..."

Again he stopped her. "I'm not telling you to begin an apprenticeship today, Miss Granger. But I believe you originally did intend to apprentice, didn't you?"

She nodded.

"Then do it. Not today and not tomorrow but soon."

"I don't..."

"I'm not finished," he snapped. "What about your parents, Miss Granger? Don't they miss you?"

"Yes," she said.

"Have you seen them at all since you finished school?"

"No."

"Did you tell them why you are still here at Hogwarts?"

"I sent them an owl," Hermione muttered and hung her head so that her hair covered her blushing face.

"Go home, Miss Granger," Snape said softly. "At least for the weekend. Your parents will understand why you stayed here. But you should explain it to them in person and not via an owl. And if you're worrying about Potter," he added, his lip curling, "you can be assured that he will be cared for until you return."

Her head shot up. "You aren't sending me away permanently? I can come back?"

He rolled his eyes. "Yes, you can. I think I can speak for the other professors as well, when I say that you are always welcome at Hogwarts." He flashed her a glance. "As a visitor."

She inhaled deeply. "Well, then perhaps I should send my parents an owl, telling them that I will come to see them this weekend."

"Yes, you should," he said and got up. He stood in front of her, towering over her.

Hermione studied him. His body was rigid, and he held his hands behind his back. He wore his usual billowing black robes. His limp, greasy hair hung above his collar; his large nose was still hooked; and his lips were pressed together in a thin line.

He looked like he always had done. Dark, cold and frightening. She didn't like to admit it to herself, but during her seven years at Hogwarts, he had often instilled fear in her as well.

Her eyes went wide as she realised that she had no longer been afraid of him in the past few weeks.

"What, Miss Granger?" he asked and scowled at her.

"Oh, nothing." She gave him a tentative smile. "Thank you, Professor Snape."

For a moment, she thought his eyes had lit up, but then they were as dark again as ever.

"Hello, Harry, how are you?" Hermione cried, before the door to the hospital wing had even closed behind her. "I'm so glad I went home. Professor Snape was right. My parents did understand and I'm feeling much better now." She took his hand. "What did you do whilst I was gone? Did anyone visit you?"

While she was still talking to Harry, Professor Snape entered from Madam Pomfrey's office. "I see you are back, Miss Granger." His deep voice rang through the ward.

She turned and saw him sneering at her. "Yes, I am," she said and gave him a bright smile.

He looked taken aback for a second, but then his sneer was back in place. "Pity."

"Oh no, you don't fool me, Professor. I remember what you told me last week."

His eyes bored into hers. "I wonder what that could have been."

"You said that I was always welcome here." Hermione kept smiling at him.

Snape raised his eyebrows. "You must be mistaken, Miss Granger. For me the happiest days of the school year are those when the students leave," he said smoothly. "If you would excuse me now, I have some work to do."

"Then she was standing before me, and suddenly the atmosphere underwent a peculiar change - almost as though the two of us had been suddenly thrust on to some other plane of being altogether. I am afraid it is not easy to describe clearly what I mean here. All I can say is that everything around us suddenly became very still; it was my impression that Miss Kenton's manner also underwent a sudden change; there was a strange seriousness in her expression, and it struck me she seemed almost frightened."

Voices brought Hermione's reading to Harry to an end when the door to the hospital wing opened.

"No, Severus. I don't think it's a good idea to treat the poor children with Dr Ubbly's Oblivious Potion on a regular basis," Madam Pomfrey said, as she and the Professor Snape entered. Then she saw Hermione. "Oh hello, Miss Granger."

"Hello, Madam Pomfrey."

"Reading, are you? What book is it?" the nurse asked while she and the Potions master approached Harry's bed.

"'The Remains of the Day' by Kazuo Ishiguro."

"I don't think I know that story. What is it about?"

"It's a Muggle novel," Hermione explained. "It's about a butler who devotes his entire life to his master and thereby gives up on his one chance for happiness."

Professor Snape's eyes narrowed. "Dreadful."

Madam Pomfrey smiled. "Do you refer to the story or the butler's life?"

He sneered. "Both."

"Oh really?" said Madam Pomfrey and, without waiting for an answer, went to her office.

Snape remained standing a few feet away from Harry's bed.

"If you don't mind, Professor, I would like to go on reading," Hermione said.

"Are you sure that this is the kind of book Potter is interested in?"

Her eyes clouded for a moment. "He doesn't complain," she said and gave a short laugh.

He stared at her, clearly surprised. She could feel his scrutinising look on her face. "Sarcasm, Miss Granger? I never thought of you as a sarcastic person."

"No, perhaps not." She swallowed hard. "But it seems appropriate in the current situation."

"What situation?"

"What situation?" Hermione cried and leapt from her chair. "Harry's situation. He's been in a coma for the past six weeks, in case you haven't noticed."

"I have indeed noticed it, Miss Granger," said Snape icily. With a wave of his hand, he indicated her to sit down again. "But I am quite astonished at your behaviour." He started to pace in front of Harry's bed.

"Why?" she asked, after having taken her seat again.

He looked at her over his shoulder. "Yesterday, when you had returned from your parents' home, you seemed to be quite cheerful. Therefore, I assumed you had found a way to cope with Potter's illness."

"Yes, I thought so, too," she whispered, following his movements with her eyes. "It felt so good to be home again, and when I came back yesterday, I was confident that everything would turn out okay for Harry." Her hands clutched at her old school robes. "But today, I don't feel confident any more. I can't leave him, and I don't want to leave him, but it's all so difficult."

Snape was still pacing the room.

She sniffed. "It's so difficult to sit beside his bed and to know that I can't do anything for him."

She started to cry silently.

He had stopped at the window. Without moving, he looked out of it, his back to Hermione. After a while, he spoke. "Some years ago, I was in a similar position as Potter is now - if only for a few days," he said in a neutral voice. His left hand caressed the windowsill. "I had been badly injured after an attack and had to stay here in the hospital wing for a week. During the four days I was unconscious, I couldn't see Madam Pomfrey and the headmaster, and I didn't hear them talking to me, but somehow I could feel that there was someone who tried to reach out to me."

He stopped himself, and after a few moments he turned around to face Hermione, who had finished crying. His voice was husky. "Don't give up on Potter. Continue visiting him and talking to him."

For once, Snape's face didn't show the contempt or derision she was accustomed to from her school days. Instead, he looked slightly agitated. Without another word, he hurried from the hospital wing.

Hermione stared after him, twirling a strand of her hair.

The stack of books on the library table had grown, but still Hermione had not found any useful information on how to help Harry.

She sat at the table, a Potions book in front of her, but she didn't read it. She was gazing at the opposite wall, which was covered by a shelf of books. Her head jerked around when she heard a dark voice.

"Miss Granger?"

"Yes, sir?" she said as Professor Snape swept towards her. He held a parchment in his hand.

"The Headmaster asked me to look for you. Although I really don't know why. Where else could you have been except the library, if you were not in the hospital wing?" He smirked.

Hermione forced her voice to stay calm. "How can I help Professor Dumbledore?"

Snape's smirk became even more pronounced. "Oh no. I think he intends to help you," he said and gave her the parchment.

With a sense of dread, she took it. It was a letter, signed by a Professor Fitzwilliam. The name didn't mean anything to her.

She shot Snape a glance, but when he remained quiet, she began to read the letter. Halfway through, she felt her blood begin to boil, and when she had finished it, she was seething.

"How dare he?" she muttered between clenched teeth.

Snape cocked an eyebrow. "I beg your pardon?"

She pressed her lips together but eventually she couldn't hold back. "Apparently Professor Dumbledore asked one of his friends, who is a Charms professor, to accept me as an apprentice." Her voice grew louder. "He didn't even ask me about it. And now this Professor Fitzwilliam has written back, telling the headmaster that he would be very pleased to have me." She crumpled the letter into a ball and threw it across the room. "How can he decide about my future without even consulting me?"

Snape's lips curled into a knowing smile. He pulled a chair from under the table and sat down across from Hermione. "He means well."

She looked exasperated. "Of course he does. But I don't want to be a Charms professor. And I also don't want Professor Dumbledore to meddle."

"Well, what do you want, Miss Granger?"

She glanced at her former Potions master, who in turn watched her levelly.

"I don't know," she said and sighed. Her hands began to fiddle with a quill that lay on the table. "Before we began to prepare for the final battle, I was certain I wanted to become a Transfiguration mistress, but now I'm not sure about that any longer..." Her voice trailed off.

"That's something only you can decide."

"Yes, I know. But it's a difficult decision. I should be happy, now that V-" She stopped. "Now that the Dark Lord is dead. And I am. But for some reason I feel more insecure about the future than I did when he was still alive." She shrugged her shoulders. "That doesn't make any sense, does it?"

Snape's black eyes fixed hers, and she looked away.

"Of course, it makes sense, Miss Granger." His voice was dispassionate. "As much as everyone wanted the Dark Lord's reign of terror to end, it nevertheless was the world we had come to know for a long time. In a way, everyone felt perversely safe, because they knew what was expected of them." He paused. "When he died, a lot of us lost what had kept us alive during that time."

Hermione turned her eyes back on him, still playing with the quill.

His face didn't betray any emotion. But suddenly his hand shot forward, and he snatched the quill from her hand. He laid it in front of him on the table.

Neither of them said anything until Snape finally rose. Softly he said, "I'm sure you will make the right decision, Miss Granger."

After he had left, Hermione remained sitting at the table, thoughts tumbling through her head.

"Look who's here," a loud voice came from the door to the hospital wing.

"Ron," cried Hermione, got up and ran into the open arms of her red-haired friend, who looked thinner and even ganglier than she had remembered him. He caught her up and whirled her round.

After putting her down, Ron went over to Harry's bed and stared at his friend for a long time.

"Hello, Harry," he said quietly, before he turned to Hermione, who stood beside him. "How is he doing? Hasn't he got any better at all?" he asked in a choked voice.

"No." Hermione shook her head. "Madam Pomfrey tells me that he will be alright again, but so far there has been no progress whatsoever."

Ron sighed and sat down on the chair beside Harry's bed. Hermione fetched another chair and sat beside him. She grabbed Ron's hand, and silently they regarded their friend.

"I'm so glad that Mum eventually let me come - at least for one day. I would have liked to visit Harry much sooner," Ron said after a while.

"I know, and I'm sure Harry would understand."

"Yeah, maybe," said Ron, his eyes cast down.

But then he lifted his head, and a smile crept across his face. "You know, I'm sure Harry wouldn't want us to be depressed, don't you think? We're free again. A lot of bad things happened." He swallowed, but then his face lit up again. "But now we're finally free."

Hermione laughed when she looked at him. His eyes were dancing.

He took her hands and pulled her from her chair. With a loud laugh, he started to whirl her around again.

Both were oblivious when the door opened and Professor Snape came in.

"Miss Granger, are you...?" His voice trailed off when he saw them.

Ron let go of Hermione and stood straight, staring at his former Potions master, whilst Hermione smoothed her robes. "Hello, Professor," he murmured.

"Mr Weasley." Snape's eyes glittered. "How nice of you to look in on your friends. They must be delighted." His lips curled into a twisted smile.

Ron looked at Snape and his Adam's apple convulsed rapidly.

"Miss Granger." Snape faced Hermione. "I came here, hoping to see you. I believe you still have the book I lent you. Would you give it back to me sometime today, please? I need it."

With a nod at Hermione, Snape turned on his heels and left.

"What was that?" said Ron. "Did he say 'please'? And he lent you a book?" He looked unbelievably at Hermione.

"Yes, one on comatose patients, who woke up again," Hermione answered. "A Muggle book. It was really interesting."

"Snape lent you a Muggle book?" Ron's voice rose higher. "The greasy git?"

"Yes. And don't call him a 'greasy git'."

"Oh, Madam Pomfrey. I think Harry is getting worse." Hermione pointed at Harry's face when the nurse had reached her. "Look, don't you think that Harry has become even paler? And he certainly looks thinner than before." She stroked his hollow cheek.

Madam Pomfrey nodded. "I'm afraid he's losing strength."

Hermione's head shot around. "What do you mean, he's losing strength?"

"The only thing he's been doing for over six weeks now is lie in bed. We feed him, but that's not enough. He needs to be outside, to walk, run, play Quidditch, feel the sun. But since he doesn't, his blood circulation is low and his muscles are atrophying."

"And?" Hermione stared at the nurse. "What are you going to do?"

Madam Pomfrey shook her head. "There's nothing I can do. When Mr Potter awakes, he will have to exercise to recover his strength himself."

"But we can't wait that long," Hermione said. "We have to do something. Now. We can't just leave him lying here wasting away."

"Unfortunately I can't think of anything to do," Madam Pomfrey said, shrugging her shoulders in defeat.

Professor Snape found her in the library. Again, she was perusing books, hoping that she would come across a cure for Harry. She had just started on another book when she heard Snape come in.

"Not giving up, I see," he said.

She looked up. He stood with his back to the window. The sun was shining in, so that his face was hidden by the shadow.

"No, I'm not," she said. "I will find a way to help him. I can't stand sitting at his bed any longer and seeing him lying there helplessly."

"But not all answers can be found in books, Miss Granger."

She squinted her eyes and tried to make out Snape's face. "It's the best I can do, isn't it? Madam Pomfrey has given up on him. Therefore, the only chance I have is to find something in a book."

"You're not doing Madam Pomfrey justice," he snarled and glided over to her table, stopping right in front of her, so that she had to tilt her head back.

"But that's what she told me herself two days ago. She said that she couldn't think of anything that might help Harry. He's losing strength, you know."

"Yes, I do know," he said quietly and stepped back a bit. "Madam Pomfrey told me about Potter's condition. She asked for my help."

"Really?" A surge of hope shot through her.

"Yes." He traced his lower lip with his index finger. "There is no potion to help Potter to wake up again. But I can brew a potion that strengthens his resistance."

She beamed. "That would be wonderful, sir."

He started to leave, only to turn around again and ask, "Would you like to help me?"

Hermione spun round. Her elbow knocked into the stack of books, which collapsed with a loud noise. "What?" she almost shouted.

He smirked at her. "I'll only ask you once, Miss Granger."

She leapt from her chair. "Yes, yes, of course I want to help," she said and stumbled after him.

When he reached the door, he held it open to let her pass through first.

Professor Snape strode rapidly along the corridor, so that Hermione almost had to fall into a run to keep up with him. After a few yards, he stopped and turned to wait for her. When she had caught up with him, he walked on - this time at a slower pace.

In silence, they went through the corridors, passed the Great Hall and started to climb down the stairs to the dungeons.

Her eyes hidden behind her long hair, she looked up at him.

He stared ahead, a slight scowl on his face. His robes were billowing behind him.

She suppressed a smile. Only a few weeks ago, her schoolmates would have pitied her, if they had seen her walking at Professor Snape's side. It had never been a good sign when the Potions master and a student were on their way to the dungeons.

Annotations:

Hermione reads to Harry from the following novel: Kazuo Ishiguro, 'The Remains of the Day', Faber and Faber, London 1993, pp 166, 167.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 4

Hermione just passed her final exam at Hogwarts. During the summer, she and Professor Snape gradually get to know each other better, and learn to appreciate each other's company, when they repeatedly meet at Harry's sickbed after Harry defeats Voldemort.

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Many thanks to my beta, cherrypop, for catching my mistakes and introducing me to the finer details of the English language.

Hermione studied her surroundings. It was the first time that she had been allowed access to Professor Snape's private workroom.

The late afternoon sun was shining into the room through a large window. The sparse furniture was made out of dark wood, but the sunlight lent it a warm shimmer of dark red. One wall was completely covered by shelves, containing a myriad of herbs and other potion ingredients, small and large vials waiting to be filled, and a variety of cauldrons. In the middle of the room stood a cleanly scrubbed worktable. Pushed up against another wall were a smaller table and a chair, both overflowing with parchments and open Potions books.

The warm air was filled with the fragrances of the many herbs.

Snape glanced at her.

"Now, which ingredients are needed to brew a strengthening potion?" he asked in a tone she had not heard since her last Potions lesson, and she had to stop herself from raising her hand.

"Nasturtium, angelica archangelica, and echinacea purpurea can all be used to strengthen a patient's resistance. We would have to choose one of them, depending on how it will react with other possible ingredients."

"And what else would you add, Miss Granger?"

"Arnica because it supports the blood circulation, and rosemary because it works as a cure if you have lost weight due to an illness."

"Very good, anything else?"

"I would also add some St John's wort. It might be able to stimulate Harry's subconscious and help create a positive mood."

Snape nodded. "Is there anything we will have to take into account?"

Hermione wrinkled her nose. "Yes, nasturtium and arnica don't go well together, and the same goes for echinacea purpurea and St John's wort. This leaves us with angelica archangelica."

"You must have had a good Potions master at school to know all this, Miss Granger," he said with a smirk.

She gaped at him.

His eyes gleamed at her, but then he whirled around and pointed with a long finger at the shelves. "Now. You can see for yourself where the ingredients are."

She hesitated.

"What are you waiting for?"

"Nothing, sir," she said and approached the shelves.

She fetched the ingredients while Snape put some knives, chopping boards, and a cauldron on the worktable.

"I don't need to tell you how important it is to chop the herbs correctly, do I?"

"No, sir."

"Very well, then go ahead."

Hermione took the arnica and began to cut it as neatly as possible. She saw him watching her closely, and her hands began to tremble. She took a deep breath.

After a moment, Snape started to chop the angelica archangelica. While his left hand steadied the board, his right hand, which held the knife, flew over the chopping board, leaving behind small green pieces.

Hermione paused. Now, it was her turn to watch him. During her seven years at Hogwarts, he had never prepared a potion in front of the class.

He looked up. "What is it, Miss Granger?"

"Oh, nothing." She bit her lower lip and returned to her own chopping.

Silently, they continued working, until all the ingredients were shredded.

Snape started to heat the cauldron. He added the arnica, then the angelica archangelica.

She was watching his hands, which stirred the herbs with a wooden spoon, when she took the chopping board with the rosemary. She was just about to add it when his hand shot forward and gripped hers.

"Miss Granger, what do you think you are doing?" he bellowed, letting her hand go again.

"I... I... thought..."

"Yes?"

Hermione swallowed.

"I don't believe you thought at all. The rosemary is the last ingredient to add."

She felt heat creeping up her cheeks and turned away.

"Miss Granger," she heard him say silkily after a few seconds, "would you be so kind to add the St John's wort instead?"

Inhaling deeply, she faced him again, took the board and let the herbs slide into the cauldron. He stirred them, and when he gave her a nod, she finally added the rosemary.

Snape eyed the boiling mixture in the cauldron. "Have a look at the colour, Miss Granger," he said and stood beside her. "Exactly as it should be - a light green with a tinge of brown."

Hermione lifted her head and gave him a tentative smile.

His eyes bored into hers. "We have both done well," he said softly. "The potion now has to simmer for two more hours, and tomorrow we will be able to give it to Potter."

Her heart jumped for joy although she couldn't have said whether she was happier about the fact that she was finally able to help Harry somewhat or that Professor Snape had acknowledged her work.

Hermione paced up and down and wrung her hands. A deep frown had appeared on her forehead. She stopped at Harry's bed. "Where is he?" she mumbled. "Why hasn't he come?"

She took up pacing once more, only to stop again after a few steps. "Well, if he doesn't come soon, I'll have to fetch him."

She had just turned towards the door when it opened to reveal Professor Snape, who carried a single vial.

"A bit impatient, aren't we, Miss Granger?" he sneered as if he knew that she had been about to fetch him.

She growled at him, but then a smile crept upon her face. "Is that it? The strengthening potion?" she asked and grabbed for the vial.

"Not only impatient but also very eager." Snape held the vial behind his back.

She stepped closer towards him. "Please, I've waited for so long to do something that might help Harry."

He cocked an eyebrow, but held the potion out to her.

Her hands became sweaty when she took it, and she wiped them on her robes.

"I'll fetch Madam Pomfrey," Snape said and went to the nurse's office.

Hermione stared at the vial in her hand. The other hand she balled into a tight fist until her fingers began to ache.

Then, Snape and Madam Pomfrey were back and standing at the other side of Harry's bed. The nurse smiled at Hermione. "Now, Miss Granger, I think you can give Mr Potter the potion."

Hermione nodded. "Good luck, Harry," she said, hearing her voice breaking. She held the vial to Harry's lips and let the potion run into his mouth. She saw his Adam's apple move when he swallowed the liquid.

When the vial was empty, she looked up at Snape and Madam Pomfrey. "How long will it be until it has an effect?"

"We will have to give him a second dose tomorrow, and then we should see an improvement," the nurse said.

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief.

"And, in the future, I think it would be best to give Potter two doses per week," Madam Pomfrey added.

Hermione's eyebrows furrowed. "Have we prepared that much?"

"No, we haven't," the Potions master said sourly. "I'm afraid we'll need some more."

Madam Pomfrey suppressed a giggle, and he shot her a glance.

"Would..." Hermione swallowed. "Would you allow me to help you again, sir?"

He turned his stare towards Hermione, and his dark eyes bored into hers. "I might."

Hermione's face split into a huge smile. "Oh, thank you, Professor Snape. Thank you so much," she cried. "That's so nice of you."

His glittering eyes widened for a moment before they bore into Hermione's.

The nurse burst out laughing and hastily retreated to her office.

Snape's scowl deepened.

"No, I mean it," Hermione said, looking at him steadily. "It's very kind of you, sir."

His expression relaxed a bit. "You're welcome," he muttered.

She looked at him closely until he seemed to realise that she was staring at him and turned away. She couldn't imagine that many people had ever seen the Potions master like this, but she most certainly wasn't mistaken. Professor Snape's face was slightly flushed.

In return, she felt her own cheeks become hot, and she began to fidget with the empty vial in her hands. Almost dropping it, she put it on the nightstand and smoothed Harry's bedclothes instead. Eventually, she sat down on the chair beside the bed.

"Well," she whispered, breaking the silence that had crept up between them. "I think I'll stay with Harry a bit longer."

Snape turned back to her, his eyes unusually soft. "Yes, of course."

He visibly composed himself and set off towards the door when it opened, and Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall came in.

"Miss Granger, Severus," the headmaster greeted them and stepped beside Harry's bed, as Professor McGonagall followed him in. "I assume you gave Mr Potter the potion?"

Snape nodded, his dark eyes fixed on Harry.

"Jolly good," Dumbledore said and smiled at the Potions master. "This is brilliant news, indeed, don't you think, Severus?"

Again, Snape nodded while Professor McGonagall went over to Hermione.

"I am confident this is the first step in the right direction. We're not going to lose the man who saved the British wizarding world," the headmaster went on with a cheerful voice.

A scowl settled on Snape's features as he still stared at Harry.

"What? Don't you agree with me?"

"Of course, I agree with you, Headmaster," Snape hissed through barely opened lips. He looked up, and his gleaming eyes met Hermione's before he shot a glance at Dumbledore. "I have to go. There's another potion I have to brew today." He turned and stalked from the room.

Hermione stared after his black figure until Professor Dumbledore's voice startled her. "I've heard that you helped Professor Snape with brewing the potion for Mr Potter, Miss Granger?"

"Yes, he was kind enough to let me assist him." She smiled at Professor Dumbledore, whose eyes twinkled at her.

"You look quite pale, Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall, who still stood beside Hermione, suddenly said. "When was the last time that you went outside and enjoyed the summer sun?"

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "I visit Harry each afternoon, and in the morning, I do some research in the library," she answered in a tight voice. "That is more important than catching some sun."

Professor McGonagall shook her head. "You have to look after yourself, Miss Granger," she said with a stern expression on her face.

"Yes, indeed, you should go for a walk," added the headmaster brightly and patted Hermione's arm before he and the Transfiguration professor left the hospital wing.

Hermione groaned inwardly.

It had been two days since Hermione and Professor Snape had given Harry the second dose of the strengthening potion. Since then, he had slightly recovered. His face was no longer as deathly pale as it had been, and he also seemed to have gained a couple of pounds. Still he would not wake up.

The summer sun mercilessly shone into the room. Tiny dust particles flew around.

Hermione was frustrated. It had been a welcome diversion to help Professor Snape prepare the potion, but now she was condemned to staring at Harry again without being able to help him. She and the Potions master would brew another batch of the potion tomorrow, but this seemed to be far away in the future. With each day that she spent, first in the library and later beside Harry's bed, time seemed to drag along even slower than it had on the day before.

She thought back to the first time they had worked together. It had been a revelation to realise how precisely and skilfully he chopped the ingredients, and to see him preparing the potion with all the self-confidence of someone who had been practising this craft for many years.

Hermione's gaze fell on the wall behind Harry's bed. The late afternoon sun created patterns on the white paint that shimmered in front of her eyes. Her head felt dizzy, and when she inhaled, she was almost suffocated by the stiflingly hot air.

She rose from her chair and gave Harry a peck on the cheek. "I have to get out, Harry. See you again tomorrow."

Once outside the castle, Hermione ran across the lawn down to the lake. Holding her face upwards to feel the warmth of the sun, she spread her arms and began to dance and twirl around until she lost her balance and stumbled.

Laughing, she sank on a bench and caught her breath. She removed her cloak and pulled up the sleeves of her blouse. Leaning back, she closed her eyes. With a smile on her face she enjoyed the sun, which she could see dancing in red and yellow behind her eyelids.

Probably Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall had not been totally wrong, she mused. Indeed, it felt good to be outside and just relax.

Nevertheless, she couldn't help thinking of Harry again and consequently the following evening. During her school days, the thought of spending time alone with Professor Snape in the dungeons would have been dreadful, but now she was looking forward to it. For Harry's sake. If she was honest, Snape still made her a little bit nervous, but it had not escaped her notice that he had been acting quite kindly towards her lately.

Suddenly, the bright colours of the sun were gone.

Hermione opened her eyes and saw Professor Snape standing in front of her. She squinted in order to see his face, and he stepped aside.

"May I, Miss Granger?" he asked, indicating the seat beside her.

"Oh... yes, of course," she answered, and he sat down. They didn't touch, but it seemed to Hermione as if she no longer felt the sun's warmth only but also his warmth.

In silence, they both gazed across the quiet surface of the lake until she heard Snape sigh gently, and her heartbeat accelerated, skipping once in a while. His clothes rustled, and something light touched her arm, causing her stomach to tingle, but she kept staring ahead, trying to steady her breathing.

After a long time, the sun began to go down, and a hue of red appeared at the horizon.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" a soft voice suddenly asked.

"Very beautiful," she said but failed to suppress the astonishment in her voice when she turned around to look at Snape. He had taken off his cloak and held it neatly folded in his lap.

His eyes glittered for a second. "Yes, Miss Granger, I am able to enjoy a sunset."

She blushed slightly and gazed at the lake again.

Silence fell onto them once more until Hermione murmured, "Do you think that Harry will wake up again, Professor?"

When he didn't answer, she turned her head towards him and found that he was observing her.

"I don't know, Miss Granger," he finally said, his voice lacking the usual sneer. "Mr Potter is a strong wizard, which originally made me believe that he'd wake up much sooner."

Now, she openly stared at him and didn't even try to hide the doubtful expression on her face.

"What, Miss Granger?" His eyes flared up.

"Nothing," she mumbled and shook her head.

"Miss Granger, although I don't like Mr Potter, I'm well aware that he is a very powerful wizard."

She nodded and averted her eyes. This time, she managed to conceal her incredulity at the fact that he had called Harry 'Mr Potter' again.

Looking back at him, she said, "I've always wanted to properly thank you for lending me the book about the coma patients who woke up again." She gave him a small smile. "You were right. It didn't offer any solution to Harry's situation, but it was very enlightening nonetheless."

"You're welcome," he said, glancing at her.

"I wondered..." Hermione hesitated. When he raised a questioning eyebrow, she went on. "I wondered about the fact that you actually own it because it's a Muggle book. When I read 'The Remains of the Day' to Harry, I got the impression that you don't read Muggle books." She looked at his expressionless face and added in a small voice, "Or was I mistaken?"

He gazed levelly at her. "No, normally I don't read Muggle books. I bought it after the incident I told you about."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked," she whispered, avoiding his gaze and fiddling with the hem of her cloak, which lay beside her on the bench.

"Miss Granger, I don't usually bite people's heads off when they ask me something." His voice sounded irritated.

"No, of course not," she hastened to say. "So, is it the only Muggle book you've ever read then?"

A small smile twitched at his lips. "No, I've read a few books some novels to be precise but never really got into them."

"Why? There are some really good ones."

"While I am sure about that, Miss Granger, they nevertheless seemed alien to me. The ones I read always dealt with things that had nothing to do with me and my life."

Hermione couldn't hide her amazement. "But that's what a lot of literature is about in the first place. To give you insight into something that you don't know; be it a past or future period, an unknown country or emotions you haven't experienced yourself."

"Is that what you appreciate about literature?"

"Oh, yes. When I still was a student, I mostly read specialised books on the school subjects, but I loved reading novels when I was at home during the summer. I especially like books that take me back in time like the ones by Jane Austen or E M Forster. Austen's books were written about 190 years ago and concentrate on the life of young women who enter the world and have to come to terms with it. Forster, on the other hand, wrote most of his novels about 80 years ago. In his books, he lets characters collide who come from different social, political or cultural spheres."

She stopped, realising she had started to lecture. Embarrassed, she looked at Snape, and her eyes met his. Expecting to see him scowl at her for showing off, she was quite taken aback when she discovered that his eyes seemed to hold a friendly interest instead. Feeling self-conscious all of a sudden, she began to roll down her sleeves to avoid his glance.

"I see what you mean," he said softly, "and I admit that it might be quite intriguing to explore the world this way. But we don't have that kind of fictional literature, and I'm not used to it."

She nodded at him in understanding, and their eyes locked. Again, she had the impression that his glance held something close to kindness. She swallowed the lump that had built in her throat before she replied, "Yes, I realised that when I first learnt about the wizarding world." She frowned. "Strangely enough though, I read Muggle books on wizards and witches when I was a child. But, of course, they were very inaccurate."

This time Snape did scowl. "The Wizard of Oz," he hissed, and Hermione had to laugh.

"Yes, that's one of them."

"I take it you know it?"

She nodded.

"Then why do you wonder about the fact that I normally don't read any Muggle books? This abysmal example of Muggle literature surely is explanation enough." His eyes glittered.

She couldn't help laughing again. His glare would have terrified any first-year student, but although she couldn't deny that he often still came across as dark and forbidding, as he had done when she went to school, he no longer frightened her. She had actually begun to feel quite comfortable in his presence most of the time.

She watched him. The last rays of the sun made his face appear less pale than usual, and the twilight lent his normally cold black eyes a slightly brighter tinge.

"Why are you watching me?" he snarled, interrupting her musing.

"I'm sorry, sir," she said, instantaneously angry with herself for relapsing into old habits and feeling rather timid again in his presence.

He shook his head. "Miss Granger, do I have to repeat myself? Didn't I just tell you that I don't normally bite people's heads off?"

"Yes, you did," she said and, quickly recovering, added, "And how come you know 'The Wizard of Oz?'"

His voice was dripping with contempt when he answered, "We read it in Muggle Studies."

"Muggle Studies?"

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Are you surprised about the fact that we had Muggle Studies in the first place when I went to school, or that I actually attended the classes?" he asked, clearly challenging her.

"Both," she offered and hid a grin. With Professor Snape, one always had to be on one's toes, she thought. Within seconds, he could change from being venomous via sarcastic to ironic.

"We were taught by Professor Micklewhite," he spat. "He wanted us to read the book so that we would know how Muggles perceived the wizarding world." He sighed exasperatedly. "Professor Micklewhite loved everything Muggle. He was worse than Arthur Weasley."

No longer hiding her amusement, Hermione looked at her former professor and detected that his lips also were faintly quirked, which momentarily lent him a less hostile expression. Again, she began to feel tingly, and her fingers spasmodically clutched her skirt. She inhaled deeply while he stared back at her, his eyes glowing in the upcoming darkness.

The moment was broken when, to Hermione's chagrin, a growl resounded from her stomach.

Snape's tiny smile widened a bit. "It's long past dinner time," he said. "Perhaps we should return to the castle."

An embarrassed laugh escaped her lips. "Yes, I think we should." She got up, took her cloak, and when he offered to help her, said, "No, thank you. I'm not cold."

He nodded, took his own cloak instead, and put it on.

As usual, he began to stride off, but after taking two steps measured his pace so that she did not need to fall into a run in order to keep up with him.

She gave him a little smile, and a corner of his mouth twitched in response, causing her to feel a rush of warmth towards him.

In companionable silence, they walked across the lawn towards the school.

Entering the castle, Hermione and Professor Snape met the headmaster in the entrance hall.

"Good evening, Miss Granger, I see you followed Professor McGonagall's advice to go out and get some fresh air," Dumbledore said and smiled at her.

"Yes, sir."

"Did you spend some nice time with Professor Snape?" His voice sounded cheery.

Hermione blushed. "Er... yes," she said and hoped that a Hippogriff would appear out of nowhere and take her with it.

Not noticing her discomfort, Professor Dumbledore turned towards Professor Snape, who had eyed the dialogue with a sour expression. "I assume that you've been an entertaining conversational partner for Miss Granger, Severus, haven't you?"

"Certainly, Headmaster," the Potions master grumbled. And with that, he rushed off towards the dungeons without another glance at Hermione.

She couldn't help feeling a pang of disappointment as she looked after his retreating figure.

Annotations:

According to my research, the ingredients of the strengthening potion are, indeed, supposed to help if you suffer from any of the symptoms Hermione mentions. However, I didn't check how you normally would ingest them whether you might brew a tea or if they might be ingredients of some homeopathic pills. I also didn't check whether there might be any positive or negative interaction if you combine any of the herbs.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 4

Hermione just passed her final exam at Hogwarts. During the summer, she and Professor Snape gradually get to know each other better, and learn to appreciate each other's company, when they repeatedly meet at Harry's sickbed after Harry defeats Voldemort.

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Many thanks to my beta, Suzanne, who helped me with punctuation and other crucial details of the English grammar.

The next evening found Hermione in the dungeons again. As agreed upon, she and Professor Snape were meeting to prepare another batch of strengthening potion.

Although last time he had treated her as if he thought she was quite capable at potion making, tonight she felt a bit like she were back in school again. Unsure whether to make any conversation, she stayed silent while she gathered the ingredients he had indicated at the shelves and placed them on the worktable. She was startled when Snape suddenly spoke.

"I couldn't help noticing this morning at breakfast that the other professors were pestering you again with queries about an apprenticeship."

She rolled her eyes whilst she began to chop the arnica. "Yes, they still think I should start one as soon as possible."

"But you don't want to." His voice, floating over from the shelves behind her, sounded slightly incredulous.

"Of course, I want to." She shuddered at the thought of not furthering her education.

"But?" he asked and stepped beside her to cut the angelica archangelica.

She stared at his nimble fingers as they chopped the herbs with a precision honed from many years of potion making. She couldn't help admiring his dexterity.

Looking back at the chopping board in front of her and slicing the rest of the arnica, she searched for the best way to express her feelings. "I very much want to apprentice with someone," she finally said. "Actually I can't imagine not apprenticing. But everything is different now. First, we prepared for the battle, then we fought it, and when it was over, Harry fell into a coma. My whole life has changed in the past six months. I know that I have to get on with my life despite the fact that some good friends died in the battle, whether Harry regains consciousness or not. I really want to move on. But, I just didn't want to be pressured."

She had stopped chopping and looked up at Snape. No longer chopping either, he returned her look, and she thought she detected some sympathy in his eyes.

"Didn't?" he asked softly. "Does that mean you're no longer in doubt you'd like to become a Transfiguration mistress?"

She shook her head. "I've wanted to do that for a long time, but now I've changed my mind. I've decided on something else. I've already got an offer from St Mungo's a few days ago that I intend to accept."

"Do you want to become a Healer?"

Hermione hesitated. She could almost hear his condescending remark when she told him what she planned to do. Seeing him raise his brow in question, she plunged on. "No, not a Healer. I'm going to apprentice at the Potion and Plant Poisoning Ward as a researcher. I'm starting on the first of October."

To her utter surprise, Snape nodded. "Yes, that will suit you very well."

She was stunned. This was the closest Professor Snape had ever come to paying her a compliment. "Do you really think so?" she finally managed to say.

"Yes, Miss Granger, I do. You have a great talent for Potions," he said, looking her straight in the eyes.

As impossible as it seemed to be, she knew that he was serious. She could see it in his eyes. His expression was earnest but kind. The room seemed to suddenly get warmer. She felt her cheeks begin to flush and turned back to the chopping board in front of her to slice the St John's wort.

They went on preparing the potion, and soon the greenish liquid simmered in a cauldron. As when they had brewed it the first time, it would have to simmer two hours until it would be ready.

Staring at the potion, Hermione wondered whether she should leave. Snape hadn't dismissed her yet, and she would rather stay with him for a while than return to her solitary room. In an effort to come up with something intelligent to say, she finally blurted out, "What about you, sir?"

"Me?" he asked as he put the herbs back on the shelf. It was impossible to miss the tone of incomprehension in his voice; and his eyebrow was cocked when he turned around to her.

"Yes. What are you going to do now that the Dark Lord is dead and you don't have to spy anymore?"

His face turned into a mask. "I don't usually discuss my private life with my students, Miss Granger."

Hermione flinched at his harsh words but was determined to not be put off by his attempt to intimidate her. "But I am no longer your student," she reminded him.

He gave her an odd look and hesitated for a second before he said apologetically, "You're right." He paused, running his hand along the top of the worktable. His eyes

bored into hers when he added, "Nevertheless, I don't tend to talk about my personal affairs with other people."

She cast her look down at his hand, which was still caressing the scrubbed tabletop. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to pry. It just occurred to me that you are free now to do what you like. I know that you've been applying for the Defence Against the Dark Arts post for many years, and I thought that..." She broke off, realising that this might be a sore point for him.

"I haven't actually thought about my future lately," he answered with a wry smile. "Like you, I was a bit preoccupied with defeating the Dark Lord. Since then I've been doing what I've done for the past 16 summers: preparing myself for the next school year. We also had to repair the damage Hogwarts acquired during the battle."

She nodded in understanding. "Yes, of course. I had almost forgotten there are only two and a half weeks until the students arrive to begin the term."

"Did you intend to annoy me by reminding me of this, Miss Granger?" he snarled, but his eyes remained placid. She was quite sure that he was only mocking her.

"No, I didn't." She laughed and, feeling quite bold now, went on, "But I was right, wasn't I? You're finally free to do whatever you want to."

"I think so, yes."

"Would you still like to teach Defence Against the Dark Arts?"

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps?" Hermione frowned as she glanced at the strengthening potion, making sure that it was still simmering. "The entire school knows that you've always wanted that post. Have you changed your mind?"

"Not really."

She picked up a wooden spoon. "Well, I always understood that you didn't like teaching Potions very much. But if you no longer want to teach Defence Against the Dark Arts either, what do you want to do instead?"

"I don't know."

"Hmm, do you have any friends outside of Hogwarts who could help you with finding an interesting job?" she asked whilst giving the potion a thorough stir.

"No."

"Family?"

"No."

Eventually noticing that his answers had become monosyllabic, she stopped stirring the potion and looked at her former teacher. He was leaning against the wall, his arms crossed above his chest. His face was dispassionate and his eyes dull.

Hermione silently chastised herself for not realising sooner how uncomfortable her questions seemed to have made him feel.

With an abrupt motion, he approached her. "Miss Granger, I've been meaning to ask you about that book that you read to Mr Potter some days ago. The one with the butler."

Taken aback by this unexpected change of topic, Hermione was momentarily lost. "Oh, you're talking about 'The Remains of the Day.'"

"Yes, I think that's the one," he said, both his voice and his eyes no longer as expressionless as they had been only moments before.

She bit back a sigh of relief. "What would you like to know about it?"

"The other day you told me what you cherish about some authors' works, and because I assume that you also appreciate this book, I thought you might explain to me what you like about it. From what I remember you telling Madam Pomfrey, it sounded quite depressing."

"Yes, it's not a very uplifting book. Sometimes it's almost heartbreaking, but I like it nonetheless." She inhaled deeply before rattling on, "It always amazes me to see how artfully the author managed to depict such believable characters, especially the butler of course."

"I see," Snape said, walking over to the table that was pushed up against a wall and pulling the single chair from under it. After clearing the chair of some Potions books, he turned back to her and asked, "Why don't you have a seat, Miss Granger?"

She stared at him and when he gave her a nod, went over to the chair to sit down. "Thank you very much, sir."

"You're welcome," he said in a soft voice, and she felt her pulse accelerate. He leant against the worktable, on which the strengthening potion was still simmering. "Am I right in understanding that the book had a deep impact on you?"

Still a bit flustered, she chewed on her lower lip, contemplating how to answer him. "There are people who think that books can change the way people view the world, but I've never believed that," she finally said. "But there are books that make me think, and this is one of them. It's not the kind of book you enjoy reading but forget about immediately after you've finished it."

He nodded, clearing his throat. "I wonder whether you wouldn't mind lending it to me."

Speechless, she stared at his dark figure. No one would ever believe her if she told them that Professor Snape asked to borrow a book of her. Suddenly, a giggle escaped her lips, which caused him to raise his eyebrow at her. She swallowed. "I'm sorry, sir, I just remembered watching the film adaptation a few years back. The butler was always dressed in impeccable black."

Scowling at her for another moment, Professor Snape gave his robe a quick glance. "Do you mean to say that I remind you of a depressing butler, Miss Granger?" He sounded dangerous. "Please be assured that outer appearances can be quite deceiving. Contrary to common belief," he added in a voice laced with irony, "I actually do know how to laugh." As if to prove that he wasn't lying, he smirked at her.

"That's not a real laugh, Professor," she retorted, and immediately clapped her hands over her mouth. "I'm sorry," she muttered between her fingers when she saw his eyes widen.

He gleamed at her. "Out, Miss Granger. Get out. It's late, and I'm no longer willing to put up with your impertinence."

She glanced at him and came to the conclusion that he wasn't really angry with her. Feeling somewhat light-headed, she got up and walked towards the door. "What about the potion?" she asked as she reached for the doorknob.

He snorted. "I'll deliver it to the hospital wing tomorrow after lunch so that you can give Mr Potter another dose of it." He pointed at the door. "Now out with you, Miss Granger."

"Thank you, sir, for allowing me to help you with the potion again. I'll give you the book tomorrow morning at breakfast," she said, her heart skipping slightly as she left his private workroom.

Later in the week, Hermione was sitting by Harry's bedside. Three days ago, she had given him the first dose of the second batch of the strengthening potion. Tomorrow, he would receive another one. He had slightly recovered and regained some strength, but so far there was no reason to assume that he would wake up soon.

Running out of ideas how to entertain Harry whilst she was keeping him company, she had brought along the chess set again. She started playing in silence, temporarily at a loss as to what to say to her friend.

Feeling rather dispirited, she first put forward Harry's rook and then moved her own queen. With a grin on her little carved face, the queen speared one of Harry's pawns with her sceptre. Hermione shuddered. Although she had seen Ron playing wizard's chess many times, she'd never got used to its brutality.

She went on moving forward Harry's and her pieces until Harry's knight kicked one of her pawns. The little black piece not only fell from the chess set but down to the floor.

"Oh no," she said and sighed, following the wooden figure with her eyes until it vanished under the bed beside Harry's. With another sigh, she dived down to pick it up.

While looking around, hindered by the shadow under the bed, she heard someone enter the hospital wing. The footfalls were quick but measured, and she recognised them as Professor Snape's.

"Hello, Professor," she greeted him, almost blindly feeling around for the piece.

"I've come to return the book you lent me," he said without preamble.

"Have you finished it already? Did you like it?" Her voice was slightly muffled as she searched for her pawn.

"It certainly was quite interesting," he said, emphasising the last word.

Finally retrieving the piece, she came up again, put it on the chessboard and then looked at Snape, contemplating his choice of words. "Interesting?"

His eyes flashed at her. "I'm sure you realise that it hit quite close to home."

Hermione cringed and mumbled, "Oh, sorry, sir."

"Don't spare my feelings, Miss Granger," he said tensely, sitting down on the bed beside Harry's. "It's a book about a man who represses all his feelings and common sense and ends up serving a wrong cause." His lips curled into a twisted smile. "Doesn't that sound familiar?"

Hermione was mortified and wished she'd never let him read the book. Of course, she had seen that there were certain similarities between the butler and her former Potions professor, but if she was honest to herself, she had not taken into account how much the book might affect Snape's feelings. Actually, she had rarely thought about his feelings so far. "Only to someone who doesn't know you well," she answered eventually.

He cocked an eyebrow. "And you think that you know me well?"

"No, not that well, but well enough to know that you are different from Stevens, the butler. He only saw his errors and regretted them when it was much too late. You, instead, made a mistake when you were very young. Since then you've helped the Order, and your help was crucial in defeating the Dark Lord."

"You're very noble, Miss Granger, but you know as much as I do that many people think differently."

"Yes, but it's only a few weeks ago that you were able to show your true colours. For twenty years people have thought that you were still a follower of Vol... the Dark Lord. Give them some time, I'm sure they'll come around. You'll see." She smiled at him encouragingly and as an afterthought added, "And you're still young, sir. Your life is far from over."

She eyed him, unsure how he would react to her words, expecting the worst. But what she saw was probably the strangest thing she'd ever witnessed.

Professor Snape began to laugh. He laughed loud and uninhibited.

Transfixed, she gazed at his face, which for once was marked by lines of laughter and not by ones of anger or ill will.

"I'm sorry, Miss Granger. I didn't laugh at you," he finally managed to say, still chuckling. "But I think no one has ever said anything like that to me. Your optimism is very refreshing if absolutely unrealistic."

"Do you really think so?"

He quickly sobered. "Yes. People won't forgive what I've done so easily, and I can't blame them."

"You're wrong," Hermione said, not sure whether she was trying to convince herself or Snape. "They might not forget, but they will forgive."

He gave her a sad little smile. "Thank you, Miss Granger. That's very kind of you. Perhaps you're right, and there are..." He paused. "... is someone who'll forgive me."

She began to nod at him in assurance, but his eyes pierced into hers and brought her to a halt. They blazed with an intensity that caused her cheeks to flush, but she couldn't turn away from his burning stare.

While she had still been at school, Professor Snape had always exuded a certain air of frostiness that had made many pupils shudder in his presence. Now however, he often seemed to radiate warmth instead, which made her feel strangely heated.

When he stopped gazing at her at last, she exhaled in relief and snatched one of the pawns from the chessboard, fidgeting with it.

They remained silent for a while, avoiding looking at each other, until Snape spoke again. "I owe you an apology, Miss Granger."

"Oh yes? Why?" Hermione asked.

"I think I told you the other day that the few Muggle books I've read always dealt with things that had nothing to do with my life and me. I'm afraid I wasn't quite honest with you when I said that."

She quirked her eyebrows at him.

"There's one book that has meant something to me for many years. It's called 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead.' It's a play by someone called Tom Stoppard."

Again, his eyes had bored into hers, but he went on in a passionless voice. "For a long time, I often felt like the two main characters in the book, who are like pawns in a game of chess." He nodded at the little black piece in her hand. "They live in a world they don't understand and don't have the power to change because this world doesn't offer any certainty or reliability. They resemble puppets, confused about what they are doing and what's happening to them."

He took a deep breath, and before she could say anything plunged on, a bitter smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "In contrast to them, I didn't die in the end, although there were quite a few moments when I wouldn't have minded dying."

Hermione opened her mouth but, at a loss for words, shut it again, and stared at him while he gazed at her.

He cleared his throat. "But recently I came to think that life has much more to offer than I ever thought possible. With the Dark Lord being dead and..." He swallowed audibly, and as a few days before, she felt a rush of warmth towards him. "And also with..." He began anew, only to trail off again.

Averting his gaze from her, he started fumbling with his robe instead, pulled a thin paperback out of his inner pocket and thrust it into her hands so that she dropped the pawn. "Here. I thought that perhaps you'd be willing to read it," he said in a hoarse voice.

"Thank you." Hermione dazedly looked down at the dog-eared book in her hands, as she tried to grasp what she had just learnt.

Glancing up again, she saw that he had turned and was on his way out of the hospital wing. His pace was even more rapid than usual, as if he was fleeing.

"Miss Granger?"

Hermione dropped the *Daily Prophet*, from which she had been reading to Harry, and turned around when she heard Madam Pomfrey's voice. "Yes?"

The nurse had come to stand beside Harry's bed. "Have you seen Professor Snape this afternoon? I'm quite sure that he wanted to bring me some wound-cleaning potion today."

Hermione shook her head. "No, he hasn't been here. I haven't seen him since..." She broke off, remembering her last encounter with the Potions master, and her eyes became unfocused for a moment. "Since a couple of days ago," she added in a low voice.

Madam Pomfrey cocked her head. "Is everything alright, Miss Granger?"

"Oh yes, thank you. I'm fine." Hermione smiled at the nurse, who nodded and returned to her office.

Indeed, she had not seen Professor Snape since he had fled from the hospital wing. She had neither encountered him there again, nor at the library, nor any other place at the school; and he had not appeared at any meals.

She had begun to miss him. She shook her head. Missing Professor Snape? How could it be? But yet, as strange as this thought would have appeared to her only a few weeks ago, it was nevertheless true.

While the other professors had virtually suffocated her with their never-ending concern about her future, Professor Snape had remained his usual self. Snarling, sneering and mocking. No, that was not quite correct. Although still a complicated and inscrutable man, he had become more pleasant towards her. Sometimes he almost treated her as an equal. In contrast to her other former teachers, he listened to her and seemed to understand her without dismissing her reasoning from the start.

Her thoughts wandered back to when she had last seen him three days ago. She didn't think there were many people who Snape had ever told such personal issues to about his time as a spy. She had read the play he had given her and could only try to imagine how he must have felt all these years.

Still preoccupied, she picked up the newspaper again.

Later that day, Hermione was just leaving the library when she almost ran into Professor Snape, and her heart leapt.

"Hello," she said, smiling at him. "Are you also on your way to lunch?"

But he only greeted her with a curt nod as he strode off in the opposite direction.

Hanging her head in sudden disappointment, she started towards the Great Hall.

"Miss Granger."

She stopped and turned around to see that he had paused as well.

"In two days, I'm going to brew another batch of Mr Potter's potion. After dinner," he said before he swept off towards the dungeons.

He hadn't explicitly invited her, but she was sure that this was his way of asking her to help him again.

Almost skipping, she resumed her way to the Great Hall.

The next day, Hermione sat at Harry's bed and read aloud a letter Ron had sent. About a week ago, their friend had travelled to Romania to visit his brother Charlie.

She was laughing at one of Ron's antics when she heard the door to the hospital wing open. She looked up and saw Professor Snape approaching her. He came to a halt in the middle of the room, a few yards away from her.

His eyes swept around the room and then settled on her. He didn't say anything but stood without moving, his arms at his side. His unfathomable features didn't betray any emotion, but Hermione saw that his left hand clenched repeatedly. Her own hand had tightened around Ron's letter and crumbled it.

Their eyes met for a second, before her glance returned to his hand, and he hid it behind his back.

Tension began to fill the room.

She gave him a questioning look when he still wouldn't say anything. "Prof...?" she began but trailed off, unnerved by his unblinking gaze. She dropped Ron's letter on Harry's bed and wiped her hands on her robes.

Snape still hadn't moved. He stood as rigid as if he had been hit by a Petrificus Totalus as usual clad in black from head to toe, with his eyes fixed on her.

Every first year student would feel a cold shiver running down their back at the Potions master's dark presence. Instead, Hermione once more felt the heat that radiated from him.

Without a sound, he came forward only to stop after one step.

She felt the heat colour her cheeks, and her throat went dry.

Again seeking her eyes, he made some more slow steps, his robe billowing gently around his frame.

Hermione's heart began to pound faster in her chest when he stopped in front of her. The stillness in the room started to roar in her ears. Slowly, she looked up into his eyes, which seemed to burn brightly, luring her. She rose from her chair.

His voice sounded husky when he finally spoke; their eyes still locked.

"Hermione."

The End