

Stalking

by chivalric

Sequel to "Summoning." Snape takes his revenge on Ron as the dunderhead had painted a moustache on the Potions master's face whilst said Potions master was lying nearly dead on the floor of the Shrieking Shack.

One-shot story

Chapter 1 of 1

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Author's Note: This is the sequel to "Summoning" and picks up events about a year later, shortly before end of term.

Thanks to my betas, amsev and IceAngel105, for crosschecking and putting up the fight with my stray commas and my misuse of the English gerund. Hugs for both of you, my dears!

Once more the term was nearly over, but this time, they wouldn't come back to Hogwarts. Ron realised this with a sudden jolt of happiness whilst ignoring completely that Snape was just explaining the homework to be handed in on Friday. Who cared about homework anymore a few weeks before they would finally and forever be rid of school? Who cared about Potions, and teachers, and Snape in particular?

Not he, oh, no!

"Weasley!"

Oh, damn. That voice sounded far too harsh, so it wasn't Hermione reminding him that day-dreaming during Potions was always a bad idea. Actually, it was too deep as well, and too unfriendly, and was that really Snape standing, towering over him?

Hell, it was. And he looked as if he would rip him... erm, no... he looked as if he would scold... no, not like that, either... he looked... hmmm... what was the word again? Confused, Ron stared in the Potions master's face, ready to hide behind Harry in case Snape would get his wand out, hexing him to pieces.

But then, Snape made no attempt to get his wand out. He didn't look angry, either.

He looked mildly surprised. And... friendly! That was the word, friendly! No wonder it had escaped Ron, as friendly and Snape just didn't go well together.

"Whasit?" Ron managed and stared at the great bat of the dungeons, who was peeking curiously in his cauldron.

"Mr Weasley," Snape said. "This potion is just perfect. Ten points for Gryffindor. I must admit I am positively surprised."

Ron, though, wasn't surprised. He was shocked to the bones not only that his potion had turned out to be not a waste of time for a change, or that Snape had actually given points to another house than his own, but because of that look in the Potions master's face. That strange, curious look Ron hadn't been able to place at first sight.

Snape had looked at him really... *friendly*.

Oh, gods. Oh, Merlin! Snape and friendliness that could only mean that he, Ron, was as good as dead.

Ron swayed, and Harry had to support his friend, leading him out of the classroom carefully whilst Snape sat at his desk, marking essays.

The following day, Ron's homework wasn't returned back to him. Instead, Ron was called into the classroom again just a moment before he would have been out of sight, out of the dungeons, out of reach of that horrible teacher. "Bugger," Ron muttered and asked Harry to wait for him, just in case Snape followed his instincts and felt like crushing him under his heel.

"Come on, mate, I'm sure he has forgotten about it," Harry reassured him, but Ron was not certain at all. In fact, the only thing he was certain about was his own uneasiness concerning that whole, unfortunate incident about a year ago. The *incident* when he had found Snape in the Shrieking Shack, believing him dead. Well, the man had lain there in his own blood, he hadn't moved a limb, was clearly nothing more than a corpse. Who could have known that he had pretended it! That he hadn't been dead at all, that he instead had even managed a Summoning! *Who would have known that he was only acting!*

Exactly. No one with a bit of brain in his head would have assumed such a ridiculous thing was possible. Therefore, it wasn't really his fault that he had seen Snape's snow white face, had failed to check on his pulse, had taken his wand instead and... well... then.

All right, all right. Had taken his wand, had dipped it into Snape's own blood and had then painted a perfect moustache on the dead man's face.

Only, for Merlin's bloody balls, Snape hadn't been dead.

But it had been a beautiful moustache, Ron thought stubbornly whilst shuffling back into the Potions classroom. It really had suited the bat well. Until Hermione had wiped it off, that was. After she had saved Snape's life, of course.

"Professor?" Ron grumbled, standing now in front of Snape's desk. How he despised the man, although no one could call him greasy anymore. It seemed as if Snape had found the showers after the war had ended. His hair was always clean nowadays, tied back into a ponytail at the nape of his neck, and Ron simply hated the fact that he could see even more of Snape's face now than before.

Could see the face, the mouth, and the lips, to be precise. Where the moustache had been. The moustache he had painted instead of helping the man. Hermione had done that. As usual, she had been smart and quick and had realised that only Snape could have summoned them. She had found the phial with the antidote to Nagini's venom, she had wiped the Potions master's face clean from sweat and blood and yes, the moustache, and Lords and Ladies, and how she had scolded him afterwards.

'Scolding' maybe wasn't quite the right word. 'Furious shouting' would have been more appropriate, or 'hellish tongue-lashing'. She had made him feel small, childish, stupid, dumb, cruel, thoughtless, idiotic, daft, blind, and generally unworthy to walk the planet's face.

Goodness, he certainly hadn't won any boyfriend-points with her that night in the Shrieking Shack. Actually, not saving Snape not even thinking about it had caused Hermione to look at him differently. She certainly hadn't attempted to kiss him again after that night. Or talk to him. Not to mention to help him with his homework after Snape had decided that the year had to be repeated.

Because, as if things weren't bad enough, Snape had been re-instated as headmaster, with his name being cleared and him being with the good guys all the time and rubbish like that. They had even given him the Order of Merlin, First Class! And then, on top of this, Snape had decided to allow the students who had begun their NEWTs with Slughorn to continue in his class, no matter if they had reached an O in their OWLs or not, which meant that now Ron was stuck with Potions until he was out of school.

Git. Big, black, nasty git.

"Mr Weasley," the git now said *friendly, friendly again!* and Ron snapped out of his dramatic daydreams.

"Yes?" Ron bit out and expected to be finally expelled.

Snape took a parchment and handed it to Ron. "This was a fine piece of work, Mr Weasley," he stated. "Quite an interesting point of view, I must admit. If you keep up your efforts, you might be able to succeed in my class after all."

"Grmpf?" said Ron and took the parchment with shaking hands. *Fine piece of work?* he thought, bewildered. *But... but I didn't have any help!*

"You may go now, Mr Weasley," Snape continued. "You do not want to miss your lunch. I take it there is a Quidditch game you and your team have to win this afternoon."

Ron opened his mouth to respond. Out came a "Mrmpf," and then he turned and ran all the way up to the Great Hall, stumbled to his place, shook like a leaf in the wind and didn't eat anything at all. He couldn't. Even when Hermione asked him what the matter was, he just stared at her and wished he could tell her the horrible news.

Snape... liked him!

Snape continued liking him the next week, helping Ron to finish a potion not only by not making nasty remarks, but by dropping the hint that stirring counter-clockwise meant actually stirring the other way round. "Understandable that you are a bit absent-minded, Mr Weasley," Snape murmured so no one else but Ron could hear him. "Your tactics during Quidditch training are brilliantly composed. I assume it eats up quite a bit of time designing them." Then he strolled on and took off house-points from Malfoy for adding too much mandrake powder to his potion.

Ron, by then, had simply forgotten how to breathe. In panic, he stared at his friend Harry, but Harry was busy with his own potion. And Hermione just gave him a little smile whilst her potion simmered peacefully to perfection.

This night, Ron, for the first time ever, had a nightmare that didn't have spiders as main actors. This night, he dreamed about Snape. A friendly Snape, who told him to stir his potion carefully so as not to upset it. A caring Snape who didn't want him to fall off his broom so he wouldn't hurt himself. A scared Snape, carrying Ron's limp body to the infirmary, telling the matron a huge moustache had tried to strangle his student.

Ron woke up screaming, and he didn't care that Harry had fallen out of bed at the noise. He knew with absolute certainty that Snape was up to something, something horrible, something so awful that Ron didn't dare to think about it. Snape would pay him back, and only because he had been messing with his teacher's facial state whilst said teacher had not been completely dead.

Maybe I will end up as a smear of blood on the Hogwarts grounds, unrecognisable even by my parents Ron mused whilst brushing his teeth. *But... maybe if I tell someone?*

At breakfast, Ron leaned towards Hermione and whispered, "Say, 'Mione, do you think Snape is capable of murdering an innocent student?"

Hermione looked up from her book and took in her friend's pale face, his shaking hands, and his completely empty mouth. Ron wasn't eating. Therefore, he must be either ill or terrified. The latter, considering the way he eyed the teachers' table. "Do you want to know if Professor Snape could murder you in cold blood because you painted a

moustache on his face whilst he was literally dying under your hands nearly a year ago?" she asked idly and took a piece of toast.

Ron thought that over. "Yes," he said after a little while.

Nodding once, Hermione took a bite. "He certainly could, Ron," she said earnestly. "But he wouldn't. Unlike you, he's an adult, and I sincerely doubt that he would be wasting time to even raise his wand towards you. He didn't once say a word about what you had done after he had been released from the infirmary. Grow up, Ron. He won't harm you."

Ron cast a look round and bent over to Hermione. "He... he's *friendly* to me!" he whispered.

"Oh, my," Hermione replied dryly. "Now that's serious. He should go to Azkaban for that crime!"

Ron paled a bit more. "I... I dreamed of him last night. He carried me to the infirmary. Hermione, I'm absolutely sure he wants to kill me!"

Annoyed, Hermione put her book down. "That's ridiculous," she stated. "Professor Snape. Headmaster Snape, that is. has no intention to harm you. The other day he even helped you with your potion. You should be grateful he didn't have you expelled last year! But as he didn't back then, you certainly don't have to fear him now."

"During the Quidditch match he constantly looked at me!"

"He was the referee, Ron. It was his job to watch the players."

But Ron just dug his fingernails into the smooth surface of the table, leaving visible marks. "Snape is stalking me," he muttered, barely audible. "He's after me, he wants my soul or he's driving me mad or..."

"You're acting completely and utterly idiotic," Hermione said coolly, got up and went to Potions classes down in the dungeons.

Ron followed her, feeling like the calf being led to the slaughterhouse.

This morning, Snape didn't talk to him once, and Ron relaxed visibly as the professor scowled at his classmates, took house points from Gryffindor and Slytherin alike, and assigned detention to Malfoy for causing his cauldron to become invisible. Homework was not only three, but seven feet of parchment, it had to be handed in the next morning, and all in all, Snape seemed to be his worst self again.

Ron sighed with relief.

Then Snape smiled at him, right before Ron would have left the classroom unharmed. To Ron, it felt as if a mule had kicked him hard in the chest, and he staggered into Harry who failed to catch him. Instead, Ron landed hard on his bottom and then hit his head even harder on the stone wall behind him.

Slightly dizzy, Ron felt his friend's hand on his shoulder and heard some concerned words. He felt blood trickle out of the wound at the back of his head, and he thought things couldn't get worse when Snape knelt beside him and examined him with strong hands. The cool fingers of the Potions master trailed along his jaw line to the base of his neck, pressed lightly on his skull, and then touched the trickle of blood.

"That looks like a concussion," Snape said, and his voice sounded truly concerned. "Mr. Weasley, I will take you to the infirmary. Do not move your head, please."

Ron would have screamed if Snape hadn't put some sort of spell on him that effectively hindered him from moving his head or opening his lips. Of course Ron yelled inside his head, begged for mercy, cried out to Hermione and Harry, who both stood next to Snape, to not let the nasty bat carry him away because wherever Snape was taking him, he would grind his bones to ashes on the way, at the very least, or worse!

Pity his friends didn't hear him. They just watched the Potions master pick up Ron's limp figure and allowed him to walk away with his burden.

How greatly Ron wished to be elsewhere. Even... even... yes, having a cup of tea and a custard cream pie with Voldemort would have been preferable to this nightmare. *Hang on*, Ron panicked. *This is my nightmare! Exactly what I dreamed about and... damn, why did I have to wake up before the dream had ended? I would at least know my fate now if I hadn't woken up!*

Neither was struggling an option. And Merlin's beard, was that Snape soothing and calming him?

"Easy now, Mr Weasley," Snape said, his voice indeed calm and reassuring. "You tripped and hurt your head, no reason to be scared. Madame Pomfrey will sort you out in no time."

To hell with you, Ron thought and tried to wriggle out of Snape's grip. *As if you were really taking me to the infirmary.*

Then he realised that Snape's grip was exceptionally gentle. The man didn't try to hurt him whilst carrying him, something Ron would have thought impossible, given their shared past. He would have sworn Snape would at least squeeze him too hard, bruise him, or bang his head accidentally, of course repeatedly against the wall. But no, nothing like that happened. Instead, a few moments later, he was placed very carefully on a big, soft bed, and the matron came scurrying round the corner, demanding answers and running her hands through his hair.

"He hurt his head, Poppy," Snape said. "I considered it best to bring him here."

"Wise decision, Severus," Madame Pomfrey answered. "One should never mess with head injuries. He seems quite confused. I will give him a sleeping potion. Tomorrow he will be as good as new."

Don't leave me alone with him! Ron begged silently, but she didn't hear him either.

Then the matron put a phial on his lips, and the world became dark and quiet. Ron's last conscious thought was *Why me?* Then he felt Snape's hand on his arm and heard the Potions master say, "Everything will be fine, my boy."

When Ron woke the next day, Hermione was sitting next to his bed holding his hand. "Hi." She beamed when she saw that Ron had opened his eyes. "Good to see you awake. How are you?"

"Where's Snape?" Ron croaked. "Don't tell me he's around. Please say he's nowhere near!"

"Ron!" Hermione scolded. "Professor Snape has been here until about an hour ago, before he had to attend classes. He personally brewed a potion that took care of your head injury, he sat with you for a few minutes, and he allowed me to stay here until you woke. I should be in the dungeons right now, you know!"

Ron sat up and swung his legs out of bed. Then he hurriedly covered himself again when he realised that he wore nothing but a nightshirt. "Madame Pomfrey had me undressed?" he asked disbelieving. "What did she do that for?"

Hermione smiled. "He did it for your comfort, Ron. Professor Snape thought you would sleep better if you weren't tangled in your clothes."

Oh, dear, there was the dizziness again. "Snape... Snape *undressed* me?" Ron asked weakly and hoped he had misheard his friend. Surely there must be a mistake? Reassuringly, Hermione patted Ron's shoulder. "There is certainly nothing he hasn't seen before, given the fact that you are both male," she said and blushed slightly. And Ron finally understood what Snape was after.

Him.

Oh damn fucking bollocks! Snape was a big poof, he was after one of his students a certain red-haired student, that was and the idea of being in bed with Snape was so revolting and so utterly horrible that Ron could do nothing but open his mouth and close it again as if he were a fish on dry land.

Snape wantstofuckme Snape wantstofuckme Snape wantstofuckme Snape wantstofuckme! Waaaaah! went Ron's scared little mind, and he threw his arms round a thunderstruck Hermione and began to cry.

The following week, after Ron had managed to be too sick to attend Potions classes three times in a row but hadn't found an excuse for Monday, Snape nearly allowed him to leave his classroom only to call him back just in the last moment. "Just a word, Mr Weasley," he said and nodded once towards Harry and Hermione, indicating they should go on without their friend.

"Oh, hell," murmured Ron, and trotted back into the trap Snape had set for him. He now knew how a Death Eater must have felt when being called to Voldemort after having disappointed the madman just like he felt now in the presence of Snape, the monster. Snape, the gay monster, who would definitely and without a doubt rape him as soon as he had closed and warded the doors.

If only he could have told his friends, Ron thought. But if he had called them back, nothing would have happened, of course. They wouldn't believe him either, with Snape now being the hero and so on.

Ron knew there was only one way out: to face Snape and to duel him. It would cost him his life, of course, but that would be a lot better than... better than... Eurgh, it was impossible to think of the alternative of death. It was simply too horrible to imagine himself... and Snape...

So Ron just wrapped his fingers round his wand, steadied himself on one of the desks, and turned round to Snape.

"You... you... you..." Ron managed before his voice broke.

"You are stammering, Mr Weasley," Snape pointed out, leaning lazily in the doorway. "I wanted to talk to you, but it seems as if your injury is still bothering you. Did you go back to the infirmary for Madam Pomfrey to check on you?"

"I... I.... I...." Ron whispered and just stared with big, wide eyes at the tall, dark wizard standing only a few steps away from him.

"Dear, dear, dear," Snape said and shook his head. "That sounds pretty serious. No wonder you couldn't attend my class in the past few days. Pray sit down, Mr Weasley, before you fall." With that, he crossed the distance between them with a few steps and now was at arm's length from Ron.

I'm the rabbit, and he's the snake, Ron mused and felt slightly light-headed. *Well, of course he is he's Slytherin. They are all snakes. Another moment and he will bend over to press his lips on mine before rogering me over one of the benches.*

"You are swaying, Mr Weasley," he heard Snape's voice saying. "You must sit down. Come, I will help you."

But Ron gained control over his feet in the last moment and moved away an inch, right before those pale, strong hands would have touched him. "Gnargl," he managed, not sure what he wanted to say with it but glad that his tongue didn't quit working entirely.

Snape crossed his arms over his chest and looked sternly at this most stubborn student of his. "If you insist on standing, so be it. But..."

"I know what you are doing!" Ron suddenly cried. "I know it, and I will tell... someone. McGonagall! I will tell Professor McGonagall! She will tell you to leave me alone!"

Snape raised a questioning eyebrow. "Tell her what, Mr Weasley?"

Ron was positively shaking now, and he got his wand out for good measure. "That you... that you are friendly to me!"

"Ah."

"And... and that you carried me to the infirmary!"

"So."

"And then that you think I'm good at Potions, and that you have assigned me house-points, and that you... that you have put me in a nightshirt!"

"I see," Snape said, reached out, and took the wand out of Ron's sweaty fingers. "I am very sorry, Mr Weasley, but you are confused. I must insist you go back to the infirmary. I cannot allow you to endanger your health." He bent over to be at eye level with Ron. Then he smiled again, the most scary thing Ron had ever seen in his life. "I will carry you, Mr Weasley. Don't struggle; don't fight against me, I would win anyway. Behave yourself, and you won't feel a thing we will have this my way." And he placed his hand on Ron's shoulder.

"Your way? Won't feel a thing" Ron blurted, then wailed, "I want my mum!" and fainted on the spot, collapsing to the floor. Snape made no attempt to catch him. Spread-eagled, Ron lay there, between the benches, white as a ghost and very much in need of a friend to take care of him.

"You shouldn't have painted a moustache on my face, and definitely not with my own blood," Snape growled at the unconscious boy, his black eyes blazing with fury. "At least you should have apologised afterwards." With a swift flick of his wand, he made a goatee beard appear in Ron's face, Slytherin green and silver. He had no doubts the boy would understand the message once he had woken up.

Then he called, "Winky!" and sat down on one of the students' chairs.

"Master!" the little house-elf piped up only a moment later.

Snape looked her up and down with piercing eyes, but the little elf just drew herself up even more. Unlike a year ago, she was clean and, most importantly, sober. She still wore a tea towel, but it was not only washed now, but ironed as well. The sadness that had radiated from her like heat when she had been summoned by the dying Potions master to the Shrieking Shack was gone. *Good idea to scare the life out of her before ordering her back to work* Snape mused, pleased by the way Winky had come around again. Approvingly, Snape nodded at her, knowing very well that it meant the world for Winky to keep him in a good mood. "Take the boy to his room, Winky," he said and had to suppress a smile the house-elf was more quickly at Weasley's side than he had thought possible in order to obey him. She had never wanted freedom she had wanted a master. And as Snape had decided not to push her away, she now was happy again.

If only happiness would always be so easy to find, Snape thought distractedly.

"Anything else Master wishes?" Winky asked, placing her small hand on the boy's wrist.

"Stay with him until he wakes, make sure he gets something to eat, then give him this." He handed her a small mirror and a scroll; then she disappeared with Ron, leaving Snape alone in his classroom.

With a sigh, he stretched only to hiss with pain a second later. His shoulder muscles felt like they were tearing apart; from his neck where Nagini had bitten him down his back and into his buttocks shot a hot bolt of fire. Carelessly, Snape shrugged his robes off, then opened the first few buttons of his shirt, slipped his hand under the fabric, and dug his fingers in his flesh.

Ouch.

Rubbing along the collarbone he tried to loosen up the pain only to find it impossible, as usual.

"Are you satisfied, Professor?"

It happened rarely that someone could startle Snape, but Hermione had just done it. Surprised, Snape ripped his head round towards the door. Unfortunately, this didn't do his shoulder any good and he growled angrier than he should have, "What?"

Casually, Hermione strolled in and closed the door behind her. "That was quite brilliant, your revenge on Ron. He truly believed you were stalking him I couldn't have thought of a better way to pay him back for what he has done to you."

For a heartbeat, Snape didn't know what to answer. Then he decided that this girl was indeed quite brighter than he had allowed himself to admit. "You knew?" he asked.

She grinned. "Naturally, as I was absolutely certain you would take your revenge on Ron. When he started shaking only because someone mentioned your name, when he stopped eating, when he fainted and later cried right in front of me only because I told him you had him undressed, I made a few conclusions. And you are extremely clever; you have your eyes and ears everywhere, and I guess you either used Legilimens on Ron or overheard his rude comments concerning Colin and Neville. Whichever, you found his weak spot and used it. He is terrified of gay people ever since he saw his older brother Charlie snogging a boy from the neighbourhood when they were both sixteen. Letting Ron think you fancied him scared the life out of him, and you didn't even have to raise your voice. As I said: brilliant."

Snape's thin lips curved slightly. "I should have thought of your excellent perceptiveness, Miss Granger. But I am surprised that you didn't rescue your friend from my... wrath."

Taking a step towards her teacher, she said, "He has earned it. Especially the goatee. But I would like to know what you have written on the parchment you just gave Winky."

Snape's fingers absently continued kneading his aching shoulder. "Detention until term's end, to be served with Mr Filch every evening; no more Quidditch training; extra hours with Hagrid to patrol the Forbidden Forest; additional homework. Ah, and the notice that he has failed his Potions exam he will have to repeat it if he wants to become an Auror. I suppose he will be delighted to read it."

"He definitely will faint again when he sees what you have done to his face and realises you just played with him. And afterwards, he will hate you even more. But yes, he will be pleased," she agreed with a smile.

Then, with a swift move, Hermione came to stand right before Snape, looking down at him. "Your shoulder is bothering you," she stated, completely changing the subject with these words. Using the thunderstruck silence for her advantage, she stepped behind him and placed her hands on her teacher's neck.

Snape froze and ripped his hand away from his shoulder. "Miss Granger!" he growled, but she just pressed her fingertips lightly into the soft flesh right under the hairline, painting tiny circles and increasing the pressure just a bit at the time.

Her fingers whispered over the bones of his spine, then parted like a Spanish fan and were drilling into the muscles above his collarbones.

Snape gave a small sound of surprise, combined with the tiniest moan of pleasure.

Hermione bent lower and whispered in his ear, "I know that your shoulder hurts, Professor. The way you hold yourself tells me everything, and now and then, after classes, you even try to ease out the pain when you think no one sees you. Is it... because of Nagini's bite?"

"That damn snake," Snape murmured, leaning into the surprisingly strong grip of his best student. "Her fangs and her venom have damaged the nerves in my shoulder. Occasionally it feels as if it might break. It has become worse in the past weeks."

Hermione's hands wandered down and were rested on his upper arms before she ran them down to his elbows and back up. "That was obvious, at least to me," she said. "And I know what to do about it."

Snape sighed contently. For the first time in months, his muscles loosened up. "Do you, now?"

"Oh, yes," Hermione answered and began to knead the area between his shoulder blades. "My mum had her shoulder broken two years ago; I learned a few tricks back then to ease her pain. I know what to do, and I know what you need apart from this little massage. Do *you* know what you need, Professor?"

"Hmmm?" he managed, as those marvellous fingers had just found the spot he never could reach himself. It hurt; then it hurt a bit more when she pressed her fingers deeper and harder into his back; then the pain eased and left nothing but bliss.

"You need a lazy weekend, Professor," she purred. "Sleep until at least ten in the morning, breakfast served in bed, a hot bath, nice food, and no thoughts wasted on teaching, or students, or potion books." Hermione had reached his lower back now, and with one hand she pushed him gently, but firmly forward until his head rested in the bow of his arm on the table in front of him. Kneeling behind him, she then placed both hands on his waist and pressed her thumbs to the left and right of his spine, running them up slowly and continuously until she had reached the base of his neck once more.

"Oh. My. Gods!" Snape breathed. He sounded as if he were melting with delight.

"You need another, more... thorough massage as well," Hermione continued, having got up again and now standing directly behind him, close enough to feel the heat his body radiated. Her palms barely touched the fabric of his shirt; her fingertips trailed along his ears, and very carefully, she began to run her fingers through his fine, clean hair, massaging his scalp.

Certainly it was the first time in many years that the Potions master actually whimpered with pleasure.

Hermione's voice was barely audible now. "A complete body massage, Severus. Best to enjoy whilst not wearing clothes." And with that, she took a step back, reached into her robes, pulled out a parchment, placed it on Snape's desk, and was gone only a second later.

"What the..." Snape said and stared bewildered into the empty classroom. Had she just used his given name?

The summer break was half over when Snape finally decided that he had truly heard her saying the words he thought she had said. Apparently, he made that decision at three in the morning, after he had been tossing and turning in his bed down in the dungeons, haunted by nightmares and tortured by the pain in his damn shoulder.

Complete body massage, he thought, his fingers nearly ripping out the stone-hard neck muscle and his body remembering her strong, skilled hands.

Lazy weekend, his memory whispered into his ear, and *Breakfast in bed*.

After another hour, he got up and searched for the letter she had left. It lay on his desk, at the precise spot where she had put it. He hadn't dared to touch it yet. But now, in the small hours of the night, he broke the seal and began to read.

Dear Severus,

I guess you will need at least a month or two to open this letter. It is now possibly late at night or early in the morning, and I suppose your shoulder hurts like hell I really can't see you reading this without being in need, but be assured I don't care about the circumstances under which you finally open this letter. And it is not too late to accept my invitation.

In case you want to pay me a visit, simply touch the coin I have enclosed. It is a Portkey and will take you directly to my doorstep. My parents are in Australia they have decided to live there permanently, and my home is now only inhabited by me. You are very welcome to join me. For a massage, for breakfast, for a bath, and for more, if you wish.

And if you still hesitate, keep in mind that I am not your student anymore.

Yours,

Hermione

Snape dropped the letter and became aware of his heart pounding more heavily than usual. Just a few lines, and his world, his well-organised, finally danger-free world got tumbled upside-down like a boat in stormy waters. This girl this young woman had made a step he himself had never been brave enough to make: she had revealed her feelings. She had clearly told him that she not only liked him, but wanted him; she had invited him. She even knew him well enough to know that it would have taken him a while to give in to curiosity and open her letter.

Now how could that happen? he wondered, trying in vain to ease the knot out of his shoulder and remembering her scared, cold fingers on his even colder chest when she had been searching for the antidote a year ago. *How can it be that she seems to know me better than I know myself?*

There were two possible paths he could take: he could ignore the letter and the invitation, or he could accept that this witch wanted him in her house, at her table, and in her bed and go for it.

Ignoring it and her would be the easiest way. It would prevent him from the very likely possibility of getting hurt once more, as he simply could not imagine her to be serious. He could go on with his quiet life he had been rewarded with after the war, he could learn to deal with the pain in his shoulder and the emptiness in his heart. He would never know if her offer had been true; he would never know if maybe he had made the biggest mistake in his godsforsaken life by not touching the Portkey. He could go the easy way; the way a coward would choose.

He wasn't a coward, though. Never had been, never would be. And therefore, Snape didn't allow himself to think about things any longer. He looked across his desk, found the little coin she had mentioned, and stored it into the back pocket of his trousers. Then he picked up a jacket, his wand, and left Hogwarts. Outside the wards, he once looked up at the night sky and the myriad of stars and touched the Portkey.

A moment later, he was facing a green door with a doorknob shaped as a lion. A streetlamp cast shadows on the pavement. The street was quiet; no light shone in any of the windows.

Well, it was not yet five o'clock in the morning and what the hell had he been thinking to come here at that time of the night? Stupidity had obviously ruled his brain; he had made a hasty decision, knowing only too well that in the morning, with the sun up and tasks to attend to, he wouldn't have found the time or the nerve to leave Hogwarts.

Snape turned on his heel without knocking on the door. He couldn't do it maybe she wasn't his student anymore, but she was still young enough to be his daughter. Ridiculous to think she would...

He was halfway down the stairs when the door behind him was being ripped open. Half-turning, he expected to see the girl, and he was right.

What he hadn't expected was that she would be wearing pyjamas; that she would be barefoot; that her wild and crazy hair could be even wilder and crazier at that early hour; that her cheeks would be flushed and that she would smile at him as if all her dreams had come true with his arrival.

The sight of her took his breath away. And for once in his life he didn't have a clue what to say.

"Hi," Hermione said and stepped out into the chilly morning. As she was a stair above him, they were nearly at eye-level. "I began to fear you wouldn't come."

"I... need to know," Snape answered and caught a whiff of her still sleep-warm fragrance. "I need to know if you are mocking me."

Her smile faltered. Hesitantly, she reached out and caught a loose strand of his long, black hair between her fingers. "You thought I made fun out of you? You thought I invited you only to tell you I didn't mean it?" she asked with a small voice. "You thought I... I could be that cruel?"

"That's generally the way things happen, at least to me," he answered coolly, but very aware of her presence.

Gently, she pulled at his hair until his face was only an inch away from her. "Not with me," she whispered and brushed his cheek with her lips. "I'm glad you came. Just in time for a nice, long morning in bed."

A moment later, the door was closed so the world would stay outside and something new could begin inside between Severus Snape and Hermione Granger.