

The Uninvited

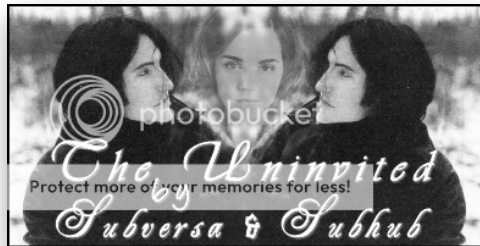
by Subversa

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Chapter 1: Wit's End

Chapter 1 of 6

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A/N: This story was written with love and respect for Pearle9420, who has given so much to this fandom with her writing and her graphics-making abilities. This is just a tiny thank you for all you do for us, Pearle.

My husband, SubHub, was the creator of the plot of this story. Thank you, darling, for giving me a new genre in which to write.

This story was beta read by DeeMichelle and Keladry Lupin; it was Britpicked by MagicAlly and alpha read by Sshg316.

The characters belong to J. K. Rowling, who has given us gracious permission to play nicely with her creations.

The Uninvited

By Subversa and SubHub

Chapter 1: Wits' End

The patient startled out of sleep to see danger step into the room on its own two legs. It was the Assassin, again no doubt about it. He had that greasy, stringy black hair and the ugly, hooked nose. The Assassin moved stealthily across the floor, his quarry in plain sight: a young woman in lime green robes sat at a table, and she wrote upon the parchment before her. She had no idea she was imperilled; she was inattentive. Never mind it was the patient's job to look out for the innocent and the helpless. He

took his position quite seriously.

Rising with stealth equal to the intruder's, he launched himself across the space between them, unable to contain the roar of fury with which he announced himself as he knocked the bastard to the ground. They grappled, and the patient shouted, moving a-straddle the Assassin and closing his hands about the ugly git's throat, seeking to put a stop to him once and for all. But the Assassin was too strong, and he threw the patient off the top of him, rolling to his hands and knees and seeking to gain his feet. With a terrific effort, the patient lunged at the intruder again, inadvertently upending the table at which the young woman had sat. Now, she stood back from the two combatants, crying out aloud, 'Stop, stop!'

He dared not spare a glance for her; he had to keep his eye on the Assassin, who had knocked the woman's chair flying and was advancing upon the patient in a fighter's crouch, his crooked yellow teeth bared in a mask of hatred and rage.

The patient placed himself carefully between the woman and the intruder, determined to protect her and keep her safe from the murderer. Every few moments, the Assassin would feint, trying to move past his adversary, but the patient was too fast for him, always moving in front of the woman before the intruder could reach her. The patient noticed a door behind the woman and he shouted to her. 'Get out! Get out, while you still can!'

The door in question opened and two rather burly fellows in yellow robes came into the room. 'It took you long enough!' the patient yelled at them, turning to gesture at the Assassin, who, at the sight of the newcomers, had begun to creep towards the window. 'Get him!'

The two yellow-robed fellows surged forward upon the command, one wrapping arms like iron bars around the patient, the other grabbing the patient's lower legs about the knees.

'Not me, you fools!' the patient screamed, incensed at this treatment. 'It's the Assassin! Get *him!*'

'Never mind,' said the man who now braced the patient's back against his own massive chest. 'Just try to relax, sir we're going to get you all comfortable, again.'

In short order the patient was stretched out upon the bed, ankles and wrists bound in the softest of magical restraints. 'Open up for your potion, now,' the second fellow said, revealing a phial of pale lavender liquid.

The patient sighed deeply, feeling suddenly very tired. He knew he wanted what the liquid in the phial brought to him. 'I'll take it but you have to watch out for him he's dangerous,' he said weakly.

'Of course we will,' the first one said, trading looks with his partner across the patient's bed.

Obediently, the patient opened his mouth, swallowing the ridiculously pleasant-flavoured mixture why on earth would someone go to the trouble of making medicine taste *good*? He accepted the small sip of water which followed the potion, then fell asleep.

'I almost feel sorry for him,' one orderly said, staring at the immobile figure in the bed.

His partner, the burly one, snorted in disgust.

'Take off the restraints on your side,' the first orderly said, freeing the patient's hand and ankle.

'It's a bloody stupid move,' the burly orderly remarked. 'He's agitated every time he wakes up, seeing things we just have to come back in here and pin him down again.'

The curly-haired Healer was seated again at the table, frowning over the parchment beneath her quill. 'Harry Potter does *not* like to see him tied down,' she said sternly, raising her eyes to stare at the orderlies. 'Our instructions are to remove the restraints when the patient is quiet or sleeping.'

The burly orderly sneered at her, but the Healer was unimpressed. 'Do as you're told, Flint.'

An aide, distinguishable by her white robes, came to the doorway. 'Healer Clearwater?'

The Healer turned to the door.

'They're waiting for you in the conference room,' the aide said.

The Healer stood, gathering her papers. 'Make sure all the patient's things are gathered together, please. His wounds are healed he no longer belongs on the Dai Llewellyn Ward.'

Flint scowled. 'Where're they going to move him?'

Healer Clearwater exited the room without bothering to reply to Flint, but the aide hazarded a guess. 'Maybe the locked ward?'

Flint's partner began to gather the few belongings the patient had acquired during his two-month stay at St Mungo's. 'That's probably what the meeting is about,' he said wisely.

The conference room held persons of some import; Healer Penelope Clearwater, who had only finished her apprenticeship two months before, was quite junior in standing amongst them. She approached Healer Smethwyck, Healer-in-Charge of the Dai Llewellyn Ward for Serious Bites, and placed the file on the table before him, then slipped into a seat behind him. Also present were Healers Pye and Johnson of the Dai Llewellyn Ward; Healer Strout, of the Janus Thickey Ward for long-term residents; Healer Webber, Chief Healer of the hospital, and Prodmore Hoofington, Head Administrator. There was a witch at the far end of the table whom Healer Clearwater did not know; the woman was thin and pale, wearing eyeglasses with lenses so thick her eyes appeared tiny. Undoubtedly, she was the ghost specialist. Penny felt a wave of professional curiosity. A true Spectral Cognoscenti was rare indeed ever more so than a true Seer.

'I think we're all here now,' the Head said officiously, glancing about the table. 'Shall we hear from the Cognoscenti? Madam Light?'

The Cognoscenti started as if frightened by the sound of her own name, then tittered nervously before speaking. 'Mr. Hoofington, I prefer to perform my investigations without prior knowledge of the circumstances, to prevent my findings from being coloured by previous conceptions,' she said in a tenuous voice. 'At this time, however, it will be useful for me to hear the patient's history it will aid in the interpretation of my findings.'

The Head waved an impatient hand. 'Yes, of course.' He frowned for a moment at the file he held, then said, 'Hippocrates? Perhaps you could fill the Cognoscenti in on the patient's history.'

Hippocrates Smethwyck sat forward, his attention on Alexandra Light. 'You know who he is, don't you?' Madam Light nodded once, and Healer Smethwyck continued. 'The patient was attacked by You-Know-Who's giant snake during the Battle of Hogwarts, suffering critical wounds to the throat. A student placed a Vita Donum Charm on him, but when the patient arrived here, he was very near death.'

'Excuse me, Healer,' the Cognoscenti said apologetically, 'but what is the Vita Donum Charm?'

Smethwyck began to explain, clearly enjoying the role of teacher. 'It's the "life gift" charm. The caster imparts a minute portion of his or her own life force to infuse the recipient with enough life to keep them alive until help can come. It is a last-ditch procedure, used most often by highly-trained trauma response wizards and witches but in

desperate times, average people learn to do extraordinary things.' The Healer glanced at the ghost specialist; she nodded her understanding. Healer Smethwyck opened the file and flipped past several closely written pieces of parchment. 'He was given Blood Replenishing Potion and an anti-venin. There was a good deal of concern that the brain would be adversely affected, because the wounds were at the carotid artery, so close to the brain stem. It was a long, slow process, but over a period of six weeks or so, the wounds healed and his physical condition stabilised, with appropriate blood volume and all body systems functioning properly.'

Healer Smethwyck closed the file and sat back, passing the flat of his hand over his face in a universal gesture of exhausted defeat. 'But he didn't wake up. We asked for consults from Healers in every other department in the hospital, but none of them could discover any reason for the patient's continued coma.'

Smethwyck motioned then for Penny to stand, and she understood she was to take up the story. 'The patient receives frequent visits from Harry Potter,' she said, looking around at all the occupants of the room, including them all in the story. 'Harry is quite determined that the patient will recover from his injuries. To that end, Harry sits with the patient and talks about all kinds of things on his visits.'

Penny grimaced as she remembered the scene she was about to describe. 'On Healer Smethwyck's instructions, I was monitoring the patient twelve hours a day, so I was usually there when Harry came. About ten days ago, Hermione Granger came with Harry when he visited. The two of them sat on either side of the patient and discussed what happened at the Battle of Hogwarts. They spoke in great detail about how the patient was injured. Hermione told the patient of how she cast the Vita Donum Charm on his body before she, Harry, and Ron Weasley hurried away to finish the battle.' Now Penny frowned, lost in her own tale. 'That night, the patient woke up but he didn't know who he was. He didn't recognise anyone, although most of his attendants had known him for years. He seemed coherent, even though he had no memory but then he became violent and irrational. He jumped out of his bed, he knocked over tables and chairs, he threw things, and he roared and raved. He told us there was a murderer in the room, and that "the Assassin", as he refers to this person, would kill us all if he's not stopped. We managed to tranquilise the patient and restrain him, but when Harry and Hermione came back the next day and saw him tied down, Harry became very upset. Harry shouted that none of us knew anything about it, and that we had no right to tie up the bravest man he'd ever known.' Penny shook her head and looked at the very attentive Spectral Cognoscenti. 'Hermione told us that we would all probably be living enslaved to You-Know-Who if not for Severus Snape and she removed the restraints with her own hands.'

Madam Light motioned to the empty chair beside her. 'Please, Healer, sit down,' she said softly.

Penny sat down and looked down at her hands, folded on the tabletop, as she continued her report. 'We talked to the hospital ghosts, asking if they had seen someone new someone who would threaten our patient but they assured us there are no new ghosts or other similar beings in the hospital now. That's when we called for you, ma'am.'

Madam Light patted Penny on the arm and nodded gravely. 'Thank you, my dear,' she said. 'The information is very helpful to me.' The Cognoscenti turned and very methodically looked all around the table, making eye contact with each person there before she began to speak.

'Professor Snape definitely spent time on the Other Side,' she said with great authority, her voice growing stronger as she began to expound upon her subject. 'It is fairly common for those who have had a near-death experience to come back to us with great tales of having seen or spoken to loved ones who have gone on. I examined the professor's quarters and his office at Hogwarts, as well as his hospital room, even going so far as to lay hands upon him. I can tell you that I did not see any indication of a spectral presence in any of his dwelling places. I did not detect any ghosts or other beings from beyond, even when I looked inside of him.'

A general murmur of conversation broke out around the table at this statement, but Madam Light was not finished with what she had to say. 'It is not unheard of for a spectre to return from the other side with one who has journeyed beyond the Veil and returned,' she said, her voice even louder now, to be heard over the hum of other voices. 'However, the fact that I did not find one is *not* conclusive.'

The roomful of Healers and hospital officials fell silent and turned faces bearing expressions ranging from annoyance to indignation to the Cognoscenti, who had now risen from her chair. 'It is still entirely possible that some malignant being from the spirit world returned with Professor Snape from his visit to the Other Side,' she said firmly.

Prodmore Hoofington slapped the tabletop. 'Well, how in the devil are we to proceed?' he demanded. 'Here's Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived-Again, hero of the Battle of Hogwarts, Vanquisher of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, visiting my office nearly *every day* insisting that something be done for this patient and we are at our wits' end!' He gave a rather condescending smile to Alexandra Light. 'Frankly, Madam Light, otherwise, we would never have contacted *you*.'

The Head turned to his Chief Healer. 'Well, Richard? Now what are we going to do?'

'I have not finished giving my report,' Alexandra Light informed them, her voice nearing a strident tone. 'You have paid me to give my recommendation I really must insist that you permit me to do so!'

With a terrific sigh, indicative of his great position and his forbearance, Mr Hoofington turned back to the Cognoscenti. 'Very well, Madam Light. Please continue. How are we to go forward in our attempts to heal Severus Snape?'

For a second time, Alexandra Light looked at every face before she spoke, making certain she had their undivided attention. 'You are going to have to send someone into his mind to make contact with him, so we can determine the cause of his visions whether real or imagined. Otherwise, I don't believe he will ever recover.'

'Are you suggesting non-consensual Legilimency?' Healer Webber asked, seemingly aghast, as well as intrigued.

'Yes,' the Cognoscenti replied, resuming her seat. 'Then, you great men of healing can determine how to go forward from there,' she added waspishly.

There was a moment of dead silence, broken at last by the soft voice of Penelope Clearwater, who expressed the unspoken thoughts of everyone at the table.

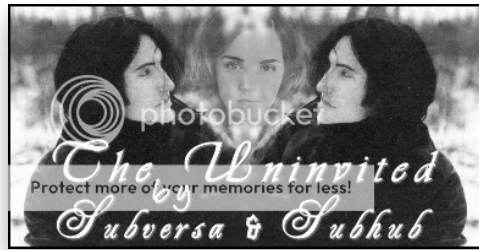
'Well, good luck with that, then.'

A/N: The Spectral Cognoscenti and the Vita Donum Charm are the products of the author's imagination.

Chapter 2: Invitations

Chapter 2 of 6

Hermione encounters the professor and pursues him through his memories.



The Uninvited

by Subversa and SubHub

Chapter 2: Invitations

Hermione Granger stepped through the door into the unfamiliar landscape with her shoulders squared and her head held high. Her hands, however, were empty, and that was what she found most troubling about her excursion she was unarmed. Intellectually, she understood that she could not venture into someone else's *mind* armed but it did not remove her emotional anxiety. The Battle of Hogwarts was too raw a memory for her to feel comfortable in unexplored territory with no way to magically defend herself.

'Professor?' she whispered experimentally, glancing about at her surroundings. Oddly enough, it looked as if she was standing in a clearing in the Forbidden Forest. There were no birds or other wildlife at hand, but she still felt that the place was quite familiar.

There was not so much as a suggestion of sound in answer to her calling for him. Did he know she was here? Was he even capable of answering her? She bit her lip and turned in a circle, trying to determine a course of action. How *did* one press on in these circumstances?

From behind her, his smooth voice fell over her like a silken shroud. 'Hermione how good of you to come.'

She turned and looked at him, a slight frown on her face. Was this going to be it, then? She called for him, he came, and she coaxed him to return with her? She had not dared hope for something so simple. 'Hullo, sir,' she replied, taking a tentative step forward, her hand outstretched in greeting. 'Thank you for coming out to speak to me. We've been quite concerned for you, you know.'

He took a step toward her, his midnight eyes fixed upon her face. 'I hate to be such a bother,' he admitted a bit wryly. 'Did you come to visit for a particular reason?'

Hermione stopped just beyond the reach of his fingertips, her frown deepening. This didn't sound like the Professor Snape she had known and loathed for the last seven years of her life. He was acting oddly calling her by her first name, thanking her for coming, projecting sheepishness what was wrong?

'Where are my manners?' he wondered aloud, and with a wave of his hand, a table, two chairs, and a complete tea service appeared between them. 'Please have a cup of tea.'

He sat. Confused, Hermione sat as well. This was not at all what she had expected when she agreed to perform Legilimency on Professor Snape and enter his mind without consent.

'It's a medical emergency,' she had been told. 'It could very well mean the difference between life and death.'

The smiling Snape handed her a cup of tea, and took one for himself, as well.

'Now, why have you come?' he inquired, taking a sip of his tea and indicating that she should follow suit.

Hermione lifted the teacup, and the comforting smell of strong tea wafted up her nose. 'I have come to speak with you about why you have not yet woken up properly,' she replied, bringing the cup to her lips.

Before she could sip, a hand impacted her teacup, forcefully knocking it from her fingers. The cup hit the table and shattered, splattering Hermione with hot tea and glass shards. She leapt to her feet, as did her companion. Anxiously turning, she saw Professor Snape standing just behind her shoulder, an ugly sneer fixed upon his face as he glared challengingly into the eyes of ... Professor Snape!

Looking from one Snape to the other, Hermione realised her mouth was open in conspicuous amazement, but she could not bring herself to care.

'Did no one ever tell you not to take sweets from strangers, Miss Granger?' the Snape at her shoulder demanded angrily.

Hermione immediately defended herself. 'He *you* are not a stranger to me!' she objected hotly.

The Snape across the table from her backed away and disappeared into the trees; the Snape at her shoulder moved around to face her. Here was the disdainful dislike she expected from her former Potions master. 'Oh, really?' he said insultingly. 'Have you ever known *me* to invite you to tea?' He let the derision sink in for a moment, then added, 'Of course you haven't for I would *never* do so.'

Hermione felt the sting of the taunt, yet her chin came up angrily. 'Is it Polyjuice?' she inquired.

He gave her look of incredulous dislike. 'No,' he answered shortly.

She knew he wanted to point out to her that it would be impossible for someone to Polyjuice themselves into another person's mind; she felt stupid for even suggesting it. 'Then who is he?' she asked patiently.

For her troubles, she received the patented Snape eye-roll. 'Don't be a firstie, Miss Granger.' As he stared into her eyes, she noticed a deep groove between his brows, far deeper than she recalled from her time as his student. The past year had been hard on him, she saw.

At last, he said, 'Why have you come? I didn't invite you.'

Hermione confounded him by resuming her seat at the table conjured by the other Snape. 'I have come to bring you back, Professor,' she replied.

His lips firmed into a thin white line. 'I have no intention of returning, you stupid little girl.' He stepped towards her in an ominous way, pointing one long, thin finger into the trees, away from the direction taken by the other Snape. 'Get out.'

Hermione deliberately crossed one leg over the other, hoping the motion would not betray the way her knees were shaking. 'No.'

A look of sheer fury crossed his face. 'Very well. I will *put* you out.'

Hermione gripped the seat of her chair, realising that he meant to use Occlumency to thrust her from his mind. She thought it was unlikely he would succeed; when she had cast the Legilimency spell, after all, he had been unconscious and unresponsive. Nevertheless, she knew he was a formidable Occlumens, so she held on and concentrated on maintaining her connexion with his mind.

His attempts to eject her felt like the flutter of moths' wings against the solid brick wall of her determination to remain. After a period of time, she heard him swear fluently, and she opened her eyes to track his movement. He strode angrily around the table, glaring at her as if his troubles were down to her.

'I don't know why I cannot get rid of you, Miss Granger, but know this: if you stubbornly remain here in face of my advice for you to leave, *he* won't rest until you are dead.'

Trying again, Hermione rose and took a step towards him, her hand extended in a gesture of peace. 'Sir, I only want to help. Who *is* he?'

The professor stood before her, his hair oily and disordered, his clothing wrinkled, as if he had slept in the garments he wore, the purple shadows beneath his eyes so deep and dark he might have been wearing stage make-up. At his throat, she could clearly see the healing scars where the great snake, Nagini, had bitten him upon the You-Know-Who's command. She had witnessed his injury it was little short of miraculous that he still survived, after his massive blood loss.

'As you wish,' he hissed at her, clearly unnerved by her conciliating posture. 'You are on your own!'

He turned and strode out of the clearing, disappearing very quickly amongst the close-set trees of the forest.

Hermione watched him go, perplexed. Clearly, making contact with him with *both* of him was not the answer. She could not compel him to return with her she could not even demand that he assist her she was stymied.

Sitting amongst the shards of shattered china, she stared intently at her folded hands. Time passed as she considered the puzzle. When applying her problem-solving skills, she was in her element. At last, she rose from the table, determination written upon her face. Professor Snape's lack of cooperation would not prevent her from completing the assignment she had accepted: it was not in her nature.

The memories began as mere glimpses of faces and places, accompanied by simple, uncomplicated feelings. At random, she reached for one, and instantly, she stood in a dark, dingy kitchen. Directly before her, a tall, hook-nosed man was shouting at a cowering woman.

'Worthless!' the man shouted, his speech heavy with a North-country accent. Even at this distance from him, the sour smell of unwashed flesh, mixed with the scent of stale drink, billowed off the man's body.

Undoubtedly, this was Tobias Snape.

'Shiftless! Stupid!' he continued, and the sullen-looking, heavy-browed woman cringed from him, each word seeming to impact her like a physical blow. Even so, there was a look of sly cunning about her eyes, as if she would choose her moment to get back her own. Why in the world did Eileen Snape not pull her wand and hex the man into silence? Had she forgotten she was a witch?

This was one of the professor's memories but where was he? He had to have been present. She turned away from the adults, and in the shadows betwixt the dresser and the wall, she saw the small boy in the corner. He had curled in on himself, as if he were a mouse, intent upon making himself as small as possible. He made neither a move nor a sound, but silent tears and snot ran down his pinched little face. Abandoned on the floor at his side was an extremely worn teddy bear, missing one button eye.

Her heart wrung, Hermione went forward and squeezed into the close space, kneeling at the child's side. Would she be able to comfort him? Would he even know if she was there?

'Don't cry, little man,' she said, pulling her handkerchief from her pocket.

Four-year-old Severus Snape turned stricken eyes upon her. Excellent! He *could* see her! His black eyes darted to the still shouting Tobias Snape, then came back again to rest on her, but he maintained his silence.

Hermione took his stubborn little chin in her hand and applied the handkerchief to his sopping wet face. She did not have siblings, but she had been a Gryffindor Prefect for two years; she had mopped up more than one homesick first-year in her time. 'There, there,' she said as she wiped. 'You're all right.'

The child allowed her to wipe his cheeks, and he even obeyed the command to blow his nose into the handkerchief, but every time Hermione spoke, he glanced again at his parents, his fear of discovery evident.

'It's all right,' she repeated, seating herself beside him. 'They can't see or hear me only you can.'

He seemed to believe her enough to try an experiment. 'Is it magic?' he whispered in a tiny voice.

Hermione pulled his unresisting form into her lap, where he sat with unnatural rigidity, as if unfamiliar with human touch. 'Yes, it's magic,' she agreed, thinking it was far too complicated to attempt an explanation he could understand. Tentatively she smoothed his dirty hair from his forehead. He turned a frown to her face, clearly confused by her behaviour. 'It's not your fault,' she told him, nodding in the direction of his parents, who were locked in personal combat so intense their child might not have existed.

Long, dark lashes swept down to cover his eyes. 'Yes, it is,' he murmured forlornly. 'If I was a better boy, Da' wouldn't be so cross all the time Mummy said so.'

Hermione glared at the cowering Eileen with profound disapproval. What kind of woman blamed the troubles of her marriage on her own child? Gently, she began to rub circles between Severus' sharp shoulder blades. 'Sometimes,' she said diplomatically, 'when people are upset, they say things they don't really mean. Your mummy was probably upset when she told you that. It's never, ever a kid's fault when grown-ups fight.'

The long lashes swept up again, and dubious black eyes looked into her face. 'It's not?'

The hope in his voice pierced her. She pulled his stiff little body against her chest, and her torso rocked back and forth. 'Of course not,' she said reassuringly. 'You're a good boy, Severus you're clever, and you do just as your mummy says. No one could ask for a better little boy than you.'

Tobias Snape slammed out of the squalid little terraced house, and his wife sagged into a rickety kitchen chair, her face in her hands. Hermione half-expected Severus to run to his mother, but instead, he resolutely turned his eyes away from the despairing Eileen, relaxing just a little into Hermione's comforting embrace. It saddened Hermione to see him, just a small child, turning a cold shoulder to his mother's suffering. It spoke volumes of the response his own anguished tears had received in this house. Children were naturally sympathetic beings, but at the hoary age of four years, Severus Snape had already learnt to discount the suffering of others he had absorbed the lesson that personal distress was a solitary business, to be endured alone.

Eileen stood and left the kitchen, but for a long time, child-Severus remained in Hermione's lap, seeming to absorb through his very pores the kind concern she showed to him. She continued to hold his ever more relaxed body to her heart, reflecting sadly on the man who had grown from this childhood.

At last, Severus struggled out of her arms and stood on his own too-thin legs. He looked down into her face. 'Are you an angel?' he asked softly, one hand curiously fingering a lock of her bushy brown hair.

Hermione smiled at him until an answering smile lit his big black eyes. 'No, I'm just a girl,' she told him. 'A friend.'

'Well, bye, Girl,' he said, and grabbing the extremely disreputable teddy bear, he ran from the kitchen to pursue the serious business of being four.

The kitchen dissolved around her and she was in the clearing again, alone.

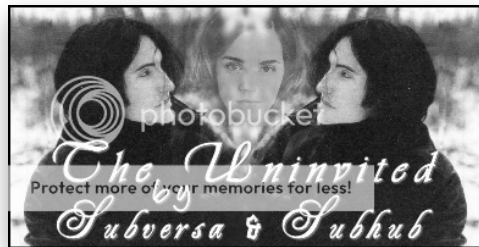
A/N: I have taken complete liberty on the subject of Legilimency and the subject of memory. You will find nothing in canon to support my portrayal of how Legilimency works. Please note that although Hermione is interacting with Severus' memory self, she is not changing his memories. There is a rationale which will be revealed at a later time.

This story was beta read by DeeMichelle and Keladry Lupin; it was Britpicked by MagicAlly and alpha read by Sshg316.

Chapter 3: Mucking About

Chapter 3 of 6

The uninvited ones in life are seldom wanted, usually disregarded, yet frequently, we encounter angels, as well as demons, unaware. One man's angel is another man's demon. Which will it be for Severus Snape?



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By Subversa and SubHub

Chapter 3: Mucking About

Hermione stood in the clearing, reasoning to herself that it must be the nexus of her professor's mind. With her heart aching, she resolutely pushed the image of the crying four-year old from her and concentrated on her next objective. As she considered, she looked all about her surroundings, but she did not see Severus Snape in any form.

'Professor?' she called quietly. 'Won't you come and talk to me, please?'

Only the preternatural silence of the wood-that-wasn't answered her. Hermione moved over to sit at the table that Snape had it *been* Snape? had conjured. What did it mean? Why had she seen two of him? Was he as confused as she was?

The idea gave her pause. Perhaps he *was* confused it might even be the reason for his prolonged unconsciousness, as well as for his amnesia when he did awake. She frowned. He certainly seemed to know who *she* was, here in his mind, but he had recognized no one else since his waking, even though all of his attendants had been former students some, even from his own House.

There was nothing to be gained by reflecting over the whys and wherefores; she had to either persuade him to wake up or find a cause for his memory loss, and she knew her time was not unlimited.

Resolutely, she reached for the next memory.

The peaked little face of the four-year-old moved past her eyes, growing older, longer, and thinner. The eyes grew more haunted, then more hooded. The only time he looked like a normal boy was when he was with the green-eyed witch, Lily Evans. Around her, his face relaxed, but his eyes burned he was utterly taken with her. It made Hermione's heart hurt to see him looking on Lily so greedily.

At last, as the montage of moments flowed past her, Hermione chose the one she wanted and was there.

It was a warm summery night, but here on the edge of the Forbidden Forest, no breeze moved through the branches of the trees. It was still and deathly quiet, save for the hiccupping sobs coming from the black-robed boy huddled beneath the ancient oak tree. Hermione kept her place until the storm of agonised sobs ceased, knowing she would likely be completely unwelcome, but feeling drawn to the need of sixteen-year-old Severus Snape.

As the distressing, keening cries quieted to harsh, gasping breaths, Hermione stepped from behind her sheltering tree trunk and approached him, making no effort at silence. She was, therefore, entirely ready to stop and stand still with her hands open before her when the boy leapt to his feet and trained his wand on her.

'Who are you?' he demanded dangerously, and in his attitude Hermione clearly saw the boy who had become one of Lord Voldemort's Death Eaters.

'Well,' she said frankly, *you* once thought I was an angel.'

He stared at her with pitiless eyes, dashing tears from his cheeks with his free hand. After a moment, he lowered his wand a fraction. 'I remembered your hair differently,' he said.

'Oh, me too,' Hermione answered with a fervent nod. 'I keep on remembering it differently, but it stays pretty much like this.'

Adolescent Severus snorted. 'What do you want?' he asked suspiciously. 'Don't think I'm going to let you cuddle me.'

Hermione kept an eye on his wand for safety's sake, but she sat down near the spot where he stood. 'I have a few things to share with you,' she answered, looking up at him. His eyes were red-rimmed, but otherwise, he looked as well as he could. He had obviously groomed himself before going to throw himself upon the not-so-tender mercies of his so-called 'best friend'. His chin-length hair was lank but clean, and even from this distance, Hermione could pick up the faint aroma of cheap aftershave. He had put his best foot forward, only to have it knocked out from under him.

He glared at her. 'What makes you think I want to hear anything *you* have to say?' His sneer followed the words after a beat, almost as if he had forgotten to affect it. How curious was he having to *teach* himself to be nasty and off-putting?

She shrugged. 'You don't have to stay, of course,' she said. 'You're free to leave at any time but I thought you should know that I think you were treated abominably.'

He seemed to sag a bit at these words, and he dropped to the ground beside her, an air of dire defeat about him. 'Did you see that? What Potter did?' he asked, his eyes turned away from her, his shame etched in his very bearing.

'I know about it,' she told him gently. 'I know you were terribly upset when you called Lily a "Mudblood". It was very brave of you, going to say sorry, you know.'

'No!' he cried, and he turned his face to her, his eyes wild with despair. 'I ought to have left her alone left her to get over it. Now she'll never speak to me again!'

Hermione touched his arm, and he jerked away from her as if she had burned him through his robes. One side of her mouth quirked up in sympathy, but she spoke to him as if he had not pulled away. 'You made a mistake, Severus we all make mistakes no one is perfect. But you behaved like a proper man. You went directly to her and apologised. Not many boys would have had that kind of courage.'

'It didn't matter,' he said desolately.

'I think it did,' Hermione said firmly. 'You did the right thing it's all you *can* do. It's up to her now.'

He turned his face away from her again, providing her with the harsh profile she knew so well here was a Snape she recognised, although his face was smooth and unlined. The jutting nose remained the same, but the landscape of his long, thin face had been ravaged by twenty years of existing on the razor edge of disaster. Here was a striking boy any witch in her right mind would be happy to fancy unless, of course, the witch in question was Lily Evans.

'I know you're upset,' she went on, determined to have her say, 'but I want you to ask yourself a question: Would a true friend refuse a sincere apology?'

He reacted as if she had touched him on a raw, open wound, shouting and scrambling to his feet. 'You don't know anything about it!' he cried.

Hermione did not answer him, wanting so badly to soothe his hurt and knowing he was beyond any aid she could provide. This was a soul-deep cut from which he bled now; only time soothed such sorrows.

It seemed as if the echo of young Snape's accusing voice had scarcely died down when another very familiar voice came to Hermione's ears.

'Now, I hear tha', Fang,' the voice of Hogwarts' Keeper of the Keys said conversationally. 'I think yer on ter summat might be a student out after curfew.'

What help Severus *could* receive was on the way Hermione knew only too well the comfort of a cup of tea in Hagrid's snug cottage. She willed herself away and was in the clearing once again.

She saw at once that Professor Snape was sitting at the table, all signs of the shattered teacup gone. 'Hello,' she said, very happy to see him.

He watched her with calculating eyes. 'So, you're here to tour my memories? Nose out interesting facts to share with your little friends?'

Hermione felt as if she had been slapped. 'Of course not!' she rejoined hotly. 'Do you think I would take this risk for the sake of gossip? You're not the only one in danger here, you know!'

Mockingly, he raised one eyebrow. 'You are cordially invited to depart at any time, Hermione,' he told her. 'In fact, now would be perfect.'

Hermione cast him a cool look and sat down across from him. 'Perhaps I would be able to leave sooner if you cooperated with me,' she said reasonably.

He sat back in his seat and crossed his arms. 'What are you looking for, specifically?' he asked, a look of beleaguered longsuffering on his face.

Hermione leant forward, resting her forearms on the tabletop. 'I'm looking at painful memories,' she said. 'If you won't consent to tell me why you won't come back, then I'll look in your memories for clues.'

She looked into his glittering black eyes and watched his expression go from boredom to amusement. 'I could direct you to the memories most suited to your purposes,' he pointed out. 'Allow me to guide you.'

Hermione sat back again, suspicious. 'Wouldn't it be easier for you to just *tell* me what I want to know?'

His eyes narrowed. 'Take it or leave it,' he said indifferently.

'Fine!' she snapped. 'How do we do this?'

He stood and extended an elegant, long-fingered hand to her. Somewhat intrigued, she stood and placed her smaller hand in his and they were away.

The first memory to which he escorted her was a Death Eater gathering. Hermione reacted violently, attempting to jerk her hand from his and to flee. Although her intellect knew it was only a memory and that all of these people were dead or imprisoned, her instinct was to escape. Her merciless companion held tightly to her hand and hissed, 'Be still! You'll miss the best part!'

Standing on a raised dais at the front of the room was Tom Riddle, known to his followers as Lord Voldemort; the Death Eaters stood in a semi-circle around him, hooded and cloaked. In the middle of the circle, kneeling before the Dark Lord, were a number of young people. Hermione did not know who the others were unlike her professor, the other young people did not seem to resemble the adult Death Eaters Hermione had known and fought. One by one, Voldemort called names and the young people crawled forward to kiss the hem of his robes. Next, two burly Death Eaters would step forward and lay hands upon the supplicant whilst the Dark Lord placed the tip of his wand to the left inner forearm, burning his indelible Mark into each new follower to the accompaniment of their screams of pain. When the branding was complete, a female Death Eater stepped forward to supply the new recruit with the hooded robe and the sinister mask worn by all their brethren.

Before Hermione's horrified eyes, Severus Snape crawled to the Dark Lord and endured his branding with white-knuckled fortitude. Her free hand covered her mouth as the tears started to her eyes, and the profusely sweating eighteen-year-old young man received the garments which would become the symbols of his servitude.

'Isn't it a shame you can't rush into a memory and kill someone?' Snape murmured idly. 'Think of all the trouble the world would have been spared.' He gave her hand a jerk. 'Enough of this. Let's see my first assignment.'

For what seemed an interminable time, Hermione flitted from horror to horror in her professor's memories, viewing duels, Unforgivable Curses, killings, mayhem and

carnage. Her guide seemed to be watching her carefully, searching for a specific reaction from her, but she was apparently a disappointment to him. Yes, she saw Severus Snape take up his wand and commit atrocities but she also saw the sickened horror in his eyes. Every time it seemed to her that she was about to witness an act of remorse or contrition, she was jerked into the next memory. At last, he tired of her.

'You have quite a tolerance for abiding in the mind of a torturing, murdering Death Eater,' he remarked to her. 'Let's see how you feel about his ... other proclivities.'

Now she was treated to images of Severus Snape in his element amongst his fellows, drinking and joking with them, but failing to pair off with witches as they did. She saw him entering a building on Knockturn Alley repeatedly, leaving his gold upon a dresser before spending a short period of time coupling with an anonymous woman in a darkened room. She turned her face away, refusing to invade his privacy.

'Can't bear to watch, can you?' her companion hissed into her ear.

'Everyone has sex, Professor,' she returned with a shrug, demonstrating to him how unimpressed she was. 'Why don't you quit mucking about in this folderol and show me something meaningful?'

In the next instant, she stood in a warm, damp room with a milling crowd of girls in various states of undress. Some were bathing in the large pool in the middle of the room, whilst others were brushing their long hair, and others still were slowly dressing themselves. They appeared to be about Hermione's age; vapidly pretty, with gravity-defying, unreasonably large breasts. A rather disproportionate number of them were redheads.

'Where is he?' said one, looking about fretfully. To Hermione's astonishment, it was obvious the girl saw her. 'Who are you?' the memory girl demanded, but then she spotted the professor. 'Oh, sir, we've been waiting so long!'

There was a general murmur of joy as the young women pressed forward, surrounding Hermione and Professor Snape. They seemed to wish for no greater joy than to touch the professor, all talking at once, but in very soft, sweet voices.

Hermione said, 'Shoo!' and the ranks broke, the girls scattering away from them. Hermione turned to Snape, who was watching her with such an arrogant smirk on his face that she had to restrain herself from slapping him. 'Why can they see us?' she demanded, trying to ignore the fact that the scantily-dressed young women were now attempting to pull her away from him.

'You mustn't be rude to him,' one of them said to her. 'He doesn't like it. And I don't care if he *did* bring you here you have to get at the back of the queue!'

A general murmur of agreement greeted this pronouncement.

Hermione strong-armed three redheads to the side. 'In queue for what?' she snarled, speaking to Snape but it was one of the girls who answered her.

'The spankings!' the young woman said rapturously. 'And after the spankings, the oral sex!'

Hermione was easily able to jerk her hand from his, for he was nearly doubled over with laughter.

'This isn't a memory,' she said, striking out again with both arms and scattering half-naked redheads in every direction. 'It's a fantasy!'

'How do you know?' the professor said, the laughter going out of him at her first show of disbelief.

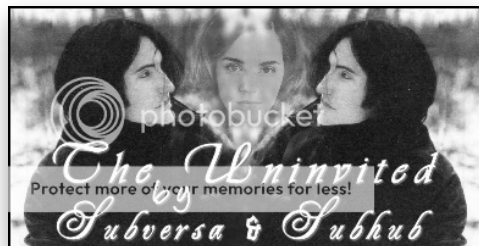
'Because I've seen the damn movie!' Hermione snapped, and with merely a thought, she was in the clearing again, alone.

A/N: This story was beta read by DeeMichelle and Keladry Lupin; it was Britpicked by MagicAlly and alpha read by Sshg316.

Chapter 4: Out of His Mind

Chapter 4 of 6

The uninvited ones in life are seldom wanted, usually disregarded, yet frequently, we encounter angels, as well as demons, unaware. One man's angel is another man's demon. Which will it be for Severus Snape?



The Uninvited

by Subversa and SubHub

Chapter 4: Out of His Mind

Annoyed, Hermione paced around the clearing. Time was running out on her; she had already stayed longer than she ought, and she was aware of the weakening of her physical body, as it sat in a chair by the professor's bedside at St Mungo's. She was losing strength both magically and physically, but she could not bring herself to withdraw. What had begun as a duty had now become personal. She had seen Severus Snape at the worst points of his life, and she had discovered something she had never truly known about him before: He was a man, a very human man, with strengths and weaknesses, with standards and ethics, with a painful childhood and a brutal youth he was a man who had overcome a dreadful beginning in life to become a respected professional. He was also a man capable of forming a lasting allegiance to one

woman, a man who would commit himself to a course of action and see it through, no matter what the consequences were for himself. Yes, he had been party to abominable acts, but she did not need to hear him say how remorseful he was for that part of his life. Every choice he had made in the ensuing years spoke quite loudly enough for Hermione to hear and understand him.

No, she was no longer in it because they had been soldiers fighting against the same enemy, striving towards the same goal. Now, she was in it because she wanted a chance to know the man because she wanted the opportunity to show him there were people in the world who could appreciate him precisely the way he was, with all his good *and* his bad traits that there were women who looked beyond appearance and wealth when choosing men with whom to spend time.

She desperately wanted a chance to show him *she* was different.

He paced the ramparts of the Astronomy Tower, his brow furrowed, his naturally pale face almost bloodless in grief. A stiff northerly wind was blowing on this cold morning, the first of November, 1981, but the professor did not wear a cloak over his robes. He had obviously come here directly from the Headmaster's office directly after hearing the news and had been pacing all night, for Hermione could clearly see the faintest pinking of the horizon, indicating that although this man's heart was broken, the world would yet go on.

He looked up sharply when she appeared, startled for a moment. He altered his route, pulling his wand from his robes with a vicious flourish and advancing upon her as if he would like to kill her. When he was close enough to see her face, he halted, and his lips pulled back from his crooked yellow teeth in a horrible snarl.

'Is it your pleasure to show up unerringly on the worst days of my life?' he shouted at her.

'I'm so sorry about Lily,' she said steadily, clasping her hands tightly together to prevent them from trembling at his reckless, threatening behaviour.

His face crumpled at the mention of the name. 'Gone!' he keened, his voice whipped away by the wild wind.

'It's not your fault,' Hermione said, clearly and firmly.

'YOU DON'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT IT!' he roared at her, happy to have a focus for his grief-driven aggression.

'The Secret Keeper betrayed the Potters,' she said carefully, mindful of what facts were available to him at this point in time.

'I ought to have taken her away forced her to go with me kept her safe!' he shouted.

'She would not have chosen to go with you, Severus,' Hermione replied. 'You know she would not have left her husband, even if you had been willing to take her son, as well.'

He was silenced by the truth of this statement, and he stared into her face, utterly bereft.

'It was *not your fault*,' Hermione said again, hoping he could hear and understand her. 'Dumbledore accepted the challenge of keeping the Potters safe, but in the end, they chose the wrong Secret Keeper. No one could have predicted their deaths would have come about this way.'

'I should have protected her,' he whispered, his eyes closing against the steadily lightening sky of a new day in which he had no wish to exist. 'No one did.'

Hermione wrapped her hands about his forearms, her touch startling him into opening his eyes to stare at her. 'Please believe me,' she said. 'There is nothing you could have done to prevent Lily's death.'

Desolate black eyes stared into her face, unseeing. 'And now, there is the child *he* made me promise but I don't know if I can'

The Astronomy Tower door clattered against stone. 'Severus Snape!' Poppy Pomfrey came out onto the tower-top. 'The Headmaster told me you have been out here all night. Come in at once! It's Pepperup for you, young man!'

The irritated command in her voice pulled the twenty-one-year old man in her direction mechanically. Hermione stood watching him move after the school matron with lagging steps, her mind already on which memories she wished to visit next. She whirled away to her next destination. She had to be there at his next great betrayal.

The Astronomy Tower again, but this time there was no pacing. When she joined him in the cold, crisp air, he stood with his hands on the crenellated parapet, unmoving. He was properly attired for a Scottish winter night, wearing a heavy black cloak with slim leather gloves upon his hands. He turned to her slowly, and the light of the bright moon showed her the changes sixteen years had wrought in him. His face was heavily scored with lines on his forehead and about his mouth from practiced scowling. His shoulders had broadened and his form had filled out; there was greater mass to his body at thirty-seven than there had been at twenty-one. Her heart quickened in her chest at the sight of him as she had known him as she *did* know him in light of what she had come to admit to herself about him.

He quickly broke her mood with his biting words. 'Well, well, well,' he sneered. 'Look who's here the harbinger of pestilence and calamity.' He came forward, halting just in front of her and looking her up and down with deliberate insolence. 'It must be as bad as I think it is, if *you're* here,' he added sotto voce, as if speaking to himself. He walked all around her, halting only when he had come full circle. 'I haven't even thought about you in years, and now, here you are and you're bloody *Granger!*'

Inwardly, Hermione quailed under the scorn in his voice, but she lifted her chin, nevertheless, and kept silent.

He held her gaze, then turned from her and crossed again to the parapet, staring out across the grounds towards the Forbidden Forest. After a moment, his voice came to her.

'All right tell me why you're here,' he said wearily.

'Why do you want to hear it?' she asked curiously, advancing to stand by his side, her gaze fixed as unblinkingly on his face as his were fixed on the distance.

'Because you have usually been ...'

For one insane moment, Hermione thought he was about say she had been right.

'...reasonably astute,' he finished. He glanced down at her. 'What do you have to say about this? About your *best friend* being prepared like a lamb for the slaughter?'

'That's not important,' she answered, willing him to believe her.

He studied her. 'All these years, I thought I was doing the very best thing I could do for Lily to protect her child, to keep him safe until he could fulfil the prophecy.'

When his eyes filled with horror, Hermione knew he was not truly seeing her.

'But all the time,' he whispered, 'all that time, Dumbledore meant for the boy to die he knew it, and he never told me.' He turned from her again, his gloved hands clenched into fists. 'All my life, he has used me manipulated my entire existence to his purposes.' His fists rose and fell on the stone wall, and Hermione was touched to see from his next words that even through his pain, his first thoughts were for Harry. 'Why could Dumbledore not trust me? If I had known, perhaps we could have worked together found a way to save the boy'

Hermione felt a dull pain in her chest as she watched his suffering; she would not tell him Harry had lived in this moment, it was too irrelevant. But she ached to comfort him in his perceived defeat. 'It's not your fault that Harry has to die,' she told him compellingly, infusing all her care into her voice. 'There is nothing you can do to change what must be, Severus.'

He turned to her sharply at her use of his name, and Hermione's breath caught in her chest. Was he upset by her use of his name? Or moved by her attempt to reach him?

'Dumbledore ought to have told you,' she continued, 'but he can't help keeping secrets it is just as much a part of his nature as is his delight in sweets.' She reached out and placed one hand over the leather sheathed fist nearest to her. 'He didn't tell *anyone* everything he knew he told you some things, and he told Harry other things and I'm sure the other members of the Order only know parts of the whole, as well.'

He removed his fists from the parapet, gently dislodging her hand, and shoved them into the pockets of his cloak. 'What he wants me to do next ...' He broke off precipitately. 'There's nothing you can do here,' he told her, his black eyes like endless, empty black tunnels. Hermione reached out to him again, but he turned from her and strode away.

Hermione's hands were trembling uncontrollably now, but she had to see him at one more point try, one last time to do what was necessary to bring Professor Snape back from the toxic self-recriminations in which he was trapped.

She moved on.

She was not sure where they were when next she joined him. He sat at a rough wooden table in a dirty little kitchen in a disreputable-looking cottage. A half-empty bottle of Firewhisky sat on the table before him. His filthy hair was matted to his skull. Undoubtedly, his exertions of this night had taxed him to the point of sweat-soaked exhaustion, as the odour from his unwashed body attested. In the next room, several lumps slept, some snoring, beneath ratty blankets. She surmised that Draco Malfoy, Yaxley, and the Carrows were amongst their number.

'So, this is a Death Eater safe house?' she inquired, moving to sit across from him.

He reached with one long mud-streaked finger and touched her hair. 'Perhaps you never were my angel,' he murmured drunkenly. 'Perhaps you have always been my daemon, coming at the worst of times to taunt me with my failures.'

'Stop it!' she said firmly, moving his hand away. 'I told you the first time: I am not an angel nor am I a daemon I am simply a friend.'

The mud-streaked hand flew out, sending the bottle of Firewhisky slamming into the wall, shattering upon impact. 'Friend?' he cried. 'I only had one friend, and I killed him tonight.' He covered his face with his hands and began to rock himself in the wooden straight chair.

'You did what he ordered you to do,' she replied inexorably.

'He betrayed me he used me but he was the only friend I had.' He dropped his hands and looked imploringly into Hermione's face. 'How could I have done it?'

'You did it because you *had* to do it,' she reiterated. 'What would have happened if you had not? Would the Carrows have tortured him? Would Greyback have ripped him to shreds?'

Snape shuddered, shaking his head back and forth, back and forth. 'No,' he whispered. 'No!'

'Exactly!' Hermione replied bracingly. 'You couldn't permit something like that to happen to him, could you? You had no other choice, Severus.'

'There's always another choice!' he cried, agitated. 'I should have told him "no" the first time he asked me.'

Hermione stood and walked around to his side of the table, crouching down and taking his grimy hands in hers. 'He trusted you to do it,' she reminded him softly. 'He depended on you to do what needed to be done at the proper time he relied on you, and you never let him down.'

He did not answer her, but her words seemed to calm him a bit. Very soon, his hands became slack within hers, and his head sagged forward, coming to rest upon his chest as he fell into alcohol-induced slumber. Hermione hauled herself back to her feet with some effort; her legs were trembling now she had to act quickly. With one last look at the memory half-blood Prince, she returned to her starting place.

He was in the clearing when she arrived, his arms crossed belligerently over his chest, his lips pressed in a thin line. She knew without either of them speaking that her hope had compelled him to come forward. A part of her wished she had realised earlier that she could force his presence by just *believing* he would be there, but deep down, she knew she would not have had the tools necessary to convince him, had she not first seen so much of the inner man. Now, if only she could put her knowledge to good use before her strength failed her!

She collapsed into a chair and waited for him to break the silence.

'What was the point of all that?' he said, glaring at her, his voice taut with emotion. 'You know you cannot permanently change memories by entering them through Legilimency! Once you're gone, it will be as if you had never been here.'

Hermione's body, sitting in the chair beside the professor's bed at St Mungo's, was beginning to have an adverse reaction to her long foray into his mind; her limbs were trembling, and she could feel strength steadily seeping out of her. Her spirit, however, had achieved a new calm, born of her absolute certainty of what she wanted. She met his angry glare with a sweet smile. 'I was showing you how it *could* have been making a different perspective available to you than the one in which you were trapped,' she answered simply.

'To what purpose?' he sneered. 'I let you go about on your own, remember?'

'Oh, Professor,' she chided gently, 'do you honestly expect me to believe that a spy with all your years of experience would not be completely aware of what was going on in his own mind? You heard every word.'

It was a true pleasure for her to watch him slowly comprehend her cunning. Although she had not been able to compel him to speak directly to her, she had known very well that he would not permit her free access to his memories without monitoring her activities. If she could not speak *with* him, she would speak *to* him, giving the shades of his memory-self the words she longed for him to hear words which he would never permit her to speak.

He advanced upon her until he stood towering over her, attempting to use his superior height and bulk to intimidate, as he had done all the years she had known him. Hermione watched his approach with unimpaired calm and looked serenely up into his face.

'Are you proud of yourself?' he hissed.

'Yes,' she admitted, realising that she was.

'Why you manipulative little '

'Student?' she supplied helpfully, when he stopped short, inarticulate in his fury.

'Bugger!' he shouted, and he turned to stomp away from her.

'No, Severus, you will not go,' she said, gentle but implacable.

It was no surprise to her when her words halted him in his tracks; after all, she had begun to comprehend some part of her power here, even if it was very nearly too late for her to use it.

He turned, some degree of the anger now gone from his face.

'It's time for you to come back,' she told him. 'Lord Voldemort was defeated he is dead and cannot return and Lily's son is alive. In fact, at this moment, he is bedeviling the St Mungo's Head Administrator, demanding that something be done to make you well.'

So much time passed before he answered that she thought he was not going to speak. 'I am glad Potter survived,' he said finally, 'but I cannot return there is nothing left for me.' His calm broke, and he began to pace. 'I thought I had died! Why could the Healers not leave well enough alone?'

Hermione did not think it was an opportune moment to inform him who was responsible for his survival; that was material for a shouting match on another day, altogether. 'You are a hero, sir,' she said, desperately. 'Harry told everyone you had been working on the side of the Light, all along.'

He managed a creditable sneer. 'Unlike your little friends, Miss Granger, I have no desire for *fame*.'

'But you have always wanted an Order of Merlin,' she reminded him. 'I remember how pleased you were when Fudge said you would receive the award for capturing Sirius Black and you *will* receive an Order of Merlin, First Class, for your part in the fight against Voldemort, Professor. Imagine!'

He stared at her very hard, as if to discern whether she was telling him the truth; it appeared that he had decided she was, for he turned aside from her with an almost regretful sigh. 'I can't do it it's not safe. If I come back, *he* will come back with me and I am too tired to continue holding him in check. I would rather die and take him with me, than go back to a world that offers him so much opportunity for villainy.'

'Who do you mean?' Hermione asked. 'Who do you have to hold in check?'

Professor Snape glanced nervously over his shoulder, as if expecting to see someone standing behind him. 'You saw him he tried to feed you poisoned tea he took you around and showed you my years as a Death Eater and ... other private memories, trying to drive you out.'

Hermione knew they were arriving at the crux of the matter; she was about to learn why Severus Snape was languishing with inexplicable amnesia. She wished with all her heart she was not so weak, but she could feel her strength flowing from her now, rather than seeping. She was losing ground very quickly, but she was determined not to give up; she would not leave without him.

'That's a part of yourself, Professor,' she explained gently. 'We all have dark parts of our psyches. I'll help you we'll all help you. You can defeat that part of you without dying I promise you can.'

His expression transformed at that announcement, and Hermione took the opportunity to stand and move on unsteady legs to stand before him, her hand outstretched. 'You won't be alone,' she said. 'I'll be there I'll help you. We will make a very clever team, sir.'

Hermione's heart leapt when he clasped her fingers, a faint glimmer of hope lighting his eyes. He stared at her hand for a long moment, as if it were an alien thing, unlike any object he had ever held. 'As long as you know who is captain of the team, Miss Granger, it is possible that...'

'Don't be such a fool, Snivellus!' a voice shouted across the clearing.

Hermione was a bit surprised when the professor shoved her behind him as he turned to face his nemesis. Couldn't he recognize his own voice?

'Don't listen to her,' the counterpart said. '*You* are alone. You have always *been* alone. You will always *be* alone. All you have is *me*. Your parents never cared about you Lily abandoned you Dumbledore betrayed you there's *no one out there* for you. If we go back, they will punish us for the rest of our lives for what *I* did! Don't be misled by the grand illusion this child paints for you do you really believe they want you? Admire you? You're nothing but a figment of her imagination!'

Hermione broke free of the hands holding her behind him and moved between them the good and the bad, the Light and the Dark - and she looked into the eyes of the bravest man she had ever known and spoke with all the passion in her heart.

'Don't listen to him!' she implored. 'Look at me! Listen to me! You pre-existed my arrival here, Severus I didn't create you! Everything he says is a lie! You want to know who your daemon is? It's him! Tell him to go away, and he will have to go!'

Hermione did not know precisely what had happened, but she heard a roar of rage, and at the same instant, she was propelled off her feet, as if she had been struck by an invisible force, flying through the air and landing hard, behind the doppelganger's back. She was aware of Professor Snape calling her name how it warmed her to hear him cry, *Hermione!* but it was the doppelganger who spoke to her.

'You stupid little girl!' he cried. 'Do you think you are the only one who can use the power of the mind to accomplish what you want in this place?' He moved to stand over her, somehow holding Professor Snape at bay by the force of his will. 'You've been in here too long, haven't you?' he whispered malevolently. 'Too bad your body will sicken unto death, and your mind will never make it back to your body you should have left when you had the chance!' He bent over her until his face was inches from hers. 'Die, you meddling bitch.'

Hermione turned her face away from the hatefully smirking doppelganger. He was right; she was too weak to fight him, now, and he had somehow drained what energy she had left. She could do nothing but watch what would happen next.

Behind his alter ego, Professor Snape struggled mightily against his invisible bonds, looking like a mime pushing against the walls of an imaginary box. As she looked at him, thinking it would be the last time she would be conscious of who she was and of what he had come to mean to her, his eyes caught hers, and with a great concussion of sound, he blew through the barrier, grabbing his doppelganger from behind and shaking him like a terrier with a rat.

'That is the last innocent person you will kill!' he screamed, and his hands closed around the throat of his double.

'If ... you ... kill ... me,' the doppelganger sputtered, pulling fruitlessly at the fingers crushing his windpipe, '*weboth* die.'

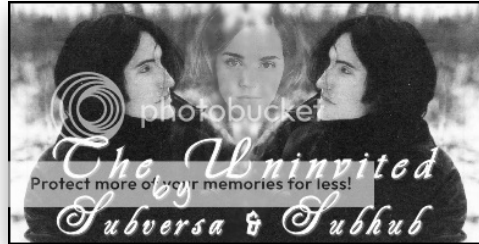
'That's what I had in mind!' the professor hissed, tightening his hold even more.

Hermione watched without breathing as the false Snape gave up on prying the hands from his throat and launched an attack of his own, squeezing the life out of Professor Snape. The two identical men held on with perfectly matched strength, driving one another inexorably to their knees. With her last conscious thought, she breathed, 'I want you in my life,' and fell into the boundless dark.

Chapter 5: The Fallout

Chapter 5 of 6

The uninvited ones in life are seldom wanted, usually disregarded, yet frequently, we encounter angels, as well as demons, unaware. One man's angel is another man's demon. Which will it be for Severus Snape?



The Uninvited

by Subversa and SubHub

Chapter 5: The Fallout

The Healers, the Head Administrator, and the mediwitches ranged about the room, observing. Healer Smethwyck watched with some disapproval; this high-profile patient was still on his ward, where he had certainly belonged when he first arrived, nigh dead from a poisonous bite. Now, however, his physical healing was complete why, the man had been sitting up and feeding himself when he was awake, even if he didn't know who he was. Smethwyck had hoped to foist the patient onto the long-term care ward, but the Administrator had been harried into *this* bit of nonsense in Smethwyck's professional opinion, the whole lot of them had lost their wits.

Healer Strout watched with fascination. If this course of action was successful, it would open whole new vistas of possible treatment for the residents of her ward. It was important for the sake of this patient, of course, but Healer Strout was far more interested in the broader good that would come of a successful completion of this experiment.

Healer-in-Chief Webber and the Head Administrator hovered, more concerned with the outcome for the hospital than the prognosis of the patient, generally getting in the way.

Healer Clearwater sat at her usual place at the table, the patient's chart before her, her quill ready to make notations regarding this historic procedure. For personal reasons, she devoutly hoped it would be successful. Not only was this *her* patient, but it was also her *friend*, and she felt more than a little responsible for the welfare of each of them.

Two mediwitch trainees hovered over the patients, one in charge of each. Daphne Greengrass looked after Professor Snape, whilst Katie Bell cared for Hermione Granger. Every few minutes, the trainees assessed the patients' vital signs, reporting their findings to Healer Clearwater, who diligently notated the parchment before her.

Nearly two hours into the process, as Granger's vital signs continued to deteriorate, there was a sudden change in Professor Snape. He began to move agitatedly beneath the bedclothes, then his head began to toss from side to side. The Healers all advanced on his bed, conferring in low voices as to what this change portended and agreeing as one that they dared not attempt to wake him or sedate him with the Granger girl still engaged with his mind.

As they stood over him, he began to sweat profusely, as if from a high fever. Incoherent murmurs issued from his suddenly parched lips, followed by a shout so loud the group of Healers actually jumped back from the bed, whilst the Head Administrator, Prodmore Hoofington, fell on his bottom with a dull thud. With the echoes of the mighty shout still fading away, there was a distinct clattering sound so familiar that each person in the room reached for and ascertained that they still held their wands.

'It's Hermione!' Katie Bell cried, and the others turned to her, just in time to see the Granger girl, whose slack hand had dropped her wand, follow the wand onto the cold, hard floor. The spectators surged to surround the motionless Granger, calling for a stretcher to move her to the trauma area. It was not until orderlies had rushed from the room with Hermione Granger that Daphne Greengrass was able to gain the attention of the Healers to make her report: Professor Snape had slipped again into a coma, unresponsive to light or pain.

The Healers and their Head Administrator were still huddled in whispered conference when Harry Potter appeared in the doorway.

'Hullo,' he said, obviously surprised to see such a crowd in the professor's room. 'Is Hermione here?'

Harry Potter stood by Hermione's side, holding her limp hand. He had paced back and forth as the Healers had worked on her, casting diagnostic spells and strengthening charms. After what seemed like an eternity, they had come to him, assuring him she was all right. She was physically and magically exhausted, and she needed to sleep. They would keep her overnight, but she was not in danger; she would recover fully.

While the orderlies prepared to move her to a room, Harry turned on his heel and marched straight to the Head Administrator's office.

'It was entirely consensual, Mr Potter!' Hoofington cried earnestly, a tell-tale bead of sweat upon his brow betraying his nervousness.

'How could you permit her to do something so dangerous?' Harry demanded. 'Didn't you have a *professional* who could do the job?'

Hoofington swallowed visibly. 'It was an experimental procedure,' he admitted. 'It had never been done before.'

Harry stared at the other wizard. 'You endangered my best friend in an *experimental procedure*?'

Hoofington's voice modulated to a wheedling tone. 'You told us to spare no expense, Mr Potter to do whatever it took to make Headmaster Snape well again.'

Harry stepped up to the large desk separating him from the despicable little man and brought the flat of his hand down on the desktop with such force that a bottle of ink fell to the floor and shattered. 'Not at the expense of Hermione!' he shouted. 'You've endangered *her* without helping *him* one whit!'

Hoofington could not prevent himself from shrinking away from the angry young man leaning toward him with such pugnacity. 'The young lady volunteered to do it,' he pled, trying not to think of the funds the hospital might lose if the Boy-Who-Lived-Again became unhappy with them. 'Healer Clearwater came to us with the consent form signed

Miss Granger was anxious to proceed as soon as possible.'

'Of course she was anxious,' Harry said with scathing contempt. 'She had to do it before I came back to town, or / would have made sure it didn't happen!' He turned his back on the Head Administrator and walked out of the git's office.

He knew where to find Penelope Clearwater.

Penny raised her head as soon as the door into the professor's room was opened; when she saw who it was, she rose to her feet. 'Miss Greengrass,' she said to the mediwitch, 'please send for me straightaway if there is any change at all in the professor's condition. I need to speak with Mr Potter.'

The mediwitch trainee murmured her agreement as Penny passed before the grim-faced Harry Potter. 'We can speak privately in my office,' she said and led him to the cupboard-like room. 'Please sit down, Harry,' she said, closing the door behind them.

'I think I'll stand, thanks,' he said shortly, his tone not encouraging Penny to hope for a friendly chat.

She sagged into the chair behind her desk, Summoning a teapot from the shelf behind her; it floated onto the desk top, accompanied by two mismatched cups. 'Oh, sit *down*, Harry,' she said impatiently. 'I knew you when I was half a foot taller than you all your blustering doesn't impress me.' She dropped teabags into the pot and conjured boiling water. 'I have a letter for you from Hermione; if you want me to give it to you, *sit down*.'

Harry fell into the seat with ill grace. 'Give it to me,' he said tersely, holding out his hand.

Ignoring him, Penny noted the time on her watch. The silence between them grew more fraught as she waited for the tea to brew, then filled the two cups. 'Sugar or milk?' she inquired politely.

'Both,' he said curtly, but he found he was so thankful for the cup of tea, he forgot to be nasty and picked it up for a fortifying sip. 'Please give me Hermione's note, Penny,' he said at last.

Penny smiled at him and pulled the parchment from her pocket, passing it to him without comment. Harry gave her a rueful half-smile and broke the seal on the scroll.

Dear Harry,

Don't blame Penny or anyone at the hospital. No one else was willing to do this, and you know it had to be done. Professor Snape did so much for all of us after all he's endured, this is the least I can do for him.

Please, Harry, if something happens and I don't wake up, make sure my parents know where I am or what happened to me, all right?

Love from Hermione

P.S. I borrowed the phial of Professor Snape's memories from your bedside table and viewed them in the Pensieve. I wouldn't have done it, except I wanted to be prepared for what I might find in his mind.

Harry closed his eyes for a moment. She had known it was dangerous, and she had done it anyway. After all the friends he had lost to the war, the notion that Hermione might have been lost, too, made him so sad he couldn't bear to think about it.

'She knew you'd react like this,' Penny said, sipping her tea.

Harry stuffed the note into the pocket of his jeans and tried another smile with slightly more success. 'She knows me pretty well,' he admitted.

'She said you were out of town for a few days,' Penny commented.

'The Ministry of Magic was holding a conference to determine who will receive awards for their service in the war,' he explained. 'I'm on the committee, and we were in meetings all day, but I was spending the nights at the Burrow.' He took a drink of his tea. 'The Weasleys are taking Fred's death pretty hard,' he added.

Penny nodded sympathetically. 'Percy and I still see one another,' she said. 'He said they've all been staying home with Mrs Weasley, because she becomes upset when one of them is gone.'

'Yeah,' Harry agreed. 'She's all right during the day, when everyone's at work, but at night, she has to see them all.' He shook his head. 'Madam Pomfrey says Mrs Weasley will get over it in time but she also says Ron and Ginny should do what their mum wants until she *does* feel better. Even Bill and Fleur check in most nights, and they have their own house, now.'

Penny poured each of them more tea. 'Hermione came in two days ago she said she had promised you she would keep an eye on Professor Snape.' She waited for Harry to nod in agreement, then said, 'I told her the ghost specialist we called in said we couldn't be sure there wasn't a malignant force present in the professor something he would have picked up during that period of time when he was hovering between life and death. The specialist told us we would have to send someone into his mind to make an assessment. Hermione was really interested in the idea, and she came back the next day, ready to try it.'

Harry frowned. 'But that would have been yesterday,' he pointed out.

'It took a full day for the Head Administrator and the Senior Healers to decide to go ahead with it.' She put down her cup and leant toward him. 'They really did consider it all very carefully, Harry.'

He sighed. 'I suppose they did,' he muttered.

'Anyway, it was felt that it would be best to do it early in the morning, when everyone was fresh and strong.' Penny patted Harry's arm. 'You really haven't had a moment's peace, even with You Know Who gone, have you?'

Harry gave her half a smile. 'If we can get Hermione well and Professor Snape on his feet, I'll be happy,' he said.

There was a knock on the door, and a white-robed aide looked in. 'Mr Potter?' she said. 'Miss Bell asked me to fetch you Miss Granger is waking up.'

She floated just below the surface. She wanted to know something there was a question she needed to ask but she was so tired, and it was so easy to float.

'Hermione?'

That was Harry. Harry needed her. He was calling for her.

'Hermione? Can you hear me?'

Well, she *did* need to ask a question perhaps if she answered Harry, he would answer her. Sluggishly, she forced her eyes to open; Harry's dear face was directly above hers, the almond-shaped green eyes warm with concern behind his round black spectacles.

'There you are,' he said gently, smiling. 'You had us worried, there.'

'How is he?' Hermione croaked, determined to receive an answer to her question.

'Ron's not here,' Harry told her. 'He's at the Burrow.'

'Not Ron,' Hermione objected crossly. 'Snape.'

Penny stepped up to the other side of the bed with a goblet of water. 'The professor is in a coma,' she reported, magicking the bed up and holding the cup so Hermione could drink. When Hermione lay back on the pillow again, Penny added, 'He had an episode of thrashing and shouting before he slipped into the coma again did something happen?'

Hermione's eyes fluttered closed. She was so tired ... much too tired to recount her adventures in Professor Snape's mind. 'Tell you ... later,' she whispered.

Harry looked up. 'She's too tired now, Penny I'll come find you when she's ready to talk, all right?'

Penny replaced the goblet on the bedside table and reached out to squeeze Hermione's hand. 'Take your time.'

Hermione woke up with the burnished rays of the setting sun shining on the plain white wall of the room. Turning her head seemed to require great effort, but she managed it, glad to see Harry sitting in a chair at her side, riffling through a magazine.

'Hi,' she said.

The happiness in his face when he looked up at her made her glad.

'Hi,' he replied, standing. 'You really scared me, Hermione.'

'I'm sorry you were scared,' she said tiredly. 'But the Healers had a big meeting about it and no one else was willing to go into Professor Snape's mind *someone* had to do it.'

'I would've done it!' he protested.

Hermione pursed her lips. 'You're pants at Legilimency, Harry you know that,' she said gently.

He scowled, but his obvious relief at her recovery robbed his words of any sting. 'Well, that's no excuse for you trying to kill yourself as soon as my back is turned!'

She gave him a tiny grin. 'It wasn't my intention.'

'It was damn near the result,' he grumbled, running out of steam.

'Are you just going to stand there and tell me off?' she inquired, eying the tray on the table behind him. 'I'm very hungry and still tired I've had a busy day.'

'Right!' he said. 'I forgot your supper.' He turned and fetched the tray, getting it situated so she could begin to eat. He resumed his seat as she took a bite of stew.

'Did you have any luck at the Ministry?' she inquired, taking a sip of pumpkin juice.

A dark look passed over his face as if he was reliving a particularly ugly skirmish. 'Yeah,' he said. 'Snape will be awarded the Order of Merlin most of them would be happier if it was posthumous, but he'll receive it, either way.'

Hermione gave him a genuine smile. 'Oh, thank you, Harry! I told him he'd get it that's what made him decide to come back with me!'

Harry blinked once before saying cautiously, 'What do you mean, Hermione? Snape's in a coma he didn't come back with you.'

Hermione picked up the napkin from the tray and politely wiped her lips. 'He's just resting,' she said serenely. 'He'll wake up any time now.' She lay back against her pillows again and murmured, 'And if he doesn't, I'm going back in after him.'

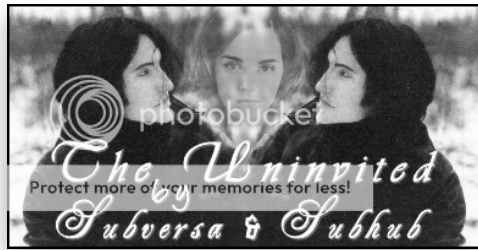
Harry tried, but not all of his protestations made any impression upon her. She bade him good night, turned on her side, away from him, and apparently went to sleep whilst he still tried to reason with her.

A/N: This chapter was betaed by DeeMichelle and Keladry Lupin and Brit-picked by MagicAlly.

Chapter 6: Awaking to a Dream

Chapter 6 of 6

The uninvited ones in life are seldom wanted, usually disregarded, yet frequently, we encounter angels, as well as demons, unaware. One man's angel is another man's demon. Which will it be for Severus Snape?



The Uninvited

Chapter 6: Awakening to a Dream

Healer Penelope Clearwater sat watchfully by her patient's side, alert for any change in his condition. She had slipped into Hermione's room after Harry's disgruntled exit, but Hermione had given her very little by way of details.

'He's *in* there,' Hermione had assured her. 'He's working through some issues, but he'll be back. You'll see.'

Standing, Penny methodically took Professor Snape's vital signs and marked them on her chart. Hermione was certain there was no malign spectral presence in the professor's mind. Penny was almost disappointed to hear it; a bad-tempered ghost would have been something specific to deal with, rather than the vague notion of 'personal issues'.

Resuming her seat, Penny trained her gaze upon her patient. She was determined not to quit his side until he regained consciousness.

Penny's wristwatch informed her it was three in the morning when the professor spoke.

'Hermione,' he whispered.

Penny sat forward. 'Professor?' she said, her fingertips light upon the back of his hand.

The gaunt face turned toward her voice, but his eyes did not open. 'My angel,' he murmured.

Penny blinked. Hermione was his *angel*? What an odd thing for him to say.

The slack hand beneath her fingertips jerked, and her wrist was enclosed by the relentless grip. 'Harbinger of pestilence and calamity!' he shouted. 'It's not my fault it's all YOUR fault!'

Penny swallowed nervously, reaching with her free hand to try to prise the claw-like fingers from her wrist. 'Professor?' she tried again. 'Wake up.' *And let me go*, she added to herself.

Once again, the face turned in her direction and the grip on her wrist loosened, permitting her to pull away from him. 'It must be as bad as I think it is if you're here,' he said quite clearly, his tone caressing. 'I'm happy to see you, but I hate to see you it's never good, when I see you,' he said, almost apologetically.

Penny scabbled for her quill and parchment and began to take feverish notes. What on earth was he talking about? Who did he think he was talking to? Surely not to *Hermione*? Not in that caring, almost *tender* way?

Agitatedly, he began to move beneath the bedclothes. 'Look out! He's going to kill you!' he cried, and he spoke with such conviction that Penny looked nervously behind her before noting his comment on the chart. 'Stay before you go,' Professor Snape said, sounding rather younger. 'Leave now,' he said authoritatively. 'Don't go,' he pled. 'He's gone it's safe come back goodbye, Girl...'

And although Penny stayed by his side for the rest of the night, occasionally speaking to him and periodically checking his vital signs, he gave no further indication of consciousness that night.

His eyes opened to a world full of the hopeful pink of the dawn. A lifetime of caution kept him still and quiet; without moving, his eyes darted about, assessing his location and situation. Obviously, he was in hospital. He didn't see *her* anywhere. He felt a small tug of anxiety at her absence, but he pushed it aside. First things first.

The door opened and he turned his head to see Marcus Flint walk into his room with an armload of clean linen. 'What day is it, Flint?' he demanded.

The yellow-robed Slytherin dropped the linens onto the floor. 'Sir!' he said, staring at Severus with goggling eyes. 'You know me?'

'Yes, to my everlasting chagrin, you dunderhead,' he snapped irritably.

'Do you know who *you* are?' Flint asked, apparently incapable of coherent thought or speech.

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. 'If this is a joke, Flint, I suggest you desist immediately. I am *not* amused.'

'Sorry, Professor,' Flint said, backing toward the door. 'It's just you've been asleep for a long time the Healer only just went for her morning tea I should fetch her.'

'Wait!' Severus commanded, and Flint obeyed instantly. Severus indulged an inward smirk. Some things remained the same, at least. 'Where is she?' he asked.

Flint evinced confusion. 'The Healer is '

'Not the Healer!' Severus snarled.

'Oh!' Flint said, nervous as ever to have his erstwhile Head of House irritated with him. 'Do you mean the Assassin?' he asked hesitantly.

'Who the hell is the Assassin?' Severus demanded impatiently. 'No, Flint don't try to answer that.' Severus took a deep breath and spoke very slowly and clearly, as if addressing someone who was not quite bright. 'Where is Hermione Granger?'

'That will be all, Flint,' a faintly familiar female voice responded, and a lime-green robed woman came into the room. 'You may go,' she added to the orderly, coming to offer her hand to Severus. 'Good morning, Professor Snape I'm Healer Clearwater.'

Severus took the proffered hand for long enough to be polite. 'I recall you quite well, Penelope,' he said dryly. 'I do not award many Outstanding marks in NEWT-level Potions.'

The curly-haired witch gave a small smile as she seated herself at a table near the foot of his bed and began to write upon a chart. The faint tug of anxiety he had experienced upon awakening and not finding Hermione present became more pronounced. Where was she? Had any of it been real? Had he agreed to return to this wretched life in response to a mere fantasy? Was it just a further example of his pathetic wishful thinking? His heart nearly seized in his chest at the notion what if it had all been nothing but a dream? Could a dream have inspired him with such amazement and respect? Could a fantasy have shown such caring and affection for him at every stage of his miserable life? How could he fantasise something he had never experienced before? No dream he had ever had could have produced this level of wonder in him no, he wouldn't disbelieve until he had seen her.

He *had* to see her.

'Do I have no visitors at my sickbed?' he asked with a wry attempt at humour.

The Healer looked at him speculatively. 'You've had a fair few,' she allowed. 'You've been here two months.'

Severus simply stared at her. Two months? How was that even possible? 'The snake bit me,' he whispered, 'and I died' He looked up at her sharply. 'I *died*, Healer Clearwater. Would you care to explain how I come to be here?'

The Healer rose and began to cast a series of diagnostic spells. 'You were brought in under the Vita Donum Charm, sir,' she told him between spells. 'You were very fortunate.'

Severus wracked his brain. Who could possibly have performed such a charm on him? The Dark Lord had left him lying in his own blood in the Shrieking Shack. Potter had been there, but the boy knew nothing of healing charms who, then?

'Professor,' the Healer said in a no-nonsense tone, 'I have to perform a mental status examination on you. You're going to find the questions annoying, but I have to do it, so it will be easier on both of us if you simply cooperate with me.'

Severus glared at her, the growing anxiety about the girl's absence gnawing at him.

'Get on with it, then,' he snapped.

'Your full name?'

They continued with fatuous questions regarding his date of birth, the name of the Minister for Magic, and the winner of the last Quidditch World Cup. He was testily naming three cities in England when Flint re-entered the room. The orderly handed Clearwater a scroll, which she quickly perused and tucked into her robes.

'Tell her he's conscious and lucid,' she murmured to Flint, then turned back to Severus.

Severus' heart leapt. 'Tell who?' he asked, forcing words past the huge lump of hope in his throat.

'Hermione Granger,' Clearwater responded, looking down at him with such kindness that he wanted to strike her.

He looked away from her, terrified that his eyes might show his confusion. 'She could come and see for herself, if she cared,' he said gruffly.

'Professor,' Clearwater said, and she waited for Severus to turn his face back to hers before she spoke again. 'We've had you here for two months. Your wounds healed, but you remained unconscious then, when you finally woke up, you didn't know who you were and you were hallucinating seeing people who weren't there.'

Severus blanched inwardly. How humiliating, to have made such a parade of himself all over St Mungo's what things had he done and said whilst out of his mind?

'We consulted a Spectral Cognoscenti,' Clearwater continued.

Severus could not prevent the sneer at this pronouncement. For the love of Merlin! They might as well have invited Sibyll Trelawney to Heal him.

'The Cognoscenti couldn't rule out the involvement of a malign spirit of some sort; she recommended that we send someone into your mind to investigate.'

Severus felt himself bristling. That, of course, explained the presence of Granger in his mind, but how *dared* they? 'You are aware, are you not, Healer, that non-consensual Legilimency is against wizarding law?' he inquired silkily. He ought to know; Merlin knew he had used it often enough, himself.

'You will, of course, do what you think best, Professor but I hope you will consider the consequences to everyone involved before you do anything ... rash.' She gave him a stern look. 'I'm sure you know that Hermione Granger came into your mind,' she continued.

Severus turned a keen eye on the Healer. Now they were getting to the part which interested him.

'I don't know what happened in your mind, Professor,' Clearwater said gravely, 'but whatever it was, it nearly killed both of you.'

Severus' hand shot out, closing over the Healer's wrist; the young woman winced, as if the wrist was sore, and Severus immediately released her. 'Where *is* Miss Granger?' he asked urgently.

'She's in the general ward,' the Healer replied, rubbing her wrist. 'Hermione is going to be all right, but she's still very weak.'

Severus struggled to sit up, appalled by his own weakness. 'Healer Clearwater, you will take me to her *right now*.'

The Healer moved quickly to elevate the bed, allowing him to sit upright. 'I understand that you want to make sure she's all right, sir,' Clearwater said with quiet compassion, 'but you're not well enough to go visiting.'

Severus felt his stomach clench in dread, his mind running in circles completely independent of the Healer's words. Did he want to know if it had been real? He drew in a ragged breath. He had to reason through it. If their connexion had only been a dream, it was better to find out quickly and to assess the ground for a possible campaign to take it from dream to reality. He wasn't used to getting what he wanted when had it ever happened? Disappointment had been the ruling emotion of his life until he had schooled himself not to hope damn her for making him vulnerable again! Surely he would be able to tell simply by looking at her if it had been a dream or reality.

Would she be as kind outside of his mind as she had been within it?

'I'm not asking you, Miss Clearwater,' he said icily, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. 'I am going with you or without you. Your superiors might take the news more kindly if you're with me when I leave my room but suit yourself.'

Hermione was sitting up in her bed with a Healer on one side and an orderly on the other when Clearwater guided Severus into the room on an air-chair.

'Look who's come to see you, Hermione,' Clearwater said as they entered.

The orderly was between them, but Severus caught glimpses of Hermione's face. 'You seem well enough,' he said, feeling awkward and wrong-footed for having rushed to her bedside.

'So they assure me, Professor,' her voice floated to him as the orderly moved away from the bedside.

Then those warm, vibrant brown eyes were on Severus' face, and his questions were met with all the answers ever known.

It was like bumping foreheads with someone when both of you were reaching for something one of you had dropped, so swiftly did their minds rush to embrace as their eyes met. A week of sunlit days passed or perhaps it was only a moment before Severus said, 'May we have the room, please?'

Clearwater gathered the others and shepherded them out as Severus magicked the air-chair closer to Hermione's bedside. The tiny bit of her life force, given at his lowest ebb to keep him going, glowed within him like a candle flame, so vividly did he feel it burning inside him. By contrast, she looked so pale and wan against the pristine white pillowcase that he was moved to speak.

'I believe I have something of yours, and I would like to return it,' he said, taking the risk of extending his hand to her and reaping the reward of having her slip her hand into his.

Hermione gazed at him as if she were feasting her eyes upon the finest work of art. For the first time in his life, Severus was on the receiving end of a burning, greedy look, and the strength of the emotion he felt in response was like drumfire in the air. It hadn't been a dream it had been real better than real, for the time in his memories was past, but this, what he felt right now, was forever. He was sure of it. He had only to share eyes with her to know it was true.

'I'd like for it to remain where it is,' she told him.

At her words, the spark pulsed once in acknowledgement, and he wondered if it would always be thus, that any reference she made to the part of her in him would elicit a physical response he could not ignore. He found himself devoutly hoping so. Yet to see her so weak when he desperately wanted to pull her into a crushing embrace was daunting. He tilted his head slightly, rubbing a gentle circle with his thumb on the back of her hand.

'Then perhaps I could return the favour?' he suggested in his mildest tone, keeping his fervent wish cloaked in nonchalance.

Her eyes lit up, and his pulse quickened; she wanted it, just as he did for each of them to have a life spark of the other within themselves, more intimate than sexual union. Yet still, she did not speak.

'As I understand it,' he added, dropping the timbre of his voice, leaning in to speak to her, and her alone, 'I am one hundred percent, physically perfectly fit and the sooner you are out of this place, the sooner the team can begin ... collaborating.'

Her eyes brightened until she seemed to be lit from within, and the smile she trained upon him would have blinded a lesser man. 'Then by all means, Professor,' she said.

Taking his wand in hand, Severus steadied his mind to cast the charm, briefly reflecting on the persons for whom he would willingly give up one iota of his life force.

Hermione. She was the only one.

'*Vita Donum*,' he intoned, and the jet of golden light which sped from his wand to her heart gave them matching frissons of energy, the charge travelling back and forth between them through their joined hands as they gazed without blinking into one another's eyes. In that moment, he had a clear memory: lying upon the dirty floor, blood gushing from his throat, and the girl appearing over him, a look of fierce concentration on her face as she pointed her wand and imparted life unto death.

He lowered his wand but held fast to her hand, watching with great satisfaction as her colour improved and strength visibly generated within her. She would recover much more quickly, now soon, they would clear out of this place together.

With all his heart in his eyes, bare to her scrutiny, he said, 'I thought I was all alone there, for a while.'

And he knew he was seeing into her utterly welcoming heart as her brown eyes filled with tears, and she replied, 'Never.'

Finite

A/N: The Author's theory is thus: Hermione's trip into Severus' mind did not change what happened in his life, but her visits and what transpired between them created a second set of memories, super-imposed over the first. The entire notion is the Author's fabrication from beginning to end and has no right or wrong answer.

This chapter was betaed by DeeMichelle and Keladry Lupin and Brit-picked by MagicAlly.

Hope you enjoyed this foray into a different genre for me. Thanks for reading!