Non Omnis Moriar

by Heatherly

Summary

Having survived the Battle of Hogwarts, Severus returns to his position as Potions Master, no more than a shadow of his former self. Hermione is determined to help him, but how can either of them make peace with a past that refuses to let them go?
Introductory Notes: Welcome, readers! Just a few notes before we get started:

1.) I've been writing HP fanfic for years, though this is my first Severus/Hermione story. I'll be exploring what might've happened if he'd survived the Battle of Hogwarts, including a fair amount of mystery and an unlikely romance.

2.) I've never seen Ron/Hermione as a compatible couple, which will be reflected here. I don't intend on making Ron a villain, but there are times when he'll be portrayed in a less than flattering light. The same is true for other Weasleys, as I do think they'd take his side in certain situations (especially him wanting to get married/start a family).

3.) My stories contain profanity, sexual content, and other adult themes. Please read at your own discretion.

4.) Future updates will be posted every other weekend (unless life interferes).

Non Omnis Moriar: (Latin) I Shall Not Wholly Die

Chapter 1: Survival

Hermione had forgotten what silence was like.

She couldn't have imagined it being quiet a few hours ago, with screams and shouts and curses flying in every direction. The centaurs had made her ears ring as they'd stampeded through the courtyard, though that was nothing compared to the rumble of stone and mortar as the castle walls had been blasted apart.

Even when Voldemort had fallen, the noise hadn't stopped. Fearful cries had been replaced by yells of triumph, explosions of fireworks peppering the morning sky.

Silence had settled over the castle by slow degrees, such a subtle change that she hadn't even noticed it at first. Ragged sobs had given way to soundless tears, moans of pain soothed away by a healer's touch. Soon enough, even those who'd celebrated had lowered their voices, surrendering to the exhaustion that haunted them all.

Hermione sighed, shooting a glance at Harry. He'd fallen asleep as soon as they'd reached the common room, his peaceful expression strangely at odds with his battered appearance. She wished she could join him, but it was simply too quiet, too serene, nothing left to distract her from her anxious thoughts. She'd never felt so restless, her nerves thrumming as she got up to pace the room.

What was wrong with her? Now that Voldemort was dead, she had nothing to worry about, nothing to fear, no reason to believe that the darkness would ever come again. She'd survived, along with most of her friends, and the others certainly hadn't died in vain. Of course, she was sad for them. Terribly so. But deep down, she knew that wasn't what troubled her now.

"What was it?" Ron had asked as Harry scooped the memories out of the Pensieve. "What did he show you?"
"Didn't you hear what I told Voldemort? Snape wasn't a traitor. He switched sides when Voldemort targeted my mother. All those years, he was protecting me from..."

"Protecting you?" Ron interrupted. "He hated you!"

"Yeah, well, there were reasons for that. I'm not saying all of them were fair, but..."

"What reasons?"

Harry hesitated, shoving the memories in his pocket. "It doesn't matter. Look, I'd rather not talk about this, okay?"

For once, Hermione had kept her mouth shut, realizing that Harry was deeply upset by what he'd seen. Who could blame him? To spend all that time thinking that Professor Snape was his mortal enemy, only to find out that he'd been one of their greatest allies? She didn't know what Snape had given him through those memories, but it was obviously something significant, the one thing that had helped him defeat Voldemort for good.

"Look... at... me..."

Hermione shivered, remembering Snape's tortured expression. It was as if he'd been trying to rid himself of every emotion he'd ever felt, projecting his feelings outward like he'd done with his memories. And then just as suddenly, the intensity in his eyes had faded, his features forever frozen in a mask of pain.

No, she didn't blame Harry for feeling the way he did. Snape's death was awful, one she wouldn't have wished on her worst enemy. To see someone suffer so much, only to realize they'd been trying to help you?

"Yes, Dumbledore's dead," Harry had told Voldemort, "but you didn't have him killed. He chose his own manner of dying, chose it months before he died, arranged the whole thing with the man you thought was your servant."

That meant Snape had acted as a spy until the very end, allowing everyone to believe he was a traitor. Why had he agreed to such a thing? He must've known that the entire Wizarding world would despise him. And what about Dumbledore? Why would he have chosen to die? How could he put Snape in such an awful position, especially when it was clear now that he'd been loyal all along? Was it a ploy to make Voldemort believe that Snape was in control of the Elder Wand?

If so, he must've known that Snape would be killed. Had he shared that part of the plan? Or had Snape stumbled into it blindly, unaware of what was happening until it was too late?

Hermione shook her head. Could Dumbledore really have been that cruel? She didn't want to think so, yet she'd seen what had happened in the Shrieking Shack. She'd heard the confusion in Snape's voice give way to panic, followed by his last, desperate attempt to communicate with Harry before he died.

"Take... it. Take... it."

No, that couldn't have been planned. She knew it, her heart aching as she imagined how Snape must've felt when he'd recognized the truth. He'd had nothing to give him comfort, only the bleak reminder that no one, not even Dumbledore, had cared whether he lived or died.

Really, it was no wonder that Snape's was the death that haunted her. Unlike the others, he'd died alone, with no reason to believe that a single soul would mourn his passing. He hadn't been
surrounded by friends and loved ones, nor would anyone bother to care for his body. Some of them hadn't even heard what Harry said. Others would almost certainly be reluctant to believe it. They'd probably just toss him into an unmarked grave, which was what they planned to do with the real Death Eaters.

Hermione didn't even realize what she was doing until she was halfway down the stairs, though by the time she made it to the front entrance, her resolve was firm. She ignored the voices that called out to her, nearly slipping on the damp grass as she raced across the grounds. Only when she'd made it past the Whomping Willow did she hesitate, bracing herself for what would no doubt be a grisly job.

"Right," she said, taking a deep breath as she entered the tunnel. "Let's get this over with."

The first thing she saw was the blood, a wide, dark stain that covered the floor like an overly large rug. But there was no body lying in the middle of it, only a crumpled black cloak.

"Bloody hell," she whispered as she spotted the markings. Bloody handprints led away from the larger stain, followed by an indistinguishable smear where Snape had struggled out of his robes. He'd managed to drag himself across the room, discarding the heavy clothing that must've hindered his movements.

Hermione moved forward, nearly tripping over his coat as she did so. It was only when she glanced over her shoulder that she saw him, his body lying facedown just a couple feet from the tunnel.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, her vision blurring as her eyes filled with tears. "God, I'm so sorry."

He hadn't been dead when they'd left him. That much was clear. He'd tried to escape, to get help, to… keep fighting? Whatever he'd been trying to do, he'd obviously failed.

Wiping her eyes, she used her wand to ease him onto his back. His face was pale and gaunt, his features so unnaturally still that she couldn't help but shiver. He wore nothing but boots and trousers, his shirt wadded up and pressed against the wound in his neck.

"I'm so sorry," she repeated. "Sorry we left you this way."

Yet even as she said it, she had a strange thought. What if he'd done it on purpose? What if he'd wanted them to think he was dead, afraid they might linger here too long? It seemed absurd, yet he'd obviously been trying to help them. If he'd believed that they'd been running out of time, wouldn't he have done whatever it took to get them to leave?

Maybe. Maybe not. In any case, she chose to believe it, finding comfort in the idea that he'd had some choice in the matter.

"Right," she said quietly, "I guess we'd better get you cleaned up."

She hesitated, surprised by how reluctant she was to touch him. She might not like dead bodies, but she'd had no problem kissing Fred's forehead, nor giving Remus and Tonks a quick hug. But of course, Snape was different. She couldn't imagine he would've wanted her to touch him, even if he wasn't alive to feel it.

"You're being absurd," she muttered, lifting her wand to cast a cleansing charm. It removed the blood and dirt from his chest, drawing attention to how thin he'd been beneath his voluminous robes. His body was nothing but muscle and sinew, his pale flesh covered by the lightest dusting of fine black hair. Strange, but she'd never imagined him having a bellybutton, nor small, round nipples that were as pink as her own. It made him seem so vulnerable, so human… in that moment, she found it hard to believe that she'd ever been frightened of him.
Feeling more confident, she moved closer, plucking several bits of debris from his hair. She pulled the wadded fabric away from his neck, relieved that the wound was no longer bleeding as she probed at it with her fingers.

He hissed.

At first, she thought she was hearing things. But then there was a strange noise, caught somewhere between a gurgle and a groan. She scrutinized his features, her eyes widening as his mouth twisted into a grimace.

"Professor Snape?!

He didn't open his eyes. Maybe he didn't have the strength. But as she looked more closely, she could see that he was breathing, his chest rising and falling ever so slightly as she placed her hand over his heart. If he was offended by the touch, he didn't show it. Instead, his features relaxed, only to contort again as she moved to clean the blood from his neck.

Finally, he cracked an eye open, giving his head an infinitesimal shake.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know it hurts. If we can just get you up to the castle…"

Another shake, followed by a groan.

"Stop that." She hesitated, sinking back on her heels. "Look, just… blink once for yes, twice for no. Can you do that?"

He fluttered his eyelashes.

"Good. Do you know where you are? Who I am?"

Yes.

"Do you want me to send for help?"

No.

These were rapid blinks, surprising in their vehemence.

"Well, what am I supposed to do then?"

He opened and closed his mouth, giving her a helpless look. The gesture drew her attention to his lips, which were cracked and bleeding.

"Would you like some water?"

Yes.

She nodded, bringing her wand to his mouth. Careful not to choke him, she dribbled a few drops onto his tongue, hearing him groan in relief as he managed to swallow. She repeated the process once, twice, and then a third time, only stopping when he seemed satisfied.

"Better?"

Yes.

"Good," she said, "though I don't know what else I can do for you. I should really send my
Patron…"

No.

She caught a flash of fear in his eyes, which helped her understand his reluctance. He had no way of knowing how the battle had ended, nor what might happen if he was forced to deal with people from either side. He wouldn't want to face anyone who might see him as an enemy, especially when he was helpless to raise a wand in his own defense.

"Do you want to know what happened with the battle? I'm sorry, I should've told you sooner."

Clearly, this was what he'd been waiting for. He blinked once, his expression almost eager.

"Well," she said, "I don't know what you shared with Harry, but it must've done the trick. Voldemort is dead."

Snape grunted, closing his eyes in apparent relief.

"Shall I tell you the rest?"

Yes.

She told him everything she could think of, describing Harry's supposed death along with Neville's moment of heroism, followed by the fall of Bellatrix and several other Death Eaters. His eyes widened as she explained Harry's return, relating every detail of the final showdown.

"Voldemort knew the truth," she said. "There at the end, Harry told him. Do you want to know what he said?"

Yes.

"He said, 'Severus Snape wasn't yours. Snape was Dumbledore's, Dumbledore's from the moment you started hunting down my mother. And you never realized it, because of the thing you can't understand. You never saw Snape cast a Patronus, did you, Riddle'?"

Snape's mouth twisted, his chest heaving with silent sobs. He lost consciousness, though only briefly, tears leaking from the corners of his tightly shut eyes. She knew then that this was why he'd struggled to stay alive, desperate to discover whether he'd succeeded or failed. Now that he knew, she could feel him slipping away, his pulse already fainter beneath her fingertips.

"It's not too late," she said hastily. "Stay with me just a little longer, all right? I'll get you some help."

"Nnnnno."

The word was barely distinguishable, more of a moan than anything else.

"So what do you expect me to do? Just leave you here to die?"

He opened his eyes, responding with one slow, deliberate blink.

"What?! I can't just…"

But it was too late to argue. He couldn't hear her now, his face going slack as he slipped into unconsciousness.

Only then did she notice the empty vial next to his hand, along with a couple others that had been
discarded nearby. Potions? That explained how he'd been able to prolong his life for the past few hours, though whatever he'd taken was obviously wearing off now. Without further treatment, he'd soon be dead.

Should she let him go? Clearly, that was what he wanted, but he also believed he had nothing left to live for now that Voldemort was gone. What kind of future could he have possibly envisioned for himself? One full of pain and isolation, no doubt, perhaps even a permanent residence in Azkaban.

Of course, he couldn't have known that she'd already decided to stand up for him. He didn't know that there was one person in this world who cared enough to fight for his survival, even if he no longer had enough hope to fight for himself. She hadn't had a chance to tell him these things, hadn't even known she'd felt them until now. But they seemed right somehow, giving her the strength she needed to push herself to her feet.

"You might live to hate me for this," she told him as she conjured a stretcher, "but at least you'll be alive."

Getting him up to the castle wasn't easy. The trip back up the tunnel was painstakingly slow, his breathing erratic as she made her way across the grounds. But she still felt his pulse beneath her fingers, his chest rising and falling ever so slightly as she guided the stretcher through the front entrance.

"Hermione! What on earth…"

Molly's eyes widened as she came to stand beside Professor McGonagall, both of them staring at Hermione as if she'd lost her mind.

"Is that Snape? Why would you…"

"Not now. Please."

Ignoring their stunned expressions, she took him straight to the Hospital Wing, meeting Poppy's narrowed eyes with a steely gaze of her own.

"He needs a bed. Blood Replenisher, Antivenin, whatever else you think will help."

"You want me to treat… I admire your compassion, dear, but after everything he's done…"

"You have no idea what he's done," Hermione shot back. "Nor do I have time to tell you. Please, help him."

Maybe it was something in Hermione's voice. Maybe it was the look on her face. Whatever it was, Poppy seemed to deflate, shaking her head as she leaned over to inspect the wound.

"Well?"

"The venom has already been neutralized, though it still doesn't look good. He's lost a lot of blood."

"I know," Hermione said, remembering the impossibly large stain he'd left behind. "I think he took some Blood Replenisher? I found a couple of empty vials."

"Looks that way, yes, though it was nowhere near enough. He'd need to be dosed every hour for at least the next couple days. Even then, I'm not sure…"

"Then dose him. We'll never know until we try."
Poppy hesitated. "That potion is already in short supply. I can't allow others to go untreated for the sake of a…"

"He's not a Death Eater. I know it seemed that way, but… look, I don't have time to explain just now. What matters is that he needs treatment. I'm not leaving until he gets it."

"It isn't that simp…"

Poppy trailed off, returning her attention to Snape as he let out a rasping noise. Suddenly, he couldn't seem to catch his breath, his eyes flying open as he gasped for air. Hermione opened her own mouth, ready to beg for help, but Poppy had already lifted her wand. She touched it to the wound at his neck, murmuring several charms in rapid succession.

"What was that?" Hermione said, sighing in relief as Snape started to breathe more easily. "What did you do?"

"He's got two holes in his throat that aren't supposed to be there. Makes it much harder to draw in enough air, especially in his weakened condition."

"You sealed them off?"

Poppy nodded. "I don't know how long it will hold, but it should be good enough for now."

Snape's eyes were still open, but he wasn't looking at them. His gaze was fixed on the ceiling, his expression bewildered.

"Professor Snape?"

"I doubt he can hear you," Poppy said, withdrawing a vial from her pocket. "The blood loss is hitting him hard now, not helped by lingering shock and a great deal of pain. He's delirious – would probably be ranting and raving if he was capable of speech."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Hold his mouth open, will you? I need to get these potions in him."

Hesitantly, Hermione brought her hand to Snape's face, sliding a thumb between his lips.

"A little wider. Yes, that's good." Poppy leaned forward, dribbling a bit of Blood Replenisher onto his tongue. She waited for his reflexive swallow and then repeated the process, emptying the vial before she reached for a different potion.

"What's that?"

"Pain reliever. Strongest one I have. It'll put him out for a day or two, though that's probably for the best. If he's going to recover, his body will need plenty of time to rest and heal."

"What are his chances?"

"Truthfully?" Poppy sighed. "I don't know. I've never seen a wound like this, nor anyone who managed to survive after losing so much blood."

"But he's made it this far," Hermione pointed out. "Isn't that a good sign?"

"Maybe, though it won't matter if I don't have enough potion to go around. I'm hoping for a delivery from St. Mungo's, but I'm not sure when…"
"Blood Replenisher," Hermione interrupted. "Is that all he needs?"

"That's the most urgent one, yes, especially since he'll need a great deal of it. I'm a little low on pain reliever, but we should have enough to get by."

Hermione glanced at Snape, relieved to see that he was unconscious again, his face no longer contorted with pain.

"I need to go take care of something," she said. "Will he be all right here?"

Poppy shrugged. "There are plenty who won't be happy about it, but I won't have anyone causing trouble in my ward. I'll put him down at the end where he's less likely to be disturbed."

"If anything happens…"

"You'll be the first to know."

"Thank you," Hermione said as she turned to leave. "I'll be back a little later."

She hadn't realized how tired she was, her eyes bleary as she trudged down the hall. Nonetheless, she headed straight for the dungeons, not stopping until she'd reached Professor Slughorn's office. She knocked several times, on the verge of giving up when he finally opened the door.

"Ah," he said, smoothing a hand over his striped pajamas. "One third of the famous Golden Trio! What can I do for you, my dear?"

"I need bat wings," she said, "salamander blood and toadstool caps. Do you have them?"

"I do, though I can't imagine wanting to brew at a time like this. Shouldn't you be off celebrating?"

"The last thing I want to do right now is celebrate. Please, I just need to make a couple potions."

"Right," he said. "Come with me."

At first, she was afraid that he'd stick around to supervise her. Instead, he unlocked the storeroom, telling her to help herself to whatever she needed.

"Now if you'll excuse me, dear, I really must be getting back to bed."

"Of course. Thank you, Professor Slughorn."

Hermione didn't know how long she stayed in the Potions classroom, barely able to keep her eyes open as she set half a dozen cauldrons to simmer. She produced one batch and then another, refusing to stop until every bit of the ingredients had been used.

At half past midnight, she finally made her way back to the Hospital Wing, her arms laden down with several trays of potions. She set them on the floor next to Snape's bed, taking a moment to check on his condition. He looked slightly better, his neck now bandaged with strips of clean white linen.

"Good gracious! How did you…" Poppy trailed off, shaking her head in disbelief.

"Will it be enough?"

"Yes, I'd say so. In fact, I'd be surprised if I didn't have plenty left over."
Hermione nodded, reaching up to stifle a yawn. "All right then. I'll see you tomorrow."

She didn't know how she made it up to Gryffindor tower, nor did she have the energy to speak to Harry or Ron. She didn't even have it in her to wonder what the morning would bring, what the future might hold for Snape or how he'd feel about what she'd done. All she could do was collapse on the closest couch, feeling strangely satisfied as she drifted off to sleep.
Chapter 2: Aftermath

"What happened?" Hermione said as she followed Harry into Ron's bedroom. "Did they set a date for the trial?"

He shook his head. "Still gathering evidence."

"Evidence? What kind of…"

"Geez, Hermione. Give him a second to catch his breath."

She shot an irritated glance at Ron, though her annoyance faded as she turned back to Harry. His face was even paler than usual, his movements sluggish as he sat down on the bed.

"Sorry," she said, struggling to control her impatience. "We can talk about it tomorrow if you want."

He shrugged. "Not much to say, really."

"Not much to say? Harry, you were gone for 14 hours!"

"Knowing the Ministry," Ron said, "he probably spent most of the time just waiting around."

"Yeah, when I wasn't signing autographs."

Harry grimaced, clearly uncomfortable with his newfound fame. The trip to the Ministry had been his first public outing since the battle – Hermione could only imagine how much unwanted attention he'd received. Really, it was a shame he hadn't asked her and Ron to come with him. If nothing else, they could've at least provided a buffer of sorts.

"But you did speak to someone, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I talked to Kingsley."

"Did you tell him about the memories?"

"A bit." Harry hesitated, plucking at a loose thread in his trousers. "I told him the truth about Dumbledore, which was the most important thing. Some of the other stuff… I don't think Snape would want…"

"Professor Snape," she corrected automatically.

"Professor?" Ron snorted. "Wasn't he sacked?"

"Only because the other professors thought he was loyal to Voldemort."

"Either way, he's not a teacher anymore."

"Maybe not, but I still think it's nice to…" She trailed off, realizing that Ron had a point. Whatever Snape chose to do in the future, it seemed highly unlikely that he'd ever return to Hogwarts.
"Anyway," Harry said, "I don't think he'd want me sharing some of those things."

"I know, Harry, but if that's what it takes to keep him out of Azkaban…"

"He's not going to Azkaban."

There was no point in questioning him any further. He spoke with absolute conviction, making it clear that in his mind, at least, the decision had already been made. She knew then that he'd stop at nothing to keep Snape out of prison. Granted, he might not want to reveal anything too private, but if it came down to that, he'd do what needed to be done.

"Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"What you saw in the Pensieve…"

He shifted his gaze to the wall, his expression guarded. "What about it?"

She'd heard what he'd told Voldemort, of course. Snape had been loyal to Dumbledore, having switched sides for Lily Potter's sake. He'd done everything in his power to save her, and when that had failed, he'd sworn to protect her son instead. Why?

Because he'd loved her.

It seemed simple enough, yet Hermione still had numerous questions. To think that Snape had cared for someone so deeply, a devotion that had changed the entire course of his life? She had no idea how to reconcile that with the man she'd known. That Snape had been cold and unyielding, never seeming to give a damn about anyone.

Then again, that wasn't exactly true, was it? He'd certainly given a damn where Harry was concerned, reacting to even the smallest transgression with harsh words or punishments. Granted, some of that could be chalked up to mutual dislike, but what about the rest of it?

"I know you don't want to tell us what you saw…"

"It's not that I don't want to," Harry interrupted. "It's just private, you know? I mean, he only shared those things with me because…"  

"Because he had no other choice," she finished for him.

"Right. We would've lost the war if he hadn't done what he did."

She hesitated, recalling that horrific scene in the Shrieking Shack. Vividly, she pictured Snape's agonized expression, his mouth twisting as he'd uttered his final words.

"Look… at… me…"

In that moment, none of them could've predicted his survival. He'd spoken with the desperation of a dying man, a flash of perfect clarity after a lifetime of concealment. But what did it mean? She'd been trying to figure that out for weeks, realizing that for one fleeting moment, Snape had revealed the truth of who he was.

"How's your mum?" Harry said, turning his attention to Ron. "Have you seen her today?"

Ron shook his head, his expression grim. "Tried knocking on the door this afternoon. She didn't
They'd been at the Burrow for nearly a month, though it might as well have been the day after the battle as far as Molly was concerned. She still spent most of her time in the twins' old bedroom, looking like a ghost on the rare occasions she came out to check on Ron and Ginny.

Arthur was grieving, too, though he seemed to find solace in work. He left before sunrise each morning, not returning until well after nightfall. Ron's brothers were coping in much the same way. Bill and Percy had returned to their jobs a couple days after the battle, while Charlie had quickly escaped to the continent.

As for George…

"I'm starving," Ron said, obviously eager to change the subject. "Hermione, do you think you could…"

"There's pizza downstairs," Harry said.

"Really? Thanks, mate."

Hermione shook her head, keeping her thoughts to herself as Ron left the room. True, it was rather obnoxious that he still expected others to cater to his needs. But he'd had to grow up in other, infinitely harder ways, which made her feel like she should cut him some slack.

"How's Professor Snape?" she said as soon as he was gone. "Did you hear anything?"

Harry yawned, lifting his glasses to rub his eyes. "Still at St. Mungo's. Kingsley says his condition hasn't changed much."

"Are they sure he's not…" She trailed off, remembering the last time she'd seen Snape. His eyes had been fixed on the ceiling, his expression blank. Even when the healers had shown up to transport him to St. Mungo's, he hadn't reacted, lying so still he might as well have been carved from stone.

Harry shook his head. "It's not that he can't respond. Just… doesn't want to, I guess."

"Do you think I made a mistake?"

"What do you mean?"

"He wanted to die. Told me to leave him alone and let him die."

"Yeah, well…" Harry hesitated, giving her hand a little squeeze. "No point in feeling guilty about it. You did the only thing you could do."

"Maybe," she said, "though if he never comes out of this…"

"If he doesn't, you shouldn't blame yourself. Really, you shouldn't. You've given him a chance to put the past behind him, to live in a world where he won't have to serve Voldemort or Dumbledore, or…"

"A chance to live for himself."

"Right. It's up to him whether he takes that chance."

"What if he doesn't?"
Harry shrugged. "Then he's an idiot."

Hermione opened her mouth, only to close it again as Ron returned. He had a half eaten slice of pizza in one hand, his expression cheerful as he plopped on the bed in between them.

"What'd I miss?"

"Nothing much," Harry said as he got to his feet. "I think I'll go see what Ginny's up to."

"Harry, wait!"

"Yeah?"

"I…" She trailed off, realizing she'd run out of excuses to keep him around. "Um, just… tell Gin she'll have the room to herself tonight."

"Are you sure?"

Harry didn't bother to hide his hopeful expression, which made her feel terribly guilty. She nodded, watching him make a futile attempt to straighten his hair before he hurried out of the room.

"'Mione?"

She jumped, startled by Ron's voice as it broke the awkward silence. "Yeah?"

"C'mere."

"Um, I was just about to go down and get some pizza."

She heard him sigh, resisting the urge to flinch as he laid a hand on her back. He moved to sit beside her, his forehead wrinkled in consternation.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing! I haven't had dinner, that's all."

It was a lie and they both knew it, though Ron was gracious enough not to point it out. He sat there quietly instead, waiting for an explanation she didn't know how to give.

"Nothing's wrong," she said more firmly. "It's just… things have been a bit weird since the battle, you know?"

A shadow passed over his features, reminding her that he'd been struggling, too. Unfortunately, they seemed to be coping in opposite ways. He obviously craved closeness, while she desperately needed space. That was why she'd spent the last three weeks looking for any excuse to keep Harry around. It was the only way to maintain a little distance without hurting Ron's feelings.

"I know," he said. "I just want everything to be okay between us."

"Everything's fine."

This time, he chose to believe her, sighing in relief as he pulled her into his arms. She didn't resist, parting her lips ever so slightly as his mouth covered hers. Really, this wasn't so bad, was it? If a bit of snogging was all it took to make him feel better…

"Ron!"
Hastily, she pulled away, yanking her top down as she did so.

"Sorry," he said. "I just thought… you know, since we're together now…"

"We are together," she interrupted. "But let's slow down a bit, all right?"

"Okay."

Before she knew it, they were kissing again, though this time, Ron made more of an effort to restrain himself. He kept his hands in her hair, his touch so gentle that she began to relax. She let him ease her onto her back, sighing softly as he brushed his lips against her neck.

Yes, this was much better. If he could just…

"Ready?"

"Ready for what?"

"You know," he whispered, his breath suddenly hot in her ear. "Ready to shag."

"Ready to shag?" She shook her head, pushing herself into a sitting position. "Didn't I just tell you to slow down?"

"If you want a bit more snogging before we…" Ron trailed off, his expression bewildered. "I mean, I don't know how long it takes to warm girls up, but if you tell me what to do, I'll be happy to do it."

"Warm girls up?!"

Only then did she realize that "slow down" meant something quite different to Ron. He obviously assumed they were on the brink of having sex, though she had no idea how he'd come to that conclusion. Wishful thinking, perhaps? Either way, he certainly hadn't consulted her on the matter.

"I'm not ready to do that, okay? Not tonight, and not anytime soon."

She hadn't meant to be so blunt, but it was too late to take it back. Ron looked crushed, his mouth opening and closing several times before he managed to respond.

"I don't understand. I mean, we've already waited so long…"

The truth was, Hermione didn't understand it either. It just felt wrong somehow, even more so in light of Ron's growing impatience. Was it really just a matter of not being ready? She wanted to think so, though deep down, she knew it was much more complicated than that.

"Look, I just don't feel like it, all right? I'm sorry."

Ron didn't respond, nor did he tell her goodnight as she turned and left the room. He glared at the wall instead, reminding her of a petulant child.

Perhaps that was the real problem. She couldn't shake the feeling that she'd outgrown him somehow, like the right moment had already come and gone. But how was that possible? Just three weeks ago, she'd been kissing him in the middle of battle, oblivious to anything but him. She'd loved him fiercely in that moment, utterly convinced that he was everything she'd ever wanted.

What had changed in just a few short weeks? More importantly, how could she get back to the way things were before?
She made her way downstairs, resisting the urge to cry as she curled up on the couch. Suddenly, she felt tired, so very tired, weighed down by the strained silence that had permeated the Burrow ever since the battle. She didn't know what she'd expected after Voldemort's defeat, but it wasn't this.

Would it ever get easier? She hoped so, though she had no idea how to make that happen. All she could do was close her eyes, haunted by Ron's disappointed expression as she drifted off to sleep.

Blood. So much blood. It seeped into the floorboards, bright red torrents still gushing from the wound in Snape's neck. That terrible scream still echoed in Hermione's ears, though the gurgling sound that followed was infinitely worse.

"Take… it. Take… it."

She moved forward, conjuring a flask as she did so. And then there was nothing to do but retreat back into the shadows, watching helplessly as Snape clutched at Harry's robes.

He wasn't her enemy. She knew that now, though deep down, she supposed she'd known it all along. How had she known? She struggled to answer that question, even as Snape's battle came to an end. His hand dropped to the floor, twitching once before it lay still.

Harry didn't cry. None of them did, though she heard someone sobbing in the distance. Who was it? Did it matter? They had to go. Voldemort was calling… they had to go.

But as she turned to leave, it wasn't Voldemort's voice she heard. It was Snape's.

"Look… at… me…"

He hadn't said those words to her. He'd directed them at Harry, pushing them out with his last, gasping breath. Still, the memory was enough to make her glance back over her shoulder, followed by the strange sensation that she'd never truly seen Professor Snape before that night. She'd certainly never seen him the way he was just then, his features slack, lying utterly still in the semi darkness. Was that how he'd looked when he'd slept? What had he dreamt about?

But of course, he wasn't asleep. He was dead. There was no point to her newfound curiosity, nothing to do but leave him behind. She turned away, Ron's hand clutching hers as he pulled her into the tunnel.

"Don't go."

Again, she heard Snape speak, though these words were quite unlike the others. His voice was soft yet strong, no hint of the painful rasp she'd heard before. She tried to turn back but it was too late. Ron wouldn't let her go, his fingers woven tightly through hers as he dragged her back toward the world above.

"WAIT!"

Hermione jolted awake, her breath catching on a sob. She pressed a hand to her swiftly beating heart, struggling to orient herself with her surroundings.

"All right, Hermione?"

She jumped, only to sigh in relief as she spotted a familiar figure at the foot of the stairs. As usual, Arthur was dressed for work, his face in shadow despite the pale gray light that crept in through the windows.
"Fine," she said. "What time is it?"

"Half past five. Do you need anything? I can make you some toast."

She shook her head, remembering his last attempt to make breakfast. He'd insisted on using a Muggle toaster, producing slices of charred bread that had been hard enough to chip a tooth. As for what had happened with the blender…

"Thank you, but I'm not really hungry."

He nodded. "Well, I best be off to work then."

She waited for him to leave before she trudged upstairs to take a shower, still shaken by her nightmare. Of course, it was far from the first one she'd had, but why did it seem like they were getting worse? She felt like she hadn't had a good night's sleep in weeks, not helped by the issues she'd been having with Ron.

By the time she got out of the shower, she felt a little better, taking a minute to fix her hair before she slipped into the sundress she'd borrowed from Ginny. She even put on a bit of lipgloss, something she hadn't done since long before the battle.

"Wow."

Until then, she hadn't realized how much she'd been neglecting herself. She stared at her reflection, unable to remember the last time she'd worn anything other than old jeans and a ratty jumper. Her hair looked better than it had in months, thoroughly brushed and woven into a neat braid.

Despite that, she was unnerved by her appearance. She'd lost more weight than she'd realized, her features almost gaunt. It didn't help that she was unnaturally pale, her skin almost translucent from lack of sunlight.

Sunlight. That was her problem. She hadn't left the Burrow in weeks, hadn't even bothered to step outside since their arrival. Really, it was no wonder she looked unhealthy. She'd shut herself up like a prisoner, oblivious to her surroundings as she'd struggled to get through each day.

Was this why Snape had looked the way he had? Try as she might, she couldn't deny the resemblance.

*Greasy old bat.*

Unlike the other students, she'd never called him names, though she *had* wondered why he didn't bother with his appearance. Now she understood, realizing that things like taking care of his hair probably hadn't even occurred to him. He'd been too busy dealing with the war, determined to keep himself alive until the very end.

Survival. That had been her focus too, a mindset that still persisted despite Voldemort's defeat. She'd grown far too used to living in hiding, ignoring trivial matters in favor of more urgent concerns.

Slowly, she picked up her wand, adding a touch of color to her cheeks and lips. She erased the dark circles under her eyes, though she chose to leave the angular shape of her face intact. It made her look older, more mature, a change she was already beginning to like. True, it wouldn't hurt for her to gain a little weight, but she didn't need a glamour for that.

With that thought, she headed to the kitchen, fixing herself a plate of eggs and bacon. She could only finish half of it, but… well, it was a start.
The time for survival was behind her. Now was the time for recovery, shifting her focus to all the little things she'd nearly forgotten. Plenty of rest. Regular, healthy meals. Perhaps even a bit of fresh air?

That, she realized, was what she'd been missing most of all. How long had it been since she'd had the luxury of moving freely throughout the world? When was the last time she'd gone somewhere simply because she'd wanted to?

Suddenly, she felt claustrophobic, the heavy silence of the Burrow seeming to press in on her from all sides. What had once been a refuge now felt like a prison, one she couldn't have been more desperate to escape.

"Accio quill and parchment!"

Went out for a bit, she scrawled hastily. Back before dinner.

The moment she stepped outside, all the tension seemed to drain out of her. She breathed in the scent of fresh greenery, sunlight warming her skin as she stopped to pick a few flowers. They were quite lovely, really, cornflowers mingled with pale pink peonies. She conjured a ribbon, tying them into a makeshift bouquet.

"So," she said to herself. "Where shall I go?"

She turned on her heel, her thoughts focused on Diagon Alley. But then a stronger, more insistent vision appeared in her mind, whisking her away to somewhere else entirely.

"Visitor or patient?"

He wouldn't want to see her. Why on earth had she bothered to come?

"Well?" The Welcome Witch scowled, glancing past her at several new arrivals.

"Um."

He wouldn't want to see her, but she needed to see him. Maybe it would help her understand…

"I'm sorry, Miss, but can you hurry up? I've got vermin coming out of my ears here."

"Visitor," she said hastily. "I'm here to see Severus Snape."

"First Floor."

Unlike the reception area, the Dai Llewellyn Ward was unnaturally quiet. Only her own footsteps pierced the silence, reminding her that she was an intruder in this place. Really, what was she thinking? Maybe she shouldn't…

"Good morning! Are you here for Mr. Snape?"

She jumped, caught off guard by the healer who'd just materialized from the closest room. Snape's room.

Her heart pounded furiously, her mind assaulted by unpleasant memories. She cringed as she remembered Professor Snape's harsh words, his insults, the cold, contemptuous way he'd looked at her no matter how hard she'd tried to please him. Eyes full of ridicule. Eyes full of disgust.
"Look… at… me…"

Eyes full of suffering.

"Yes, I…" She cleared her throat. "I'd like to see him."

"Brilliant." The healer smiled, tucking a wisp of silver hair behind her ear. "You're the first visitor he's had."

"Really?"

"Well, other than those fools from the Ministry. Why they keep bothering him with all their questions is beyond me. The poor man can't even speak!"

"I'm not here to bother him," Hermione said hastily. "I just want to see how he's doing."

The healer nodded. "Go on in, dear. I'm sure he'll be happy to see you."

Hermione doubted that, though she knew it was too late to turn back. She took a deep breath, her body rigid with tension as she stepped through the doorway.

"Oh."

To her relief, Professor Snape had never seemed less intimidating then he did just then. His usual black had been replaced by a white cotton robe, matching the pristine bandages around his neck. His hair appeared to be freshly washed, swept back from a face that was thinner, more gaunt than she remembered, cheekbones etched in sharp relief beneath crescents of thick black lashes.

"That's okay," she whispered to the healer as she turned to leave. "I'll just come back when he's awake."

"Ah, no need for that. Mr. Snape? Mr. Snape!"

"No, please…"

She cringed as Snape's eyes snapped open, darting around the room before they fixed on her. With that, she knew he was neither unresponsive or oblivious to his surroundings. His gaze was sharp and alert, the corners of his mouth turning down in a barely perceptible grimace.

"Mr. Snape, you have a visitor."

Before she could react, the healer left the room, closing the door behind her with a soft click.

"Hi," she said after a moment, desperate to fill the awkward silence. "I… um, I brought you some flowers. I mean, I don't know if you even like flowers, but I saw them when I was walking outside the Burrow, and I just thought…"

Snape gave the bouquet a passing glance, his dark eyes returning to her face.

"That's where I've been staying for the past few weeks. The Burrow. I didn't have anywhere else to go, really. My parents…" well, I won't go into all that. I'm sure you don't want…"

She trailed off, searching his features for some sign of emotion. Boredom? Annoyance? Pure, unadulterated hatred? She saw none of those things, only that same inscrutable stare.

"I know you can't talk," she said, "but there must be other ways for you to communicate. You can
still blink, right?"

He fluttered his eyelashes, giving her what she could only interpret as a sarcastic look.

"Good. How about once for yes, twice for no, just like we did on the night…"

Suddenly, his feelings were all too clear, his jaw tightening as he shifted his eyes to the ceiling.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I mean, for bringing it up, not for saving you. I can't apologize for that, even
if… do you want me to stop talking about this?"

He blinked once, slow and deliberate.

"Well, why don't I tell you about the books I ordered the other day?"

Again, he responded with a single blink, looking somewhat more relaxed.

"Let's see," she said, encouraged by his response. "I got all my seventh year textbooks. Not that I'm
planning on going back to Hogwarts, but I thought it would be good to familiarize myself with the
material. I've also ordered some magical history books from other countries – China, Egypt, India,
the United States. I've always been interested in other cultures. You know, how their practices differ
from ours? I might like to study that more seriously someday."

She paused, searching his face for any sign of boredom. Instead, he looked expectant, almost as if he
wanted her to continue.

"Of course," she said, "I'd have to actually go to those places to study them properly."

Snape made a tiny, barely audible noise, which seemed to be an expression of agreement.

"Have you ever traveled?" she asked him. "Well, I guess you haven't had much of a chance before
now, but you'll be able to do whatever you like once you've recovered."

His jaw tightened again, reminding her that the future must seem frightening from his perspective.
Why hadn't she set his mind at ease to begin with? Here she was, rattling on about books and travel,
while he'd probably spent the past few weeks dreading the possibility of imprisonment.

"I know you must be worried," she said quietly, "But you're not going to Azkaban. Harry's doing
everything he can to get your name cleared. He's been interviewed by the Ministry, and…"

She trailed off, startled by the abrupt entrance as the healer bustled into the room.

"All right, dear. Visiting hours are over."

"What? But I just got here!"

"Mr. Snape is feeling tired."

"How did you…” She shook her head, spotting a small object in Snape's palm. Clearly, he did have
ways of communicating with the healers, which he had no problem using if his visitor tread on
dangerous ground. For a split second, he almost looked smug, though his face quickly smoothed out
into that same inscrutable expression.

"Right," she muttered, trying not to sound peevish as the healer ushered her out of the room. "I guess
I'll see you later."
Overall, Hermione thought her visit with Snape had gone well. That was especially true now that she knew he'd had a choice in the matter. He could've summoned the healer much sooner, yet he hadn't. He'd only done so when she'd brought up a topic he clearly wasn't ready to hear about.

Really, she should've known better. The night he'd almost died was obviously painful to recall, as were the memories he'd chosen to share with Harry. She'd just have to be more careful in the future, sticking to whatever subjects he seemed to find tolerable.

"Where'd you go yesterday?" Ron asked her at breakfast the next morning.

"Nowhere, really. Just took a walk."

"Really?" He hesitated, clearing his throat rather loudly before he continued. "Well, look, I did want to apologize. About the other night, I mean. I wasn't trying to rush you."

"It's all right."

"If you need to wait, I'm okay with that. Will you just… can you tell me when you are ready? I'd rather not try again unless…"

"Sure," she said, managing to flash him a little smile. "I can do that."

He grinned back, obviously relieved that things were okay between them. Perhaps they were, at least for the moment, but she couldn't help worrying what would happen in the future. What if her feelings didn't change anytime soon? Would he still be patient after a few weeks, a couple months…

"Hey," he said, interrupting her thoughts. "How about a game of chess?"

"Oh, um, can we play later tonight? I have plans this afternoon."

"Plans?"

He looked confused, though to be fair, she could understand his reaction. It had been weeks since she'd attempted to do… well, much of anything, really.

"Yeah," she said. "Thought I'd go down to Flourish & Blotts. I forgot to order that Arithmancy textbook I wanted."

"Hermione, we're not in school."

"You're not on the Quidditch team either, but that doesn't stop you from playing all the time."

"That's different."

"Oh?" She raised an eyebrow. "How so?"

Ron shrugged. "Quidditch is fun."

"To you, maybe. Personally, I'd much rather…"

"Speaking of Quidditch," Harry said as he wandered into the kitchen. "Do you want to go down and check out the new broomsticks?"

"Sure." Ron paused, stuffing a last piece of toast in his mouth. "Hey, Hermione's already headed that way. Why don't we all go together?"
"Great! I'll see if Ginny wants to come."

Hermione sighed, unable to think of an excuse to avoid the outing. How could she explain that what she really wanted was a little time to herself? They wouldn't understand, especially if they assumed she was planning to visit Diagon Alley. Shopping was a social event, after all, the type of thing they'd always done together.

Of course, they did everything together. That was the problem. They'd been cooped up in the same house for nearly a month now, and before that... well, life on the run hadn't left much room for personal space.

"Ready?"

She nodded, trailing behind her friends as they headed for the Apparition point. Taking Ron's arm, she turned on her heel, closing her eyes against the dizzying whirl of shapes and colors.

"So," Harry said when they'd reached their destination. "Where to first?"

"Quality Quidditch, of course."

Sighing in resignation, she followed them into the shop. She'd never understood what was so fascinating about broomsticks, but they examined them for what seemed like hours, followed by a lengthy discussion with the shopkeeper. He persuaded Harry to sign several pieces of merchandise, thanking him profusely as he set the items back on the shelf.

"I'd be happy to give you a share of the profits."

"Um, that's really not necessary."

It was Harry's embarrassment that gave Hermione a reprieve, his cheeks crimson as he hurried out of the shop.

"Hey," Ginny said. "How about some Fortescue's?"

They headed to the ice cream parlor, which had recently been reopened by Florean's niece. If she was saddened by her uncle's death, she didn't show it, flashing each of them a cheery smile as she handed them their cones.

"So," Harry said a few minutes later. "Where to next?"

"Um." Ginny hesitated, shooting a quick look at her brother. "We thought we'd go check on George."

Harry nodded. "We'll just meet back up later, then."

"You sure?" Ron said.

"Of course," Hermione said, resisting the urge to roll her eyes. "Give George our love, all right?"

"Okay."

_Inseparable_. That word was usually meant as a compliment, but it wasn't necessarily a good thing. True, it had been unavoidable toward the end of the war, when relying on each other was often a matter of life or death. But now? She couldn't help but notice the way Ron glanced back over his shoulder, his expression anxious as he and Ginny disappeared around the corner.
"So," Harry said, flashing her a little smile. "Flourish & Blotts, then?"

"It'll probably take hours to find what I want. Isn't there something else you'd rather do?"

He shrugged. "I really don't mind."

"I know, but…"

"Are you Harry Potter?"

They both turned around, coming face to face with a rather large group of girls. None of them could've been more than 13 years old, their little faces bright with excitement as they waited for confirmation.

"Um, yeah," Harry said.

"I knew it!" one of the girls screeched.

"He's even more handsome in person!" exclaimed another.

A third girl stepped forward, visibly trembling as she thrust a copy of the *Daily Prophet* at Harry's chest. It had been published the day after the battle, his tired yet triumphant face emblazoned across the cover.

"Mr. Potter, may I have your autograph?"

Swallowing her guilt, Hermione seized the opportunity she'd been given. She slipped away without Harry's notice, her heart pounding as she made her way out to the London street. Only then did she feel like she could breathe freely, every muscle in her body seeming to relax.

She loved her friends. Really, she did. But she also needed time to herself, something she hadn't fully realized until her visit to St. Mungo's. Doing something on her own… making choices without having to consult Harry or Ron…

That, she supposed, was why she hadn't told them she'd gone to visit Snape. It was *her* choice, after all, not theirs. True, Harry would understand, but *Ron*? She didn't need his input, didn't feel like dealing with his confusion and snarky remarks.

If that meant she had to lie to him? Well, so be it. She had a right to her privacy.

She turned on her heel, closing her eyes as she Apparated to St. Mungo's. This time, she didn't hesitate, passing quickly through the reception area on her way to the first floor.

"May I help you?" the Welcome Witch called.

"No, thanks. I know where I'm going."
Chapter 3: Recovery

"Professor Snape?"

The figure on the bed remained perfectly still, not bothering to react as Hermione transfigured a stool. She sat down beside him, refusing to feel discouraged as she pulled a book out of her bag.

"I'm sorry for what happened yesterday. It's not easy carrying on a one-sided conversation, but I should've known better than to…"

Snape's chest rose and fell in a heavy sigh, letting her know he was already growing impatient with her.

"Anyway," she said hastily. "I thought it might be better if I read to you. Would you like that?"

He showed no hint of encouragement, though to be fair, he didn't try to stop her either. She took a deep breath, flipping to the title page.

"Hieroglyphical Magic: A History of Ancient Egypt."

The book turned out to be quite tedious, even by her standards. She managed to get through the first chapter, expecting the healer to come shoo her away at any moment. Instead, Snape gradually turned his head in her direction, his fingers nowhere near the alert button.

When she finished the third chapter, she paused for a sip of water, giving him a dubious look.

"Do you want me to stop?"

He made a peculiar noise, one that almost sounded like a grunt of displeasure.

"Guess not," she said, resisting the urge to smile. "All right then, where were we?"

She was halfway through the fifth chapter when he finally fell asleep. His breathing became deeper, more even, his relaxed expression softening his harsh features.

"I'll come back tomorrow," she whispered, tucking the book away. "Promise."

Unfortunately, Hermione's third visit didn't go as well as the second. She arrived the next morning to discover that Snape's bandages had been removed, revealing the half healed wounds beneath. The sight was jarring, angry slashes standing out in sharp relief against his pale skin.

She tried to hide her reaction, but it was too late for that. He jerked his head away, followed by a hiss of pain as he fumbled for the alert button.

"I'm sorry, dear," the healer said as she ushered her out of the room. "I guess he's not in the mood for visitors today."

"Maybe I shouldn't come back."
"Nonsense! Why would you say that?"

"Well, I'm obviously not helping. I upset him even when I don't mean to, I…"

Shaking her head, the healer put an arm around Hermione's shoulders. "You've already made a world of difference."

"What do you mean?"

"Before you showed up, he was… lifeless. Didn't react to anything, not even the pain. Now? I don't know what you did, but…"

"Maybe I annoyed him into responding."

"Maybe," the healer said, her lips twitching. "Though it's still a huge improvement."

Hermione waited three days before she returned to the hospital. She stood in the doorway to Snape's room, waiting for him to reach for the alert button. Instead, he only moved his eyes, his gaze flickering to the chair that had been placed beside the bed.

It was quite different than the stool she'd transfigured. The chair was much nicer, though obviously well used, upholstered in a delicate floral pattern.

She knew better than to ask questions, though she desperately wanted to know how it had gotten there. Had the healer brought it? Well, of course she had, but was it her idea? Or had she done it at Snape's request?

"Comfortable," she said as she sat down, watching him closely. He didn't react to her comment, his eyes fixed on her beaded bag.

She sighed, feeling like an idiot. To think that Snape of all people would be concerned about her comfort? True, he might be willing to tolerate her presence to some degree, but why on earth would he do her any favors?

"Shall I read a little more?"

This time, he did respond, inclining his head just the slightest degree. He closed his eyes, seeming to relax as she picked up where they'd left off.

He couldn't have been interested in the material. Hermione had never read a more tedious book, convoluted descriptions followed by exhaustive lists of places, names, and dates. But he seemed neither irritated or bored, as if what he truly enjoyed was the simple act of being read to.

Deciding to test this theory, she returned the next day with a different book. She flipped open the cover, convinced he'd have her kicked out before she made it through the first paragraph.

"Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," she read aloud. "By Lewis Carroll."

Other than a raised eyebrow, he didn't react. He just gazed up at the ceiling, still wide awake when she finished the final chapter.

"Did you like it?" she asked him. "I know it's a Muggle book, but it was always one of my favorites. When I was little…"

"I'm sorry," the healer said as she stepped into the room, "but visiting hours are over."
For a crushing moment, Hermione thought Snape had decided to send her away. She quickly realized that wasn't the case, comforted by his startled expression. Startled… and maybe even a little disappointed? Whatever it was, he didn't seem happy about the intrusion.

"What time is it?" she asked the healer.

"9:30. I gave you an extra half hour, but I really can't…"

"9:30?! Oh no!"

She grabbed her bag, scolding herself for losing track of time. Then again, was it really so surprising? The afternoon had been incredibly relaxing, allowing her to forget the world and all its complications.

Maybe that was why Snape didn't care what she chose to read. No matter what it was, it gave him something to focus on that had nothing to do with what he'd been through. That was true for both of them, she realized. Reading was a welcome distraction, a much-needed escape from the harsh realities that still haunted them both.

"Sleep well," she told him as she hurried from the room. "I'll be back tomorrow."

Hermione returned the following morning, trying not to scowl as she dropped into the chair beside Snape. She soon realized there was no point in hiding her feelings – he was far too perceptive, watching her with what she interpreted as mild curiosity.

"I hate boys," she told him. "More trouble than they're worth, really."

To her surprise, he grunted in an obvious sign of agreement. Feeling mollified, she pulled several items out of her bag, setting them on the bedside table.

"I've brought the latest issues of Potions Weekly and the Daily Prophet. If you're not interested in either of those, we can continue with Egyptian magical history. I've also got a book on Transfiguration, two on obscure charms and spellwork, and…" She hesitated, picking up the final book. "Shakespeare."

She held each of them up, watching for his subtle cues. Finally, he gave a slight nod, surprising her by choosing the only book that was distinctly Muggle.

"All right," she said. "There are six plays here, so why don't we just start at the beginning?"

She read the opening scene of "As You Like It", her bad mood gradually fading. Oh, it still bothered her that she'd fought with Ron, who couldn't seem to understand her need for privacy. She felt guilty for lying to him, but she wasn't doing anything wrong, was she? It wasn't like she'd been sneaking around with another boy, or…

Glancing over at Snape, she lost her train of thought. He'd never looked so peaceful, soothed by the elegant, archaic text she was reading. Deciding he had the right idea, she put Ron out of her mind, focusing her attention on the first act. She'd just made it to the third when someone knocked on the door, echoed by a huff of surprise from Snape.

"They're back," the healer said, scowling as she swept into the room. "Though I'm not sure why they bother. They know he isn't responsive. I've told them a dozen times that I'd let them know when that changes."
Snape's features twisted, his eyes narrowing as Hermione heard voices in the hall. By the time the Ministry officials entered the room, he was perfectly composed, his eyes as blank as his expression.

"Come on, dear. Let's you and I have a cup of tea."

"Really?"

"I don't see why not," the healer said, closing the door behind them. "I've only got two patients, and I don't imagine either of them will need me for a bit."

Her name, Hermione learned, was Amaryllis. She'd been at St. Mungo's for more than 30 years, though she'd only recently been transferred to her current ward.

"We were stretched pretty thin after the battle," she explained. "Had to do some shuffling around. I've never seen so many injured, not even during the First War. Fortunately, most of them have been treated and released."

"That's good."

"As for your friend…"

"My friend?" It was bizarre to hear Snape referred to that way, though Hermione didn't know how to clarify their relationship. She took another sip of tea instead, waiting for Amaryllis to continue.

"He's taking a bit longer to recover, though that's only to be expected. Really, it's a miracle he survived."

"Do you think he'll ever be able to talk again?"

"Oh, sure. He could talk right now if he wanted to."

"What?!" She shook her head, staring at Amaryllis in disbelief. "Then why hasn't he… how do you know?"

"The inside of his throat is mostly healed, but it isn't just that. I've heard him cry out in the night a couple times. Trust me, the words were perfectly intelligible."

"If that's true, I don't understand… well, no, I guess I do understand."

Amaryllis nodded. "It isn't just about physical recovery. That's one thing you learn after three decades of healing. Mr. Snape is still recuperating in other ways… I think the lack of speech is giving him the space he needs to do that."

"Yeah, I'm sure he's not up to dealing with the Ministry quite yet."

Speaking of which…" Draining her teacup, Amaryllis got to her feet. "It's been 20 minutes. I only have to give them 15 before I'm allowed to kick them out."

Hermione followed her back to Snape's room, waiting outside as she dealt with the Ministry officials. A second later, they came rushing out, their expressions harried.

"Can I go back in?"

"Probably not a good idea right now. He's a bit… agitated. I've given him some Dreamless Sleep."

Hermione nodded, swallowing her disappointment. "I don't know if I can come tomorrow, but I'll be
back in the next few days. Will you tell him?"

"Of course. Have a good night, dear."

She emerged from the hospital a few minutes later, surprised by how late it was. The sun had long since set, the streets relatively empty as she hurried toward the Apparition point. Closing her eyes, she turned on her heel, landing in the field beside the Burrow.

Why hadn't she been more careful? After her fight with Ron, she'd promised not to stay out past dinner. It hadn't even taken her a day to break that promise, but being at St. Mungo's made it far too easy to forget the world outside.

She let herself into the house, wondering if she should finally come clean. But then she remembered what Amaryllis had said about Snape's silence.

"He's still recuperating in other ways. I think the lack of speech is giving him the space he needs to do that."

The same was true for Hermione herself, albeit in a different way. She didn't want to tell Ron about her visits to St. Mungo's because they were a part of her own healing process, something she simply wasn't ready to share.

"Where you been?"

To her surprise, Ron didn't seem upset. He followed her into the kitchen, helping himself to a piece of cake before he plopped down at the table.

"I went to a Muggle library to study. Hey, where did all this food come from?"

He grinned, reaching up to wipe a bit of frosting off his chin. "Mum made it."

"Are you serious?"

"Yep. She cooked breakfast and dinner, too. Know what else?"

"What's that?"

"She hasn't been in the twins' room at all today."

"Oh Ron, I'm so happy to hear it. I really was starting to worry."

"Me too." He paused, slicing off another piece of cake. "But I feel like everything's going to be all right now, you know? Even got a letter from George this afternoon."

"Really?"

"Yeah, he said he might come by for dinner next week."

"That's wonderful!"

She grabbed a plate, helping herself to a heap of potatoes. She added several slices of roast beef, devouring a piece of freshly baked bread. She was absolutely famished, which was hardly surprising. Food was another thing she tended to forget while she was at St. Mungo's.

"Hermione?"
"Yeah?"

"Do you think we could hang out tonight?"

He'd never looked so hopeful, his expression filling her with guilt.

"I'd love to."

By the time they'd finished the second game of chess, Hermione was exhausted. After her long day at the hospital and the enormous meal she’d eaten, all she wanted was to curl up and go to sleep. She kept these feelings to herself, however, stifling a yawn as Ron put an arm around her shoulders.

"So," he said, looking uncharacteristically shy. "Want to go up to my room?"

She hesitated. "I'm still not ready…"

"I'm not asking you to shag," he said hastily. "Just a bit of snogging, I promise."

She wasn't sure how it happened, but somehow, both their shirts ended up on the floor. After some deliberation, she allowed him to remove her bra as well, flattered by his admiration as he stared at her breasts. He reached out to touch them, clumsy in his eagerness, fumbling fingers followed by his warm, wet mouth.

"Hermione," he said, his voice muffled. "I can't wait until…"

She didn't need him to finish. His desire was obvious, pressed against her leg as he moved up to kiss her neck. The next thing she knew, he'd shifted his hips, bringing them flush against hers.

"Ron…"

She trailed off, realizing that he wasn't making any attempt to remove his jeans. Instead, he started to move, whispering in her ear as he rubbed himself against her.

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No, just… keep your trousers on, all right?"

"Okay."

It didn't take him long. He rocked back and forth for a couple more minutes, mumbling a garbled version of her name before his body went limp.

"Bloody hell," he panted as he collapsed on the mattress. "That was amazing."

He didn't bother to ask her whether she'd enjoyed it, too. Yawning, he laid his head on her chest, falling asleep in a matter of minutes.

Perhaps she should've been offended. Instead, she was relieved she'd found a way to satisfy him. True, there'd been nothing in it for her, but at least it hadn't involved doing anything she wasn't ready to do.

"No," he mumbled when she tried to pull away.

"Ron, I'm tired, too. I can't fall asleep in here."
"Five more minutes."

"All right." She sighed, letting her head fall back against the pillow. "But then I have to go."

"Ronald Weasley!"

Hermione jerked awake, gasping as she spotted the figure in the doorway. Molly's face was thinner than she remembered, though that did little to distract from her expression. It was caught between shock and outrage, her eyes widening as they dropped to Hermione's chest.

"Oh, no…"

The scene couldn't have been more incriminating. Both she and Ron were topless, clothes scattered across the floor. They were partially covered with a blanket, though in this case, it did more harm than good. It made it appear as if they were fully naked, concealing the fact that they were both wearing jeans.

All the while, Ron slept on, his face pressed against her bare breast.

"This isn't what it looks like." Even as she said it, Hermione felt like an idiot. "We didn't…"

"Get dressed," Molly said tersely. "I want you both downstairs in five minutes."

With that, she left the room, closing the door with a bang.

"Oi!" Ron said as he shot up in bed. "What was that?"

"Your mum."

His eyes widened. "Did she…"

"We've got five minutes to get downstairs."

To Hermione's relief, Molly chose to talk to them separately, lecturing Ron for a good 15 minutes before calling her into the kitchen. He passed her on his way out, his cheeks scarlet.

"Sit down."

Hermione did as she was told, trying not to fidget as Molly fixed her a plate of bacon and eggs. She seemed calmer, pouring them both a cup of tea before she sat down on the other side of the table.

"Both of you are of age now, and you were off on your own for nearly a year. I guess it would be foolish to think you never…"

"We didn't. We still haven't, honestly!"

"Even if that's true…" Molly's expression made it clear that she didn't believe it for a second. "It's only a matter of time. In bed with a boy with your clothes off? Things happen, whether you mean for them to or not."

Hermione blushed, remembering the night she'd just spent with Ron. True, she'd set limits, but she certainly hadn't planned on letting him rub himself off on her. It just happened.

That was the problem. It had made sense to go along with what he'd wanted, easier to submit than refuse. That was how he managed to push her a little further each time, creeping ever closer to that
inevitable moment when she finally gave in.

"You're right," she told Molly. "I think we need to slow down."

"That's not a bad idea, though it's easier said than done. Once you've crossed that line…"

"We really haven't…" She sighed. "Look, I'm sorry about this morning, okay? It won't happen again."

"Are you using contraceptives?"

"What?"

"You know, charms, potions, that sort of thing. I guess there are Muggle methods as well, though I've heard they're less reliable."

"I haven't really thought about it. Ron and I aren't…"

"Well, you need to use something, dear. That is, unless the two of you are planning on getting married in the near future. If that's the case, I certainly wouldn't mind a grandchild. Or a whole slew of them, for that matter."

Hermione hadn't thought the conversation could get any worse. Clearly, she'd been wrong.

"Right, well, I need to get going."

"Not until you've finished your breakfast."

Realizing there was no way around it, she choked down the eggs and bacon she'd been given. Washing it down with a last bit of tea, she rose to her feet, resisting the urge to run out of the room.

"Hermione?"

"Yeah?" she said, cringing as she glanced back over her shoulder.

"I realize that both of you are adults, but this is still my house. Unless the two of you are married or at least engaged, I'd prefer it if you slept in separate rooms."

"Yeah," she muttered under her breath. "Me too."

"You wouldn't believe the morning I've had."

Of course, Snape didn't respond, though Hermione welcomed his silence. She dropped in the chair beside him, shaking her head as she reached in her bag.

"I mean, really, it's like the Weasleys don't understand the concept of privacy. Heaven forbid they knock on the door before they enter a room, or you know, not ask a dozen questions every time they see you. They always have to know where you're going, what you're doing, why you're being so quiet, or…"

She glanced over at Snape, expecting him to be annoyed. Instead, he seemed faintly amused by her tirade.

"I like the Weasleys," she continued. "Really, I do. But… did you just snort?"
Snape's expression was carefully blank, his eyes fixed on the ceiling.

"Anyway, they just make me feel crowded, you know? I guess I should be used to it by now, but I'm not. Maybe it's because I was an only child. I never had to deal with anyone expecting me to entertain them all the time, or... am I bothering you?"

He grunted, obviously thrown by the change of subject. Slowly, he turned his head in her direction, his dark eyes meeting hers.

"Would you rather I read?"

He didn't respond, which she couldn't help but find annoying. After all, it wasn't as if he'd been hiding his ability to make noises or subtle gestures. But then it occurred to her that his options for communication were somewhat limited. He might be able to answer yes or no or express displeasure, but as long as he chose not to speak, there was little room for more nuanced responses.

"I have an idea," she said. "Can you move your fingers?"

He rolled his eyes, wriggling each of them in turn.

"Okay, index finger means yes, middle finger means no. Ring finger means you either don't know or don't care. Got it?"

He looked dubious, though it wasn't difficult to understand why. According to Amaryllis, his lack of communication was a defense mechanism, something he was obviously using to shield himself while he recovered.

"I won't tell anyone," she said quietly. "I won't ask you any questions you don't want to answer either. Believe me, the last thing I want to do is invade your privacy..." She trailed off, giving him a mischievous look. "I'm not a Weasley, you know."

Snape made a strange noise, almost as if he'd just swallowed a cough. It took her a minute to realize he was laughing, his chest rising and falling several times in rapid succession.

She'd made Professor Snape laugh. Not in a mocking way... not cruelly or maliciously... she'd honestly made him laugh.

"Besides," she said, elated by his reaction. "If I do anything you don't like, you'll just have me tossed out."

He lifted his index finger, responding with a slow, deliberate yes. His lips were still twitching, his body much more relaxed.

"Good, I'm glad we understand each other. Now would you like me to shut up about myself and read for a while?"

He hesitated, then raised his ring finger.

Of course, if he did want to hear more about her life, he'd never admit it. He was far too good at feigning disinterest, an ability he'd relied on during the war. Once, that facade had fooled her as much as anyone else, but she was beginning to recognize the subtleties.

"You don't care?" she said casually. "Okay then. As I was saying, I've never understood how the Weasleys can live on top of each other the way they do. I was an only child and both my parents worked all the time, so I always had plenty of space."
If she'd seen Snape's expression a couple years ago, she would've assumed he was bored out of his mind. Now she could tell he was listening intently, his brow furrowed.

"Of course," she continued, "that wasn't always a good thing. My childhood was pretty lonely sometimes, especially since I didn't have any friends. Until I met Ron and Harry…"

Just the mention of Harry's name made Snape tense, letting her know she was treading on dangerous ground. Hastily, she backtracked, steering the conversation in a safer direction.

"I did love to read, though. Even when I was really small, I always wanted books instead of toys. I spent most of my time at the Muggle library – that's still my favorite place in the world, even better than…"

She caught herself, realizing he probably didn't want to hear about Hogwarts. Instead, she listed off a handful of books from her childhood, explaining why they meant so much to her.

"I especially loved anything having to do with science. Biology, chemistry, physics? Those were my favorites. I wish there was more respect for Muggle knowledge in the magical world."

To her surprise, Snape grunted, lifting his index finger in agreement. She desperately wanted to ask him what Muggle subjects he'd studied, but of course, that wasn't the type of question he could answer. Clearly, he was feeling his limitations, too – he opened his mouth and then closed it again, obviously frustrated by his inability to offer an opinion.

"Of course, I always loved Shakespeare, too. Would you like me to read you another play?"

A twitch of a finger and she launched into "A Midsummer Night's Dream". She read it from start to finish, her throat aching by the time she reached the final page. By then, Snape was deeply asleap, his head still turned in her direction.

"Sleep well," she whispered, reaching out to straighten his blanket. "I'll try to be here tomorrow."

Hermione returned to St. Mungo's the next day, slipping away from the Burrow while the others were playing Quidditch. She headed straight up to Snape's floor, coming face to face with a beaming Amaryllis.

"You truly are a miracle."

"I am? What did I…"

"Here, let me show you."

As usual, Snape's door was slightly ajar, a thin sliver of light slicing across the hallway. Hermione frowned, shooting a questioning look at the healer.

"What…"

"Muffliato," Amaryllis whispered. "Look!"

She peered through the crack, her eyes widening as she spotted Snape. He was sitting up in bed, oblivious to her presence as he lifted a spoon to his mouth.

"He isn't lying down," she said, though she felt foolish for stating the obvious. "He's…"

"Eating!" Amaryllis finished for her. "First time he's done it on his own. Before today, I was feeding
him nutrient potions, maybe a little broth if I could coax him into taking it. Look at him now! He's had almost an entire sandwich, along with that bowl of fruit he's nearly finished."

"That's wonderful!"

"Yes, and you know what else he did? He used the toilet! A bit shaky on his feet, to be sure, but he's managed it twice now. Told me not to bring him any more bedpans."

"That's…" She hesitated, quite sure Snape wouldn't appreciate the two of them discussing his bathroom habits. "How did he tell you? I mean, how did you know he wanted food?"

Amaryllis chuckled, withdrawing a note from her pocket. She handed it to Hermione, shaking her head as she did so.

"He's very…"

"Particular?" Hermione suggested, reading over the neat lines of script. Snape had detailed exactly what he wanted to eat, followed by a handful of notes on preparation.

"I suppose that's a good word for it. He was a teacher, wasn't he?"

"Potions Master."

Amaryllis nodded. "That seems fitting. I'm sure he had high standards."

"You have no idea."

Hermione made it to the final line of script, the handwriting so small and cramped she could barely read it.

*Please place another stasis charm on my flowers. They're starting to wilt.*

"Flowers?"

"Oh," Amaryllis said, plucking the note out of her hand. "I don't think you were supposed to see that."

"The flowers I brought?"

"He hasn't received any others."

"But I… I never saw them after that first day. I just figured he'd had them tossed out."

Amaryllis shook her head. "He has me take them out of there each morning, but he keeps them with him at night."

"Why?"

"I suppose he finds them comforting, even if he'd rather keep that to himself."

*Comforting.* The word stirred something in Hermione's memory, reminding her of a previous visit. She glanced at the note in Amaryllis's hand, unable to suppress her curiosity.

"The notes… how long has he been able to do that?"

"A couple weeks now. Two, maybe three? I received the first one right after you started showing
Hermione nodded. "How do they work? Does he write them himself, or…"

"Oh, no." Amaryllis withdrew a couple items from her pocket, handing one of them to Hermione. It looked exactly like Snape's alert button, an oblong shaped object that fit neatly into her hand.

"How do I…"

"Project your thoughts."

She held down the button, focusing on a simple message.

*How does this work? Protean Charm?*

"Ah," Amaryllis said, watching the words appear on the slip of parchment she was holding. "There we go. It's similar, yes, though the spell is enhanced for more complex communications. Your message wasn't urgent, so the alert I received was subtle. In the case of an emergency…"

"Yes?" Hermione prompted, fascinated by this new discovery.

"The message would be verbal rather than written."

"Even if the person who sent it can't speak?"

"Our alert system isn't dependent on physical capabilities. Patients have to be able to communicate, especially those who are incapacitated."

"Has he ever…"

Following the direction of Hermione's eyes, Amaryllis glanced at Snape's doorway. "Not yet. He only communicates in written form."

"Well, at least he's communicating, I guess. Can I ask you something else?"

"I suppose so."

"That chair in his room… how did it get there?"

Amaryllis frowned, momentarily confused. Then she reached in her other pocket, shuffling through numerous slips of parchment. She handed one to Hermione, a tiny scrap that contained a single line of Snape's handwriting.

*If I'm to have visitors, it said, they'll need somewhere suitable to sit.*

She didn't say anything. How could she? Yet another one of her preconceived notions about Snape had been shattered, leaving her utterly at a loss. The chair. The flowers. Laughing at her jokes? She had no idea how to reconcile that with…

"He looks forward to your visits," Amaryllis said, "You've helped him a great deal, even if he's too proud to admit it."

"He still won't talk."

"No, but he's responding in other ways, none of which seemed possible before you came. To tell you the truth, I didn't think he was going to make it. All he did was lie there, not seeming to care whether
"And I'm the one who changed that? I don't see how. He and I were never… well, to tell you the truth, he hated me."

"But you're here," Amaryllis pointed out. "You're here and you care. That can make a huge difference, especially to someone who has no one else."

Hermione nodded, not knowing what else to say. She found it difficult to believe that she'd helped Snape as much as the healer claimed, though at the very least, she knew now that he welcomed her visits. That alone was all the encouragement she needed.

"Can I see him now?"

"Of course! Just don't tell him about…"

"Don't worry," she interrupted. "I won't say a word."

Snape looked up as she entered the room, acknowledging her presence with a slight nod. Comforted by the familiarity, she closed the door behind her, settling herself in the chair beside the bed.

_The chair he'd requested for her._

Resisting the urge to smile, she retrieved a handful of books from her bag.

"I see you're sitting up today," she said, doing her best to sound casual. "That's a nice change."

He grunted, reaching for the books she'd placed on the bedside table. Rejecting the first two, he settled on the third, leaning back against the pillows as he flipped open the cover.

"So we're reading to ourselves, then?"

Another grunt.

"I guess so," she muttered, selecting a book for herself.

To her surprise, it wasn't the least bit awkward. On the contrary, she'd never felt more comfortable, soothed by the rustle of turning pages as they read in companionable silence. She lost herself in the material, finishing one book before she started on another.

"Pardon me, dear."

The book fell from her hands, hitting the floor with a smack. She looked up to find Amaryllis standing in the doorway, both of them shifting their attention to Snape. He was still sitting up, though deeply asleep, clinging to the open book that rested against his chest.

"Here, let me get that for you."

"No," she said hastily. "Let him keep it."

"All right, well, it's late. You should probably…"

"How late?"

"A little past two."
"Two?!" her eyes widened. "I thought visiting hours ended at nine!"

"They do," Amaryllis said. "But I had to help out with a situation upstairs. I wasn't able to make it back down here before now."

Hermione grabbed her other books, cursing softly as she shoved them in her bag. She raced down the stairs and through the reception area, panting as she emerged onto the London street. She'd nearly reached the Apparition point when she met Ron's Patronus, his frantic voice demanding to know where she was. Five minutes later, she practically staggered through the Burrow's front door, bracing herself for what was sure to be a nasty argument.

"I'm sorry, Ron. I was reading a really good book and I lost track of time."

"Lost track of time? Do you have any idea how worried I've been?"

"I said I was sorry. It won't happen again."

"Yeah, that's what you said last time. What the hell is going on, Hermione?"

"I told you I was reading."

He shook his head. "Nobody reads that much. Not even you. Are you seeing someone else?"

"Of course not! How could you think that?"

"Why wouldn't I think that?" he shot back. "You keep disappearing, staying out until all hours of the night. You obviously don't want to shag, rarely even want to make out anymore. Ginny told me you've been borrowing her dresses, and…"

"I don't have any clothes, Ron! I lost most of my stuff when we went on the run, remember? I'm sorry if I don't want to keep wearing the same ratty old jeans."

"You don't seem to mind wearing them around me. You only change when you go out."

"That's because I'm out in public. It doesn't mean…" She sighed, sinking down onto the couch. "This is a pointless argument, Ron. Really, it is. I'm not cheating on you, okay? Promise."

"Even if that's true, you haven't been the same since…"

"Since when? Before the battle?"

"Yeah."

"Well, of course I haven't been the same! I lost my parents, lost a lot of my friends, had my entire world turned upside down. I'm sorry if I can't just…"

"And I lost my brother!" Ron shouted. "Watched friends die just like you did! I'm still here, Hermione. I'm not shutting you out, giving you the cold shoulder and disappearing all the time. It's not fair!"

"Fair? This isn't about being fair. We just have different ways of coping, that's all."

"We should be coping with it together. Isn't that what couples do?"

Together? She hadn't left the Burrow for nearly a month after the battle. She'd been there to listen whenever he'd needed to talk, sometimes for hours on end. Granted, she'd been less than enthusiastic
about their physical relationship, but she couldn't help that. She wasn't going to force herself to do anything she wasn't ready to do.

"What do you want, Ron? What do you want that I'm not doing?"

He sat down on the couch beside her, letting out a heavy sigh. "Nothing, I guess. I just… I want to know where you've been going, that's all. It wouldn't bother me so much if I didn't feel like you were hiding something."

"You really want to know?"

"Please."

"Okay." She took a deep breath. "I've been going to see Professor Snape. I was at St. Mungo's several times last week, once or twice the week before, and that's where I was tonight. We've been reading together."

Ron burst out laughing.

"What? I'm serious."

He only laughed harder, his face turning an unflattering shade of red. "You mean to tell me… you've been hanging around with Snape? That's the worst excuse I've ever heard!"

"You know what? Nevermind."

"Come on, don't be mad. You've got to admit, it is pretty funny."

"How so?"

"Hermione, we're talking about Snape. He wouldn't let you come see him even if you wanted to. Can't imagine why you would, really."

"He nearly died fighting for our side. Have you forgotten that?"

Ron shrugged. "He's still a nasty old git who hates us. Doubt that's changed, no matter what he did in the war."

"He really isn't…" She trailed off, realizing that she didn't really want Ron to know the truth. She'd given him a chance to act mature, to give both her and Snape the benefit of the doubt. He'd failed on both counts. Why should she fight to make him believe her, when obviously, he'd rather treat it as a joke than even attempt to take her seriously?

"Hermione?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you sure you're not seeing someone else? You could tell me, you know. Not saying I wouldn't be mad, but…"

"I'm not cheating on you, Ron. Please don't make me say it again."

"Then why can't you tell me where you were?"

"I tried to tell you. You didn't believe me."
"So," he said, flinging an arm over the back of the couch. "You really were off reading?"

"Yes."

"Why can't you do that here?"

"Because…” What could she tell him? That the house made her feel claustrophobic? That she hated being interrupted every five minutes? Or maybe she could tell him how much she loved reading with Snape, the one person who seemed to enjoy the written word as much as she did?

In the end, she told him none of these things, knowing that he wouldn't understand.

"I just need a little time to myself, Ron. That's all."

"Okay." He let out a defeated sigh, making it clear that the fight was over. "Just… try not to stay out so late, yeah? I really was worried."

"I know. It won't happen again."

Hermione sent a message to St. Mungo's, letting Snape know she wouldn't be able to come for the rest of the week. She did her best to smooth things over with Ron, spending as much time with him as possible as she focused on life at the Burrow.

By the fifth day, she couldn't take it anymore. The minutes seemed to drag by like hours, her mind preoccupied with thoughts of Snape. What was he doing right then? Sleeping? Eating? Wondering why she wasn't there even as he pretended that it didn't matter?

She waited until the others went outside to play Quidditch, grabbing her bag on her way out the door. Apparating straight to St. Mungo's, she practically ran upstairs, eager with anticipation as she opened the door to Snape's room.

"Sorry I couldn't come sooner. I…"

The bed was occupied, though not by Snape. In his place was an elderly witch, who'd obviously been startled by her abrupt entrance. Hastily, she backed out of the room, mumbling her apologies.

"Ah, there you are."

She turned around to see Amaryllis hurrying toward her, carrying the book she'd left behind on her last visit.

"Where is he? He didn't…"

"Oh, no, he's fine! We released him yesterday morning."

Frowning, she accepted the book, tucking it in her bag. "Did he leave a message? Any contact information?"

"I'm sorry, dear. I'm afraid he didn't."
Chapter 4: Broken

SEVERUS SNAPE, FORMER HEADMASTER AT HOGWARTS SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDRY, ACQUITTED OF ALL CHARGES

Hermione glared at the latest issue of the Daily Prophet, tempted to set it on fire. Of course, she was glad Snape's name had been cleared, but the way they'd written about him…

As a boy, Severus Snape knew nothing but loneliness and deprivation, isolated from his peers by his peculiar behavior. This led to him forming an obsessive attachment to Lily Evans, a beautiful young witch who happened to live nearby. Unfortunately for Snape, Evans never reciprocated his feelings, cutting off all contact on the day they arrived at Hogwarts. From that moment on, she had eyes for no one but James Potter, Quidditch star and fallen hero.

Rejecting Snape's persistent and ultimately futile efforts to win her over, Evans would eventually marry Potter, giving birth to a son. That son, of course, was Harry James Potter, nemesis of Lord Voldemort and future savior of the Wizarding world.

"I can't believe they wrote that." Harry scowled, munching furiously on a piece of toast. "I never said…"

"What did you say? Could it have been misinterpreted?"

"No!"

"Which reporter did you talk to?"

"I didn't talk to any reporters! I only told Kingsley. He said it was strictly confidential, but how else…"

"Harry," she interrupted. "Did you see this?"

"What?"

She shook her head, pointing to the tiny line of script beneath the article.

Written by Rita Skeeter, author of "The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore". Excerpt taken from her upcoming publication, "Snape: Scoundrel or Saint?"

"Bloody hell. I should've known."

"Do you think he's seen it?"

Harry sighed. "I don't know, Hermione. I mean, no one even knows where he is."

"Maybe he's out of the country," she said, trying to be optimistic. "After everything he went through, I'm sure he needed a little time away. He could've gone to France or Spain or Switzerland, someplace where he won't even see it."

"Yeah, but if she's got a book coming out…"
Ron and Ginny entered the kitchen, effectively putting an end to their conversation. They started chatting about Quidditch team rankings instead, not seeming to notice as Hermione ducked out of the room. She headed upstairs, summoning a pair of scissors as she sat down on Ginny's bed. Carefully, she cut out the headline along with Snape's picture, tossing the rest of the paper in the trash bin.

SEVERUS SNAPE ACQUITTED OF ALL CHARGES

Humiliation aside, how would he feel when he received the news? What would he choose to do now that all possibilities were open to him? Would he finally find a way to be happy?

She stared at his photo, recognizing it as the same one the Daily Prophet had used to announce his takeover as headmaster. Had that only been a year ago? It seemed like a lifetime, his grim expression filling her with dread as the trio cowered at Grimmauld Place. She'd seen nothing but cruelty in the harsh lines of his profile, his eyes so cold they'd made her shiver.

Now? All she saw was suffering. It was there in the dark circles under his eyes, obvious in the unhealthy pallor of his skin. For the first time, she realized he'd lost a great deal of weight after Dumbledore's death, his face so gaunt it looked like he hadn't eaten in weeks. How had she missed all that? Why hadn't she seen…

"Hermione?"

Hastily, she stuffed the photo in her beaded bag, forcing herself to smile as Ginny entered the room. "Yeah?"

"We're headed down to Diagon Alley. Wanna come?"

"Oh, no thanks. I think I'll stay here and do some reading."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "You're always reading. Why don't you come out and socialize for once?"

Hermione opened her mouth and then closed it again, biting back a sharp retort. It felt like she did nothing but socialize these days, lucky if she could steal even a few minutes for herself. Life at the Burrow was gradually getting back to normal, heavy silence replaced by constant noise and activity. George often stayed over, while Percy, Bill, and Fleur had begun making daily appearances. She'd never felt more crowded, not helped by Ron's constant need for attention.

"Next time," she told Ginny. "Promise."

Soon enough, the house was relatively quiet. She stretched out on the bed, sighing in relief as she retrieved Snape's picture from her bag.

Strange, perhaps, but she really did miss him. She hadn't seen him in nearly two months, deprived of the visits she'd somehow come to rely on. Her time at St. Mungo's had given her a sense of purpose – now there was nothing to do but sit around the Burrow, each day more monotonous than the last.

What was she supposed to do with herself? For the first time in her life, she didn't have a single goal she was trying to achieve. She wished she could relax and have fun like Harry and Ron, but she couldn't ignore the sense of urgency within her. That feeling had plagued her for as long as she could remember, an intense, almost overwhelming need to accomplish…

To accomplish what? She didn't even know anymore. All she knew was that she had to do something productive. Otherwise, she'd go mad.

"Any ideas?" she asked Snape's picture. He stared back at her, grim faced and stoic, as stiff as a
Muggle photograph. The only movement she could detect was a slight flaring of his nostrils, a clear sign that he'd hated having his picture taken.

She didn't mind his stillness, nor the lack of response. Both of those things had become intimately familiar during her time at St. Mungo's, Snape lying quietly beside her as she'd talked for hours on end. She'd found clarity in that silence, feeling more like herself than she had since the end of the war.

Suddenly, she knew what she needed to do. Insane? Perhaps, though it was the only thing that made sense at this particular moment. She set the picture on the bedside table, taking a deep breath before she started to talk.

"I don't know what to do with myself. I really don't. Guess I could get a job, but…"

Gradually, her confusion faded, replaced by a newfound sense of certainty. An hour later, she tucked the picture back in her bag, dashing off a quick letter before she headed downstairs.

"You're what?" Ron stared at her, aghast.

"I'm going back to Hogwarts."

"Why?"

"Because I'd like to continue my studies. Really, Ron, you don't have to look so surprised."

"Surprised? Of course I'm surprised! We've been out of school for more than a year!"

She shrugged. "Professor McGonagall doesn't think I'll have any trouble picking up where I left off."

"Trouble?" Ron shook his head. "Hermione, I'm sure you already know whatever it is they teach in seventh year. What's the point in going back?"

"Well, I'll have a harder time getting into university if I don't finish at Hogwarts. Besides, I wouldn't mind a refresher."

"University?"

"I'm not sure about that yet," she said, "but I'd like to have the option."

"What about…" Run hesitated, staring down at his hands. "What about us? Are you breaking up with me?"

"What? No!"

"But you're going back to Hogwarts."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean our relationship has to end. We'll just be apart for a little while."

"Nine months," he said, sounding sullen.

"I'll be back for breaks. Really, it won't be so bad."

To her surprise, he didn't protest any further. He did give her the cold shoulder for the next few days, but by the end of August, he seemed resigned to the idea. He even went with her to Kings Cross station, his expression wistful as he told her goodbye.
"You'll write? Promise you'll write."

"I will."

"And no snogging other blokes."

She rolled her eyes. "Trust me, I have no interest in boys. I just want to focus on my studies."

"Okay," he said, sounding a bit more cheerful. "See you at Christmas, then?"

"Of course."

She kissed him goodbye, glad he'd accepted her decision. Time apart was exactly what they needed, a chance to reconcile with the past before they turned their eyes to the future.

"Ready?"

She nodded at Ginny, her stomach fluttering as they boarded the Hogwarts Express. It looked exactly the same, even *smelled* the same, reminding her of…

"Where is everyone?"

The words had already left Ginny's mouth before she grasped the implications. Hermione watched her turn pale, both of them shaking their heads as they walked past row after row of empty compartments.

No, it *wasn't* the same. Less than half the students would be returning this year, a stark reminder of how many lives had been lost. Even some of the survivors had chosen to stay away, too scarred to even consider another year at Hogwarts. Their vacant seats were haunting, something Hermione desperately tried to ignore as she and Ginny settled into their seats.

"If everyone else gets to stay home," Ginny said, "I don't see why I can't."

"Don't you want to finish your schooling?"

Ginny shrugged. "I've already learned all the important things. Besides, it's not like I'm going to need it. All I want to do is shag Harry and play Quidditch."

"I know, but…" Hermione hesitated, caught off guard by her frankness. "You're not planning on doing that for the rest of your life, are you?"

"Why not? I can get recruited for a team next year, play a few seasons before I'm ready to retire. Then Harry and I will get married, maybe have a couple kids. I don't need any NEWT level classes for that, do I?"

Hermione shook her head, unable to fathom that level of certainty. At 17, Ginny knew exactly what she wanted, as if her entire life had been planned out since birth. How was it possible to be that confident? When Hermione looked into her own future, she saw a dozen paths she might take, each one more hazy than the last.

"What about you and Ron?"

"I… I honestly don't know. Guess we'll figure it out when the school year's over."

To her relief, Ginny didn't question her further. She dug a book out of her bag, pretending to read for the rest of the journey.
"Ah, we're here!"

She followed Ginny off the train, waiting quietly with the other students for the carriages to arrive. Of course, she had no trouble seeing the Thestrals – they all did, with the exception of a few younger students who'd been spared the carnage of battle.

In that moment, she couldn't help wondering if she'd made a mistake. She'd always loved Hogwarts, but now it seemed foreign, sinister, looming out of the darkness like a monstrous beast. Some of the happiest moments of her life had happened there, yet all she could remember was that final, terrible night, bodies strewn across the grounds like so many fallen leaves.

She averted her eyes, spotting the Shrieking Shack in the distance. Just the sight of it made her feel ill, haunted by the memory of Snape's blood, his scream, the anguish on his face when he'd…

"All right, Hermione?"

Somehow, she forced herself to smile. "I'm fine."

"Bit weird, isn't it? Being back here?"

"Yeah, it is."

Indeed, it was strange, yet there was no turning back. Where would she go if she didn't stay here? Back to the Burrow? The thought made her cringe, stiffening her resolve as the castle drew near. Whatever happened, she was determined to make the most of her final year at Hogwarts, hoping it would give her the perspective she needed to move on with her life.

She exited the carriage, taking a deep breath as she stepped into the Entrance Hall. Despite herself, she couldn't help thinking about Snape, wondering what life at Hogwarts would be like without him. He'd always been a fixture here, his scowling face as predictable as the Sorting Ceremony.

"Hermione Granger!"

Professor McGonagall looked as if she'd aged five years, though she seemed to be doing reasonably well. She smiled as she approached, tucking a stray wisp of hair behind her ear.

"Hello, Professor… erm, Headmistress."

"Go ahead and call me Professor. I've been using it so long that I don't know how to answer to anything else."

"Okay." Hermione hesitated, glancing at the door to the Great Hall. "Would you mind if I skipped the feast? I'm feeling a bit…"

"Yes, I'm sure you need a little time to adjust. Go on upstairs – I'll see that your absence is excused."

"Thank you. May I have the password?"

"Oh, you won't be staying in Gryffindor tower. I've arranged for you to have a private room."

"Thanks, but I don't need special privileges. I really don't mind…"

"This isn't a privilege," Professor McGonagall interrupted. "Merely a courtesy. You mentioned in your letter that you'd like to focus on your studies with as few distractions as possible. Naturally, it'll be easier to do that if you have a bit more privacy."
"I didn't mean…” She trailed off, not knowing how to refuse without seeming ungrateful. Besides, she certainly wouldn't mind having a room to herself.

"Ah, I need to get in there for the Sorting Ceremony. You'll find your room in the guest wing on the third floor. Last door on the right."

Hermione nodded, taking a deep breath as she headed upstairs. It took her ages to find the room, tucked away in a little used corridor she'd never noticed before. She reached for the doorknob, gasping as it snapped at her with a set of brass teeth.

"How am I supposed to get in?"

"Answer the riddle," the doorknob replied.

She frowned, leaning down to study it more closely. It had taken the shape of a mouth, lips twitching impatiently.

"Okay, what's the riddle?"

"The more you take, the more you leave behind. What am I?"

"Footsteps."

The door swung open, revealing a small yet comfortable looking room. In the center stood a four poster bed, though it wasn't draped in the House colors she'd come to expect. Instead, the canopy was patterned in neutral shades, soft creams mingling with deep, rich browns.

"Well?" she asked Crookshanks as she released him from his basket. "What do you think?"

He yawned, stretching luxuriously before he hopped up on the bed.

It didn't take her long to unpack. She enlarged her trunk and set it against the wall, hanging her spare school robes in the tiny closet. Retrieving her textbooks and other supplies, she arranged them neatly on the desk, hanging her bag on the back of the chair.

"There," she said. "That's better."

A room to herself? This was one change she could definitely get used to. She'd spent the better part of a year sharing a tent with two boys, followed by an entire summer sleeping in Ginny's room. Her newfound privacy felt wonderful, something she chose to celebrate by stripping down to her knickers before she crawled into bed.

"Lumos."

Summoning a pile of books, she smiled as she settled herself against the pillows. For the first time in as long as she could remember, there was no one around to criticize her for reading too much.

"Oh, no."

Hermione sprang out of bed, cursing under her breath as she summoned her clothes. How had she managed to oversleep? She'd always been so punctual, not satisfied unless she was the first to arrive for her classes.

Of course, that was before she'd spent nearly a year on the run, sleeping in shifts rather than maintaining a normal schedule. It was also before her summer at the Burrow, staying in bed until
noon simply because there was nothing better to do.

She shoved her books in her bag, briefly attempting to straighten her hair before she abandoned it as a lost cause. Two more minutes and she was out the door, nearly tripping on her robes as she raced through the halls.

If not for the staircase, she would've made it. Unfortunately, it refused to cooperate, making several false starts before it slid into place. By then, she was 10 minutes late, sighing in frustration as she opened the door to the Potions classroom.

Would Professor Slughorn punish her? Probably not. He'd always treated tardiness as a minor issue, especially with students he favored. One third of the Golden Trio? Honestly, she'd be shocked if he even bothered to take a few House Points.

"Sorry, Professor Slugh…" She stopped in her tracks, her eyes widening. "Professor Snape?!"

If he was similarly surprised, he didn't show it. He barely looked at her, jerking his head at an empty seat before he flicked his wand at the blackboard. With that, he swept out of the room, leaving the students to whisper among themselves.

"What's going on?" she hissed at Ginny. "Why is he here?"

"I don't know. Guess he needed the job?"

Surely that couldn't be it. He'd worked at Hogwarts for nearly two decades, earning what must've been a decent salary. What would he have spent it on? He was a single man with no one to provide for other than himself. Obviously, he wasn't materialistic either, so he'd probably accumulated a considerable amount of savings over the years.

But if he didn't need the money, then why was he here? As far as she knew, he'd only agreed to teach as part of his cover, working behind the scenes to protect Harry and defeat Voldemort. Clearly, that was no longer a factor, so why…

She shook her head, slicing off a bit of arrowroot and dropping it in the cauldron. Glancing up at the blackboard, she did her best to focus on Snape's instructions, relieved when her potion turned a perfect shade of crystal blue.

Snape finally returned, placing a basket on the desk before he settled himself in his chair. He never said a word, stonefaced and silent as the students turned in their potions. Ginny's had clearly been botched, though he didn't seem to notice. He just sat there, eyes fixed on the wall as they exited the classroom.

"That was weird," Ginny said, waiting for Hermione to catch up before they headed upstairs.

"I know."

"Honestly though, it's an improvement."

"An improvement?" Hermione stopped in her tracks. "How can you say that?"

"Oh, come on. He didn't take any House Points, did he? No nasty remarks, even left us alone for most of class. He isn't…"

"He isn't himself."
Ginny smiled. "Exactly."

Hermione shook her head, realizing there was no point in responding. Ginny wouldn't understand, nor was she likely to care that Snape might be having a difficult time. All she saw was the effect his behavior had on her, choosing not to question that behavior as long as she benefited from it.

"What's your next class?"

"Arithmancy."

"Right, well, I've got Divination. See you at lunch?"

She nodded, waiting for Ginny to leave before she let out a heavy sigh. She couldn't stop thinking about Snape's apathetic expression, his eyes cold and lifeless as he'd stared past her. What had happened since the last time she'd seen him? He hadn't been like that at St. Mungo's. True, he'd chosen not to speak, but he'd shown a full range of emotions. Now he seemed utterly detached, reminding her of…

"Oh."

Suddenly, she knew where she'd seen that expression. He'd been lying in the Hospital Wing, staring blankly at the ceiling as the healers had arrived to transport him to St. Mungo's. That had been just a couple days after the battle… the last time she'd seen him at Hogwarts.

Had returning here traumatized him that deeply? If so, why on earth had he chosen to stay?

Severus shut the door to his private quarters, summoning a bottle of Firewhiskey. Conjuring a glass, he filled it to the brim, dropping into a battered old armchair.

Minerva had offered to replace his furniture. She'd promised him any number of perks if he agreed to return. He'd refused them all, wishing he had the strength to turn down his former position as well.

"Please, Severus. I know I have no right to ask, but Horace has gone into retirement again and I can't find anyone suitable to take the job."

Why hadn't he said no? He could've stayed at Spinner's End, separating himself from the magical world and all its complications. He wouldn't have had to deal with lingering suspicions or pitying looks, forced to reconcile with a past he still wasn't ready to face.

Then again, there was no hiding from that past. He'd learned that on the day he'd left St. Mungo's, haunted by his own solitude throughout the weeks that followed. He'd shut himself up at Spinner's End, heavy silence pressing in on him from all sides until it felt like he couldn't breathe. Even sleep had given him little respite, punctuated by hideous nightmares that left him gasping for air.

He'd tried to treat himself with potions, finding some relief in Dreamless Sleep. Unfortunately, the effects had grown weaker over time, an inevitable consequence of constant use. By that point, he'd had no other option but alcohol. True, it hadn't helped with the nightmares, but it did take the edge off, numbing his senses to the point where he could function.

Of course, that only created another dilemma. What did it even mean to be functional now that the war was over? He'd tried to keep himself busy with books and brewing, but those were only temporary distractions. No matter what he did, it all seemed pointless somehow. He could never escape the feelings of hollowness and futility that had been with him since the battle.
Well no, that wasn't exactly true, was it? He had found relief, brief, precious moments when he'd felt more like himself. The source of that relief had been as unnerving as it was unexpected… by all rights, Hermione Granger should've been the bane of his existence.

Severus lifted the glass to his lips, realizing that it was empty. He filled it a second time, pausing for a long swallow before he returned to his musings.

Indeed, he should've despised her. He'd certainly hated her during those first, excruciating days, wishing she'd left him to die like he'd told her to do. But then the pain had dissipated, giving way to mind numbing boredom. By that point, he'd been so desperate for a distraction that the rest of it hadn't mattered. He'd accepted her first visit, unable to think of a reason to send her away.

Of course, it hadn't taken her long to give him one. She'd babbled about Potter and the war, subjects he wasn't ready to discuss. Then he had made her leave, figuring that would be the end of it. He'd never expected her to come back, unprepared for the relief he'd felt when she'd returned the following day.

After that, he'd been eager to receive her visits. Pathetic, yes, but he couldn't deny it. He kept telling himself that it was only the distraction he craved, but deep down, he'd known it was more than that. She came to represent a feeling, a reminder, some faint recollection of who he'd once been, filled with urgency and purpose.

That, he supposed, was why he'd agreed to return to Hogwarts. He'd wanted to focus on something other than himself, desperate to feel useful again. Of course, he'd known it wouldn't be easy, but he'd needed to find something to live for. Without that, he was utterly at a loss.

"Accio box."

A small, ornate object flew off the bookcase, landing in his palm. He hadn't opened it since right before the battle, that terrible night when he'd needed all the strength he could muster. It wasn't much, just a torn photograph and a scrap of parchment. Still, they'd bolstered his courage, stiffening his resolve as he'd faced what he'd expected to be the final hours of his life.

He opened the box, staring down at Lily's laughing face as he poured himself another drink. Taking a long swallow, he braced himself for his usual reaction.

It didn't come.

Where was the remorse, the self-hatred, his insatiable craving for absolution? Those feelings were gone now, replaced by a twinge of regret. Even his love for her felt different, soft and bittersweet rather than sharply painful.

Of course, it didn't take him long to figure out why. He'd fulfilled his promise, ridding the world of Voldemort while doing everything in his power to save her son. There was nothing left for him to do now, no debt he still owed her, no part of their past that had been left unresolved. All that existed now were things that couldn't be changed, realities he had no choice but to accept.

He sat there bewildered, no longer haunted by something that had once caused him so much pain. Perhaps it should've been comforting, but that pain had also given him purpose, his driving force for what seemed like a lifetime. What did he had to live for if not Lily? What the hell was he supposed to do with himself?

As much as he'd hoped otherwise, Hogwarts offered no solution to that problem. There were no glaring threats on the horizon, no goal he was trying to achieve, not a single person in need of
protection. All he saw before him was countless days of teaching, followed by endless nights alone in his quarters.

Was this all there was, then? Nothing to fear, yes, but nothing to look forward to either. There was no one left who needed him, no one who cared whether he lived or…

Well, perhaps there was one person, but what difference did that make? Whatever Hermione had done, she’d done out of a sense of obligation. Now that he was healed, at least in a physical sense, he had no right to expect anything from her.

Still, he couldn’t deny what he’d felt when he’d seen her, emptiness replaced by a flash of relief when she’d walked in his classroom. Unfortunately, that feeling had faded, chased away by the reminder that she wasn’t there for him. She’d only come back to finish her schooling, preparing for a future that was far more promising than his own. That future had nothing to do with him. Indeed, it was unlikely that he’d even be around to witness it. He’d still be here at Hogwarts, no doubt, forced to accept the fact that he had nowhere else to go.
"Got another letter from Harry," Ginny said. "He's been down at Diagon Alley with Ron all week."

"Really?"

"Yeah, they're helping George reopen the store."

Hermione nodded, her attention focused on the Head Table as a platter of food appeared in front of Snape. He only took a couple mouthfuls, Vanishing the rest with a flick of his wand.

"He's doing a lot better, you know."

"What?"

"George. He's doing better."

"Oh, right."

Of course, Ginny hadn't been talking about Snape. His skin was even more sallow than usual, eyes underscored by dark circles that looked like bruises. He'd lost quite a bit of weight, too, voluminous robes seeming to swallow his thin body as he rose and left the hall.

"Hermione?" Ginny sounded mildly annoyed, waving a hand in front of her face to get her attention.

"What? I'm sorry."

"I asked if you'd gotten any letters from Ron."

"Oh. Yeah, I believe so."

"You mean you haven't read them? I can't even wait five minutes to read mine."

"I'll catch up over the weekend," she responded as she got to her feet. "For now, I need to get to work on that Transfiguration essay."

She didn't go straight to the library. Instead, she wandered through the halls, her thoughts drifting back to Snape. What had happened since she'd seen him last summer? Was there anything she could do to help?

She'd asked herself that question countless times over the past few weeks, though she couldn't come up with any ideas. How was she supposed to help him when he went out of his way to avoid people, only appearing at meals and at the beginning and end of class? He never prowled the halls, deducting House Points or assigning detentions as he'd done in the past. He'd even skipped the first Quidditch game of the season, not seeming to care that Slytherin was playing Gryffindor.

Why had he returned to Hogwarts if he didn't want to be here? Maybe like her, he'd needed something productive to do? That would make sense, but the problem was, he didn't seem to be doing anything at all. He hadn't given a single lecture since term had started, his lessons copied straight from the textbook. No originality, no attempts to challenge…
She lost her train of thought, eyes widening as she spotted a familiar figure at the other end of the hall.

"Professor Snape?"

He stopped in his tracks, turning around to face her.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

Of course, she knew he could speak now, but this was the first time she'd heard his voice since his return. He sounded… different, though it took her a minute to figure out why.

"I was just wondering…"

"What is it?"

Suddenly, she realized what it was. There was no bite to his words, no sharp edge of hostility when he spoke. He'd never addressed her this way, without even a hint of irritation in his voice.

"Sir…" She hesitated, taking a deep breath. "Are you okay?"

He flinched, his mouth compressing into a tight line.

"That's hardly an appropriate question, Miss Granger. If you wish to inquire about your essay…"

"I watched you in the Hall this evening, and at breakfast, too. You barely touched your food."

"Scrutinizing my dietary habits?" He raised an eyebrow. "Surely you have better things to do."

"No," she said frankly. "I don't."

"Well, your failure to find a suitable hobby isn't my problem. I'd suggest…"

"Sorry," she interrupted, "but I can't help noticing what's going on around me. I know you haven't been eating. By the looks of it, you haven't been sleeping either. The way you've been acting…"

"And how, precisely, am I supposed to act? What is it about my behavior that you find so objectionable?"

"I only meant…" She took a step closer without realizing she'd done so, her eyes widening. "You've been drinking."

"Pardon?"

"Firewhiskey," she said. "I can smell it."

For the first time, she saw a spark in his eyes, his nostrils flaring as he glared down at her. "I am 38 years old, Miss Granger," he said, sounding uncannily like his former self. "It is both intrusive and entirely inappropriate for you to…"

He trailed off, both of them spotting the small group of students who'd just entered the hallway.

"I'm sorry," she said under her breath. "I just…"

"20 points from Gryffindor."

"What?!"
"20 points," he repeated, "for your impertinence."

Without another word, he turned away, black robes billowing behind him as he strode down the hall.

Severus was no stranger to unjust punishments. He was unaccustomed to feeling guilty about them, however, berating himself as he headed toward the dungeon. What had he deducted points for, exactly? The fact that she'd picked up on the obvious? Or was it the implication that she gave a damn?

No. He'd punished her because he hadn't known how to respond to either of those things, blindsided by three simple words.

"Are you okay?"

Dumbledore had asked him that question, but only to ensure he was up to the task at hand. Inquiring after his well-being without any agenda, just to make sure he was all right? He couldn't remember the last time anyone had done such a thing.

Of course, he wasn't all right. She'd had no trouble picking up on that, even before she'd smelled the alcohol. She'd been observing him for days, it seemed, perhaps even weeks.

Why?

That was the bigger question, one that left him confounded. Why did she care?

Her decision to save his life? That made sense. She wasn't the type of person who could've just left him there to die, whether she'd despised him or not. As for St. Mungo's, he'd assumed it was guilt or feelings of obligation that motivated her visits. Well, that and her need to escape the Weasley clan, which he could certainly understand.

But what about now? He wasn't ill or incapacitated, nor was he on the brink of death. Why did she still feel the need to check up on him?

Severus shut the door to his office, hardly aware of what he was doing as he poured himself a glass of Firewhiskey. He scowled as he lifted it to his lips, setting it back on the desk. All else aside, he needed to cut back on the drinking, appalled that someone had picked up on his newly acquired habit. An occasional nightcap was one thing, but getting pissed before dinner? That was rather excessive.

Summoning a pot of tea instead, he graded a handful of essays before he retired to his quarters. By then, he was fully sober, already dreading the night to come. He'd barely slept since he'd returned to Hogwarts, even with plenty of alcohol in his system. Without it…

He sighed, changing into a loose sleeping robe before he stretched out on the bed. At least he had something to distract him tonight, staring up at the canopy as he dwelled on his conversation with Hermione.

"Sir, are you okay?"

Whatever her reasons, she hadn't been faking it. He'd heard genuine concern in her voice, along with a fair amount of sympathy. Of course, he'd detected wariness, too, a clear sign that she'd anticipated a negative reaction.

She'd expected him to lash out at her, yet she'd still chosen to question him. Why?
Closing his eyes, Severus forced himself to reflect on the past few months. Yes, it made sense that she'd saved his life... but how had she known he was alive in the first place? That wouldn't have been possible unless she'd returned after the battle, expecting to find a corpse.

Why had she come back? There could only be one reason. She'd wanted to make sure he received a proper burial, affording him some small measure of dignity.

That one simple act had shifted his perspective, making it impossible to hate her. It wasn't the fact that she'd saved his life, but that even in death, she'd tried to show him respect. It was the last thing he would've expected, certainly far more than he'd deserved.

Of course, that was true for her visits to St. Mungo's, too. He didn't know why she'd treated him with so much compassion, but even now, it left him feeling humbled.

"I thought it might be better if I read to you. Would you like that?"

She had no idea how much he'd liked it. He'd lost himself in the sound of her voice, wondering how he could've ever thought of it as shrill and demanding. Soft and pleasant, oddly sweet... he'd been content to listen to her for hours, the one thing that had given him some measure of peace since the end of the war.

Severus yawned, attempting to recapture that feeling as he turned on his side. From the day he'd left St. Mungo's, it had eluded him, but tonight was different. It was almost as if...

"Mr. Snape? Your visitor's here."

Severus lay still and silent, his stomach fluttering as she walked in the room. What a stupid reaction. Downright absurd, really. Why should he care that she'd chosen to come back? Was he really that desperate for company?

Yes, he was. He couldn't deny it, eager with anticipation as he watched her set down her bag. She pulled out several books and set them on the table, flashing him a smile that made him catch his breath.

When had she become so...

Beautiful? No, he couldn't allow himself to think of her that way. Still, he had to admit that there was something appealing about her soft brown curls, framing a face that had matured tremendously over the past couple years.

"More Shakespeare?"

He grunted in response.

"Okay."

Closing his eyes, he lost himself in the melodic prose. Her pronunciation was flawless, her voice never faltering as she read the first act. She was...

She was touching him.

He lay there stunned as a warm hand parted his robes, caressing his chest before it slid across his stomach. Holding his breath, he felt her move lower, wrapping her fingers around his...

What the bloody hell was she thinking? Didn't she realize how inappropriate...
He opened his mouth to speak, though all that emerged was a gasp. Meanwhile, his hips began to move, arching upward, seeking her touch.

"What..." he finally managed, each word catching on a pant. "What... are... you... doing?"

Oddly enough, she didn't seem to hear him, still reading in that calm, collected voice as she continued to stroke him. Her hand...

Severus jerked awake, his eyes widening as he looked down at himself. It was his own hand that had slipped inside his robes, gripping a part of him that hadn't been responsive since long before the battle.

How was this possible? He hadn't gotten hard since...

Oh, who the bloody hell cared? He was certainly hard now, desperate to take the act to its inevitable conclusion. Closing his eyes, he picked up the momentum, stroking himself faster until finally, finally...

He could've wept with relief, shuddering in the darkness as he pictured her face. For the moment, he couldn't even bring himself to feel guilty about it, his body utterly relaxed as he drifted back to sleep.

Severus wished he could hide under the covers for at least a week. Instead, he heaved himself out of bed, summoning his teaching robes as he headed for the shower.

Of course, he wasn't unhappy to discover that he could still function. But the way it had happened...

It didn't help that he'd awoken in a similar state, his thoughts still focused on Hermione. This time, he refused to act on them, gasping as he stepped beneath a stream of icy cold water. He scrubbed himself from head to toe, shaking his head as he did so.

To think that he'd fantasized about one of his students... that was something he'd never done, not even when he'd hardly been older than they were. Granted, he'd been too grief stricken to have much of a libido back then, but still...

Still, he shouldn't be having those kind of thoughts about Hermione. No doubt she'd be horrified if she knew about the dream he'd had, repulsed by the thought of putting her hands on a nasty old git like him.

And what about him? Could he honestly say he'd ever want to...

No. No, of course not. What happened last night had only been a dream, one that bore no reflection on his current reality.

Severus sat stiffly at the Head Table, his expression stoic. He never even glanced at Hermione, appearing every bit as disinterested as he had for the past few weeks.

Still, there was something different about him. She watched him out of the corner of her eye, resisting the urge to smile.

He was eating.

She saw him polish off a couple pieces of toast, followed by a handful of sausages. He helped himself to a bit of fruit, rounding off his breakfast with a bowl of fried potatoes.
Had he gotten his appetite back? Or was he just trying to avoid her scrutiny? Either way, she was pleased to see him taking better care of himself. He even looked like he'd gotten a decent amount of sleep, the circles under his eyes slightly less pronounced.

She finished her own breakfast, wondering what else she could do to help. What would it take to break through his apathy, sparking his interest in what was going on around him?

"Ready?" Ginny said.

She nodded, still watching Snape as he rose and left the hall. He didn't speak to anyone on his way out, though of course, no one spoke to him either. It had been that way since the start of term, both students and teachers choosing to keep their distance.

That was the problem, she realized. No one ever attempted to engage him, whether that was asking questions during class or chatting with him at meals. Really, was it any wonder that he seemed disinterested? It wasn't as if anyone had taken an interest in him.

"Sir, are you okay?"

He'd been shocked when she'd asked him that question. Not annoyed or offended, but genuinely shocked. He'd done his best to hide it, responding with his usual sarcasm, but she'd seen… well, she didn't know what it was, but it certainly wasn't apathy.

Was that all he needed? Human interaction, someone who cared about his well-being? That would explain why he'd been so responsive at the hospital, surprisingly tolerant of her company.

No, it wasn't just tolerance. He'd enjoyed her visits. It didn't matter whether she'd been reading, chattering about her childhood, or telling him about her future ambitions… he'd seemed to welcome the attention. Granted, he'd been a bit more standoffish last night, but actions spoke louder than words. Her attempt to engage him had made a difference, leading to the first positive change she'd seen since he'd returned to Hogwarts.

She made her way to the dungeons, feeling optimistic as she entered the Potions classroom. Snape was already seated at his desk, staring intently at a pile of essays. He didn't bother to look up as she walked by, though it didn't matter. She had a plan.

As she'd come to expect, he never said a word. He rose to his feet instead, flicking his wand at the blackboard before he turned to leave the room.

She took a deep breath, her hand shooting up in the air. "Professor Snape?"

What the bloody hell was she doing? Severus had answered three of her questions already, yet here she was, raising her hand for a fourth time. Surely she couldn't be having that much trouble with her potion. It should've been simple to brew, especially for a NEWT level student.

"What is it, Miss Granger?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I think I missed a step. Could you take a look?"

He'd been trying so hard to keep his distance. He hadn't even made eye contact, staring at the wall as he'd answered her previous questions. Of course, he could always do the same with this one, but he couldn't ignore some tiny spark of curiosity. Why would she of all people be struggling with this assignment? For the past few weeks, her work had been flawless.
Rising from his desk, he strode over to where she was seated. He peered at the contents of her cauldron, giving his head a little shake.

"Miss Granger, your potion is…"

She glanced over her shoulder, her eyes widening as they met his. He was standing too close. Much too close. He could feel the warmth of her body, his senses reeling as he caught a whiff of her hair. It smelt like vanilla and sunlight, that faint fragrance she'd left behind in his hospital room. Even in his dream, he'd remembered it, breathing it in as she'd…

"There's nothing wrong with your potion," he snapped, taking an abrupt step backward. "Stop wasting my time."

With that, he swept from the room, slamming the door behind him.

Was Hermione surprised that Snape had lost his temper? Of course not. She'd been making a nuisance of herself, going too far in her efforts to engage him. Really, it was no wonder he'd chosen to leave. She was just lucky he hadn't taken House Points on his way out the door.

But before that, the way he'd looked at her…

She could still picture it, his breath hitching in his throat as his eyes met hers. For that brief, utterly baffling moment, she'd almost thought…

How was that possible? He was her teacher, a man who'd despised her for years. True, he seemed to find her more tolerable these days, but the idea that he might be attracted to her?

Shaking her head, Hermione shed her school robes as she sat down at her desk. She made a brief attempt to work on her Charms essay before she set it aside, her thoughts returning to Snape.

Of course, he wasn't just her teacher. Not anymore. The past few months had changed their dynamic, shattering boundaries she'd once taken for granted. She'd seen him broken, helpless, his stoic facade blown apart by raw suffering. Those terrible moments in the Shrieking Shack…

And what about St. Mungo's? She'd told herself that he'd enjoyed her company, but she knew it went much deeper than that. She'd felt his isolation, his despair, knowing it was her he'd turned to for comfort. Hadn't the healer said as much?

"You're here and you care. That can make a huge difference, especially to someone who has no one else."

After all that, how could she help but see him differently? To her, he'd become a human being, no less vulnerable than herself.

His perception of her had changed, too. He'd made that obvious, treating her more like an equal than he ever had in the past. The conversation they'd had last night… true, he'd responded sarcastically, but not with his usual venom. He'd listened to her concerns, taking them seriously enough to modify his behavior.

"Here, Crookshanks."

She opened the door, letting the cat out to roam the castle. Changing into her pajamas, she crawled into bed, still bewildered by what had happened that morning. No, Snape wasn't just her teacher, nor did he seem to see her as just another student. But that look in his eyes, the intensity she'd seen
Of course, it didn't mean anything. How could it? Just a brief moment of weakness, some passing
thought… no use dwelling on it, really.

What she should be doing? Thinking of Ron. He was her boyfriend, after all, a boyfriend she'd been
neglecting for weeks.

"Accio, Ron's letter."

Three unopened scrolls landed on the bed, filling her with guilt. She hadn't realized she was that far
behind, igniting the tip of her wand as she opened the first one.

Ron missed her. He couldn't wait to see her over the holidays. He'd played Quidditch with Harry that
afternoon, though it was a lot less fun with only two people.

The second letter was strikingly similar, other than a couple of lines about his work at George's store.
The third was more peevish, wondering why he hadn't heard from her.

She couldn't blame him for that, promising herself that she'd write him first thing in the morning. In
the meantime, she summoned his picture, studying features that were as familiar as her own.

But as she closed her eyes, it wasn't his face she saw. It was Snape's. Try as she might, she couldn't
forget the way he'd looked at her, wondering why it had affected her so deeply. Why hadn't she ever
felt that way when Ron…

She pushed the thought away, choosing to ignore it as she drifted off to sleep.

Hermione sat up, wondering what had woken her. She rubbed her eyes, watching as silhouettes
gradually separated themselves from the darkness. Her desk… her wardrobe… the chair where she
sat to do her homework…

A tall figure standing at the foot of the bed.

Before she could react, the figure moved, looming over her for a brief, terrifying moment before it
drew back into the shadows. She shrank against the headboard, grabbing her wand from the bedside
table as she opened her mouth to scream.
Chapter 6: Panic

Severus jerked awake, staring down at the Patronus next to his bed. The cat opened its mouth to speak, Minerva's voice informing him that he was needed on the second floor.

"Possible intruder. Keep an eye out on your way up here."

He dressed as quickly as possible, holding his wand at the ready as he crept upstairs. There was no sign of any disturbance, however, the halls peaceful and silent. He only heard voices when he'd reached his destination, picking up on the low murmur of conversation as he swept into the guest wing.

"Ah, Severus, there you are."

"What happened?" He looked past Flitwick, his eyes narrowing as he spotted a small figure in flannel pajamas. What was she doing down here?

"Severus," Minerva said, waving him over. "Miss Granger says…"

"Someone was in my room!"

"We've checked and there's no sign of any intruder. A nightmare, perhaps?"

"He was in there!" Hermione insisted. "Standing right at the foot of my bed!"

"He?" Severus frowned. "Who?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. It was too dark to see."

"Then how can you be sure…"

"I know what I saw!"

"Severus, may I speak with you for a moment?"

He nodded at Minerva, following her until they were both out of earshot.

"She's been sleeping in the guest quarters?" he said, his voice low. "Why?"

"I thought she could use her own space."

"As opposed to other students who…"

"She missed an entire year of school," Minerva interrupted. "Not to mention everything else she's been through. We were worried she might have trouble adjusting."

"We?" He echoed, raising an eyebrow.

"Molly Weasley wrote me. She said Hermione wasn't herself over the summer, avoiding the family and going off on her own all the time. It seemed she was having difficulty interacting with others, so
we agreed that…"

"Meddling old bat."

Minerva blinked. "Pardon?"

"Not you," he said. "Molly."

"Well, she did live with the girl for several months. I'm sure she knows what's best."

Severus shook his head, choosing not to mention all those visits to St. Mungo's. She'd had no trouble socializing with him, had she? True, she'd grumbled about the Weasleys quite a bit, but who wouldn't? They really were a meddling lot, as intrusive as they were annoying.

"Has it occurred to either of you that Miss Granger might know what's best for herself? She isn't a child."

"I know she's not…" Minerva frowned. "Severus, why is this bothering you?"

"Bothering me? Not at all. I simply question the wisdom of allowing Molly Weasley to make decisions on the girl's behalf… especially when those decisions might compromise her safety."

"Her safety hasn't been compromised."

"No? According to her…"

"I heard what she said, Severus. I also know that the door was shut when we arrived. No one else was in there, nor were there any signs of intrusion."

"If the intruder knew the password…"

"Riddle."

"Riddle?" he repeated, ignoring the chill that skittered up his spine.

Minerva nodded. "No one can access that room without answering the riddle. Besides, there's only one door. If someone had managed to gain access, don't you think she would've seen them leave?"

He opened his mouth and then closed it again, forced to concede the point.

"She had a nightmare, that's all. I'll have Poppy give her a calming draught."

"Very well." He hesitated, letting out a heavy sigh. "If anything changes…"

"I'll let you know. Good night, Severus."

Nightmares? That did seem like a logical explanation, yet Severus couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. Wouldn't Hermione of all people know the difference between a real threat and an imagined one? She was the veteran of a war, not some cowering child still foolish enough to believe there were monsters under her bed.

He shut the door to his office, pouring himself a glass of Firewhiskey before he dumped the contents back in the bottle. No, he couldn't drink. Didn't want to, really. If there was an intruder in the castle, he'd need to be on high alert, in full possession of his senses. True, this might very well be a false alarm, but still…
Still, he felt restless, his nerves tingling in a way they hadn't done since Voldemort had fallen. He settled himself at his desk, forcing himself to focus on a pile of essays that needed to be graded.

This was something he had done frequently during the war. It had always managed to calm him, his anxieties soothed by the monotony of the task. That was particularly true in this case – how many poorly written essays on the properties of fluxweed could one read before they died of boredom?

Deciding he'd rather not find out, Severus rose to his feet, stifling a yawn. He opened the door to his private quarters, only to stop in his tracks as he spotted a slip of parchment under his boot. He leaned over to pick it up, his eyes widening as he read the message it contained.

This war will never be over. Not until I finish what he started.

"All right, Hermione?"

She nodded, reaching for a glass of pumpkin juice. "Fine, thanks."

"I heard you had a nightmare."

"What? Who told you that?"

Swallowing a mouthful of eggs, Ginny pointed to a roll of parchment on the table. "Mum wrote me."

"How would your mum know…" Hermoine trailed off, shaking her head. "Anyway, it wasn't a nightmare. Someone was in my room."

Ginny shrugged, buttering a piece of toast before she responded. "Yeah, I've had that happen. Nerine hangs her robes on the bed post sometimes, and I swear, it looks just like…"

"No, I didn't imagine it. I saw them move, I…"

"You know what might help? Get Madame Pomfrey to give you some Dreamless Sleep. I took that for the first few days after I came back and it worked wonders."

"I don't need… look, let's just forget it, all right? I'm fine."

"Okay." Ginny returned her attention to her plate, devouring a couple sausages. "Hey, did I tell you that the Holyhead Harpies are recruiting next year? I was thinking of trying out."

Hermione nodded, glancing up at the Head Table. To her surprise, Professor Snape was staring directly at her, his brow furrowed. Why? Did he believe her? Or did he assume she'd only been overreacting to a nightmare?

She hoped it wasn't the latter. It was embarrassing to have anyone think she couldn't handle a bad dream, but him? She'd hate for him to think of her as childish or immature, especially after all the progress they'd made over the past few months.

Of course, there was nothing she could do about it right now. She just hoped the intruder would be caught, proving to herself and everyone else that she'd been telling the truth.

"I'll see you later," she told Ginny, reaching for her bag. "I've got to get to class."

Later that evening, Hermione headed to the library, eager to work on her latest essay. Strategies for using Transfiguration to combat Dark magic? Personally, she found the subject matter fascinating.
She handed her permission slip to Madame Pince, making her way over to the Restricted Section.

It took her a while to find what she needed. She selected one book and then another, grabbing three more before she was satisfied. Finally, she headed back down the aisle, her arms laden down with ancient texts.

"Granger..." a voice whispered, so faint she barely heard it.

She stopped in her tracks, frowning as she glanced over her shoulder. Of course, she saw no one – other than her and Madame Pince, the library was deserted.

Shaking her head, she continued on her way, deciding it must've been her imagination. But then she heard a rustling sound, followed by soft, quick footsteps on the other side of the aisle.

"Madame Pince?"

It wasn't the librarian. Deep down, she knew that, stuffing the books in her bag before she pulled out her wand. She peered through the gaps in the shelves, her breath catching in her throat as she glimpsed a shadow on the other side.

Unfortunately, she couldn't get a good look at whoever it was. They ducked around the corner, disappearing from sight.

What should she do? Should she call for help, or...

"Confundus."

The speaker said something else, though she couldn't understand them. Just a brief, barely audible whisper and her vision grew fuzzy around the edges, scraps of parchment flying around her head. Her arm was moving, wand slashing through the air... she couldn't seem to stop. Another whisper and she snatched several more books of the shelves, giving them the same treatment.

"Enough."

She understood that final word, though it was too late to figure out who'd said it. All she could do was stare at the ground, her eyes widening in horror as she realized what she'd done.

"Madame Pince? Madame Pince!"

"No need to shout. I can hear you just..." The librarian swept into the aisle, letting out a choking sound as she spotted the mess. "What have you done?"

"I didn't do it!" Hermione said hastily. "I mean, I did, but not on purpose! I was Confunded by... well, I don't know who cast the spell, but everything got fuzzy, and..."

"No one else has entered this library," said Madame Pince, biting off each word like she was chewing on a hard piece of taffy. "Not for hours. It's despicable enough that you would ruin such valuable property. Offering such a poor excuse for your behavior? That is inexcusable."

"Honestly, I didn't..."

"You've destroyed six books, four of which are irreplaceable. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Hermione opened her mouth and then closed it again, unable to think of a suitable response. Really, what could she say? It wasn't like Madame Pince would believe her.
"Please," she finally said, her voice barely above a whisper. "May I speak with Professor McGonagall?"

"Yes, you most certainly can. In fact, I think the headmistress should be summoned immediately."

Severus retired to his quarters right after dinner, deciding to make an early night of it. He wasn't particularly tired, but the day had been stressful, leaving him longing for a bit of quiet time. What he needed was a pile of books and a nice cup of tea, something to distract him from his troubled thoughts.

Of course, that was easier said than done. He'd spent all day dwelling on the supposed intruder, unable to stop thinking about the note he'd received. Was it any coincidence that both those things had happened on the same night? Somehow, he doubted it.

How had someone gained access to his office? How had they found their way into her room? His was protected by a password he'd never shared with another soul, hers guarded by a riddle that had to be relatively secure.

This war will never be over. Not until I finish what he started.

Was it a tasteless prank? A genuine threat? Both of those possibilities set him on edge, though of course, the latter was far more disturbing. Finish what he started… what did that mean? Was it a reference to Voldemort's plan to conquer the Wizarding world… or his attempt to kill his most "loyal" servant?

Severus shook his head, refusing to dwell on it any longer. He flipped open a book as he sipped his tea, perusing an exhaustive list of Chinese potions ingredients.

The distraction worked, at least for a little while. He finished half the book along with an entire pot of tea, surprised to discover it was well past 11 PM. Of course, he was still wide awake, nerves thrumming under the effects of far too much caffeine. He leaned back in his chair, deciding it wouldn't hurt to read a few more…

His head snapped up, his eyes scanning the room. Was he hearing things? No, there it was again, a soft, peculiar noise like someone was shuffling a deck of cards.

Where was it coming from? Drawing his wand, he pointed it at his trunk, which seemed to be the source.

It moved.

Only slightly at first, but then it started to shake, hinges squeaking like something inside was attempting to break free. A Boggart, perhaps? He flicked his wand, bracing himself as he unfastened the latches.

"Riddik…"

He stumbled backward, his eyes widening as the trunk exploded. Dozens of photographs flew across the room, duplicating themselves in rapid succession. They covered the bed, the floor, piling up until they were several layers deep. Even then, they didn't stop, countless images of Lily laughing up at him as he struggled to bring them under control.

"Prohibere duplici!" Cursing under his breath, he tried again. "Summa desinunt!"
After a few more attempts, he managed to stop the duplication, though it didn't end there. He cast what seemed like hundreds of Vanishing spells, finally returning his quarters to their former state. Tucking a single copy of the picture back in the little box, he closed the trunk, reinforcing it with an extra set of wards.

What did it matter that someone had gained access to his office? That was nothing compared to them invading his private quarters. What they'd done, attempting to torture him with Lily's picture, of all things…

That was personal. Far too personal.

Severus sighed, returning to his armchair though he no longer had any motivation to read. He stared into the fire instead, waiting to see if there were any other signs of a disturbance. A couple hours passed before he relaxed somewhat, though even then, he couldn't imagine falling asleep. He searched for something to take the edge off, desperate for a few hours of peace.

Firewhiskey? No, he needed something more effective.

He summoned a vial of Dreamless Sleep, tipping it into his mouth. To his relief, the immunity he'd developed over the summer had worn off, his eyelids growing heavy as he slipped into bed. He'd have to be more careful about his dosage in the future, just to be sure that the potion retained its effectiveness. Really, he'd been foolish to overindulge, should've known better than to…

Severus did fall asleep, though it certainly wasn't dreamless. He woke up an hour later, the sound of his screams still echoing off the walls.
Chapter 7: Belief

For the first time since his return, Severus bore an eerie resemblance to his former self. He stalked through the halls like some oversized bird of prey, sneering at anyone who was unfortunate enough to cross his path.

Clearly, sleep deprivation had taken its toll on him. It didn't help that he was perilously on edge, his muscles aching with tension. Of course, he would've preferred to take his frustrations out on the perpetrator of these recent stunts, but until that person was found…

"Ah, Severus," Minerva said as he swept into the teacher's lounge. "We were wondering when you'd show up."

"My apologies. There was an… incident that needed my attention."

"Did it have anything to do with Mr. Wiggins?" asked Flitwick. "I just saw him coming out of the dungeons – poor boy looked quite traumatized."

"Yes, well, I don't tolerate carelessness, especially when one is handling potentially dangerous ingredients."

"What did he…"

"Enough," Minerva interrupted. "Let's call this meeting to order, shall we?"

Finding a seat near the back, Severus pretended to listen as she dispensed with her usual business. He put in an order for Potions supplies, nearly nodding off as Rolanda launched into a lengthy explanation regarding the need for new Quidditch uniforms. Really, he didn't see why he had to be here. He could've prepared a list and sent it straight up to Minerva's office, no need to sit through all the mundane…

"Now that that's taken care of, I'd like to talk about Hermione Granger. I assume all of you heard about the incident in the library?"

"Library?" he echoed, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, you weren't at breakfast, were you? Really, Severus, you should leave the dungeons more often."

He rolled his eyes, deciding not to remind her that his office, classroom, and living quarters were all located down there. "What happened?"

"Miss Granger tore up a bunch of books," Flitwick said. "Irma was furious."

"Impossible."

"I would've thought so, too," Minerva said, "but it couldn't have been anyone else."

Severus shook his head, remembering the books Hermione had brought to Saint Mungo's. She'd handled them like priceless treasures, seeming to forget that they were nothing more than ink and
"Impossible," he repeated. "That girl would rather slice off one of her own limbs."

"Severus, she admitted it."

"Indeed? What did she say?"

"She insisted that she hadn't done it on purpose. Swore that she must've been Confounded."

"Well, that makes a lot more sense."

Minerva shook her head. "According to Irma, there was no one else in the library. Severus, you know how vigilant she is – do you really think she wouldn't have seen someone come in?"

"Miss Granger was alone in her room the other night, too," Flitwick pointed out. "We couldn't find a shred of evidence to prove otherwise."

"Exactly," Minerva said. "I don't believe she's doing this intentionally, though it does seem like her imagination is getting the better of her."

"War trauma?" Poppy suggested.

Minerva nodded. "We've seen quite a bit of that this year, as you well know."

"Yes, I am running rather low on sleeping potions and calming draughts. If you can find the time, Severus…"

"Have any of you considered," he interrupted, "that these incidents might be a case of legitimate harassment?"

"Given the lack of evidence," Minerva said, "that seems unlikely. We must also consider that Miss Granger was known to have emotional issues. According to Molly Weasley…"

"Oh, bugger Molly Weasley!"

"Severus!"

The other professors stared at him, obviously shocked by his vehemence. He'd surprised himself, truth be told, though it didn't matter. He knew damn well that Hermione's behavior had nothing to do with any emotional issues.

"Forgive me," he said. "My only point is that Mrs. Weasley's… opinions are irrelevant in this situation. This is clearly a Hogwarts issue, one that I believe should be handled internally. I also believe…"

Should he admit that these things had been happening to him, too? He hesitated, deciding that the incident with Lily's picture was too personal to share. Other than that, what could he say? That someone had slipped a note under his door? Minerva would assume it was just a prank – a tasteless prank, but a prank nonetheless.

No. What he needed was more proof, something that couldn't be denied.

"I also believe," he continued, "that these incidents should be investigated further. May I have your permission to do so?"
"I don't see where that's necessary. We've already…"

"If, as you say, there is no legitimate threat, then no harm can come from me poking around a bit."

Minerva sighed. "Very well, Severus, but do this on your own time. I don't want it interfering with your teaching duties."

His duties? He shook his head, remembering the endless demands that Dumbledore had put upon him during the war. He'd rarely missed a class, even when the Dark Lord had placed additional strain on his time. He'd worked diligently for the Order, played the loyal Death Eater, all while maintaining a full-time teaching career. Did she really think he couldn't handle one little investigation? If anything, he had more time than he knew what to do with these days.

"Well then, I suppose this meeting is adjourned. Severus, may I speak with you privately?"

"Of course."

He wasn't surprised by her request. From her perspective, his concern for Hermione had to seem unusual, even unwarranted. Fortunately, he had a perfect excuse for his behavior.

"Your interest in Miss Granger…"

"I wouldn't call it an interest," he said, "merely an obligation. Need I remind you that the girl saved my life? I'm indebted to her, whether I wish to be or not."

"Oh yes, I'd completely forgotten. But Severus…"

He raised an eyebrow.

"While I'm glad to see you treating her more kindly…"

"I haven't been kind."

"Less… acrimonious then."

He inclined his head, deciding this was acceptable.

"I believe this is a positive change, but that doesn't mean you should encourage these odd behaviors. What she needs – what we all need – is to put the war behind us. A return to normalcy, if you will."

"Normalcy?" he repeated. "What's that?"

"Well," she said, her lips twitching, "as close to normal as it ever gets around here."

He nodded. "That is my goal, as well as the reason for my investigation. If I can put the girl's fears to rest, perhaps we can finish the school year without further incident. That would be better for all of us, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, I suppose it would. Very well, Severus, do what you must."

No matter how hard she tried, Hermione couldn't seem to focus. She'd fallen asleep twice in Professor Binns' class, though that wasn't nearly as bad as the Charms essay she'd forgotten to finish. To her relief, Professor Flitwick had chosen not to penalize her, extending the deadline for a week as he'd murmured about the difficult time she'd been having.
Of course, that didn't mean he believed her. None of the professors did. They might be concerned, but that had nothing to do with the fact that she might be in danger. They didn't make announcements or take any precautions, didn't even bother to assign additional patrols to the guest wing where she slept. They obviously thought it was all in her head, some belated response to the traumas of war.

If this had been a Muggle school, they would've sent her to counseling, perhaps even given her medication. In the Wizarding world, mental issues were either tolerated or outright ignored, unless one was so far gone that they earned themselves a permanent residence at Saint Mungo's.

Was there something wrong with her mind? That was the real question, one that had begun to trouble her immensely. She'd honestly thought there was an intruder in her room, one who'd also forced her to destroy those books. But what if the professors were right? What if she'd imagined that someone else was there, her perception so distorted that…

"Bollocks!"

The cauldron exploded, spraying her with putrid green liquid. To her horror, she burst into tears, dismayed by yet another reminder of how detached she was from reality.

"Hey Granger! Looks like you've got a rat spleen in your hair!"

"20 points from Slytherin!"

"But sir…"

"Quiet, Mr. Forrester. Unless, of course, you'd like me to double it."

The Slytherin shook his head, his eyes wide. It wasn't difficult to understand his confusion — Snape had always favored his own students, reluctant to take points for even the most grievous offenses.

"I'm sorry," Hermione whispered as he came to stand behind her. He didn't acknowledge her apology, scowling as he Vanished the mess she'd created.

"My office," he said. "8 PM tonight."

Hermione couldn't believe Snape had given her detention. It felt like a personal insult, a brutal reminder that he still held all the power. Of course, he was her teacher, but punishing her like she was just another student? That felt wrong somehow, as if the past few months had never happened.

That wasn't the only thing that felt off. Her day went from bad to worse, a dismal performance in Transfiguration followed by an A on her Arithmancy test. Acceptable? She supposed it could've been worse, though she'd never scored anything less than an O in that class.

What was wrong with her? True, she'd barely slept since the night she'd seen an intruder in her room… or had thought she'd seen… she didn't even know anymore.

"Come in."

She sighed, opening the door to Snape's office. He was seated at his desk with a pot of tea beside him, brow furrowed as he inspected a roll of parchment.

"Sit down, Miss Granger."

Quietly, she obeyed, dropping into the empty chair on the other side of the desk.
"Do you know why you're here?"

"To serve detention."

He looked up, his dark eyes connecting with hers. "This isn't detention. More of a meeting, I'd say."

"Look, I really *am* sorry about the cauldron. I didn't mean…"

"I'm sure you didn't," he interrupted, "though I'd like to hear your explanation. It's unlike you to be so careless."

For the first time that day, she felt slightly better. True, he might still punish her, but at least he was willing to hear her out.

"I haven't been sleeping," she told him. "After what happened in my room, the library…"

"Yes, I heard about the books. You believe you were Confunded?"

"That's what it felt like. I heard someone speak and then everything went fuzzy, and then… I don't know what happened. Professor McGonagall says…"

"I'm well aware of her opinion. Right now, I want to hear yours."

"Honestly?" She hesitated, letting out a heavy sigh. "I'm scared."

"That seems like a logical reaction," he said, pouring a cup of tea. "If you believe someone's targeting you…"

"It isn't just that."

"No?"

To her surprise, he set the tea in front of her, fixing a second cup for himself. He even passed her the cream and sugar, leaning back in his chair as he waited for her response.

"I… I'm scared that they might be right."

"Who?"

"Everyone. The other teachers, Madame Pince, even Professor McGonagall. They seem to think it's all in my head, like I'm having some sort of mental breakdown."

"I don't believe that," Snape said quietly.

"You don't?"

"No," he said, pausing to take a sip of tea. "In fact, I'm quite certain that we're dealing with a legitimate threat."

"How…"

He retrieved a slip of parchment from his pocket, sliding it across the desk. "Read it."

"The war will never be over," she read aloud, a chill skittering up her spine. "Not until I finish what he started."

"Someone slipped that under my door three nights ago. The same night…"
"The night I saw an intruder in my room."

"Yes, and that isn't all. The night before last…"

"The night I went to the library?"

He nodded. "Someone managed to gain access to my private quarters. They cast a jinx that duplicated one of my personal items."

"What was it?"

"It doesn't matter," he said. "The point is that I believe you. I'd be foolish not to, considering that these incidents have been happening to me, too."

"Have you told anyone?"

"No."

She frowned. "Why not?"

"Because it isn't enough. You saw how the others reacted to the incidents with you, how quick they were to trivialize…"

"It was like they wanted to believe I'd made it up."

"Precisely. And why do you think that is?"

"I'd guess it has something to do with Volde…" She hesitated, noticing his sharp intake of breath. "You-Know-Who being gone. I think a lot of people convinced themselves that getting rid of him would solve all our problems."

"An astute observation," Snape said.

"Of course, that isn't realistic."

"No," he agreed, "but they're eager to put the war behind them. They're determined to believe that all is well, that…"

"That there's nothing left to be afraid of," she finished for him.

He inclined his head. "A natural reaction, I suppose, though it does make things more difficult for us."

"So what do we do?"

"Truthfully?" He sighed, looking as tired as she felt. "I don't know. It's impossible to come up with a plan when we have no idea who we're dealing with or what their intentions are. It could be that these are just a series of pranks, disturbing yet not inherently dangerous. But…"

"But we can't afford to take that chance."

"No, which is why I want you to report directly to me from now on. Whatever happens, anything you might see, I want you to tell me. Even if it seems insignificant, a slight inkling, some random suspicion…"

"I'll tell you." She hesitated, hoping she wasn't crossing the line. "If you agree to do the same."
He finished the last of his tea, eyeing her over the rim of his cup. Finally, he set it back on the table, folding his hands in his lap.

"Agreed."

Nearly a week passed without incident, allowing Severus to relax to some degree. He even managed to get a bit more sleep, his nightmares stifled by sheer exhaustion. Still, he knew it was just a matter of time. If life had taught him anything, it was that no problem could be obliterated by wishful thinking.

As such, he wasn't surprised when Hermione approached him after class a few days later, telling him she had an incident to report.

"Well, I don't know if I'd call it an incident," she said, "but…"

"What happened? Did you see anything?"

"No, but I think Crookshanks did."

"Crookshanks?" He frowned. "That's your…"

"My cat."

"I see. Go on."

"For the past couple weeks, I've been keeping him with me at night. He usually just curls up and goes to sleep, but last night, he was acting weird."

"So your cat…" Severus trailed off, biting back a sarcastic remark. True, she was referencing a type of animal that was notorious for peculiar behavior, but hadn't he told her to report even the most minor occurrences?

"Your cat," he repeated, keeping his tone mild. "What did he do?"

"I think he was standing guard. He sat by the door all night, refusing to come when I called. I even heard him growl a couple times, like he was warning someone off. Someone or something… I really don't know."

"The castle is full of animals," Severus pointed out. "He could've been growling at a stray mouse, or perhaps another student's companion."

She shook her head. "I've never seen him growl at ordinary animals… or people, for that matter. He only acts like this when he senses danger."

"Such as?"

"Remember Scabbers?"

"Scabbers?" Severus frowned, wondering why the name sounded familiar.

"Wormtail. He was…"

"Impersonating Ronald Weasley's rat. Yes, I remember now."

Hermione nodded. "Crookshanks figured it out long before any of us did. He kept trying to attack
him, nearly killed him once or twice."

"It's a shame he didn't succeed. Go on."

"I couldn't understand why he hated him so much. He didn't have a problem with anyone else's animals, even other rats. But Crookshanks is very smart. The witch I bought him from told me he was half-Kneazle."

"Ah, that explains it."

"So you believe…"

Severus inclined his head. "I believe your cat could indeed prove useful. He might not be large enough to capture an intruder, but he at least has the ability to warn you, it seems. Keep him with you, and do let me know if it happens again."

"I will."

He thought that was the end of their conversation, though she clearly wasn't in any hurry to leave. She hovered in front of his desk instead, their conversation replaced by awkward silence.

"Was there anything else?"

"Actually, I was hoping…"

"Yes?"

"Do you have any Dreamless Sleep?"

He frowned, noticing the dark circles under her eyes. She looked like she hadn't had a decent night's sleep in weeks, her face pale with exhaustion. Unfortunately, he didn't have any Dreamless Sleep to give her. He'd Vanished his entire supply, frustrated in the aftermath of a ghastly nightmare.

"I'm afraid not," he said. "Nor do I have time to brew a fresh batch. I still have four classes ahead of me, not to mention two detentions scheduled for this afternoon."

"That's all right."

"Perhaps you might ask Madame Pomfrey?"

"She already thinks I'm cracked. It's okay, really. I'll just…"

He shook his head, suppressing a sigh. "I'll have it for you this evening."

"You really don't have to…"

"Miss Granger?"

"Yeah?"

"A simple 'thank you' will suffice."
Chapter 8: Trigger

"You're early."

"You didn't give me a specific time."

"No," Severus said, conceding the point. "I suppose I didn't."

He waved Hermione into his office, shutting the door with a flick of his wand. Draining the last of his tea, he rose from his desk, gesturing at the lone portrait that hung on the wall.

"Sublime artistry, wouldn't you agree?"

It took her a minute to spot it, half hidden between towering shelves. It was a small, crude etching, occupied by a sour faced wizard with a bulbous nose.

"Um, yes, it's very nice."

"Five points from Gryffindor."

"What?!"

"Five points," he repeated. "Now tell me what you really think."

"It's…"

"Yes?"

"It's the ugliest portrait I've ever seen."

"A fair assessment. Five points to Gryffindor."

He heard her mutter under her breath, quite certain she'd just called him a git. That only added to his amusement, his lips twitching as the painting huffed in protest.

"Ugly? How dare you…"

"Not just ugly," he told the portrait. "Positively hideous."

"If you don't like it," Hermione said, "why do you keep it here?"

"Not for aesthetic appeal, I assure you. *Revelio.*"

"Bugger off."

*Revelio,* he repeated, brandishing his wand for extra emphasis. Mumbling a flurry of obscenities, the portrait slid aside, revealing a spiral staircase.

"What's that?"

"My personal lab. Come."
They descended the stairs, followed by a sharp intake of breath from Hermione. Of course, he wasn't surprised by her reaction. Unlike the Potions classroom, his lab featured an impressive array of equipment, fine pewter cauldrons gleaming beneath the floating candles. It was the one luxury he'd afforded himself over the years, a hidden sanctuary he could escape to whenever circumstances allowed him to do so.

"Have a seat," he said, plucking several jars off the shelves. "This won't take long."

Brewing was intimately familiar, though it had never ceased to be hypnotic. His entire consciousness was reduced to the task at hand, chopping and stirring, measuring the precise amount of ingredients. Only when he'd set the cauldrons to simmer did he remember Hermione, puzzled by her uncharacteristic silence.

"Miss Granger?"

"Yes, Professor?"

"You're… unusually quiet this evening."

He glanced up, frowning as he noticed her expression. Her eyes were scanning a slip of parchment, her lower lip trembling.

"What is that?" he said, taking a step closer. "Another threat?"

"I wouldn't call it a threat. It's…"

She trailed off, hesitating before she held it out to him. He dropped onto the bench beside her, his stomach tightening as he spotted the familiar lines of script.

*What you did to them was unforgivable. You might as well have killed them.*

"Where did this come from?"

"I found it under my door this afternoon."

He nodded, scanning the rest of the note. "And I assume this is in reference to…"

"My parents."

"I see. Well, whatever you did…"

"I erased their memories," she interrupted, her voice catching on a sob. "I made them forget they even had a daughter. gave them different names, sent them to Australia, I…"

He didn't know how it happened, but suddenly, her head was resting on his shoulder. The weight of it made him feel strange, panic mingled with a flurry of other emotions he couldn't seem to identify. He forgot how to move, how to speak, sitting there frozen for several endless moments before he forced a few words out of his mouth.

"Ah, so that's where they went."

"You knew they were gone?"

"I'd heard about their disappearance," he responded, willing himself to relax. "Knowing that the Dark Lord wasn't responsible, I naturally wondered…"
"I only did it because I had to. They were…"

"They were sitting targets. If you hadn't acted on their behalf, they would've been slaughtered."

"So it wasn't unforgivable?"

"Unless you think they would've fared better in the clutches of Bellatrix Lestrange…"

She shuddered in response, prompting him to wrap an arm around her shoulders. Bewildering though it was, it seemed like the right thing to do, her body relaxing against his as she sniffled somewhere close to his ear.

"I'll never see them again."

"You can't know that."

"Even if I found a way to reverse the charm, they'd never forgive me. How could they?"

"You had no other choice."

"Maybe not," she said, "but they won't understand that."

He tried to summon up an optimistic remark, though that proved to be a useless endeavor. Offering comfort had never been one of his strengths, probably because he had little experience in such things. When was the last time anyone had turned to him for reassurance? He couldn't recall such an occasion.

"Professor Snape?"

The formality seemed odd when she was sitting so close, her body nestled beneath the crook of his arm. Still, there was something to be said for observing protocol, a touch of familiarity in an otherwise bewildering situation.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"There's something I still don't understand."

"What is it?"

"How did they know about my parents? Other than Harry and Ron, I've never told anyone."

Severus hesitated, losing his train of thought as she lifted her head to look at him. Their faces were inches apart, so close he could see golden flecks in her eyes. He hadn't been this close to anyone in… he couldn't even remember, deciding it was irrelevant as his gaze was drawn to her lips. He'd never realized how inviting they were, soft and pink, parting ever so slightly as he leaned closer, so close that his breath mingled with hers.

"Severus!"

He jerked back, whipping his head around to see where the voice had come from. To his relief, it was only Minerva's Patronus, informing him that he was needed upstairs.

"Wait here," he said brusquely, flicking his wand at the cauldrons as he hurried from the room.

Hermione shook her head, struggling to wrap her mind around what had just happened. Had Snape
really put his arm around her? Yes, but that wasn't all. If they hadn't been interrupted, she was almost sure he would've…

She shivered as she remembered the intensity in his eyes, his body leaning toward hers like she was some kind of magnetic force. For that brief, baffling moment, she'd forgotten about everything else, her heart pounding furiously as her nerve endings tingled with anticipation.

Could she really be attracted to Snape? It seemed absurd, yet even now, part of her wished he'd come back and finish what he'd started. Or what she'd started? Either way, she hadn't wanted it to stop.

Letting out a shaky sigh, she rose to check on the potion. She removed the Stasis Charm he'd placed on the cauldrons, letting them simmer for a few more minutes before she turned down the heat. By then, she felt more settled, focused on the task at hand as she gave the potion a final stir.

One by one, she filled the vials, arranging them neatly on the counter. She'd just sat back down when he finally returned, sweeping into the room without so much as glancing in her direction. He did notice her handiwork, however, shaking his head as he stared at the empty cauldrons.

"Did I instruct you to…"

"Professor Snape?"

"What?"

"A simple 'thank you' will suffice."

He snorted, relieving the tension somewhat as he handed her a couple vials. Tucking them in her bag, she frowned as she studied his profile.

"Something happened, didn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Professor McGonagall? She sounded like something was wrong."

Finally, he gave her a cursory glance, waving her in the direction of his office. She followed him upstairs, waiting quietly as he settled himself at his desk.

"There was another… incident."

"Incident?"

"Someone took it upon themselves to dress up one of the statues." He paused, taking a deep breath. "It was clad in full Death Eater regalia."

"Are you serious?"

He inclined his head. "Unfortunately, we couldn't find the culprit. We even questioned the ghosts."

"Do you think…" She tried to choose her words carefully, hoping she wouldn't offend him. "I don't mean to make accusations, but could it be one of the Slytherins?"

"It's certainly possible, though I haven't noticed anything suspicious."

"Me either," she said. "Besides, a Slytherin wouldn't have known about my parents."
"I wouldn't be so sure of that."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean there are few secrets in the Wizarding world. You of all people should know that by now."

Did he intend for his words to have a double meaning? Either way, she couldn't help thinking about that strange moment of intimacy they'd shared. No doubt there'd be consequences if anyone suspected him of being involved with a student. He might even lose his job.

Meanwhile, she still had Ron to consider. Their relationship hadn't been easy these past few months, but that didn't mean she was willing to cheat on him. How could she, knowing how much it would hurt him if he ever found out?

"It's getting late," Snape said abruptly, rising from his desk. "I should escort you to your room."

Severus added an extra layer of security to Hermione's door, muttering under his breath as he headed downstairs. Boundaries. Yes, boundaries were good, something he needed to be more mindful of in the future. Guarding her against unidentified threats wasn't enough. No, he also needed to protect her from his own foolishness.

"Idiot."

Why had he allowed himself to get so close? Why hadn't he recognized the risk involved in doing so? He was only a man, after all, one who'd spent most of his life deprived of intimate contact.

There were a few exceptions, nights long ago when desperation had driven him to seek out the only companionship he could find. He'd purchased it somewhere deep in Knockturn Alley, trading a handful of Galleons for much needed release.

Was that intimacy? Perhaps not. He hadn't even known who they were, their faces shrouded in darkness as he'd lifted their robes and taken what he'd wanted. Those encounters had been brief, temporary relief followed by an inevitable sense of shame. It was the latter that had made him stop, long before the Second War, loneliness replaced by a grim determination to manage on his own.

That had been easier than he'd expected, helped by Potter's timely arrival at Hogwarts. Following that, he'd had neither the time or the inclination to worry about sex, constant stress causing his libido to plummet. Soon enough, it had disappeared entirely, eclipsed by more urgent matters.

*Play your part. Do what needs to be done.*

For as long as Severus could remember, that had been his singular focus. Whatever he'd done, everything he'd said or thought or felt... it had all been in service to that cause. When he'd eaten, it hadn't mattered whether he'd enjoyed the food. He ate to keep his body strong, to make sure he was up to the task at hand. Getting enough sleep? A well rested mind was a sharp one, a necessary asset when dealing with two of the most brilliant wizards the world had ever known.

Truly, it was no wonder he felt lost. He'd forgotten how to live for himself, hadn't dared to want anything for his own sake. He hadn't needed it. Hadn't deserved it, really. What did it matter, anyway? He'd been living on borrowed time, convinced he'd be dead by the end of the war.

Indeed, he'd expected to die alone. He'd certainly lived that way, assuming such a fate would be easier to bear after so many years of solitude.
He'd been wrong.

Severus shuddered, recalling that dreadful night in the Shrieking Shack. Only then had he understood what "dying alone" truly meant. Bravery had given way to terror, futility and desperation mingling with a lifetime of regret. In that moment, all his facades had crumbled, replaced by raw, aching need. It wasn't just the wounds that had left him gasping for air. No, it was that terrible need for comfort, an inexplicable hunger to hear just one kind word as he'd lain there dying.

And he had died. He knew that now. True, his body had survived and his mind was relatively intact, but some part of him had never left the Shrieking Shack. He'd left it on that floor, a mess of preconceived notions about who he was and what he was supposed to want.

But where did that leave him? What was he supposed to do now that his previous life had ended? He couldn't go back to the way things were before, years of isolation followed by a solitary death.

Years? No, he had decades ahead of him. Just the thought of spending all that time alone…

Perhaps his former self could've managed it, but he knew better now.

The alternative? He didn't know what that was yet, but he'd felt hints of it with Hermione. Indeed, he'd been intoxicated by that feeling, the warmth of her body pressed against his as she'd rested her head on his shoulder.

That was a type of intimacy that couldn't be found in Knockturn Alley, one he didn't even know he'd been craving until he'd experienced it. Suddenly, he'd found himself imagining what it would be like to have a companion, a partner, something he hadn't allowed himself to consider in more than two decades.

Of course, that didn't mean Hermione could be that partner. Not only was she half his age, but she was also one of his students. He'd been foolish to let the thought cross his mind, even more of a fool to let her get so close. What he needed was someone older, more appropriate, someone who wasn't…

Severus stopped in his tracks, frowning as he spotted a scrap of parchment under his boot. Once again, it had been slipped under the door to his quarters, the handwriting eerily familiar.

*You do have a thing for Mudbloods, don't you, Severus? Think this one will let you fuck her before you inevitably get her killed?*

Chills skittered up his spine, his hands shaking as he sank into his armchair. Just the thought that history might repeat itself in such a hideous way…

But it wasn't just that.

No, whoever had written the message must've been there. They had to have seen what had happened in his private lab. But how?

That was the first, most obvious question. How had they gained access, bypassing all his security measures? How had they managed such a thing without him detecting their presence? There wasn't anywhere to hide down there, so how in the hell…

Yes, he wanted to know how, but more importantly, he needed to know why. Why were they doing this? What was their motivation?

And then, of course, there was the biggest question of all.
What could he do to stop them?
"Aurora, may I have a word?"

Professor Sinistra looked up from her plate, her expression startled. Severus wasn't surprised by her reaction – he couldn't recall ever speaking to her beyond the occasional brief greeting.

"Certainly," she said, recovering her wits somewhat. "What can I do for you, Severus?"

"I need to speak with the Slytherins. Can you arrange a meeting?"

"Of course. How about 4 PM this afternoon?"

To his relief, she didn't ask any questions, deferring to him as unofficial Head of House though he no longer held that position. He reported to the Common Room later that day, feeling strangely out of place as the students gathered around him.

"Thank you for coming," he said. "I'd like to ask you a few questions."

Until that moment, he hadn't realized how much the dynamics of his house had changed. The students were unnaturally subdued, an air of defeat hanging over the Common Room. Most had lost friends and family during the war, but he didn't get the impression they were holding any grudges. All he sensed was sadness and shame.

Was that such a bad thing? Perhaps not. He'd always hoped the Slytherins would redeem themselves, that they'd become something more than villains or scapegoats. Could that be possible now that the wars were over? None of them had ever been Death Eaters. Youth had saved them from recruitment, sparing them from having to fight in that last, terrible battle.

As for Voldemort… what reason would they have to admire him now? His lofty ambitions had ended in failure, his followers either dead or locked up in Azkaban.

"Very well," he said when his last round of questions yielded no results. "You may go."

Indeed, the future looked brighter for his Slytherins, though that didn't solve his immediate dilemma. He knew better than to ask Minerva if he could question her Gryffindors, nor would Flitwick appreciate the suggestion that a Ravenclaw might be involved. Both still assumed these were nothing more than pranks, a belief that persisted despite the incident with the Death Eater robes.

"Tasteless, to be sure," Minerva had said as she'd inspected the statue, "but hardly any cause for alarm."

Would she feel differently if she saw the note he'd received last night? Probably, though it wasn't as if he could show it to her. The mere suggestion that anything inappropriate had happened between him and Hermione…

No, he couldn't rely on his colleagues to assist him. He'd have to seek out other options.

"Have a seat, Miss Granger."
Hermione obeyed, waiting patiently as Snape finished grading the essay in front of him. Finally, he lifted his head, something sparking in his eyes as they met hers.

"I was wondering," he said quietly, "if you might do me a favor."

"What do you need?"

"The Invisibility Cloak… does Potter still have it?"

"I think so."

"Good. Can you write to him and see if he'll allow you to borrow it?"

"I can, but…" She frowned, noticing the tension in his jaw. "Did something else happen?"

"I received another note."

"What did it say?"

He hesitated, his nostrils flaring ever so slightly. When he finally spoke, his voice sounded strained, his eyes fixed on the wall behind her.

"If you don't mind, Miss Granger, I'd rather not repeat it."

She resisted the urge to question him further, realizing that she wasn't likely to get any answers. Instead, she mumbled something about lunch, relieved when he dismissed her with a wave of his hand.

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Dear Harry, she wrote a few minutes later. Can I borrow the Invisibility Cloak? I know how important it is to you, but strange things have been happening and we're trying to get to the bottom of it. I'll send it back as soon as I can, I promise.

She received his response at breakfast the next morning, smiling as she scanned the familiar handwriting.

No such thing as a peaceful year at Hogwarts, eh? I'm almost jealous.

Catching Snape's eye, she pointed at the package. He nodded, taking a sip of tea before he resumed his conversation with Flitwick.

There was another letter from Ron, wondering why she could find the time to write to Harry but not to him. She felt a flash of annoyance, though that was quickly followed by guilt. He did have a point – she'd been neglecting him for weeks.

I'm sorry, Ron, she wrote back. Things have been hectic around here. Be patient with me, yeah? I'll write again soon, and of course, I'll see you over winter break.

56 more days, he responded. Seems like forever.

I know, but it'll be worth it. We'll have two whole weeks to spend together.

She wrote him frequently after that, determined to put more effort into their relationship. True, they'd had problems over the summer, but that had been in the immediate aftermath of the war. Would things be better now that they'd both had time and space to heal? She hoped so.
So, she asked him a few days later. *What do you want for Christmas?*

*You.*

*Ron, I can't believe you made that poor owl fly all the way up here just to deliver a one word response. Anyway, you already have me.*

*Yeah, but you know what I mean, don't you? I was hoping…* He'd scribbled out several lines before he continued. *We don't have to if you don't want to, but you asked what I wanted for Christmas. Can't think of anything I want more than that.*

He wanted to shag. Of course he did. She'd kept him waiting for months, after all, a reluctance she still didn't understand. Would she feel differently the next time she saw him? She couldn't be sure, but it seemed best to leave that door open.

*Why don't we wait and see what happens?*

*Sounds good,* he wrote back. *Can't wait to see you, 'Mione.*

In many ways, Severus had reconciled himself with the past, though he'd never gotten over his hatred for Halloween. He left before the feast began, unable to shake a feeling of unease as he patrolled the halls.

Was he being paranoid? Maybe. The school was utterly quiet, so peaceful that he began to relax. He checked the upper floors one last time, deciding he might as well head back to the dungeons and grade a few essays. Perhaps he'd even have time to do some reading if…

"**Bloody hell!**"

The cry came from several floors below, high-pitched and filled with terror. He raced down multiple flights of stairs, skidding to a stop as he spotted a crowd gathered outside the Great Hall.

"Prefects!" Minerva said briskly. "Escort everyone to your common rooms!"

The hallway began to clear, drawing Severus's attention to the opposite wall. His eyes widened, his breath catching in his throat as he spotted the graffiti. *DEATH TO MUDBLOOMS*, one message screamed, while another proclaimed that *ALL TRAITORS MUST DIE.* Beneath them was a perfect replica of the Dark Mark, blood dripping down the wall to pool near his feet.

"Are all the students accounted for?" he said, his voice low.

Minerva nodded. "We did a headcount right before you arrived."

"Good."

Severus saw panic in her eyes, mirrored in the expressions of the other professors. Finally, they were taking this threat seriously, their wands drawn as they split up to scour the halls. He waited until they were gone, taking a closer look at the graffiti before he glanced over his shoulder.

"Miss Granger? You can come out now."

He watched her remove the cloak, smirking as he noticed her reddened cheeks.

"I was just…"
"Up to your old tricks, I see."

She snorted. "You were the one who told me to send for the damn thing."

"Touche."

He motioned for her to follow him downstairs, reluctant to let her out of his sight. Unfortunately, a thorough search of the dungeons yielded nothing, leaving him no choice but to escort her to her room.

"Stay here," he said. "Don't come out until morning. Whoever is doing this…"

"I know."

Not satisfied with the riddle's protection, he added an extra layer of security to her door. Finally, he returned to the first floor, resisting the urge to perform another search.

"Ah, Severus," Minerva said as she watched him approach. "Did you find anything?"

He shook his head. "You?"

"The Fat Friar claims to have seen a dark figure duck around the corner. He tried to follow, but whoever it was disappeared. We couldn't find any trace of them."

"I see," he said, taking a closer look at the graffiti. The blood had dried, rust colored flakes clinging to his finger as he touched the Dark Mark. "What would you have us do?"

"There's nothing we can do, at least for the moment. Still, it's clear that these are more than just harmless pranks."

"Obviously."

"No need to be sarcastic, Severus."

He didn't respond, shaking his head as he stared at the wall. Whoever was responsible for these incidents was no novice. They were adept at concealing their identity, not to mention gaining access to restricted areas. Granted, they hadn't harmed anyone yet, but that didn't mean they wouldn't.

"Keep an eye out," Minerva said. "Report any suspicious behavior and make sure curfew is strictly enforced. I don't know who's behind this or what they're planning, but we certainly don't want students wandering the halls late at night."

"Agreed."

Hermione settled herself at her desk, finishing her Charms essay before she responded to a letter from Ron. In both cases, she was grateful for the distraction, still shaken by what had happened downstairs. To think that there might be a Death Eater lurking around the castle…

No. That was impossible. Voldemort had been defeated, all of his followers imprisoned or killed. Whoever was doing this was obviously trying to frighten her, but that didn't mean…

"Come on, Crookshanks," she said, stifling a yawn as she got to her feet. "Let's try to get some…"

She gasped, spotting the message on the opposite wall. The handwriting was unmistakably familiar, though these words were written in blood instead of ink.
I know all your secrets, Mudblood. I will use them to destroy you.
Chapter 10: Sentry

Hermione watched the other students file out of the classroom, waiting for the door to close before she approached Snape's desk.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"Something happened."

"Something?" he echoed, cocking an eyebrow. "Well, yes, I'd assume that many things happen over the course of a given day. Could you be more specific?"

As strange as it seemed, she'd come to appreciate his snarkiness. Perhaps it had wounded her in the past, but now she understood that he wasn't always trying to be nasty. Sarcastic remarks could even be an indication that he was relatively cheerful, which seemed to be the case right now. His expression was mild, almost pleasant as he waited for her response.

She took a deep breath, hating to spoil his good mood.

"Remember Halloween?"

"While I might be a couple decades older than you, I'm hardly senile. I'm perfectly capable of recalling a holiday that occurred less than a week ago."

She smiled, enjoying the way he was teasing her. Part of her didn't want it to stop, though in the end, he gave her no choice in the matter. His expression grew serious, his eyes fixed on hers.

"Tell me what happened."

"Those messages? I… I found one in my room."

"What did it say?"

"It said…” She hesitated, wishing she didn't have to repeat it. "'I know all your secrets, Mudblood. I will use them to destroy you.'"

He didn't react, other than a slight narrowing of his eyes. When he spoke, his voice was so quiet she could barely hear it, a clear sign that he was making an effort to restrain himself.

"Halloween," he said. "That was four days ago."

"This is the first class I've had with you since…"

"You should've told me immediately. Why didn't you?"

"I'm sorry, I just…"

"Just what?" he prodded.

"I knew there wasn't anything you could do. The castle had already been searched, and…”
She trailed off, effectively silenced by his reaction. His jaw tightened, his nostrils flaring as he bit out a response.

"I can see where you might assume that I'm incapable of protecting you. My past failures would certainly suggest…"

"Your failures? What are you talking about?"

But even as she asked, Hermione knew the answer. Whether it was due to circumstances or youthful mistakes, there'd been plenty of times he'd been helpless to intervene. Even when he'd become headmaster, he'd had to do so under false pretenses, forced to maintain his cover as countless students were mistreated. That final battle… he hadn't even been able to lift a wand in his own defense, let alone anyone else's.

"Professor Snape," she said, her voice gentle. "I don't think you're incapable of anything. I only meant…"

"Nevermind," he said brusquely. "Do you have the Invisibility Cloak?"

"Yes."

"Good. Leave it with me."

"What are you planning?"

"I'll be standing guard tonight. Tonight and every night until this situation is resolved. The next time anyone attempts to enter your room… well, let's just say it'll be the last time."

It was a solid plan, though she couldn't help noticing the dark circles under his eyes. When was he planning to sleep? She opened her mouth and then closed it again, sensing that he wasn't in the mood for personal questions.

"Okay," she said instead. "Guess I'd better get to Charms."

"Miss Granger?"

"Yeah?"

"If anything happens in the future," he said, his voice quiet. "You'll report it to me immediately."

She shivered, unable to do anything more than nod in response. Despite the change in their dynamic over the past few months, he was still in a position of authority, ready to draw on his power if he deemed it appropriate to do so. Of course, she trusted him not to abuse that power, but she was very much aware of its existence. Having it reinforced in a situation like this? He'd done that for her benefit, making it clear that her personal safety was something he took quite seriously.

"Sir?"

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"Thank you."

Severus took a nap that afternoon, fortifying himself with an entire pot of coffee before he headed to the guest wing. By then, it was 10 PM, the halls silent other than the sound of his footsteps. Unlike Potter, he had the presence of mind to cast a silencing charm, ensuring that not even the slightest
noise would give him away as he put on the cloak.

Then there was nothing to do but wait, his thoughts wandering as he positioned himself against the wall. Inadvisable, perhaps, but he couldn't help wondering what Hermione was doing at that moment. Was she working at her desk? Getting ready for bed? The latter led his thoughts down a different path, one he knew should be avoided at all costs.

He did avoid it, at least for a little while. But as the night deepened, boredom won out over his restraint. By then, he knew she had to be sleeping, unable to suppress a mental picture of her lying in bed. Would she be on her back or stomach? Cuddled up on her side, perhaps? Either way, he knew her curls would be tumbled across the pillow, long, dark lashes resting against her cheeks. He could almost imagine himself lying beside her, breathing in the sweet scent of her hair.

What was wrong with him? He had no business…

He lost his train of thought, his body tensing as he heard a growl from inside Hermione's room. Withdrawing his wand, he waited, holding his breath as he did so.

Another growl.

Unable to remain still any longer, he prowled the hallway, taking a moment to check the stairwell before he poked his head into the vacant rooms nearby. He saw nothing, and yet the cat growled again, louder and more urgent this time.

"Homenum Revelio," he whispered, pointing his wand at Hermione's door.

The first marker was only to be expected, revealing that Hermione herself was inside. But then a second marker materialized, a scant few inches from where she slept.

"Bloody hell."

Flinging off the cloak, he jerked on the doorknob, cursing under his breath as the riddle prevented him from entering. He solved it in a matter of seconds, startling Hermione awake as he burst through the door.

"Professor Snape?!"

A brief glance to make sure she was unharmed, and then he scoured the room, using his wand to tear open the wardrobe before he ripped the covers off the bed. He peered underneath, shaking his head as he whipped around to check the bathroom.

"Homenum Revelio!"

This time, he saw no extra marker, shaking his head as he turned to look at Hermione. She was sitting up in bed, her face white as a sheet as she pointed toward the desk. The contents of her schoolbag had been dumped on the floor, all of her textbooks destroyed.

"The library," she whispered. "That's what happened when…"

"When you were Confunded?"

She nodded.

"Stay here," he said, plucking her wand off the bedside table and tossing it in her lap. "I'll return shortly."
There was no point in checking the hall. He'd slammed the door when he'd entered the room, ensuring that no one could've possibly escaped. And yet they weren't in there now, so how…

He frowned, checking the stairwell one last time before he returned to Hermione.

"I'm at a loss," he confessed. "I could've sworn someone was in here. The spell…"

"There one minute, gone the next," she said. "That's what it was like the first time I saw them. Didn't even have time to cast Lumos before they disappeared."

He sighed, igniting a handful of sconces before he dropped into the chair at her desk. For several minutes, they stared at each other in silence, her frustration as palpable as his.

"They ruined my things."

He leaned down to sort through the mess, desperate for something useful to do. Unfortunately, there was little to be salvaged – her essays and other bits of homework had been shredded to pieces. Perhaps that was why one sheet of parchment stood out to him, whole and unblemished while the others were in tatters. He turned it over, sucking in a sharp breath as he spotted the familiar handwriting.

"Is that…" She got out of bed, bare feet padding across the floor.

"It is."

"What does it say?"

"It says and I quote, 'He's not as invisible as he thinks he is.'"

She came around to the back of the chair, peering over his shoulder. "How could they have known? Did you take it off before you…"

"No," he said. "I had it on all night, right up until I entered your room."

"Do you think they might've heard you?"

He shook his head. "Silencing charm. Whoever it is, they must've overheard our earlier conversation."

"But how is that possible? There was no one else in the classroom."

"There was no one in your room either," he pointed out. "No one in the halls when the walls were graffitied, no one in the library when you were compelled to damage those books. This… individual seems to be exceptionally skilled at concealing their location. I've never seen anything quite like…"

"Rita Skeeter."

"Pardon?"

"Rita Skeeter," Hermione repeated. "You know, the reporter?"

"I know who she is. Beast of a woman, though I find it hard to believe she's dressing up statues in Death Eater regalia, or…"

"No, that's not what I mean. Did you know she's an unregistered Animagus?"
"I didn't," he said, "though it doesn't surprise me. Tends to be quite common for people I find loathsome."

He wasn't sure if Hermione knew who he was referring to. If she did, she let it pass.

"Can you guess what her Animagus form is?" she said instead.

"Shrew?"

She shook her head, her lips twitching.

"Weasel?" he suggested. "Magpie, perhaps?"

"Try again."

"Chihuahua?"

"Good guess, but no."

"Miss Granger…" He hesitated, sighing heavily. "Do us both a favor and get to the point."

"She's a beetle."

"A beetle?"

Hermione nodded. "That's how she's able to spy on people, gather all sorts of information she isn't supposed to have. Honestly, I don't know why she bothers. Her stories are so distorted she might as well just make them up."

Severus cringed, remembering the excerpt Rita Skeeter had written about him. Unfortunately, there was much more to come, though the full publication had yet to be released.

"So," he said. "you're suggesting there might be another unregistered Animagus on the loose… one who's form is small enough to access areas that would be restricted to anyone else."

"Small enough to disappear at a moment's notice."

He nodded. "That makes sense, though it's exceedingly rare for Animagi to take the form of insects. I believe this is only the second or third time I've ever heard of it."

"Rare," she said, "but not impossible."

"No, I suppose it isn't."

He turned to look at her, immediately recognizing his mistake in doing so. She was still leaning over his chair, brown curls tumbling wildly over her shoulders. But that wasn't the only thing he noticed, his eyes drawn to the top she was wearing. It was nothing remarkable, some old Muggle T-shirt that should've been tossed out a decade ago. The collar was much too loose, affording him a generous view of…

"Miss Granger," he said, his voice much harsher than he'd intended. "You should really get some sleep."

"How am I supposed to sleep? If they come back…"

"They won't. Not if I'm here."
"You mean you'll stay?" She moved around the chair to look at him, her eyes wide.

"I can't think of a better solution, at least for tonight. We'll figure out some other arrangement tomorrow."

"Are you sure you don't mind?"

He sighed. "Go to bed, Miss Granger."

She obeyed, grabbing her blanket off the floor before she clambered onto the bed. Forgetting to avert his eyes, he caught a glimpse of white cotton underwear, long, shapely legs disappearing beneath the covers.

Why did he find her so appealing? Why couldn't he just…

"Professor Snape?"

"You're supposed to be sleeping."

"I know," she said, her voice drowsy. "Just wanted to tell you… there's books in the desk. Top drawer."

"Thank you. Good night, Miss Granger."

"Night."

The room fell silent, no sound but her deep, even breathing as she drifted off to sleep. After a few minutes, Severus decided to take her up on her suggestion, retrieving a book from her desk. Archaic spell work? That would work just as well as anything else.

He did his best to concentrate. Really, he did. Unfortunately, he found it impossible to ignore the fact that there was a half naked girl sleeping just a few feet away, one who happened to have exceptionally lovely breasts. Try as he might, he couldn't banish them from his mind, imagining what it would've been like to slide his hands inside her shirt, testing their weight, their fullness, sliding his thumbs across pale pink nipples that practically begged to be touched. Would she have allowed it? She hadn't pushed him away when he'd been tempted to kiss her, so perhaps…

*I'm a bloody pervert.*

Sighing, he made another attempt to focus on the book. That was infinitely more difficult when she moaned in her sleep, but he refused to turn his head, refused to allow himself even the briefest glimpse of what she looked like in the throes of slumber. Beautiful? No doubt about it, though that was irrelevant. He was here to protect her, not ogle her like some hormonally driven schoolboy.

With that thought, Severus decided to learn everything he could about preserving food in the Middle Ages by magical means. It wasn't the most exciting subject matter, to be sure, but it did help to diminish his libido somewhat. If he could just keep himself distracted until morning…

Hermione opened her eyes, shocked to see Professor Snape asleep at her desk. Of course, that was before she recalled the events of the previous night, smiling as she remembered his promise to watch over her until morning.

She didn't want to wake him. Not yet. Despite what looked like an uncomfortable position, his expression was peaceful, his head pillowed on his arm. Really, it was difficult to believe she'd ever
found him frightening. These days, he seemed like her greatest ally, someone she truly felt lucky to have in her life.

Eventually, she crawled out of bed, wondering what she was supposed to do next. Before she could figure it out, he finally stirred, dark eyes bleary as he lifted his head.

"Professor Snape?"

He grunted. "What time is it?"

"Just past seven."

"Didn't mean to fall asleep."

She shrugged. "You were tired."

He didn't respond, setting her book on the desk as he rose to his feet. Disappearing into the bathroom, he looked much more like himself when he emerged a few minutes later. The wrinkles were gone from his robes, not a trace of stubble along his jaw. Even his hair was perfectly in place, his profile hidden by a shining black curtain as he brushed past her.

"My office," he said, wrapping himself in the Invisibility Cloak. "2 PM this afternoon."

With that, he slipped out the door, leaving her to wonder what had just happened. Had she really just spent the night with Professor Snape? Well, obviously not in that way, but still… she could only imagine what Harry or Ron would say, chuckling to herself as she stepped into the shower.
"Come in, Severus. Would you like some tea?"

He nodded, feeling unnerved as he stepped into the Headmaster's office. *His* former office, he supposed, though it had never felt that way. He'd changed nothing during his tenure, choosing to leave Dumbledore's possessions exactly where he'd found them.

Most of those things were gone now, replaced by objects that belonged to Minerva. Unlike him, she'd chosen to make herself at home, swaths of tartan and various knickknacks displayed throughout the office.

"Cream?" she asked as he took a seat across the desk. "Sugar?"

"Two sugars."

Adding a couple spoonfuls, she slid a saucer in his direction. She fixed one for herself before she leaned back in her chair, eying him over the rim of her cup.

In this way, too, the atmosphere had changed. She wasn't like Dumbledore, willing to waste time on idle chitchat. Clearly, she expected him to get right to the point.

"There was another incident last night," he told her. "Once again, an intruder has taken it upon themselves to invade Miss Granger's room."

"You're sure?"

"I am," he said. "I also know they were in there on Halloween – they left a message on her wall, written in blood."

"Why wasn't it reported?"

"She reported it to me."

Minerva frowned. "Why would…"

The question in her eyes was obvious, though he knew she was hesitant to put it into words. Why would Hermione choose to confide in him of all people? Clearly, she didn't know how to ask without coming off as offensive.

"Why me?" He shrugged. "Why *not* me? I'm the only one who took her seriously when all of this started. Everyone else thought she'd gone mad."

"To be fair, Severus, we couldn't have known…"

"No," he agreed. "Not when you chose to rely on preconceived notions rather than common sense."

It was a step too far. He knew it even as he said it, though he made no effort to take it back. He sipped his tea instead, watching as her eyes narrowed. She stared at him in silence until finally, she conceded the point, sighing heavily as she leaned back in her chair.
"An error in judgment on my part. It hasn't been easy…"

"I know."

He didn't need her to elaborate. Many students had been traumatized by the war, reacting in ways that had nothing to do with an actual threat. Some had chosen not to return to Hogwarts, while at least a dozen had left after the first couple weeks. Those who'd decided to stay seemed to be managing well enough, even if Poppy was constantly running out of Calming Potions and Dreamless Sleep. Hermione's situation was entirely different, of course, though he supposed he couldn't blame Minerva for missing the obvious.

"What happened last night?"

"After the incident on Halloween, I decided to patrol the corridor outside her room. I did everything I could to conceal my presence, hoping I'd be able to catch the intruder."

Minerva nodded, motioning for him to continue.

"I didn't see anything," he said, "but I heard her cat growling. I cast a revealing charm, only to discover that Miss Granger wasn't the only person in her room."

"Who…"

"I don't know. By the time I entered, they were already gone."

"How is that possible?"

"I asked myself the same question. There's only one theory that seems plausible, one that was provided by Miss Granger herself. She believes we might have an unregistered Animagus on our hands."

"That's certainly possible," Minerva replied, giving him a thoughtful look. "Of course, their form would have to be unusually small, but that isn't unheard of."

He nodded. "It would explain why this… perpetrator is able to access restricted areas, even those with security measures in place."

"That's true. Riddles aren't too effective when someone can just slip under the door. Or if they attached themselves to a piece of clothing, entering at the same time…"

"Exactly," Severus said, "which is why I'd recommend moving her to a safer location."

"Gryffindor tower?"

"As we've just established, a password will not prevent this individual from gaining access. And while there's something to be said for safety in numbers, we cannot know if this threat is coming from another Gryffindor."

Minerva sniffed. "That seems highly unlikely."

"Need I remind you what happened to the Potters?" he said, cocking one eyebrow. "Unless I'm mistaken, it was a member of their own house who betrayed them to the Dark Lord."

"That was a completely different situation. Besides, the odds of this being a Slytherin…"

He shook his head, holding up a hand to stop her. "I have no interest in debating the merits of our
respective houses. What I'm interested in is providing adequate protection for Miss Granger until this threat is eliminated. It couldn't be more obvious that she's the target, regardless of where these attacks are coming from. I'd rather put her in a place where no one can pose a threat to her safety."

"What are you suggesting?"

"Come with me."

Hermione followed Snape out of his office, both silent as they headed upstairs. He didn't speak until they'd made it to the second floor, his voice terse as he waved a hand toward the guest wing.

"Gather your things,"

"I'm being moved?"

He cocked an eyebrow. "Obviously."

"Snarky git," she muttered.

It didn't take her long to pack her trunk, shrinking it down and shoving it in her pocket before she stepped back into the hall. Before she knew it, they'd reached the fifth floor, dawning realization making her stop in her tracks as he headed for the next set of stairs.

"Are you taking me to the Room of Requirement?"

"Seems like the most sensible place, at least for the time being."

"Professor Snape…"

"Yes?"

"That room was destroyed."

He glanced over his shoulder, his expression caught between wariness and curiosity. "Destroyed?" he repeated. "What do you mean?"

She explained what had happened during the battle, shivering as she remembered the Fiendfyre.

"I see," he said. "And have you tried to access the room since that happened?"

"Well, no. I just assumed…"

"Assumptions aren't proof."

With that, he continued on his way, not slowing down until they reached their destination. He paced in front of the wall, nodding in apparent satisfaction as the door was revealed.

"How long have you known about…"

He smirked. "I've spent most of my life at Hogwarts, Miss Granger."

Not only had he gained access to the room, but it soon became obvious that he'd requested the Room of Hidden Things. It bore no resemblance to the one Hermione remembered, but there was no mistaking the cavernous ceiling, beams of sunlight trickling in through the windows.

She shook her head, gazing at the piles of ashes that were scattered across the floor. They were all
that was left of the stacks of clutter, puffs of gray powder clouding the air as Snape ventured deeper into the room.

"What are you doing?" she said, frowning as he leaned down to sift through the ashes. She saw something spark, her eyes widening as he whispered a freezing charm. "Are those…"

"Ashwinder eggs," he said. "Conjure a suitable container, if you will."

She didn't know what he meant by 'suitable', but he seemed satisfied with the metal box she handed him. He filled it to the brim, tucking it under his arm as he rose to his feet.

"Useful," he said, "though not why we're here. Come."

He led her out of the room, gesturing at the wall where the door had been.

"Right," she said. "I guess I should ask for…"

"Whatever you ask for," he interrupted. "I wouldn't say it aloud."

She nodded, pacing in front of the wall once, twice, and then a third time as she focused on the type of room she wanted. Soon enough, the door revealed itself, seeming to beckon her forward.

"Oh," she said as she stepped into the room. "This is nice."

"Indeed."

She hadn't realized Snape had followed, though the implications were unmistakable. Smiling, she glanced back at him over her shoulder.

"I guess you don't mean me any harm."

"Pardon?"

"I asked for a room that no one who wished me harm could enter.""

"Miss Granger…" He rolled his eyes, giving his head a little shake. "If you're still questioning my allegiance at this late date..."

"No, I know I can trust you. It's just nice that the room agrees."

"Yes, well..." Trailing off, he scanned the room, his eyes lingering on the comfortable furniture before he poked his head in the bathroom. "Your accommodations seem suitable enough. Just be mindful of your behavior outside this room."

"My behavior?"

"Make sure you're in here by curfew," he told her, "preferably an hour or two before. If you do find yourself running late, ask me or another staff member to escort you. You shouldn't be wandering the halls alone."

"Okay."

She waited for him to leave before she settled herself on the bed, pleased with her new surroundings. This room was much nicer than her last one, not to mention far more private. She wouldn't have to worry about anyone slipping notes under her door or leaving messages on the wall... nor waking up to find an intruder hovering over her in the middle of the night.
"I don't suppose," she asked the room, "that you could replace my textbooks?"

After a moment, several of the desk drawers rattled. She opened them to discover exact replicas of the books she'd lost along with numerous sheaves of parchment and a brand new quill. Murmuring her thanks, she arranged them neatly in front of her, glad for an opportunity to lose herself in her school work.

As the weeks passed, Severus began to relax, secure in the knowledge that Hermione was out of harm's way. He didn't find any notes under his door either, nor was he summoned to deal with graffiti on the walls.

Perhaps the culprit had given up? Well no, he wasn't ready to be that optimistic. But they'd at least gone dormant for the time being, giving him the opportunity to catch up on much needed rest.

At the end of yet another uneventful day, he retired to his quarters early, adding a bit of Firewhiskey to his tea before he stripped down to his underpants. After some consideration, he got rid of those, too, his body bare as he slipped between the covers.

He already knew what he was planning to do. He'd been craving it for weeks, his head falling back against the pillows as he began to stroke himself. Even guilt wasn't enough to stop him, his body swiftly becoming aroused as he pictured Hermione. The golden flecks in her eyes, those soft pink lips… there was no denying that he found her attractive, nor any reason to fight it as long as he kept it to himself.

He groaned, gripping himself tighter as he pictured her leaning over his chair. The shape of her breasts, that enticing flash of underwear as she'd clambered onto the bed… he could only imagine what it would've been like to join her, her body warm and willing as it pressed against his. Touching her, tasting her, undressing her by slow degrees…

His breath caught in his throat, muscles rigid with tension as he strained for release. It didn't take long. Just the thought of her wrapping those long legs around him, dark eyes widening as she took him inside her…

Severus cursed aloud, waves of intense pleasure ricocheting through his body. He didn't bother to open his eyes until a few minutes later, shaking his head as he came back to his senses. What was he doing? She was his student, not some object of lust. True, it was difficult to remember that sometimes, but he needed to get a handle on these feelings. If he couldn't manage to do that? There were other ways of coping with them, outlets that would be far more appropriate.

He sighed as he finished his tea, slipping into a nightshirt before he laid back down. Did he have any interest in visiting Knockturn Alley, trading a few coins for faceless encounters? Not particularly, though if that was what it took to bring him under control…

He yawned, losing his train of thought as he drifted off to sleep.

Cracking an eye open, Severus glanced around the room. It took him a minute to figure out where the noise had come from, his breath catching in his throat as he spotted the snake on his chest.

"SSSSeverus…"

He'd always taken pride in his lightning quick reflexes, dismayed by his inability to move. He lay there frozen, eyes fixed on Nagini, cringing as a forked tongue flickered against the scar on his neck. Unable to move, unable to speak… he might as well have been Petrified, helpless to raise a wand in
his own defense. That hideous snake…

That hideous snake wasn't Nagini.

It certainly looked like Nagini, but it was less than half the size, its body slightly transparent. He knew then that it was no more than an illusion, summoning his wand before he cast a Vanishing spell. The snake disappeared in a puff of smoke, followed by a sigh of relief as he pushed himself into a sitting position.

"Lumos," he whispered, which was quickly followed by a string of curses.

They were everywhere. Dozens, perhaps even hundreds of snakes had filled the room, some crawling up the walls while others slithered across the floor. Several were perched on top of the bed canopy, at least half a dozen more having taken up residence in his wardrobe. A rather large specimen had curled up in his favorite armchair, tongue flickering in and out as it waited for him to react.

This time, he didn't hesitate. He Vanished the repulsive creature, wand flicking in quick succession as its companions met the same fate. Still, he wasn't given any respite, heart pounding furiously as he went through his drawers, his cabinets, muttering under his breath as he stormed into the bathroom. He watched them crawl out of the drain, one after another, wondering how anyone could've done such a thorough job of…

Destroying his peace of mind?

Yes, that was certainly what they'd done. Even when he'd gotten rid of all the snakes, he couldn't seem to calm down, summoning a bottle of Firewhiskey as he sank into his armchair.

He'd been doing well with the drinking, only allowing himself a taste every now and again. At the moment, however, he didn't give a damn about restraint. He drank straight from the bottle, shaking and fuming as he tried to imagine who the perpetrator might be. Someone who hated Hermione, obviously, though their grudge toward him seemed to be on a different level. They were intimately aware of his secrets, in tune with all his weaknesses… how could some random student possess that kind of knowledge?

Eventually, he got up to take a shower, his mood further blackened by a lone snake that crawled up from the drain. By the time he'd finished, it was after 10 AM, the school deserted as he swept out into the hall. Only then did he remember the Quidditch game, an event that gave him the perfect opportunity to scour the school from top to bottom.

He headed upstairs, still gripping his wand as he scowled at a lone Hufflepuff who was unfortunate enough to cross his path.

"Report to the Quidditch pitch," he snapped. "Now."

Hermione hadn't meant to oversleep, though she didn't regret having done so. It gave her a perfect excuse to stay in the castle, avoiding the Quidditch game that would keep everyone occupied until later that afternoon.

That was one thing she liked about attending Hogwarts by herself. Without Harry or Ron around, there was no need to feign interest in Quidditch. That gave her a lot more free time to do things she actually enjoyed.

On this particular Saturday, that involved taking a long bath, followed by a bit of studying. She
finished a Transfiguration essay that wasn't due until the following week, feeling quite pleased with herself as she turned her attention to her latest Arithmancy project. Unfortunately, she was missing one of the books she needed.

She tried asking the room, but to no avail. It wasn't the type of book that could be duplicated, apparently, an exceedingly rare volume that was kept in the Restricted Section.

Should she risk it? On one hand, she'd promised she wouldn't wander the halls alone. On the other… well, it was the middle of the day. It wouldn't take her long, and besides, there hadn't been a single incident since she'd moved to the Room of Requirement. What could go wrong?

Slipping out into the hall, she glanced around before she headed toward the library. She ducked around the corner, only to slam into a dark, immovable object.

"Professor Snape?"

She'd never seen him so angry, not even when she and her friends had been a constant source of frustration. His eyes were narrowed into slits, nostrils flaring, his jaw so tight she was afraid it might break in two.

"Miss Granger," he said, his voice dangerously quiet. "Where do you think you're going?"

She straightened her shoulders, determined not to let him intimidate her. "Just a quick trip to the library."

"The library? Unless I'm mistaken, you're supposed to be at the Quidditch game."

"I overslept," she replied. "Anyway, I didn't know it was mandatory."

"What's mandatory," he said, "is for you to be mindful of your own safety. I told you not to wander the halls when no one else was present."

She sighed. "I'm sorry, okay? I didn't mean…"

"Not as sorry as you're going to be."

"What?" Her eyes widened.

"Detention, Miss Granger."

"Detention?! You can't…"

"Oh, I most certainly can," he said, his lip curling into a sneer.

"But…"

"My office. Immediately."

With that, he turned away, leaving her no choice but to follow as he strode down the hall.
Hermione jumped as Snape slammed a basket down beside her, several dead bats skittering across the surface of his desk. He reached in the top drawer, handing her a knife before he dropped into his chair.

"What do you expect me to…"

"Disembowel them."

Her eyes widened. "You can't be serious."

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

She'd hoped he'd calm down on their walk to the dungeons, that perhaps he'd even apologize for overreacting. Clearly, those hopes had been futile. He was every bit as angry as he'd been when they'd first run into each other, arms crossed over his chest as he glared at the wall.

"Get to work, Miss Granger."

"No."

For the first time, he looked directly at her, his eyes burning with anger. "What did you say?"

"You heard me."

He shook his head, snatching an empty jar off the shelf. "This is large enough to hold fifty bat spleens. I expect it to be filled within the next two hours."

"Well then," she said, keeping her tone light, "you'd better get started."

It was the first time she'd ever rendered him speechless. He glared at her for several minutes, nostrils flaring, until finally, he thrust the jar across the desk.

"I have no tolerance for impudence, Miss Granger. You will…"

"I won't."

"You're not leaving this office until…"

She rose from her chair, hearing a sharp intake of breath behind her. For a moment, she thought he might actually block her from leaving, though nothing prevented her from turning the knob. Finally, he spoke, his voice so low she could barely hear it as she opened the door.

"If you refuse to serve your detention," he said, "you will be expelled."

"Expelled?" She looked back over her shoulder, staring at him in disbelief. "For what?"

"For your defiance."
"Fine," she shot back. "Go on and try to expel me. We'll see what Professor McGonagall has to say about…"

"Ah, yes," he said softly. "Gryffindor privilege rears its ugly head."

"Privilege? How the hell have I been privileged? I spent half my childhood fighting in a war, lost more friends than I can count, not to mention my own parents. If that's privilege…"

"It's a bloody picnic compared to what some of us have been through."

With that, she closed the door, returning to her seat at the desk. Maybe she was giving in too easily, but something about his expression, the haunted look in his eyes… she couldn't help picturing him bleeding out on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. He did have a point – few had suffered more under Voldemort's regime.

"Professor Snape," she said, making an effort to keep her voice gentle. "I'm sorry for what I did. Really, I am. But you can't just punish me whenever…"

"Whenever you break the rules? You're still one of my students, Miss Granger, which means I have the authority to…"

"You don't treat me like a student," she said quietly. "Not anymore."

The color drained from his face, his eyes darting around like he'd just been accused of a crime. For the first time since she'd run into him in the hall, he didn't look angry. He seemed panicked, the muscles in his throat working convulsively as he opened his mouth to speak.

"If I've behaved inappropriately…"

"No," she said. "You've treated me like the adult I am, which I appreciate."

He sniffed, recovering somewhat. "Yes, well, I can hardly treat you like an adult when you insist on behaving like a child."

"A child? All I did was try to go to the library!"

"You disobeyed my orders."

"Fine," she said, "but don't you think your reaction was a little excessive?"

He hesitated, sighing heavily. "Perhaps twenty bat spleens would've been more appropriate."

"No bats."

"Twenty points from Gryffindor, then."

She shook her head.

"Miss Granger," he said, "this isn't a negotiation. I'll concede your point where the detention is concerned, but the House Points stand."

"You don't get it, do you?"

He leaned back in his chair, cocking one eyebrow. "I understand that you wish to thwart my attempts to punish you. Beyond that? You'll have to enlighten me."
"This isn't about punishment," she said, "or at least, it shouldn't be. If you're unhappy with something I've done, why can't we just talk about it? Reason with me, help me understand why it bothers you."

"I tried that," he pointed out. "I made it abundantly clear that it wasn't safe for you to venture out into the halls by yourself. You refused to listen."

She shook her head. "I did listen. I've been in my room every night, long before curfew. The only time I was even a little bit late, I had Professor Flitwick walk me up. I've been very careful, believe me."

"Except for today."

"Except for today," she conceded. "But it was the middle of the day, and I just needed to grab a book from the library. I figured I'd be okay, especially since nothing's happened in weeks."

"Yes, well..." Snape hesitated, pinching the bridge of his nose. "That isn't exactly true."

She frowned. "Another note?"

"No."

"What did they..."

He shook his head, rising from his chair to pace the room. "It doesn't matter what they did. The point is that this person, whoever they are, is still very much a threat. This isn't the time for any of us to grow careless, nor for you to take your safety for granted."

She studied him more closely, noticing the rigid set of his shoulders. Suddenly, she understood why he'd reacted the way he had, recognizing the fear beneath his anger. Could he have handled the situation better? Yes, especially since she'd had no way of knowing that another incident had occurred. That said, it wasn't difficult to forgive him. At least he was attempting to communicate with her like an adult now – really, that was all she'd wanted.

"Professor?"

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"I really am sorry about what I did. If I'd known, I would've never..."

"I know."

He didn't apologize in return, nor did she expect him to. As far as they'd come over the past few months, she knew it still wasn't easy for him to admit when he was wrong. It was enough that he'd abandoned his attempts to punish her, stuffing the dead bats back into the cabinet before he resumed his pacing.

"Will you tell me what happened?"

He shook his head. "It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does. If it happened to you, it could happen to me."

He paused, folding his arms over his chest as he leaned against the desk. "I don't think it's anything you need to worry about. Well, unless you have a paralyzing fear of snakes."

"Snakes?"
He nodded. "That's what I was greeted with when I woke up this morning. Hundreds of snakes."

Immediately, she understood the implications, cringing right along with him as he explained what happened. She was glad the snakes had only been illusions, but that didn't mean he hadn't been traumatized. Even now, she could see him shaking, his eyes haunted as he stared at the opposite wall.

She rose to her feet, driven by some impulse she barely understood. It seemed like madness, and yet she couldn't bring herself to stop, holding her breath as she slid her arms around his waist.

She wasn't surprised when his body went rigid. What shocked her was the moment he gave in, his arms wrapping around her so tightly she could barely breathe. She realized then that this was exactly what he'd needed. He clung to her like a lifeline, fingers digging into her shoulders as his lips brushed her neck.

"This is… highly inappropriate."

She barely heard him, caught off guard as he pulled back to scrutinize her face. His eyes were filled with some unknown emotion, so deep and intense that she felt herself shiver in response. She knew what was about to happen, but she did nothing to stop it, closing her eyes as he brought his lips to hers.

She'd been kissed countless times, but never like this. It didn't matter that Snape didn't seem to be particularly skilled in the art – he made up for it with a passion that stole her breath away. No one had ever kissed her more deeply, more thoroughly, his heart pounding against her chest as he buried his hands in her hair. She knew her heart must be doing the same, her senses reeling, a soft moan escaping her throat as he…

She opened her eyes, utterly bewildered. All of a sudden, he was halfway across the room, refusing to even look in her direction.

"Professor?"

"Miss Granger," he said, his voice strained. "You should get back to your room."

What the bloody hell was happening to him?

He'd been working at Hogwarts for almost two decades and never, not once, had he behaved this way toward a student. He'd never even considered it, maintaining the strictest boundaries at all times. But Hermione…

She'd broken through all his barriers.

Not only that, but she'd refused to let him put those barriers back up. She'd become immune to threats or intimidation, demanding that he treat her like an adult. And what had he said? What had he done? He'd allowed her to get away with it, not deducting so much as a single House Point.

Why had he given in so easily? He was still in a position of authority, well within his rights to discipline her as he saw fit. He could've given her ten detentions, could've taken as many points as he pleased. So why hadn't he…

Because he hadn't wanted to.

As much as Severus hated to admit it, that was the truth. He hadn't wanted to punish her. Oh, the
impulse had been there at first, anger driven by underlying fear. As soon as he'd calmed down, however, he'd thought better of it, reluctant to do anything that might earn her resentment.

He'd never felt that way before. Indeed, he'd never given a damn how his students felt about him or his disciplinary measures. But Hermione was different. It hardly made sense, but… he wanted her to trust him, to see him as fair and reasonable. That made it difficult to maintain the upper hand, running roughshod over her the way he'd done with so many others. She'd made it necessary to communicate, to compromise, which had somehow become preferable to the alternative. It allowed them to approach each other as equals, not teacher and student.

Was that equality appealing? Yes, though it was also frightening. He'd come to rely on her in more ways than he'd realized, expressing his fears on a level he couldn't imagine doing with anyone else. Lowering his guard, allowing her to see his weaknesses…

The fact that he'd done that was unnerving enough. The way she'd responded?

He couldn't recall the last time anyone had attempted to hold him. Perhaps it had never happened at all. Either way, he hadn't been prepared for it, her eyes full of sympathy as she'd drawn him into her arms. In that moment, the last of his defenses had been shattered. He'd clung to her desperately, like she was the only thing preventing him from tumbling into a pit of werewolves.

Of course, it hadn't ended there. What happened next…

He shouldn't have done it. Severus knew that, yet there was no denying that she'd wanted it, too. That, he supposed, was why he'd found it nearly impossible to stop, her lips parting as she'd kissed him back with equal fervor. The warmth of her body, the taste of her mouth… he still didn't know how he'd managed to pull away, cursing himself for his restraint as he'd retreated to the other side of the room.

He'd been right to put a stop to it. He knew that now, even if his body disagreed. She was still his student, and besides…

Besides what? He couldn't seem to answer that question… at least, not in his current condition. What he needed was to clear his head, whether that involved a cold shower or a quick wank. Unfortunately, he wasn't ready to return to his quarters, still traumatized by the incident with the snakes. It didn't seem wise to pleasure himself in his office either, which left him with just one solution.

He retrieved the basket from the cabinet, smirking as he reached for a knife. Disemboweling bats? If that didn't suppress his libido, nothing would.

Hermione ran into Ginny as soon as she left the dungeons, surprised to discover that it was already time for dinner. The two of them headed to the Great Hall, settling themselves at the Gryffindor table.

"Less than a month now," Ginny said. "Can you believe it?"

"You mean winter break?"

"Of course! What else would I be talking about?"

The truth was, Hermione had never felt particularly close to Ginny. Not that she disliked her, but they'd never had much in common aside from Harry and Ron. She had no interest in talking about Quidditch, while Ginny would roll her eyes if she tried to discuss her latest Arithmancy project.
That said, either of those subjects would have been preferable to winter break.

"It's a bit easier than last year," Ginny said, helping herself to a couple slices of roast beef. "I know where Harry is, at least, and we send each other letters every day. But…"

"Every day?"

"Sure. Don't you and Ron…"

Hermione shook her head, reminded all over again that she was a terrible girlfriend. She'd been trying to write Ron more frequently lately, but she rarely managed more than one letter a week. More often than not, she barely even thought of him, too distracted by her life at Hogwarts.

"I've been really busy."

"Yeah, I noticed you weren't at the Quidditch game. What did you do all afternoon?"

"I…" She hesitated, feeling her cheeks turning red. "I was in my room. Thought I'd get a head start on next week's homework."

To her relief, Ginny didn't question her further. Instead, she pulled several pieces of parchment out of her bag, sliding one across the table.

"I don't have an extra quill, but…"

Sighing, Hermione reached into her own bag, pulling out her writing supplies. She knew Ginny wasn't trying to be pushy, though that only made her feel worse. Shouldn't she want to write to her boyfriend? Shouldn't she make that a priority no matter what else she had going on? Ginny had no problem keeping in touch with Harry, regardless of her full schedule and place on the Quidditch team. She'd already written more than two paragraphs, smiling as she started on the third.

Unfortunately, it wasn't that easy for Hermione. She stared down at the blank parchment, her quill hovering over the page for a minute or two before she set it back on the table. She couldn't think of a single thing to say that wasn't truthful, which… well, this hardly seemed like a good time to start confessing her feelings.

Dear Ron,

I'd write you more often, but there just isn't much to talk about. Telling you that I miss you, too, is starting to feel repetitive, and I'm not particularly interested in the latest Quidditch recruitments…

No, she couldn't write that. Definitely not.

Dear Ron,

I know this might come as a shock, but I snogged Professor Snape this afternoon. I have no idea why I did it, but I have to admit, I enjoyed it quite a lot. Honestly, I was sorry he stopped when he did, even though I know it shouldn't have happened. I wish…

Of course, she would never, ever tell him about that. She already considered it her most closely guarded secret, feeling incredibly self-conscious as she glanced up at Ginny. What would she say if she knew? What would anyone say?

She shook her head, chewing on the tip of her quill. It was bad enough that she'd kissed anyone behind Ron's back, but Snape? She still didn't know why she'd done it, though she certainly
understood why he'd pulled away. Obviously, he'd remembered the consequences, not wanting to put either of them at risk.

Why had she forgotten those things? Why hadn't it mattered that she was his student, that he was her teacher, that she had a boyfriend waiting for her to come back to him? It all seemed so obvious now, yet none of that had even occurred to her at the time. She hadn't thought about anything except how good it felt to be close to him, craving his kisses without knowing why. It hadn't mattered…

But it did matter. She knew that now. Snape knew it too, which was why he'd put an end to it. If it had gone any further… well, perhaps it was best not to think about that.

Dear Ron,

Sorry I haven't written you this week, but I've been busy getting things in order for the holiday. I'm really looking forward to getting away from Hogwarts for a couple weeks. I need a chance to clear my head, and of course, I can't wait to see you.

The last few months have been strange, often confusing, but I suppose that's only to be expected. So much has changed, hasn't it? I don't know how to feel about that sometimes, nor why I react to things the way I do. All I know is that I'm ready to feel like myself again, surrounded by people who love me.

I'll see you soon, okay? We'll have a wonderful Christmas, I promise.

Love, Hermione

In her own way, she supposed she had told him the truth. She hadn't mentioned Snape, but her confusion and mixed feelings? That was the crux of it, really. She wasn't the same person she'd been a year ago, still trying to figure out who she was and what she wanted now that the war was over.

Maybe that explained her attraction to Snape. Maybe she felt drawn to him simply because he was familiar, because she knew she could trust him. Feeling isolated, cut off from the life she'd known before… wouldn't it be natural for her to reach out to anyone who made her feel less alone?

"Finished?"

She nodded, blowing on the ink before she rolled up the scroll.

"Me too," Ginny said. "Let's head up to the Owlery."

Loneliness. The more Hermione thought about it, the more that theory made sense. There was also an easy solution, one that didn't involve cheating on her boyfriend or putting anyone's job at risk. She just had to remember who she was, which had always been centered in Harry and Ron. Focusing on her relationships with them, doing whatever she could to strengthen those bonds? Perhaps that would make her feel more like herself.

As for Snape…

She quite liked him these days. That wasn't going to change, though she'd have to be more mindful of boundaries. All else aside, it wasn't like she could have a future with him. He found her physically attractive, obviously, but that didn't mean…

No. Ron was the one who loved her. He'd already made it clear that he wanted to marry her someday. Was she willing to throw that away for the sake of some temporary attraction? Of course not.
By the time she made it back to her room, her mind was made up. Of course, that didn't stop her from dreaming of Snape that night, sighing softly in her sleep as she pictured herself in his arms.
Chapter 13: Sleepless

The next couple weeks passed peacefully enough, though that didn't mean Severus was ready to let his guard down. He'd made that mistake before, completely unprepared for the incident with the snakes.

No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't put the memory behind him. He visited his quarters for fresh clothing or a quick shower, but he couldn't bring himself to sleep there, afraid he might awaken to another nightmare. Absurd, really. He'd never reacted this way, not even when he'd come face to face with a homicidal werewolf.

Of course, that werewolf hadn't torn his throat to shreds, nearly killing him process. It hadn't injected him with venom, scorching his flesh, his veins, every nerve ending in his body catching fire. He'd never known what it was to be helpless on that level, unable to even cry out in response to the most excruciating pain he'd ever felt in his life.

When he looked at it that way, Severus supposed he had legitimate reason to be wary of snakes. But the serpents in his room had only been illusions, wisps of magic that posed no threat to his safety. What was he afraid of? It wasn't as if Nagini herself had been summoned back from the dead.

Logic was a powerful thing, yet it failed in the face of unrelenting fear. It was that fear that drove him to prowl the halls each night, searching for any sign of the perpetrator. He wouldn't get a decent night's sleep until they were caught, but that wasn't all. He desperately wanted to be the one to find them, needed to make sure they were suitably punished.

What would that punishment entail? He wasn't sure yet, only that it would have nothing to do with detentions or House Point deductions.

"Professor Snape?"

He looked up, surprised to see Hermione hovering in front of his desk. For the past couple weeks, they'd rarely interacted, only seeing each other at meals or in class. To be fair, that had been somewhat intentional on his part – he'd known it was best to put some distance between them after what had happened in his office.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"I was wondering..." She glanced behind her, as if making sure they were alone. "Are you all right?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I hope this doesn't offend you, but you look exhausted."

"Pointing out the obvious?" He shrugged. "That's hardly offensive."

"You haven't been sleeping."

"An astute observation." Withdrawing his wand, he tapped on the desk, summoning a pot of coffee.
He poured himself a cup, adding a couple spoonfuls of sugar before he lifted it to his lips.

"It's the snakes, isn't it?"

"Not specifically, no. I am tired of these incidents, however, so I've been spending my evenings searching for the perpetrator."

She didn't believe him. That couldn't have been more obvious, the look in her eyes almost unbearably sympathetic.

"Honestly?" she said. "I wouldn't want to sleep in there either."

"Yes, well..." He trailed off, wondering how she always managed to make him feel so vulnerable. If she'd been anyone else, he would've shut her down without a second thought.

"Do you have anywhere to go? Anywhere that feels safe?"

"I am perfectly fine, Miss Granger. I don't need..."

"You need to get some sleep."

Again, she was only pointing out the obvious. Other than the occasional brief nap at his desk, he hadn't slept in weeks. He'd been fortifying himself with rejuvenation potions and endless cups of coffee, both of which had become considerably less effective over the past few days.

"As I said, I'm perfectly..."

"You're not fine," she interrupted. "You nodded off twice during class, and I'm pretty sure you were asleep at breakfast this morning."

He was quickly losing his patience, though he didn't have the energy to snap at her. Instead, he shrugged, pouring himself another cup of coffee as he leaned back in his chair.

"As you've deduced," he said, "I'd rather not sleep in my quarters. Those quarters have been breached not just once, but multiple times. The only way to restore my privacy, it seems, is to find the culprit as quickly as possible."

"You don't know how long that will take."

"No," he admitted. "Though I hardly see where that's relevant. I won't be able to rest until..."

"Until you feel safe."

He inclined his head, realizing it would be pointless to deny it.

"That's how it was for me," she said. "I had a lot of trouble sleeping before you moved me out of the guest wing. Now I have no issues at all."

"While that was an adequate solution for you," he replied, "we only have one Room of Requirement. Being as that room is already occupied..."

"Why can't you sleep there, too?"

He sputtered, spilling coffee down the front of his coat. It took him a minute to recover, feeling quite undignified as he cast a drying charm on himself.
"Miss Granger," he said, "what you're suggesting is entirely inappropriate."

"No, I didn't mean..." She hesitated, her cheeks turning red. "I wasn't talking about you spending the night there. I just thought you could use it for a nap every now and again. It's not like I'm always in there, you know?"

Of course she hadn't meant... he shook his head, feeling like a fool.

"That might be true," he said, "but my days are busy. I have a full class load, not to mention grading, detentions, and other responsibilities."

"What about tomorrow? I'll be going down to Hogsmeade, which means I'll be gone for most of the day."

He sipped at his coffee, forced to admit that her suggestion wasn't entirely unreasonable. In fact, he was quite sure he could get out of his chaperoning duties, considering that he'd taken sole responsibility for nightly patrols over the past couple weeks. Besides, she did have a point – he'd never felt more worn out. How much longer could he go on like this before he collapsed from exhaustion?

"Very well," he told her. "I'll take it under consideration."

Severus showed up at the Room of Requirement at 8 AM the following morning, stifling a yawn as he waited for Hermione to emerge. The previous night had been grueling, his patrols yielding nothing more than a couple Hufflepuffs who'd decided to sneak out after curfew.

At this point, he couldn't think of a single reason why he should refuse her offer. He just wanted to fall into a nice, soft bed, forgetting about the world and all its complications.

"Good morning, Professor Snape."

He stared at her in silence, struggling to make his brain function properly. Finally, he managed to form a coherent thought, turning to pace in front of the wall.

"I'll be gone before you return."

"Okay."

To his relief, she didn't attempt to prolong the conversation. She smiled instead, swinging her bag over her shoulder as she disappeared around the corner.

I need a safe place to sleep.

His request was somewhat different than hers. As such, he expected the room to be different, too. He quickly realized that wasn't the case, frowning as he stepped inside. Her clothing was hanging in the wardrobe, books and sheaves of parchment stacked on the desk. Even her cat was present, a large, unfortunate looking creature that was stretched out on the bed.

Her bed.

Should he go back and request another room? Probably, though he was far too exhausted to bother. He removed his boots and frock coat, partially unbuttoning his shirt before he collapsed on the mattress.

Suddenly, he was glad the room was hers. The vanilla fragrance of her hair still clung to the pillows,
a sweet, comforting aroma that had become intimately familiar. Closing his eyes, he breathed it in, his body relaxing as he drifted off to sleep.

Hermione did everything she could think of to keep herself busy. After the trip to Hogsmeade, she spent a couple hours in the library, followed by an unnecessarily long dinner. She didn't return to the Room of Requirement until right before curfew, more than 12 hours after she'd left.

Was he still in there? She hadn't seen him since that morning, though she supposed he could've returned to the dungeons without her noticing.

*I need a room that no one who wishes to harm me can enter.*

She repeated the request in her mind, wondering whether the door would appear. If it was being used for another purpose…

Apparently not.

She stepped through the doorway, stopping to pet Crookshanks as he appeared at her feet.

"I brought you a bit of chicken," she told him. "Would you like…"

She trailed off, her breath catching in her throat as she spotted the bed. Or the man lying in it, to be more specific. Snape was stretched out on his stomach, eyes closed, lips slightly parted as he sighed in his sleep. The sound sent a shiver up her spine, a sensation she did her best to ignore as she moved closer.

Should she wake him up? Part of her thought so, convinced that he wouldn't want to be seen in such a vulnerable position. Then again… well, he had chosen to sleep in her room, hadn't he? Obviously, he couldn't be too concerned about her invading his privacy.

Deciding to let him sleep a little longer, Hermione settled herself at her desk. She tried to focus on homework, though she couldn't help glancing over her shoulder as he shifted onto his back. His dark hair was spread out across the pillow, leaving his neck exposed.

She hadn't seen it since Saint Mungo's, a rough, puckered scar where there'd once been a gaping wound. It looked much better than the last time she'd seen it, but still… she couldn't help seeing it for what it was, an unmistakable reminder of all the things he'd suffered.

Perhaps that was why she found it so difficult to disturb him. How could she when he looked so peaceful? Even now that the war was over, he rarely got to enjoy…

"It's impolite to stare."

She jumped, her eyes widening as his snapped open. Slowly, he lifted his head, giving her a measuring look.

"Why didn't you wake me?"

She shrugged. "I didn't think it would hurt to let you sleep a few more minutes."

"What time is it?"

"Just after 10."

"A.M.?"
She shook her head. "P.M."

Cursing under his breath, Snape buttoned his shirt with one hand, reaching for his coat with the other. In a matter of seconds, he was fully dressed, raking a hand through his hair as he headed for the door.

"14 bloody hours."

"You needed it."

"Yes, well..." He hesitated, one hand on the doorknob. "Good night, Miss Granger."

"Good night, Professor Snape."

---

Snape looked much better Monday morning, sharp eyed and alert as he stalked through the halls. Unfortunately, his newfound burst of energy didn't last. His eyes were underscored by dark circles by Wednesday, his face haggard with exhaustion when Thursday rolled around. By Friday, he was sucking down cups of coffee like his life depended on it, though that didn't stop him from nodding off at dinner.

"I'll be in the library all day tomorrow," Hermione told him. "I've got a Charms essay due Monday, and I haven't even started it yet."

Was that true? Of course not. She'd finished that essay more than a week ago. Snape didn't question it, however, obviously too tired to resist the offer of a safe place to sleep.

"Wake me at 7 PM."

She nodded, watching him disappear into the Room of Requirement before she headed to the library. Ignoring Madame Pince's suspicious look, she settled herself at an empty table, pulling a quill and parchment out of her bag.

How much longer could he go on like this? Weekend naps did seem to help, but more often than not, it was only coffee and sheer willpower that kept him on his feet. She had to do something... letting him use her room clearly wasn't enough.

Fortunately, she already had another idea, one that made her smile as she dipped her quill in the inkpot.

_Dear Harry,_

_I hate to ask another favor, but can I borrow the Marauder's Map? I know I already have the cloak, but I really do need both. Can't tell you what for just yet, but I'll explain everything over winter break._

She received his response at breakfast the next morning, sighing in relief as she stashed the map in her bag.

_Dear Hermione,_

_Of course you can borrow it. Honestly, I should've just given it to you when you went back to Hogwarts. Not much I can do with it here, right? Anyway, I hope you find whoever it is you're looking for. Can't wait to hear all about it._

Snape might not know it, but he didn't have to do this alone. Would he accept her help? Probably
not, but he didn't have to know about it, did he? She could always work behind the scenes, hopefully bringing an end to the search that much sooner. Then he could finally get some sleep, secure in the knowledge that the culprit had been found.

She waited until well after curfew that evening, full of nervous anticipation as she put on the cloak. Tucking the map in her pocket, she cast several charms on herself before she stepped out into the hall.

Silently, she crept down the stairs, pausing to glance at the map. This was her secret weapon, one that virtually guaranteed she'd find the perpetrator. It might not happen tonight or tomorrow, maybe not even for another week or two. But soon enough, they'd strike again, unaware that she had everything she needed to expose their identity.
Hermione stifled a yawn, doing her best to focus on Snape. He was pacing the aisles, speaking in a low, hypnotic voice as he described uncommon uses for lacewing flies.

"A rare tonic," he said, "extraordinarily difficult to brew. If one can manage to do so properly, however, it can remove even the most grievous scars. The transformational properties…"

Of course, none of this was new to her. She'd read an entire book on lacewing flies during fourth year. Surely it wouldn't hurt to zone out for a minute or two, just long enough to rest her eyes? As long as she didn't...

"Miss Granger!"

She gasped, shocked to find Snape looming over her. Hadn't he just been on the other side of the room?

"I'm sorry," she said hastily. "What did you say?"

"I said, 'class is dismissed'. See me in my office."

Had she really been asleep for 20 minutes? Shaking her head, she followed him out of the classroom, scouring her mind for some plausible excuse. Unfortunately, she was too groggy to come up with anything suitable.

She wasn't the only one who was tired. It was Friday, nearly a week since Snape had used the Room of Requirement. His face was even paler than usual, his movements sluggish as he closed the door to his office.

"Explain."

What was she supposed to say? Should she tell him that she'd been patrolling the halls every night? He'd be none too pleased about that, especially if she explained her reasoning. Telling him that he needed help, that her strategy seemed like it would be far more effective than his? 'None too pleased' was an understatement. He'd be positively livid.

Besides, secrecy was the most crucial part of her plan. Not that she didn't trust Snape, but if the culprit was eavesdropping…

No, she couldn't take that risk. If her suspicions were correct and this was an unusually small Animagus, they couldn't hope to find them without the Marauder's Map. How many years had Peter Pettigrew gone undetected before his identity was revealed?

This person was obviously smarter than Pettigrew, not to mention far more skilled at magic. How else had they been able to access so many restricted areas without getting caught? Those messages, all the sinister pranks they'd pulled? They wouldn't have been able to do that without switching forms, which they'd somehow managed to do without detection. Clearly, they knew what they were doing… which meant she had to be extremely careful to keep her own intentions hidden.
"Sorry," she said, realizing that Snape was still waiting for an answer. "I stayed up a bit too late the last couple nights. Studying, you know."

"Miss Granger..." He hesitated, letting out a heavy sigh. "While I commend your dedication, there's no point in going to extremes."

"I know. It's just I lost track of time, and..."

"Yes, well, be more mindful in the future. If you continue to fall asleep in my classes, I'll have no choice but to penalize you."

She nodded, waiting for him to continue. He said nothing, however, rubbing his eyes as he summoned a pot of coffee.

"Sir?"

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"Will you be using my room tomorrow?"

He hesitated, fixing himself a cup before he conjured a second one for her. She accepted it gratefully, adding an obscene amount of cream and sugar.

"Not tomorrow," he said, pausing to take a sip. "I have to attend the Quidditch game."

"Oh yeah, Gryffindor's playing Slytherin, aren't they?"

He inclined his head. "While these events are somewhat less mandatory now that I'm no longer Head of House, I'm still expected to be there. That's particularly true as I've already missed two games this year."

"So," she said. "No time to catch up on sleep."

"I'm afraid not."

"How about Sunday, then?"

"Perhaps," he said. "On one condition."

She frowned. "What's that?"

"That you'll agree to use the room on Saturday. Catch up on your rest, make sure you're prepared for another week of classes."

His tone was casual, but she knew he wouldn't have said it if he wasn't concerned for her well-being. Resisting the urge to smile, she took another sip of coffee before she responded.

"So I have your permission to skip the game?"

"You do... as long as you agree to stay in your room this time."

"Professor Snape," she said. "I think you just became my favorite teacher."

"Yes, well..." He shifted uncomfortably, though she knew he was pleased by her comment. "I'll see you Sunday morning. 9 AM sharp."
Their weekend plans went off without a hitch. Hermione slept from breakfast until dinner on Saturday. On Sunday, Snape didn't leave the room until right before curfew. By Monday morning, he looked as well rested as she felt, engaging in what appeared to be a lively conversation with Flitwick as she passed him in the hall.

By Monday night, she'd never felt more ready. She put on the Invisibility Cloak, casting a Silencing Charm before she left the Room of Requirement. Like last week, she saw Snape every now and again, black robes billowing behind him as he scoured the school from top to bottom. She did her best to keep her distance, heading to the first floor as soon as she realized he was ascending the stairs.

So far, her efforts hadn't yielded much. There'd been a few more messages left on the walls, and she could've sworn she'd heard strange noises a couple times. Honestly, she was no closer to discovering the truth than she'd been a week ago, but she refused to be discouraged. She ducked into an alcove, her brow furrowed as she studied the map.

There were plenty of names she recognized. Others were unfamiliar. In either case, they were all clustered together, dozens of students who'd long since retired to their dormitories. She saw Minerva in the Headmaster's Office, along with several professors who appeared to be in their private quarters. Filch was somewhere on the third floor, while Snape was prowling the floor above him.

After a while, she headed to the Great Hall, settling herself at her usual table. The ceiling above her was pitch black, the thinnest sliver of a crescent moon slicing through the artificial sky. She squinted beneath the light of the few stray candles that were still burning, her eyes fixed on the entrance to the dungeon.

Was it a student? It had to be. She had no reason to suspect any of the professors, and ghosts couldn't write or cast spells. Filch? He was incapable of using magic, and besides…

She tensed, her eyes darting to a different part of the map. A single dot had separated itself from the others, stepping out into the hall. Not a Slytherin as she'd expected, but…

Ravenclaw?

The dot moved down the hallway, descending a flight of stairs. Where was he…

As Hermione watched, the strangest thing happened. That dot… that student? He walked straight to Filch's office.

Sneaking out after curfew… shouldn't he be going out of his way to avoid Filch? Apparently not. The two dots hovered close to one another for what seemed like an unusually long time before they headed in opposite directions.

Hermione got to her feet, adjusting the cloak before she took off after the student. She had no proof of anything, but if she could catch him, perhaps even question him about his odd behavior…

Catch him? She never even saw him. By the time she made it to the upper floors, he'd already disappeared, rejoining the other dots in Ravenclaw tower.

"Damn."

Could it be a false alarm? Perhaps, though she wasn't ready to give up yet. Turning her attention to Filch, she was surprised to see him in the dungeons. What was he doing down there? She watched him curiously, realizing he'd just entered Snape's storeroom.

She took off at a run, though she had a feeling it was too late. She'd just reached the final set of stairs...
when he brushed past her, muttering something under his breath.

There was no point in following him now. He headed straight back to his office, which could hardly be considered suspicious.

As for Snape's storeroom…

She frowned as she slipped inside, igniting the tip of her wand. As usual, the shelves were perfectly arranged, dozens of vials glittering beneath the light. There was nothing out of place that she could see… maybe Filch had come down here to investigate some false report? That seemed like the most likely explanation. After all, what could he possibly know about potions ingredients?

She was just about to leave when she spotted several vials on an upper shelf. She'd learned how to make that potion in her sixth year, a glowing mixture in a distinct shade of periwinkle. Sniffing it just to be sure, she nodded as she pocketed a couple vials.

Snape wouldn't mind, would he? Really, it wasn't like she'd stolen the potion. She'd find a way to replace it… hopefully without having to explain why she'd taken it in the first place.

She glanced at the map, her eyes widening as she noticed that Snape was headed in her direction. Hastily, she extinguished her wand, making sure she was well away from the storeroom by the time he reached the dungeons. She made her way back to the Room of Requirement, deciding there was no point in continuing her patrol. The dot she'd spotted earlier was now perfectly still, fast asleep in the dormitory where he belonged.

Alain Ashwood?

It didn’t take Hermione long to figure out who he was. He sat with the other Ravenclaws at breakfast, chewing on a bit of bacon as he stared off into the distance. He was a sixth year student, a slender boy with a shock of light brown hair that hung over his forehead. His eyes were a pale, crystal blue… eyes that missed nothing despite how distracted he seemed.

She averted her own eyes, careful not to stare. Instead, she focused on her most recent letter from Ron, mumbling halfhearted responses as Ginny rattled on about Quidditch practice.

The boy seemed unusually interested in what she was doing. She could feel it, though she didn't dare look in his direction again. Once, she caught him out of the corner of her eye, watching as his gaze flickered from her to the high table. Snape was oblivious to the scrutiny, his attention fixed on his plate as he nibbled a piece of toast.

At this point, Hermione wasn't suspicious. She was thoroughly convinced. Unfortunately, that wouldn't be enough. She'd need some sort of proof before she started making accusations.

The rest of the day seemed to drag on forever. She struggled to pay attention in her classes, distracted by thoughts of the night ahead. Now that she knew who Alain was, wouldn't it be easier to put an end to all this if she caught him in the act? She hoped so. More than anything, she wanted Snape to get a good night's sleep. She wanted him to be comfortable in his own quarters, wanted them both to feel safe and secure. A chance to relax, breathe easier, nothing to worry about except work or studies until the end of term…

All that would be possible once this situation was behind them. Of course, that also meant they'd have no reason to meet privately anymore. There'd be no lengthy discussions, no need to talk about anything personal at all. He wouldn't sleep in her room on the weekends, leaving behind the comforting scent of sandalwood and old books. That smell would fade, even as the distance between
them grew. Once she left school… when would she even see him again? He'd still be at Hogwarts, while she…

"Dismissed."

She waited for the other students to leave, hesitating as she reached Snape's desk. He lifted his head, giving her a quizzical look.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

Part of her desperately wanted to tell him. She hated keeping secrets, especially from someone who'd become her primary confidant. But then she reminded herself how furious he'd be if he knew she'd been wandering the halls at night. He'd insist that she leave the Invisibility Cloak with him, preventing her from seeing her plan through to its conclusion.

No. He'd know the truth soon enough. There'd be no avoiding it when she presented her evidence. But first, she needed to get that evidence… until that happened, she couldn't risk coming clean.

"Sir…" What was she supposed to say? That she'd stopped to talk to him simply because she'd wanted to? Because the thought of losing their connection left her feeling strangely disappointed? No, she couldn't tell him that either.

"I… I was just wondering if there are any new developments. With the patrols, you know. Have you seen anything?"

He shook his head, sighing heavily. "I'm afraid not. They've painted a couple more Dark Marks on the walls, and there was an incident in the Transfiguration classroom that I'm quite sure can be credited to them. Any hint as to who they are, however…"

"Don't worry," she told him. "No one can stay hidden forever."

Now that Hermione knew who Alain was, she couldn't believe she hadn't noticed him sooner. How long had he been watching her and Snape? She felt him staring at the back of her head all throughout dinner, resisting the urge to turn around and confront him.

"Want to come with me to the library?" Ginny said over dessert. "I need to finish this bloody essay."

"Thanks, but I can't."

"You don't want to go to the library? Who are you and what have you done with Hermione?"

Forcing herself to laugh, she searched for a plausible excuse. Finally, she mumbled something about needing a good night's sleep, bidding Ginny farewell before she hurried to the Room of Requirement.

She hadn't lied. Nervous anticipation had given way to exhaustion, her eyelids drooping as she changed out of her school robes. She wished she had Snape's ability to summon a pot of coffee, though…

"Of course!"

The Rejuvenation Potion she'd borrowed from Snape's storeroom… how could she have forgotten? Retrieving the vials from her pocket, she downed the contents of one before she sat down to put on her shoes.
She expected to feel a burst of energy. Instead, that simple task seemed like an enormous effort. She rubbed her eyes, unable to stifle a yawn as she glanced at the bed. Was it normal to feel this tired? It seemed like the potion should have the opposite effect, but…

She lost her train of thought, hardly aware of what she was doing as she dropped onto the mattress. Just for a second, then she'd get up, and…

"Bloody hell!"

Hermione stared at the clock, shaking her head in disbelief. It was well past 2 AM… had she really been asleep for five hours?! Hastily, she put on the cloak, casting a couple charms before she unfolded the map.

She looked for the dot in Ravenclaw tower, only to realize it wasn't there. Where was he? Where was Snape, for that matter? She expected to find him patrolling the halls, though she quickly realized that wasn't the case. His dot was in his private quarters, so still that she knew he must've fallen asleep.

Her eyes widened as she spotted a second dot in his office. After a moment, that same dot entered his quarters, advancing on him until the two names overlapped.

By then, she'd already reached the fourth floor, her heart pounding furiously as she raced toward the dungeon.

"Petrificus Totalus!"

Severus awoke with a gasp, though it was too late to stop it. His body went rigid, his eyes darting around in frantic circles as he attempted to identify the intruder.

"Snape," a voice spoke from beyond his line of vision, "it was only a matter of time. You must've known that."

Naturally, he couldn't respond. He couldn't do anything except stare at the shadow on the wall. It seemed grotesquely large, though that might've been an illusion created by the single candle that flickered on his bedside table.

Why the hell had he chosen to sleep here? He couldn't even remember now. His last clear memory was of sitting in his office, tipping back a vial of Rejuvenation Potion as he'd prepared for his nightly patrol.

"You know why I'm here, don't you?"

He couldn't identify the raspy whisper, couldn't even shake his head. He lay frozen, trying to summon up some wandless incantation he might be able to cast. Unfortunately, the first few failed him, his state of paralysis rendering him magically immobile as well.

"I'm here because you're a traitor. You betrayed the Dark Lord, a treachery that resulted in his death."

Reading the messages was one thing. Hearing the words spoken aloud? They took on a whole new meaning, infused with so much hatred that Severus couldn't help fearing what might happen next. The idea of being murdered in his own bed, helpless to defend himself…

"I don't know how you managed to escape the Dark Lord's wrath, but it won't happen again. You're
Indeed, Lord Voldemort himself hadn't been able to kill Severus. To think that this fool might be able to finish the job? It was too much to bear, a cruel mockery of the second chance Hermione had given him. Had he really beaten the odds, only to…

Suddenly, it was her face he saw, eyes shimmering with tears as she'd hovered over him in the Shrieking Shack. He recalled what she'd said to him, her voice trembling with emotion as he'd hovered on the edge of consciousness.

"It's not too late. Stay with me just a little longer, all right?"

That was why he'd chosen to keep breathing, he supposed. Knowing there was a single person who'd cared whether he lived or died? That had made all the difference, even if he'd resented her for it at the time.

Now? He still wasn't ready to give up. This existence of his… he'd thought it would lose all meaning after Voldemort's fall. Clearly, that wasn't the case. His life still mattered, at least to her, which was reason enough to go on living.

But it wasn't just that. As strange as it seemed, he wanted to live for his own sake, too. He'd never allowed himself to feel that way… at least, not since Lily's death. Remorse had never allowed him to heal, bitter recriminations of the past preventing him from hoping for a better future. But now that the war was behind him, now that he'd fulfilled his vow…

Yes, he wanted to live, to find some measure of peace now that all was said and done. Did he deserve it? He couldn't be sure, though he supposed it didn't matter. He'd done everything in his power to set things right… as far as he was concerned, the rest of his life was his own.

Granted, that life might not last much longer, especially if he was hit with the Killing Curse. As long as there was a chance, however…

"You're going to die," the intruder whispered again. "But first, you're going to suffer."

Severus sighed in relief, even as he braced himself for the pain. It wasn't over. Not yet.

"Crucio!"
Chapter 15: Ambush

Hermione crept through Snape's office, relieved that the door to his quarters was slightly ajar. She lifted her wand, casting another Silencing Charm before she entered.

It was a good thing she did. Otherwise, the intruder would've heard her gasp, her eyes widening as she spotted Snape on the bed.

He wasn't making any noise. He wasn't moving either, rendered immobile by what was obviously a Full Body-Bind. Still, his agony couldn't have been more obvious, his muscles rigid, a single tear trickling out from beneath his tightly closed lids as he suffered under the effects of the Cruciatius.

"Stupefy!" she shouted.

Alain flew backward, hitting the wall with a painful sounding thud as she aimed her wand at Snape. In the blink of an eye, she freed him, his body jerking several times before he managed to push himself into a sitting position.

"Mr. Ashwood," he said. "What a surprise. Then again, perhaps it isn't so shocking. I should've known…"

"Cruc…"

"Oh no." He smiled dangerously, disarming the boy with a flick of his wand. "No, we won't be having any more of that. Miss Granger? Summon a chair, if you will."

He hadn't recovered. Not even close. She could see that in the ashen pallor of his skin, his hand trembling as he gripped his wand with a white knuckled fist. He didn't even attempt to rise from the bed, probably because he didn't trust his legs to hold him upright.

"Sit."

"No."

"Do as I say," Snape said, "or you'll regret it."

Even his voice was unsteady, though it didn't matter. He was fully in control now, even if Alain was too stupid to realize it.

"Traitor. I don't take orders from you!"

"I beg to differ."

The next thing she knew, Alain was bound to the chair, slender black ropes entwined around his arms and legs. He struggled to free himself, but it was a useless effort. After a few minutes, he gave up, cursing aloud as his body went limp.

"I suppose I don't need to ask why," Snape said, grimacing slightly as he pushed himself to his feet. He stepped forward, unfastening one of the ropes before he jerked on Alain's sleeve.
"It's…"

"The Dark Mark? Yes, Miss Granger, it would appear so."

"But I thought…"

"You assumed that only a Slytherin would stoop so low? I would've thought that you of all people would know better."

"No," she said, stung by the bitterness in his voice. "That isn't what I meant. It's just... he's a sixth year. He couldn't have been more than 15 when…"

For the first time, Snape looked directly at her, seeming to relax somewhat. "Yes, well, the Dark Lord wasn't too particular about age... especially toward the end."

"How dare you speak of him?!" Alain shouted. "You killed him, you filthy bastard!"

"Did I?" Snape cocked an eyebrow. "As much as I'd like to think so, it seems I was unconscious at the time of his death."

"You killed him! All of you!"

"He deserved to die," Hermione said.

"He didn't," Alan shot back, his face turning a mottled shade of red. "But you do, you Mudblood bitch!"

She didn't have time to react. Snape moved faster, his black eyes burning as he lifted his wand.

"Use that word again," he said, his voice deathly quiet, "and you'll discover why the Dark Lord recruited me at such a young age."

"I'm not afraid of you!"

"No? Then you're a foolish boy. The pain I could inflict on you…" Snape sneered. "Let's just say it would be far more... intense than your pathetic attempt at the Cruciatus."

"You're bluffing."

"Indeed? Well, I suppose there's only one way to find out."

"Wait," Hermione said. She didn't know if Snape was serious, but this seemed like a good time to intervene. His threat had obviously worked - Alain had turned a shade paler, his manner more subdued.

"What is it, Miss Granger?"

"I don't understand," she said. "I mean, I get that he was working for the other side, but... why now? Why risk everything just to..."

"I've already lost everything!" Alain shouted, struggling against his bonds again. "Because of you, both of you! If you hadn't betrayed him…"

"Then he would've betrayed you," Snape said.

"Never! He told me…"
"That you had remarkable talent, skills that would be useful to his cause?"

"It wasn't just that."

"Of course not." Snape's tone was casual, underscored by just a touch of venom. "I'm sure he also promised you power, protection, a chance to rise in the ranks if you performed to his satisfaction. Did he say that you had limitless potential, too?"

"You were *eavesdropping!* You sneaky, *traitorous*…"

"Eavesdropping? That's your specialty, Mr. Ashwood, not mine. I know what he said because…"

"Because he told you the same things."

Snape nodded. "Astute as always, Miss Granger."

Alain's expression was mutinous, his eyes darting around the room before they fixed on Snape. "So he told you that, too," he said. "So what? Just because you turned out to be a disappointment… that doesn't mean…"

"A *disappointment*? Oh yes, what a disappointment I was, excelling where so many others fell short. The fact that he relied on me above anyone else, referring to me as his most trusted servant? I suppose that was a suitable reward for my… failures."

"You betrayed him!"

"Yes, but he didn't know that. Not until the very end, hours after my supposed death. When he killed me… *or tried* to, at any rate…"

"He thought you were loyal," Hermione said.

"Indeed. 'A good and faithful servant'… I believe those were the words he used. In the end, it made no difference. My life, such as it was, meant nothing to him. Just a tool to be used and squandered as he saw fit."

"You deserved it!"

"Did I, Mr. Ashwood? Perhaps, though by that logic, *anyone* who served the Dark Lord would've deserved the same fate."

"Anyone," Hermione added as she looked at Alain, "including you."

"Shut up, Mudblood!"

She couldn't have stopped Snape, even if she'd wanted to. His wand was already pointed in Alain's face, his expression feral.

"I told you," he said from between gritted teeth, "*not* to use that word. I *also* told you what the consequences would be if you did so again. Tell me, Mr. Ashwood – would you like to know how it feels to be slaughtered by the Dark Lord?"

"Don't," Hermione whispered. "Please, you can't kill…"

She trailed off, silenced by a single glance from Snape. Somehow, it reassured her, though it didn't prepare her for what happened next.
Alain shrank back in his chair, his face turning pale. He shook his head vehemently, his breath emerging in quick, panicked bursts.

"No," he whispered. "No, please…"

"Professor Snape…"

She never got to finish, the rest of her words drowned out by an unearthly scream. Snape chose that moment to release the bonds, Alain's body hitting the floor with a heavy thud. He lay there twitching, clawing at his throat, a terrible gurgling sound emerging from somewhere deep in his chest.

"Stop it," she hissed. "You're killing him!"

"I'm not," Snape said, giving his wand another flick. Alain went limp, his face wet with tears as he lay trembling at their feet.

"Is he…"

"Injured? Not at all. Mr. Ashwood? Get back in your chair."

"I… I can't."

"I lost half the blood in my body," Snape said. "More than that, I'd expect. I'd also been injected with some of the most toxic venom…"

"It burns."

"Yes, it does. Fortunately, there's not a single drop of it in your body. What you experienced was an illusion, one that lasted no more than a minute. I lay that way for hours, scorched from the inside, weakened by massive blood loss. Yet still, I found a way to move. I dragged myself from one side of the room to the other, gritting my teeth through the agony before I finally lost consciousness. What you've just endured? Trivial in comparison. Now get in your chair."

Alain did what he was told, rubbing his arm as he sat back down.

"Do you see now?" Snape said. "No pity, no mercy, not even for the Dark Lord's most trusted servant. He doesn't deserve your loyalty, Mr. Ashwood. He never did."

Until that moment, Hermione hadn't fully understood Snape's intentions. She thought he'd punished Alain for calling her a Mudblood, which might've been true to some degree. But it was also something deeper than that, something that wrenched at her heart as she recognized it for what it was.

Snape was trying to save him.

Despite everything, he still hoped to get through to Alain, attempting to show him the error of his ways in the only way he knew how. This was the mercy that Voldemort had been incapable of, a shot at redemption with no strings attached.

"Mr. Ashwood?"

Alain had recovered somewhat, his expression unreadable. Gradually, it shifted, transforming into that same mask of resentment he'd worn before.
"Liar," he said, his voice dripping with hatred. "You're still a traitor, and you still deserve to die!"

For the moment, the only thing that died was the spark of hope in Snape's eyes. His mouth tightened, compressing into a thin line.

"Clearly," he said, "you're incapable of listening to reason. You are perfectly capable of facing the consequences of your actions, however, including the use of an illegal curse. As soon as I summon the headmistress…"

"Wait," Hermione said.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

"He… he knows things. Or at least, I think he does."

She didn't need to elaborate. Snape knew what she was talking about, jerking his head before he pointed his wand at Alain.

"Legilimens."

For several minutes, the room was silent. Finally, Snape withdrew, his expression grim.

"That day in your office… after you found the snakes… was he…"

"Yes."

She shook her head. "We can't let anyone find out…"

"That you're shagging the greasy dungeon bat?" Alain smirked. "Yeah, I'd be embarrassed, too."

"I'm not embarrass… I mean, we never…"

"Obliviate."

With a flick of his wand, Snape took care of the problem, renewing Alain's bonds before he turned back to Hermione. He didn't quite meet her eyes, looking as embarrassed as she felt as he cleared his throat.

"Minerva," he said.

"I can send my Patronus if you want."

"Yes, but… you're in my private quarters at four in the morning. How are we supposed to explain that?"

"Oh, that's easy," she said. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you before, but…"

"Bloody hell!"

Severus shook his head, cursing to himself as he stared at the empty chair. He scanned the room, though of course, there was no point in doing so. Once again, Ashwood had disappeared into thin air.

Clearly, the boy was an unregistered Animagus. Why hadn't he bothered to find out what species he was? Discovering that he was an insect wouldn't have been particularly helpful, but even that
would've given him somewhere to start from.

"We have to go after him!"

"And how," he said, "do you propose we do that?"

The words came out more harshly than he'd intended, but it didn't matter. Hermione was barely listening, her expression intent as she stared at the piece of parchment in her hand.

"What is that?" he said.

"The Marauder's Map. It's…"

"I know what it is… or at least, I have a vague idea. Give it to me."

As soon as he touched it, the ink disappeared, replaced by the childish insults he'd seen years before. Scowling, he handed it back, peering over her shoulder as she tapped it with her wand.

"I solemnly swear I am up to no good."

He rolled his eyes, though his irritation was quickly forgotten as the map revealed itself. Even he had to admit that it was an impressive bit of work, a perfectly proportional layout of the school. But that wasn't all. He quickly determined its true purpose, his eyes sweeping over several clusters of dots before he located the one he was looking for. Separate from the others, it was the only one moving… straight toward the Entrance Hall.

"He's trying to get outside!"

"The doors are warded," he said without thinking. "Only a staff member…"

"Wards didn't stop Peter Pettigrew!"

She was right. Of course she was. He took off at a run, sensing her close on his heels as they ascended from the dungeons. Soon enough, they'd reached their destination, pausing to catch their breath as Hermione scoured the map.

"He's still here!"

"Where?"

She took a couple steps forward, still looking at the map as he glanced over her shoulder. Her name was almost fully overlapped with Ashwood's now, their eyes scanning the floor as the latter dot began to separate itself.

It took Severus a minute to see it, a slight flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye. He pointed his wand in that direction, opening his mouth to request that Hermione do the same.

Too late. She was one step ahead of him, her eyes widening as she peered at the tiny creature.

"A locust?"

"It would appear so."

"But I thought locusts flew," she said. "wouldn't that have been a quicker way to escape?"

"It would be," he responded, watching the insect hop toward the door. "Unless, of course, that locust
has a damaged wing."

It hadn't registered at the time, but suddenly, he remembered the boy grimacing as he'd rubbed his arm. He must've injured it when he'd fallen from the chair, an unintended side effect of Severus's spell.

Did he regret it? Not particularly. Were it not for that little mishap, Ashwood would've been long gone.

"Ready, Miss Granger?"

She nodded, lifting her wand.

The insect hissed, which turned into a scream of protest as they forced him back into his human form. Severus didn't bother responding to the curses that followed, silencing Ashwood with a flick of his wand before he pointed at the stairs.

"Headmistress's office," he said. "Now. Miss Granger? Send your Patronus."

"I'm not going up there!"

"You say that like you have a choice in the matter."

They'd just reached the third floor when Alain transformed, attempting to hop toward an open window. Fortunately, Hermione was quicker, swooping down on him with a glass jar she'd conjured. She tightened the lid with a flick of her wrist, her expression smug as she handed it to Severus.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," he said wryly, "but you've done this before."

She shrugged. "Once or twice."

"Rita Skeeter, I presume?"

She nodded.

"What madness compelled you to release her?"

"I couldn't just keep her in a jar for the rest of her life."

"Why not?" he said. "Somehow, I doubt she would have been missed."

"Maybe not, but…"

Hermione trailed off, both of them coming to a stop as they reached their destination. There was no need for a password – Minerva was standing there with the door open, stifling a yawn.

"This couldn't have waited until morning?"

"Attempted murder?" Severus said. "I'm afraid not."

"Murder?!" Suddenly, she was wide awake, ushering them both into her office. "What happened? Shall I summon the other teachers? Whoever did this… if they're still on the loose…"

"No need to summon anyone." He set the jar on the desk, gratefully accepting the chair she offered.
While he'd done his best to hide it, his body still ached from the curse he'd endured. "Professor Flitwick will need to be informed, of course, but that can wait until a more reasonable hour."

"Who did they attack?"

"Me."

"You, Severus? But I thought…"

"You thought Miss Granger was the target? Yes, well, we both were. Fortunately, I took the brunt of the boy's punishment."

"The boy who is currently trapped in this jar?"

"Alain Ashwood," Hermione said. "He's a…"

"A Ravenclaw," Minerva finished for her. "Yes, I know. Tea?"

Severus inclined his head, the three of them silent as she tapped on the teapot. She filled a trio of cups, passing the milk and sugar before she settled back in her chair.

"I'd imagine," she said as she lifted her cup to her lips, "that the two of you need this as much as I do."

"Indeed," he responded, nearly groaning in relief as the familiar warmth spread through his bones. It had a calming effect on his mind, too, which was no doubt Minerva's intention. She waited a few minutes before she leaned forward again, her eyes lingering on the jar.

"Tell me what happened. All of it."

"I fell asleep in my quarters," he said, "only to be awoken by a Full-Body Bind. Naturally, I was unable to defend myself. I had no choice but to lie there as Mr. Ashwood threatened to kill me."

"But why? What would motivate him…"

"The answer to that can be found on his forearm."

"A Death Eater," Minerva said, pouring herself another cup of tea. "I always thought he was a bit strange, but I wouldn't have guessed…"

"Because he's a Ravenclaw?"

"No, of course not. It's just he's always been well behaved, excelling in his classes, and…"

"Yes, the boy is quite talented. I was particularly impressed with the strength of his Crucius."

"He used an Unforgivable on you?" Minerva's jaw tightened.

"He did," Severus said, "and would have continued to do so if Miss Granger hadn't stopped him."

"But how…"

"How did I know what was happening?" Hermione said. "I… I used a tracking charm."

"A tracking charm?" Minerva frowned. "On Professor Snape?"

"No, on Alain Ashwood. I'd caught him staring at us at meals and saw him sneaking around after
curfew. I wasn't sure he was the person we were looking for, so I…"

Why didn't she just tell Minerva about the map? Was she afraid it would be confiscated? Under the circumstances, that hardly seemed like a valid fear, but… well, who was Severus to give away her secrets?

"Miss Granger was determined to find proof, and so she did. I might've been killed had she not intervened."

"50 points to Gryffindor," Minerva said, almost as an afterthought, "do you really believe Mr. Ashwood would've killed you?"

"I'd like to believe otherwise, but yes, I do. He is… thoroughly corrupted. Poisoned by hatred. He holds both myself and Miss Granger responsible for the Dark Lord's death… his hero's death, as it were. I tried to reason with him, but…"

He trailed off as Minerva picked up the jar, turning it this way and that before she opened the lid. Flipping it upside down, she dumped the locust on the floor before she reached for her wand.

"Your assistance, Severus?"

"Certainly."

The insect screeched, howling as they forced him back into his human form. He reached up to grip his arm, his face stark white as he unleashed a string of obscenities.

"Severus?" Minerva said, elevating her voice above the din. "How did Mr. Ashwood's arm get broken?"

"An accident," Severus said smoothly. "He injured himself in a fall."

"Liar!" Ashwood screamed. "He beat me, tortured me… he was the one who used the Cruciatus!"

"He did not!"

"Shut up, Mudblood!"

This time, Severus didn't have a chance to react. Hermione was faster, slapping Ashwood with so much force that he stumbled backward.

"You shut up," she said. "I'm sick of…"

"Enough," Minerva interjected. "Mr. Ashwood? Have a seat."

To Severus's surprise, the boy did as he was told, cradling his injured arm as he dropped into the closest chair.

"Did you use an Unforgivable on Professor Snape tonight?"

"No."

"No?" Minerva raised an eyebrow. "According to him…"

"It was just a little Stinging Hex. Not my fault he can't tell the difference."

"A Stinging Hex?" Unable to help himself, Severus laughed. "Stupid boy. I've been enduring the
Cruciatus since before you were born. Trust me, I am intimately familiar with its effects."

"Stupid? At least I'm not a traitor!"

With that one word, Ashwood gave himself away. Not that Minerva wouldn't have believed them, but…

"A traitor?" she said quietly. "To whom?"

Ashwood sat mute, flinching as Severus moved closer. He screamed in protest as Severus took hold of his injured arm, pushing up his sleeve to reveal the Dark Mark.

"Brackium Emendo."

Why did he heal the boy? Severus wasn't sure, though he was certainly relieved when the screeching stopped. He sat back down, catching Minerva's nod of approval out of the corner of his eye.

"So," she said, "I assume this wasn't just an isolated incident? Dressing up the statues, painting messages on the walls, sneaking into Miss Granger's room…"

"Mr. Ashwood was responsible for those things, yes," Severus said. "And quite a few others besides."

"Like what?"

"Private notes, tampering with my personal items…"

"Don't forget the snakes," Hermione said.

He hadn't been planning to mention that, though in the end, he supposed it was best to do so. The fact was, the boy was dangerous. It would be best for everyone if he was punished in accordance with his crimes.

"I see," Minerva said. "Do you have any proof?"

"About that incident?"

"Any of them."

"You don't believe…" He stared at her, stunned.

"Professor McGonagall, please," Hermione said. "I saw him use the Cruciatus on Professor Snape, I heard him…"

"Of course I believe you. Both of you. If he is to appear before the Wizengamot, however…"

"Ah, yes," Severus said, relieved she was taking the threat seriously. "Additional proof will make for a stronger case."

Minerva nodded. "Exactly."

"We have his wand," Hermione pointed out. "Proof that he cast an Unforgivable. He's got the Dark Mark, and…"

"So does he!" Ashwood said, jabbing a finger at Severus.
"Professor Snape has already been tried and exonerated, Mr. Ashwood. His past is none of your concern."

"It certainly isn't," Severus agreed. "At any rate, we also have quite a few messages we could pass along, which certain experts might be able to trace back to him. That probably won't be necessary, however."

Minerva frowned. "Why not?"

"Because the boy will never be able to withstand a serious interrogation. His irrationality diminishes his self-control, particularly where the Dark Lord is concerned. That feeble, pathetic creature… I don't know why anyone would still be willing to serve him, but…"

"Feeble?!” Ashwood shouted. "He was the most powerful wizard in existence! If you hadn't betrayed him…"

"Oh yes," Minerva said, her lips twitching. "I see your point."

She summoned the Ministry soon thereafter, presenting them with the jar Hermione had conjured. Ashwood had been a bit harder to catch now that his injury had been healed, but they'd found a simple solution for that. Minerva had transformed, too, executing an impressive leap as she caught the locust in her mouth.

"Well," she said as the Aurors departed. "I'm glad that's resolved, though it's always a shame to lose another student."

Severus nodded, though at the moment, he couldn't bring himself to care. All he could think of was how exhausted he was, his muscles aching from what had been an extraordinarily difficult night. He sighed in relief as he and Hermione were dismissed, hoping he had the strength to walk back down to the dungeons.

"Sir?"

"Miss Granger."

"About the map… I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but…"

He held up a hand to stop her, giving his head a little shake. "Later."

She didn't press the issue, bidding him good night before she headed in the opposite direction. Meanwhile, he made it to the dungeons somehow, yawning hugely as he staggered into his office. He didn't even attempt to enter his quarters, falling asleep right there at his desk.
Chapter 16: Denial

Hermione trudged into the Potions classroom, stifling a yawn as she took her seat. Snape looked as exhausted as she felt, which of course, was only to be expected. Neither of them had gotten a decent night's sleep in weeks, fueled by coffee and adrenaline as they'd searched for their mysterious tormentor.

Now that the search was over? She could finally relax, though that didn't mean she'd be catching up on her rest anytime soon. Trying to sleep in a house full of excited Weasleys…

"I said _four_ sprigs of arrowroot, Mr. Whitfield," Snape snapped. "Not three! 10 points from Slytherin."

Something about him was different today, though it wasn't his foul mood. Hermione watched him lower his head, black hair falling forward to shield his features.

He hadn't looked at her. Since the moment she'd walked in, he hadn't so much as glanced in her direction.

She kept an eye on him throughout the rest of the class, her consternation growing as he continued to ignore her. Finally, she finished her potion, waiting for the other students to trickle out before she approached his desk.

"Sir?"

"Miss Granger," he said, not bothering to look up.

"Are you mad at me?"

"Is there any reason why I should be?"

"I hid the map from you," she said. "I lied about what I was up to."

"Both of which worked out in my favor," he pointed out. "Under the circumstances…"

"I didn't _want_ to lie. Really, I didn't. It's just… I couldn't have known if he was eavesdropping. If he'd heard me telling you about the map…"

"Miss Granger…" Snape sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I've already deduced all this. There's no need to explain yourself any further."

She hesitated, wondering whether she should press the issue. Deciding against it, she forced herself to smile instead.

"No hard feelings, then?"

"None."

Still, he kept his eyes averted, studying the slip of parchment in his hand. It was blank, but it didn't matter. He stared at it like it was the most fascinating thing he'd ever seen.
"Sir…"

"Yes?"

"That day in your office… you know, when you tried to give me detention?"

His head snapped up, his eyes narrowing as they met hers.

"What about it?" he said brusquely.

"You don't think he told anyone, do you?"

"Ashwood?"

She nodded.

"Doubtful. At any rate, he's hardly a credible witness."

"Neither is Rita Skeeter, and people believe her all the time."

"Don't worry, Miss Granger," he said, his expression sour. "Your reputation remains intact. That said, I apologize for my behavior. I put both of us at risk for the sake of… well, whatever that was, it was stupid on my part. I should've known better."

_Stupid?_ Hermione felt like she'd been slapped.

"You don't have to apologize," she said, her voice calm. "I regret my actions, too."

For a second, he almost looked stung. He recovered quickly, his features smoothing out into a mask of indifference.

"So we're agreed," he said. "It will never happen again."

"Agreed."

He nodded, lowering his eyes to the parchment. A silent dismissal? Probably, though Hermione wasn't finished quite yet.

"Sir…"

"What?"

"I need a favor."

His eyes flickered to her face again, his expression wary. "What is it?"

"Can I borrow a few potions ingredients?"

"I suppose so," he said, "though it seems my current stores have been tampered with. I've submitted an order for replacements, which should arrive later today."

"I can come by in the morning," she said. "What time should I meet you?"

"No need for that. Just take what you need from the storeroom."

She opened her mouth and then closed it, not knowing what to say. On one hand, she appreciated his trust. On the other? Tomorrow was the last chance she'd have to see him before winter break. Was
he that anxious to be rid of her? It hurt her to think so, even as she chided herself for feeling that way.

"Thanks," she said as she turned to leave. "I hope you have a nice break."

"Same to you."

As soon as Hermione walked through the door, Ron pulled her into a massive hug. She hugged him back, grinning at Harry as he entered the room.

"Hey, can I get one of those?"

Memories flowed through her like water, her senses soothed by familiar sights and sounds and smells. Why had she ever wanted to leave this place? It felt like home, all the more so as she followed the boys into the kitchen.

"Hermione!" Molly exclaimed, hurrying forward to kiss her cheek. "I hope you're hungry."

"Starving."

Soon enough, the family was gathered around the table, digging into the most delicious meal Hermione had eaten in months. Molly and Arthur, Ginny, Ron, George, Percy, Bill and Fleur… Charlie had even flown in from Romania, his hair conspicuously longer than it had been the last time she'd seen him.

"So," Arthur said, serving up slices of ham. "How's Hogwarts this year?"

Ginny groaned. "Dreadfully boring. Can we talk about something else?"

"How about Quidditch?" Ron suggested.

This time, Hermione groaned, which earned her a sympathetic look from Harry.

"Let's hold off on that for a bit longer, mate," he said, "I want to hear about Hogwarts, too."

Honestly, Hermione didn't want to talk about Hogwarts either. It had been a rough few months, not helped by that last, awkward meeting with Snape. Why had he acted that way? After everything they'd been through…

"How are your classes, dear?"

That was from Molly, who served her a massive pile of roasted potatoes.

"Fine," she said. "I'm really enjoying Arithmancy this year."

Dinner passed without incident, filled with laughter and small talk. Like most Weasley meals, it lasted for hours, only ending as various family members wandered off to bed. Finally, Hermione, Ron, and Harry were the only ones left, talking quietly among themselves as they headed upstairs.

"I can't stay long," Harry said, closing the bedroom door behind them. "I mean, I'll be back to sleep here, but I told Gin I'd spend some time with her first."

Ron nodded, the two of them exchanging a knowing look. Hermione tried to ignore it, settling herself on the bed between them.
"So… did the map help?"

"It did," she told Harry, "the cloak, too."

"He was a Death Eater, wasn't he? That's what McGonagall told Mum."

"Yeah, he was." Hermione hesitated, swallowing a twinge of nervousness. "What else did Professor McGonagall say?"

"She said you saved Snape's life."

"Well, sort of. It's a bit more complicated than that."

"How so?"

She gave them a brief overview of the past few months, telling them about the mysterious notes without revealing their contents. She touched on some of the other incidents as well, explaining who Alain Ashwood was and how she'd finally caught him.

"You were in Snape's bedroom?" Ron shuddered. "Does he sleep upside down?"

"Ron?"

"Yeah?"

"Shut up."

"I was just being funny."

"It's not funny," she said. "It's mean. Why can't you just…"

"Look, I'm sorry, all right? Let's not fight about it."

He wasn't the least bit sorry. She could tell by his sullen tone, his expression anything but apologetic. Still, she decided to let it go, watching the boys exchange another knowing look as Harry rose from the bed.

"You off, mate?"

"Yeah, I'll be back a bit later."

With that, he closed the door behind him, leaving the two of them alone.

"You have no idea how much I missed you." Ron said, wrapping an arm around her waist. He leaned closer, seeming to forget about their brief disagreement as he nuzzled her neck.

"I missed you too, Ron."

That was true, she realized. She'd been delighted to see him, happy to reconnect with people who felt familiar and safe. Even now, she felt that way, though that didn't necessarily translate into…

She lost her train of thought as Ron kissed her, his mouth hot and urgent against hers. It reminded her of the eagerness she'd heard in Ginny's voice on the Hogwarts Express, the anticipation she'd seen in Harry's eyes as he'd left the room.

Whatever that was? She didn't feel it. All she felt was…
Honestly, she didn't know what she was feeling. On one hand, she was tempted to pull away, make some excuse and put it off a bit longer. On the other? She just wanted to get it over with.

In the end, she chose the latter, telling herself that it was just a case of nerves. She hated the thought of disappointing Ron, and besides…

Unbidden, an image of Snape flashed through her mind, dark eyes smoldering as he lowered his mouth to hers. The way he'd made her feel…

It didn't matter how she'd felt. Snape had made that abundantly clear, dismissing it as a stupid mistake.

"So we're agreed. It will never happen again."

"Agreed."

That was the end of it, shutting a door that should've never been opened in the first place. Ron was the one who loved her, after all, the one who'd waited for her all this time. He'd waited even when she'd kept her distance, denying him the one thing that might've brought them closer.

Well, she was done putting him off. For his sake, for the sake of their relationship…

She laid back on the mattress, closing her eyes as he slid a hand under her jumper. He unfastened her bra after several clumsy attempts, his kisses frantic, his breath coming in short, excited bursts. She couldn't match his enthusiasm, but she did nothing to stop him either. She even helped him remove her jumper, the cool night air raising goosebumps on her bare skin.

"Hermione…"

She opened her eyes, surprised to discover that his clothes were gone. He was lying on top of her, something hard and unfamiliar pressing against her stomach.

Should she stop him? Part of her was still tempted, though she also understood what that would mean. If she didn't go through with it now? She never would.

Ron seemed to realize that, too, his eyes pleading with her to give him an answer. Not just an answer, but the right one… the only one that wouldn't drive them further apart.

"Please, Hermione." 

She stared at him in silence, unable to find the word she needed. Finally, she nodded, holding her breath as he unbuttoned her jeans.

Severus took another swig of Firewhiskey, scowling as he leaned back in his chair. He hadn't had a drink in months, though tonight, he was willing to make an exception. It was Christmas Eve, after all – what else did he have to do? Besides, it wasn't as if Hermione was around to scold him for it. She wouldn't be returning to Hogwarts until the Sunday after New Year's.

Nine more days… pathetic that he knew that. Even more pathetic? He'd been counting since the day she'd left.

He hadn't expected to miss her. No, he'd clung to his own lies, swearing that what had happened between them was just a momentary lapse in judgment. That was what he'd wanted to believe, at any rate. He'd been trying to protect them both, shaken by what he'd seen in Ashwood's head.
"I regret my actions, too."

She regretted it… yes, well, she would’ve regretted it a lot more if their secret had been exposed.

"We can't let anyone find out…"

"That you're shagging the greasy dungeon bat? Yeah, I'd be embarrassed, too."

Ashwood was a lunatic, but on this subject, his feelings were much the same as anyone else's would be. The thought of Hermione being subjected to judgment and mockery, shunned by her friends and almost certainly her two closest companions? Severus couldn't stomach that. He didn't want to become a source of shame for her, a fleeting impulse followed by months or perhaps even years of regret.

It couldn't happen again. He knew that, which should've been the end of it. But the sick, hollow feeling in his stomach when he'd spoken those words… the emptiness he'd felt from the moment she'd left Hogwarts…

Severus shook his head, taking another drink before he summoned his coat. Brooding in his office clearly wasn't doing him any favors – what he needed was a distraction.

He headed to the Great Hall, joining the other staff members for the feast. There wasn't a single student among them, an anomaly compared to Christmases past. Different, yes, but not surprising. There were fewer students these days… fewer students with far more protective parents.

"Severus," Minerva said. "I'm so glad you decided to join us!"

Flitwick nodded, pouring him a glass of wine as he sat down at the table. He thought about refusing, considering that he was already tipsy. Then again, why shouldn't he indulge? No classes to attend, no detentions to oversee… he could spend the next week in a drunken stupor and it wouldn't make any difference.

"The elves have outdone themselves this year," Pomona said. "Really Severus, you must try the ham."

He nibbled at his food, glad that no one attempted to drag him into conversation. They'd resumed their idle gossip, something he'd come to expect at staff events.

"I'm impressed with Ginny Weasley this year. That girl's got the makings of a professional Quidditch star."

"I'm sure that's true, Rolanda," Flitwick said, "though I wish she'd put forth as much effort in her classes as she does on the Quidditch pitch."

"Oh, what does it matter? Academics are overrated."

This was a familiar argument, one Severus had heard at least a dozen times. He shrugged, helping himself to another glass of wine.

"Overrated?" As usual, Flitwick allowed himself to be baited, his eyes widening in outrage. "Every student needs to develop other skills, no matter how talented they might be at sports. No one can play Quidditch forever."

"Perhaps not," Minerva said, "though we needn't be concerned for Miss Weasley's future. She has plenty of natural talent, and besides…"
"She'll be married soon enough."

"Yes, Poppy, one would hope so. Such a beautiful couple… I'm sure they'll be quite happy together."

Severus rolled his eyes, already regretting his decision to leave the dungeon. He downed the rest of his wine in one swallow, remaining silent as the others discussed Potter's impending marital bliss.

"Of course," Minerva said, "theirs isn't the only wedding I expect to take place in the near future."

"Ronald?"

She nodded. "Poor Molly… she'll have her hands full with all that planning."

Severus looked up, his eyes narrowing. Surely she didn't mean…

"So soon?" Flitwick said. "I would've assumed that Miss Granger would want to delay such things."

"Perhaps, though she is involved with a Weasley. You know how family-oriented they are, all the more so now that they've lost one of their own. Molly will press the issue, no doubt, and I can't say I'd blame her. Besides, there will be plenty of time later on for…"

"Time for what?" Severus interrupted. "What, exactly, do you think she'll have time for after she spends the best years of her life breeding the next generation of Weasleys?"

Minerva blinked, obviously shocked by his outburst. "Well, I don't know," she said. "But there's nothing wrong with marrying and having children."

"Not for Molly Weasley, perhaps, and not for her daughter either. Miss Granger is… different. Her interest in and capacity for…"

"I agree with Severus," Flitwick said. "Miss Granger is much more academically minded. We've all seen how she excels in her classes… how she's always excelled, despite all the troubles she's had to cope with over the years. Now that the war is over, it would be nice to see her further her education. She has a ton of potential… potential that deserves to be fully explored."

Severus nodded. "My point exactly."

"I don't disagree," Minerva said. "Nonetheless, the choice is Miss Granger's, not yours or mine. If she prefers to marry and start a family…"

"Not what she prefers, apparently. What Molly prefers."

"You misunderstood me, Severus."

"Did I?" He raised an eyebrow. "You said, and I quote, 'Molly will press the issue, and I can't say I'd blame her'."

"A little nudge in the right direction, perhaps."

"The right direction? Or the direction that suits her interests?"

"Severus, I know you care for Miss Granger, but…"

"I don't care for her," he interrupted, "I merely recognize potential when I see it. She's a talented girl – it would be a shame to see that squandered."
"Speaking of talent," Pomona said, effectively changing the subject, "I received a holiday card from Neville Longbottom the other day…"

Severus stayed for a few more minutes, not wanting to give the impression that his departure had anything to do with the previous discussion. He swallowed a few mouthfuls of Christmas pudding, forcing himself to make a bit of small talk before he rose from the table.

"Leaving so soon, Severus?"

Soon? He felt like he'd been sitting there for a lifetime.

"Too much wine," he said. "I'm ready to sleep it off."

The others murmured in understanding, wishing him a Happy Christmas as he staggered out of the hall.

He didn't return to the dungeon. Instead, he stepped outside, hardly noticing the frigid night air. He didn't know where he was going until he arrived at the Apparition point, hoping he wouldn't splinch himself as he turned in a slow, wobbly circle.

Opening his eyes, he found himself in Diagon Alley, his body thankfully intact. Even then, he wasn't quite sure what he was doing, lingering on the sidewalk as he struggled to process what he'd learned.

She was with Weasley.

He should've known that. Indeed, he'd certainly known it over the summer, and she'd given him no indication that circumstances had changed. She'd kissed him, yes, but she'd also expressed regret over doing so, agreeing that it could never happen again.

And it couldn't. He knew that now. It wasn't just about protecting her… he had to protect himself.

"I don't care for her…"

What a liar he was. Minerva might not know it, and as far as he was concerned, no one else would either. Still, he could no longer deny the truth, at least to himself. He did care, far more than he'd realized, cursing himself for a fool as he headed toward Knockturn Alley.

Hermione stepped out into the hall, averting her eyes as she hurried past Harry. She headed straight for the bathroom, locking the door behind her before she dug through her bag. Contraceptive Potion. Yes, that was what she needed. She swallowed an unnecessarily large dose, wishing she'd brewed some pain reliever as well.

"That was incredible," Ron panted, his body sticky with sweat as he'd collapsed on the mattress. She hadn't been able to respond, though he hadn't seemed to care. He'd fallen asleep in a matter of minutes, snoring loudly as she'd lain there stunned, shaken, and sore.

Incredible? More like incredibly awful, at least from her perspective. He'd managed a few jabbing thrusts before he'd let out a yell, too distracted to notice her whimpers of pain.

Of course, he hadn't meant to hurt her. He'd had no idea what he was doing. But it hurt nonetheless, a pain that still lingered as she crawled into bed next to Ginny.

Why had she gone through with it? How had she convinced herself that sex would fix things between them? Thinking that it would help her feel closer to him? If anything, it had done the
It was cruel, really. He hadn't done anything wrong… or at least, she didn't think he had. So why did she feel so… so…

Hermione shook her head, resisting the urge to cry as she drifted off to sleep.

**Author's note:** I'm sorry for the long delay between chapters. I do my best to update every other week, but there's been a lot of upheaval in my life over the past few months.

That said, I did find time to start a new website. It's called "Always Snape", a community specifically for Snape fans. Members can post writing and artwork, engage in discussions, play in "Snape's Dungeon" (18+), and all sorts of other fun stuff. We'll have artwork and writing challenges, and I'm even planning some giveaways in the near future.

[alwaysssnape.com](http://alwaysssnape.com)

If you're a Snape fan (a fair assumption if you're reading this story), please feel free to join me over there! It's a nice break from social media – no Snape hate, no bullshit.

You guys are awesome. Thanks so much for supporting this story. :)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](http://www.fanfiction.net) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!