Bricks of Crumbs
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Bricks of Crumbs
by thehollowones

Summary

Harbouring a secret that threatens to tear her apart, Hermione Granger takes refuge at Hogwarts. Severus Snape, who has never left, has had all of his secrets stripped away. Aided by their favorite books, they form an uneasy alliance.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Chapter 1

Hermione Granger climbed the staircase to Headmistress McGonagall's office, one month to the day after her graduation ceremony, when she surveyed the castle for what was to be the last time. She was dizzy with apprehension, but knocked nonetheless."Enter," called Professor McGonagall.

She did, drying her hands on her skirt. The portraits watched her beadily, as did the Headmistress.

"I got your owl this morning, Professor. You wanted to see me?"

"Indeed I did. Sit." She sat. "I am going to spoil the surprise of your N.E.W.T. results, Miss Granger, and inform you that you received the highest overall score in 50 years."

Hermione allowed herself a small smile. Professor McGonagall smiled back, seeming genuinely pleased.

"As such, I'd like to offer you the post of Professor of Muggle Studies."

Hermione stared. The very thin segue had startled her.

"But Professor," she said, striving to be reasonable, "I've never done a formal apprenticeship. I didn't do a Muggle Studies N.E.W.T. I took a year of Muggle Studies!"

"That is irrelevant both to me and, if they know what's good for them, the board of governors." Professor McGonagall waved her objections away. 'You are an uncommonly clever muggle-born witch and a war hero, and I am giving you free reign to rebuild this program from the ground up. Unless, of course, you have other plans?"

The sudden pinprick of shame didn't distract her from the objectionable part of Professor McGonagall's reasoning. Hermione felt the need to dry her hands again before speaking.

"You want me to teach Muggle Studies because I'm famous," she said flatly. "Because I would draw people to the program. Not because I'm anywhere near qualified."

Professor McGonagall sighed and leaned back in her chair.

"Would you like a lemon drop?" she asked, pointing at a dish on her desk. "Professor Dumbledore's portrait gets rather shirty when I don't offer."

Hermione shook her head. Professor McGonagall looked very seriously at her.

"I'm appointing you because you can handle it. The attention, the pressure, the responsibility. I'm appointing you because we all need Muggle Studies done right. I'm appointing you, frankly, because no one else is brave enough to take the job. It's the second week of July. You have seven weeks to prepare." Professor McGonagall's sudden smile made her look years younger. "Now, shall we talk compensation?"

Over her head, Professor Dumbledore winked.

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Hermione gripped the sink with both hands, feeling her legs shake beneath her. She couldn't seem to take in enough oxygen. She wasn't entirely sure how she had made her way to the fourth-floor washroom. She was entirely sure that this would be the time her panic actually killed her. Her heart
felt like it was trying to claw it's way out of her chest.

What had set this off? The job offer, yes, but also nothing, everything, the sight of her future unfurling before her, the letter that had never come, would never come-

"No," she said aloud to the echoing stalls. Chancing a glance in the mirror, she saw that her face was pale, her eyelashes glued together by unshed tears. She felt cold sweat trickle down her back.

"Breathe in for five seconds, hold for five seconds, breathe out for seven." She did this until she felt sensation return to the tips of her fingers.

She had a purpose now. She had a job to do. She could no longer indulge the aching void inside of her.

She was sitting at a table in the library, surrounded by precarious piles of books. Not even twenty-four hours earlier, she had finally admitted that most of the muggle related content in Hogwarts's library was hopelessly out of date, never mind borderline offensive. She had supplemented her piles with glossy new tomes from a muggle bookstore.

I should assign novels, she thought, one a year. And then there's television, that's important. I'll have to do electricity first. Sixth year? Seventh? Can I get a television to work here? Sports! Add sports to third year. That makes third year sports and culture and politics and-

"Slow down," Hermione said, louder than intended. Since she last surfaced, filaments of her hair had started to float about her head from constant contact with her nervous hands.

"Miss Granger," said a flat voice.

Hermione looked up and had to suppress a sympathetic flinch at the sight of Professor Snape. She had almost forgotten how drastically his appearance had gone downhill since the war.

All of the sneering affect he had possessed was gone. His skin, which had always tended towards sallow, now seemed bleached of pigment. Dark bruises were imprinted below his eyes.

"Professor Granger," she said firmly. It was difficult to be afraid of a man she had watched bleed out in a shack.

"A sentimental decision, no doubt." His voice was still the same as it had ever been, just as cold, just as insinuating. It had the effect of pinning her to the spot.

Hermione felt a hot flush of anger at his words. She sat up straighter.

"Excuse me?"

"A sentimental decision, as you are in no way qualified for the post in which you find yourself."

This was too far, and too close to the truth, to be allowed to stand.

"You may have gotten away with insulting me when I was your student, but don't think for a second you'll be able to treat me with that sort of disrespect these days. I am your colleague. You don't have to like it, you don't have to like me, but you will respect me."

Her voice was calm, but she had risen from her seat. Instead of attempting to gather up her sheaves of parchment and piles of books, she maintained steady eye contact with Snape. He would have to
leave first.

Snape watched her for a long moment. With a hint of his old sour expression, he backed out of the Muggle Studies section of the library.

Hermione smiled to herself. She had been firm and assertive without overstepping. She looked down at her hands planted on the table, half in a sunbeam, half in shadow. They were perfectly still.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The time passed in a dream-like fashion. Hermione spent every day ensconced in the library, breaking only to absently watch dust motes swirl around her while her brain ticked busily onwards. She rarely saw another living person. The castle drew her inexorably into the past, a past where she felt strong and self-assured. But the nights were more akin to nightmares, and she spent them curled around Crookshanks, trembling.

The students arrived, bringing their laughter and their petty anxieties to the quiet castle. At the start of term banquet, Hermione made a point of making eye contact with Professor Snape, as she did every time they met. He gave her a slight nod in return.

Her small moment of assertiveness did nothing to quell the unease that had surrounded her all day. No one touched her as she sat at the Head Table, but she felt the presence of those in the Hall like water pressing on her eardrums. She missed the Sorting entirely, occupied with coaching herself through a bout of nausea. When her appointment was announced and duly applauded, Hermione summoned up a passable smile that turned genuine when she saw Hagrid wiping his eyes on the tablecloth. Nonetheless, she pushed her food around her plate until all were sent off for bed.

They don't know you, she thought as she closed her chamber door and rested her forehead on the cold wood. They only know what's in the papers. They don't know a thing. They don't know the worst, the very worst. They don't know what you've done.

She slept not at all.

Morning came, and Hermione ran the gauntlet down to the Head Table, taking a seat between Hagrid and Professor Snape. When Hagrid's effusiveness ("Our Hermione, a teacher!") was abandoned for a platter of sausages, she looked around for something to distract her from the sensation of pins and needles in her fingertips. The sky was a cloudless blue, the students were an indistinguishable mass, Professor Snape was reading a paperback.

Professor Snape was reading a paperback.

"Tess!" Hermione blurted out. Snape raised his eyes to hers with almost comical reluctance.

"Sorry," she said, "I love Tess of the D'Urbervilles."

For a long moment, Hermione thought he would make no reply.

"The love interest is named Angel. I'm losing the will to go on."

Hermione thought this was not quite the case, going by his previous absorption, but her reply was in earnest. "It's ironic, really. Give it a bit longer. It's a great book, probably Hardy's best. Tess was always one of my favorite characters. Thomas Hardy's favorite too, come to think of it."

Snape looked appraisingly at her. At least, Hermione thought he did. His obvious exhaustion distorted what minimal traces of expression he displayed. Had she said too much?
In the end, he merely nodded at her and continued reading.

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Hermione leaned back against her desk and surveyed the faces in front of her. Fourth years, an even dozen of them, sleepy-eyed and fidgeting. As Muggle Studies was not offered during Hermione's eighth year, these students were taking Muggle Studies for the first time.

She held her chin high. She was prepared for this. If she showed no fear, she would feel no fear. In the moment, this seemed a belief she could subscribe to.

"Tell me something about Muggles," she said. Hermione was hoping to throw them off balance. The students stared at her, expressions vacant. "Go on, hands up. Tell me what you know."

A tiny blonde girl with ears of an unfortunate size raised her hand. Hermione remembered her name from role call: Aimee Martens. Hermione pointed at her.

"They travel in metal tubes called aeroplanes. The aeroplanes travel through the sky, and tall women called stewardesses hand out peanuts and drinks to the passengers. The people who fly aeroplanes are called pilots." This was all said very quickly. Hermione gave her an encouraging smile. Yes, she knew this kind of girl.

"Very good," Hermione said, and in response three emboldened hands went up.

"They don't wear robes!"

"People carry letters instead of owls!"

"They chop entire legs off!"

Hermione waited until she had the class's attention. Then, she asked her real question. "What have you heard people say about Muggles? What are they like?"

"They're dumb," said a slouching boy without raising his hand. There were a few nervous titters that cut off when Hermione crossed to the chalkboard and wrote "DUMB" in large letters.

"What else?"

After a few minutes the chalkboard was completely covered with words like "SUPERSTITIOUS" and, amusingly, "UGLY CLOTHES."

"This is what I want you to take away from my class," Hermione said, indicating the chalkboard. "I'm going to teach you about aeroplanes and electricity and, er, 'chopping legs off,' but the really important stuff is on this board. Are Muggles dumb? Are the mean? Are their clothes ugly? In short, are they anything like us at all?"

Hermione looked around. Was she seeing what she wanted to see or were their upturned faces looking more curious and engaged than they had at the outset? Or were they really just there to gawk at a war hero?

"We won't be using quills this term. Instead, we'll use Muggle implements called pens. When you receive a pen, use it to copy down this diagram here." She flipped the chalkboard to reveal a meticulous reproduction of a simple ballpoint pen. "A volunteer to pass out pens, please."

Amelia Martens' hand was first in the air.
I do not own the rights to these characters.

The book referenced is Tess of the D'Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy. I highly recommend it :)

Chapter End Notes
Hermione awoke as the first fingers of dawn spread across the sky. It was the morning of September 20th. Her stomach managed to both churn and ache with emptiness. She dressed in the half-light.

The walk up to the owlery took thirteen minutes at a fast clip. Hermione used the time to rehearse what she was going to write, muttering aloud to the dozing portraits. Forgive me, forgive me. I had my reasons and they were good.

The owlery was cold enough to raise goosepimples on her arms. She took her supplies out of the pocket of her robe and placed quill to parchment. She stayed poised there long enough for the ink to spread from the point of contact like the meandering red lines of infection. Finally, Hermione scribbled down a single sentence, stuffed the parchment into an envelope and tied it to the nearest wakeful owl. She told him the address twice as he watched her with solemn eyes. She expected to feel lighter when he soared away. She felt nothing at all, though the absence itself was a kind of victory.

- At dinner that evening, Hermione didn't bother with the pretense of pushing shepherd's pie around her plate. Emulating Professor Snape, she had brought a well-thumbed copy of *A Separate Peace* and promptly buried her nose in it. She did this mostly to escape the nerve-jangling thrum of the Great Hall, but also with some scant hope of drawing a literary discussion out of Snape. It was rare to find a witch or wizard who read more than spell books and overcooked bodice-rippers. Besides, she didn't have to like the man to speak civilly with him. However, not only had this not occurred, they hadn't even sat near each other in the past fortnight. Snape had a habit of arriving late and therefore took what seat he could get.

"What are you reading?"

Hermione nearly leapt from her seat. Her train of thought had seemed to conjure up the man himself who, at some point in the last ten minutes, had taken the seat on Hermione's left side previously occupied by Professor Flitwick. She angled the cover towards Snape so he could see.

"Have you read it?" He nodded. "I've assigned it to my seventh years. I thought it might help them to read about children on the cusp of a war."

Snape nodded again, but thoughtfully.

"Or it might just re-traumatize them" Hermione sighed. She had had this debate with herself many times. She knew she had a tendency to barge in, to push too hard. Her friends and various house-elves were only too happy to confirm this.

"It's worth a few nightmares if it gets them empathizing with Muggles. I assume that's what you're after."

"That too," said Hermione, slightly taken aback. Her plan seemed to have Snape's approval. Now that she had it, she wasn't at all sure that she wanted it. Nothing about the way he ran a class appealed to her. She changed the subject. "Did you finish reading Tess?"
Snape opened his mouth to answer. Before he could speak, his demeanour stiffened. He pushed his chair back, leaving a cup of untouched tea and an empty plate behind. Hermione watched him make his way over to a clump of Slytherin boys who were engaged in a shoving match. Not her house, not her problem.

Hermione turned the page, her eyes falling on a line she had previously underlined. I knew too much of hate to be contained in a world like this.

Snape never returned to the table.

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She was in a maze and couldn't get out. Hedges loomed around her, reaching up to the brooding sky. She walked aimlessly, meeting many dead ends. She knew with dream-certainty that something was wrong.

She felt the sudden urge to dig through her pockets and realized that her wand was missing. She bent down and sifted through the damp earth until she felt her hands close over something made of wood. She picked it up. Was it her wand? Her eyes couldn't quite focus. She needed her wand!

Slowly, she became aware of two presences. Not people, exactly, but flitting at the edge of her vision as if they had substance. Who were they? Why weren't they helping her? The night closed in around her like a vise. She could not breathe. She knew who they were, and the knowledge was terrible. She could not breathe.

Hermione woke with a gasp, panic propelling her upwards into a sitting position. She was going to die. This was it, these were her last moments on earth and she would spend them afraid.

"Five, five, seven." She sobbed but the tears wouldn't come. "Oh, help me! Five, five, seven. Breathe in for five, hold for five, breathe out for seven."

By the time the tightness in her chest abated, Hermione had missed breakfast. Her first class didn't begin until 10, leaving her with an hour to fill. She felt a need to be around people, to have a reason to maintain an expression of calm. She decided to finally make use of the staffroom. Hermione had always steered clear of it, feeling like an outsider, as though her presence would discomfit the real teachers. But today, she could give no consideration to the feelings of others. This was about survival, messy and desperate.

She dressed in the dark with shaking hands.

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She paused at the staffroom door, resisting the urge to knock. Professors Sprout and Vector sat in sagging armchairs alongside Madame Hooch. They looked up at Hermione's entry and made polite sounds of welcome. Her attention was drawn to a table in the corner where Professor Snape sat, resolutely ignoring her. No gestures of welcome would come from that quarter, and that kind of unsociable society was exactly what Hermione wanted.

Hermione dropped a pile of papers in need of grading on the table with a satisfying thwack, and sat down without saying hello.

"Has anyone actually seen Sybil this year?" asked Professor Sprout, sounding concerned.

"Leave out a bottle of sherry, she'll come running," said Professor Vector to peals of laughter. Snape made a disparaging noise, drawing Hermione's attention to him. He was marking up an essay in red
ink. The margins were full of his cramped commentary and a full two inches were crossed out and labelled "NO."

"Which poor soul is getting that back?" Hermione was torn between amusement and sympathy. She had been on the receiving end of Snape's quill for seven years.

"Milford," Snape grunted, viciously underlining one of his own comments.

"Not Davie Milford? I have him in Muggle Studies. He seems very bright.

Snape looked up at her, obviously annoyed. "He is very bright."

"So you're, what, trying to knock him down a peg?"

"I am trying to get him to turn in work equal to his potential."

"Oh," she said. She had never considered that Snape might be motivated by anything other than bad temper in his interactions with his students. She was suddenly struck by something Sirius Black had once said: "The world isn't divided into good people and Death Eaters."

For the rest of the hour, they marked in silence.

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Hermione walked her fourth years through the basics of landlines, cellphones, and satellite phones; gave her fifth years an impassioned lecture on Shakespeare; and supervised her three seventh years as they wrote down all they had retained on world religions. As the owls swooped in at lunch and dinner, her heart thudded painfully in her chest, though she knew a return owl from Melbourne was unlikely so soon.

After dinner, Hermione retreated to her office. She clasped and unclasped her hands, under the unpleasant impression that she wasn't quite in her body. That she was, in fact, a few inches above herself. It was difficult to prepare for a class in this state, so she just sat, with the justification of holding open office hours.

There was a rap on the window.

Her first thought, absurdly, was that an office the size of a broom cupboard didn't really need a window. Then she came back to herself and hurried to let the owl inside in a whirl of wing and wind. It was the same tawny owl she had send out yesterday morning. The envelope, similar to the one she had sent, was unaddressed. Her mouth had gone dry, she could hear her heartbeat thudding in her ears, and she felt a liquid looseness in her knees. She untied the envelope with shaking fingers and ripped it open.

It wasn't similar to the envelope Hermione had sent. It was the envelope she had sent and inside was the letter she had written, just three words, unread. "Happy Birthday Mum."

The tears came immediately, cascading hotly down her face. She made an inarticulate noise that became a long drawn-out sob. She collapsed into her desk chair, still holding the letter, and bent over to rest her forehead on her knees. She shook, she shook, she shook.

"Professor." She had left her office door unlocked. She was holding open office hours.

Hermione lifted her head up and looked at Snape. He looked, as usual, like warmed over Hell. She couldn't have said a word if she'd wanted to.
Snape turned to go, door in hand, then seemed to reconsider.

"You were right about Tess," he said quietly, not meeting her eyes. "Though I could have done without the whinging about modern agricultural techniques. Good evening."

Snape closed the door behind himself. Hermione heard the lock magically click shut. She shook, she shook, she shook. The tawny owl hooted in sympathy.

Chapter End Notes

The books referenced are A Separate Peace by John Knowles, and Tess of the D'Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy. Both are highly recommended.
Chapter 4

The ground beneath her was sharp with October frost and Hermione had the feeling that brooding by the lake was not exactly professorial behavior, but neither of these things really reached her. Nothing reached her anymore, save the proprietary joy she felt when a student truly excelled, and even this was but a searchlight in heavy fog.

Fang bounded up to her and placed his slobbery head in her lap, tail wagging madly. Hermione startled then patted him absently. She could feel Hagrid's approaching footfalls vibrating through the ground.

"Hello, Hermione. What're yeh doin' down here?"

"Just wanted some air," she said, craning her neck to look into Hagrid's face.

"Yeh feelin' alright? Yer looking a bit peaky." Hagrid's face was scrunched up in concern. A desperate exhaustion came over her. She felt that she might not have the energy to draw her next breath. She leaned her head against the tree at her back, feeling the cold bark through her hair, and looked out at the lake.

"I've done something awful, Hagrid. Unforgiveable."

"Nonsense. Isn't a thing on this earth not forgivable to those that love yeh." Hagrid sat down beside her, causing the ground to lurch and pitch. "Besides, yer one of the good'uns. I've known yeh since yeh was knee high to a Kneazle. It can't be as bad as all that."

Hermione swallowed past the hard lump in her throat. She wanted so badly to believe Hagrid, to find him as steadying a presence as she had in her miserable third year. She wanted him to grant her absolution.

"Them boys aren't givin' yeh trouble again, are they?"

This got a laugh out of Hermione. "No, they're great. Busy, obviously. I'm not there to do their coursework."

They chatted about Auror training until the grass soaked through Hermione's cloak. Hagrid never asked what it was she had done.

It was third period on a dreary Monday morning, and the world wasn't quite balanced on it's axis. Aimee Martens had come in with the bell, red-eyed and sniffing, and resolutely avoided eye contact with Hermione. She kept her eyes fixed on her desk until the class had settled in.

"We're nearing the end of our transportation unit, which means a test on Thursday." There was a collective groan. "I know, I know. But today we're going to talk personal vehicles. Can someone please remind us of the sub-types?"

Most of the class looked at Aimee, who reddened slightly but didn't look up. The silence stretched out until Colleen Jones raised her hand and rattled off "car, van, truck, sports utility vehicle, motorbike."

Hermione kept them busy with talk of engines and petrol, doling out more house points than was her
wont in an effort to tempt Aimee into participation. Eventually, the bell rang and she dismissed her students with a reminder to have The Great Gatsby finished by November 1.

"Miss Martens, a word." Aimee dragged her feet up to Hermione's desk. Hermione waited until the last straggler had collected his things before speaking. "Are you feeling alright? You were very quiet today."

Aimee was quiet for a long time, her eyes welling with tears. "I'm not a failure. I'm not!"

"Of course you aren't," Hermione said, taken aback.

"P-professor Snape says I can't take potions anymore until I can prove that I'm n-not a failure of a witch. And he took twenty house points and I'm going to fail potions and everyone is going to hate me."

"Oh, Aimee." The girl, now sobbing freely, buried her face in her hands. Hermione conjured her a handkerchief, feeling helpless in the face of such emotion. She spent the next ten minutes spouting vague platitudes and reassurances about everything turning out in the end, until Aimee calmed enough to leave for her next class.

Yes, she would be having a chat with Severus Snape.

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"I want a word with you."

"Close the door, then." Snape didn't look up from the text he was perusing, which was the size of a pavement slab. The light caught on the jars of unpleasant things strewn around his office, giving the room a sickly sort of glow.

"You've absolutely terrified Aimee Martens."

"Good. She almost killed half the class." Snape ruffled through a couple of pages, frowning.

"Don't be dramatic," Hermione snapped, though she knew this was entirely possible. It had it's intended effect, as he finally deigned to look up at her. "You had no right to call her a 'failed witch'."

"Are you questioning the way I teach a class?" His voice was dangerously low.

"No, I'm not."

"Because if you are, I suggest you take it up with the Headmistress. I'm sure the opinion of a girl who's been teaching for a month will hold great sway with her."

"I'm not questioning your teaching skills, I'm questioning your people skills. You should know better than to perpetuate this crap with the way you were treated!"

She knew instantly that she had gone too far. She froze, not sure how to take back what she had said.

"Get out."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't you dare, don't you ever, talk about things you don't understand." His face had twisted up into the look of rage she remembered from her childhood. "Get out."
She left the dungeons at a near-run, heading for the relative warmth of the Entrance Hall. It was empty and echoing. She clung to the staircase's sweeping bannister. Hermione knew she had made a fatal miscalculation. She was furious with herself, and still furious with him. She had gone into the argument with justification, and now she was the one who felt sick with guilt. But it wasn't until people started to stream out of the Great Hall in twos and threes that she realized how very alone she now was.
"It's man versus man, Professor."

"Yeah, Hamlet versus his step-dad." The two boys nodded at each other. Hermione noted it down on the chalkboard. Lara Donaghue, the only other member of the seventh year class, sighed in a long suffering way that indicated she would be joining the discussion.

"It's man versus self. Specifically, Hamlet versus despair."

Hermione writes this down too. "Who would you say wins these conflicts? Does Hamlet ever -"

Her voice caught in her throat. Harry was standing in the doorway of her classroom, looking awkward. When their eyes met, he gave her a bright smile and a wave. Hermione summoned up every ounce of maturity she possessed to prevent herself from running to her friend and throwing her arms around him. Her students were gaping at Harry, turned all the way around in their seats, and Hermione cleared her throat to get their attention.

"Do you think there was a clear winner in these struggles? Did Hamlet beat Claudius. Did he overcome his despair?"

"Does anyone?" countered Lara in a mournful tone only a teenager could produce. The bell rang.

"I want your financial conversion charts by Wednesday, and your fashion essays by next Friday. That's twelve inches and I will be measuring!"

As they filed out, the students gave Harry a respectfully wide berth. When Lara's bouncing ponytail had rounded the corner out of sight, Harry picked his way through the scattered desks and gave Hermione a tight hug.

"Hello, Professor." They broke apart and just stood, smiling giddily at each other.

"I missed you," was all Hermione could manage to say.

She led him through the corridors to her rooms on the third floor. Students stopped mid-stride to stare at them.

"Do you think this'll make the Daily Prophet?" Harry asked. "I haven't made the press in ages."

"The Boy-Who-Loved reunited with old flame." Hermione framed the headline in the air with her fingers.

"The Boy-Who-What?" Harry said, aghast. Hermione laughed from sheer joy at the look on his face.

They talked about her classes, and Ginny; his training, and Ginny; the Weasleys, all of whom were managing as best they could and, of course, Ginny. Harry talked about Quidditch until Hermione got fidgety and then they went for a rambling walk around the grounds. The whole time, Hermione felt a pressure behind her eyes that was not entirely joy. Harry was her best friend, her brother, and she loved him with ferocity and delighted in his presence. But they could never return to the heady symbiosis of their childhood. That part of their lives was over.

Many hours later, they were back in Hermione's rooms, sprawled out and analysing the contents of
Ginny's latest missive. Harry suddenly sat up and adjusted his glasses in a way that meant business. Hermione was viewing him upside down, lying on her back on the rug with her feet on the sofa, not at all prepared for the discussion to take a serious bent.

"Listen, Hermione, Hagrid sent me a letter last week. He said you weren't looking too good and you were moping about. And you don't - I mean, you look good - but you looks like you've lost half a stone since the summer. I swear I could feel your ribs when I hugged you. I guess... I'm concerned, is what I'm saying."

"I'm fine!" She scrambled up to a more dignified position on the sofa. "I've just been a bit stressed."

"Are you still having those panic attacks?"

"Merlin's beard, Harry!"

"I just want to know if you're happy here," Harry continued doggedly. "Because you can leave and come stay with Ron and me, anytime. You'll always have a home with us."

"I like it here, I'm doing good work, and I don't need to be checked up on." Hermione stared at her hands. She didn't want to be having this discussion. Harry was fidgeting with his wand. He had never been comfortable talking about emotionally charged subjects, and she knew he would take a change in subject gratefully. "You'll never guess who's been talking literary to me. Or used to, anyway."

She told Harry all about her conversations with Snape, ending with their disastrous argument. Hermione half-thought he might be shocked that she was having civil discussions with their old nemesis, but Harry declared that this made a certain amount of sense.

"You're both smart, you work together, and you've both got this sort of ruthless practicality."

"I'm not ruthless," she protested.

"Hermione," Harry said, mouth twitching, "you kept a woman in a jar for a year."

Hermione huffed. She had to admit he had a point.

"Just apologize. He'll come around. Mind you, he didn't with me. Never wrote me back."

"You wrote to Snape?"

"Yeah, once it looked like he was going to live. Just thanking him and stuff, and giving him a head's up about all the press coverage. I guess he still wants nothing to do with me." Harry looked over at the bookshelf and Hermione watched him, feeling uncomfortable. They both knew that Snape wouldn't be changing his mind about Harry Potter.

"Exploding Snap?" she asked.

"Exploding Snap it is!"

As he hugged her goodbye by the wrought-iron gates, Harry said very seriously, "your parents are morons. But they'll come around and then everything will be okay."

"Everything will be okay," she echoed, glad he couldn't see her face.
"May I come in?"

Snape was chopping something bright green on his desk at the front of the empty classroom, a cauldron bubbling sluggishly beside him. Hermione thought it might be unwise to confront him whilst he was holding a knife but, as he ignored her greeting instead of sending her away, she thought it might be her only option. She stepped into the room and closed the door behind her, wordlessly casting ‘muffliato’. It wouldn't do to be overheard now.

"In my first year, I participated in illegal dragon smuggling. In my second year, I brewed Polyjuice Potion in a bathroom and accidentally turned myself into a cat person. In my third year, I smacked Draco Malfoy right in his stupid face and broke about eight different laws. In my fourth-"

"Have you taken leave of your senses?" Snape demanded, knife work forgotten.

"No," she said, choosing her words carefully. She had to get this right. "I was just thinking how difficult it must be to have had your whole life story in the papers, and how angry I would be if someone used my past to score points in an argument. So I thought I would level the playing field a bit, and we could put this behind us."

There was a long silence. Hermione desperately wanted to brush her hair out of her eyes, but felt she couldn't move when she was being so thoroughly considered. Then, Snape waved a hand towards the store room and resumed his chopping, evidently having come to a decision.

"Fetch me the salamander tails." She went in and squinted at the labelled jars in the low light. Then, as though he couldn't help himself, Snape called out "dragon smuggling?"

Hermione smiled.
"Get the door, Crooks." From somewhere under the covers, Crookshanks snorted sleepily at her. The banging noise continued. Hermione got up, feeling as though she weighed a thousand pounds, and groped her way to the bedroom door. She walked through her sitting room, gathering her dressing gown as she went, and finally pushed on the back of her portrait of a grouchy monk to swing it open. She clambered through the opening gracelessly.

Professor Snape was waiting on the other side. His eyes caught on her unmanaged hair and then swept downwards, eyebrows growing ever higher as he took in her magenta pyjamas with their motif of brightly colored rubber ducks.

"Can I help you?" she prompted. She pulled her dressing gown around herself and tied it tightly.

"Flitwick’s been concussed by a flying book. I need someone to take his place chaperoning the Hogsmeade visit."

"Okay," she said, hesitantly. She had no desire to go into Hogsmeade. She wanted to climb back into bed and sleep until the feast, but Snape had asked her. Her, and not one of the other teachers. This was the first overture he had made since their conversation in his classroom. "When are we leaving?"

"9:30."

"And what time is it now?"

"9:27."

Hermione slammed her portrait shut with more force than was strictly necessary.

"Happy Halloween!" Snape called.

- 

The crunch of gravel underfoot beat a steady rhythm in her ears. The sun was no longer strong enough to warm her face, but Hermione tilted her head to it nonetheless.

"It's nice to be outside," she said to Snape. He took his eyes from the chattering mass of students ahead of them to frown at her. In his customary black ensemble, he didn't look like a man who appreciated birdsong or the smell of hot pine needles.

"I'm taking my third years to Abergavenny in the new year," she tried again. "Will I need another teacher with me then?"

"The policy's always two." They walked in silence for a few beats, laughter drifting back towards them. "Did you put in a portkey request? Inform the Heads of Houses?"

"Yes and yes, but I can't talk logistics until I get a coffee."

They began to pass the outlying houses of the village. The students scattered slowly, breaking off from the group in clumps of twos and threes at every intersection. A large contingent trod the path to the Three Broomsticks. Hermione and Snape followed them. At the door, decked out with a bright
new poster imploring them to shop local, Snape paused. Hermione could hear someone calling his name.

"Professor Snape!" A man trotted into view, coming to a halt in front of them and wiping at his forehead in an exaggerated show of being exhausted. A quill and parchment floated over his shoulder. Hermione's heart dropped at the sight. She opened her mouth, but was beaten to it by the reporter: "What would you say to those still calling for your imprisonment?"

"Piss off," Hermione snapped, "or I'll have bats coming out of your ears faster than you can say 'journalistic integrity'."

The man clearly recognized her, and considered her for a moment with dark, deep-set eyes. Then his quill began to skitter across the parchment.

"Professor Snape, what do you think Lily Potter-" Hermione stuck her wand in the man's face, making him go cross eyed. Slowly, he raised his hands in a show of surrender. He took a few steps back, eyes fixed on Hermione's wand, and then twisted away in apparition.

She turned to Snape. He was staring at the point where the reporter had disappeared. One of his hands hovered at his throat. Hermione wanted to demand to know why he hadn't fought back, but even awash with adrenaline she knew this would get her nowhere. "Ignore him. Let's get coffee."

Hermione pulled open the door to the pub and shouldered her way through the regulars crowding the bar. "Two coffees, please," she said to Rosemerta, who looked harried even at this early hour. "I've got this," she said to Snape, who wasn't there. Who was gone.

"Never mind," Hermione called, leaving the pub at a brisk jog. Once outside in the sunlight, she looked around for Snape and caught a glimpse of black robes rounding the corner. He was moving very quickly.

"Where are you going?" she asked, drawing level with him. The street they were walking down was residential and, as far as Hermione knew, led nowhere in particular. "Would you slow down? Talk to me!"

Hermione reached out and grabbed Snape's arm, causing him to lurch to a stop. In the milliseconds before he whirled to face her, she had time to realize that she had never actually touched him before. She had, of course, lit him on fire, but that was another matter entirely.

"If your precious Potter wasn't going to let me live in peace, he damn well should have let me die in it!" Snape was taking large ragged breaths, glaring ferociously, with his hands twitching at his sides like he wanted to strangle someone.

"I'm sorry. I am." She was frightened by the vehemence of his response but thought that she could understand it. Hermione didn't consider herself a very private person. But she still felt oppressed by every headline and flashbulb. What would it be like to have nothing but your secrets, to survive for and by way of them, and then be unmasked? "It's claustrophobic, the Wizarding World. Sometimes I wish... I..."

"Granger!" Hermione came back to herself with a jolt. She had just had an idea, a mad one certainly, but one that just might be effective. She smiled at Snape, who glared back.

"Sorry. I have a question. How attached are you to the Halloween feast?"
"It's stupid to be nervous," she told Crookshanks sternly. He swished his tail. "This was my idea."

Hermione generally avoided looking in the mirror. Harry had been correct in saying that she had lost weight and her face was shadowed with sleepless nights. But she looked now, rather nervously, and she did not like what she saw. Yes, Hermione was dressed appropriately in Muggle clothes - jeans and a red sweater - but her face was washed out, wide eyed and somehow foreign. That's not me, she thought. Not really. It unsettled her. She began to lose sensation in her fingertips, and had to lie down and breathe for five minutes before going to meet Snape.

He was standing in the Entrance Hall, looking suspiciously at the crystals in the House hourglasses. Slytherin was trailing Ravenclaw by a healthy margin that year.

"Evening! Back towards Hogsmeade then, as we're apparating."

"This is ridiculous," Snape sniffed. Hermione wasn't sure if he was referring to the points count or their trip. She thought it was probably both.

"And yet you're here," she said cheerfully. He was wearing what would pass for Muggle clothes. They were, of course, black. Hermione didn't think she had ever seen Snape wear colors other than black or Slytherin green.

They pushed open the front doors and struck out towards the gate. They walked in silence, Hermione battling her nervous anticipation and Snape maintaining his ill temper. The night was cool and the sun had already set.

Once they were clear of the gates, Hermione held out her arm. "Sorry, but you don't know specifically where we're going..." She thought he might turn around and stalk back to the castle, but he grabbed on to her arm without further coaxing. They twisted into nothingness and reappeared in front of the lit marquee of a London movie theatre.

Hermione studied what was on offer, doing her best to ignore the crowd swirling around her.

"Rom-com? Action? Horror?" She realized she was wringing her hands and put a stop to it. Snape was watching the crowds and affected to ignore her, so she chose a film at random and purchased their tickets.

When the lights went down, Hermione glanced over at her colleague, who was absorbed in watching the trailers. She was feeling rather strange. There was a sensation in her stomach like her oft-present anxiety but looser, and it spread to her extremities, causing her to tap her toes on the sticky floor.

"Minerva's going to skin us alive for this," Snape said, not taking his eyes off the screen.

"I don't care," she said. The feeling was giddiness.

"Youth are our future," Snape said expansively, as they watched a teenage boy walk headfirst into a pole. It was coming up on ten in the evening, the wind was harsh, and the bench they occupied was cold beneath them. Hermione laughed.

"Is that why you became a teacher? To mold those bright young minds?" she asked, emptying the last of her popcorn into her mouth.

Snape shook his head seriously. "To stay close to Dumbledore. And it affords me time for my research."
"But do you like it?" she pressed.

"We should go."

"No, hang on!" She tugged on his sleeve until he sat down again. "What did you want to do, before you became a teacher?"

"I wanted to work for the Ministry, in the Potions Development department." He looked away as Hermione tried to think of something to say. She knew he was unable to work for the Ministry as a former Death Eater.

"I wanted to be a Broadway singer," she said. "No, really! And a neurosurgeon."

Snape offered up his first smile of the night. It was tinged with bitterness. "And yet, here we are."

"Here we are," Hermione agreed. She shivered in the cold. "Okay, let's go."

She rose and extended her arm to Snape, forgetting that he knew the way to Hogwarts. He took it anyway.

Chapter End Notes

These chapters just keep getting longer! I promise a return to literary goodness soon.
And I so love hearing your feedback. Thank you all!
Hermione paused outside the staffroom. It was a Thursday morning, and she met Professor Snape in the staffroom on Thursday mornings. This was a habit formed in the three weeks since Halloween, and one she was reluctant to break, especially today. Hermione felt unwell - hot and cold in waves, sweating in discomfort at both extremes - and her legs were burning and trembling from the short walk from her rooms to the staffroom. But she had something to say, and no one who would appreciate it save Snape.

Hermione brightened her expression and willed her legs into solidity as she entered the room. Professor Sprout was adding to a teetering tower of cards with her tongue stuck out in concentration and Snape had the other table littered with bits of parchment. Neither looked up. Hermione pulled out the chair opposite Snape very carefully, not wanting to disturb the house of cards.

"Merlin's freaking left elbow, did you read that scene?"

"It's my book, Professor, obviously I've read it." The tilt of his mouth as he spoke undercut the sarcasm in his voice. "Which scene?"

"The one where Dostoevsky puts on his son's suit and lies down on his bed. I can still see it in my head, it was brilliant, it was like-"

"It was like he was trying to become his son."

"Yes. Transubstantiation or something. It was as though he wanted to will his son into existence like one of his characters. Coetzee's a genius. Thank you for-"

There was a loud bang. Hermione's chair shrieked in protest as she flinched away from the sound. Professor Sprout's card tower had exploded, leaving nothing but scorch marks on the table. Snape had not visibly startled at the noise, but his expression was stormy as he swivelled to face Sprout.

"Do you mind? Some of us have actual work to do."

"Nonsense, you were talking books again." Sprout waved a hand dismissively and pulled a fresh deck of cards out of her pocket. The spaces where her eyebrows had been were still smoking.

Snape stood up, gathered his papers with impatient motions and headed for the door without looking at Hermione. She was annoyed by this. She was nowhere near finished talking about the novel.

"Coming, Granger?" He called from the door way.

Snape led her down the steps towards the dungeons. Hermione assumed they were heading for Snape's office. It wasn't particularly comfortable, never mind pleasant, but the risk of sudden conflagrations was lessened. Twice, Snape told her to keep up. Hermione's legs were having a hard time matching his easy pace, and her head felt as though there was a tight metal band around it.
They went through the door to Snape's office. Instead of stopping at his desk, however, Snape pushed open the side door to his chambers and went inside. The door slammed shut behind him. Hermione wasn't entirely sure he meant her to follow, but her curiosity propelled her forwards.

Snape's rooms were laid out much like her own. Hermione found herself in a small sitting room, with closed doors leading elsewhere. She was relieved to see that Snape did not feel the need to decorate his living quarters with the disturbing jars of his office.

"Tea?" Snape asked. He was standing by the fireplace, looking like he wasn't sure what to do with his hands. Hermione realized that he probably didn't get many visitors.

"Yes, please." She had been drawn automatically to the large bookshelf taking up the far wall. Hermione ran her hand along the spines, tilting her head to read the titles, and had an unfamiliar cloth-bound tome half off the shelf before she remembered her manners. "May I?"

Snape nodded his assent and she took the book in her hands. She cracked it open, looking for a synopsis, but found that the letters swam in front of her eyes. Hermione wasn't seeing spots, exactly. It was more like a dark wave that roiled in front of her eyes, obscuring and then receding. Her legs trembled beneath her and she reached out a hand to clutch at the shelf. She heard the book hit the ground, but did not recall the feeling of it slipping through her fingers.

"Granger."

"I need to sit down," she muttered. A ringing sound had started in her ears. Afraid that she wouldn't make it to the armchairs by the fire, Hermione sat down where she stood, her back resting against the bookshelf.

"Granger. Hermione, tell me what's happening." Hermione was aware of Snape crouching down in front of her but kept her eyes closed tightly. She was trying to breathe this away like one of her attacks. When she finally opened her eyes, the wave was still there. She was trembling and felt cold sweat trickle down her back.

"I'm taking you to the hospital wing." Snape had used his classroom voice, the one that preceded a removal of house points and warned of the consequences of arguing. Hermione shook her head, annoyed.

"I'm fine, I'll be fine. I have classes." If she could only remember how to stand, she could make it through the day.

"Please shut up." Snape grabbed her left arm above the elbow and lifted her up. Hermione's legs gave out and she stumbled into his side but managed to right herself. Hermione felt the first stirrings of fear. This was different from her usual state of unwell. Her throat began to tighten with tears, making it difficult to breathe.

Snape walked her over to the fireplace, removing his hand from her arm only to grab a handful of Floo powder from a jar on the mantelpiece. The flames roared to life in a greenish hue and he stepped inside, dragging Hermione along with him.

Snape left her standing by the fire and went to find Madame Pomfrey, his footsteps echoing through the empty ward. There was no one there to gawk at her and the room was spinning in a nauseating swirl, so Hermione sat down on the nearest bed and closed her eyes until she heard two sets of footsteps heading towards her.

"How are you feeling, Professor Granger?" Madame Pomfrey gave her a quick, professional glance
and, in the absence of broken bones or bloody wounds, began to fuss with the screens around Hermione's bed. "Severus, close the door on your way out, will you?"

Snape huffed but began to back away. "I'll find someone to cover your classes," he promised Hermione. As the door swung shut behind him, Hermione had to stop herself from calling him back. She was frightened and ill, and more than wanting just any company to distract her, she found that she wanted his company. Whatever was wrong with her, Hermione knew Snape wouldn't make her feel worse by fretting openly.

"How are you feeling, Professor?" Madame Pomfrey had set up the screens to her satisfaction and gave Hermione her full attention.

"Dizzy. My head hurts and my legs are sore and I can't stop shaking."

Madame Pomfrey hummed in acknowledgement and flicked her wand in Hermione's general area. A thin strip of parchment shot out the end of her wand and she examined it closely.

"Lie down please... Now stand up." Madame Pomfrey took the three strips of parchment and compared the spidery writing on them. "Well, my dear, just from looking at your vitals I can see a few problems. First of all, you've got a Body Mass Index of 17.8. Do you know what that means?"

"Healthy is 18.5 to 25." Hermione took comfort in rattling off this fact.

"That's right. Which means you need to gain some weight. Problem number two is your blood pressure. It's within normal range, but there is a bit of a dip when you stand, which could explain part of your dizziness. That'll clear up with the weight gain. But the most pressing issue is your blood sugar. You're at 3.2 mmol/L, which is rather low. We bring that up and you'll feel much better.

"Okay," Hermione said quietly. She looked down at the blanket on the bed, running her fingers over it's tight weave. She could feel herself blushing. She felt foolish and ashamed. The angry, irrational part of her looked around for something to blame, but Hermione knew she had brought this on herself.

Madame Pomfrey stepped away, only to return with a pitcher of apple juice and a large glass. She watched Hermione drink with narrowed eyes and then settled herself on a chair by the bedside. Her eyes were kind but her words were brisk and clinical.

"Professor Granger, sometimes people can fixate on their weight as a way of shutting out other problems or traumas. It's no one's fault, and I know you're not doing it intentionally. But you've come to a place where your inadequate nutrition is affecting your health. Eating disorders are very serious."

"I don't have an eating disorder!" Hermione, who had been staring open mouther at Madame Pomfrey, had roused herself to speech. She thought she could already feel the sugary juice coursing through her veins, reinvigorating her. "I've just been a bit stressed. Honestly!"

Madame Pomfrey sighed. Hermione could tell she didn't believe her. "Well, whatever the cause, I expect to see your weight go up. I'll be monitoring you closely. Is there anyone you would like me to contact?"

"No." Hermione said. "There's no one."

- Hermione woke with a start. The sunlight streaming through the hospital wings windows shone
directly in her eyes, impeding her vision of the person at her bedside.

"I've brought your book," Snape said. He had been in the act of placing it on her bedside table, but instead thrust it into her hands. Hermione blinked sleepily at the black lettering on the cover: The Master of Petersburg. It was the book Snape had lent her, the one she had left in her bedroom that morning.

"Did you break into my rooms?"

"Summoned it. Might have smashed a window. What's wrong with you then?"

Hermione frowned. She knew she would be asked this many times over the next few days and had prepared a response, but that didn't mean she was looking forward to the conversation.

"Just low blood sugar. I skipped breakfast." Here, she was meant to make a self-deprecating face and change the subject, but Hermione looked up at Snape's serious dark eyes and felt herself continuing: "I've skipped a lot of breakfasts, actually. I get anxious and can't eat."

This confession opened a deep hole of vulnerability inside of her. Hermione felt her muscles tense in preparation for flight. She never said the word "anxious." She was "stressed," she had mentioned her "attacks" to Harry and Ron, but she couldn't even say the word to them. Hermione didn't know why she could say it now.

"I have trouble sleeping." Hermione whipped her head up to face Snape. He was looking several inches to her left, his hands twitching at his sides. He looked desperately uncomfortable. For the second time today, Hermione felt on the verge of tears, this time at how much it must have cost him to make that confession. She reached out and tugged on his sleeve to get his attention.

"Thank you," she said earnestly. "And thanks for the book as well. Do you think - can I raid your bookshelves when I'm done?"

"If you like," Snape said indifferently, but he was smiling at her. Outside, small flecks of snow began to tumble from the sky.
"What I don't understand," said Hermione, burrowing down further into her winter cloak, "is why there are no great wizarding authors. At first, I thought all their creative energy was channelled into spellwork, but there are wizarding musicians and painters."

"You're forgetting Madame Mantel and her Seduced by a Centaur," said Snape, who was scanning the sky. He had told Hermione that clear skies favored Slytherin, somehow, but the sky remained stubborn clouded.

"Repressing it, more like. Look at Muggle Britain: there's Shakespeare, Dickens, Tolkien-"

"Chaucer was a wizard."

"What?" Hermione stopped mid-stride, causing them to be overtaken by a crowd of excited Hufflepuffs. "He wasn't. Was he? He wasn't."

Snape kicked at the ground. "Nice and solid. They'll get a good kickoff."

"Fine," said Hermione, lighting on a way out, "I'll just go to the library then, figure it out." She made as if to turn around. Snape put a hand on her lower back and pushed her forwards a few steps.

"What if I told you that the Hufflepuff beaters just had a nasty breakup, and there's good money on them attacking each other mid-match?"

"I still hate Quidditch," Hermione grumbled, glaring at the stadium looming overhead. She could hear the Hufflepuffs start up a cheer that rhymed 'quaffle' with 'awful' and lacked the tunefulness of 'Weasley is our King'.

They separated at the rickety staircase, Hermione and her red scarf going to sit with the Gryffindors, who had turned out in full force despite not having a team in the game. As they parted, Snape said something in her ear that Hermione didn't catch.

"What?" She was being borne away by the crowd and had to resort to reading Snape's lips.

"Turgenev was a wizard."

"Shut up!" she mouthed, making sure he saw her smile before she turned away.

Hufflepuff was annihilated.

-

Hermione's hands and face ached from the cold as she caught her breath on the sweeping marble staircase in the Entrance Hall. For her last class on a Friday afternoon, she had attempted to teach her third years the finer points of football out on the Quidditch pitch. They had taken to it immediately, and Hermione had enjoyed watching their enthusiasm. But despite her best efforts at consuming three meals a day, the December chill still soaked through her bones like never before.

A friendly hoot echoed beside her. Absently, Hermione stretched out a hand to run her fingers through the owl's feathers.

"Looking for me?" The owl hooted again and Hermione turned to look. She felt a sense of unreality, of surrreality, as though she had looked in the mirror to see a cat's face staring back, as though she
was confronted with the body of her best friend, waiting for him to open his eyes, to move. Hermione was aware that she had stopped breathing. She wasn't sure she would remember how to start again.

The owl was undersized, snowy white with a caramel patch on her left wing joint. She had dark, intelligent eyes. Her name was Persephone. Hermione had purchased her for her parents the summer of her fourth year.

With surprisingly steady hands, Hermione untied the letter from Persephone's leg. The owl skittered away across the bannister, picking up on Hermione's mood. She ripped it open. Her mouth had twisted into a smile that she did not feel, or felt so deeply that she couldn't even comprehend the edges of the emotion.

Hermione, Please come to see us as soon as you can. Mum and Dad.

No 'dear,' no 'love from'. But a letter, an honest to God letter, asking her to come home. Hermione sagged against the bannister, pressing a fist against her mouth. Home.

She took off running, the faces of passing students smearing together in her peripheral vision. She had a vague idea of heading back to her rooms, to grab... She didn't need to grab anything. She had lost the letter somewhere, dropped it in a corridor, but that was alright. Hermione spun around, rounding a corner only to slam into a familiar blur of black.

"What the hell-"

Hermione threw her arms around his waist. Why not? Everything would be alright now, even Snape. She was smiling so hard her face hurt. After a bout of shocked rigidity, Snape extricated himself, pulled her through the nearest door and shut it behind them. They were in an empty classroom.

"What is the matter with you?" he hissed.

"I got a letter," she said. Hermione was suddenly aware of how deranged she must look in her big Muggle parka, shaking and flushed from her run. She raised a hand to brush the hair from her face and found a stray tear pooling with it's twin at the side of her nose. "Sorry, Prof-"

"If you're going to be assaulting me in corridors, you'd better call me Severus. What letter?"

"From my parents! They want to see me. They said they'd never want to see me again, but now they do, and it's all going to be okay!" Hermione patted her pockets, looking for evidence. "I just had it..."

Snape- Severus, and she really had to think about what that might mean - was frowning ominously. "They never wanted to see you again," he said flatly.

"I took their memories at the start of the war and sent them to Australia." Even as she said, Hermione felt the familiar undertow of shame and fear, but it couldn't bring her down. She was happy, so deliriously happy it was like experiencing the emotion for the first time.

Severus didn't seem to share her joy. No doubt still peeved about her hugging him, he gripped her arm hard. They were standing very close together in the darkened classroom, and Hermione felt herself beginning to flush under the weight of his gaze.

"Who else knows?"
"No one. Harry and Ron, and now you. You're missing the point!"

"You could go to Azkaban." Hermione couldn't identify the emotion in his eyes. They were wide and startled. He was taking away from her moment, the one she had built up in her head to be the turning point, to fix the darkness that had plagued her for so long.

"They're not - I gave the memories back. They're not going to turn me in. They're my parents and they love me. They just needed time. Now get out of my way, please. I have to go."

Snape continued to block the door. "You can't apparate like this. You're shaking."

"You can come with me, then. Make sure I don't splinch myself. But we have to go now."

Snape considered this. From the corridor outside came the sound of laughter.

"I feel sick," she muttered. Her hands were shaking from fear and she was sweating in the Melbourne heat. Mercifully, she had discarded her parka before they left. Hermione looked up at her parents' townhouse, squinting in the bright sunlight. This was only her second time here, and the first - she shook her head against the memory. "You'll wait here for me?"

"I'll wait."

Hermione strode up to the front door, drying her hands on her jeans as she went. There was a small Christmas wreath on the front door. It made her throat spasm with grief. She pressed the doorbell gently and had to stop herself from fleeing when she heard the muffled sound of approaching footfalls.

Her father pulled the door open. His hair was greyer and the line that appeared between his eyebrows when he was worried seemed to have taken up permanent residence. His brown jumper was familiar and Hermione found herself staring at it, avoiding his eyes.

"Hi, dad."

"Hi, bean." His tone was kind, giving her the courage to look up. They watched each other for a beat. "Come in?"

Hermione nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

They sat down in the living room. None of the trappings of their old life were present. It was the room of strangers, well appointed in a clinical fashion. Her old house had been bursting with knick-knacks; her parent's new home was free of clutter. Hermione perched on a chair clearly designed to be looked at, while her father settled in on his side of the couch.

"Vi, Hermione's here," he called, as though her mother might not have heard the doorbell. The clank of dish on dish that emanated from the kitchen paused, then continued louder than before. Her father looked apologetic. "We weren't expecting you right away."

Hermione fought the urge to apologize. She could feel her heartbeat pulsing in her throat. She was facing away from the window, and therefore couldn't check that Severus was still waiting.

The noise from the kitchen ceased. Her mother appeared in the doorway. Hermione's eyes filled with tears at the sight of her, but her mother seemed unable to meet her gaze. She walked briskly to the couch and sat down beside Hermione's father, covering his hand with her own.
"We've decided to stay in Melbourne," she announced. "We have a life here. There's nothing left for us in England."

Hermione was stung, but felt as though she had no right to be. There was a silence filled only by the gurgling of the dishwasher.

"We've also decided to put your... Actions behind us. You are welcome in our home."

"Thank you," Hermione breathed. "Oh, thank you, mum." Her father winked at her, but her mother merely pursed her lips.

"Would it be okay if- could I come by on Christmas?" Her parents hesitated, glancing at each other. The gesture, so unfair yet so deserved, broke the last of Hermione's restraint and she burst into sobs. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry, mum!"

"Oh, for-" Hermione's mother stood up and stalked out of the room. Hermione rested her head on her knees and tried to cry noiselessly. After a minute, she felt a tentative hand on her back.

"Everything's okay, bean," said her father. "Just give her time."

"She h-hates me!"

"No, sweetheart. Nobody hates you. You've been so brave."

Hermione cried for a few minutes. Then, head feeling as though it were stuffed with cotton, she excused herself and stood up to leave. Her mother had never come back.

"Write to me," her father said. His face was illuminated by the bright Australian sun. For the first time in Hermione's memory, he appeared truly old.

"I will," she said. It only felt like half a lie. Her father took one last look at her and then eased the front door closed.

Severus was leaning against the picket fence, looking out of place in his dark robes. Hermione went to stand beside him, still sniffling. Severus's attention seemed to be caught by a giant inflatable snowman on the lawn opposite. Glowering at it, he held his hand out wordlessly. Hermione linked their fingers together and braced for the feeling, exhilarating and a little too welcome, of stepping into nothingness.
"You're sure you'll be alright?"

"Granger, I survived for years without you around to ask me stupid questions."

Hermione huffed, holding up two rolls of wrapping paper to compare patterns. Would Harry's present - a copy of Ludo Bagman's new memoir, Ludicrous - look better in red or white? She considered asking Severus, but he was prickly this afternoon. She chose red.

"I'm just saying, it's Christmas Eve. You'll at least go for dinner in the Hall?" Snape glared at her. "Right, that's the last of them wrapped. I'm off."

Hermione lugged her bag of presents and overnight things over to the fireplace. Severus had been poking at the fire all day, but despite these ministrations it was still blazing merrily. She snuck a look at him. His expression was placid, giving nothing away. She had been dreading this moment or, rather, anticipating it. Somehow the two feelings had become indistinguishable and Hermione found herself avoiding things she might enjoy too much to spare herself the angst.

She made her way into her bedroom and grabbed the wrapped package she had left on her nightstand. Hermione dried her hands on her robes, remembered how to breathe, and stepped back into the sitting room. She held the present out to Severus, who turned his fathomless gaze on her. It seemed to acquire weight as it left her hand.

"Happy Christmas. I thought you could open it now, it sort of needs explaining."

Severus unwrapped the green paper delicately, turning the present over and easing the tape away from the paper. Hermione had a sudden memory of him demonstrating how to slice something or other in class, using the same methodical motions. Finally, the paper fell away, leaving Severus holding a hardcover copy of A Separate Peace. He frowned at it thoughtfully.

"I know we talked about it a long time ago and you said you had already read it. But I wanted to give you a copy anyways because of the beginning, where Gene goes back to his school fifteen years later to look around. It's raining out and he goes to look at that tree. And then there's the line 'anybody could see it was time to come in out of the rain,' but it's not about the rain, not really. It made me think of you." Hermione took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. "The war's over, Severus. For both of us, for everyone. It's over and we've got to live as best we can. I just thought you could use a reminder."

"Hermione," he said, and she had never heard her name said that way before. Like she had perfectly brewed a Draught of Living Death and invented a self-spelling wand and broken his heart.

Hermione shifted her weight from foot to foot, picking at a loose thread on the sleeve of her jumper. She wanted to give Severus enough time to rearrange his expression.

"You can open this now," he said, businesslike. He came to stand beside her and held out a present wrapped carefully in ice blue paper, which Hermione tore open immediately.

Snape's present too was a book: a copy of Les Miserables with a sepia portrait of a somber Victor Hugo on the cover.
"Thank you," she said brightly, though she was secretly disappointed. Severus must have forgotten that they had talked about Les Miserables before. Hermione had told him that it was the one book she had never gotten through, defeated by rambling digressions on architecture that rivalled any of those found in War and Peace. She opened the book at random for something to do with her hands, and then did a double take. She flipped to the next page, then skipped ahead several chapters. Every page's margin was filled with Severus's spidery writing. She squinted down at a comment that read 'skip ahead 10 pages unless you have an architecture fetish.'

"I thought some commentary might help you finish it. Les Mis is worth a read."

"You remembered! How long did this take you?" Hermione asked. Severus shrugged dismissively. "It must have been days of work. Really, thank you."

She thought about hugging him, but Severus looked pleased with himself, and the firelight had softened his expression even further, so that she was loath to cause him to scowl. She contented herself with beaming at him.

"So-

"So-

"Take care of Crookshanks for me?"

"Your demented Kneazle can take care of himself," Severus grumbled, handing her bag to her.

"And a happy Christmas to you too!"

As she tucked her elbows tightly into her body, clutching her bag and her new book, her last sight through the green of the flames was of Severus, frowning in that way that was secretly a smile.

- 

"So she says 'get down from my ceiling at once!' And Ron, who at this point is bobbing in mid-air, staring straight down her shirt-

"I was not!"

"- says 'the view's nice though, isn't it?!''

Hermione laughed, more at the affronted look on Ron's face than the story. She felt more relaxed than she had been in months. The firewhiskey had lent a pleasant looseness to her shoulders and she had her back against the wall, her arm pressed up against Harry's arm and her legs sprawled over Ron's legs.

"Oh, no!" Ron said, straightening up. "Out, you!"

Hermione leaned around Harry to see Ginny standing in the doorway, clutching a mug. She looked distinctly unimpressed.

"Why can't I come in?"

"I know you, you'll just... You'll just suck Harry into your orbit of depravity!"

"Orbit of depravity?" Hermione echoed, bursting into giggles. She might have overdone it with the firewhiskey.
"Mum wanted me to bring Hermione some hot chocolate. I'll try to avoid corrupting my boyfriend."

"Why don't we get hot chocolate?" demanded Ron, waving the empty firewhiskey bottle for emphasis. Ginny gave him a withering glare as she passed the steaming mug to Hermione and sat down on the floor.

"Because Hermione is the only one of you to show up looking like a corpse. No offense, Hermione. You're a very pretty corpse."

"Thank you, Ginny."

"It's Christmas," Harry said suddenly, looking down at his watch. "Happy Christmas everyone."

Hermione wondered if they all felt the same warm glow that she did. She felt that being loved by them, in this moment, and in every other moment that had come before would be enough to light her existence in perpetuity, even if she never experienced a moment's kindness again. That they were enough, that this was enough, that all of her angst paled in comparison to this singular joy. She poked Harry in the ribs to get his attention.

"You're my family," she said.

"And you're mine," said Harry. She rested her head on his shoulder and immediately fell asleep.

Hermione awoke on Christmas morning with a pounding head, momentarily uncertain as to where she was. The watery winter light fell on her scratchy blanket, and she watched it contentedly. She could hear the hum of human activity, muffled by several floors distance. Hermione shut her eyes. Then Ginny jumped onto her bed and shrieked "presents!"

They met the boys on the landing and tramped downstairs, where Mrs. Weasley made them all sit down for a proper breakfast before congregating around the tree. Everyone ripped their presents open at once, a half dozen voices overlapping in cries of 'you shouldn't have' as Celestina Warbeck warbled in the background.

Hermione unwrapped a box of sugar quills from Ron and a biography of Oscar Wilde from Harry, leaving a package that could only be a Weasley sweater and a small black box. Hermione went for the box and prised it open. Inside was a medium sized golden locket that opened to reveal a smooth expanse of mirror.

"It's from me," Ginny said, pulling an identical locket out from under her house coat. "I had it made from the mirrors Harry and Sirius had, in case you ever needed some girl talk."

Speechless with gratitude, Hermione crossed the room to give Ginny a tight hug.

Once the floor was ankle deep in wrapping paper, the Weasley children, Harry, and Hermione went outside for a bitterly contested snowball fight. Then it was back inside for a long, leisurely lunch.

By mid-afternoon, Hermione was starting to feel claustrophobic. Mrs. Weasley had taken to watching her with worried eyes, plying her with pastries, and fussing about whether or not it was warm enough for her. Surely she was imagining that everyone was watching her? That it was several degrees too warm to breathe properly? When Ginny started to demonstrate the proper way to loop two Beaters with the aid of couch cushions, Hermione slipped out of the room.

She closed and locked the bathroom door behind her, which deadened the noise to such an extent
that she sighed from relief, feeling her shoulders relax. Going over to the mirror, she attempted to tame her hair with her fingers, knowing that it was a hopeless task. Hermione looked into the mirror and immediately clapped a hand over her mouth to hold in a scream.

She wasn't alone.

George Weasley was sitting in the empty bathtub behind her, fully clothed, reading an issue of The Adventures of Martin Miggs, the Mad Muggle. He met her gaze in the mirror and gave an abbreviated wave. "Need some privacy, or are you hiding from Mum?"

"I'm hiding," Hermione admitted, "but not just from your mum."

"Join me. This tub is a safe space."

Hermione clambered in to the other side of the bathtub and pulled her knees up to her chest. George stretched out a foot to kick her shin in a friendly manner. He looked just the same as he ever had. Was it strength of luck. Conversely, was Hermione weak or just unlucky to have her smaller, lesser grief manifest so physically? She leaned her head back onto the cold porcelain and stared up at the ceiling.

"Martin's accidentally stowed away on a spaceship," George informed her, flicking to the next page. They sat in silence for awhile. Occasionally a laugh or shout would reach them from the living room.

"I miss him at Christmas," George said abruptly, still looking at his comic. "But that's okay. It's when I don't miss him that it hurts."

"George-"

"Don't you dare say you're sorry." George looked at her with the same truculent expression that Ron often wore.

"Is Martin going to the moon or to Mars?"

"Hm... Mars I think."

They stayed there for an hour or two, Hermione producing blue bubbles with her wand when she got bored, until Ron knocked on the door and demanded entry.

Hermione flooed back to Hogwarts after dinner, over the protestations of just about everyone. She had an enormous pile of marking to attend to and a desire for some peace and quiet, but there was also a nagging guilt at the back of her mind. Severus was spending Christmas alone, save for a skeleton staff made up of teachers of whom he did not seem overly fond. Not that this was her problem, but Severus was her friend too.

As she had stepped into the fireplace at the Burrow, Hermione had gotten some ash in her eye and was too busy trying to remove it to register Severus's presence in her sitting room. Finally, one eye streaming, she looked up to see her fellow Professor sitting in her favorite armchair, her cat in his lap, reading a copy of the Brothers Karamazov that looked as though it had been dropped in the bath at some point.

"Have you been sitting here since last night?" Hermione asked. Snape rolled his eyes up to the ceiling in mock despair.
"I see spending time with Potter and his side kick has done nothing for your intelligence." He nudged Crookshanks off his lap and stood up. He came over to Hermione and reached to take her bag from her hand. They were standing very close together. "Obviously, I've been here this whole time, pining away-

Hermione kissed him. She could think of no other way to express the affection that had welled up inside her at the sight of him. She had to stand on her toes to reach him, her lips did not quite meet his at the right angle, but it felt right in a way that kissing Victor or Ron had not. For a moment, they were so close together that she thought she could feel the heat of him along her entire body. For a moment, he kissed her back.

Severus pushed her away. His eyes were wild and his expression as ominous as a storm cloud.

"I'm not sorry," Hermione said.

"Don't ever do that again," Severus said, using his classroom voice. Hermione was extremely irritated at the sound of it.

"Because you didn't enjoy it? Or because you have to be lonely as some sick form of penance?" He didn't glare at her, didn't do anything but watch her as though she was about to add too many newt tails and blow up her cauldron. "Just once, tell me what you're thinking, please."

He turned to go, picking up his book as he went.

"Don't just walk away!" Hermione's voice was shrill. She hated the sound of it. Severus paused with his hand on the door.

"Have a happy Christmas, Professor."

The door slammed shut behind him. Hermione dropped her bag on the ground and stalked into her bedroom, only to find a wrapped package lying on her bed. She went over and tore it open with shaking hands. Inside was a large package of sugar free candies and a note that said 'Happy Christmas, bean!' She did not cry. She slipped beneath the covers, fully dressed, and flicked off the lamp with her wand. She lay in the darkness. She did not cry.

Chapter End Notes

Did I do this right?? I would love to hear any comments or criticisms.

Books mentioned are A Separate Peace by John Knowles, and Les Miserables by Victor Hugo. And Ludocrous by Ludo Bagman, which is possibly the worst pun I have ever made.

Also, OVER 100 KUDOS! I have so much gratitude for every kudos, comment, bookmark and all of you who took time out of your lives to read this thing I wrote.
This isn't where she was supposed to be, Hermione thought. This wasn't supposed to be happening.

It had happened in fourth period on the first day of school after the holidays. Hermione had spent the night pacing her bedroom, unable to sit still, and her eyes felt grimy with exhaustion all day. Then, in fourth period, in front of a class of dazed looking seventh years who were being shepherded through the British taxation system, it had suddenly occurred to Hermione that she could have an attack. Right here, in front of her students. The thought itself summoned panic to the point that her vision began to darken and she dismissed the class fifteen minutes early to sit in a broom cupboard and cry.

Hermione clutched her head in her hands. She had been forgiven, she reminded herself. But it wasn't enough - she was stuck in the orbit of her attacks, a small satellite in the darkness. Her attacks had a life of their own and she was just a grown woman having a cry in a cupboard.

This wasn't supposed to be happening.

Hermione did her headcount twice, making sure all eleven of her third years were accounted for. They were impatient standing in the shadow of the castle, fidgeting their gawky limbs to dispel the chill, puffs of breath fogging around them. They were all wearing their best Muggle clothes, carefully chosen before the holiday break. They had done well. Hermione had taught them well. A flash of pride reached her through the haze of exhaustion.

Professor Snape shouldered the front doors open and came to stand at the back of the group. Hermione had to stuff her hands in her pockets to hide their shaking. She hadn't been sure he would come, though she now realized that was foolish and solipsistic. Severus kept his professional commitments.

"Right, we have eleven minutes until the portkey leaves, so we have to get off the ground quickly. Follow me!"

Severus took his place at the front next to Hermione as they set off. He snuck glances at her often and the fact that she noticed could only mean that he wanted her to notice. Hermione didn't react. She wasn't feeling up to playing his games.

Once they were clear of the wrought iron gates, Hermione gave the students a quick explanation of portkeys for the uninitiated and set them up around the empty beans tin she had pulled out of her purse. By the time she had them suitably arranged, the only open place was between tiny Muriel King and Severus.

"One minute. Everybody hold on," Hermione said, her voice sounding thin. Severus had his eyes on her and she lifted her chin, holding his gaze. But finally, she had to take her place beside him. They were pressed together from their shoulders downwards, standing back to back. Hermione could feel every point of contact like a burn. Then came a sudden jerk, and they were spinning through space.

Hermione stumbled, landing painfully on her ankle, and Severus reached out a hand to steady her. She leaned into the touch before remembering herself. All of her third years were on the ground, giggling, and she ordered them up before passersby took an interest.
They had landed in front of a large shopping complex in Abergavenny. The third years looked around in wonder and apprehension. Even at this early hour, there were more people around than on an average day in Diagon Alley. Davie Milford was watching the automatic glass doors glide open and closed with his mouth gaping.

"You know the rules. Watch out for each other," Hermione said. "Make one financial transaction and have at-"

"Milford, pay attention," Severus snapped.

"-and have at least one conversation with a stranger," Hermione continued serenely. "Be back by noon, or we will leave you behind. Have fun, alright?" The students took off without a backward glance, whispering excitedly. Her mood took a cliff dive towards dread as they disappeared from view.

"Hermione-"

"You left me alone. All break. You were my friend, and you left me alone." He opened his mouth to speak but Hermione cut him off. "And the worst of it was, I felt so powerless. Knowing that I had to wait you out, that if I tried to have a rational, civil conversation with you you'd give me nothing but vitriol."

Hermione turned her back on Severus and stalked over to a fountain that had been shut off for the winter. It had a wide lip around it that Hermione perched on. After a long moment, Severus sat down as well, keeping a careful distance between them.

"I've been reading Notes from the Underground," Severus said. "It's about a foolish, spiteful man who ruins the only good thing in his life."

"I know what it's about. I suppose, in this analogy, I'm the prostitute?"

"Hilarious, Granger."

"For what?"

Severus swept a hand out to encompass the day, the shopping center, all of civilian life.

"Oh, Severus. Tough." He blinked at her. "So, you're still alive. You have just about the best problem in the world. You have to learn to deal with it."

Severus continued to run his finger along the lip of the fountain, looking away from her. Impulsively, Hermione reached out a hand to arrest it's motion.

"I can't fix you, you know. And you can't fix me. But I like you. I think I might- and whatever this is between us, I want it. So what do you want? If you have to be alive, what do you want from life?"
Because we are owed. We are owed a little happiness. And if we aren't, we're going to damn well take it anyway." Hermione realized she was lecturing, and dialed down her tone. "What do you want, Severus?"

How much did Hermione Granger really know about Severus Snape: the teacher, the traitor, the soldier, the spy? She knew that he could be vicious and unkind, that he had spent six years denigrating her in front of her peers. She knew that he had lived his life for so long by the light of a long dead obsession. She knew that he cut his gaze to the right when he was making a joke, that he thought Fyodor Dostoevsky the greatest author who'd ever lived, that he still looked taken aback each time she said something kind. She knew what he was going to say.

"You," he said. "Just you."

Hermione let her breath escape in a rush. "Okay then. That's settled."

"For the record, Granger, I think you'd make an excellent prostitute."

"I do have a good head for business," Hermione mused. Then she laughed, startling them both, and when her sides ached so she was no longer able, she smiled her brightest smile in months. When the sun reached it's zenith it the sky and her students returned, she gave them each five points just because she could (Severus managed to deduct Davie Milford's before they even made it back to the castle).

Over dinner, they were separated by Hagrid and Professor Sinistra, but kept catching each other's eye and smiling a conspiratorial smile. Hermione's hands trembled with a new and infinitely more exciting sort of anxiety.

The next time she found herself in a broom cupboard, she decided, she would go back to Abergavenny, find the nearest phone booth and book herself an appointment with a psychiatrist. Hermione Granger was twenty one years old. She had something messy and real and wonderful with Severus and friends who loved her. She didn't need to be forgiven.

She could damn well forgive herself.

Chapter End Notes

Book mentioned is Notes from the Underground by Fyodor Dostoevsky.

This is the end, my wonderful readers! Feel free to stop by the comments and say hello. This won't be the last you see of me :)

End Notes

I do not own the rights to these characters.

(Go easy on me, I swear this gets better.)
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!