Empty

by debjunk

After hiding for five years, Severus Snape is found and convicted of Dumbledore's murder. His punishment is way beyond anything ever thought of before. Can Hermione help restore what Severus has lost?

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 13

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Chapter One

Harry Potter burst through the door and stormed up to Hermione's desk.

"Guess what?" he cried.

Hermione looked up from the contract she was reading and gave Harry a quizzical look. "Harry, why are you so agitated?"

"They've found Snape!"

Hermione's eyebrows lifted almost off her head.

"How?"

Harry frowned. "They caught him at my mum's grave. Evidently, the Aurors have been staking the gravesite out for months."

Hermione sat back and folded her arms in front of her. "They knew he would attempt to visit Lily's grave. How mercenary can they be! Why can't they just leave the man alone?"

Harry bent over the desk and placed his hands on it. "Because they don't believe me. They think Snape is a murderer. You know that, Hermione. We have been fighting this battle for five years now." Harry straightened and began to pace in front of the desk. "He knew his life was in danger! They've been hunting him ever since his body disappeared from the Shrieking Shack! Why did he decide to come out of hiding just to put a flower on a grave?"

"Harry, he loved your mother."

Harry grimaced as he turned to Hermione. "Don't you think I know that? I still wish he would have stayed in hiding."

"Where is he now?"

"He's in a holding cell. The Minister is scrambling to schedule a trial. Shacklebolt wants to get this over with as soon as possible."

"This is ludicrous, Harry. He's innocent!"

"Hermione, he needs your help. Will you represent him?"

Hermione worried her lip. "I'm not his favorite person, you know."

"You're the only one who can do this, Hermione. Your job here in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement gives you the right to represent him. No one else could, or would."

Hermione studied her hands for a moment. "We need to do something. If we don't, he'll be sent to Azkaban for life."

She rose and grabbed a pad and quill. "I'll visit him immediately. Don't worry, we'll find a way for the Wizengamot to believe what you know. You are willing to testify in Snape's behalf, right?"

"Of course," Harry replied.

"I'll let you know how my meeting with Snape goes." She stopped and tapped her finger on her lip for a minute. "Gather whatever evidence you have about his spying, Harry. We'll need every bit of it."

Harry gave a curt nod. The two friends left Hermione's office and went their separate ways. Hermione made her way to the small jail next to the courtrooms. She entered the front office and spoke to the wizard sitting at the desk.

"I need to conference with Severus Snape," she explained.

"No one is to see the prisoner," the blond wizard explained.

"I am his legal counsel," Hermione told him.

"I wasn't alerted that he had chosen legal counsel."

Hermione flashed her wand, and her id materialized in front of the man. "I am Ministry-appointed legal counsel. Mr. Snape has the right to an attorney. I will be handling his case from now on and ask for unlimited access to him."

The man studied the credentials in front of him. He looked up at Hermione, comparing the photo on her I.D. with her. He nodded finally. Standing up, he motioned for her to follow him.

Hermione was led through a thick door and brought to a cell in the back of the hall. The wizard unlocked the cell and motioned for Hermione to enter. He locked her in.

"Can you cast a Patronus?" the guard asked through the bars.

Hermione nodded.

"Just send it when you're ready to go."

"I will," Hermione assured before turning to Snape.

She arched an eyebrow at him. He was lying on the provided cot with his hands behind his head. It seemed that he was just taking a rest. His face held no emotions whatsoever... except for the glare he was casting at Hermione.

Hermione looked around the small cell as she waited for the guard to leave the cell block. Three grey cement walls greeted her, the fourth wall of the cell being the cell bars behind her. It was a narrow room, only large enough to fit the cot with a small space left for movement. At the back of the cell sat a toilet and small sink.

Turning to Snape, Hermione made sure the guard was out of earshot before speaking.

"Professor Snape, we all thought you were dead."

"I am no longer your professor, Miss Granger. It is still Miss Granger, is it not?"

Hermione conjured up a chair, wedged it between the bed and the wall, and sat. "Yes, it is," she replied officially. Severus sat up and rested his back against the wall. His arms automatically folded in front of him.

"Why, sir? Why did you get yourself caught?"

Severus stared at Hermione for a long moment. Had he heard concern in her voice? No one felt concern for him. No one even gave him any heed. He'd been surviving for five years without anyone giving him a second glance. Simple Notice-Me-Not spells had seen to that. He hardly left the small shack he'd been living in, but when he did, no one ever even glanced at him.

Severus noticed Hermione waiting patiently for him to answer.

"I did not intend to get caught, Miss Granger. The Aurors had set a trap. They had anticipated my arrival and my use of the Notice-Me-Not spell. I was surrounded and disarmed before I even had a chance to stop spinning from the Apparition."

Hermione frowned. "I'm sorry. We have been fighting to get your name cleared all this time."

Severus narrowed his eyes at her. "Who exactly do you mean by *we*?"

"Harry and I. Harry explained about the memories you left him." Hermione looked to the floor. "I'm sorry. That's probably how they finally came to await you at Lily Potter's grave."

"The whole world knows my business?" Severus raged.

Hermione's head shot up. "No, sir. Harry swore Kingsley Shacklebolt to secrecy. They even made a wand oath, but it would be easy to send Aurors to the gravesite without their knowledge as to why you would appear there." Hermione sighed. "Kingsley said that the memories were inadmissible. He believed that they'd been tampered with by you to gain Harry's support."

Severus raged within. "Why would I give him such memories if they weren't true? Doesn't Shacklebolt have any inkling as to what those memories mean to me? We have spent evenings together as Order members, and he can't see how the knowledge of such information would make me feel?"

Hermione's eyes searched out his. "I know, sir. It's been incredibly frustrating for us. Kingsley says he needs more evidence. Since there is none that we know of, he's putting together a case against you. He plans to send you to Azkaban for life."

"And you are here because..."

"I am your legal counsel."

Severus put his head in his hands. "Wonderful, I am to be represented by a child."

Hermione straightened her body and narrowed her eyes at Severus. "Sir, I am twenty-three years old. How many twenty-three year old children do you know?"

Severus looked at Hermione for a long while. Finally, he cleared his throat. "You must forgive me, Miss Granger. I still see you as the precocious sixteen-year-old I taught Potions and Defense to. Obviously, you are an adult now."

Hermione relaxed. "That's understandable, sir. We haven't exactly kept in touch over the years."

"It's hard to keep in touch with a dead man."

Hermione couldn't help but smirk. "You have the option to decline my counsel if you choose, but I highly discourage it. Without counsel, there will be no one on your side in that courtroom."

"Why do you care what happens to me?" Severus snapped.

"You're innocent."

"Spoken like the naïve woman you are, Miss Granger," Severus remarked snidely. "You've always had a penchant for lost causes, haven't you?"

Hermione bristled. "Look, I am fully aware of the pitfalls of the Ministry. I am working to solve them, but I have just been in my position for a year. Change takes time. I am not naïve to the fact that the Minister, and probably the entire Wizengamot, want to see you locked away. I am willing to help you to not have to go through such a punishment. After everything you've done for us, the last thing you deserve is to be locked away in Azkaban for life!"

"Isn't it, though?"

Hermione looked at him in puzzlement. "What do you mean by that?"

Severus stood and glared at Hermione. "I was a Death Eater, Miss Granger. I killed people. Merlin, I killed Albus Dumbledore! I deserve whatever I get."

Hermione rose, too, and stood mere inches from Severus. "You were ordered to kill him! You never wavered in your spy work. If the Ministry can't recognize that Voldemort would still be walking around if it wasn't for you, then they're nothing but a bunch of idiots!"

Severus looked shocked. "Why do you defend me so?"

"Haven't you been listening to me? I know the truth! I know you were on our side. No one else sacrificed as much as you did. You don't deserve to be locked away!"

Severus looked her up and down. "Fine," he retorted. "What do you need to know to represent me?"

He sat down on the bed again and folded his arms in front of him.

"Everything," Hermione mused. She withdrew the pad book and quill. "Do you have anything you can use as evidence that supports the memories you gave to Harry?"

"No, but I must share something with you, Miss Granger. Dumbledore is not dead."

Hermione looked up at Severus in shock. "I beg your pardon?"

"Dumbledore isn't dead. A month before his faked demise, I came up with a potion that cured the curse that was ravaging his body. He decided to keep up the premise that his hand was withered and put a glamour over it. He knew Draco Malfoy was commissioned to kill him. He didn't want that to happen. He and I devised a way to make it only look like he was killed."

Hermione's mouth dropped open. "But Harry saw you cast the Killing Curse."

"He only thought that's what he saw. I cast a similar curse. A slight change to the pronunciation was all it really took. When he thought he heard me say Avada Kedavra, I was actually saying Avida Kedava, placing the Sleep of Death over Dumbledore. Technically, yes, he was killed, but the spell was created to cast a stasis over the body. Lasting five days, it breaks itself automatically, reviving the dead man. Albus awoke inside his tomb. He had transformed his spectacles into a Portkey, and as soon as he regained consciousness, he Portkeyed out of his tomb."

"If he's alive, then where is he?" Hermione asked curiously.

Severus' face fell. "I do not know. He was supposed to make contact with me after he emerged from the tomb, but I never heard from him."

Hermione frowned and scribbled something on her pad. "Is it possible he never escaped the tomb?"

"No. I have searched his tomb; there is nothing there but a fake body. The plan worked, but I have no idea where Dumbledore is."

"Well, it seems that if we can find Dumbledore, then we can end all of this."

Severus huffed. "I have been searching for him for five years, to no avail."

"You'll need to tell me everything you've done already, so I don't waste time repeating things you've already tried."

Severus nodded and began to tell her of his long search for Dumbledore. She wrote down everything he told her and asked several questions along the way. Then they began to brainstorm what to do if they couldn't find Dumbledore. Hermione continued to write furiously as the two of them discussed possible defense tactics.

After a long while, they were finally finished. "Thank you, sir. I'll get working on this information."

"You should call me Severus," Snape offered. "You are an adult now. I hold no influence over you."

"Okay... Severus," Hermione said tentatively. "Oh, you should call me Hermione, then."

With a quick snap of his head, Severus had agreed. Extending her hand, Hermione shook Severus'. "I'll get you out of this, Severus," she encouraged.

"I won't hold my breath," Severus countered.

Hermione was unsure whether that comment was a cut on her abilities or on the bleakness of the situation. She narrowed her eyes at him.

Severus' eyebrow arched at her. "I only meant that I could be represented by Merlin himself yet the Wizengamot would not be interested in what he has to say. My fate is

set in stone. I am resigned to that fate."

"I'll fix this, Severus. I promise you."

Severus looked into her eyes, and Hermione felt as if she were tumbling to the ground. "Thank you, Hermione, for at least being willing to try."

Hermione walked slowly back to her office. It was time for her to go home, but her mind was a blur with everything that had gone on in Severus' cell. The man had been civil. That had been a big surprise. A few sarcastic comments had fallen from his lips, but he hadn't been overly mean. Hermione frowned. If anything, he'd been sad. He knew it would be next to impossible to be set free.

Their conversation had actually been polite. Would wonders never cease? Evidently not having to deal with 'dunderheaded' children on a daily basis, or having to answer to two masters, had done wonders for Severus Snape's disposition. Though caustic at times, he'd been respectful of her once he realized she wasn't a child anymore.

Hermione's heart beat a bit faster. She'd always sought out his approval as a student. As a youth, she'd needed to be accepted. Severus Snape had never given her that. Now, he seemed to accept that she knew what she was doing. Maybe this would be the opportunity she needed to prove to Severus that she was more than just a juvenile who waved her hand in the air incessantly.

Hermione blushed at her memories of her youth. She really had been overbearing. Mistaking being a nuisance for being eager, she'd been quite the know-it-all, as Severus had dubbed her. It had taken her a long time to realize that she didn't need to always seek the approval of others. Her time on the 'extended camping trip' with Harry and Ron had really made her see what was truly important. She still loved learning and reading, but she now understood that it wasn't vital to be the best at everything. She hoped that Snape would eventually recognize that in her also.

Harry Floo'd over to Hermione's apartment that evening. She filled him in on everything. Hermione gave him all of the information on the manhunt that Severus had done for Dumbledore. She knew that if there was anything to find, Harry would find it. She only hoped they'd have enough time.

"Kingsley set the trial for a week from today," Harry divulged.

"A week! That gives us hardly any time to prepare! How are you going to find Dumbledore with only a week to do it in?"

"I don't know, but I won't rest until I've found something, Hermione. We'll get him off. We have to."

Hermione nodded. "I hope we can, Harry. The Ministry is out for blood. They might not listen to anything I present."

Harry gave Hermione a determined look. "Just prepare the best case you can, Hermione. That's all you can do. We can only hope for the best. Not everyone on the Wizengamot is a follower. Some will see the truth in what you present."

"I certainly hope so," Hermione said softly.

Thank you, Lilith Kayden, for your hard work with this story. Your suggestions helped to make it all the better!

Here's the prompt, which is almost as long as this chapter.

A. Oldies but Goodies

1. revisit a once popular challenge

2. try to bring it up-to-date by using current canon

3. Hollow Man Challenge

More information about that challenge follows:

-The war is over, Potter has won, and Dumbledore has gone missing. No longer using the Dementors or their kiss, the Wizengamot create a way to punish Death Eaters: both their powers and personalities are magically removed (the wizarding version of a strong lobotomy, if you will, leaving them only slightly better than if they had been Kissed) and they are awarded as house help to those most directly affected

by the war. Unfortunately, without Dumbledore to provide favorable testimony, Fudge takes the chance to get our beloved Potions Master convicted.

-Knowing the truth, Hermione (or any other character), who is one of the people entitled to such "compensation" (maybe she lost her parents to a Death Eater raid, or maybe she was

attacked herself, I'll leave the reason up to you; if, by any chance, you feel you don't want to

provide it, feel free not to), decides to spare Severus the humiliation he would undoubtedly endure in the "care" of any other of his former students and requests him for herself. At some point during the time Severus is living with her, Hermione finds out that the magic and personalities of the convicts are stored in the Ministry, not unlike the prophecies in Order of the Phoenix, and she decides to break in and retrieve Severus'. After restoring him to his former self, they will need to discover what happened to Dumbledore and, if possible, get him to testify.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 13

After hiding for five years, Severus Snape is found and convicted of Dumbledore's murder. His punishment is way beyond anything ever thought of before. Can Hermione help restore what Severus has lost?

Chapter Two

Dolores Umbridge sat at her desk, humming to herself. Her office was pink, just like her outfit. Oh, how she loved her office. She glanced around it. Her babies were all there. Every single little kitty had its own place on her wall. An occasional meow would come from one or another of them.

"That's it, my pretties. You are all such darlings!" she gushed.

An interoffice memo shot into her office and landed on her desk. Umbridge picked it up and unfolded its paper airplane form. Her eyes scanned the paper and a frown crossed her face.

Meet me at the Leaky Cauldron at noon. I have a way to punish Snape.

That was the entirety of the message. There was no signature, no details, just this order to go to the Leaky Cauldron. Umbridge pulled her wand out and waved it over the memo. She could determine nothing from her spells. Staring down at the paper for a long time, she finally made up her mind. She wanted Snape punished, and she would do everything she could to see him rotting in a cell for the rest of his life. The only choice was to meet with whoever had written the memo and find out what they had in mind.

Umbridge had been sitting in the Leaky Cauldron for fifteen minutes, waiting for whomever she was to meet. She was beginning to think she'd been duped when a young boy sat down at the table across from her. Umbridge's mouth dropped open.

"Young man, I am waiting for someone! It is impolite for you to just plop yourself down at my table."

A gruff voice came from the boy. It was a voice that was of a much older man than the youth sitting across from her. "I sent that note," the boy said.

Umbridge sputtered.

The boy leaned across the table and sneered at Umbridge. "Haven't you heard of Polyjuice?" he snarled.

Realization washed over Umbridge's face. "Oh, of course," she whispered. "Why are we here?"

"I thought my memo was clear," the boy said with a bored tone.

"It was not."

"I believe you want to see Snape punished. Am I right?"

Umbridge scoffed. "Of course I do! He's a murderer and a no-good Death Eater. Everything he did was for his own advancement and to ingratiate himself with You-Know-Who. He needs to be put away."

"What would you say if I told you I could help to punish him in an even better way?"

"There is no better way. Azkaban is the only answer for such criminals!" Umbridge responded haughtily.

"Do you think so?" the boy asked. His tone belied the fact that he'd obviously found an even better way.

"Tell me what you have in mind?" Umbridge urged. Although wary, she was eager to find out if it were possible to make Snape suffer more for his crimes.

"I have developed a spell that will turn anyone it is cast upon into an automaton. Their magic is blocked, so they cannot escape their fate. Their personality is trapped deep within them. They can do nothing. They are incapable of responding to anyone, they are just simply... nothing."

Umbridge scowled. "You're describing the effects of a Dementor's Kiss," she said with a roll of her eyes. "Even though I would love to see Snape kissed, the Minister has forbidden the use of Dementors as punishment."

"This isn't a Dementor's Kiss. It's a spell that works almost like it. The best part is, the subject can respond to simple commands."

Dolores pondered the boy's words. She tapped her finger on her lips before responding. "How does this spell work?" she asked excitedly.

The boy sat back. "When it is cast, it has the ability to concentrate the personality and magical ability of a wizard into a small part of the wizard's brain. That part of the brain is disconnected from the rest of the body, leaving a shell of a person, who is able to follow commands, but has no ability to think for himself."

"What happens to the personality and magic of the wizard?" Umbridge asked.

"It stays dormant."

"Can it be released back into the body?"

"The spell can be reversed, but it is a lengthy process. You can't just cast a *Finite Incantatem* to reverse it. Besides, who would ever want to reverse it? The entire world wants to see justice for the crimes Snape has committed. Once cast, there will be no way for Snape to break free of the spell. He will remain an empty shell. Think of the things you could do with him!" The boy was leering at Umbridge. She leered right back.

"This will truly be glorious!" she cried.

"Shh! Keep your voice down."

"Who are you, anyway?" Umbridge finally asked.

"That's not important. What is important is that we have the same goal. You must convince Shacklebolt that this is the best punishment for Snape."

"I will," Dolores vowed. "Oh, I will."

"Minister, thank you for seeing me on such short notice," Dolores Umbridge gushed. Her fake smile never came up to her eyes.

Kingsley looked at the toad-like woman standing before him. He chided himself on a daily basis for letting her stay at the Ministry. She should have been fired at the end of the war. She probably should be sitting in a cell in Azkaban right now, but she had sweet-talked herself out of that punishment. Claiming to have been a victim of the Imperius Curse, she'd convinced the Wizengamot into giving her a pardon for her horrid treatment of Muggle-borns during the war.

Kingsley wasn't convinced that she'd truly been Imperiused, but had chosen to keep her on staff anyway. If truth be told, her organizational skills were second to none. He also believed she would be less trouble if he could keep an eye on her. When she was monitored closely, she did her job, and did it well, not infecting others with her special form of hate. Umbridge had retained her seat on the Wizengamot, but he'd demoted her to what was effectively a receptionist and secretary in his office. That, of

course, didn't stop her from "Hem, hemming" whenever she saw fit. This was, unfortunately, one of those times.

"What can I do for you, Dolores?" he said diplomatically.

"I have found the perfect punishment for Snape!"

Kingsley narrowed his eyes at her. "We will not execute him."

She tittered. "Oh, no, sir! That would be too humane! We need something that fits the crime. Wouldn't the public love to find out that the soul had been driven from Severus Snape's body?"

Kingsley gave Umbridge a sour look. "Dolores, I refuse to reinstate the Dementors."

The short, pink woman waved her hand in the air. "I'm not talking about the Kiss, Kingsley. A friend of mine has come up with the most wonderful spell! It separates the wizard from his mind and magic. He will be turned into a robot that can't think for himself. The best part is he is open to suggestion, so he can be told what to do."

"So, you're saying I should make Severus Snape into a slave that cannot think?"

Umbridge frowned a tiny bit. "Well, yes, I suppose you could look at it that way."

"No."

"But, Minister..."

"No."

"Surely..."

"I said no, Dolores. That is too great of a punishment for anyone. It's... what... a step up from the Dementor's Kiss? He won't just be an inanimate blob; he'll be able to take care of himself when ordered to? No. I will not play a part in such foulness. He will go to Azkaban if convicted."

"Minister, please, just give it some thought."

"I don't need to give it any thought. I refuse. I don't want to hear about this any more."

Umbridge frowned. Kingsley thought that just that one look from her could send the walls around him tumbling down. Nothing happened thankfully, except for Dolores Umbridge turning on her heel and stalking out of his office.

Good Riddance! he thought as he watched her backside storm out of the room.

Dolores sent an owl that night to her contact. Putting down the short note that had detailed the Minister's response to his new spell, he frowned. Obviously, he'd have to take matters into his own hands. Umbridge was incapable of convincing anyone to do anything.

No matter... He had a plan. He rose and went into the back room, where a cauldron sat, waiting to be used. He gathered what he needed and began to brew.

Hermione had been holed up in Severus' cell for the past three days. It had taken long hours to mount a defense, but both Severus and she were happy with what they had gathered and were to present. Hermione looked up at Severus.

"There's nothing else you can think of that we can add?"

Severus shook his head.

Hermione looked down at the huge file that now sat on the table. "They'd be foolish to ignore everything in here anyway."

"The Ministry is made up of nothing but fools."

Hermione's eyes closed. "I know."

"You should get out now, while your reputation isn't smeared."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Don't you think that the papers will be filled with gossip about you once they find that you are representing me?"

"Well, they already found out and are badmouthing me as we speak. Personally, I don't care what the papers say. You deserve a good defense. I can give that to you."

Severus looked at her with a bit of admiration. "Miss Granger, you have finally gotten the self-assurance you were seeking in your youth. It... suits you."

Hermione was stunned. She'd received a compliment from Snape, and it had been delivered in a pleasant way, too. She didn't know what to say.

"I thought we'd agreed to call each other by our first names," she sighed finally, choosing to ignore his comment.

"Hermione, then."

She smirked at him. "You're always so to-the-point."

"I appreciate the truth and those who give it quickly."

"I think I've always admired that about you," Hermione confessed.

"I didn't think you admired anything about me, Hermione."

"Well," she responded as she leaned in conspiratorially. "You're wrong."

Severus looked away. He seemed embarrassed.

"I've always admired your intelligence and your bravery. I even admire your sarcasm sometimes. Not too often, though."

"Yes, well, you have to understand it to admire it."

Hermione laughed. "Oh, I understand it, all right. I just think you are a bit harsh at times."

"Harsh times deserve harsh responses."

Hermione tilted her head and looked at Severus. "Perhaps you're right. You don't seem to be nearly as caustic as I remember before the war."

"Sorry, I can try harder if you'd like."

Another laugh escaped Hermione's throat. She had come to find his quick wit refreshing, if not surprising. "No, that's quite all right," she said. "I think that I like you better when you're not railing at everyone and everything in sight."

"Kill-joy."

Hermione's mouth dropped open. She eyed Severus, whose face didn't belie the joke he'd just uttered.

"Wow," she said finally. "You really are quite a bit more than I ever expected."

"Certainly you didn't think I was that mean teacher twenty-four hours a day."

Hermione thought about that. "To be honest," she said sheepishly, "I think I did."

"So, you, Hermione Granger, are the same with your work colleagues as you are with your friends?"

"Of course not."

"But I should constantly be a snarky bastard?"

Hermione's lips thinned as she looked up to the ceiling. Embarrassment came off her in waves. "No, of course you shouldn't. I'm sorry, Severus. Just like you considered me to be a little girl when we first met this week, I have considered you to be a... how did you put it? A snarky bastard... for all these years."

"So, there's room in that enviable mind for you to see me as something more?"

A jolt went through Hermione. She knew what he'd meant. It hadn't been anything provocative whatsoever. Why, then, had she felt hot all over with his question? Something more? Severus Snape? That was not something that had ever crossed Hermione Granger's mind. A picture of him kissing her flashed through her mind.

Okay, now stop that. Where did that come from? Hermione, you have been alone for much too long. That man would never, ever, ever, ever do that with you. She studied his face for a moment. *He does have nice eyes, though. Oh, for Merlin's sake, give it a rest! Drop it! It falls into the realm of impossibility...never going to happen. Quit being a dunderhead!*

"Hermione?" Severus asked, looking a bit concerned.

Hermione snapped out of her berating and focused on Severus. "Sorry," she said quickly. "I got distracted for a minute." She looked at Severus and saw him in a new light. "I think I had already figured out you weren't just a snarky bastard, Severus. It's nice to get to know a different part of you."

"It is also nice to get to know a different part of the know-it-all that invaded my classroom."

Hermione blushed.

"Thank you, Hermione, for doing this for me. It doesn't matter what happens. I will always remember how you have taken this upon yourself."

Her mouth wanted to drop open, and she wanted to gape in an unladylike manner. She fought it with all her might. She would not let Severus see how his words had affected her. That would be a bit too revealing. She didn't want him laughing at her for hours after her departure. She clamped her mouth shut and pretended that his words hadn't affected her in the least.

"Thank you, Severus." She got up. "I'll see you tomorrow. It will be the last day we have to prepare before the trial."

Severus gave her a curt nod before she turned and sent her Patronus to get the guard. She waited silently, knowing that Severus was watching her, but she didn't turn. Soon, the guard came and opened the cell for her. She waved to Severus and was gone in an instant.

Severus watched Hermione go. He settled himself onto his cot with his hands behind his head. He would need to grow accustomed to spending his time in this manner. After all, a lifetime in Azkaban would be filled with days just like this.

Frowning, he mulled over the situation. Granger was good, but the Ministry was against him. He didn't think that anything Hermione said would make any sort of impact on his future. The Ministry already had made up its mind that he needed punishment for his non-crimes.

Too bad I'll be locked away forever; I was beginning to enjoy Granger's company.

Severus frowned more at that thought. Granger and enjoyable company were not usually synonymous in his brain.

She has changed. The years have refined her. She's nice to look at too.

Severus blinked. Nice to look at? Was that phrase even in his vocabulary before today?

I've been alone way too long. I'm starting to create impossible scenarios.

But wouldn't it be nice to be noticed by a lovely woman?

Why would Granger ever even look at me as more than a git? She admitted it herself; she's seen me as nothing but a snarky bastard for years. How could she ever leap from that to having feelings *for me?*

I don't have feelings for her. She's just attractive, can't a man look?

No, looking creates attraction, attraction leads to desire, and desire leads to... nothing good.

Go away! If I'd wanted the voice of reason in my head, I wouldn't be fantasizing over a relationship with Granger.

Who said anything about a relationship? Remember... you're a snarky bastard.

Severus shook his head. This conversation was going nowhere. He needed to get Granger out of his mind before something horrible happened. He began to recite the ingredients for potions in his head.

Chamomile, dove feathers, Ashwinder eggs...

Severus stopped. He was listing the ingredients for a Love Potion. His hands came up to his face. He sighed as he ran his fingers down his cheeks in frustration.

Knock it off, you fool. Nothing, and I repeat, NOTHING, will ever happen between you and Hermione Granger, is that clear? You are destined to live a life of solitude in a cell similar to this one. Get her out of your head!

He returned to his ingredient listing and quickly put the beautiful, young woman out of his head.

Hermione stared out the enchanted window at her office. Being underground, the Ministry had installed magical windows in the building so workers wouldn't feel closed-in. The window could be made to show anything the office occupant wanted. Hermione had chosen a view of the ocean. She found the waves lapping up on the beach to be quite hypnotic. Sometimes, they even helped her to brainstorm ideas when she had a case to solve. Today, the waves sent her into her own head, where her thoughts were tumultuous.

That man... what was she doing thinking about him like that? The thoughts she'd had about Severus in his cell were repeating themselves over and over again in her mind. She'd tried everything to cast them out, but to no avail. Severus Snape pulled her to him and ran his fingers through her hair as his lips pressed against hers passionately. Just the repeating image had made Hermione's breath shorten. Could a kiss from him really be so magnificent? Did she really want to find that out?

Hermione shook her head rapidly back and forth to clear her mind. These thoughts were useless. The man had other things on his mind! He was about to be sent away for life. Besides, what could he ever see in her? Severus had reviled her for most of her life. He'd just barely become civil to her. What kind of idiot was she to be jumping to a relationship when they'd barely been nice to one another for less than a week?

I'm truly hopeless... she thought as she returned to the paperwork on her desk.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 13

After hiding for five years, Severus Snape is found and convicted of Dumbledore's murder. His punishment is way beyond anything ever thought of before. Can Hermione help restore what Severus has lost?

Chapter Three

A memo dropped onto Dolores' desk. She opened it and read it.

Leaky Cauldron at noon.

She crumpled the note and incinerated it with her wand.

The man stirred his cauldron until the liquid inside turned clear. He quickly pulled a ladle from the table and scooped some of the liquid into a vial, filling it halfway to the top. He placed the stopper into it and examined the elixir. Before his eyes, the liquid disappeared. The man smiled evilly.

Placing the vial into his pocket, he wandered into another room. He approached a bed, where a figure lay. The man on the bed would have appeared to be sleeping, except that his eyes were wide open and staring at the ceiling. No movement came from his body except for the painfully slow rise and fall of his chest. The other man approached and looked down at the motionless slip of a man.

"Soon..." the man announced. "Soon there will be no one who will know of your existence," he crooned. "Then there will be no hope for you to ever become what you were before." He threw his head back and laughed. "Imagine! A lifetime of awareness, yet unable to move a muscle! Preserved in a frozen state, unable to die, yet prevented from living." The man came close to the still man's ear. "It's only what you deserve!"

He withdrew then, leaving the statue-like man to his own private hell.

Dolores sat nursing a cup of tea in the pub, awaiting her contact. She didn't need to wait long. A short squat man with round glasses and a balding head soon joined her. Once he spoke, Dolores recognized the man she'd been in contact with earlier in the week.

"Shacklebolt didn't go for the plan?" he asked gruffly.

Umbridge frowned. "No, he thought it was too invasive. What do we do now?"

The portly man produced a vial that appeared to be empty.

"This should solve all of your problems."

Dolores bent low and looked at the vial. "It's empty," she said.

"It's filled with a gaseous potion, you dolt."

Umbridge harrumphed and sat back, glaring at her partner. "Ahem! I am no dolt. How was I to know there was anything in there?!"

"Why would I give you an empty vial?" the man sneered.

Umbridge's lips thinned. "How should I know?"

"This..." the man said as he lifted the vial, "is an Influencing Potion. It works similarly to the Imperius curse, without the repercussions of using an Unforgivable. If opened in a room, it will make all within its walls open to suggestion." The man glared at her for emphasis. Umbridge's eyebrows had lifted as she looked eagerly at her partner.

"I suggest you use this on your colleagues in the Wizengamot right before the start of the trial. You can then order them to convict Snape and explain exactly what the punishment will be."

Umbridge opened her mouth to say something. Instead, she took the vial and rolled it between her fingers.

"What happens after the trial, when this wears off? Everyone will realize they were duped into a false conviction!" Umbridge looked at her partner with a smug look.

"That's the beauty of this potion. Once the suggestion is planted in the victim's mind, it becomes their own thought. They will always think that it was their own idea to do what they did. It is a foolproof way to accomplish our task."

Dolores' hand fisted around the vial before it disappeared into her robes. She grinned conspiratorially at the portly man across from her.

"You've done it," she said. "You've found a way to get rid of Snape forever!"

The man grinned, his chubby cheeks bulging out with the movement of his lips. "We'll celebrate when the deed is done."

Dolores lifted her tea cup. "To success," she toasted.

The man nodded. "To success."

Hermione turned to Severus and smiled as the guard locked the cell door behind her. She settled herself on the far end of the bed and set her large trial folder in between them. She gave Severus a concerned look.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Severus scowled. "I'm wonderful. The highlight of my life has been being locked up in this cell. Really, Hermione, you should try it. It does wonders for one's mental state."

Hermione's shoulders slumped. "I'm sorry. I'm sure this is hard for you."

Severus softened slightly. "It is not your fault that I am locked up in here."

Hermione nodded, figuring that would be the only apology she would receive from him. "All right," she said as she removed a small packet from the file folder on the bed. "Look that over and see if there's anything I've missed." She handed the papers to Severus, who took several minutes to peruse them. When he'd thoroughly looked them over, he handed them back to her.

"Everything seems to be included," he acknowledged. "There's nothing more to add."

Hermione put the papers back into her file and scooted to the back part of the bed. She rested her back against the wall and stretched her legs out in front of her. Severus followed suit and got into the same position.

"When you testify, Severus, please try to stay as calm as possible. The lawyer for the Ministry has studied your personality extensively, I'm sure. He'll try to rile you. He'll want to make you look like a ruthless Death Eater. You'll need to stay calm, no matter what the man says."

"Can I take a Calming Draught before the trial?"

"No. You cannot take any potions or medications whatsoever before the trial. Any drugs like Veritaserum will be administered while you are in the courtroom."

Severus folded his arms in front of him. "I will do my best to curb my temper, then."

"You should also refrain from sarcastic remarks."

Severus looked at Hermione shrewdly. "You take all the fun out of everything, don't you?"

Hermione's look was a mix between humor and frustration. "I'm just trying to help you make a good impression."

"If I'm going to be cast away for life, I might as well have some fun at my own trial."

Hermione straightened up and faced Severus head on. "Severus, stop it. We will prevail. With the memories you gave to Harry, plus your own, and the testimony under Veritaserum, you will prove to them whose side you were on."

Severus looked down and flexed his fingers. "You are an eternal optimist, aren't you?"

"I have high hopes for the outcome of this trial. That's all."

"You have high hopes for everything. I'm surprised the war didn't tarnish your view on the world."

Hermione looked away. "It did for a while. After the war, I was terribly depressed. I left the country and spent a good deal of time with my parents in Australia. After I restored their memories, they helped me to work through my grief. It helped all of us, really. It helped me to get over everything the war had changed in me, and it helped my parents to understand why I modified their memories. In the long run, it was very therapeutic for all of us."

She looked over at Severus now. "Did you ever do that?"

Severus arched an eyebrow at her. "Do what?"

"Unburden yourself of everything you'd been through during the war."

Severus scoffed. "Who would listen to me? I found the neighbor's cat wanted nothing but a good scratch behind the ears. I haven't really spoken to anyone in five years. I've been in hiding, remember."

Hermione gave a grim smile. "I do remember. That's why I asked."

Severus was the one to look away now. "There isn't really anything to unburden, anyway."

"No, I would imagine there wouldn't be," Hermione said wryly. "It must have been really uplifting to have an entire school rallying against you... trying to undermine you at every step. Having those who used to be your friends give you evil looks... that was probably fun, right?"

Severus scowled, but did not look at Hermione.

"Killing your friend, whether you really killed him or not. That was probably really easy. Did you have a good laugh after you Apparated away from Hogwarts that night? Did you look in the mirror and say, 'Great job killing Albus!'?"

"Enough!"

"You said there was nothing to unburden, Severus. I was just agreeing with you."

"Do not make fun of me!"

Hermione scooted over next to Severus, reaching over to put her hand on his. "I'm not." She squeezed his hand, causing him to look over at her finally. "It took me a long time to be able to talk about how I felt, and I was surrounded by people who loved me. I can't imagine how it must have been for you. How it must still be for you. I will listen if you would like to speak about it."

Severus scowled and looked down. Hermione kept her hand on Severus'. She didn't move. She knew it was important to stay quiet and let him come to his own decision about whether he would say anything or not. She knew that to push now would send him far away from her and keep him from telling her anything.

They sat in silence for a long time. Finally, Severus cleared his throat.

"Even though I knew that Albus wasn't truly dead, I... I didn't handle it well. I had to report to the Dark Lord. He told me how valued I was. He spewed on about what a wonderful job I had done. I wanted to vomit on the spot. I left as soon as I could and retreated to my home at Spinner's End. I warded it, put a repelling spell on it, and made it impossible for anyone to be able to tell whether I was within it or not. I crouched in a corner in the dark as I heard Aurors Apparate nearby and try to get to the house. They couldn't find it. Soon, they gave up, but I didn't leave that dark corner until the next morning." Severus looked off into space, deep in thought. "I must have called myself every nasty name I knew that night. I have never loathed myself so much before or since that incident."

Hermione squeezed his hand again. Severus turned his hand up into hers and held it. He was a bit surprised that she even wanted to touch him, but he welcomed her little bit of comfort. It was calming just to have her hand in his.

"I fought a nightly battle with myself from then on. Becoming Hogwarts Headmaster made me even more miserable. I never wanted such a position, but just the fact that I'd attained it, not through my own merits, but because I was the Dark Lord's plaything, was quite demeaning. The reactions of the staff and students were understandable, actually. I would hate myself if I had believed I'd done what everyone else thought I'd done."

They were quiet again. "My parents said something to me that I've always tried to remember," Hermione said at last. "They said, *No matter how much you feel what happened is your fault, remember, you only played a small part in those events."*

Severus scoffed. "Why would you feel that anything was your fault, Hermione?"

Her eyes got big as she looked over at Severus. Tears formed in them. "I was standing right next to Fred Weasley when that explosion hit. If I had only stepped forward three paces, I could have shielded him from the rubble."

It was Severus' turn to squeeze Hermione's hand. "Your parents are right. It wasn't your fault. There was nothing you could have done. If you had, you would be dead."

"I would have gladly given my life for Fred."

"That would have been quite a sacrifice. I don't even think Fred Weasley would have wanted you to do that for him."

Hermione put her head back against the wall. "It's just that so many good people were killed. I felt that I should have been one of them. Why did I get the gift of life when so many others didn't?"

"I have often wondered that myself. Why that fool-of-a-phoenix decided to swoop in at the last minute and cure me is beyond my comprehension."

Hermione's eyes snapped to his. "That's how you survived?"

Severus nodded. "Fawkes came in only a minute after you and your friends had left. His tears cured me within a few minutes. I debated fighting more, but I was still very weak. I managed to Apparate without splinching myself and stayed at my home until I felt well enough to really disappear."

"Why did you do it, Severus? Why did you visit Lily Potter's grave? You must have known they'd look for you there."

"She was my friend. I swore an oath to protect her son. I wanted to honor her death on the anniversary of it. The thought that the Aurors might stake out the graveside after so many years seemed rather paranoid to me. In essence, I fooled myself into feeling secure."

"I thought you were in love with her."

"Yes, so did I," Severus said wryly. "After I had a chance to breathe again...after the battle...I had a lot of time to really examine my feelings. I had mistaken obsession with love and guilt with devotion. She'll always be dear to me... always. Nevertheless, I realized soon after the battle that I hadn't truly loved her for years."

"It all seemed to be a creepy kind of wonderful anyway."

"Whatever does that mean?" Severus asked curiously.

"Who wouldn't want such devotion given to them?" Hermione removed her hand from his and placed it on her lap. "There are few who could love someone so fully that they would endure it for the time you did. Yet, she was dead, and had loved another. Forgive me, I really don't know anything about the two of you, but it seemed a bit obsessive to me in the long run." She glanced over at Severus to make sure she hadn't angered him.

"A very diplomatic response," Severus said with a glower. "I suppose what you really wanted to say was that I was insane for hanging on to such feelings for so long."

"No, that's not it at all!" she exclaimed. She looked to her lap, trying to find the right words to express her feelings. "It's just that I think you are worth more than just having an unrequited love to long for."

Severus stared at her incredulously. "I'm not worth anything, Hermione."

She scoffed. "How could you ever say such a thing?"

"I'm serious. After everything I've done, I don't deserve any such happiness. I'm a loner, and a loner I will be forever."

Hermione shook her head. "You're wrong, Severus. You, out of anyone who fought in this war, deserve to be happy. You have sacrificed the most."

"I have done the most harm."

"*You* have done the most good."

"I have sold my soul."

"You made it possible to win the war."

"You are living in fantasyland."

"Would you like to come join me? It's quite pleasant."

Severus frowned, not sure what to say to that comment.

Hermione shifted and turned fully toward him. "Look, you did do harm when you became a Death Eater. Then you redeemed yourself by turning spy. You were on the side of evil for far less time than you were working against it."

"Nonetheless..."

"Severus, stop it. Throw away the shame and guilt." Realization suddenly dawned on her. Her eyes grew wide. "You wanted them to lock you up! That's why you showed up at the Potters' gravesite. You wanted them to punish you!"

"Don't be ridiculous," Severus said as his eyes shot to the wall.

"Why? How can you think you need to be punished? Haven't you punished yourself enough?"

"No! No, I haven't. I should be cast away for what I did."

"Stop it!"

"No! You wanted the truth. You wanted my feelings?" he railed. "I deserve this!" His hand shot out as he gestured around the cell. "Dumbledore is nowhere to be found. I as good as killed him! If he weren't dead or who-knows-what, then he'd show himself. He wouldn't hide away for over five years! It's my fault, and I should be punished for it."

"Stop this, Severus, it is insanity. Something happened to him, yes, but you can't blame yourself for that. You followed his instructions to the letter. If anyone is to blame, it's him! Someone must have known about your plot. They were probably waiting for him wherever his Portkey took him. They probably killed him or kidnapped him right then. You had nothing to do with that!"

Severus looked at her with a bitter expression. "Why haven't I been able to find him? He couldn't have just disappeared! For all I know he's been killed and turned into a stick or something!"

"Severus, Harry is searching for him. He's got connections that you didn't as a man on the run. Something will come up. We'll find him."

Severus could only stare at her. He'd given up on finding Dumbledore a long time ago, but he'd still gone through the motions. Maybe a new set of eyes could uncover something about what had happened to him. He could only hope. Unfortunately, it seemed that Potter would not have success before his trial tomorrow.

Hermione began to look uncomfortable with his staring. She cleared her throat and looked at him levelly. He cleared his throat also and looked away.

"I should be going," Hermione said after a long silence. She conjured her Patronus, which was sent to get the prison guard.

Severus nodded but did not look at her. He felt a hand on his and raised his head to find Hermione stooped over him.

"We will prevail, Severus. You will be free soon."

With a slight nod, he acknowledged her statement.

"I will see you tomorrow, okay?" she reassured him.

"Yes."

Hermione gave him a little smile. "Get some rest. You have a long day tomorrow."

She straightened and went to the door. The guard had come and was unlocking the cell with his wand. She stepped through the cell gate and turned back to Severus.

"I will be right beside you tomorrow. They will listen and believe."

"Thank you, Hermione."

"Good afternoon, then," she said and was gone.

Rest, Severus thought. *That's the last thing I'll be getting tonight.*

He lay down again and tossed to get comfortable to await the morning and the sealing of his fate.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 13

After hiding for five years, Severus Snape is found and convicted of Dumbledore's murder. His punishment is way beyond anything ever thought of before. Can Hermione help restore what Severus has lost?

Chapter Four

Hermione was with Severus in his cell. They had about half an hour before his trial would begin. Hermione sat on the bed with her back against the wall. She watched as Severus paced back and forth in the small space between his bed and the cell wall. The man fervently paced the three steps to the cell bars, then quickly wheeled around and retraced his steps to the toilet. Over and over again, he repeated this, his hands held tightly behind his back. His gray prison jumper lacked the billow of his robes, but in the state he was in, even they seemed to enlarge and make him look intimidating.

"Severus! Please sit down!" Hermione demanded.

"I can't," he said in a clipped tone.

"Wearing a hole in the floor will not make the trial start any faster," Hermione mused.

Severus stopped his pacing. "I'm not hoping that it will come sooner, Hermione. I'm hoping it will never begin. With the beginning of that trial comes the end of my freedom."

"Severus, it will work out. They will find you innocent because you are."

Severus sat heavily on the bed next to Hermione. "No, they will not. They will sentence me to a deserved fate. I just didn't realize when I made myself vulnerable to capture that I would now be regretting my decision."

Hermione's hand rested on his shoulder. She squeezed it encouragingly. "You don't deserve such a fate, Severus, and deep down, you know it."

Severus frowned. "It matters not what I know or do not know. I have doomed myself to this fate. There is no chance, Hermione. Surely, you recognize that."

Hermione shook her head violently. "No, I don't, Severus. There's a mountain of evidence to prove that you were working for us. You'd have to be blind not to take it all into account. You will be acquitted."

Severus looked at the ground, but smiled ruefully. "I will miss your positive attitude when I'm put away, Hermione."

Hermione caught her breath. "Please! Don't speak like that. This will all work out."

"Nothing ever works out for me. There's no reason for it to start now."

Dolores Umbridge sat in the courtroom and made sure that everyone in the Wizengamot was assembled. When she was certain, she rose.

"Excuse me, Minister," she said to Kingsley Shacklebolt. "I forgot my wand at my desk. May I be excused?"

"Yes, Dolores, but make it quick. The hearing is to start in ten minutes."

"Of course, Minister," she tittered.

She left as Minister Shacklebolt gave the Wizengamot some last minute instructions before the courtroom was opened to the public.

Dolores paused outside the closed door and extracted her wand from her robes. She silently cast a spell that opened the small vial she'd left on the floor by her seat. Looking at her watch, she followed the time and waited for two minutes. Her partner had warned her not to enter the room before then, as the gas would not dissipate for that length of time. Pocketing her wand once again, she reentered the courtroom.

"Hem, hem... Just some guidelines for the trial today," she instructed in her high-pitched voice. "Severus Snape will be found guilty, no matter what evidence is presented. No memories are to be seen today. They will be considered to be inadmissible evidence. His punishment will be to have the Hollowing Spell cast upon him. This will remove his personality and magic. He will be no more than a shell. It is the ***BEST*** alternative. Does anyone have any questions?" She asked the last bit quite cheerfully. Her eyebrows rose as she looked at all of them with a happy smirk on her face.

The entire Wizengamot shook their heads at her.

"Wonderful!" She turned to the guard standing at the back door of the court. "You may let in the observers," she commanded.

The man opened the doors, and a flurry of reporters and spectators filed into the courtroom. Dolores returned to her seat. She wondered which person was her contact. He had told her he'd be in the courtroom and would meet her and the Minister in the courtroom's antechamber to administer the hex. She perused the audience, seeing many people she didn't recognize. She wasn't sure which one was her partner.

Harry Potter and his wife Ginevra had come in and sat on the far left. Umbridge frowned. She tolerated Potter, but would never like him. He'd been an insufferable boy, always meddling where he wasn't needed. He was now a colleague...an Auror here at the Ministry...so she needed to be somewhat respectful, but secretly she loathed him. She hoped he would be sacked soon, but he seemed to be climbing the ladder of advancement at a quick rate, being loved by everyone in his department. Oh, well. It was impossible to drive everything in the world.

Soon, everyone was settled. Minister Shacklebolt pounded his gavel on the block to quiet the courtroom.

"Bring in the prisoner," he commanded.

Severus was brought in, his wrists shackled. Hermione followed closely behind him. Severus was led to the seat in the center of the room. Hermione made her way to a table next to the seat and settled into the chair behind it. The guard roughly thrust Severus down. His shackles attached themselves to the arms of the chair. Chains surrounded his legs also. Hermione winced at the sight of a bound Severus Snape.

The Minister brought the court to order, and the trial began. Hermione stood.

"Your honor, our first piece of evidence will be the memories that Severus Snape gave to Harry Potter on the night of the final battle."

"That evidence is inadmissible," Umbridge tittered. "Those memories could have been altered as they left the defendants body."

"Yes, they are inadmissible," the Minister mimicked.

Hermione frowned and looked down to her notes. "Then I would ask that a Pensieve be brought in and Mister Snape's own memories be examined."

"My dear," Dolores drawled. "No memories can be used in this hearing. For all we know, with the defendant's abilities in Legilimency and Occlumency, his memories could be showing pure lies, and we wouldn't be able to tell."

Hermione bristled. "Madam Umbridge, surely you know that when memories are tampered with, there is obvious evidence to the fact. Even Mister Snape could not change his memories in such a way to avoid detection."

Kingsley spoke up then. "The memories are inadmissible. The defendant's ability to direct his thoughts makes them unreliable."

Hermione scowled. She hadn't foreseen this argument, and she berated herself for not anticipating it being used. She perused her notes and pulled herself together. It would do no good for her to begin to have a tirade only five minutes into the trial.

"Very well," she acquiesced. "I call Harry Potter to the witness stand."

Harry rose and came to the center of the room, taking the empty chair to the left of Severus which faced the Wizengamot.

"Mister Potter, what where your feelings towards Mister Snape before the final battle?" Hermione questioned.

"I didn't trust him. I thought he'd murdered Dumbledore. I knew he was a Death Eater."

"And after the battle, did your opinion of him change?" Hermione asked.

"Yes. He'd given me some of his memories so I saw that he had been told by Dumbledore himself to kill him. He continued to spy against Voldemort and worked to defeat him."

Kingsley interrupted then. "Memory evidence is not permitted Mister Potter."

"Your honor," Hermione retorted. "This is Mister Potter's view of the events that happened. Surely, he shouldn't be kept from speaking."

Kingsley narrowed his eyes at Hermione. "I'll allow it."

"Mister Potter, since the final battle, have you come across anything that would support Mister Snape's claim that he was on our side?"

"I found out that it was he who planted the Sword of Gryffindor in the woods so I could destroy the Horcruxes I came across."

"How can you prove that, Mister Potter?" Hermione questioned.

"He sent his Patronus to guide me to the sword."

"What is the form of his Patronus?" Hermione asked.

"It's a silver doe," Harry answered.

Hermione turned to the Minister. "Permission to allow Mister Snape to conjure a Patronus."

Umbridge chimed in. "We can't give him a wand! He might escape!"

Hermione sighed and looked to Umbridge. "He is chained with magical irons. There is no way he can break those bonds, whether he has a wand in his hand or not. Letting him have a court wand for a minute to conjure a Patronus will in no way help him to escape."

The Minister motioned to the guard. "Please bring in the courtroom wand." The man left the room to get the wand.

"With this wand, Mister Snape, you will only be able to cast a Patronus," Shacklebolt explained. "It is tied to the courtroom and can only perform the spell that I allow. Do not try anything else with it, as you will be knocked unconscious. Is that understood?"

"Fully," Severus said.

The wand was brought to him, and Severus cast his Patronus. A silver doe gracefully emerged from his wand and looked at the Wizengamot. It turned quickly from them and nuzzled Severus' cheek before dissolving. The wand was taken from Severus, and the trial went on.

Harry finished his testimony and other witnesses were brought up. Many were for the prosecution, telling of Severus' doings as a Death Eater. Hermione tried to direct their testimony to always reflect that Severus was a spy when he did the things that were reported.

Finally, it was time for Severus himself to testify.

"Your honor, I wish to administer Veritaserum to the defendant," Hermione requested.

"Request granted," Kingsley stated.

Three drops of Veritaserum were dropped into a spoon and given to Severus. The court waited a few minutes for the serum to take effect. Hermione walked over to Severus.

"State your name," she ordered.

"Severus Tobias Snape."

"Are you a Death Eater?"

"No."

"Have you ever been a Death Eater."

"Yes."

"When?"

"I joined the Death Eaters as a youth. I left them when the Potters were killed."

"Why did you continue to associate with them?"

"I became a spy for Albus Dumbledore."

"How long did you serve as a spy?"

"Until the end of the war."

There was chatter in the courtroom. The Minister banged his gavel to quiet everyone.

"Why did you attack Albus Dumbledore?" Hermione asked. Severus and she had determined that the fewer who knew about Albus not having been killed, the easier it would be to find out what had happened to him. Hermione chose her words carefully so that Severus could answer without giving the full truth away.

"He told me to kill him."

More whispers and mutterings came from the court.

"Why?"

"He was dying. He knew that Draco Malfoy had been ordered to kill him. He wanted to save Draco and end his life without having to suffer extensively. He asked me to do it in fear that the Death Eaters would torture him if given the chance."

"What did you think when he first asked you to kill him?"

"I was mortified."

"Why did agree to do it?"

Severus looked directly at the Minister. "It was what Albus wanted. He wanted me to ensure my place in the Death Eater circle. He wanted me to be trusted by the Dark Lord. He also wanted to make his end a bit easier."

The questioning continued. Soon it was the prosecution's turn to question Severus.

"Mister Snape, when did you become a Death Eater?"

"At age seventeen."

"Why did you join them?"

"I wanted to be looked up to. I wanted to be powerful. I had spent my entire life prior to that being taunted and teased and beaten. I looked upon being a Death Eater as an end to such treatment."

"How many people have you killed, Mister Snape?"

"I don't know."

Is a human life so unimportant to you that you don't remember when you take one?"

"No."

"Then how many have you killed?"

"I'm not sure."

"You don't know how many people you've killed, yet we are to believe that you killed Dumbledore at his request. How can you even remember that?"

Severus' lips thinned. "Albus was my friend. I would remember such a request. Most of the people I killed were killed among raids. It was easy to lose track of who killed whom."

"Would you say you are an experienced killer?"

"No."

"After the hundreds you've struck down, you don't consider yourself to be an experienced killer?"

Severus struggled against his shackles. "I did not kill hundreds!" he snarled.

"My, my, Mister Snape. That's quite the temper you have. Could it be that your murder of Albus Dumbledore was simply a crime of passion. After all, he was the strongest wizard who fought against your beloved master."

Severus' hands clamped into fists as a snarl emerged from his throat. A hand closed around Severus' arm. He looked to see Hermione leaning over and calming him with her hand. He settled down immediately.

"No further questions," the prosecutor said as he sat down.

The Minister looked to Hermione. "Do you have anything more, counselor?"

Hermione rose again. "Mr. Snape, what are your feelings towards Voldemort?"

"He was a murdering despot who yearned for power. His ego and desires made him the most dangerous wizard of our times."

"Yet, you still followed him as a Death Eater?"

"I was young when I joined him. I didn't fully understand his madness. His message is very enticing to those who are searching for acceptance. I was duped."

"Once you realized his true character, what did you do, Mister Snape?"

"I turned from him and began my spy work."

Hermione turned to Shacklebolt. "No further questions."

"Do you have any more witnesses to call, Miss Granger?"

"No, sir."

"Anything more, Mister Duncan?" he asked the prosecutor.

"The prosecution rests."

"Wizengamot, are you ready to rule."

"Yes, Minister," Dolores Umbridge said.

"All those who find Severus Snape guilty, raise your hand."

Every member raised their hand, including Shacklebolt. Hermione's mouth dropped open. Severus frowned intensely.

"The judgment is unanimous. We the Wizengamot find the defendant, Severus Snape, guilty of murder and conspiring with Tom Riddle, also known as Voldemort. The penalty for this offense is for the defendant to undergo a spell to remove his personality and magic from his person. He will be left as little more than a hollow man, able to follow simple commands."

Severus turned white. Hermione stood immediately. "Minister, I was under the assumption that the penalty would be life in Azkaban. I was not informed of this change in penalty."

"The penalty stands as explained." Kingsley pounded his gavel, and the reporters fled from the room.

Two guards came to Severus and released the shackles from the chair. They lifted him up and began to lead him away. Hermione rushed to his side.

"Severus!" she exclaimed. "We'll fight this!"

"It will be useless if my being is to be destroyed," he muttered grimly. His face was a mask. "Thank you for your effort," he whispered as he was led away.

Another guard kept Hermione from following him. "You may see him when you are summoned," he told Hermione. She stopped fighting him and stood helplessly, watching Severus being led away.

Harry bounded up to her. "What happened?"

Hermione shook her head forlornly. "I don't know. I've never seen a unanimous vote in the Wizengamot. I don't even think there's one on record. Something's wrong here, Harry."

"We need to find Dumbledore, and fast," he whispered to her.

"Do you have any leads?"

"No, but I'll get back to work. Will you be all right?"

Hermione nodded absently. Harry turned and left the courtroom. Hermione fidgeted, awaiting her admittance to the room where they had dragged Severus.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 13

After hiding for five years, Severus Snape is found and convicted of Dumbledore's murder. His punishment is way beyond anything ever thought of before. Can Hermione help restore what Severus has lost?

Chapter Five

Severus struggled as he was brought into the small antechamber of the courtroom. He tried to wrestle free from his captors as he was brought in front of a desk where the Minister sat. Dolores Umbridge stood to his left, and a tall man with dark, slicked-back hair stood on his right. The guards shook Severus to still him. Kingsley smiled at Severus.

"Finally, we get some justice, eh, Severus?"

Severus glared at Shacklebolt.

"Dolores, is everything ready?" Kingsley asked.

Dolores turned to her partner, who was the other man in the room. He nodded.

"Yes, Minister, we may begin when you are ready," Umbridge urged.

"Go ahead," Kingsley instructed.

The man with the slicked-back hair raised his wand. He grinned evilly before uttering the curse.

"Inservio!" he cried as an orange light shot from his wand.

Fear filled Severus' heart and he stiffened. He stared as the light came toward him in slow motion. He felt the bolt hit him. A strange sensation came over him as he felt himself diminish. He was literally pulled into himself. All went black, but not for long. When things began to clear, he felt very small and very weak. His magic seemed to be bound. Unable to feel the usual simmering magic that surrounded him, he began to panic. Even his panicking felt small. His psyche had shriveled somehow. He felt empty, bereft of his usual powerfulness.

He seemed to be in a tunnel. He could still see and hear, but the sounds came from far away, and his sight was altered. It was as if he was looking through a tube at his surroundings. He tried to blink, but nothing happened. Trying to raise his hand, panic gripped him as he realized he couldn't. A deep terror coursed through his consciousness as he realized he couldn't move any part of his body. It was as if he was totally cut off from his bodily functions. He tried desperately to gain access to his body again, but to no avail. He was helpless.

He was trapped inside himself with no way to communicate with anyone... unable to be released. It was a cruel punishment indeed. A lifetime watching everything around him was no way whatsoever to exist. How long would it take him before he went insane? It probably wouldn't take a long time at all.

His attention was drawn to Umbridge, who had crept up to him and was leaning into him, looking at him strangely.

"It's done then?" she asked.

"It seems to have worked perfectly." The spell-caster's voice came from far away. "Command him to do something."

Umbridge got a cruel grin on her face. "Slap yourself in the face."

Severus felt his hand move and hit his face. The pain from the slap was intense, and if he'd had any control, he'd have taken in a sharp breath. But he could only suffer silently.

"Hah! He did it!" Umbridge rejoiced.

The man who cast the spell wandered over to him and glared into his face. "Not so haughty now, are you, Snape?" he remarked caustically. "May you rot in hell with all your secrets!" The man sneered and turned away from Severus, positioning himself to the side of Umbridge.

"Can I have him?" Dolores asked Shacklebolt with an evil glint in her eye.

"I beg your pardon?" Kingsley's voice asked from a distance.

"Can I keep him? I'll punish him every day. It will be glorious!"

Severus cringed at the horrid woman and hoped beyond all reason that her wish would not be granted.

At that moment, Hermione Granger burst through the door. She took one look at Severus, and her face fell. Moving quickly up to him, she stood next to Umbridge and gawked at him.

"What possessed you to do such a thing?" she cried.

"Hermione," Kingsley said. "It was the only way."

Hermione turned, her shoulders tensely set. "What happened to life in Azkaban? Certainly that would be punishment enough!"

"This was better in the long run," Kingsley explained.

"Can I have him?" Umbridge interrupted.

Hermione glanced over at Umbridge and saw the look on her face. It was carnivorous, as if she was about to devour Severus Snape right then and there.

This isn't good, Hermione thought to herself. *She mustn't get him. She will do horrible things to him. Kingsley, however, seems to be on her side. Something has influenced him, and he doesn't care what happens to Severus.* Her quick mind fashioned a plan. *Maybe I can turn this to my favor. I'll have to convince them that I'm as ruthless as Umbridge, though, or it'll never work.*

"What do you mean, Madam Umbridge? Why do you want him?" Hermione asked finally.

"Why, think, Miss Granger. He needs to be punished, who better than me to enforce that?"

Hermione glanced at Severus. Her face turned cold. "I would think that one of his ex-students would be able to do that much better than you, Madam Umbridge."

Dolores sputtered as Hermione turned to Kingsley. "Let me have him!"

"But... but... She was just defending him!" Dolores screeched.

Hermione's head snapped back to Umbridge. "That is my job, isn't it?" She didn't wait for a response. "I was employed to defend the defenseless. I did my job, but I have no love for Severus Snape." She began circling his still body. "He was horrid to me as a teacher. I was Harry Potter's friend. To him, that was unforgivable. He berated me at every turn. Don't you think I've privately dreamed of seeing him reduced to such a fate? How I would love to be the one to direct punishment for him!" She faced Kingsley now. "Please, Minister. I deserve this. It's only fair. After all, she's never been insulted by this git."

"Minister, she may be right, but the girl is inexperienced. She wouldn't know the first thing to do to punish him!"

Hermione turned to Severus. "Get on your knees!" Her conscience screamed at her, but she continued as she watched Severus lower himself to his knees. "Bow before me."

Severus lowered himself to the ground. Hermione felt as if she were about to throw up. She steeled her face to show none of it. "Rise."

Severus jerked to a standing position again.

Hermione conjured a knife. It floated in front of him. "Take the knife," she directed. Severus grasped it. "Slice through your Dark Mark."

Severus lowered the knife to his forearm.

"No!" Shacklebolt screamed. "Hermione, that's enough! You will not kill him."

Severus paused, the blade-tip pointing into his flesh. His face held no emotion whatsoever. He gazed down blandly at the blade that was jabbing into the remnants of his Dark Mark, awaiting instructions.

Hermione turned to Kingsley. "As you wish, Minister." Turning back to Severus she commanded he drop the knife. It clattered to the floor as Severus straightened up and stared forward blankly.

"You have proven your point," Kingsley declared. "I order you to refrain from killing him. His punishment is to remain in this state for life, and you will not shorten that life, is that understood?"

"Yes, Minister."

Umbridge bristled beside her. Hermione wanted to smirk, but she was still disgusted with her display.

"You may have him. Be sure to punish him daily."

Hermione's eyes glimmered evilly. "That will be a pleasure, Minister."

"You may take your new acquisition."

"Thank you, Minister," Hermione said with a slight bow of her head. She turned to Severus. "Come, Snape," she ordered.

Severus turned jerkily and followed her out of the antechamber. Hermione led him to the main lobby in silence and brought him to one of the Floo's. She refrained from making eye contact with him.

"Step into the Floo. When you appear at my house, step out of the Floo to make room for me."

Severus jerked into the fireplace. Hermione threw in some Floo powder and called out her home. Severus disappeared, and Hermione replaced him in the fireplace. Soon, she was standing in her home, looking up at the man she'd fought so hard to set free.

Her face fell as she really looked at him. She had avoided taking in his appearance too closely in the antechamber for fear that she would break down. Now, it mattered little whether she broke down or not. She came close to him and really looked at him. His face was empty. She gazed into his eyes, the most expressive part of him. They were empty. Bereft of emotion and awareness, they were simply void.

Hermione searched his face, looking for something. There was nothing. He was simply not there anymore. Except for his physical appearance, there was no sign of Severus Snape. Gone was the glint in his eye when he was being sarcastic. Gone was the smirk on his face when he found something humorous. He just wasn't there. Severus stared ahead blankly, not moving at all.

"Oh!" Hermione cried. "What did they do to you?" The tears she'd been holding back fell down her face. She took her hand and stroked his cheek. "Are you even in there? Is there any hope?"

She crashed against him. He made no move whatsoever. His arms sat limply by his side as she grasped him and crushed him in an embrace. "Severus, I'm sorry! This is my fault. I'm sorry I had to be so harsh with you in the antechamber. I knew that if they suspected that I would treat you well, Umbridge would take you. I couldn't let that wench have you. She would have destroyed you."

Hermione pulled back and looked at Severus. His face remained a stone. He stared forward, not acknowledging her at all. He wasn't there. He was just... empty.

"You're gone, aren't you?" Hermione squeaked. "They've totally destroyed you! There's nothing there! Oh, Severus!" she pulled herself into him again. "I will find a way to fix this."

When Hermione had said all that she had to Shacklebolt, Severus had believed every word. Who knew the woman could act so well? He actually feared that she would go through with making him cut himself. He'd questioned whether his placement with Hermione would be better than Umbridge in the long run.

When she had thrown herself at him, it had been like a balm. Relief flooded him that she hadn't meant a word she'd said to Shacklebolt. He longed to put his arms around her and scream that he was there. In the long run, though, it didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

"Hermione!" he tried to shout, but his mouth would not cooperate. He tried to lift his arms to touch her, but they were limp by his side. He was immobile. He couldn't even direct his eyes towards her. He only stared off into the distance, blinking occasionally.

He was unable to communicate with anyone or anything, and he would remain that way forever. Even Hermione's impassioned vow to fix everything didn't make him believe that he would ever escape this personal hell he found himself in. He had been sentenced to a torture worse than death. He would never again be able to do anything for himself. He was trapped in the body that had now become a prison cell. There was no escape for him. There never would be.

Despair filled him as the reality of his situation crashed down around him. He was lost... forever. He withdrew into himself, not even paying attention to what his vacant eyes could see or what his useless ears could hear. Darkness filled his soul.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 13

After hiding for five years, Severus Snape is found and convicted of Dumbledore's murder. His punishment is way beyond anything ever thought of before. Can Hermione help restore what Severus has lost?

Chapter 6

Dolores sat in the Leaky Cauldron, sipping a pink Pomegranate Fizz. She looked down at the drink. It was the Wizarding equivalent of a Shirley Temple. It was made with pomegranate juice and cream. Aside from tea, it was her favorite beverage, being the one she always turned to when she wanted to celebrate. Today, she had much to celebrate.

Her musings were interrupted as her partner joined her. He ordered a Firewhiskey and smiled gloatingly after Tom had shuffled off to get his drink.

"Ah, Dolores, we have conquered!" he said haughtily.

Umbridge grinned, her teeth flashing a bit as she too gloated about their win. "He has finally been taken care of. He should have been thrown in Azkaban after the first war!"

Her partner shrugged. "It doesn't matter now. His new prison will make up for all the punishments he's escaped over the years. I suspect he'll be totally insane in a few months."

Tom came and placed the drink in front of Dolores' partner. He grasped it quickly and saluted her. Dolores, in turn, lifted her Pomegranate Fizz and clinked her glass against his.

"To a lifetime of misery for Snape," the man said.

"And an eternity of pain and torture!" Umbridge added before shooting back her drink. Her partner did the same. She straightened out and placed her glass back onto the table. "I want to thank you for your help. This truly was the perfect punishment."

The man smiled evilly. "Yes, it certainly was. The only unfortunate thing is that you don't have him in your possession."

Umbridge stared into her glass. "Yes, that would have made for a perfect day, wouldn't it? It seems that the Granger girl has some vendetta against him, though. Hopefully, he'll get his just rewards for being one of those despicable Death Eaters. I wish we could cast this spell on every one of them."

Her partner furrowed his brow, but Umbridge was still gazing into her glass and didn't see his look of consternation. "Indeed," he said finally as he rose. He lowered his head slightly in farewell. Umbridge looked up and smiled at him.

"Thank you, again, for your help," she said before he departed.

"You know how to contact me if there are any problems, right?" the man asked.

"You're simply an owl away, aren't you?"

"Yes, that's right. Simply an owl away." The man turned and left the pub, leaving Umbridge to smile into her glass as she thought of the horrors that awaited Severus Snape in his newfound existence.

A loud knock came at Hermione's door. She got up and answered it. Harry burst through the door.

"They did it, didn't they?" he asked in trepidation.

Hermione nodded her head and motioned toward a stiff Severus Snape, who was seated on her lounge chair. Harry ran up to him and crouched down so he could look into his face.

"Hermione, there's nothing left of him!"

Hermione came up to Harry. She frowned down at him. "I know," she replied. "I've never seen anything like it. I imagine he would look much the same if he'd been Kissed. I don't think there's much of a difference, do you?"

"No, I don't. Can he do anything?"

Hermione gave a quick nod. "He listens to commands. He can carry them out."

"What are we going to do, Hermione?"

"I was hoping you might have an answer."

"They used a spell, right?" Harry asked.

"Yes."

"Spells can be broken." He stood straight and pulled out his wand. *"Finite Incantatem,"* he chanted. Nothing happened. "I figured that would be too easy, but at least we've ruled it out."

Hermione looked to Harry with trepidation. "What if his being is gone forever?" She began breathing heavily as she glanced at Severus. His body remained still, his eyes vacant, as he stared blankly at the wall.

"Oh, Merlin, what if he's simply gone, and we can do nothing to get him back?" she cried.

Harry's hands came up to Hermione's arms. He jostled her slightly so her attention would be drawn back to him.

"Hermione," he said softly. "There's a way. We'll find it. If a spell was cast, then it can be reversed. His spirit went somewhere. It will be able to reenter his body once we find the counter-curse."

Hermione looked deeply into Harry's eyes. She saw the reassurance in them and calmed herself. Her shoulders slumped, and she breathed a small sigh of relief.

"You're right, of course, Harry. It's just... it's just so hard to see him like this." She glanced back at Severus' immobile figure. It was as if he were a doll perched upon the couch. He hadn't moved a muscle nor had he hardly blinked. His stare was fixed and lifeless. If Hermione hadn't known better, she'd assume he was dead.

Hermione shook her head and tried to clear her mind. She pulled away from Harry and wandered over to her bookshelf. Her fingers traveled the books on the shelf until she found the one she was looking for and pulled it down. *Breaking Spells* was the title. "Maybe there's something in here we can start with."

Harry pulled another book off the shelf. Hermione gave him an odd look.

"Hey, you're not the only one who can do research, you know!"

Hermione smiled for the first time in hours. "You wouldn't have been able to tell that during our school years, Harry."

He grinned at her and settled himself on the couch to pore through the Potions book in his hand, hoping that maybe the spell could be counteracted with some sort of potion. Hermione settled next to him and began poring through the spell book.

They remained like that for hours. Hermione glanced up occasionally and frowned at Severus. He never moved. He hardly blinked. It was as if he wasn't really there, but he was. The whole situation was very eerie.

Finally, she slammed her book shut. She looked over at Harry.

"It's late, and I've come across nothing. I'm heading for bed. You can stay here, if you'd like."

"No, Ginny would worry." He closed his book and set it on the table in front of them. "I'll poke around the Ministry tomorrow. Did it seem to you that Umbridge was in control during the hearing?"

Hermione nodded. "She would say something, and Kingsley would mimic it."

"She wouldn't have Imperiused him, would she?" Harry asked.

"She would have had to do it to the entire Wizengamot. They were unanimous in their decision."

"Hmm... I think she's probably the place to start. Maybe we can find out exactly what spell was used on Snape, and go from there."

"That's a good idea, Harry. I'll search the Ministry library and see what I can find on breaking spells."

"All right. Good night, Hermione."

Harry glanced at Severus and frowned. He walked by him and let himself out of Hermione's flat. Hermione moved to Severus and stooped low so she could look at him.

"It's time for bed, Severus."

Severus made no move at all. Hermione stood and went into her spare room. With a wave of her wand, a bed appeared. She waved her wand again, and a chair morphed into a small dresser. She went to the doorway and called to Severus.

"Severus, get up and come over here, please."

Severus rose and jerkily walked to the spare room.

"You can sleep here, Severus. Go ahead and go to bed."

The man jerked his way to the bed, laid down, and stared up at the ceiling.

Hermione's heart constricted within her. She waved her wand, and his clothes transfigured themselves into pajamas. She wandered over to his side. Looking down at him, she studied his face once again. Empty... it was empty. She bent low and kissed him on the forehead. She pulled back and tenderly closed his eyes for him.

"Go to sleep, Severus," she whispered. Turning, she looked back at him once again. "Hopefully, we'll have some answers tomorrow."

She made her way out of the room, leaving a Hollow man marveling at the tender touch he'd received from the beautiful witch who was his caregiver.

A few days had passed before Harry had returned to Hermione's flat. In that time, Hermione had studied whatever books she could find on breaking spells. She had come up with ideas, but without knowing exactly what was cast, she would be unable to do anything to counteract the spell.

She'd taken a few days off from work, giving herself the time she'd needed to study. She had also taken that time to care for Severus. He really hadn't needed much care, actually. All he'd done was sit in a chair and stare at the wall. Hermione had prepared him meals, and he'd robotically eaten them. She'd fussed around him occasionally, trying to see if there was any Severus Snape within him, but she had always been disappointed. Sometimes, she would try to keep from looking at him, but her eyes had ultimately been drawn to him frequently. His vacant expression had clouded her dreams at night.

She sat next to him now. He was on the couch, staring straight ahead.

"Severus, look at me."

The man turned his head slowly until his vacant eyes were looking toward her. Hermione gasped involuntarily. It was a reaction she'd found herself doing a lot these past few days. His eyes were always so empty. No matter how she'd tried, she was unable to keep from reacting to the sheer emptiness in his face. Unbidden tears fell down her cheeks. Would she ever stop crying for this man?

"I didn't realize how hard this would be," she muttered to herself. "How I want you back and whole again!" Her hand came up, and she caressed his face.

At that moment, Harry decided to Floo through into her flat. He emerged from the fireplace and gave Hermione a curious look. Hermione withdrew her hand and placed it in her lap awkwardly.

"Umm," Harry said. He cleared his throat. "Am I interrupting?"

Hermione gave him a withering look. Harry chuckled. "You have to admit, that was a bit of an odd sight...you stroking Snape's cheek."

Hermione blushed furiously. Harry's eyebrows rose. "*IS* there something to tell, Hermione?"

"Harry, of course there isn't! Are you accusing me of taking advantage of a man who's lost his mental capacities?"

"No, Hermione. I know you would never do such a thing." He watched his friend curiously. "So, why were you doing that?"

She glanced at Severus and then back at Harry. "I feel so lost and helpless. I hate seeing him like this. Harry, I don't know how much longer I can watch him bumble around like a mindless drone."

"Are you sure this is just friendly concern?"

Hermione's eyes snapped to Harry's. "What are you implying?"

"Could your concern be more than just... concern?"

Hermione looked down and twisted her hands in her lap. "What would you say if I said that it was?" She glanced up and gave Harry a tremulous look.

"You're saying you have feelings for Snape?"

She sighed. "Yes, that's what I'm saying. It started almost immediately when I was working on his case. He's not what he used to be when we were kids." She looked at the empty shell that was once Severus Snape. "I find him intriguing."

"Does he find you to be equally... intriguing?"

Hermione scoffed. "I doubt it! He finds me to be a capable lawyer. That's as far as his feelings go... or went... however you want to categorize it."

"Hermione, why are you doing this? If he has no feelings for you, you're setting yourself up for disappointment, if and when we can restore his personality."

"No, I'm not. I know there's absolutely no chance for me with him. Harry, he needs me. I'm not going to abandon him just so my feelings don't grow."

"Can't you just keep yourself from becoming enamored, for lack of a better word?"

"I think it's too late for that," Hermione muttered.

"Be careful, okay? Snape's not the nicest guy when he feels cornered."

"Harry, I won't corner him. He'll never know. We'll get him back to himself, and he can go on with his life."

"We'll have to find Dumbledore first."

"How is that coming?"

"Nothing has come to light. I do have a plan with Umbridge, though. That's why I stopped by."

"Please, don't keep me waiting," Hermione retorted.

"I'm going to meet with her in place of Auror Duncan for their weekly review of arrests. I'll slip her some Veritaserum and question her about what happened. It will serve her right after all the Veritaserum she used on students during our fifth year."

Hermione smiled. "I think that should work. Come by as soon as you're done. I want to know what you learn."

"You'll be the first to know, believe me."

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 13

After hiding for five years, Severus Snape is found and convicted of Dumbledore's murder. His punishment is way beyond anything ever thought of before. Can Hermione help restore what Severus has lost?

Chapter 7

Harry knocked on Dolores Umbridge's door. A tray laden with two cups and a stack of papers balanced somewhat precariously on his arm as his fist tapped the open door. Umbridge looked up, and her eyebrows narrowed.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Madam Umbridge. Auror Duncan sends his apologies. His daughter is sick so he cannot make your scheduled meeting. He sent me to review the arrests for the week with you."

Umbridge sighed. "Come in, then," she said curtly.

"I took the liberty to bring us up some tea. I hope that's all right?" Harry asked.

Umbridge looked from Harry to the tea. She smiled. " Darjeeling... my favorite! Thank you, Mister Potter. That was most... kind."

Harry set the tray on the desk and distributed the tea. He settled into the soft chair in front of Dolores' desk and passed a copy of the arrests to her. He sipped his tea, hoping to urge Umbridge to do the same. She followed suit, after sniffing at it curiously. Not finding any offensive odor, she downed the cup quickly. Harry began his report, keeping an eye on her, looking for the signs that the Veritaserum he'd slipped into her cup was working. Her eyes glazed over slightly after a few minutes.

"Madam Umbridge, what was your involvement in Snape's trial?"

"I controlled it, of course," she stated. Her eyes narrowed at Harry, but he didn't let her get a word in.

"What do you mean?"

"I slipped the Wizengamot a potion that made them susceptible to suggestion. I merely suggested that Snape be convicted and that the Hollowing Spell be used as his punishment."

Harry's lips thinned. "How does the spell work?"

"It binds the person's magic and personality so the person becomes a shell of himself."

"Where does the magic and personality go?"

"They are trapped in the inner recesses of the brain." Umbridge fidgeted a bit at the information that was spewing out of her mouth, but she had no choice but to comply.

Harry's eyebrows rose. "So, Snape is still there, he just can't do anything?"

"That's right."

"Is he aware of his surroundings and what's happening around him?"

Umbridge grinned evilly. "That's the beauty of the punishment. He is fully aware and can feel whatever happens to his body. He just can't react! No one knows he's cognizant. It's like solitary confinement for eternity!"

"What spell did you use?"

"I didn't use any spell. I wasn't the caster. My partner was."

"Who is your partner?"

"I don't know. He always comes in disguise. He told me of the spell and gave me the potion to use on the Wizengamot."

"What spell did he use?"

Umbridge fought not to answer. Unfortunately, the Veritaserum was her enemy. "He said *Inservio* before casting the spell."

"How did he move his wand?"

Umbridge removed her wand and made a back and forth swishing movement.

Harry thought for a moment. He decided that he'd found out all he could. Quickly, he pulled out his wand and pointed it at Umbridge. *"Obliviate!"* he chanted.

Umbridge blinked. Harry gave her a quizzical look as he hid his wand away again. "Madam Umbridge? You seemed to be far away for a moment."

Dolores blinked and looked at Harry. "I'm s... sorry," she stuttered. "I seem to have drifted off. What were you saying?"

Harry pointed to his paper. "We apprehended the vagrant wizard who was living behind the Diagon Alley Café. His hearing will be tomorrow."

"Oh, thank Merlin! He was such a nuisance!" Umbridge uttered.

The two went through the rest of the report, and Harry soon was on his way, carrying his laced tea with him, a smirk gracing his face.

Hermione lifted the spoon and fed Severus a mouthful of soup. It was simply easier for her to feed him herself when dealing with a messy food like soup. He was constantly missing his mouth and spilling all over himself when he did it on his own. This way, food actually got into the specter of a man.

A knock on the door caused her to frown. She rose and went to answer it. She looked a bit surprised to see Harry so soon after their conversation the other night.

"You've done it already?" she asked as Harry moved past her and into the room.

"It was quite easy, Hermione. She's a glutton for Darjeeling tea. She drank it down almost immediately. She did sniff at it, but as the Veritaserum is odorless, she didn't suspect anything."

Hermione pulled him to the sofa and sat down. "What did you find out?"

Harry explained the entire conversation to Hermione, highlighting the fact that Umbridge had controlled the Wizengamot and was working with someone unknown. He craned his head and looked over at Snape, who was seated at the table, staring blankly ahead.

"No change in him?" he asked Hermione.

"Of course not." Hermione looked to Severus sadly. "It just breaks my heart to see him like this."

"Hopefully, he won't have to be this way much longer. Umbridge told me the spell."

"What is it?"

"She said the man who put the spell on Snape moved his wand like this." He paused to show her the movements. "Then he chanted *Inservio."*

"Inservio," Hermione repeated. That means to enslave." She thought for a moment. "Did she tell you exactly what the spell did?"

Harry explained all that Umbridge had divulged about her partner and his spell. He told her how Severus was trapped within himself. Hermione rose and went over to the stiff man sitting at the table.

"So, he's in there, he just can't communicate?" she asked as she peered into Severus' face.

"There's more," Harry continued. "He can hear everything that goes on around him, and he can feel anything that happens to his body."

Hermione frowned. "You mean he can hear us right now?"

"Yes, he just can't respond back. Umbridge said it was like a solitary-confinement type of punishment."

Hermione stared at Severus. "You can hear me?" she muttered. "Oh, Severus, we'll get you back, I promise!"

He was still empty, but the realization that he might be able to hear her whether he showed any emotion or not, calmed Hermione and gave her some hope. Straightening, she went back to Harry. She sat back down on the sofa and folded her arms in front of her. Suddenly, her eyes went wide. She looked at Harry as if the world were about to end.

"I thought you'd catch on rather quickly," Harry mused.

Hermione stood and grabbed Harry. She dragged him to her bedroom and closed the door behind her. Casting a *Muffliato* spell, she turned quickly back to him.

"Oh, what am I going to do? He heard every word the other night! He knows I care about him."

"Hermione, it's all right. Everything will be all right."

"Harry, no, it won't! This is Severus Snape we're talking about. He'll be... angry. He'll belittle me and call me a fool!"

"Hermione, you don't know that. Maybe he'll be flattered."

Hermione wrung her hands together nervously. "Flattered? Severus Snape might be flattered? Have you lost your head? He'll frown and call me a silly, little girl with silly, little fantasies. What have I done? I've ruined a friendship that was just beginning!"

Harry reached out and grasped her shoulders. "You need to get a hold of yourself. We need to reverse this spell and then you can go hide under a rock as far as I'm concerned."

Hermione furrowed her brow in thought before snapping her head up and holding it high. "You're right, of course, Harry. We have to concentrate on reversing the spell. Show me the wand movements again."

Hermione turned off her emotions and became serious. She was all business as they picked apart the wand movements.

"All right, let's look at some of the books I've found. They're out in the front room."

She removed the Muffliato and went back into the room. She stopped dead when she saw Severus. He hadn't moved, still facing the same wall, still with a blank look on his face, but everything changed for her. Her eyes widened, and she seemed to turn in on herself. A friendly hand touched her shoulder reassuringly.

"Hermione, focus please. Everything will be all right."

Hermione gave her head a little shake and went over to the table. She grabbed a book and sat down across from where Severus was. Harry picked up another book and sat next to her. The two friends flipped through page after page, working at a furious pace, scanning the pages quickly and turning to the next. Hermione found nothing in the book she was studying that could help, so she exchanged it for the next book in the pile. This went on as they searched every book on the table. Finally, in the second to last tome, Hermione pointed at the page she was scanning.

"There," she said, showing the book to Harry.

"Mind Altering Spells," he read as he looked at the top of the page.

Hermione explained what she'd found. "This spell is the basis for reversing Mind Altering Spells. Since Severus' mind is still intact, we can start here and adjust the spell to pull his mind back to where it ought to be."

"You're not just going to shoot spells at him until he's cured, are you?"

Hermione looked at Harry as if he'd lost his head. "Harry, we need to do more research before we'll be ready to do anything. In any case, we can't cast the spell on Severus right away. We'll need to experiment with some test subjects."

"What kind of test subjects?" Harry asked.

"Mice will work," she replied. "I'll pick some up tomorrow. We'll have to cast the Inservio Spell on them first and then try to cure them. Hopefully, it won't take too many trials before we find a combination that will restore Severus' being to him."

"What can I do?" Harry asked.

"Give me a couple of days to experiment. When I've come up with a spell, I'll have you join me and learn it."

"You want me to perform the spell."

Hermione glanced at Severus. "I think that would be best."

Harry gave Hermione a concerned look. "Whatever you say," he said finally. He then stood. "I'll leave you to your research, then."

"You don't have to go, Harry."

"Oh, yes, I do," Harry said with a laugh. "Ginny will be upset if I spend too much time away from her. I came right over after work, and she'll want me to be home soon."

"She has you so wrapped around her finger!" Hermione joked.

"It's exactly where I want to be."

Hermione smiled at him. She rose and walked him to the door. Closing it behind his retreating form, she leaned against it and sighed. She longed for someone to feel that way about her. Glancing back at Severus, she frowned. If only it could be him!

Wandering back to the table, she told Severus to get up and get ready for bed. He jerkily rose, then walked into the bedroom and lay down on the bed. As she'd done every night, she transformed his clothes into pajamas. A clean set of clothing sat on the dresser, awaiting the morning.

Hermione sighed and her shoulders sagged. She meandered to the bed and sat on the side of it, looking down at Severus. His eyes stared up at the ceiling and never wavered from their position. His face registered nothing.

She took his hand in hers. "Harry says you can feel this," she said as she rubbed his hand with her thumb. "I know I'm not your favorite person, but I thought you might like some physical contact."

She continued to rub circles on his hand and stared at him. Quite a while passed before she mustered up the courage to say what she wanted to say to him.

"Severus, I'm sorry. I didn't know you could hear me when I spoke about my feelings for you. I've enjoyed our small amount of time together and was hoping to consider you a friend. I suppose I've mucked that up now. I hope you aren't too angry with me.

"I promise, Severus, I won't breathe another word of this out loud. I wasn't intending to tell you, and I won't bring it up. I'll keep my distance from you and give you your space. I don't want you to be uncomfortable."

The man lay motionless on the bed. Nothing moved. His eyes remained glued to the ceiling. Hopelessness filled Hermione. Even if they succeeded, could he ever be the same? Her eyes closed, and her head dropped slowly.

This just isn't fair. No one should have such a punishment placed upon them. It's evil.

Her head came back up as she opened her eyes. She reached over and closed Severus' eyelids, so he could get some sleep.

"I'm going to work on the counter-spell now, Severus. Hopefully, this nightmare will be over soon."

She'd kissed his forehead every night before this. She debated whether she should do it again.

Of course you shouldn't do it again. Not with everything you know now.

Still, the debate raged within her. What would it hurt?

I've already done the damage to our relationship. A few more kisses on the forehead in the next couple of days will not make his rage any worse.

With her decision made, she bent low and placed her lips on his forehead. She kissed him quickly, rose from the bed, and left the room. Knowing that he could feel her when she kissed him made her insides flutter. Could it ever be possible that he would enjoy such a show of affection from her?

Now you're really in fantasyland, Hermione. How could he ever think of you as more than the little know-it-all that he used to teach? Don't get trapped in possibilities that will never be possible. He doesn't see you that way and never will.

She went back to her book and buried herself in it, spending the rest of the night making notes on possible spell variations.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 13

After hiding for five years, Severus Snape is found and convicted of Dumbledore's murder. His punishment is way beyond anything ever thought of before. Can Hermione help restore what Severus has lost?

Chapter 8

Severus stared through his tunnel vision at Hermione. She was sitting across from him with her nose buried in a book. She hadn't lifted her head in a long while. Her brow was furrowed as she read. Muttering something to herself, she looked up and over at the table. Severus couldn't see the table, but he knew there was a cage with ten mice in it placed there.

He had been seated at the table when Hermione had brought in the cage, along with a smaller one, and set both there. She'd taken one of the mice out of the large cage and had placed it alone in the smaller one. Casting the Insevio Spell, she'd then gasped as the mouse was thrown into the side of the cage and began to shake. The mouse had continued to shake violently, no matter what Hermione had tried. She'd been forced to kill the poor creature to end its misery.

That disturbing episode had sent her into her book. She hadn't emerged again until now. She turned from the table and looked at Severus.

"I'm going to try the spell again. I think the problem was my intent," she informed him. Blanching, she continued. "I didn't really want to do it before. I couldn't make myself want what has happened to you to happen to any creature, even a small mouse." She grimaced as she looked once again to the mice in their cage. "But I have to, don't I?" she said absently. "Without the intent, the mouse was condemned to a more horrible fate than Hollowing. I killed him by trying to save him."

Severus' heart constricted within him. Hermione was truly one of the most compassionate women he'd ever met. Who else would bemoan the death of a small rodent? In fact, who else would bemoan his fate? No one.

He yearned to envelop her in his arms and tell her everything would be all right. Unfortunately, he neither knew that everything would be all right, nor could he move to console her. Anger rushed through him. There was so much he wanted to tell the woman before him, but he was incapable of it.

The day she'd confessed her feelings to Potter, Severus had been shocked. His mind reviewed his reactions as his body continued to stare blankly ahead.

She likes me?

She... has feelings... for me?

How can that possibly be?

No, don't think that, Hermione! I do have feelings for you, too! Hermione... Hermione! You're wrong! I find you incredibly intriguing!

There is a chance for us! We just have to both be able to speak! Hermione, I care about you, too! Don't think that our being together is impossible. It's not! I will do everything in my power to convince you of that!

Her confession had driven the darkness from him. He no longer felt the urge to withdraw and sulk. He wanted to jump up and shout to the world that she loved him. He wanted to throw himself at her, pick her up, and twirl her around in happiness. He wished he could simply touch her and feel her skin under his fingers. His condition clearly made that impossible.

Now, however, he was a bit worried. She'd apologized for saying her feelings aloud. For some reason, she thought he wouldn't reciprocate. Well, if he really looked at himself and his persona, it wasn't hard to see why she thought the way she did.

They'd worked for a week together to get his trial ready. He'd been quite civil then, but all of Hermione's previous memories of him had been tainted by the Death Eater persona he'd been forced to take upon himself. Granted, he tended to enjoy being surly and frightening, but he wasn't that man always.

As he'd told Hermione before, he wasn't always the snarky bastard that the students thought him to be. Even his friends, though, didn't really know who Severus Snape was. He had gotten lost a long time ago in a character that needed to be developed to keep him safe from the Dark Lord.

If the truth be known, not even he knew who he was. He knew who he wanted to be, but could he truly be more than what he'd become? He hoped so. The witch before him deserved someone who was whole and mature. His actions as a spy had been very self-serving and, to some extent, immature.

He'd been forced to do and say things to many that were hurtful and uncaring. Even those who were close to him, those who'd known him well, had been on the receiving end of his caustic tongue. Despite his outward nonchalance, he'd been disturbed at times by the length in which he'd go to insult others.

Ah, and you, my dear Hermione, have gotten the brunt of it, haven't you? My insults toward you, the friend of the hated Harry Potter, were always more venomous because of who you were. It's no wonder you think I could never love you. I hope to dispel those misgivings soon.

"Severus, come over here. You should probably be able to see what I'm doing."

Severus felt his body jerkily stand and move to the table where Hermione now stood.

"Go ahead and sit down, Severus," Hermione told him as she motioned to the empty chair at the end of the table.

He awkwardly moved to it and sat down. Gazing at her as she studied the table with the cages, he longed to touch her. He reached out an imaginary hand and pulled her to him. He whispered his affection into her imaginary ear and eased her misgivings about his possible reaction to her. The vision dissolved in smoke. *Cursed spell, making my life impossible!*

Hermione heaved a great sigh, bringing Severus' attention fully upon her. The second mouse now sat in the single cage like a zombie. Her spell had worked.

"I suppose that's a good thing," she muttered to herself. She pointed her wand and cast the spell over and over again. Soon, all the mice were in the same catatonic state. She took out the separated mouse and placed him with his brothers. None of them moved a muscle but only stared blankly ahead.

Hermione looked sadly to Severus. "Is there anything I can get you?" she asked. Severus saw her frown to herself. "Maybe you'd like it if I read to you? Go ahead and go back to the couch," she ordered.

Hermione moved out of Severus' tunnel vision for a few minutes. By the time he had jerkily returned to the couch, she had returned. She came up to him and bent low to look into his face. "Why don't we see what the newest issue of *Potions Today* has in it, hmm?"

She sat down next to him and began to read an article on rare ingredients from Australia. Severus listened attentively, but felt a bit wistful as he could no longer see her. However, Hermione's thigh was pressed up against his, and he had the most delightful reaction to her nearness.

Delightfully frustrating, actually. What hell is this? The touch of a lovely woman next to me, yet I am frozen and unable to enjoy it fully. There must be something I can do! A noise, a movement... something!

He tried. Oh, how hard he tried. First he was bold and tried to pick his arm up and maneuver it onto Hermione's shoulder. That task was definitely beyond him, as not even a finger twitched. Trying to turn his head proved futile as well. Resorting to something hopefully simple, he tried to make a sound. Nothing.

I shouldn't be surprised. I've been trying to move and speak for days with no luck. It's just that with Hermione so close, I just want to let her know I'm here.

Hermione had stopped reading and was speaking to him now. He tried to pay attention.

"I wonder if I could reach you through Legilimency?" she mused, almost to herself.

He saw her face come into view again. She was looking at him curiously. "If you're in there, somewhere, I should be able to talk to you, shouldn't I?"

Severus' heart leapt into his throat. *Yes, oh, yes! I hope it's possible!*

Hermione knelt before Severus and pulled out her wand. *"Legilimens"* she called.

Severus felt something within him. A vague something. Maybe he could help by calling to her.

Hermione, I'm here!

Hermione, here I am!

Hello?

Hermione?

In his mind, he was jumping up and down and shouting on top of his lungs. Still, he did not feel her presence. He could hear her moving about in his mind, but something blocked the way between the two of them. That devil had thought of everything with this spell. The monster certainly had gone to great lengths to ensure that Severus Snape would never communicate with the outside world.

Severus mentally sunk to his knees in despair. He cried out once again.

Hermione, please! Can you hear me? I'm right here... right here...

He felt her withdraw, and she was once again close to his face. He felt her hand touching his cheek in a tender caress. Even his despair was evaporated with that touch.

"I'm sorry, Severus. There's some sort of barrier. I can't get past it. I don't see anything when I'm in your head."

Oh, Hermione, don't stop touching me, please.

Her thumb rubbed his cheek, but then she seemed to think better of it, and withdrew it awkwardly.

"I'm sorry!" she cried. "I shouldn't have done that. I know you don't feel that way. Neither should I."

Severus reached out for her in his mind. He felt nothing. Even his ability as a Legilimens was gone. Oh, why couldn't he just touch her once? Just to show her that he cared, that she was wrong, and that he wanted her just as much as she wanted him?

Hermione... I love you too...

She withdrew then and left him to himself. Worry filled him. What if she couldn't come up with a counter-spell? Worse yet, what if by the time she did, all those feelings for him were gone? How long could a woman pine away for a shell of a man? Would he miss yet another opportunity at happiness?

Please, Hermione, don't put me out of your head. I know this seems impossible, but if you just hold out, I promise I will return all of your affection. Don't give up on me yet.

His eyes stared at the wall. His arms sat limply next to him. On the outside, Severus Snape was a lifeless shell. On the inside, however, he was filled with deep emotions and feelings for a woman whom he'd like to someday call his.

Please, Hermione, get the counter-curse quickly.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 13

After hiding for five years, Severus Snape is found and convicted of Dumbledore's murder. His punishment is way beyond anything ever thought of before. Can Hermione help restore what Severus has lost?

Chapter 9

Harry sat next to Hermione as she trained her wand onto a mouse in the smaller cage. The mouse was still, its whiskers not even moving. The Inservio Spell had effectively taken every drop of soul right out of the mouse. Hermione was preparing to cast the reversal spell.

"Inservio Eripio!" she cried as she flicked her wand at the mouse. The mouse fell over... dead.

"Well, I suppose that's one way to be freed from enslavement," Harry quipped.

Hermione glared at him. "I don't think Severus would like it if we killed him in the process of trying to free him."

Harry glanced over at Snape. "I don't know. Anything would be better than how he is now."

Hermione went over to the table and rifled through her books. She turned the pages of one and studied the text. She turned her head toward Harry.

"It says that Eripio can be interchanged with the term Libertas in spells such as this one. We should try that."

She took out another Hollowed-out mouse. It was limp in her hand. Hermione frowned at its placid demeanor. She placed it in the cage and stood back.

"Inservio Libertas," she chanted.

The mouse curled up into a ball after the stream of orange light hit it. Hermione put her wand down and frowned at the small creature. She walked over to it and was examining it visually, trying to determine whether it was dead or just unconscious, when the mouse's head popped up. It began to sniff. Before long, the mouse was scurrying around in the cage, sniffing at everything.

"Severus, I think we've done it," she declared to him. She hoped he would be able to answer soon.

They had taken the rest of the day to experiment on the rest of the mice. Each one had been brought out of its robotic state without harm. Hermione told Harry that she would observe the mice overnight, to make sure there were no ill side-effects, then she would begin teaching Harry the spell.

All the mice had survived the night and were in good shape. Hermione felt it was time to use the spell on Severus. That evening, she taught it to Harry. He practiced it over and over again until he could utter it in his sleep. He worked with the mice until he was sure that his swishing and flicking were exactly what they should be.

"Let's do it," Harry said.

Hermione glanced over at Severus and then motioned for Harry to follow her into her room. She cast the Silencing Spell and sat down on the bed.

"I want you to take him to your flat and cast the spell on him," she told him.

"Why there?"

"I don't want to be present when he revives."

"Hermione, you've worked night and day to create this counter-spell. You should be there to see Snape revived."

"No, Harry. We don't know how he'll react to being back to himself. I don't want anything to be awkward or make him react in a way that would hurt him."

"I guess I can see your point. I'll Floo you when he's stable and ready for you to visit."

"I won't be visiting. He'll need some time to recuperate. If he wants to see me, he can Floo here." She looked tentatively down at her hands.

"Hermione, I'm sure he'll want to see you."

Hermione lifted her head proudly. "I'm not as sure as you are. I will be here if he wishes to speak with me. If he doesn't, I will abide by his wishes and leave him alone."

"Are you sure?" Harry asked.

"I am."

Harry hugged her. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I wish you'd fallen for someone easier."

She gave Harry a small grin. "It wouldn't be the same if I had, Harry."

She cancelled the wards, and Harry went back out and over to Snape. "Come with me, Snape," he instructed. The body of Severus Snape rose and followed Harry. Harry motioned for him to enter the fireplace and sent him through the Floo.

Turning to Hermione, Harry tried one last time. "Why don't you come with me? You can always leave if things aren't going well."

"No, Harry. It's best for me to stay here."

Harry nodded and stepped into the fireplace. "Wish me luck," he told her.

"Good luck, Harry," Hermione said as Harry threw Floo powder down and said his destination.

Hermione stood and stared at the fireplace for a long time. She marveled at the silence surrounding her. It was almost palpable. Even though Severus hadn't been able to talk, just his presence had dispelled the silence. Now, it enveloped her and pushed in, trying to suffocate her. She stumbled forward and put her hand on the mantle. She knew she'd never see Severus Snape again. He would avoid her at all costs. It had been too good to be true that she would get along with someone who actually stimulated her mind.

Her shoulders moved up and down as she breathed in heavily, trying to hold back her tears. At least she'd been able to help him. Umbridge hadn't gotten her vindictive claws on him. She'd found a cure for him. She fought to pull herself together. Straightening a bit, she squared her shoulders and stood tall.

I've done all I can. It's time to move on. There's plenty to keep me occupied in the future. I won't even have time to think of Severus Snape.

She knew she was kidding herself, but the thought gave her a little comfort. She went to her bedroom, settled in on the bed, and began to read.

Harry led Severus into the study in his house. There was lots of room there, in case the retransformation was a violent one.

"Stay still, Snape," Harry ordered. He grinned at his bad joke. "I'm going to cast the spell. It might knock you unconscious for a bit, or at least make you more immobile than you already are. Are you ready?"

Again, Harry chuckled. As if Snape could answer him! Lifting his wand, he pointed it at Severus' chest. The spell fell from his lips while a bright shot of orange hit Severus and sent him crumpling to the ground. Harry crossed his fingers as he rushed over to the other man's still frame. Severus had been knocked unconscious. Harry felt for a pulse and was relieved when it beat strongly under his fingers.

He waited patiently beside Snape's body. It seemed to be taking an awfully long time for Severus to regain consciousness. Harry felt his pulse once again. All seemed normal. He supposed that the differences between mice and human metabolic rates were affecting Severus' recovery. Finally, Severus began to writhe, but he didn't regain consciousness. His body shook involuntarily. Harry could only watch as the process took place. Soon, Severus' body stilled. Eventually, a low grumble came from him. Harry leaned over and watched as Snape turned slowly onto his back and rubbed his head. His eyes opened and Severus looked around. Startling Harry, he sat up quickly and searched the room.

"Where's Hermione?" he asked with trepidation.

"She's back at her flat," Harry explained.

"Why didn't she come?"

"She didn't want you to feel awkward."

Severus rose and went back to the fireplace. He stepped into it.

"Hey, wait," Harry called after him.

Severus looked at him expectantly.

"You know she cares about you... Don't say anything stupid."

Severus glared at him. "I don't intend to, Potter," he replied before throwing down the Floo powder and disappearing.

In an instant he'd emerged from Hermione's fireplace.

"Hermione?" he called.

Hermione's head snapped up from the book she was attempting to read. Her eyes widened as she recognized Severus' voice. Fear gripped her. She was ecstatic to hear his voice. That meant that he was recovered. *Oh, why is he here? Has he come to berate me already for my infatuation?*

There was a loud knocking on the door. "Hermione, are you in there?"

Hermione held the book to her and hugged it. "C... come in," she stammered.

The door swung open, and the most beautiful sight Hermione had ever seen stood in the doorway. Severus Snape, restored, was moving toward her. No longer was his face an empty mask. His eyes glowed with emotion. His mouth frowned at her. His pace wasn't hindered by the jerky movements his brainless body had exhibited. He was whole again... whole and standing right next to her bed.

"Have you gone mad?" he asked curtly.

"What do you mean?"

"Why weren't you with Potter? You worked on that spell for days, and you couldn't even find out if it worked?"

Hermione shifted uncomfortably. "I didn't want you to feel awkward."

Severus scowled, making Hermione want to crawl under the bed and disappear.

"Foolish woman," he scolded as he sat down on the bed. "Did it not occur to you that perhaps I'd be more upset by your absence?"

"No, that thought never crossed my mind, to tell you the truth."

"You never thought that maybe, I could have possibly grown fond of you in the short amount of time that we worked on my defense?" Severus asked.

Hermione scoffed. "That wouldn't happen."

Severus pulled her to him and kissed her fiercely. He pulled away and looked into her startled eyes. "I beg to differ. You are not the only one who berated themselves for falling for someone unattainable. Imagine my surprise when you admitted to Potter about how much you were attracted to me. For the first time in my life, I hoped. I hoped that you could release me from that hell. I hoped that I could convince you that my feelings for you were equal to yours. I hoped... that perhaps, we could find happiness together."

"That's impossible."

"Why is that impossible?"

"That would mean that something I actually wanted, came to be." Hermione gazed into his eyes. She was caught up in their emotion. Just an hour ago they'd been lifeless; now, they seemed to be on fire. "I'm glad you're back," she whispered.

Severus took his hand and ran his fingers along her cheek. "It would be useless for me to come back if you weren't there. I'm here for you."

"Please, Severus, don't toy with me."

"You told Potter you cared for me, was that a lie."

Hermione grasped Severus' hand and pulled it down. "No, Severus, I wasn't lying. I just don't expect you to fall all over me simply because I am attracted to you."

"Why are you being so difficult about this? I am attracted to you also."

Hermione withdrew from him and went to the window. She folded her arms in front of her as she gazed out on the sunny, blue day. Everything outside was cheery, belying the turmoil that was swirling through her at the moment. This couldn't be real. Severus Snape wasn't here, telling her exactly what she wanted to hear. It was all too perfect to be true.

"You've changed your mind," Severus said stiffly. "You came to your senses and realized just who you'd fallen for." He sighed. "I understand. I won't bother you again."

She wheeled around, to see him headed out of the room. "Severus, stop!" she cried after him.

He stopped, but didn't turn to her.

"What do you feel for me?" she asked.

"Please, Hermione, I have come here and embarrassed myself. Just leave it alone."

"I've never wanted someone the way I want you," she confessed. "It fills my soul. This can't just be a lark. I don't want a quick fling. I don't want you to be with me just because I am attracted to you, thinking that it will be something short term. If you hope to have something with me, it has to be something long-lasting."

Severus turned and looked at her grimly. "You truly would want a long-lasting relationship with me?"

Hermione nodded.

"Then I am by far the most fortunate wizard alive, for that is what I would want from you also." He walked over to her and once again caressed her face.

"I have longed to be able to touch you this whole time while I was under that spell. I wanted to hold you and tell you that I appreciated everything you did. I wanted you to know that I felt the same way you did." His voice took on a tone filled with irony. "But that damned curse kept me from being able to say anything. I prayed that it wouldn't take long for you to release me... that you would still care for me when you did. When you didn't come with Potter, I supposed that you'd already gotten over your crush. I feared that I'd lost."

Hermione closed her eyes as he continued to caress her face. She leaned into his hand and looked up at him. His lips were slightly parted. His gaze held her eyes, and she saw his raw emotions as he looked down at her. Realization hit her then. He meant every single word.

Her hand snaked up, and she caressed his face as well, pushing some of his hair back, so she could see him better.

"You really want this?" she whispered.

He smirked at her. "More than anything."

She was caught up in his eyes again. He was coming closer.

"This is much more than a crush, Severus."

"I was hoping you would say that," Severus admitted before crushing her mouth against his.

Their lips moved together as their hands pulled each other closer. Hermione's heart filled with joy. She was amazed that a man like Severus Snape could lower his barriers and find it in his heart to care for her. His lips begged for her. His arms encircled her back and embraced her possessively. Hermione treasured every minute. If this was what it was like to be loved by Severus Snape, then she never wanted him to let her go. Her arms came around him and her hand moved into his hair. She grasped it and ran it through her fingers as their kisses became more passionate.

Severus' hand came up to her face, and he cradled her cheek in it. Pulling back slightly, he gazed into her eyes once again. Hermione's breath caught within her again.

"You are truly exquisite," he murmured.

Hermione smiled at him. Suddenly, she came back to reality, realizing that it had only been a short while since he'd been freed from that horrid spell. Her hand came up to his arm, and she squeezed it.

"Are you feeling all right after being trapped within yourself for so long?" she asked him.

He smirked. "You're always so worried about my well-being," he retorted, but his face suddenly looked drawn.

"Come and sit down, Severus. I'm sure the counter-spell must have been taxing on you."

Hermione led Severus over to her bed. They both sat down on the edge of it. Hermione looked at Severus and pushed his hair behind his ears.

"You look pale. Is there something I can get you?"

Severus frowned. "In my eagerness to see you, I did not take the time to recuperate that I should have."

"I'm sorry, Severus. It's my fault. Do you need a Strengthening Solution or anything like that?"

Severus looked up at her. "That would be most welcome."

Hermione got up and went into her bathroom. Soon she'd returned with a small vial. Severus downed the potion. In an instant, his coloring improved. He smirked at Hermione and thanked her.

"What do we do now?" Hermione asked.

"What do you mean?" Severus questioned back.

"There's the problem of the Ministry thinking you've been turned into a zombie, and Dumbledore is still missing."

Severus narrowed his eyes and thought. He drummed his fingers on his leg. "Potter said that when he questioned Umbridge, she mentioned working with someone else."

Hermione nodded her head.

"Was it the man who cast the spell?"

"Yes, it was."

"I know who he is. Despite his being Polyjuiced, I recognized his voice."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Who is it, Severus?"

"It's Rodolphus Lestrange."

Hermione's mouth fell open as she gaped at Severus. "I hadn't realized he was so adept at magic. To create that spell and the potion that swayed the Wizengamot. I would have never suspected he could do such things."

"He is satisfactory at potion making. His love of the Dark Arts made him an expert spell caster. I believe he was one of the best among the Death Eaters. He studied and worked very hard to impress the Dark Lord. He augmented the Cruciatus curse that he and Bellatrix shot at the Longbottoms. That's why they have never been able to be cured. I suppose it could be considered a precursor to this new Hollowing Spell."

"But insanity has always been a possible outcome of the Cruciatus."

Severus glanced over at her. "Yes, but in most cases, the victims can be cured, or at least recover enough to lead a normal life. In the Longbottoms' cases, neither were able to be helped in any way. There was no relief of symptoms; they just continue to be oblivious to most of what goes on around them."

Hermione shook her head at the thought of such ruthlessness in one person. "Won't Umbridge be surprised to know she's thrown her lot in with a Death Eater?"

Severus smirked. "I think there's more to this vendetta than he's letting on. There was something in his voice after he cast the spell on me. He's hiding something."

"Maybe I should call Harry through," Hermione said as she began to rise from the bed.

Severus pulled her back. His face closed in on hers before he kissed her again. Hermione forgot all else as his lips claimed her. When he pulled away, Hermione was dazed and breathless.

"Now you may get Potter," Severus commanded with a smirk on his lips.

Hermione's eyes lingered on Severus' lips. "You would have to ruin the moment by mentioning Harry." She ran a finger around his lips and then kissed him again before rising and leaving the bedroom. She went to the fireplace and threw some Floo powder into it. Soon, Severus emerged from the bedroom and saw Harry stepping through the Floo. The younger man gave the couple curious looks.

"Is everything all right?" he asked Hermione.

"Everything has worked itself out," Hermione explained while blushing prettily.

Severus approached her from behind and laid his hands on her shoulders. "No snide remarks, Potter, all right?"

Harry stared at the small show of affection, unable to draw his eyes away from it.

"Potter?"

His eyes snapped up to Severus'. "Of course, sir."

"Come in and sit down, Harry," Hermione directed.

When they were all seated comfortably, Hermione and Severus on the couch and Harry on the recliner across from it, the conversation began.

"Severus recognized the man who is working with Umbridge," Hermione explained.

Harry's eyebrows shot up. "Really? Who is it?"

"Rodolphus Lestrange," Severus said dryly.

Harry's eyebrows knit together. "Lestrange has been assumed dead since the battle. There was no body found, but there hasn't been any sign of him these past five years."

"I, too, was assumed dead for these past five years. As you can see, I am very much alive. If Lestrange doesn't want to be found, he won't be."

Harry pulled out a small note pad and quill and began to take notes. He glanced up at Severus tentatively. "What would you have me call you, sir?"

"Your Majesty comes to mind, but Severus will do."

Harry stared. Disbelief ran across his face before he chuckled. "Severus, do you have any idea where we could start to look for Lestrange?"

"You should use Umbridge as bait. She'll lead us right to him."

"Why would she contact him?" Hermione asked.

"If she knew her plan had backfired and that I was restored, she would contact him," Severus mused.

"No!" Hermione cried. "If the Ministry finds out, they'll just throw you into Azkaban!"

Harry interjected then. "The whole Ministry doesn't need to know." He tapped his mouth with his quill. "Hermione, you could bring Severus to the Ministry, pretending that he still suffers from the spell. If you go to Umbridge's office, you could show her alone that he's back to normal."

"What's to keep her from running to the Minister and having Severus thrown into Azkaban?"

"I think ultimately she would do that, but she'll contact Lestrage first. He's her accomplice, don't forget, and the only one who knows exactly how deeply she's involved in this."

Hermione turned to Severus with a frown on her face. "I don't like this, Severus. It's too dangerous."

Severus grasped her hand. "It will be all right. I can defend myself and flee if something goes awry."

Hermione had been outvoted. She agreed begrudgingly. The plan evolved quickly. Harry would hide under the Invisibility Cloak and stay in Umbridge's office after Hermione and Severus left. He would then follow her whenever she left, hoping that she'd lead him straight to Lestrange. Hopefully, they'd have the Death Eater by the end of the week.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 of 13

After hiding for five years, Severus Snape is found and convicted of Dumbledore's murder. His punishment is way beyond anything ever thought of before. Can Hermione help restore what Severus has lost?

Chapter 10

Hermione, Severus, and a cloaked Harry made their way through the Ministry. They'd had no problem getting through security, except that the clerk made some rude comment about Severus, making Hermione want to hex him where he stood. She controlled herself and ordered Severus to follow. He jerkily came after her.

Surprisingly, when they entered the lift, they found it empty. Not even an interoffice memo was floating about. Hermione glanced over at Severus, whose face was almost as blank as when he'd been under the Hollowing Spell.

"I really can't stand to see you like that," Hermione commented.

"It's just for a few minutes," Harry said from beneath his cloak.

"Still..."

Severus' hand snaked silently to hers. He grasped her and squeezed her hand in comfort. His face made no change whatsoever, even though the elevator was still empty. He was the living embodiment of *Constant Vigilance* if Hermione had ever seen one.

The lift stopped and several people hustled into it. Arthur Weasley was one of them. He glanced at Hermione and her charge.

"It's a shame they did that to him," Arthur muttered to Hermione.

"Yes, it is," Hermione agreed. "I'm hoping to have it reversed."

"Do you think there's a chance at all?" Arthur asked curiously.

"I'm going to speak with Umbridge right now. My hopes aren't high, but it's worth a try."

The lift doors opened again, and Arthur nodded to her. "Good luck, Hermione," he said as he exited and went his way.

At the next stop, the trio exited the lift and made their way to Umbridge's office. Hermione rapped on the door.

"Come in!" came a high-pitched voice from inside the room.

Hermione opened the door and led Severus through it. Umbridge's expression at seeing the two was one of curiosity. She'd almost forgotten about Snape with all of the important things she had to deal with at the Ministry.

"Miss Granger, what can I do for you?" Umbridge said in a clipped tone.

Hermione had closed the door and led Severus to her desk by this time. She leaned nearer to the pink witch and smiled.

"I want you to change Severus back to what he was."

Dolores gave Hermione her most sugary grin. "I'm afraid I can't do that. His punishment is for life."

Suddenly, Severus sprung into action. He rounded the desk and had a grasp of Umbridge's hideous pink robes in an instant. Dolores' eyes grew wide as she began to sputter.

"I want all charges dropped," he snarled at her. "You will go to Shacklebolt and tell him that I am innocent. Tell him you found new evidence that proves that Dumbledore ordered me to kill him. Then you will convince him to drop all charges, is that understood?"

Umbridge looked livid. Her eyes were narrowed, her mouth set in a small pucker. "You can't tell the Ministry what to do, Severus Snape. You'll be back in Azkaban before the night is over!"

Severus' wand slipped into his hand. No one had thought to look for a wand on a zombie, so it had been easy to smuggle into the Ministry. With a small flick, Umbridge's body began to shake uncontrollably. Severus didn't hold the punishment very long. After a few moments, Dolores stilled, but the pain that had coursed through her body left her gasping. Severus sneered at her.

"Should I turn her nose into that of a pig's, Hermione? Or maybe she'd just like to have a pig's tail. She so loves the color pink."

Hermione tittered. "You will tell no one of our visit, Madam Umbridge." She walked over to one of the office walls and removed a stack of plates from their nails. Turning back to Umbridge, she continued. "If you say anything, these dishes will be destroyed."

Umbridge's eyes went wide. "You... you wouldn't hurt my little ones, would you?"

Hermione lifted one up and gazed at the fluffy black kitten in the plate. It hissed at her. "I wouldn't dream of hurting your precious pets, Dolores, but remember, accidents do happen. You will let us walk out of here without being bothered, and then I will send one these precious kitties back to you by owl. When charges have been dropped against Severus, you will receive your other precious darlings. Do we have an agreement?"

Severus dug his wand into Umbridge's neck. An evil sneer graced his face. The older witch nodded furiously.

"Just don't hurt them!" she shouted.

Hermione shrunk the plates and placed them into her pocket. She looked up to Umbridge and gave her a smile.

The wand poked farther into her neck. "Just remember your part of the bargain. Go to the Minister and proclaim my innocence."

"I will, I will, just get my pets back to me!"

Severus withdrew his wand and quickly went back around the desk. In an instant, Hermione and he were leaving the office and closing the door behind them. Severus immediately became a zombie once again as they began their exit from the Ministry.

"Hurry up!" Hermione scolded. "Walk faster you waste of a Death Eater," she ordered for show.

Severus began to jerk faster. Before they knew it, they had traveled by lift, collected Hermione's wand, and exited the building. Hermione embraced Severus and spun around. They Disapparated to safety.

Appearing back in Hermione's apartment, Hermione did not let go of Severus, but pulled him close instead.

"I'm so glad that worked!" she murmured into his robes.

His arms came up around her, and he calmed her as he stroked her back. "I told you I would be fine."

"Still, I don't think I've ever been so nervous about anything."

Severus kissed the top of her head. "Let's hope it was worthwhile and Potter gets a lead."

Hermione pulled away from Severus and looked into his eyes. "Come on, we have work to do."

Severus nodded, and they separated and headed for the table, where they were to prepare the return package for Umbridge.

Harry quietly sat down in a chair near the wall. He adjusted his robes and readied himself for what he assumed would be a bit of a wait. He almost laughed out loud as he watched Umbridge fall apart.

First she got up and ran to the empty wall, rubbing it with her hands and whining a bit. Then she stepped back and began to chew on her nails.

"I'll get you back, my darlings!" she cried as she returned to her desk and pulled out a parchment and a pink-feathered quill. She scribbled a quick owl before summoning her bird. She attached the note to the owl's leg and sent it off. She sat down and began to drum her fingers on the table.

"I'll get you, my pretty, and your evil Death Eater too!" she squawked.

Harry almost lost it then. He clamped a hand over his mouth and stifled the giggles. Little did Umbridge know that she had somewhat quoted a Muggle movie, nor did she realize just how much she resembled the witch who had uttered a similar phrase. His body trembled with the unreleased laughter as he bit the inside of his cheek to give him enough pain to still himself. This was not the time to fall apart. He summoned all of his Auror training and willfully silenced himself. He continued to watch Umbridge as

she impatiently awaited the answer to her owl.

An owl finally came, but it wasn't the one she was expecting. This one belonged to Hermione. It carried a small parcel. Dolores ripped it from the bird's talons and shoo'd the owl away. She grasped the paper and ripped it off her precious plate. She looked down at her pet to ensure it was all right.

"Oh! What have they done? What have they done?" Umbridge cried.

Harry could stand it no more. He rose silently and moved behind Umbridge to see what Hermione had wreaked on her beloved pet. Again, he could barely stifle his mirth. Hermione had transfigured the kitten into a hairless wonder. The cat wailed at Umbridge, its head bedecked with a clown hat and a green ribbon tied around its hairless tail.

Umbridge scurried around to find her wand. *"Finite Incantatem!"* she cried, but nothing happened. "Oh!" she wailed and pulled the plate to her bosom, hugging it for dear life. "Oh! You look hideous!"

It was then that she noticed a small note attached to the bottom of the plate. She ripped it off and quickly unfolded it.

The charm will last for 24 hours and then your precious kitty will be restored to her fluffy self. This is just a warning not to double-cross us.

Dolores crinkled the paper and threw it into the trash. She placed her precious kitty face-down on the desk. She'd check on her later.

Finally, her owl soared through the door and landed on Umbridge's desk. Her hands shakily undid the message. She read it quickly and gave a great sigh. Rising from her desk, she grabbed her cloak...the loveliest shade of pink known to her...and was off. Harry was right behind her.

Severus and Hermione settled themselves into Hermione's couch for the long wait. Severus put an arm around her and pulled her close.

"So, I'm a waste of a Death Eater, am I?" Severus asked teasingly.

Hermione stiffened, not recognizing the mirth in his tone. "I was just acting, Severus, so people wouldn't wonder about you."

Severus pushed her away from him. "I think that you believe what you said."

Hermione's mouth gaped open. "Of course I don't!" she cried.

Severus quirked an eyebrow at her. "I don't know whether I should believe you or not. Is there some way you could prove to me that you don't think I'm a waste?"

"Severus... what..."

"Certainly, you could think of *something* that would convince me?"

Hermione gave him an exasperated look. "Well, I'm sure I could think of *something."*

"Such as..."

Hermione gave him a smug look. "Let's see," she said as she tapped her finger on her chin. "What could convince you that I don't think you're a waste?" She tapped her chin some more and pretended to be deep in thought.

"I thought you were the brightest witch of your age, certainly you can come up with a simple thing to prove yourself."

Hermione kept tapping away at her chin, drawing out the entire episode. Severus grumbled in frustration. She glanced sideways at him and watched him begin to frown.

"Now, don't pout," she ordered before pulling him toward her and placing a quick kiss on his lips.

"That's all you have?" he said with disappointment in his voice.

"Well, I might be able to muster a bit more enthusiasm." Winding her arms around Severus' neck, Hermione pulled him in again, this time lingering over his lips for quite a while. Finally, she pulled away and gave him a questioning look.

"All right, I believe you," he murmured. His eyes scanned her face, taking in everything about it.

"How long do you think this will take?" Hermione asked.

Severus thought a moment as he ran his fingers through Hermione's hair. "I believe she'll alert Lestrange right away. He'll be desperate to meet with her. It shouldn't take too long."

"So, we shouldn't get used to sitting here like this?" Hermione asked innocently.

"I think we have a little wait ahead of us."

"I was hoping you'd say that." She scooted off the couch for a moment, eliciting a cry of protest from Severus.

His displeasure was quickly abated when Hermione sat in his lap. His frown turned into a smirk as she settled herself into him and pulled him to her. He forgot all else as her soft, enticing lips closed in on his. Could heaven be any more perfect? He was sure that it couldn't. Easing back into the couch, he caressed her back and claimed her lips for his own.

Harry paused in the place where Dolores Umbridge had Disapparated. He waved his wand over the spot for a few seconds until a swift light jumped to his wand. Smiling to himself, he lifted his wand and turned on the spot, still covered in his Invisibility Cloak.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 13

After hiding for five years, Severus Snape is found and convicted of Dumbledore's murder. His punishment is way beyond anything ever thought of before. Can Hermione help restore what Severus has lost?

Chapter 11

Dolores Umbridge appeared in a deserted field. She looked around, searching for her contact. He hadn't arrived yet. She tapped her foot impatiently. Her hands wrung in front of her nervously. She looked to and fro, but her partner was nowhere to be seen. At long last, a man appeared out of nowhere. She gazed at her partner. He'd chosen a thin, balding man to mimic through Polyjuice. Dolores moved toward him.

"What are we going to do? Snape has been released from the spell!" Umbridge cried.

The Locator Spell that Harry had used to track Umbridge automatically deposited him several hundred yards away from Umbridge's point of arrival so as not to be discovered. He hurried along under his Invisibility Cloak to the small, squat, pink figure that was waiting in a clearing. Suddenly, he saw a tall man Apparate near her. He raised his wand as he closed in on the two conspirators.

"He needs to be taken care of... now!" Dolores tittered nervously.

"Now, now, Umbridge, don't get all excited. This will be simple to remedy. I will just kill him."

"Kill him! He was to suffer, not be killed!"

"I can do both. I'll torture him, and *then* I'll kill him," Lestrange said in a calm, calculative voice.

Dolores grinned evilly. "It will have to be a very *long* torture for him to get what he deserves."

"Of course... He will suffer... oh, he will suffer."

"I want to be there. I want to see it!" Dolores cried triumphantly.

Harry had heard enough. He waved his wand in a circle and sent a dispersed Petrificus Totalis Spell at the two criminals. Both Umbridge and Lestrange were enveloped in light. They quickly froze, their precarious positions causing them to drop to the ground.

Harry pulled the Invisibility Cloak off and smirked down at his captives. Their eyes shifted back and forth in fear. Harry bent low over Dolores Umbridge.

"I don't think the Ministry will take kindly to you conspiring with a known Death Eater, Dolores," he said before straightening up again. He went over to Lestrange. "Your days of freedom are over, Lestrange."

He levitated both of them and pushed them close together. Pulling a shrunken Portkey that looked like a rag out of his pocket, he enlarged it. He placed the old, tattered blanket over the two petrified bodies and touched the edge. Before he knew it, they had snapped out of existence and reappeared in Hermione Granger's living room.

Much to Harry's embarrassment, Hermione and Snape were in the throes of some passionate kissing. They didn't even notice the three newcomers, despite their rather loud arrival. Harry cleared his throat.

Hermione pulled away and gave Harry a startled look. Snape glanced up at him indifferently and pulled Hermione back for one last kiss. Harry grimaced. Supportive or not, this relationship would be a bit for him to swallow.

Releasing Hermione, Severus carefully rose so as not to dump her out of his lap and onto the floor. They both straightened themselves out at last, and walked over to Harry and his captives.

"That didn't take long at all," Hermione said, visibly blushing from being caught snogging Severus Snape senseless.

"Not long enough," Severus muttered.

Harry chose to ignore them. He looked at Lestrange. "We'll have to wait for the Polyjuice to wear off before we can confirm that it's Lestrange," he said.

"We can still question him," Severus commented as he stared at the petrified man.

With a flick of his wand, Lestrange was bound in ropes.*"Finite Incantatem,"* Severus chanted, and the Petrificus Totalus Spell was released. The ropes stayed firmly in place, keeping Lestrange from moving much.

Severus hoisted the man up from the floor and threw him into a chair. He pointed his wand at him.

"Are you Rodolphus Lestrange?"

By this time, Harry had done much the same to Dolores Umbridge. She too was bound and sitting in a chair, opposite Lestrange.

"Heavens, he's not Lestrange!" she cried.

Severus' head shot towards her. "You, woman, are one of the most obtuse people I have ever met. You don't even know when you are consorting with a Death Eater!" he sneered.

Umbridge shut her mouth quickly, but gave Severus a withering look. Finally, she was able to speak again. "It can't be him. I would have known."

"You couldn't see past your own desire for revenge! You are a sorry excuse for a witch," Severus snapped. "You sold yourself to the highest bidder. I hope you can live with yourself for your decisions."

Severus turned back to Lestrange. "Why don't you tell her who you are, Roddy?"

The thin, balding man snarled at him. "Why should I give you the pleasure of knowing who I am?"

Severus closed the distance between them, bent low, and glared at Lestrange. "I already know who you are. Do you think I cannot tell your gruff, rumbling voice in an instant? I knew the second you cast the spell upon me who you were. Now, why did you do it?"

Lestrange struggled against his bonds, trying to get at Severus. He was unsuccessful. Instead, he grimaced at Severus.

"It's no more than you deserve, you cowardly traitor!"

Severus straightened and wiped a bit of spittle that had landed on his face from Lestrange's outburst.

"If this were just about revenge, you wouldn't have bothered. It wouldn't have been worth it for you to come out of hiding and risk your own life just to get to me." Severus' wand dug into Lestrange's cheek. "Now tell me why you've done it."

"I'll never tell! You'll have to kill me first!"

Umbridge was whimpering in her chair, unable to believe that she'd been duped by a foul Death Eater. Her usually prideful, snobby face was now filled with shock. She glared at the man she had trusted without a second thought. Her hatred radiated about her.

Severus bent low again, so that his eyes were level with Lestrange's. "We can do this the easy way or the hard way. Which do you choose?"

Lestrange narrowed his eyes at Severus. "I'll take my secret to my grave!"

Pulling back, Severus trained his wand on Lestrange. *"Legilimens!"* he chanted.

Lestrange's slim face dropped in disbelief, and his skin went ashen as he realized what Severus was doing. Too late, he tried to put up some defense. Severus crashed through his mind until he found what he was looking for. All was revealed to him within a matter of minutes. He pulled out of Lestrange's mind as the Polyjuiced man fell forward, limply.

Severus turned to Hermione and Harry, who had been watching anxiously from the side. His face was grim.

"Lestrange has Albus," he explained.

Hermione gasped as her hand went up to her mouth. Harry looked on with concern.

"Where... how?" he asked Severus.

"It seems that when Dumbledore Portkeyed out of the tomb, his mind was a bit addled. He wandered around near the town where he appeared. Unfortunately for him, it was the town where Lestrange was living. No one knew that he had a small house there. He would go there after a raid to avoid detection. Dumbledore literally stumbled down his street. In his weakened state, Albus was easy to catch."

Severus' mouth thinned as he looked back to Lestrange. Rage filled him at the thought of Dumbledore's fate these past six years.

He continued the tale for Harry and Hermione. "Lestrange developed a variant of the Body-Bind Spell that froze Dumbledore indefinitely. He's been a statue on Lestrange's bed for all of this time. Lestrange knew I was searching for Dumbledore. He set out to make it impossible for me to ever find him."

"Why didn't he just kill you... and Dumbledore for that matter?" Hermione asked as she glared at Lestrange.

"That's where the revenge part comes in. He thought it a fitting end to have the greatest wizard in the world reduced to a stiff, corpse-like being. Better than death, even. Instead of alerting Voldemort to the deception, he decided to use Albus as a bargaining chip. If ever the Dark Lord found Bellatrix or him in disfavor, Lestrange was ready to use Albus' survival and capture as a means to avoid Voldemort's wrath.

"After the Dark Lord's defeat, he wanted to punish me for turning against Voldemort, so he developed the Hollowing Spell. It would have been simpler had he just killed us, but Lestrange doesn't think that way. He wants to inflict the most heinous punishment imaginable. He felt that Dumbledore's awareness, yet inability to move, would be the worst possible punishment he could receive. He felt the same about the Hollowing Spell with me." Severus grimaced. "I believe he was correct on both accounts."

Everyone in the room was silent for a while. All that could be heard was the tittering sobs of Dolores Umbridge. She muttered to herself about the fact that she'd let herself be duped into following the whims of a Death Eater. She worried aloud about what the Ministry would do to her for her folly.

"Do you know where Lestrange is keeping him?" Harry asked.

Severus nodded. "I will Apparate there and bring him back here."

"Do you know how to release him from the spell?"

"I do," Severus said in a clipped tone. Turning to Hermione, he looked at her seriously. "I will be back soon," he told her.

"Do you want us to come with you?" Hermione asked.

"No, I must do this alone."

Hermione's hand came to his arm. "You're sure?" she asked.

Severus gave her a quick nod before Disapparating.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 13

After hiding for five years, Severus Snape is found and convicted of Dumbledore's murder. His punishment is way beyond anything ever thought of before. Can Hermione help restore what Severus has lost?

Chapter 12

Severus appeared in front of a small house. Drawing his wand, he approached it cautiously. Turning left and right, he sent spells to identify wards and booby-traps. Nothing suspicious seemed to be awaiting him, but the wards on the door were intensive. He waved his wand in a figure eight pattern and began to break through them. He was almost through when a ball of light sped from around the back of the house and came straight for him. A lesser wizard would not have had time to react. As it was, Severus barely had time to deflect the curse. Assessing his surroundings again, he found another hex rounding the house. Severus shielded himself again. The balls kept coming,

appearing to grow in size with each new ball. Severus spun his wand in a small circle and sent a powerful spell from it. He watched as it disappeared around the house, and a bright light flashed for a second. He waited, wand outstretched and at the ready, but no more ball hexes came at him. Keeping an eye to his side, he turned back to the wards. Suddenly, an apparition of Lestrange appeared before him.

"Ah, Snape. You can't get in here," the apparition said.

"Why not?"

"Because, you are going to kill yourself before you can get the ward down."

Severus frowned. The apparition came closer and stared into his eyes. "Go ahead. Take your wand and cast the killing curse at yourself. It's only what you deserve, after your betrayal of everyone. You have let us all down. Go ahead... lift your wand."

Severus fought the urge to lift his wand and point it at himself. He felt the Killing Curse at the tip of his tongue. His hand rose slightly. He tried to push it down, but it would not yield. He watched in horror as it got higher and began to turn against him.

"No!" he shouted at his hand. The hand hesitated. He looked at the apparition. "You have no power over me!" he snarled at it.

"Oh, but I do!" the apparition said with a laugh. Suddenly, it was face to face with Severus. "I have all the power, and you have none!"

Severus dropped to the ground, all of his strength leaving him.

"Now, cast the curse against yourself," Lestrange demanded.

Once again, Severus' hand began to snake toward him and point the wand in his face. Severus struggled against the hypnotic magic. Every mind game he ever played to strengthen his shields against Voldemort was used to get control. He looked up at the apparition, now floating above him.

"You... do... not... control... me!" he grated out finally. With a final push, he forced his arm to extend as he shot one last hex at the door.

"Nooooo!" the apparition screamed. The wards around the door disappeared, and Lestrange's apparition dissolved into smoke. Severus collapsed fully to the ground and took in huge gulps of air. He stayed there a while, building his strength back up before he entered the home. He had no idea what other tricks Lestrange had set up for an intruder.

When he felt his strength had returned, he rose and extended his wand again. Entering the house, he waited to be ambushed. Nothing happened. He stood in the doorway and assessed the home. It was small with humble furnishings. He spied the door through which he knew he would find Albus. Cautiously moving forward, he made his way to the back room and flung the door open. There in the dark lay the body of Albus Dumbledore, thin and frail looking. His eyes stared at the ceiling, unmoving.

Severus checked the room for spell-traps and found it to be safe. He rushed to Dumbledore's side and gazed down at the man who had been his friend for most of his life. He placed a hand on his head and stroked his hair.

"I will release you, Albus," he murmured before stepping back and casting the spell to make Dumbledore whole again. A yellow light enveloped Dumbledore's body and was absorbed into it. Severus held his breath as he awaited movement from the still man. What would six years have done to the old wizard's brain? Would he ever be the same?

A blink was the first movement made, then another and another. Arms began to bend and fingers flexed. With a turn of the head, Albus Dumbledore was looking upon Severus Snape. The older wizard's eyes widened.

"I knew you'd come for me," he said in a gruff voice, weak with misuse.

Severus struggled to keep his emotions well hidden. He schooled his face into the mask he usually wore. He grasped Albus' arm. "It has taken much too long for me to find you."

"Ah, Severus," Albus said roughly as he patted his arm weakly. "But you did, my boy, you did."

"Albus, can you sit up?" Severus asked worriedly.

"If you'll help me, I believe I can."

Severus gently put his arm under Albus' back and lifted him into a sitting position. He settled next to him on the bed and steadied the older man. Albus looked at him gratefully.

"I can't tell you how good it is to be rid of that spell," he muttered.

Severus grimaced. "I searched for you, almost day and night. There was no clue as to where you'd disappeared. If Lestrange hadn't sought to take vengeance on me, I would have never realized he was connected. I am sorry, Albus, that you have been trapped like this for so long."

Albus lifted his hand and placed it on Severus' shoulder. "Severus, you blame yourself for every bad thing that happens. It was not your failure in not finding me. Please don't wallow in guilt, Severus. You have done that for too long in your life already."

Severus looked to Albus. Here was a man who had railed against him for his choosing of sides. He'd used him ruthlessly as a pawn and set him up to take the fall for his murder. He knew Albus had some sort of feelings for him, but they were never in the forefront of their relationship. Albus would never put their friendship ahead of his agenda. He had never cared how wracked with guilt Severus had been in the past. This man who sat next to him had never given his comfort a second thought as he sent him time and time again to Voldemort, never knowing in what condition he would return.

Seemingly knowing all that had just run through Severus' head, Albus gave Severus a sympathetic look.

"In the state I was in, I have had much time to think about our past relationship and the things that I did to win this war. I believe that in my zeal to defeat Tom Riddle, I may have let my closest friends suffer. I would like to apologize for that."

Despite Severus' calm exterior and indifferent front, his insides were churning. The man who, of all the people he knew, had been the hardest to understand had just laid himself bare for Severus. An apology was the last thing he'd expected. A realization of everything that he'd done to him had been beyond Severus' understanding. He looked to Albus, not quite sure what to say or believe.

The hand squeezed his shoulder. "Severus, please forgive me. I should have never lost sight of our friendship just to get a little bit of information. I shouldn't have put this huge burden of my death on your shoulders. I thought the plan was foolproof, but as you can see, I failed to foresee how my awaking from the spell would affect me. I failed to see how my kidnapping would cause you to be punished for a crime I had no intention of you ever being punished for."

Severus stared at Albus for a long time. Finally, he gave a great sigh. "I know that what you did was for the cause, but at times it felt as if you cared nothing for me except in what way you could manipulate me to your will."

"At times, that is mostly all I thought about," Albus said as he looked down sternly. "All this time under that spell, I have been trapped with only my memories to keep me sane. Unfortunately, my memories would probably drive a normal wizard insane in minutes. Luckily, I was used to them." He smiled ruefully. "But I took the time to examine

my motives and found myself coming up short. I lost sight of what truly mattered in the quest for victory. Harry and you both suffered the most for it. I truly am sorry, Severus."

Severus nodded, but kept looking straight ahead. He wasn't sure of what else to say. Albus' words had lifted a great weight from him. Gone was his guilt at not finding Albus. Gone was his remorse at all the evil he'd done. How could a short conversation do such a thing? He wasn't sure, but the feeling was quite liberating.

Looking to Albus once again, Severus spoke. "Are you ready to go? We can Side-Along Apparate back to Hermione Granger's flat. She awaits us there with Potter."

"I feel strong enough to do so, Severus," Albus answered.

Severus helped Albus to his feet and grasped his waist to support him. He turned swiftly, and they Disapparated together.

At the appearance of Severus and Dumbledore, Hermione and Harry were overwhelmed with emotion. They rushed to the old wizard's side and hugged him furiously. Severus shoo'd them away after a moment, claiming that Dumbledore needed to sit and rest.

Albus lifted his hand in protest. "Now, now, Severus, I am feeling much more myself," Albus stated. "But perhaps a seat would be welcome."

Harry, Hermione, and Severus helped Albus over to the couch and settled him in. He glanced at the two people who were tied to chairs in Hermione's sitting room. The Polyjuice had worn off Lestrange, and he sat there glaring at Dumbledore. Umbridge, for her part, couldn't stop staring at Lestrange. She had a grimace on her face and appeared to be worried, the enormity of the situation seeming to have hit her finally.

Albus struggled to rise. Severus' hand and arm was proffered, and Albus accepted it gratefully. Staggering somewhat, he made his way over to Lestrange. He glared at the other wizard. "It seems that your plan has been found out, Rodolphus."

"At least I took away five years of your life!" Lestrange spat.

"Yes, well, I'm sure the Ministry will take away much more than that," Albus said as he turned away from the man who had been his captor for so long.

"Professor Dumbledore, please sit down," Hermione begged, noticing how shaky he seemed.

Albus let himself be guided to the couch. Everyone sat and looked at him expectantly. He glanced at Hermione.

"I should have known that you would be involved in this somehow, Miss Granger. You've always had a keen mind for solving things."

Hermione smiled. Severus placed his hand upon hers, which elicited raised eyebrows from Dumbledore.

"It seems I have missed much," he muttered.

Hermione blushed as Severus squeezed her hand. "We will have time to catch up," he said. "Now, we must take these two to the Ministry."

Lestrange immediately began to struggle. "No! You can't do this!" he cried.

Harry flicked his wand, and a gag appeared over Lestrange's mouth. He moaned and groaned, but no one paid him any heed.

Dumbledore looked over at Harry. "I am ready whenever you are," he told him.

"Let's get this over with," Harry told him.

There had been quite the uproar at the Ministry when Harry and Hermione showed up, not only with a Severus Snape who wasn't a zombie, but a very much alive Dumbledore and two prisoners in tow. Before anyone knew it, the group stood in front of Kingsley Shacklebolt. He looked from one to the other incredulously. Finally, he found his voice.

"You mean to tell me that you've been alive all of this time, Dumbledore?"

Albus nodded.

"How?" Kingsley queried.

The entire plot was laid out for Shacklebolt. He listened with rapt attention and took notes during the entire story. His head shot up when Harry explained that Umbridge had used a potion to sway the Wizengamot to find Severus guilty.

"That's impossible," Kingsley countered. "I didn't even have anything to drink or eat before the trial. I came to my judgment on my own."

"Minister, the potion was released into the air. That's how the entire Wizengamot was affected. She told all of you to find Severus guilty."

Kingsley's head snapped to Umbridge. "Is this true?"

"Well, Minister, yes." Umbridge straightened. "I did what had to be done. I brought the solution to you days before the trial, but you would have nothing to do with it. I had no choice. Obviously Snape needed a special punishment. If you were wise, you would cast the spell on him again!"

"Madam Umbridge, is it not yet clear to you that Severus Snape has been on our side from the beginning?"

"I will never believe that! He was only concerned about his own hide. He sided with whoever was the party that was going to win."

"So, you purposely swayed the Wizengamot's verdict and imposed your own sentence."

"I did what needed to be done!" Umbridge claimed unrepentantly.

"I do not take kindly to being Imperiused!" Kingsley shouted.

"I didn't Imperius anyone. It was a potion."

"You might as well have cast an Imperius. This crime will be treated as if you had. You will be charged with use of an Unforgivable... potion in this case, and conspiring with a Death Eater. I'm sure there will be a nice cell in Azkaban awaiting you at the end of your trial."

"No! You can't do that!" she spat. "Don't you know who I am? This government wouldn't survive without me!"

Kingsley looked over to one of the guards who was standing by the doorway. "Take the prisoner away," he ordered.

Umbridge struggled against the strong hands of the man who held her to no avail. She yelled and yelled as she was taken away.

"You'll be sorry!" she cried. "I will not be silenced! Severus Snape must pay, just like every Death Eater must pay."

Her cries continued down the hall as Kingsley listened with a look of disgust on his face. Turning to Lestrange, he continued where he'd left off.

"Rodolphus Lestrange, you are charged with Death Eater activities during the war, kidnapping, harming another wizard, and collusion. Perhaps you would like to share a cell with Madam Umbridge?"

"If I never see that old toad again, it'll be too soon," he growled.

Kingsley looked to the other guard. "Take him away," he ordered.

Lestrange's departure was much less of a spectacle than Umbridge's had been. He quietly left, escorted by the guard. Kingsley looked to Severus.

"I apologize for everything, Severus. I'm not sure that you would have been found innocent had the Wizengamot not been tampered with, but to have your trial come out this way is unconscionable. As Albus is alive, all charges will be dropped against you."

Severus gave a slight bow of his head to Shacklebolt. "Thank you," he said.

"I suppose that's it," Kingsley said. "I will be in touch with all of you for the upcoming trials."

"Thank you, Minister," Hermione said.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 of 13

After hiding for five years, Severus Snape is found and convicted of Dumbledore's murder. His punishment is way beyond anything ever thought of before. Can Hermione help restore what Severus has lost?

Chapter 13

Hermione lay on her stomach on the bed and glanced at the paper. A cat had gotten transfigured into a troll; two witches had been caught robbing the Leaky Cauldron. She lazily turned the page. Not much exciting to read about today. Not like the flurry of news that had been peppering the paper for the last two weeks.

The trials of Dolores Umbridge and Rodolphus Lestrange had been swift and widely publicized. The *Prophet* had a field day with all the press. They must have sold three times the papers that they usually did as the Wizarding population rushed to find out what had happened.

Dumbledore Lives

Severus Snape Exonerated

Lestrange/Umbridge Charged with Collusion, Using Imperius, and Kidnapping

Trial Starts Today

Wizengamot Deliberates for Only One Hour

GUILTY

It's Life in Azkaban for the Dastardly Duo

The craziest headline of them all was the last... obviously penned by Rita Skeeter

Will Cellmates Find Love?

Hermione had chuckled on and off for days at that one. The Wizarding world as a whole had rejoiced to know that the most famous wizard in the world was once again alive and well. The news that all charges had been dropped against Severus Snape had not been celebrated quite so widely, but most people had agreed with the decision.

Hermione flipped the page of the current edition, scanning the articles. Nothing really newsworthy, just a lot of gossip-filled the pages. She turned to the classifieds. She normally didn't read the wizard personals, but Severus had dropped a hint that she might want to peruse them today. Scanning the columns quickly, she came to what was surely a note from Severus.

Know-it-all,

You have brightened my existence with your

devotion to me. I will never forget you or what

you've done.

Snarky Bastard

Hermione smiled at the short, loving note. Suddenly, her smile faded. Why did that message seem like a good-bye? She re-read the message.

Why would he write that last part? Is he trying to tell me something? No, he wouldn't just disappear, would he?

Of course he would, that's what Severus Snape did. He disappeared for years on end.

But things are going along so well. We are almost inseparable. He hasn't really said much about his feelings, though. Hermione hesitated for a minute. *Oh, Merlin, I've smothered him. He's a loner, and all I've done these last few weeks is throw myself at him. It's too much. He's running.*

Hermione drummed her fingers on the bed. Something had to be done about this before Severus disappeared for good. She lifted herself up and bounded from the bed, determined to find Severus and knock some sense into him, even if she had to back off from him and let him be.

Rap, Rap, Rap

Hermione knocked loudly on Severus' door at Spinner's End. Fear gripped her. What if he'd already fled? She knocked again.

Rap, rap, rap

"Oh," she grumbled. "This is ridiculous." Pulling her wand from her robes, she lowered the wards and strode through the door.

"Severus?"

Her heart raced. She was too late, she knew it. The house was too quiet. She ran through every room, but he was nowhere to be found. Collapsing onto the floor in his bedroom, she let her head droop into her hands and began to weep.

"I'm too late... I'm too late."

Her muffled cries were filled with a pain of which she'd never before felt. Her chest hurt with the weight of it. She just wanted to disappear too, but she knew that running would never make her forget Severus Snape. He'd become a part of her being. Her tears fell quickly down her cheeks as she continued to mourn her loss.

That's how Severus found her half an hour later, crouched on the floor, weeping softly. His eyes widened in shock before he rushed to her side. Kneeling beside her, he placed an arm around her and lifted her gently.

"Hermione, what is it?"

Hermione sniffled and grasped Severus' arm, gazing up at him in relief. "Oh, thank Merlin!" she cried as she threw her arms around him, nearly knocking him off balance. "You haven't left yet," she whispered.

Severus put his arms around her and held her tightly. "Left for where?" he asked in befuddlement.

"Don't go, Severus. I swear, I'll back off and not smother you so. I know that you like your privacy and seclusion, I just got carried away. Please, we can work this out, don't leave!"

Severus pushed Hermione away from him and looked into her eyes. He wiped her tears and soothed her.

"Now, stop this crying. I want to know what you're on about?" he said gently, trying not to upset her more.

"You're leaving."

"I'm not."

Hermione looked up at him. She still had tears in her eyes, so it was hard to focus on his face. Wiping the tears out of her eyes, she looked back at him again.

"Then what was that note in the *Prophet* all about?"

Severus looked puzzled. "I thought it was self-explanatory. I just wanted you to know how much you have done for me. I wanted you to know I'm grateful for that."

Hermione bit her lip. "You didn't write it to say good-bye?"

Realization dawned on Severus. "You thought I was ending our relationship and fleeing because of what I wrote?"

Hermione nodded. The tears came again, unbidden.

Severus opened his mouth to say something, but closed it swiftly. He looked off to the side for a moment before looking back at Hermione.

"You honestly think I would end our relationship in such a cowardly way?"

"I don't know what I thought! I panicked! I started thinking all sorts of things. I know you like your solitude, and we've been spending every minute together. I feared that it was too much for you."

"Hermione Granger," Severus said sternly as his grip tightened around her. "You will never be too much for me. I liked my solitude because I was a spy, and the fewer friends I had, the better my cover could be kept. No, I'm not the most social person in the world, but I assure you, I have cherished every moment we have spent together."

"You have?" Hermione searched his face before flinging herself at Severus. "Oh! I'm sorry. I jumped to conclusions and have made myself into a fool."

Severus held her for a long time. They didn't say anything. Neither was upset with the silence, but finally, Severus cleared his throat. He held her close as he whispered in her ear.

"I have been the fool, Hermione, for letting you think that this relationship meant nothing to me. I'm not a demonstrative man, and that has led you to question just how serious I may be about you."

He caressed her hair and pressed his face into it. His eyes closed as he enjoyed her closeness.

"I treasure every moment with you," he continued. "Thinking of my life without you in it is the worst possible thing I think that could ever happen to me. I have no intention of breaking this relationship off, or of disappearing any time soon. If I had my way, we would never be apart." He pulled back and stared into her eyes.

"Hermione, I love you."

Hermione took his face in her hand. She looked deep within his eyes. His eyes radiated love and passion, trying to help her see just how he felt for her.

She smiled thankfully. "I love you too!"

Hermione entered Kingsley's office with a stack of paperwork. She didn't bother to look up as she placed them on his desk. Finally looking to Kingsley, she sighed.

"These are the current contracts that need approval from you." Her gaze wandered to the side of the room, where a stiff, Rodolphus Lestrange stood staring blankly ahead.

She gave Kingsley a quizzical look.

He grinned slyly at her. "Something the newspapers didn't report was that the Wizengamot thought that turnabout was fair play. Lestrange and Umbridge were Hollowed-out."

Hermione gasped. At that moment, Umbridge walked jerkily into the room toting a cup of tea. It sloshed slightly as she made her way to the desk and plopped it in front of the Minister.

"The only bad thing is my teacup is never full," Kingsley mused as he picked the cup up and took a sip.

"Kingsley, what on earth was the Wizengamot thinking?"

Kingsley waved his hand in dismissal. "It's only for three weeks. Then they'll be returned to their normal selves and spend the rest of their lives behind bars."

Hermione stared at the blank face of Dolores Umbridge. Instead of the normal look of superiority, her face was slack and lifeless.

"You just have them hang around here with you? Isn't that a bit creepy?" she asked.

"They rotate around the different offices. They clean and fetch things. I'm hoping they're both duly embarrassed by the level to which they've fallen."

Hermione nodded absently. "Still... It's a horrible punishment, even for them."

"I thought you would be happy. After all, you had to watch Snape like that for weeks."

"That's why I'm a bit sickened. I hope you don't plan on using that spell on any other prisoners."

"The Wizengamot deliberated it, but I convinced them it was too invasive a punishment. We just felt that these two deserved a taste of their own medicine."

Hermione nodded her head. Suddenly, she remembered something. "By the way, I have some things of Madam Umbridge's. Would it be possible to return them to her? Maybe liven up her cell a bit. I'm sure Lestrange will love the addition."

"What do you have of hers?"

Hermione bent over and whispered in Kingsley's ears. His eyebrows arched. "Hmm, that would be most... appropriate, I think."

Rodolphus Lestrange and Dolores Umbridge were led back to their cell in Azkaban. The last three weeks had been the worst of their lives. Lestrange hung his head dejectedly, and Umbridge frowned as she walked along.

The loss of their abilities had taken its toll. She had railed against her own body, trying to take control. She had listened as the people around her had belittled her when she could do nothing about it. But the worst was having to do the bidding of others without any agency of her own. Her body had jerked along without her say-so. She had been humiliated over and over again.

They approached the cell, and the guard gave the two prisoners an extra push to get them to the door. Umbridge gasped as she looked into the cell, noticing the walls. She was forcefully pushed into the cell, but she would have entered gratefully.

"My lovelies!" she cried as she spun around the tiny cell, eyeing the plates of her kitties one by one. She touched each and every one of them, and the plates all gave her a meow for a greeting. She clasped her hands together. "I'm so glad you are all here."

Lestrange glanced around the cell and grimaced. "They've sentenced me to hell," he murmured under his breath. Stalking to the narrow bed on his side of the cell, he threw himself onto it and buried his head in his hands.

The meows grew in volume. One prisoner rejoiced, while the other wondered how long before he went insane.

Albus sat comfortably in the Headmaster's office, smiling at Hermione and Severus. Minerva had insisted that he resume his post, and not having much else he was interested in, he'd agreed wholeheartedly.

"Are you recovered, Headmaster?" Hermione asked.

Albus shrugged. "I'm a bit stiffer than I was before I died, but I've learned to adjust."

Severus glared at Albus while Hermione snickered. "Well, it's wonderful to have you alive and moving again," she commented.

"Yes, movement is something we all take too much for granted." Albus proffered a small bowl. "Lemon drop?"

Severus rolled his eyes. "Why, Albus, of all the candies you could possibly choose, do you pick the most foul one ever created? Have you not heard of caramels? Toffees? Chocolates? Why anyone would want their face to invert when eating one of those is beyond me." Severus shook his head.

"A simple no would suffice, Severus."

Hermione stifled a giggle.

"Now, when are the two of you tying the knot?" Albus asked sagely.

"I beg your pardon?" Severus snapped while sitting straighter in his chair. Indignation came off him in waves.

"You know..." Dumbledore made some criss-cross motions with his hands. "When are you two marrying?"

"Old man, you meddle too much!"

Hermione blushed. "We haven't actually talked about that, Headmaster."

Albus fixed Hermione with a penetrating stare. "You will address me as Albus, my dear. You're practically family."

"Family?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Well, Severus is as close to a son as I'll ever get, so that makes you my future daughter-in-law."

Severus shot out of his chair and stood ram-rod straight. "Albus, I would ask you to..."

"Yes, yes, mind my own business; keep my nose out of it... something along those lines, Severus?"

Severus glowered at Albus but nodded his head swiftly.

"If I don't say anything, you'll never do anything. You'll be with this woman until the end of time, but not get up the nerve to ask her to be yours fully."

Hermione looked from the grey wizard to the black. She fidgeted uncomfortably, but had no idea how to address the things that Albus was intimating.

"Perhaps I want to ask her in my own due time!" Severus snapped back.

"Ah, so when hell freezes over then?" Albus murmured.

Severus leaned over and slammed the desk. "Old man, you are... insufferable." The sneer on his face was set as he turned and stalked out of the office. Hermione looked a bit sheepish.

"I suppose I should go after him." She stood and made her way to the door.

"Oh, Hermione?"

Hermione turned and looked back at Albus. "Always treasure him. He deserves that."

Hermione smiled knowingly at Dumbledore. "I will because you're right, he does."

Hermione rushed down the stairs in search of Severus. Merlin, the man was fast! She caught sight of a black, billowing blur a couple of floors down. She called out, but the blur did not slow its pace. Hermione began to take the stairs at a furious pace. Still, she could not catch up with Severus. It wasn't until he was stalking along to the entry doors that she finally caught up with him. Grabbing at his arm, she pulled at him.

"Severus, wait!"

Severus stopped but would not look at Hermione.

"Severus, just ignore him. He gets his kicks out of meddling, you know that."

Severus pulled his arm free of her and silently stalked to the doors and exited the school. Hermione blew a stray hair out of her eyes and followed after him. Severus had stopped in the courtyard and was staring off into space. Hermione came up to his side.

"Why are you running away from me?"

Severus looked at her. His eyes blazed with fury. He reached for her hand and placed something in her palm.

"Just take it," he snapped and moved off down the path.

Hermione looked down in her hand and gasped at what was there. A black-velvet ring box rested in her palm. She caressed the top before sprinting after Severus. Catching up to him, she grabbed him and stopped him.

"Is this what I think it is?" she cried.

Severus did not look at her. He stared at the ground and shrugged.

"You were going to propose?"

He shrugged again.

"When?"

"Tonight... at dinner," he snarled.

"And you're upset because?"

Severus head snapped up, and he glared at her. "Because you would have thought that I went out and got that ring after Mr. 'I-Have-the-Answer-to-Everything' made his little speech. You would not have believed that I have been planning this for weeks now! It's like he read my mind! I don't doubt that he did. So, instead of letting me have my moment, he... he... *ruined* it!"

Severus turned from her. His chest heaved up and down rapidly. Hermione stared at him, not quite sure what to do. She bit her lower lip and thought.

"How were you going to do it?" she asked finally.

Severus turned rapidly. "Do what?"

"How were you going to ask me, Severus?"

"It doesn't matter now."

"Of course it does. Show me, please."

Severus begrudgingly took the ring box back and hid it from Hermione's view. When he turned back, the box had disappeared.

"Forget it. It's foolish anyway. It's all ruined"

She stepped up to him and placed her hands on his chest. "No, it's not. Show me."

"I need music. I wanted us to dance together."

Hermione smiled and waved her wand. Dance music surrounded them. "How's that?"

Severus arched an eyebrow. "Perhaps something a bit slower?"

With another wave, the music changed to a beautiful orchestral melody.

The irritation left his face as Severus pulled her to him and whispered into her ear. "That's better."

Hermione felt a chill course through her body at his voice. They began to dance slowly, bodies close, swaying to the music. Severus' arms surrounded her as he placed small kisses on her neck. Her arms entwined behind him. Severus pulled back and took her hand in his.

"I love you, Hermione Granger."

A shimmer of light surrounded them, and Hermione looked to her hand. A pear-shaped, Slytherin-green emerald adorned her finger. She let out a gasp.

"Hermione, please marry me."

"Severus, why would you think that this moment would be ruined?"

"Hermione?"

"I mean, really, this is the most romantic thing that anyone has ever done for me. I don't care if Albus shouted that he knew what you were doing. It doesn't matter!"

"Hermione?"

"I can't believe that you weren't going to do this after he said that. Oh, I would have been so mad!"

"Merlin's beard, are you going to marry me, or not?!"

Hermione gaped. Her cheeks turned crimson as realization hit her. "Bloody hell, of course I'll marry you!" She threw her arms around Severus.

"Good," Severus mused. "Can we forget that Albus Dumbledore and his meddling even exist, then?"

Hermione grinned devilishly at Severus. "Who's Albus Dumbledore?"

"That's my girl." His lips crashed into hers. His tongue begged entrance, and she willingly let him in. Marveling at the incidents during this past half hour, Hermione could not believe what had happened. But Severus' furtive lips and the beautiful ring that weighed down her finger were more than enough proof that her hopes and dreams had finally come true. She belonged to Severus Snape. And soon, she would belong to him forever.

The End