

# Love in the Heart of Darkness

*by Phantasm Phoenix*

Severus Snape is not a nice man (a good man, but not a nice one), but even he can fall in love . . .

## Freedom

*Chapter 1 of 3*

Severus Snape is not a nice man (a good man, but not a nice one), but even he can fall in love . . .

\* A quick note about this chapter -- narrative takes place when Hermione & co are in their early 20's. Voldemort is still at large, and I have kept Dumbledore alive (or I might have a way for him to come back, but I'm looking into that, but that will be set out in later chapters). I have created an original character (Jasmie Aldovir) an old friend of Snape -- but a few years younger. This relationship will also be built up/explained later when the two meet again (chapter 2).

Freedom.

She walked the corridors of the building with a rumbling of fear. Not an undue amount, but an uncertainty and a feeling of foreboding. The small cell left far behind, facing life outside would be difficult, and she was not ready. She could feel eyes all around her looking, watching from the shadows, and was caught totally unaware by a man who popped before her, smiling. He wore a bowler hat and a sharp suit of what looked black, but she suspected it was a deep navy. His face was bound at the middle by a thick moustache and matching eyebrows with no hint of grey anywhere, though he looked old enough to warrant greys.

"Good afternoon, my dear." He held out a warm hand to shake hers. "Must feel good to be getting out after ten years in this place, eh?"

It did not feel good, and she did not take his hand. Undeterred, he thrust his hand into her palm and shook it rather violently. "Just a couple of people to see first though; you'll be on your way soon enough." She doubted this; Ministry matters seemed to last far too long. This last one had cost her ten years of her life. Not that it mattered much to a person like her.

"Yes, that's it, just in here please. One of our Aurors would like a quick chat before you greet the press." Aurors? Press? This was not mentioned. She would rather not have a one on one chat with an Auror; they had never been very pleasant people in her experience.

Upon stepping into the room, she was led to a seat in front of a desk; the man on the other side didn't look so much like an Auror as like a balding Muggle. He smiled gently as she sat and pushed some papers towards her. "Sign by ALL the Xs please, Miss." She nodded and signed with the quill provided. The quill felt strange in her hand. It had been so long since she had had warrant to write to anyone; correspondence between her and her former mentor, Severus Snape, had long since dropped, and she had no one else who might wish to talk to her. Alas, she didn't have the time to delve into another daydream now; the papers were snatched back, and another more burly wizard took the place of the man on the other side of the desk. This was to be the trying part of the procedure.

"Your arm," was all he said, and she placed her left arm on the table. The wizard sighed and grabbed the hand, pushing her sleeve up past her elbow with his free hand. He then reached for his wand. She knew this would hurt, partly from experience and partly on instinct, knowing that no one intended to be that gentle today. The burly wizard touched the tip of his wand to her forearm, a little above where the Dark Mark lay, dead and motionless. A bright flash of light took her quite by surprise, and the amount of pain which followed it was definitely not expected. This felt more like a dose of Crucio than a branding; her spine ached, and she strained to see the wizard opposite her. It ended as soon as it began, and she rushed to see the mark -- a lion.

"Typical," she said and was about to continue when she stopped short, shocked at the sound of her voice. It was only then that she realised that she hadn't spoken since she had entered Azkaban nearly ten years ago. She grinned as the man stood beside her, but joy was soon pushed aside. The moustached man entered the room and hurried them on down the corridor towards a thick metal door which looked as though it should have been made of oak.

There were six people here now: the man with the moustache, four Aurors, and herself. The man with the moustache turned to look at her as the door swung open. A broad smile snapped onto his face, and he just had time to say, "Look perky, my dear, or you won't be out a full day," before he strode through the door into a swarm of flashes and shouts.

She tried to look happy as she followed. The first thing she heard was, "Miss Aldovir, how does it feel to be the first prisoner to be paroled from Azkaban?"

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Severus Snape stood in the office of Albus Dumbledore at Hogwarts. Curious little trinkets and decorations bustled about the room, tinkling or clinking as they went. The noise was often enjoyable, even to him, though not today. Today he had too much on his mind, and he barely heard the noises of the room. Snape knew what Dumbledore had summoned him there to speak of, but he was unsure of the tone the headmaster would take. So he just waited, somewhat impatiently, for the old man to return.

"Ah, Severus, I'm glad you came so promptly," was the first thing Dumbledore said as he entered the room.

"Good morning, Headmaster." Snape moved to the chair on his side of Dumbledore's desk and sat as he always did.

"I take it you have remembered the day, Severus?" Snape nodded curtly; how could he forget the day? "So may I also take it that you have decided to remain here then? I know the two of you were close."

"Rest assured, Headmaster, I shall not be meeting Miss Aldovir today. We have not spoken in nearly ten years; the climate between us is bound to be uncomfortable."

"But you do still believe her innocence?"

"Of course," was all he said in response.

"Very well, Severus, I trust I will see you at dinner today then?" Snape nodded again and turned to leave. However, as he reached the door, he turned back.

"Headmaster . . ."

"Yes, Severus, I do believe that she is innocent of those murders."

"But you let her go to Azkaban? You didn't help at all . . ."

"She was guilty of other things." Snape noticed the pain in Dumbledore's voice as he said that. "And she would be safer in there than anywhere else. You forget Severus, Voldemort was a very big danger to her at the time---"

"I had not forgotten," he said flatly.

Dumbledore smiled then, a dry smile. Snape found the headmaster somewhat patronising at times.

When he left the office, he heard Dumbledore chuckle. It was not an unkind chuckle, but he was not in the mood to be laughed at. He strode off down the hall, his teaching robes billowing behind him like a shadow come to life. In fact, the whole of Severus Snape looked something like a shadow, perhaps because he had spent so much of his life in shadows.

Classes that day were awful, both for him and his fearful Potions students, none of whom he thought worth teaching. It had been so long since anyone worth teaching Potions to had requested his instruction. However, little did he know that later that day he would be asked to instruct someone he would eventually consider worth the effort.

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Jasmie Aldovir was free; she was out in the world. She had not expected it to be wonderful, not like there would be birds tweeting and bunnies rubbing at her ankles or anything like that. But this was not what she had been expecting.

The Ministry had seized all her money, she was not allowed to Apparate or to fly or to leave the country and she had to take instruction over the summer. Her magic licence would not be reinstated unless she took instruction at Hogwarts over the summer, so the students would not be there. There were three weeks until she had to be there, and she had nearly two hundred miles to travel without using magic. Not that she much wanted to go to Hogwarts, but she needed that licence, and it had been ten years since she had attempted magic of any kind.

The other problem she faced was the reaction of the wizarding community. As soon as she had set foot on the shore after leaving Azkaban, she had been swarmed with angry witches and wizards. Fleeing, she finally lost them in the woods, but now she was lost, alone, and very much in need of a friend. She crouched in the undergrowth and nearly wept.

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Snape retired to his rooms after dinner to find a letter waiting for him. It was placed on the hearth, so he assumed it had arrived by Floo. But when he stooped to pick it up, he noticed Dumbledore's seal on the back. Not at all in the mood for the headmaster's games, he put the letter on his desk and went to take a shower. He spent most of the evening ignoring it, but at around ten o'clock, his curiosity had become too much to deal with. He grabbed the letter and tore off the back of the envelope, sitting at his desk to read it.

Severus,

*I do wish you would have read this earlier.*

*Typical, thought Snape, the man always knows exactly what I will do, even before I do, it seems.* He read on.

*I do not know everything that you do, Severus, but it does keep you on your toes!*

*Now, as to the real purpose of this letter, we will be having two guests this summer. The first is Jasmie. I know you will not be too partial to this arrangement, but I promised the Minister I would provide her with instruction in the summer holidays. You will not have to be in contact unless you wish to be. In fact, she does not know of your continued teaching post here yet.*

*The second guest relates more directly to you. Hermione Granger will be spending the season with us. I have asked her to come and help with some preparations for next term. With the increased threat to our safety since Voldemort's return, I have decided to enlist help in reworking the wards and enchantments which protect Hogwarts this summer. Due to Miss Granger's marvellous progress at the Ministry, she will be a part of the team, now consisting of you, Miss Granger, Minerva and myself.*

*Please see me if you have any problems with these arrangements.*

Kind regards,

A. Dumbledore

Snape snorted. He certainly *did* have some problems with them, but Dumbledore would already know that; what was the mad fool planning now? Just as he began to leave for the headmaster's office, the Mark on his arm began to burn.

Voldemort wanted to see him.

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Snape jotted a note to Dumbledore telling him where he was going and strode out of the room, collecting his cloak on the way. The night outside was unusually cold; not a good sign, he thought. The grass was moist, and he had to take care as he descended the slope towards the main gate. As he slipped through the gate, he thought he glimpsed Dumbledore's light glimmering in his office. No doubt he would already know where Snape was off to and would wait up until he returned.

*This was the way things were now,* Snape thought. *Always running someone's errands, constantly being fathered by someone. A man my age should be the father by now, not the child.* He sighed as he closed the gates and vanished into the thickening darkness.

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Hermione Granger stood in her bedroom, wondering what to pack. She wanted to seem successful when she returned to Hogwarts, but she didn't want to seem too stuck up about it. She knew she was successful, and obviously Dumbledore had noticed her developments in ward technology while working for the Ministry. So shouldn't everyone else already know it?

*Perhaps the trouser suits were a mistake,* she thought. She minimised them and put them away in the drawer by her bed. She had recently realised that if she kept all her clothes minimised, she could keep far more in her tiny flat, and without needing to fill her bedroom with an oversized wardrobe. It was a discovery that her bank balance had had to suffer for. She also tended to keep Muggle clothes, finding it easier to travel to and from work, as well as meaning that she didn't have to change so much.

Now she was beginning to panic; she had to leave for Hogwarts the day after tomorrow, and she was not at all prepared! Turning to Crookshanks, sprawled on the bed, she sighed and began rethinking her packing choices. The sun was beginning to set outside, washing London with a burning pink light. She would have considered it beautiful, but bright sunsets meant Voldemort was active.

It was a spell she had created: whenever there was a large amount of dark magical activity, the sunset or sunrise would be fiercely coloured. And if ever someone should cast the Avada Kedavra curse anywhere in England, the next sunrise or sunset (which ever was to occur next) would be bright red. It was a subtle way for the wizarding community to keep up with current affairs, and any Muggle would just see a brilliant sky. However, sometimes that was all it was, as no one had yet created a way to stop brilliant sunsets/rises made by mother nature. But it was the best they had, though it had taken a lot of persuading to get the Minister to come round, but she had won two months of trial -- to see if people got panicked. She sighed again and turned her attention back to her packing.

The sky was totally dark by the time she was done, having chosen a blend of casual (but nice) jeans, several t-shirts and button down shirts, as well as some material she could transfigure if necessary. She was not a great one for make-up, but always travelled with a reasonable amount -- there might be someone to impress anywhere! Crookshanks yawned and stretched on the bed. She wondered what he would make of returning to Hogwarts. Curling up next to him, she barely had time to consider his reaction before she was asleep and dreamt, strangely enough, of Professor Snape.

What was that pain? Hermione straightened up after an awkward night next to Severus. He had woken before her and was watching her sleep. She smiled and sat up, rubbing what she now knew was a stiff neck. He leant in to kiss her . . .

She sat bold upright in her bed, sending a bemused Crookshanks pirouetting across the room. What had she just dreamt about? "It must just be my nerves at returning to school?" she said aloud.

All day the dream hung over her, not sure what to make of it. She had felt happy in the dream, but now that she was awake, it just made her feel nauseous. But the happiness confused her. Had she really been longing for a boyfriend? She didn't think so. But she certainly didn't think of Snape like that. His greasy hair! Sallow skin! Deep, seething eyes! No! No! No! There was definitely nothing in that theory; she dismissed it from her thoughts. She put it all down to nerves about returning to Hogwarts and hoped that she wouldn't face another dream like that tonight.

## Meetings in the Mist

Chapter 2 of 3

Severus Snape is not a nice man (a good man, but not a nice one), but even he can fall in love . . .

Hermione Granger paused just beyond the gates of Hogwarts. She was nearly 20 minutes late, but she couldn't quite go on. She needed to compose herself before facing what she knew would be an angry Snape in a few moments; she guessed that he wouldn't take too well to waiting for her. She sighed deeply and lifted Crookshanks in his box as she made her way to the gate. Even though she knew he was there, Snape still caught her off guard; his lank, greasy appearance was even more sickly than she imagined. But his eyes burned even more intensely than she remembered.

"Good afternoon, Professor," she offered, as whole-heartedly as she could. He nodded and opened the gate for her, not offering to help her with a struggling Crookshanks, or with her bags. This annoyed her, but she still apologised for her tardiness, and when he didn't even respond she decided that she had had enough of his bad manners.

"You know it is considered courteous to accept an apology when it is offered!" Snape seemed also deaf to this comment; now determined to get his attention, she said something she would soon regret.

"I suppose what did I expect from a Death Eater?"

Snape quickly rounded on her. He caught her off guard, and she stumbled backwards, falling over Crookshanks and ending up sat in the mud.

"What did you say, girl? Manners, was it? Well I find it incredibly impertinent when someone uses a person's history against them, Miss Granger!" His black eyes seemed to grow strangely red as he spoke. He loomed over her, a black shadow marked against a brilliant white sky. She was scared of what he might do next, but the malice

appeared to have left him as quickly as it had crept in, and he extended a hand to pull her up, which she reluctantly accepted.

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Dumbledore sat at his desk in his office, watching a moth tottering around on his window sill. He was waiting for Snape and Hermione ~~they should be there by now~~ but he was a patient man. Almost half an hour after she was supposed to have arrived, the two came knocking at his door.

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"Greetings, Miss Granger, and how was your journey?" Dumbledore came forward to shake hands.

"Fine, thank you, Headmaster, and please, call me Hermione."

"Of course, Hermione. Now, I've put you up in a nice room in the North Wing overlooking the grounds; I hope that will be satisfactory. I'm sure you'll want to be getting settled, so I'll have a house-elf take you up."

"Thank you, Headmaster."

"Albus, please; you're not a student anymore, Hermione."

She nodded and left the room, and Dumbledore returned to his desk. Absently, he said, "Severus, I take it there is a reason you remain in my office?"

"Yes, Headmaster."

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Snape had been struggling to find the words to explain his concerns about the following weeks when the Mark on his arm began to burn. Dumbledore had realised almost the same time as he and did not seem at all surprised to see him turn and walk out without any explanation at all.

Now, standing in the middle of a foggy field somewhere in Kent, he wished he had taken a little longer to say goodbye in the warmth. Never mind that now though; he needed his wits about him. No one should try to speak with the Dark Lord on half-baked nerves; this he had learnt early on in his Death Eater career.

He made his way across the damp landscape towards a supposed abandoned house set deep within the lush green. Not that he could see the luscious green of the place in which he was treading. The sun was beginning to set, and a brilliant red sky was reflected in the fog about his feet, giving the scene an eerie glow and making everything seem a washed out brown.

Much as he tried, Snape could not gather his thoughts as tightly as he would have liked. Every time he thought he was safe, Hermione Granger popped back into his head. This began to worry him. He had about three minutes before someone would know he was approaching; he had to clear her from his head. In his worry, he didn't pause to analyse the thoughts as they passed by. If he had, he would have been confused further by their nature. Probably best that he did not have the time now.

In his rambling, Snape did not realise that he had been walking away from the house and away from Voldemort. He found himself quite lost wading through the fog that had now risen up to his waist. "Shit," he said aloud. Quite loud actually, because an answer came drifting to him through the fog.

"Is there someone there?" A pause. "Hello?"

Snape knew better than to go trekking across the British countryside chasing voices in the mist, so he ignored the voice and turned back the other way. He was considering Apparating back to his original location when the voice came again.

"Please. Help me."

He knew he should go and see what was up, but everything in him screamed that he shouldn't. It wasn't exactly wise to ignore The Dark Lord when he called you, or to go off chasing anonymous voices in the mist. Then again, he was now quite late and this would give him the excuse he needed a security threat he had to investigate. So, on that thought he turned again and made his way towards the voice in the mist.

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Hermione sat on the bed in her room. Dumbledore was right; this was a nice room. There was a fireplace, a large window with a window seat, and an en suite bathroom. Not to mention the king size four-poster which dominated the room. All the wood was dark, as it had been in her dorm when she had been a student here. Crookshanks lolled lazily on the pillows, and she sat and daydreamed of the old days she had spent in this castle.

She was completely immersed in her reminiscing when from out of the fireplace bounded a house-elf. It was sporting a Hogwarts tunic and introduced itself as Millie. Hermione had sprung from the bed and was now standing on the window seat, quite beside herself. The young elf, crying desperately, began grovelling and apologising for the incident, saying that she had only come to tell Miss Granger that it was time for dinner.

"Now, now, Dearie," said Hermione, "it wasn't your fault. I just didn't know they had hooked Hogwarts up to the Floo network."

"They haven't," exclaimed the elf. "It's an internal network for us house-elves." She puffed out her chest here, obviously quite proud to be a Hogwarts house-elf. "And for the sending of internal letters, Miss." She beamed at Hermione, who wondered how this elf had gotten such a good grip on the English language; normally elves were almost illiterate and lacking in verbal skills too.

She assured Millie that she would leave for dinner momentarily, but now she needed to find something to wear. Her first dinner in Hogwarts, should she dress up? Should she wear Muggle attire or wizard robes? The questions flowed in her mind, swirling and buzzing.

"Do not panic. Do not panic," she kept telling herself. Why was Hogwarts having this effect on her? She never used to be like this. Even recently, when she had been dressing for dates or smart dinners, she hadn't been that bothered about what she wore. But now . . .

She entered the Great Hall in black Muggle trousers and a black shirt, which she had transfigured from a pair of jeans and an old t-shirt. All this effort only to see Dumbledore sat seated in the centre of the staff table, between Professor Flitwick and Madam Hooch. Was this all her audience?

"Ah, I see Professor Snape has arrived," exclaimed Madam Hooch as she walked the length of the room. Upon hearing this, Hermione spun round to see if he was following her. No Snape? She turned back again when she heard Dumbledore chuckling behind her.

"No, my dear, she was referring to you! Black is a bit serious, don't you think?"

Hermione flushed and responded by tapping her wand on her shoulder and turning the clothes back to their original state. Redder than a beetroot, she sat down next to Flitwick and was greeted by a full English roast dinner, sprouts and all.

"Is it just the four of us tonight then?" she asked, only to be answered by Dumbledore recalling an alphabetised list of the locations and reasons for being there of all the faculty, past and present. By the time he was done, everyone had finished eating, including puddings.

"And that only leaves Severus," he concluded. Hermione could sense herself reddening again.

"Where would he be, Headmaster?" she choked out and was met by a stern look from Flitwick.

"Don't ask," he whispered.

"Severus Snape is out there defending our freedom, Hermione. And possibly fighting for his life. Who knows? I applaud the man." The headmaster continued in this fashion for some time, saying that since she was a silent member of the Order of the Phoenix, it was okay to tell her this. But he advised her not to ask him about it directly, and that she must not, on any grounds, talk about it with anyone else either unless they were an active member of the Order. Dumbledore then smiled and said that they might as well all leave now, since they had eaten.

"Miss Granger, I have arranged for you, Minerva, Severus, and I to meet tomorrow at nine to discuss our plans. The password to my office is Liquorice Wand. See you tomorrow."

Hermione left the dining hall feeling flat and a little disgruntled. Not only had she made an effort for no reason, but she had been called upon it, and Dumbledore kept dismissing her so bluntly!

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Jasmie Aldovir lay in a ditch somewhere in England. She knew she hadn't left the country, but she hadn't a clue where she was. The last town she had passed by, she was met with hostility and violence like she had never seen. She had had to resort to using her magic, which was very rusty and did her more damage than help. One harmless jinx she had cast had backfired and left her burnt and wet in this ditch. She could hear water running nearby, just the gentle trickle of a stream, and she thought she had heard a car go by some hours ago. In far too much pain to move, and not wanting to risk any more magic, she had just lain there watching the fog roll in and the sky turn blood red and then to an inky blue.

When the last of her hope was ebbing away from her, she heard a voice. She wasn't sure what it had said, but it was definitely a human voice. So, she had taken a risk and called out for help. At first it seemed as though she was either ignored or actually not heard, but now footsteps were approaching her. Not at all slowly or cautiously, a man came striding out of the mist; he had a wand drawn by the looks of it.

No, it couldn't be . . .

"Severus?"

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\* Just a brief note ~ this chapter exists as a way to basically tie everything up for the real narrative to begin. Please bear with me, it will get better.

## Duels and Dreams

### *Chapter 3 of 3*

Severus Snape is not a nice man (a good man, but not a nice one), but even he can fall in love . . .

#### Chapter 3 - Duels and Dreams

It had been a long day for Hermione. She had moved back into Hogwarts. Her room was comfy and had beautiful views over the breathtaking grounds surrounding the castle. Crookshanks seemed to have made himself at home. She had been worried that he might stress too much about moving, and he was an old cat. She had also been worried about seeing Snape after the dream she had had the night before. But both fears were unconfirmed; Crookshanks was curled up asleep, and Snape was keeping himself to himself; she should have known he would! In fact, since their little to-do on the walk from the gates, she hadn't seen him at all.

The sky outside was turning a deep red now. *Not a good sign*, she thought. Hermione sighed and sat down next to Crookshanks to fondle his ears as he purred softly. So far she was not enjoying her return, especially after the eventful dinner she had shared earlier.

Seeing as it was only seven o'clock, she didn't much feel like going to bed. Turning to the stack of books which she had chosen to accompany her, she scanned the titles: *Charms for Charming Witches*, *Wards of the Wetlands*, *Norris's Guide to Self Defence* Nothing seemed to take her fancy really. She knew she should do some reading before tomorrow's meeting, but all she could think about was the past. Perhaps a stroll over the grounds would help her relax, get the reminiscing out of her system?

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Snape stood, dumfounded. Was he really seeing what he was seeing? Jasmie Aldovir laying, quite helpless, in a muddy ditch in picturesque Kent? She should be at Hogwarts the day after tomorrow; this was not where she should be.

"Severus?"

"*Oh my God, it is her,*" he said to himself. "It's been a long time." He tried to smile, but it ended up as a grimace.

"Do I look that bad?"

"No, I..."

"Wasn't expecting me?" she offered. "Well, I wasn't exactly expecting to be here either, much less to meet you. Anyway, why are you here? If you don't mind me asking."

"I do."

"Oh."

Shocked by his bluntness, she thought it best not to simply lie on the ground before him. He obviously enjoyed making her feel inferior. When she tried to move, he could see the pain it caused her, and he wanted to help, but something in him was stopping him, holding him back. So he watched . . . Watched her sit up. Watched the tears tumble down her cheeks as she tried to fight them back. Watched as the crusty sleeve on her arm kept its folds and was caught up around her elbow. Watched the Dark Mark wriggle around on her forearm, a horrible reminder of the past they had shared. But now it was twinned with a new mark, though he couldn't quite see what it was. His

curiosity beginning to get the better of him, he bent down to help her up (and too see this new mark). A look of sheer terror grew on her face, and he frowned. *Had she not called for help?* he thought. But then he felt a presence behind him; how did they know he was here?

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Hermione was wandering along the side of the lake when she too felt a familiar presence behind her. Hagrid. She turned to embrace the man, overjoyed to have finally met a true friend at Hogwarts. She had been here nearly a day and was already lonely.

Hagrid's home was exactly the same as she had remembered it: warm and cosy. The two of them fell into conversation very quickly. Hagrid asked her about her life since Hogwarts and was quite confused about her love life, or lack thereof.

"But yer a beautiful young woman, Hermione."

She smiled and took it all in her stride, as usual. She was used to people telling her to get out and meet people. She had been a bridesmaid at Ron's wedding last year, a day that had nearly driven her mad. She told Hagrid so.

"But they had only known each other six months!" she protested, when he didn't seem to be taking her side. "How can they ~~be~~ *be in love?*"

"It doesn't take long at all you know. Love at first sight and all."

"That's not real, Hagrid. That's just lust."

It was well past sunset now, the clear sky punctuated by twinkling stars. There were no lights up at the castle, as far as she could see, so everything around her was either grey or ink blue, save for those stars above her as she walked away from Hagrid's. The midnight air was warm, but there was a chill in the breeze as it brushed by.

*Perhaps it will rain tomorrow.* It was a delight for Hermione to be able to relax in the earthy darkness. Living in London, one rarely got to see true, honest night-time, and with the increasing threat of the Dark Lord, it was even more rare to be able to simply enjoy one's self like this.

She was just about to cross the threshold of the castle when a voice called to her from behind. When she turned, she couldn't see anyone at first, but slowly the ambling figure of Dumbledore approached.

"Miss Granger, you're out a bit late aren't you?"

"Sorry, Headmaster, I guess I just couldn't sleep."

He waved away her apology, saying something about him not sleeping either.

"Something's troubling you, isn't it, my dear?"

"No, Professor." But a look in his eyes told her that he knew, knew about her loneliness, about her now worrying about her sex life, about the dream she had had ~~shit~~, *surely he doesn't know about that?* She had completely forgotten it herself, yet now, standing in front of him her mind had been drawn back to it. Was he inside her head? She went cold. It was not something she wanted people to know about; it wasn't something she even wanted to remember herself. In the midst of her panic, Dumbledore chuckled and walked inside, bidding her a goodnight.

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Hermione was trembling on the sofa. He could see that from the other side of the room. She would not meet his gaze, but he believed what she had just told him all the more.

"Hermione, I..." he started to say, but his lust could not be confined any more, and he crossed the room in one stride, snatching her up from her seat and meeting her lips with his in a time stopping kiss.

She sat bolt upright in her bed. *What was going on in her head?* He had even treated her appallingly when she had seen him yesterday, yet here was another dream. She knew she didn't like him. She was sure she didn't like him. Then again, it had been a very nice dream. But no, she could not like Professor Snape, she concluded. She must just be very, very lonely. However, she had not reacted to this dream the same way as she had to the other one. She felt herself even wanting to get back to sleep to finish it.

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Pettigrew was sitting at Voldemort's feet as usual. *More like a pet than a Death Eater*, thought Snape. He was unusually nervous today. Normally he faced the Dark Lord with a composed and focused mind, but the events of the day had left him quite shaken.

Jasmie seemed to have slotted back in to the run of things very quickly; she was sitting in a corner speaking with Lucius Malfoy as though nothing had happened. *Probably comparing takes of Azkaban*, he thought. Snape was curious why Voldemort had not punished her more for her slip-ups all those years ago; he had practically let her walk right back in, and that was not at all like him. He didn't have to wonder much longer though, for at that moment Voldemort pulled out his wand and rose from his seat, Pettigrew snickering at his back. The room went silent.

"Severus."

"My Lord?" Snape bowed from the waist, respectfully.

"I am seeking a little entertainment tonight. You have been lacking in action recently. Prove to me now that you have not lost your touch." The Dark lord smiled slightly at his own plan.

Just as Snape was about to ask the nature of the demonstration, Crabbe and Goyle, both long serving Death Eaters, crossed the room to where Jasmie was sat. He went cold inside, feeling a hunch about what was to be asked of him. Voldemort had obviously noticed his momentary hesitation and turned on him.

"Do you have a problem with this?" he hissed before screaming, *'Crucio'*, and sending Snape to his knees. Snape's spine stiffened, but the muscles across his back seemed to be trying to bend it. Every nerve in Snape's body was on fire, and every cell was writhing in pain, yet his whole body stayed perfectly still, save for the slump to his knees. "It's been a while, hasn't it, *old friend*," he whispered into Severus's reddened ear. "Can you still remember the old days? Does the pain slip back through you just the way it was before?"

The breath on his cheek was almost too much to bear, even more than the numbness left in the wake of the curse. Shivers began to pulse through his body, sending him face first onto the floor, his mind erratically flashing through memories he was powerless to stop. After several minutes of these spasms, he relaxed and the room went dark. He felt dizzy, as though he were drunk; a gentle voice called to him through his blindness.

"Severus. Severus. Severus."

He lay, not knowing whether his eyes were open or closed, watching Hermione walk towards him, arms outstretched. She looked as though she were trying to catch him, he thought. It was this thought that carried him back into the room, confused and shaken.

"Haul him up, boys." Voldemort was crouched at his side. "It is now time for you to entertain me. A duel, I think!" He swept across the room, almost dancing to his leather-bound chair in the corner of the room, the dusty floorboards not seeming to bother his bare feet. "And remember, boys and girls, no Avada Kedavra."

"Master, I have no wand," came a quiet voice from the shadows.

"Never mind, my dear. You'll just have to work with what you've got." Voldemort smiled viciously, and Snape could see the malice in his eyes *This is her retribution*, he thought.

Snape could see that she could barely stand, let alone fight him. Whatever had happened to her had left her badly burned up her left arm, the one she used to cast with, and she was obviously exhausted from travelling. This was not a fair fight. Could he really do this?

Slowly raising his wand, Snape steeled himself and half-spoke, half-whispered, *Crucio*."

The duel had lasted almost an hour, yet Jasmie had barely managed to fire back a single basic jinx, which was dodged easily. When the Dark Lord had finally called it off, he told Snape to get her fixed up and then bring her back. He had said that he might have some further use for her.

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Jasmie watched from across the room as Snape fell to the floor. She saw even from that distance the light fading from his eyes. She had wanted to step in from the moment it had begun, but now she could not restrain herself any longer. Darting across the room she crouched at his slumped body, gently stroking his care-worn face and whispering his name.

"Severus. Severus. Severus." Slowly but surely he began to stir, and she was pushed away by Goyle, exiled once again to shadowy outreaches of the room. She pressed herself into the damp wall; the horror was plain to see in her eyes.

When at last the great man was hauled back to his feet, the blood was pumping through her ears so loudly that the other sounds of the room were muted, so she did not hear Voldemort's orders. All she saw was Snape raise his wand against her, and the bright light of a curse headed her way. *He had betrayed me?*

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The dawn that day was unusually beautiful, and as the sun crept over the hills to the east, two figures were making their way up towards Hogwarts castle. They were met at the great doors by Dumbledore, who escorted them inside.

"What happened, Severus?"

Snape simply shook his head. How could he tell Dumbledore all that he had done? They had had to cast several different versions of *Ennervate* to resuscitate her; for a while it looked as though he had done too well. She had looked so peaceful lying there on the floor, just like she had before she was taken from him. He resented her for leaving him so alone, but for that instant he completely forgot about that.

She was still dazed he had practically dragged her to the castle but now she was safe, so he need not have any more concern for her. He bid the Headmaster goodnight and left for his chambers. Perhaps sleep would make him feel more alert.

Hermione was trembling on the sofa, he could see that from the other side of the room. She would not meet his gaze, but he believed what she had just told him all the more.

"Hermione, I..." he started to say, but his lust could not be confined any more and he crossed the room in one stride, snatching her up from her seat and meeting her lips with his in a time stopping kiss. He felt her body soften into him, the curves of her breasts pushing gently into his chest. He allowed his hand to slide from her arm across her back and down to the top of her arse; she was more curvaceous than her clothes made her look, and he wondered what she would look like without them.

Snape woke in the morning with a presence he hadn't felt in a long time, a certain tension between his legs. He hadn't awoken with morning glory since . . . In fact he couldn't actually remember. He reached under the covers and instinctively began massaging his erection. That was when last night's dream hit him. Was *she* the reason for this? The thought of Hermione intensified the pleasure; he felt himself building up to a climax and he slowed his rhythm. This must be his first masturbation in nearly six years, and he was damn well going to enjoy it.

The twenty minutes he was able to postpone his orgasm lasted a lifetime, and when he did relent it was with Hermione's name on his lips. Then he knew; he had to have her. At least once before the end.