

Enduring Recovery

by sweetflag

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Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 7

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Author's notes: This is challenge number 38 from the list provided. Now that I may, I would like to express my sincerest thanks to my beta, falconfalmorgan. Without this lady's help, guidance and patience, I would have stopped writing almost as soon as I started. If you have enjoyed reading this story, then your thoughts and thanks must go to falcon. Also, I need to thank my sister, who sat me down one evening and explained the principles of homeopathy to me... several times. Thank you!

Chapter One.

She couldn't stand it! Only hours had passed since the smoke had settled to reveal the battle-scarred castle and the deeply gouged earth surrounding it. She could recall the origin of each wound, either from her own terrible recollections or from the whispered terrors of her comrades. Only hours to mutate from a girl who had believed in the wisdom and care of her elders into a woman who seethed at their duplicity and callousness. The euphoria of being alive and knowing that the enemy was truly dead had evaporated to leave a scorching anger.

She couldn't stand it. In the calm surroundings of the Headmaster's office, her eyes had flickered to the serene, bearded face in the portrait, and her feelings had intensified into a white-hot flame. So many questions had blossomed in her head until it felt weighted and clogged with suffocating, twisting vines. She had been amazed at Harry's generous attitude, amazed at how he still adored the man who for all intents and purposes had used them as pawns in a game.

With one last resentful glance at the Headmaster, she followed Harry out of the office. The walk out of the castle was just as bad as the one in; bloodstains marked the suffering and death of so many. The air was cold, but not as refreshing as she had hoped, given that it was still slightly smoke-filled and had that cloying, underlying scent of death and fear. Aurors and Healers wove between the injured and the dead, the white of the Healers' robes soon dulled by dirt and blood. Some of the younger students gathered in tight groups of misery, holding each other for support while they waited for their parents or teachers to tell them what to do. Hermione felt that the landscape before her depicted quite graphically the inner turmoil that they all felt... churned up and ripped apart.

It was with some shame that she realised that her thoughts had not dwelt upon her friends, but on her own vicious epiphany, so when Ron suddenly called out his sister's name, she inwardly cringed at the enormity of her neglect. She watched as Ron sprinted across the disturbed earth towards Ginny. Hermione swallowed as she took in the heartbreaking scene of Ginny holding a limp girl against her chest, her red hair falling in a matted cascade, hiding how she was weeping. Biting her lip, she watched Ron slow and then collapse onto his knees, draping his arm over his grieving sister's shoulder. She turned away when Ginny let the dead girl slip from her lap so she could fall into her brother's embrace.

"Harry!" shouted a harsh voice, shattering the eerie silence that had suffocated Hogwarts since the last cheers of Voldemort's demise had finished echoing. "Harry Potter!"

Hermione turned and sought out the owner of that rude exclamation. A tall, thin Auror was approaching with two others in tow. Her eyes narrowed and her brow furrowed.

How dare they? she thought angrily. How dare they shout in this place! A place that should now be considered hallowed ground. Harry seemed equally unimpressed, and she thought that he would turn and walk away, but he held still and waited for the Aurors to approach.

The elderly Auror sensed the disapproval emanating from Harry, and he glanced away before removing a scroll from the depths of his pocket. Harry raised his eyebrow, and she could almost hear his thoughts ridiculing the man's pomposity.

"Mr Potter," the aged Auror repeated more respectfully. "I have here a summons, asking if you would be gracious enough to attend an interview at the Ministry of Magic."

Hermione felt her lips curve up as she saw an opportunity to either ease or vent her anger. Ron was soothing his sister, and Harry would be at the Ministry while she would be left to her own devices. Her skin tingled, and she felt a thrill as she realised that her intention was on the cusp of fulfilment. But then, she looked at Harry...how exhausted he looked, his skin deathly pale and his eyes dull, and she felt another flicker of shame. Her thrill withered as sharply as it had ignited, and she was left hoping that Harry would refuse the Auror's request so she could find a more honourable way to accomplish her aim: to confront Dumbledore! She would not use the woes and strains of her friends to help accomplish her ends; if she did, then what would she be?

"Yeah, sure!" Harry responded numbly, shrugging his shoulders and dragging a dirty hand over his dishevelled hair.

"Harry!" she scolded gently. "Don't you think that you should see a Healer first?"

Harry turned to her and smiled weakly. "I'm fine. Get this over with and then I can rest... for the rest of my life."

She stared into those emerald depths, and for the merest moment, she felt the urge to hold him, to keep him there for one moment to help her through this unnerving and terrible vacillation between thought-incinerating anger and soul-destroying numbness. Inwardly, she screamed. She was torn between two desperate desires...the need to solve this indefinable and insurmountable thing that was the 'Final Battle' and the need to see if her faith had been misplaced and subsequently terribly abused. Her choice was made for her the moment Harry's fingers touched the Summons.

The parchment acted as a Portkey, and she was left alone, staring at the space that their forms had occupied, her mind suddenly blank now that she was presented with her opportunity. What was it that she really wanted to know? What part of the last, terrible year did she want explained? What was it that she needed? Her feet carried her back to the castle, her eyes blind to it all as her mind circled over those doubts and terrors that she had endured. The fears that had kept her awake and followed her into those occasional bouts of fitful sleep. She shuddered, recalling the horrors and mental decay she had experienced when she had had the duty of caring for that horrid Horcrux. It took her by surprise when she found herself standing before the stone guardian to the Headmaster's office; she had not yet ordered her chaotic thoughts. Perhaps his face would engender that surge once more, and the questions would tumble from her mouth.

The office was almost as they had left it, but with one annoying subtraction...Dumbledore's portrait was empty. Hermione sneered as she entered, her frustration rising like lava until it erupted from her mouth in one, long howl of scorching bitterness. Had he seen her discontentment and left to avoid the confrontation that he must have feared, and avoided, from Harry? Did he fear someone seeing him for what he was: a manipulative and cold man? She shook her head in disgust. Knowing that her target had fled, she stumbled over to the desk; her limbs and head felt weighted as her exhaustion finally got her attention. She felt hollow. They had been nothing but weapons to destroy Voldemort; from the time that they had sealed their friendship with Harry, they had also cemented their fate. Tears stung her eyes, waiting to fall, and deep within her chest, something clenched painfully. It could have been anyone else; she needn't have been the one to have faced such pain, horror and fear... Her friendship, and her inclination, had made her do those things. Would she have faced Bellatrix's Cruciatus for the Boy Who Lived? Would she have lived with the constant fear merely for the Chosen One? Would she have Obliviated and sent her parents away solely for the Golden Boy? No! But for Harry Potter, her friend, she had. She sobbed and collapsed against the solid desk. Guilt, shame, anger, bitterness and despair coiled around her, tightening and smothering until she couldn't think or hear anything but her own weeping. Dumbledore and the others had known; they must have been able to see the future impact of being Harry's friend, and yet they had said nothing, given no warnings. They had used her feelings to keep her loyal to someone who would bring pain and suffering upon her. It all came back to why?

She wept herself dry, and when it seemed pointless to stay slumped against the desk, she used it to push herself upright. Her puffy eyes glanced lethargically over the desk's surface; she could see the scorch mark from where the Elder Wand had repaired Harry's faithful yet broken wand. Earlier, much of the desk had been obscured from her view by Harry's and Ron's trembling frames, and now, with no one there, she saw it: Dumbledore's Pensieve! Her breath caught in her throat when she peered into the depths of the bowl and saw the shimmering memories shifting like liquid silk. She made the connection almost immediately...they had to be Snape's memories! Her earlier, desperate need for answers battered at her depression, and she bent eagerly over the bowl. If Dumbledore wouldn't answer her, then maybe Snape would. She flexed her fingers, chewed on her lower lip while some innate sense of propriety tried to make itself heard, and then she plunged her fingertips into the cool liquid.

It came as a shock that Snape and Lily had been close; her mind seemed to struggle with the notion...so much seemed against such an unlikely alliance...and even though her doubts had finally been realised, she had felt intense despair at their separation. She saw his humble origins and extrapolated upon the clues therein to deduce that his childhood had been far from happy and secure, and that the torment foisted upon him by a certain group of Gryffindors had killed any remaining joy. She devoured the snippets where Dumbledore declared his guile and culpability, her eyes wide as they gleefully took in the evidence to support her burgeoning disdain for her ex-Headmaster. She felt dry sobs wrack her body when she realised the depth of Snape's feelings for Lily, and she wondered whether Snape's hate for Harry had been as deep as he had always demonstrated. The images flowed into each other, a disjointed disclosure of a dying man. She hugged herself when Snape sat listening to the old man's portrait: sitting there, haunted by Dumbledore's dedication, driven by the old man's desire even from beyond his grave. Hermione had to cover her mouth to muffle the mewling cries issuing from her throat. She wiped away a stray tear, and her heart beat an unsteady rhythm. In comparison, she had suffered very little, and all that she had done was to support her friend and keep him from harm. Snape had suffered his woes far longer and to a deeper degree than she would ever have to face, and for very little. How he must have loved Lily! She felt ashamed that she was diverting blame from herself to others. It was her fault that all those things had happened to her, and she had done it all willingly and lovingly. A tear slipped down the curve of her cheek, past her trembling lips and then on to fall from her quivering chin. Snape had protected them all. She reached out a shaking hand to stop the Memory Snape from leaving the Headmaster's office; she knew his fate, and she could hardly bear it.

She slipped from the memory world and crumpled into a heap. Her head banged against the side of the desk, and her fingers lanced through her hair, her nails digging into her scalp. It was too much, too hard! She had heard people say that surviving was the most difficult thing you had to face and she had scoffed at it. But now... Now, when she was beginning to understand the enormity of having passed through such a thing, she wept and considered the worth of her future. Could she ever not think of those who had perished? Would she able to look at her friends without recalling this day? How could she ever repay those who had died? The dirty fingernails pressed more deeply, drawing blood as she tried to control the upsurge of emotion. She shivered...she felt so cold...her teeth chattered and her extremities felt numb. No matter how she tried, she just couldn't stop shaking.

She heard the slam of the door; she even thought that she felt the vibration of it through the floor, but she just hadn't the energy to respond. Her head just wouldn't lift, and after all that had happened, what could possibly harm her now? A hand gripped her upper arm, a tight, vice-like grip that, even through her intense apathy, hurt. She was hauled to her feet, her body dangling limply beneath her arm as it was held aloft. She had the most unusual need to giggle, and a couple burst past her numb lips. Another hand joined the effort to support her, and her right arm was caught in an equally painful grip. Those hands worked together and gave her several sharp, rather vicious, shakes. Her teeth crashed together, and pain flared through her jaw. Matted, bushy hair flopped around her face, and a flicker of fear scattered the lethargy. Gasping for breath and clutching at the arms of whoever was shaking her like a doll, she straightened and opened her eyes. The scream lodged in her throat when she found herself lost in a pair of blazing, onyx eyes.

She cringed back as he thrust his fury-filled face towards her. Her heart now thundered against her chest, a cold sweat swathed her trembling body, and she had never felt more alert.

"How dare you!" he snarled. Foamy spittle sprayed from his twitching lips, and she tried to swallow past her suddenly dry throat. He gave her another, stronger shake, earthing a portion of his anger through her slender frame.

Hermione felt wave after wave of pain roll through her sore and war-battered body, and her teeth cracked together painfully. Snape was an indistinguishable blur as her head snapped back and forth. Through the pain and the shock, she felt a slow-to-waken anger begin to bubble. After all that she had suffered, how dare he treat her so roughly...how dare he!

For his part, Snape was almost senseless with rage. He had spilt his deepest and most sacred memories to Harry Potter, his last attempt to help the boy kill the Dark Lord.

As he had bled into the dusty floor of the Shrieking Shack, he had felt a strange, but beautiful, warmth suffuse him, and he had welcomed it until he realised that his mind had spewed out more than he had intended. Those secret and precious memories that had sustained and strengthened him had leaked out with those that Harry had needed. He had doubted that his preparations would save him...Nagini's venom was notorious...and he had not cared at the time... A dying man could be excused for sloppiness. But this went too far! The bushy-haired bookworm should have known better than to pry. She should have been more respectful and minded her own business. Wasn't it enough that he had given his life to this? Wasn't it enough that he had risked it for their benefit? Would it have been too much for them to consider that and leave him in peace, rather than steal and glut on his sweetest memories?

Something shocked him, and Snape pushed Hermione away as though she had burnt his hands. Banging against the desk, she used it to support herself while her head still span. From the corner of her eye, she saw the hem of Snape's black cloak slip over the carpet as he backed away. Clutching at her forehead, Hermione lifted her head and stared in wonder at the man she had thought dead...the man she had mourned only a few moments earlier. He still looked dead. His skin was deathly pale save for the twin red marks on his neck, the skin freshly healed and a shocking marker for the murderous fangs that had ripped into the flesh. His eyes, which had flared, were now dull and sunken, and lips that had pulled back in a furious scowl now hung limply as he stepped back to stumble against the door. Breathing hard, Hermione rubbed at her biceps, feeling the heat of the bruising blossoming there, and she wondered what had prompted Snape to release her and cower away as if she had wounded him.

It had taken some time for the sounds of her whimpers to penetrate the fog of resentment and anger that had clouded his thinking. As soon as he recognised her high-pitched squeals and moans, he saw what he was doing: he was hurting her. Appalled at his behaviour, he released her, looking at his trembling, almost alien hands and wondering what had possessed them to assault a student he had sworn to protect. What vileness seeped through him? What corruption had he absorbed that still crawled beneath his skin, not purged by Voldemort's death? Gasping for breath, he backed away, glad for the solid door behind him as he crashed against it and slowly sank down onto the floor.

"You're alive!" she croaked out.

"Remarkable observation, Miss Granger," he responded, but the fire and the disdain were absent, and he sounded small and morose as he sat hugging his shins and pressing his face against his knees.

Hermione was astounded. Not only was he alive, but he seemed vulnerable and... human. She recalled the images from the Pensieve: his anguish as he knelt in Sirius' room and clutched Lily's letter to his chest, and then his quiet and poignant declaration to Dumbledore of his eternal devotion... the silver doe.

"I saw Nagini bite you!" she said shrilly. She crushed her arms against herself, pressing the palm of her hand against her roiling stomach. "I heard you scream," she whispered hoarsely. Nausea rolled up her throat, her stomach churned unpleasantly, and the scream that had burst from Snape's lips echoed in her ears. Her mind replayed the image of his body on the floor, blood and silvery memories gushing out; she remembered how he had asked Harry to look at him and how his leg twitched even as the light in his eyes snuffed out. Her heart broke for the second time, and hot tears rushed down her face.

Snape squeezed his eyes shut and bit his lower lip: he would not fall apart in front of her. He had hoped to slip away: the Boy Who Lived would be the perfect and unquestionable witness to his demise, and then he could leave... Leave it all and try to finally live. But he had given away too much merely to flee; he needed his memories of Lily, convinced he could never live without them. And now, he was as trapped as ever. He could have slipped away, but yet again, Lily dragged him back to this life, this role. He would always be here.

"How?" she asked. Maybe if she had a few answers, that would be enough to make the rest make sense. Perhaps if something...anything...seemed right, then maybe the rest would too.

"Intriguing question, Miss Granger."

Both of their heads snapped up towards the wall behind the Headmaster's chair; two pairs of eyes fixed upon the enquiring face with its customary twinkling blue eyes. Dumbledore's tone had been light and innocent, but she saw Snape glare furiously up at the portrait.

Snape snarled and rose up like a cobra, all teeth and threat. His dark eyes narrowed, and he surged forward to place his clenched fists on the polished wood of the desk. Hermione stepped away from him, her sherry-coloured eyes darting from Headmaster to Potions master.

"You expected me to die!" Snape spat out, his voice venomous. "You knew that the Dark Lord would think me the master of the Elder Wand, and you said nothing." His voice was a waspish whisper, but it carried all the venom of that vicious insect. Disgust and hurt dripped from every word, and his thin body shivered as the anger and disappointment surged through his flesh. "You gave me my orders, expecting me to serve you 'til the end without question and without thought for myself. I was nothing to you but a means to an end." Snape straightened and stabbed out a pointing, accusing finger at the serene portrait. "You never saw a life for me beyond serving you to help Potter destroy the Dark Lord!" The finger trembled, and Snape's breath was fast and hard. "I never served you! Always her... Always."

Hermione inhaled sharply and pressed a hand against her quivering lips as she watched, wide-eyed, while Snape crumpled up and let out a howl of intense misery.

"You know that isn't true, Severus."

Such pain had flooded Dumbledore's voice that Hermione wrenched her eyes away from the black-clad man and up to the portrait where painted eyes wept, and silvery tears slipped down the canvas.

"I admit that I used you; I could do no other to bring down such as Voldemort. I needed the best and the most powerful, and that was you. I always knew that you did what you did because of another, and I shamelessly used that knowledge."

The sorrow that had suffused Dumbledore's face dispersed and a hardness set in, his eyes glittering as his anger reached the surface. "But I never used you without thought, Severus. I never expected anything of you. I certainly never expected you to die, and I have never thought of you as a tool." At the last, his voice broke, and a few choked sobs escaped from his pale lips. "I have seen you suffer, Severus. When you returned from your meetings and sat there, divulging what you had gleaned, I saw your suffering... and I suffered with you. Had it been within my power to let you go, to let you shake off the yoke that had you trapped, then I would have. I would have helped you slip away."

"You expect me to believe that... even after knowing that you sent Potter to his death!" Snape shouted out, his face flushed with colour, spittle flying from his mouth. "You loved him...or so you professed...and yet you set him up nicely as the sacrificial pawn; so where does that leave me? I, who disgust you! I, who at every turn have done despicable things in His name and in yours..."

The words rushed up, but stuck in her throat, the emotion clogging her pharynx. Her lips worked uselessly, and she tried to mouth her words; on weak and trembling legs, she stepped over to him.

"You used us all! You bastard!" he screamed out, his words echoing around the small office. His pale face screwed up into a perfect picture of pain, and his lips worked silently as he struggled to unleash the words that his emotions had stoppered. His thin hands reached up to clutch at his hair, and he folded up; his breath coming in ragged and shallow gulps, and his black eyes wide and desperate, he struggled with it all. "I wanted her... Oh Merlin!" he sobbed out. "Needed her... to forgive me! Keep Potter safe... Forgive me... Need her..."

His voice was increasing in volume and pitch, but his intensity of feeling was rendering him incoherent, the anger thought-consuming. He fixed the old man with a baleful glare; the calm face in the portrait, with its mockery of grief pasted so expertly upon the callous emptiness of the shell behind, incited his hatred to spiral out of control, and Snape snapped. Just when Hermione thought that he would collapse, he straightened before her, and his hand delved into his dirt-streaked robes, his fury making his fingers fumble and his face twist into an ugly and fearsome scowl.

The breath that she had held burst out from her burning lungs in an explosive, desperate sob, and she whimpered in sympathy as the man continued to fall apart before her. His body trembled violently, and his voice, although a whisper compared to his earlier rant, carried more heartfelt and raw pain than she thought possible. Crying with

him and for him, she staggered forward, her heart breaking for a man who had served for longer than she had lived. At the last moment, she saw his hand whip out of the folds of his robes, and she could see what his anger was prompting him to do; but it was futile and potentially dangerous as the portraits were charmed with protective spells. Compelled by instinct, Hermione lunged forward to wrap her arms around Snape's chest, pinning his arms by his side. He screamed out his fury and frustration, twisting his body to try to dislodge her, but she held fast.

Inches from her right hip, she saw the tip of his wand issue forth violent and vivid sparks, and her guts quivered at the danger she was in; Snape was mad with grief and fury. The mindless attempts to free himself, so that he could vent it all on the portrait, resulted in him overbalancing, and he crashed to the carpet. Hermione fell with him, her forehead connecting painfully with his jaw, and for a moment they lay in an ungainly heap. Their rapid pants were all that could be heard, and then she heard and felt Snape's indrawn breath.

"Get off me... Now!" His teeth were clenched painfully together, and his eyes flashed dangerously as his hissed whisper reached her ears.

Stricken with a bout of instinct rather than common sense, she continued to hold him and licked her dry lips, the words she needed to say reaching her tongue like bubbles through crude oil. He shifted beneath her, his hands moving to grip her hips, his fingers biting into the flesh, and she cried out in frustration. Immediately the pressure on her sides diminished, and a stricken look passed over his pale face. They looked into each other's eyes; his were dark and unfathomable, and hers were wide and desperate.

"Harry's alive!"

At her croaked-out revelation, his eyes widened, and he drew in a shuddering and frantic breath. The thin frame she had pinned to the ground shook violently, and he closed his eyes while his lips fell open to emit a series of muted gasps. It took a while for her to realise that he was weeping. Unsure as to what to do, she rested her head against his shoulder and slid her hands between his shoulder blades and the carpet. Almost instantly, she felt his arms encircle her waist, and he crushed her to him as he wept into her hair.

How long they lay there, she had no idea, but for the first time in quite some time, she felt useful and full of purpose. She no longer flapped like a tattered flag, but felt in control of her life. She grew in confidence and crooned soft, nonsensical sounds that she hoped would ease his pain while encouraging its release, and despite his fingers digging uncomfortably into the skin on her back, she continued.

"Severus!" Dumbledore's voice sliced through their moment of mutual healing, and a red-eyed Snape glared up at the portrait. "The others are coming. If you want to leave, now is the time."

Snape stared uncomprehendingly, and then his dark eyes flickered to Hermione's face. He was momentarily shocked. Dumbledore was offering him the escape that he had tried to secure, even knowing that he held information vital to the capture and internment of many Death Eaters. He blinked. With only the smallest sign of a sneer, he gently pushed her off and struggled to his feet, wincing as blood rushed into oxygen-starved limbs. He considered his options: he knew that he had no true life if he stayed with the Order, he had hurt too many in his role as spy, and the remaining free Death Eaters would know by now that he had betrayed them. Any decent future lay in a new life. As far as he was concerned, he had done enough. But where could he go? He had no money, no home and no allies whom he could trust. He dragged his hand through his hair, letting his nails drag over his scalp, and then with a frustrated snarl, he slammed his palm down on the desk.

Perhaps his turmoil was played upon his features, but Hermione seemed to follow his thinking and was rapidly coming to her own conclusions. The Wizarding world would be ruthless, and Snape would suffer despite his sacrifices and struggles. Her mind worked and seemed to leap to ideas and solutions; it all fitted so nicely, her lips twitched up into her first smile in what felt like decades. A dull, grinding noise emanating from beyond the door made her turn sharply, and she realised with a jolt that whoever 'the others' were, they were on the stone stairs leading to the office. Snape was still staring at the dark, wooden table, his shoulders slumped, his back bowed and his hair hanging in limp curtains. She chewed her lip and ignored the irony of looking up to silently beseech the man she had originally sought out to condemn.

"Severus, you are still the Headmaster of this school," Dumbledore said swiftly, his eyes flitting from dejected man to door and back again. "You can lower the wards around this room and Disapparate away!"

Snape just slowly shook his head; it seemed that the burning anger had rendered his will down to ash.

Dumbledore caught Hermione's frantic gaze, and then he stiffened in his portrait. "Severus Snape!" he stated commandingly, and at the sound, Snape straightened and faced the old man. "Lower the wards!" The imperative echoed around the office; it carried a power that she didn't think could exist in voice alone, and she watched in amazement as Snape waved his wand in the air in a series of complex arcs and slashes, his expression seemed dazed. She felt the atmosphere change, as though some force had been lifted, and then just as she heard footsteps outside the door she grabbed Snape's forearm. He turned to look at her, but before his face registered any response to her touch, she Disapparated them both away.

Her fears regarding Side-Along Apparition meant that as their feet struck carpet, Snape was forced to prise Hermione's fingers open to maintain proper circulation to his forearm. Honed skills took over, and even as his anger became super-heated, he took in the details of his surroundings. Clean, magnolia walls, with a few photos and paintings arranged tastefully, and two large, west-facing windows on the left side of the room let pale daylight into the rectangular-shaped room. They stood near the doorway, and behind him, a large, stone fireplace stood empty and cold. In the far left corner rested a beech effect desk upon which stood a sleek, black computer almost cocooned in dust, the russet-coloured office chair pushed firmly under it, reinforcing the notion that the room had long been abandoned. The carpet was lush and a subtle apricot colour that complemented the walls and the grey-green curtains and upholstery. A coffee table, complete with a thick layer of dust, stood at an oblique angle to offer support to those either on the sofa or the single armchair, and a television was nestled in the corner behind him so that the windows did not affect the viewing pleasure. The dust and that smell of stale air suggested that the room had not been used in quite some time. It did not take much to confirm the suspicion that he was in Hermione Granger's sitting room.

"What in Merlin's name have you done?" he hissed out as he rounded on her.

She gaped and backed away...what had she done? She swallowed and lifted a trembling hand to brush away errant strands of hair. She had acted on instinct, logic forgotten; some deep feeling and need had rushed up and compelled her to act, and now, as she faced a very angry Severus Snape, she realised that in her current dilemma, her logic had left to gloat from the fringes of awareness.

"I ..." she began, only to have her intentions wither on her tongue. "I ... I had to get you out. They were coming." It was weak, and she cringed at the inanity of it, Snape's raised eyebrow enough to seal her idiocy.

"Because I couldn't have managed?" he spat out snidely.

She swallowed and ran a hand through her matted hair. It all came rushing up in a torrential tsunami of despair, anger, bitterness, belated fear and exhaustion. It stuck in her throat for the merest moment, choking her and snatching her breath, and then it burst free from her white lips.

Snape backed away as the howl filled the small room. Her head was flung back, and her hands clenched into tight, knuckle-popping fists. The pain in it was unmistakable, and even through his own anger, he thrummed in sympathy. What had she suffered while hiding from the Wizarding world? What had she seen and done while she was at The Golden Boy's side? He slid his wand back into his inner breast pocket and drummed his fingertips against his leg thoughtfully. He had been the Head of House for Slytherin, and as such, weeping girls were not unfamiliar to him, though generally his presence cured many of the wiser ones of their distress, but there were those rare times when their fears surpassed his deterring personality. He considered that in that role, he would have called upon the aid of his female prefect, but here, in this house, it was just him and Hermione Granger. Struggling to override years of following proper codes of conduct, he watched the young woman fall to her knees; her howl had softened to a keening sound, although it still carried that same pain. Forgetting codes and rules, he swooped down upon her, kneeling by her side, and rested his hand gently between her shoulder blades. In a tone that would have shocked many who knew him, he muttered softly and gently rubbed his palm over her shuddering back. He swallowed as he realised the absurdity of his reservations after he had earlier held her and cried into her hair.

Hermione didn't care about any impropriety; she could barely feel the touch of his hand as myriad images and sounds filled her skull, trying to burst out of her head. It was

is if she had lived unaware of the last year, and now it was rushing back in excruciating detail, reminding her of the horrors she had tried to ignore and showing her all the smaller tragedies that had been overshadowed at the time. She felt that she couldn't breathe, couldn't think; she was just a mass of burgeoning and suffocating emotions. Weeping into the dusty, apricot carpet, she curled up. She was so tired; she just wanted to sleep and wake up to see that it had all been a terrible nightmare. Her mum would come in and stroke her forehead, her dad would stand in the doorway, watching with concern, and they'd dispel her terror with a few gentle words. She'd grin sheepishly and then wish them a goodnight, and all would be well. But no! That wouldn't happen! It wouldn't happen because she had cursed them: she had seen the look of confused horror on her mother's face as her daughter fired a curse at her husband and then the horrified disbelief as that wand was turned upon her. They were a thousand miles away, but no matter how close they were, they'd always be parted by a curse... They would never forgive her.

ooXoo

The kitchen was square and huge. He felt lost in it compared to his narrow galley kitchen at Spinner's End; each surface was clean, and silver accoutrements glittered in the powerful glare from small lights spotted under the wall units. The worktops were sleek, black and highly polished; the units were a gentle cream colour, and the floor-tiles were as dark as the worktops. Despite its elegance and beauty, it was cold and sterile. He stepped, cringing as his footsteps echoed in the emptiness, over to the sink and the electric kettle that gleamed on its base. After a few moments of study, a few choice swear words and the fail-safe method of brute-force, he lifted the black plastic lid and lowered the kettle under the tap. He let out a groan at the so-called benefits of design and ergonomics as he fiddled with the bizarre knob at the side of the single tap. After much twisting and pulling, he realised that moving the lever back and forth controlled the temperature of the water and that to pull the lever down and away from the tap actually turned it on and dictated how fast the water came out. His next challenge came with figuring out how the kettle worked; and all this just so that the know-it-all could have a soothing cup of tea.

Hermione knew that Snape had comforted her, listened and stayed with her while she poured out her grief onto the carpet, and that he had lifted her up and settled her onto the musty-smelling sofa: she just couldn't quite believe it. From the kitchen, she could hear the scuffles and curses as the wizard battled Muggle technology, and it just seemed so surreal, but after everything she'd faced, she hadn't the energy to be mystified or impressed. All she wanted was to sleep. Her eyes were drawn to the empty arm chair; it seemed to have lost all indications that it had ever been sat in, and she had to close her eyes against the proof of her actions. If she tried, she could recall how her father sat there, his glasses perched near the tip of his nose as he read the newspaper. She could almost convince herself that the sound of clinking crockery from the kitchen was her mother, preparing tea, and she smiled as the phantom aroma of shortbread filled her nose. Her delusions didn't last long: the sound of feet on carpet, though light, seemed wrong, and then at the clatter of saucer against table, she opened her eyes and shuddered as Snape turned to glare at her.

"Thank you, Professor," she said softly.

"I am no longer your teacher, Miss Granger."

That realisation made her jolt, and she momentarily looked bereft as she sat huddled on the sofa, and then her eyes widened in pain as he moved to sit in the armchair. She seemed about to say something and then merely shuddered before reaching out for the cup. He smirked at her distress; she did more than just invite him into her home, and he would not feel responsible for her discomfort.

"Where are your parents?"

"On holiday," she replied automatically, but rather too defensively, and she cringed as Snape frowned and flashed her a dark, penetrating look.

"When will they return?"

"Soon," she said quietly, her chest tightening with each question and lie.

"They left, knowing that you were not at school? How remiss of them!"

She licked her lips and swallowed hastily, her eyes focusing on the steam rising from the cup of black tea. What did he want to hear? What was he after?

"It was perhaps very fortunate that they were on... an extended holiday, a sabbatical of sorts, Miss Granger." He waited until she lifted her head to look at him questioningly; he saw that expected and looked-for look of panic flaring in her chocolate-hued eyes. "Ministerial officials felt obliged to visit those parents who had not encouraged their children to attend Hogwarts."

"What do you mean?" she asked sharply, her eyes darting to the windows, and she hastily scrambled over to peer intently through the glass. "They were here?"

She was confused and tired, her head hurt and she doubted that she had a muscle which didn't ache, and he was being annoyingly vague. Did it go so against the grain for a Slytherin to be straight and say just what they meant? Or am I missing what he's saying? Oh, why are things so hard?

It was startling to see her so disorientated and erratic; Snape thought he recognised the symptoms, symptoms that would be echoed in a great many wizards. His original plan to leave was negated; until he knew that she would be cared for, he could not in good conscience leave her, nor could he remain so aloof regarding her distress.

"They'd planned it for a while," she explained slowly, her mind trying to evade the trap while scrabbling to spot the lure. "They needed to go, and I never really let them know what was going on at school." Her head dropped, her hair covering her face, and she glanced at him through the corner of her eye. His face was smooth and as expressionless as ice, and then she saw him nod slowly. Had she passed? What had been the test? Bitterness welled up, and she felt tears prickling the back of her eyes; she was so lost in all the emotions that were swamping her: she was drowning under them.

Frustration finally won out, and she stepped away from the window, flinging her arms up and then clutching at her hair. Hermione inhaled and pursed her lips; it was absurd! This had to be some nightmare! She was losing control again, feeling disjointed from her environment, thoughts and feelings. Nothing was making sense again. People had been killed, she had been tortured, Hogwarts was in ruins, and Snape was sitting in her dad's chair, drinking tea. She needed something, some focus, some target, some... something.

"Why haven't you left?" she demanded hotly, her emotions melding into real and reliable anger. "I got you out; so now, you can leave!"

"It's not that simple, Miss Granger."

He saw several emotions war across her face, and despite desperation and fear being predominant combatants, she still had her anger and that crushed all else. He knew that she was suffering from trauma; it was clearer than spattergoit pustules, and he knew that such a thing could leave suppurating wounds that would poison her life.

"Fine!" she spat out. She was trembling with rage, and Snape felt the hairs on the nape of his neck stand on end; she was building up an emotional surge of magic. He carefully slipped his hand into his pocket and felt the smooth wood of his wand slip along his fingers and into his palm. He gritted his teeth, his jaw aching, and he watched her intently for the merest sign of a discharge. Aside from her red face, tense shoulders, trembling limbs and quaking chest, she seemed to be containing her magical energy even as her emotions and mind descended into the hell that surviving. Just as he felt that he would have to act, her raging emotions collapsed, and she deflated, her shoulders slumping and her head lolling to the side. He could see her face screw up, and then she raced from the room.

Left alone, he sipped his tea; it was bitter due to the age of the tea and the lack of milk, but it was suitable to quench his thirst and establish some sense of normality. He had had no intention of staying in this house with a former...the cup stopped inches from his mouth as a thought ricocheted through his head; she was not so former, given that the academic year had not yet finished. He was in a student's house! Part of his mind that wasn't fatigued or numb sighed and then presented itself; with it, it brought years of memory evidence indicating all the atrocities he'd witnessed and committed, all the evils that he had done. It quite solemnly replayed a few images highlighting that he had so much more to feel appalled about than having tea in a student's home. The first snigger burst past his lips quite by surprise, and soon, others were joining it; he was forced to put down the cup for fear of scalding his fingers; all the while, more chortles escaped his chest. Soon, he was wracked by sobbing laughter, one hand stuffed against his mouth to quieten the sounds, and the other pressed against his throbbing ribs. His pained laughter echoed up the stairs, colliding and intertwining with the descending sound of pained weeping.

Author's notes: The challenge selected was number 38.

38. After the final battle is over, Hermione goes to ask Dumbledore's

portrait a question, but she sees the Pensieve and is unable to not

peek. Inside, she sees the memories Snape gave to Harry firsthand.

What does she think? To her surprise, when she comes out, she's face

to face with an angry (and alive) Severus Snape. What happens next?

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 7

Snape is rescued by Hermione, and it soon becomes apparent to him, that it is she who needs saving. But after confessions, cathartic breakdowns and tumultuous tempers, who is actually saving whom?

Chapter Two.

Sunlight streaming in through the window gently prised her eyes open, and as her mind awakened, she stretched lazily upon the bed, luxuriating in the idea of snuggling back down for an extra few minutes. It *had* been a terrible, terrible nightmare. She was in her bed, feeling the softness of the duvet against her cheek and the comforting warmth of the bed. She smiled and wriggled down; soon, her mother would shout up, calling them down for breakfast. There was something that didn't seem quite right, but whatever it was, she wasn't in the mood to analyse it and thus ruin this wonderfully relaxed moment.

Her tongue slid over her teeth, and she grimaced at their unclean texture; her very mouth seemed coated with fur and tasted stale. Sighing, she flung aside the covers and climbed out of bed to walk over to the slender wardrobe in the corner of the room. Pulling open the doors, she rummaged around for some clothes, selecting a pair of jeans and a cinnamon-coloured, roll neck jumper. Her undies were plucked from a drawer, and she padded off to the bathroom, inhaling and salivating at the thought of her mother's cooking.

The hot water pummelled her skin; she closed her eyes and slowly turned, letting those wonderful jets massage her all over. It ran through her hair, the hot water soothing her scalp, and she let it relax her. After a few moments of indulgence, she scrubbed herself clean and then lathered her hair, teasing her fingers through the myriad knots that her hair was predisposed to settle into. Wrapping a towel around her shivering body, she stepped out of the shower and glanced in the mirror on the cabinet door. She was surprised at how pale she looked... and had she lost weight? Shrugging her shoulders, she withdrew her toothbrush and toothpaste and proceeded to scour her teeth clean.

There was something so soothing about brushing her teeth; she felt so content for those few minutes as the brush moved over her teeth and gums. She spat out the paste and frowned at the pinkish hue to it; her head lifted towards the mirror, and she pulled back her lips to examine her mouth. From between two molars, blood oozed out, coating her teeth; at the sight, she felt her chest constrict, and she gagged into the basin. Gripping the edge of the sink, she closed her eyes and fought the urge to vomit. She'd had bleeding gums before, but she'd only ever felt that stinging disappointment, never fear.

The toothpaste slid towards the plughole, bubbles and streaks of blood moving with it, and she focused on it, hardening herself to the image. The nausea passed, and she straightened. Ignoring the mirror and the metallic tang in her mouth, she roughly towelled herself dry. The jeans slid up her legs and over her hips with extreme ease, and she frowned...she *had* lost weight! The jumper that has been so snug now hung loosely on her frame, and she felt a burgeoning distress at the sudden, inexcusable change. She walked back to her room and slipped on her slippers; they, at least, seemed fine.

The collection of mail on the table by the front door made her pause on the bull-nose... How odd that Dad hadn't picked it up! She scooped up the pile, amazed at how many there were, and walked along the hallway into the sitting room.

"Morning, Dad. I..." she said, only to stop abruptly at the sight of the empty chair. Her eyes darted around the room, each compelling piece of evidence crushing her: the computer, cold and lifeless, the empty chair, the fire not warming the chilly room, no newspaper on the coffee table and no music filling the silence. She licked her lips and ran her fingers through her damp hair. It wasn't unusual to find the house empty; her parents were both busy professionals, but this time, their absence sent a thrill of fear through her. Trying to keep calm, she nibbled her lower lip and looked down at the plastic-wrapped magazines and plain white letters. She sorted it so that she could study the postmark on each one, and she frowned. The oldest was from three months ago...some Home Insurance information. She ignored the tremor deep in her bowels. Where were Mum and Dad? It was so tough to think; her thoughts moved so sluggishly, and the ones that managed to break free were confusing and disjointed. Mum and Dad had mentioned going on holiday... That's it! They'd saved up to go away for... how long? Didn't her dad say something about a sabbatical? She let out a shaky laugh and dropped the junk mail on the kitchen table. She'd been at the airport to wave them off; how could she have forgotten?

She set about preparing some tea, flicking the kettle on and removing her favourite mug from the cupboard. She smiled at the embossed pale blue letters, '*We all make spelling mistakes*'; and remembered the impish smile on her father's face. It had been a gift, an apology from him for his ranting and raging after she had let Madam Pomfrey repair her teeth to how they wanted to be and not to what they had been. Her smile faltered...that seemed so long ago...she seemed to have been someone else. She recalled sitting in the infirmary, weeping quietly while she had waited for the matron to finish healing the bite wounds on a first-year's hand; her mind had gone over Snape's hurtful words, and she had felt a burning resentment that she had been caught up in one of Harry's fights.

Lost in her thoughts, the kettle made its peculiar hissing sound as it boiled the water, and the sound slowly permeated her nostalgia. She shook herself and glanced at it; she could see the bubbles rising from the metallic plate through the clear plastic. The noise was fascinating; had she ever stopped to listen to it before? Her eyes followed the sway of the water's surface as the heat agitated it from below. It was odd, but the sibilant hiss of the kettle seemed to fill her skull; it seemed to reverberate within her mind, and she frowned as she tried to ignore the sound and tear her gaze from the frantic eruptions of hot water. With a struggle, she managed, but the amount of effort both alarmed and annoyed her.

The teaspoon clattered satisfactorily against the china mug, and she slammed the cupboard door closed after retrieving the coffee; she began to hum a melody from some song, but that kettle still managed to be heard. She shook her head and smiled; how ridiculous to be so affected by a mere machine. The fridge greeted her with a blast of cool air, and she relished the distraction. With a sigh, she saw that there was no milk, and the inside of the fridge looked decidedly derelict; she would have to do a shop. She shivered. She would have to go out. Go out. Black coffee would have to do.

The fridge door closed with the merest sigh of expelled air from between frame and plastic seal, and she hesitated before approaching the vexing kettle. She glared at it,

and she felt her upper lip curl in disgust. Frustration welled-up and lanced down her arms, instilling the urge to fling the kettle from her. Clutching at her ears did nothing to smother the horrible hissing, and now, the water was roaring as it boiled. And then it came! It shredded her control, and it leapt through her wounded mind. The image of Nagini, rising and writhing from Bathilda's shell, exploded in her mind; how she slid sinuously, extending her slender body with that haunting susurrus as her scales slid over the shag-pile. Hermione staggered, vomiting bile as she relived that terrifying moment.

oooXooo

The explosion had him standing with his wand at the ready. With heart in mouth, he flung off the sheets he'd found and rushed from the spare bedroom. Breathing erratically, he peered over the banister; fine dust billowed out from the kitchen, and there was the sound of metal screeching against metal and dull heavy thuds. Taking two stairs at a time, he then jumped lithely into the hallway and hugged the wall as he crept towards the kitchen door. Chunks of plaster and slithers of wall tile littered the dust-smothered carpet in the hallway, and cracks in the plaster around the doorframe suggested that something heavy had impacted against it. Swallowing and narrowing his eyes, he entered the kitchen.

She was standing like some sculptured statue, pale alabaster and eerily beautiful; no churchyard angel with her serene beauty had ever stolen his breath in such a manner. He could feel his eyes widen, the skin on his scalp tingle and something coil in his guts. Descending dust and the light from the hole punched through the wall silhouetted her, giving her the appearance of some fine dryad shrouded in mist. Her eyes were closed, and her lips parted. Her head tilted up so that her throat was extended and the curve of her jaw exposed; she looked as though in rapture from some Benediction. Her wand was held in the gentlest of grips, looking so innocent and incapable of such destruction within those slender fingers. He gaped. Perhaps she heard some sigh from him, but she slowly lowered her head, and her eyelids fluttered open...oh those eyes as they fixed upon him!...so dark and deep against the pale, dust-coated cheeks. Her lips, where the moisture from her mouth had wiped away the plaster, were so enticingly pink. He shuddered.

Tearing his eyes from hers, he looked around the kitchen; the worktop that had rested beneath the kettle was a pile of splintered rubble, and the base units were shattered and scattered about the kitchen. Sections of the ceiling had fallen to expose the joists and floorboards, revealing dangling power cables, and the floor tiles looked as though they had melted, cooling into the same swirling patterns as lava. Smoke rose from the detritus of battered pans and smashed crockery like gentle, elaborate filigrees, despite the wounded wall, and in that huge silence that follows such explosions, the water from the ruptured pipes trickled and babbled.

"Oh my!"

The trembling, awestruck voice shattered the scene, and Snape's head shot round to see a worried face peering in through the hole. Hermione was still lost in some ecstasy, her eyes half-shuttered and her lips mouthing silent litanies. The neighbour, her face pale with wide eyes and mouth, watched him approach.

"Are you both all right? That was a mighty bang!"

"*Obliviate!*"

Kitchen renovation had not featured heavily in his life; it wasn't on the school syllabus, nor was it prevalent in the Death Eater entry requirements. He looked at it all and gritted his teeth. The neighbour smiled vacantly as Snape cast a variety of spells on the mess; she even giggled a few times when chunks of wall whooshed past her ear, and after an exhausting few minutes, the wall was as fixed as it was ever going to be. Wiping away the sweat from his forehead, he gently caught the befuddled woman by her elbow and steered her out of the kitchen and into the driveway between the two houses. He looked over the short fence between the houses and saw the back door wide open, and assuming that that was the door she had obviously rushed through, he led her back to her home.

Hermione was still standing where he had left her, that same disturbing serenity suffusing her. If she had wept or screamed, he could have dealt with it, but this stillness and quiet was disturbing. Licking his lips, he walked behind her and tentatively placed his fingertips on her shoulders; she didn't flinch, and so he moved to grip them firmly. Giving her a gentle push, he directed her away from the wreckage and over to the kitchen table. She obliged and made no sound as she followed his directions. While he repaired as much as he could, he kept a watchful eye upon her. He suspected that he knew where she was: in a safe and seductive place where nothing was there but what she wanted to know; and he knew that the eviction from that haven would be as shocking and as vile as anything she had suffered.

The expression of utter peace...on the face of it, looking quite exquisite on her thin features...still looked wrong: it was akin to seeing rainbows in oily puddles, beautiful, but from a contaminated source. Those lips still trembled minutely as she mouthed some incomprehensible code to her troubled mind, and her dust-laden eyelashes cast long shadows upon her cheeks. It would be a hard task to help her, and he wondered why he felt so compelled to be the one. Snickering thoughts, cloistered in the back of his mind, taunted him with whispered recollections of the time when he had sought mental oblivion rather than face the terrible present with its terrible past. He had been plucked from that duplicitous heaven and fought and battered at his malicious saviour until he had seen the vicious lure to that disgusting trap. It was like a drug, and even though he had weaned himself off it, the memory of that state still haunted and teased him. He closed his eyes against the sting of withheld tears.

Steadying himself, he strode over to her and looked down upon her slightly upturned face. The rounded features of her youth had been ground away by age and experience, and he recalled that shock he had experienced when forced to look at her in her fifth year to assess the damage of a wayward curse. She had grown, blossomed! Her eyes had reflected her horror, and he had seen it all looming to descend upon her, that pain and fear following her due to her friends. He had heard her stuttering gasps as she had clutched at her mouth to try to stop the teeth from growing, and he had felt a flutter of understanding at her sense of humiliation. But he had had no choice, and he had ridiculed her.

Snape pursed his lips; the dust would be irritating her skin past the point of just sensation; it would be now damaging it. Raising his wand, he cast a cleaning spell. It was a milder form of the one used to scour out the cauldrons, and one that was a standard for potion-makers who would at some point in their careers need to remove noxious ingredients completely from their skin and clothes. Swathes of colour appeared with each gentle stroke of the wand, and her hair billowed as if in a gentle breeze; he ignored what he thought was a gasp of pleasure. He had hoped that the feel of the spell would have penetrated her fugue, but aside from the smallest of sighs, she was still as wrapped up as ever; just like another witch he had known.

oooXooo

"So, why 'ave we got this 'ere letter?" he snarled angrily, waving the vellum paper in the air and glaring down angrily at the cowering woman. "If 'e's all right, then 'ow come we... 'ave... this... letter!" he roared out, his voice getting louder as his face got redder.

As Severus stood in the kitchen doorway, he watched with wide eyes; his mother crouched defensively as his father waved a letter inches from her face, and he noted the redness of his dad's knuckles and a few spots of blood on the back of his clenched fist. Something gripped him round the throat, and he couldn't breathe; some force kept him riveted to the spot while he watched. This couldn't be, he thought; not after everything that had happened, and not after all the others had turned from him.

The large, hook-nosed man turned and saw his son standing in the doorway. His long face was red and trembling, the fleshy lips pulled back into a disgusted sneer, and the tendons in his neck protruding grotesquely as his anger coursed through him.

"What the 'ell is this, boy?" he asked, his voice softening to a fearful, hissed whisper. "Trips to that 'ospital for some kind of check-ups."

"It's St Mungo's, and I think the letter is quite complete." He knew it was stupid, he knew it was provocative, but he had to fight the fear; if he let that win, then he'd be as lost as she was. From the corner of his eye, he saw his mother pale and shake her head slowly, her mouth falling open in distress and her head lolling back, and he felt sick to his stomach.

Tobias straightened and his face softened, a small smile curved his lips. "Ye like bein' smart, don't ya, lad?" he said jovially.

Fury surged up, heating his chest and burning his cheeks. His teeth bit down on his tongue to stem the flow of words that wished to erupt from his mouth. He had balked at Madam Pomfrey's request that he see a Healer about any possibility of being infected, but even after his rant about being nowhere near Lupin's mouth, she had pointed out that he had been close enough to have been exposed to the beast's saliva, and given the number of cuts he'd received, a check-up was in order. But it was all right because Potter would have to go too. He inwardly seethed, *All so that Lupin could stay at school..* The boy who could have been *his* friend... had not Black seen fit to ruin

all that he had.

"Ye've always been a cut above the rest, ain't ye; thinkin' that ye've got that gift that'll see ye thru'." His pale eyes, bloodshot and sunken, glared into Severus', and he took a step towards his son. "Well, it didn't, and it never will." He smiled viciously and waved a hand lazily back over his shoulder towards his trembling wife. "Ye're no better than she is; ye're nowt!" he said in a vitriolic whisper. "Ye think that ye've got everythin', what with that wand an' all. Didn't 'elp you much when you went messin' round in that forest and got too close to that werewolf, did it? Some stupid stunt, I bet!"

It took a moment for the words to sink in; he was too engrossed in his own pulsing anger, and as his face fell at the impact of his father's words finally struck, so rose the numbing surge of disillusionment. Confusing his success, Tobias leant forward until his breath ghosted over his son's cheek, and the reek of alcohol clung to the back of Severus' throat.

"Ye're weak like 'er, and without that there wand, ye're a coward!"

Still numb from his father's disclosure, he lowered his head; had they dismissed everything? And worse: in their explanation, they were blaming him for the consequences. He felt sick.

It was always quiet afterwards; a few moments of bangs, fleshy thuds and shrill pleas, and then this consuming silence, swallowing everything. No sound ever left the house. He knew that his mother would silently tidy up and cast surreptitious healing spells while his father went to his room to watch the television. He had once crept downstairs to help his mother, but the blank shell that had bled into tea-towels had pushed him out the door and ushered him back upstairs. Once that period of quiet was over, Dad would go out, and his mother would be all smiles and hugs. They would bake and play; but that had changed. His father had stopped going out, and with each passing month, his mother shrank further and further away.

Shaking himself out of his melancholy, he waited until he heard the television click on; muted strains of conversation filtered up through the floorboards, and he slipped off the bed. He knew every creaking floorboard, and he danced his way silently to the door; he had oiled the hinges so that the door would swing open without betrayal. He walked down the shadowed stairs; he could see the light from the television flickering over the thin carpet from beneath the door, and he could hear the soft, careful clink of crockery. Licking his lips, he withdrew his wand from the sleeve of his smock and held it at his hip; the black wood was warm within his fingers, so much so that he barely felt as though he held it, but rather that it was a part of him.

"Accio!"

Heart pounding and guts rolling, he stood in a half-crouch, waiting for the cream letter to flutter to his fingers. The sounds of the television seemed excessively loud, and every creak made him twitch and turn, thinking that the front room door would pull open. With a muted gasp of relief, the paper appeared around the edge of the doorframe, and straight as an arrow, it darted to his eager hand. Steadying himself, he swallowed and crept back up the stairs, the letter held in a crushing grip against his thundering heart.

There was no light bulb in his room, so he walked up to the window and held the crushed letter out and into the weak daylight. He stared at it, such an innocent looking thing, and felt oddly scared to open it. He could believe that his father had been spewing more hurtful nonsense, but he had that snarling and scratching doubt attacking his faith, and he found that he couldn't bear the idea of finding out that he really did have no one.

The letter opened, the edges vibrating as his fingers trembled, and with cautious and hopeful eyes, he read the words:

Dear Mr and Mrs Snape,

Due to an incident on school grounds (the Forbidden Forest) occurring on the evening of 12th May, we wish to inform you that an appointment has been made at St Mungo's for your son to undergo tests for Lycanthropy. We assure you that the test is purely part of protocol and does not infer that the condition is present. The details of the appointment will be owed to you as soon as possible, and we urge you to attend.

Given the nature of this situation and the inherent trauma, the school has not decided to take action against Severus Snape for breaking the rules set in place at the school for his protection. As such, Severus will be welcomed back at Hogwarts, pending the results from the tests. We thank you for your assistance in this manner.

Yours Sincerely,

Healer Simeon Braithwaite.

(Muggle Liaison Office)

He heard a whimper escape from his pursed lips; not only was he told not to reveal the identity of the werewolf, but they were blaming him for the whole horrific mess! Black and Potter were to remain innocent of culpability in his pain and terror. His chest burned with the effort of trying to breathe, and when he managed to inhale, it was a series of shuddering, desperate gulps. The print blurred before him as his hands trembled, but it was no matter as his eyes were stuck at the point they had read to, paralysed by the tumultuous impact of Dumbledore's betrayal. His heart thundered in his chest in violent, heavy thuds as it broke.

The revealing and vicious letter crumpled in his fist, and with a tear-free face, he looked up and out of the window; he had nothing and no one... Well, almost no one.

oooXooo

He was impressed. After almost two hours, the kitchen looked as though nothing had happened to it, although all his efforts had failed to yield a kettle. However, he felt little remorse; the blasted thing was a nuisance anyway. The last of the repaired plates was placed in the cupboard, and the saucepans were all lined up on the worktop, dent-free and gleaming. He selected a small pan and filled it with water; he desperately needed a drink, and the more caffeine it possessed, the better. With some trepidation, he turned the knob on the cooker and pressed the ignition switch; he let out a sigh when the gas ignited with a gentle, mocking pop. He set the saucepan to boil and rested against the worktop.

It was unnerving to have her sitting there, so quiet and still...it was unnatural! The girl...*woman*, some thought said suggestively before he stomped on the suggestions springing to mind...had been the bane of his life, always ready with the answer, always eager with a question. He had grown to respect her mind, though begrudgingly, and not so because she was a Gryffindor or Potter's playmate, but because she flaunted and revelled in her own prowess. Her pride could be a lure for the ever-watchful predator, and it would blind her to the perils of misplaced admiration. But here, she was... dumb!

He opened up the recently repaired wall unit and pulled out the first two mugs his fingers caught. He needed some lure to pull her out of her state, some subtle sign to lead her back...he would even tolerate her constant questioning to have her back.

The mugs hit the table with a clatter, and she remembered that she was making tea, but why should she bother? It was so nice here. It was quiet and still, nothing loomed or snarled, and she wasn't thirsty any more. She had never known such peace; never known such freedom. No pain. No anger. No anything. Something caught her eye, and it niggled at her, worried at her until she just had to take a quick glance, just a quick, little glance to ease that pestering.

That pestering would not cease! Her eyes focused in on what her brain was complaining about and settled on the mug. Hadn't she just made tea with that mug? What was the problem? *Think...* It was so hard to think! Panic flared. What was this place? *Focus!* Her eyes finally settled on the neatly printed words, the pastel blue on cream looking very pleasant, but then as she processed what her eyes had discovered, she saw the vileness of it.

Snape took a deep gulp of coffee, wincing as the hot liquid scalded his tongue and the roof of his mouth, but it was worth it, every scalding second of it. He felt itchy from dust that had slipped down his robes, and he longed to use the shower. He was wondering whether it would be polite to ask, when Hermione suddenly surged forward and

grasped the mug in front of her so that her knuckles and tendons were white and straining. Snape watched her intently, wondering what had triggered the response; he would never have thought that something as trivial as a mug of coffee would have made any dent.

"My cup!" she wailed.

Snape looked down at the mug; it seemed perfectly normal and inoffensive.

"What have you done to it?" she asked waspishly, her gaze darting from the cup in her hand to his startled face at her table. She had never realised that she could be so angry. It leapt through her like wildfire, igniting all those niggling and petty injuries that she had laughed off or ignored. She was a conflagration of past scorn and dismissed hates. It was so much better than the fear and the terror.

"You should be grateful that I repaired the mug, Miss Granger!" he replied snidely, his tone hiding his concern as the woman rose from her chair to loom over him. He noted that although coffee spilt over the sides, in her fury, she paid no heed to it.

"You had a temper tantrum earlier on and destroyed it."

"I did no such thing," she snarled. "You ruined it!"

"Miss Granger," he shouted out, rising to his feet and leaning forward so that their foreheads were a few inches apart. "You found something in this kitchen to be deeply offensive that you eliminated it by using Reducto; a foolish thing to do."

He saw a flicker of confusion in the depths of her wild eyes, and some of the tension slipped out of his body; if she doubted, then she was still listening to him, and if she was listening, then she could be reasoned with.

"No!"

Her breath brushed over his face at her spat out objection, and he could see how her lips trembled with the effort of trying to keep it all under control. *Keep fighting, he urged her. Don't lose it now. I know that it feels glorious, that anger racing through the veins, making you feel alive, but don't lose it only to slip back into that nothingness. Use the anger, girl; use it!*

"It's you! It's always been you," she said, hate and anger staining her words with disgust. "You corrupt everything! You ruined Harry's mother, tried to destroy Harry, and you killed Dumbledore. It's you that is offensive." It was so obvious; why hadn't she seen it before? Snape was the one behind everything; he had been at the heart of everything. She looked into his dark eyes, noticed how they shimmered like crude oil; nothing about him was clean.

"If the mug is ruined, then we can repair it." He ignored the vicious barb, tried to suppress the pain that her words incited and focused on the fact that a powerful witch was losing the plot not more than a foot away from him. She was incandescent with rage, and he could sympathise with the sheer power and force coursing through her; she would feel invulnerable. "Tell me what is wrong, and let us fix it."

The mug, she mused, that was important. Sod the mug! He killed Dumbledore, he tried to kill Harry! He loved Lily. She sobbed. He hated Sirius. She rallied. He saved Harry... No, he tried to kill Harry. He protected George. Her heart thumped with the revelation. He cursed his ear off! Some snide voice corrected. He stood up against the Dark Lord. A valiant attempt to stave off the sneering and hateful thoughts. He served the Dark Lord. The condemning truth battered at her. Dumbledore trusted him. He killed Dumbledore. You saw him cry! Lies... Lies... Lies...

"Lies!" she screamed out, clutching at her ears as though they pained her.

He was ready to die to save you all.

"No!" she said in a hushed whisper. He had had risked nothing; he was standing in her kitchen, more alive than the dozens of others who deserved to live. A sudden, horrible thought exploded! He was alive, and Dumbledore, that mad, conniving bastard, had helped him to escape, helped him evade the justice that he deserved. Sick to her stomach, she reared back. He was alive; after all that he'd done, he was still alive, and she was the only living person who knew that. Fear slid down her spine and seeped through her abdomen, clutching and squeezing at her guts. A sob escaped her quivering lips.

Snape was trying to keep track of her thoughts; her mind was a mess of mixed memories and churned up recollections; it was impossible to make sense of it. Just as her eyes widened, like a welcome invite, he saw her thoughts condense down to one horrific thought.

He watched as she backed away, her hand slipping frantically into her clothes, trying to find her wand. As each pocket was searched and found empty, her face crumpled further, and by the time her hand fell limply by her hip, she was weeping and keening. Moistening his lips, he lifted his hands slowly. Sherry-coloured eyes followed his raised palms and she crouched defensively. A spark of anger flared; how could she be so weak? After all that she'd done and had suffered, how could she be so weak and just give up now? The waste that she represented revolted him, and he sneered. To have that power and let something so basic and so conquerable as fear sap it all. Unforgivable!

"Miss Granger," he said as soothingly as he could manage. "I didn't bring you here; *you* brought me here. I have done you no harm and intend you no harm."

She shook her head, and he almost screamed at her to end her foolishness; why was she being so obdurate? Raking his fingers through his hair, he wondered at his own foolishness for thinking that he could help her. What was he thinking? That after losing so many, saving one would make it all worthwhile? His eyelids fluttered closed as his mind tormented him with his own morbid failings, how he had witnessed and allowed so many to die in front of him while inside, he screamed and raved at their unnecessary deaths. How long had it been since he had been able to save any of them? If he could save just one.

She watched him gape and shudder. Turning on his heel, he faced away from her, his hands cupping his face, and she could see his rounded shoulders tremble as he struggled under some great weight. *All a trick*, some part hissed at her. But that didn't seem right; he had never tricked any of them, and as far as she could recall, he had never lied. *He will kill you*, the voice said, *just like all the others. You are nothing to him but an obstacle to his freedom, and he will destroy you.*

It was the greatest test of faith she had ever faced. Hadn't she wept at his Pensieve, hadn't she felt rage against Sirius and James and a flicker of remorse that his love had left him bereft? Had he ever hurt her? She stepped over to him and rested a hand lightly on his shoulder, and though he flinched as though she had burnt him, he did not step away. What right did she have to try to help? What skills did she have that would impact upon him? All she had was her suffering. Would that be enough of a common denominator to nullify all other boundaries? She circled him and gently caressed his hair.

He jerked at the contact, rearing back and staring down at her with a mix of wonder and wariness. Hermione looked him in the eye, opening herself up to any and all of Snape's tricks to determine her innocence, and as she stepped forward to embrace him, she bowed her head forward until it rested against his shoulder. At that touch, he felt a need rise up from deep within. He knew as best as he could what she felt; it echoed in him from ages past, and it resonated within him now as he watched her. Pulling her towards him, feeling her press up against him, as if his warmth could somehow keep all that hurt away, he wrapped his arms around her. Her hands reached round to clutch desperately at his back, and his own fingers dug into her skin in his own attempts to help ease her pain and understand his own.

They held each other while the sun slipped over the roof, while the traffic rumbled on and the birds wheeled in the sky. They let the world continue while they secured one moment of peace. The mug had tipped over on the table, the coffee spilling across the wood, and it had rocked upon its curve until the last few perfect and provocative words on the mug were aimed at the consoling pair... *'spelling mistakes'*.

Some intense burn of an itch finally managed to pierce the wonderful sensation of a human in his arms and made his fingers dart to his throat, and he scratched frantically

at the source of irritation. He felt her stir against his body. A trickle of warmth down his throat made him pause, and he looked at his fingertips. Blood had collected under his nails, and trails had run down the palm of his hand. He spluttered and pressed his hand against his throat, and his palm became wet and warm.

Hearing his distress, Hermione moved away from him, her swollen and red eyes searching his face for the cause. Her eyes latched onto his fingers, finding that the tips were bloodied and glistened sickeningly in the light. Jolting away from him, her hand pressed against her mouth; she saw him press his palm against the wound several times, his face a picture of terrified confusion, and watched as he bolted from the room.

It can't be! he thought as he raced up the stairs and into the bathroom. The potion had been refined; he had worked on it as a prophylactic, and he had made it ten times more efficacious than the one he had made for Arthur!

The mirror confirmed his fears. The skin was ripping, the knitted flesh unravelling, and he saw tiny slits appearing in the garish, pink skin, just where that vile viper had sunk in her fangs. Blood oozed from the narrow apertures, collecting in a spherical ruby before melting to run down his throat. His eyes widened in panic, and he aimed his wand at the wound, casting the most powerful healing spells that he knew. The flow of escaping blood waned, and the holes healed closed, but he could see some weakness where the skin had not fused properly. Gripping the sides of the basin, he spat out spit and swallowed the rising bile. What had gone wrong?

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 7

Snape is rescued by Hermione, and it soon becomes apparent to him, that it is she who needs saving. But after confessions, cathartic breakdowns and tumultuous tempers, who is actually saving whom?

Snape was sitting at the kitchen table with a mug in one hand and the *Daily Prophet* in the other. His lips were drawn together into a displeased line, and a deep furrow marked the midway between his dark eyebrows. Her eyes lingered morbidly over the pink patch of exposed skin on his throat; his collar had been unbuttoned to prevent the stiff material from grazing against the fragile skin. The very faintest of marks were visible, as though something was lurking beneath the skin, and she shuddered.

Last night, she had lain awake for hours, thinking about the blood bubbling through his fingers as he had pressed his palm against his neck before racing from the room to thunder up the stairs. Shocked, she had stood and stared at the trail of speckled dots on the carpet. The sound of the bathroom door hitting the wall had roused her, and she had hastily followed. He had been hunched over the basin, his shoulders jutting up as he gripped the edges of the sink, and his head was bowed; he struck her as looking like some eager vulture or similar bird of prey, lowering its head to seek its prey. Swallowing nervously, she had stepped further in and caught sight of the red handprints and streaks on the white porcelain and the smear on the mirrored door of the cabinet from where he had straightened it to study the wound.

"Miss Granger," he said lazily while scanning the writhing print on the paper. "Stop gaping like some landed trout and sit down."

She jolted out of her reverie; years of instilled response rose up at his call, and her feet marched her over to the table. With her hand on the back of the chair, she hesitated at her strange and worrying ability to accept such oddities, and she frowned as she pondered her subservience. Her knuckles were white and protruded from her thin and wasted hand; it barely seemed recognisable as it gripped the chair.

Hermione was aware of Snape sitting so snugly in her home; his presence almost burned her skin, and he seemed more real than the familiar settings that had previously comforted and protected her. Unsure as to how to deal with the weirdness of it, she walked away from the table to the stove to peer into the saucepans that rested on the hob...one act of defiance, a foundation stone to bolster her flagging resolve. One held the white, fluffy remains of a poached egg, another, a dried collection of beans, and the last made her gag...tomatoes! The clumps of chopped tomatoes glistened in the bottom of the pan, and she couldn't stop the images of exposed, spell-ravaged muscle flooding her mind. Her eyelids slammed shut, and she turned away. From behind her, she heard the rustle of pages being turned and the soft plinking sound as the grill cooled.

"There is some breakfast for you," Snape said, his voice striking her ears and making her jump. "It's under the grill, keeping warm."

Over the years, he had gained the ability to use his peripheral vision to discern those subtle signs that people sometimes let slip when they thought they went unnoticed. From the corner of his eye, he had seen her frown and pale as she stood by the chair, and then a flicker of distress had flashed across her thin face before she had turned sharply, striding over to study the leftovers from his earlier cooking. While she grimaced at the dirty pans, he sipped the tepid coffee; it was strong and sweet, not his usual early morning drink, but he found that the instant coffee was harsh and bitter without it.

Once he was finally free, one of the first things he would do was discover what brand of coffee the house-elves used; nowhere else had he had coffee that satisfied his need so completely. Many students owed the fact that they had survived his classes with nothing worse than the edge of his tongue...and that the only red streaking their homework had been the ink from his quill...to his early morning jolt of liquid humanity.

The mug hovered against his lips as he pondered those quiet hours in his private study, marking papers and losing himself in the delusions and deviations of his students' literal appreciation of potions. It had been a remarkable balm, that scratching across someone's homework, to let his anger and frustration seep out and into the parchment. Each stroke was a slash on the flesh-coloured paper, each ink-filled groove a bloody welt, and each full-stop a stab at the futility of teaching the young. The rare gems, such as the trembling woman before him, had placed dazzling delights in front of him, and he had despaired that, sometimes, such minds were wasted in Gryffindor pride.

For all that had bothered him, his one grace...and it was a petty one, he would readily admit...was that Harry Potter had not had his mother's skill and had been truly terrible at potions. He had come to really *relish* marking Potter's efforts.

"Where did you get the food?" she asked, feigning interest in how he had managed to cook for them. The rustling stopped, and she turned to glance at him through the corner of her eye; she almost smiled as the *Daily Prophet* moved up to cover his face from her scrutiny. Her indifference evaporated at the image of Snape hiding his discomfort behind the periodical. She turned to face him, her arms crossing, and she persisted with her enquiry. "The cupboards were empty last night."

The mug slammed down on the tabletop, and the paper fell onto his lap. Despite the slight colour in his cheeks, he seemed as disdainful as ever. "I could hardly have gone down to the shops, could I?" he said in the haughtiest voice she had ever heard him use. "Use your brain, girl." He threw the paper down in such a way that the headline was aimed at her.

'Hunt for Death Eater Allies was the bold headline. The words lured her over, and she plucked up the paper. Her eyes glanced through the text, pausing over the relevant words... 'wizards must be aiding and protecting wanted criminals', 'life in Azkaban for those corrupted individuals supporting the last of the Death Eaters', and 'those at large will be found'.

She looked up sharply, a frown marring her features, and Snape watched her teeth worry her lower lip. "But you're not really a Death Eater," she said softly.

"Don't be imbecilic!" he spat out.

He saw her inhale and her lips form the start of many retorts, and then she snapped them together. Remorse crept sluggishly through his stomach; she couldn't have known that he had once been charged and had pled guilty to being a Death Eater, and her naivety, although bordering on stupidity, reflected her innate sense of fairness, and as such was nothing to scorn, but his anger and own frustrations made it impossible for him not to respond harshly.

The smells emanating from the kitchen were sickening, and she once again squeezed her eyelids shut, painfully so, until lights blossomed in the darkness. A scream burrowed its way up her throat, compressing her chest and heart and lodging next to that frantic organ. Her head felt so heavy, her skull was crushing down upon her, and her few thoughts were scattering under the pressure. She was an *accessory*.

After the revelation in the kitchen about her criminal deed, she had gone to her room and left Snape to stare at the coffee rings on the table. He knew that he should just slip away, but some need quashed any plans to flee, and if he was found, and they befuddled the truth out of him, they would then come after her. It was a mess. The more he thought, the more his throat itched, and the more it itched, the more he ached to scratch at it. Realising that there was no peace or point in pondering his dilemma, he collected together the dishes and washed up. The soapsuds tickled his forearms, and the warmth of the water soothed his hands, and while he washed away the dirt, he wondered if he could ever be as clean.

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What had she done? The question circled her head like vultures over a dying beast. Sighing in frustration, she thumped the pillow. *So much for acting on good intentions* she groused while flinging herself backwards on the duvet. *And to top it all, for someone who's been nothing but a dark cloud on my horizon* But did he deserve the fate that the Ministry would impose? After all that he had done, was he really the same as the others? Her mind drifted over the snatched glimpses of his life through his memories, all that tragedy and strife, abandonment and loss... How would she cope if everything she had was either stolen or destroyed? But then... What of Voldemort?

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After a quick search, he located a pen and a pad of paper near the phone in the hallway, and with a coffee refill, he sat down at the kitchen table. Taking a breath and ignoring the itching in his neck, he filled the blank page with all the ingredients and steps involved in brewing the potion that should have spared him the consequences of Nagini's bite. It was a complicated potion; the method had evolved several times from the one he had hastily created due to the fact that he had had to imbibe it once a day rather than the one large dose that Arthur had swallowed. As a result, any one of the ingredients could have reacted with the snake's venom to produce this unexpected result. If only he had had the time to explore it more fully before resorting to using it.

Studying the list until his eyes burned with the effort, he was dismayed to realise that nothing should have conspired to prevent his healing...so what was at fault? Flinging the pen down in disgust, he sat back in the chair and stared out of the window. The tips of the hawthorn in the garden swayed in a strong breeze, and the clouds slipped past, taking the threat of rain with them. Perhaps he should have died on the dirty floor, bleeding onto the floorboards of the Shrieking Shack?

His melancholic musings were interrupted by movement in the corner of his eye, and he saw Hermione standing in the doorway. She looked pale, and it was clear by the way her hands writhed around each other that some anxiety gripped her.

"I've just come to get something to drink, Professor," she mumbled before walking over to the sink.

"As I said last night, Miss Granger," he replied softly, "I am no longer your teacher."

She paused in the process of selecting a glass from the cupboard, and that same look of disorientation flickered across her face. An inspiration wriggled through his frustration and despair; perhaps some focus would help clear her mind?

"However, in saying that, I feel that you hardly need any more teaching anyway."

If he had slapped her, he doubted that she would have looked as surprised; her mouth was a perfect 'o' and her eyes were wide and shimmering beneath eyebrows trying to disappear into her hairline. Smirking, he looked at her more thoughtfully. He needed some assistance, some help to recreate the potion that he had hastily concocted after Dumbledore's warning about Nagini.

"Does this house have a basement?"

"No," she answered with the hint of a returning question in her voice.

"Does it, by any chance, possess an attic?"

"Yes, we boarded it out some years ago." She stepped away from the sink, the empty glass still held in her hand and an eager expression on her face. "Why?"

He sighed and gesticulated towards his throat. "I need some space and time to discover why my precautions seem to be crumbling and the opportunity to remedy the situation. I am going to turn your attic into a makeshift potions lab."

As expected, he saw a flutter of academic interest in the depths of her eyes and the slight blush of excitement on her cheeks...he had presented a challenge, and all her instincts had risen up.

Over the next few hours, they planned how to acquire the equipment; the lab would need more than just a cauldron and a student's potion kit, and it was decided that Hermione would visit Diagon Alley for the essential accoutrements and basic ingredients on the pretence of preparing for the next academic year.

While Hermione was shopping, Snape added protective wards to the attic space, strengthening the walls and floors and charming the room to be as non-flammable as possible. Ventilation was another issue, and he created an opening in the wall which separated the attic from the chimney flue. He then removed a one-foot-squared section of the roof directly above his intended workspace and charmed the opening to only allow air through it. When he was working, he would create a magical brazier in the makeshift hearth which would draw fresh air in through the hole in the roof as the hot air rose up through the chimney, thus any fumes would be automatically drawn away from the attic and released harmlessly into the outside air with the benefit of continual fresh air for the brewer.

Living in a Muggle house had given Snape a valuable insight into what worked well and what didn't, and although dribbling candles was seen as the most esoteric way to light your way to brewing, it was an electric light bulb that offered the best lighting. He located several plug sockets, and after a good rummage through a store cupboard, he found several extension cables, and so all that was lacking were three 100-watt light bulbs and three sturdy lamps. Satisfied that the attic was as close to a potions lab as he was going to get, he returned to the kitchen, made another hot drink, and waited for Miss Granger to return.

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Diagon Alley was eerily quiet. Hadn't the streets rung out jubilantly the last time Voldemort had been defeated? People seemed to rush from place to place, not stopping to make conversation and seemingly absorbed in their own purpose. The low-lying mist swirling and clinging to the hasty shoppers did nothing to lift the sombre quality of the normally frenetic alley. Her stomach roiled, and she had an unpleasant surge of adrenaline which made her skin tingle and her palms slick with sweat. Swallowing rapidly, she tugged down her hood and made a beeline for the Apothecary.

Odd shadows hidden within the mist made her jump, and with each passing moment her agitation increased: the scuttling shoppers passed her, and she wondered if they knew what she had done. Were they scurrying off to alert the Aurors? The small shop was a lighthouse in the descending fog, and she aimed for it as any wary and weary

captain would.

The bell jingled merrily as she pushed open the door, and she felt relief flood her as the door clicked closed behind her. The brass handle felt wonderfully cool in her hot hand, and she took a few moments to collect herself, feeling mildly surprised that she had felt so disorientated and exposed while in the street.

The smell of the shop assaulted her. It wasn't a bad smell as such, just an overpowering collection of confused scents. It was impossible to identify each one, but it inspired certain flashes of recognition; the lemon tang of Bergamot, the dry, musky smell of dried shrivelfigs and the cloying, earthy smell of toadstools. It made her nose tingle. The shop was basically five massive sets of drawers; one single column of deep drawers rested snugly against the far wall, and two, double-sided columns dominated the room, leaving narrow, claustrophobic aisles between them.

The drawers were made from some dark wood, and they lent the shop a dark and mysterious ambience. Flickering lanterns lit the way in the gloomy aisles, and the whole esoteric charm was emphasised by the bushels of dried, unidentified plants hanging from hooks and snatching at the patrons as they squeezed down between the towering stacks. Despite the oppressive atmosphere, Hermione inhaled deeply and smiled as she worked her way into the shop.

"May I help you there, Missy?" asked an elderly and bent man, his bald pate glowing in the light and his face shadowed in what would be in a rather malevolent way had not his face been round, fat and extremely jolly.

She smiled at the man behind the long counter and reached into her pocket to withdraw the list she and Snape had laboured over. As she handed it over, he smiled, whipped out a pair of glasses and carefully placed them on his nose. There were a few moments of silence while he studied the document before he placed it carefully on the counter.

"Shouldn't take too long to gather this all together," he said confidently, and he withdrew his wand with a practised flourish. "If Madam would care to wait?"

Hermione smiled and nodded. A small, three-legged stool rested at the near end of the counter, close to the window, and she settled herself on it while the owner waved his wand and began to mutter under his breath. At his request, glass alembics, boiling tubes, cauldrons and mortars clattered and clinked as they flew through the air to line up neatly before him. Chopping boards and stands, knives made of various metals...and even one made of bone...bowls and flasks, phials and pipettes, various thicknesses of muslin cloth, crucibles and tongues, glass tubing and bungs of differing sizes. She was staggered. On paper, it had seemed relatively straightforward, but laid out on the counter, the sheer mass of things was daunting. The owner gave the gathered army of utensils a quick glance and, with an exaggerated wave of his arm, reduced the battalion into a small heap no bigger than shoebox. A small giggle erupted from her at her foolishness.

The ingredients, though numerous, were far more easily managed, as many were already packaged into brown paper bags, and it was only a matter of mere minutes until she was standing and pulling out her purse to pay the owner. With everything neatly stowed in a basket, she bade the smiling man a farewell and slipped reluctantly out into the murky street. She was pondering whether to risk Apparition or stick with Muggle transport when she caught a snippet of gossip from a group of elderly witches talking conspiratorially in a doorway.

"Yes; and good riddance to such filth!" said a stumpy, dark-haired witch, rearing up like some bantam and daring the world to disagree with her. "He was a terrible blight on Hogwarts; my youngest grandson was terrified of him, and it looks as if he had good reason to be. From what Harry Potter says, the Dark Lord killed him himself."

"Oh," uttered another, her eyes riveted to the one with the secrets. "He's dead then?" She became flustered under the intensity of their gazes and waved a hand dismissively. "I mean that they never found him, did they?"

"Well, I heard that Snape's isn't the only body what is missing," said the bantam smugly. "That quite a few of the dead have disappeared, taken by some people as of yet unknown."

"Utter tripe!" spat out the thinnest and oldest of them. "What on earth would anyone want with them?"

The smug woman eyed her dismissive companion coldly, and after a few moments she smiled sweetly, as one does before dropping a bombshell. "Well, Lavinia, some would want revenge upon those who had injured or possibly killed their loved ones. Or perhaps someone would use them to show the others what would happen to them when they are found."

Lavinia spluttered and shook her head. "But it's just a corpse, hardly capable of feeling anything, and do you really think that the others would care about the things done to their dead comrades?"

The story teller gave a tinkling laugh and gently pulled on Lavinia's arm, drawing her closer for the juiciest morsel. Hermione pretended to rearrange the packed items so that she could listen in.

"There are ways of extracting memories from the dead," she whispered. "The Ministry would be very keen to get their grubby mitts on some of those dead Death Eaters, don't you think?"

The flustered woman bobbed on the spot and looked perplexed. "But that's a myth, isn't it?" Her small eyes darted from one woman to the next. "I know that they tried it years ago to help bring cases against the Death Eaters from before, but they never managed it."

Lavinia was staring through her cautious cohort into her own musings, her neatly plucked eyebrows distorted by a deep frown, and her lips worked as she pondered. "They never actually said that they hadn't managed to find a way."

"Exactly!" exclaimed the gossipmonger triumphantly. "No one ever did question Crouch's endorsement of the Killing Curse back then."

Hermione's fingers paused in their pointless rummaging. She stared at her fingertips resting against the edge of a brown parcel, and the whispered words worked through her mind. Discomforted by their ramblings, she left them to their chatter and made her way home.

oooXooo

Snape eyed the table thoughtfully. It was sturdy enough and had the right dimensions, and he knew that he could move it into the attic with the minimum of fuss and stress, but its presence would no doubt generate *questions*. But it was so ideal, and the thought of borrowing it so tempting.

The rattle of the key in the lock interrupted his appreciation, and he watched as the elderly lady stepped in, tugging on the tartan trolley. With a clatter of wheels, she manoeuvred it into the middle of the small kitchen and pushed the door closed. After untying her headscarf and unbuttoning her coat, she flicked on the kettle and mumbled as she sat down to unzip her warm ankle boots. He could smell her face-powder from where he sat, and somehow, he was comforted. While the kettle boiled, she prepared a pot and gathered together cups and saucers, and as she hummed a merry tune, he wondered if she felt some companionship too, even if it was down to a charm.

"While it brews, come 'elp us put the shoppin' away," she requested, and he quickly obliged. Soon, her shopping was away, and a neat pile of food grew on the table for Snape to take with him back to Miss Granger's home. They sat down and sipped their tea, and in the silence, Snape took to examining the table yet again. He ran the palm of his hand over the smooth, slick wood, relishing the warmth of it beneath his skin; it was a glorious refectory table.

"My 'Arold made me that when we were courtin'," she said rather solemnly before a smile shattered her melancholy. "'E said that if 'e was going to get his feet under a table, then it was goin' to be one that 'e liked." Her smile slipped, but some of the joy of her past lingered in her eyes. "Seen a lot, that table 'as." She took a deep gulp of tea and sighed softly. "Rarely use it nowadays," she admitted sadly.

Snape flattened his palm over the table possessively and glanced up at the woman; he reasoned that such a beautiful thing should be used, and he considered its enforced laziness to be the highest of sins. His mind was made up; the table would go to the attic, and questions be damned!

"In that case, might Miss Granger and I borrow this table for a while?" He watched her face go through several expressions, and then she finally smiled and reached out to pat the back of his hand.

"Course," she said, nodding in agreement. "I know that she misses her mum and dad. All tears she was when she got back from seein' 'em off," she said, her voice laced with sympathy. "It's nice that ye've dropped in to check on 'er."

Snape sighed and placed the cup back on the saucer. He looked at the old woman slurping her tea and felt the urge to tell her the truth, *"Actually, I was abducted by Miss Granger, who in a fit of misplaced camaraderie thought fit to save me from the hordes of grudge-ridden Aurors about to descend upon me to make my life even more of a living hell."* He knew that he was being silly, but his life suddenly felt so surreal. He let out a small, quickly smothered chortle while she sat there, oblivious to his mental ramblings. *"I'm sleeping in her spare bedroom while we both slip into the madness that is 'trying to cope'."* He sobered at the ironic thought and looked down into his tea. They weren't coping, and his idea to get Hermione to help him had deeper connotations than merely helping her to focus her mind: without a way to permanently heal Nagini's wound, he would either very slowly or very quickly bleed to death.

After tea, he thanked the neighbour and stealthily levitated the table and shopping from her kitchen and into the Grangers'. The food was hastily transferred from one table to another, and the new Potions bench was manoeuvred up into the attic, although a slight modification had to be made so that it slipped through the attic hatch. The table looked magnificent in the middle of the attic. The evening sunlight speared through the vellux windows and made the dark wood glow sumptuously. He ran his fingertips over the highly polished surface and smiled to himself; it was most certainly worth Miss Granger's indignation.

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Muggle transport had never delighted her; it was slow, smelly and suffocating. The basket had come in useful, and the strange smells emanating from it had meant that no one had sat next her on the bus, but the looming presence of other passengers as they stood in the aisle had still made her feel enclosed and trapped. The narrow windows were open, but if any fresh air sneaked through, none of it reached her desperate lungs. Hot and bothered, she found that she had little remorse for the people who were jarred and scraped by the basket she carried as she passed down the bus and out into the cool, delicious air. With a hiss and billowing exhaust fumes, the bus screeched away from the bus stop; Hermione adjusted her grip and followed the gently curving road to her house.

It was amazing just how exhausted she felt; the white uPVC door had never looked so welcoming. Locking the door behind her, she placed the basket on the floor, intent on removing her coat and the shoes that seemed to pinch her toes, but some scent made her pause. Inhaling in small doses, she stepped towards the kitchen, lured by a delicious, mouth-watering aroma, and peeled off her coat as she went. With wide eyes and twitching nose... and a huge degree of bemusement... she watched Snape as he bent over the hob to drop something into a saucepan and then stir the mysterious concoction furiously. Steam rose up from the pans that bubbled away happily, and it swirled about him as he worked with what at first glance appeared to be contentment. She looked again, studying him more carefully, and she felt that disturbing flicker of fear as she processed something so uncharacteristic. His efforts, combined with the steam, had put some colour into his cheeks, and his usually sallow skin looked healthy and radiant. He must have washed his hair at some point because it framed his face rather than hung limply around it, and she noticed that the black had blue undertones like the wing on a raven. The jacket had been cleaned and buttoned up to highlight how lean he was, and the material of his trousers clung shamelessly to his calves and thighs as he moved from hob to sink and back again. Swallowing past a dry throat, she followed his movement with greedy eyes, and the way he held the ingredients over the pans in that long-fingered and graceful grip made her shudder.

Confused, she turned back into the hallway and hung her coat up. *It must be the stress*, she reasoned. That was it! Hadn't she read somewhere that stress causes bizarre and unexpected reactions? Content with her explanation, she returned and managed to ignore said bizarre reactions.

Dinner had been amazing; it had been some kind of lamb stew served with new potatoes and buttered cabbage. She had never felt so hungry as she took in the chunks of meat, salivated over the thick, rich gravy and watched the butter slowly slip down over the greens. Her stomach had growled impatiently, informing her in no uncertain terms that no mental or emotional anxiety would be allowed to deprive it of such a feast. Between mouthfuls, she had pestered him about the herbs he had used, and he had discussed the recipe as though cooking thrilled him as much as potion-making. His laugh at her shocked expression had made her feel warm all over; thankfully, he mistook her blush as being in response to him laughing at her, but it was in fact because she had found that laugh of his to be quite... nice. And if she were honest, that had really been the most amazing thing about the meal: that they had talked nicely. No talk of Quidditch, no mad ramblings about why they had to do homework, no looming shadows of terror and no feeling that she was talking to herself. She had enjoyed the whole experience.

Once the dishes had been hand-washed and dried, they sat in the front room, drinking coffee and discussing whatever sprang to their minds. Snape relaxed into the softness of the sofa, his head tipping back to rest against the cushion, and closed his eyes. The evening had been most pleasant. He had forgotten how much he enjoyed cooking, and judging by the way Miss Granger had eaten her food, she had enjoyed his cooking too; her enjoyment of the food had more than paid for his effort.

It was almost eight o'clock when they were ready to transfer the Potions equipment and supplies to the attic, and Snape felt a thrum deep in his gut: the lab would be complete, and Miss Granger would see the table. Sure enough...

"That looks familiar!"

"Does it?" he replied innocently.

He could feel the intensity of her glare burning the back of his head, and he slowly turned to face the full effect. He almost sniggered at her stance. Hands on hips, lips pursed and eyebrows tugged together, she was just one move away from tapping her foot, but given all that, she managed to express her anger very well.

"That looks like Mrs Cooke's table."

"That's because it *is* Mrs Cooke's table."

"What have you done to my neighbour?" she demanded hotly, colour rising in her cheeks.

"A mild befuddlement charm; it will do her no harm."

"Why?"

"Because given her age and state of mental acuity, I hardly needed to cast a stronger version of the charm."

"No," she said carefully, and despite his outward appearance of innocent observation, inwardly, he smirked at her treacherous, innate, dark humour threatening to breach her sense of propriety. "I meant: why did you charm her at all?"

"I needed someone to get some supplies; I couldn't leave for fear of being seen, and I summated that you would not feel up to a jaunt to the local grocery store." He watched her expression and saw her begrudgingly see the logic in his argument; it was sometimes so easy to argue with the intelligent, their logic got in the way.

"I guess not," she said reluctantly. "Oh!" she exclaimed suddenly, and her eyes rolled in sarcastic despair. "I overheard in Diagon Alley that they're convinced that you're dead and that your body was taken so that the Ministry could extract your memories." She snorted at the stupidity of it and brushed loose strands of hair from her face; she failed to see Snape stiffen and pale at her glib recollection of the gossiping women's conversation. By the time she turned to look at him, he was calm, the cold and aloof man she had always known, and although she was dismayed that the earlier mood had fled, she felt some comfort in the familiarity of his stance.

"A ridiculous notion, indeed," he replied coolly. "But the assurance of my demise will be most helpful."

Despite her earlier objections about the table, he noted with some smugness and relief that she took to slowly caressing the dark wood while she laid out the potions equipment upon it. He had not had this feeling of companionship in quite some time, and he found that as the evening progressed, he felt more and more relaxed.

So it was that just before eleven at night, the Potions lab was in precise order. Hermione had found some spare lamps, and despite that they were all different, they cast more than enough light to satisfy Snape's critical eye. The main cauldron was slowly lowered into place, carried out with an almost solemn sense of tradition, and Hermione felt a thrill as she took in each detail: the row of phials, the boiling tubes glinting in the lamplight, the conical flasks and the retort stands, the fat alembics glowing, and the three cauldrons of varying sizes that seemed so hungry and eager to be used...it was beautiful!

Fatigue settled in like a sudden fog, and with a weary smile and a goodnight to Snape, she turned and made to leave. He watched her go; her face was pale with exhaustion, but the kind that comes from effort and not depression, and he was gratified that some aspect of his plan was having the desired result.

"Miss Granger," he called out.

She stopped by the hatch and sleepily faced him.

"I have said that I am no longer your professor," he said with feigned asperity.

She smiled at his tone. "Goodnight, Mr Snape," she said softly, and then she was gone.

For some reason, her use of his title disappointed him, but then he berated himself harshly for his moment of weakness. Battling the rising disgust he felt at his disappointment, he switched off the lamps. In the dark, he sighed and idly scratched at his tingling throat. But it had been so long since he had felt human, since he had felt anything other than vile bitterness and hate.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 7

Snape is rescued by Hermione, and it soon becomes apparent to him, that it is she who needs saving. But after confessions, cathartic breakdowns and tumultuous tempers, who is actually saving whom?

To say that their working relationship was an instant success would be a lie; she found his sometimes terse instructions to be bordering on rude, and he, in turn, found her incessant questions to be distracting. After six hours, two coffee breaks, a quiet lunch and an even more dire early evening, they had decided that enough was enough for the day. They drank their tea in an uncomfortable silence, and each pondered how the other should improve their behaviour.

"What we need is some structure for the day."

Hermione glanced up from her intense study of the pattern in the wood grain on the table and waited for Snape to continue.

"I am not used to working with anyone during research, and I do not expect to have to explain my every instruction while you assist me, but," he added when her face darkened, "I appreciate that you cannot assist me fully without knowing what it is that we are trying to achieve."

Hermione relaxed and took another sip of tea.

"With that view, I cannot deviate from my own methods, but in an evening we will discuss what we have done in the day, and if any questions present themselves during the actual brewing, then you will have to exercise patience and ask them during a potion-limited step."

"Potion-limited step?" she repeated, her brow furrowing. She lowered the mug and leant forwards, her interest smothering her frustrations.

"Some potions require either a certain amount of time to mature or for a particular ingredient to settle within it before the next step can take place; in other words you have to wait. The overall brewing time is limited by one or more steps in the potion-making process."

"I've never come across that term."

"It would have been covered in the first term of your NEWT level potions, along with the deeper intricacies of potion-brewing," Snape said while watching her face blossom as her interest waxed; it was unnerving to have her sitting so close and loving a passion that stirred him...it felt wrong in some way.

"You sound a bit dismissive of the syllabus, sir."

And that was that! Instead of practicing the restraint that he had hoped to maintain, he launched into a two-hour discussion on the mysticism behind the ingredients themselves. Talked about how the choices of ingredient were much more subtle than just chucking in something with the required property, and that the better potion masters knew how to get the very best out of a potion by selecting the best for the whole potion and the sum of its parts. It quite escaped his notice that she had moved closer and that they were exchanging keen and witty talk, and he remained oblivious to her sparkling eyes and her sweetly parted lips as she drank in his words. Indeed, it came as quite a shock when she left to make some dinner that he realised that he had enjoyed her company.

Hermione peeled the potatoes; she had never really considered the humble potato before, but as the smooth, creamy-white tuber sat in the palm of her hand, she found herself using it as a case in study. Would a different potato make a better mash? Hadn't she heard that Maris Pipers made better chips? Could she make a better meal by selecting the better ingredient? Was the right selection the difference between food being from your home or from a Michelin star restaurant? She had spent the best part of her academic life reading and learning, but she had never *appreciated* her education before... used that gained knowledge and put it all together. Herbology had been loosely related to potions as far as she had seen it, but the nature and care of the plants had seemed so superfluous, and the final product was what had truly mattered. She grinned at the irony that Neville Longbottom would be a better theoretical potion master than she. She dropped the potato in the pan and picked up another.

She had always known that Snape was intelligent, and Sirius had once confirmed as much, but she had never realised the depth of his knowledge or its breadth, or that the wit he had aimed at her and her friends to wound was so capable of making her laugh with delight. He had come alive during their talk; his eyes had glittered and his cheeks had flushed with colour, so much like that little boy talking excitedly to Lily in his Pensieve. The peeler slipped and grazed across her knuckle, and the sharp pain derailed her train of thought. She brought her thumb to her lips and sucked on the bloodied knuckle. Finishing the prep work, she placed the vegetables in the steamer and switched it on. After a few moments a scratching at the window finally caught her attention, and she saw an owl, looking affronted as it sat on the dark window-sill.

She hastily rinsed and dried her hands and opened the back door. The owl launched from its precarious perch and glided in through the doorway to land on the back of a chair. She didn't recognise the elegant bird as it turned wide, unblinking eyes upon her, and she approached it with something akin to trepidation. From the pouch attached to its leg, she withdrew a cream envelope, and then, as an afterthought, she dashed over to the cupboard and pulled out the first thing that could constitute a treat...some of Crookshank's cat treats. The fishy smell was slightly overpowering as she opened up the small bag, but the owl didn't seem to care and gobbled down the offered

handful before silently leaving.

Puzzled, she shut the door behind it and sauntered over to the table. The envelope was blank, so the bird belonged to someone she knew rather than a Ministry owl, and she slowly slipped a fingertip under the sealed edge. She let out a sigh when she recognised the handwriting, and a smile curved her lips, but as she read, her smile slipped and hot tears slid down her cheeks.

Hermione,

I know that this is tough; it's tough for all of us, but we've always looked after each other before, so we're a bit confused and hurt as to why you aren't with us now. Ron is upstairs, moping around because he doesn't know what's going on, and he won't talk to anyone about it... To be honest, no one is really talking! It's so different here at The Burrow! So quiet!

We need you, Hermione, even if it's to keep us all from going crazy with it all... You have the answers; you always have. Mrs Weasley is crying all the time and hugging us at every opportunity; even Ginny has got fed up by it all and spends hours in her room not talking. Mr Weasley has cleared out his shed; all the plugs and screwdrivers were packed up yesterday, and it's just not right here.

I'm staying here until things quieten down and you're here for Ron, and then I'm off to Grimmauld Place... It's the only home I have now, but I don't really want to live there anymore.

Anyway, it's Fred's funeral on Friday, and you're invited... Is that right? Are you invited to a funeral? Sounds too light-hearted. It's at 10 o'clock at the church in Ottery St Catchpole; it's the only one in the town, so you can't miss it. We're coming back here afterwards. Hope you can come; we miss you.

Love,

Harry

Her hand clenched around the pale paper, screwing it up into some distorted flower, and she felt each sentence slash at her. What was she to them? Nothing more than a walking answer to a problem they couldn't be bothered to solve for themselves. So nice of them to wonder how she was coping: how wonderful that they hadn't realised that just as she hadn't gotten in touch with them before now, so neither had they! If Ron was so concerned about her being and coping alone while he was surrounded by the Weasley clan, then he'd made a valiant effort to make sure that she was okay. And to be used as a convenient babysitter so that Harry could dispense with his duty was just the icing on the cake. After the pain, the anger surged up and flooded her, and it was so easy to become that white-hot creature; it scorched away all other feelings, fears and doubts.

It rampaged through her, ravaging her memories of her times with Harry and Ron, and as it shone brightly within her, she saw those moments in a different light. Had they ever truly cared for her, or for what she knew and could do? Even now, they sought her out to ease their woes while negating her own with the simple idea that she had always been there to help them. Her face felt hot and itched from the drying tears. Oh! She felt that she was burning! The heat was rushing through her; it flickered beneath her skin and made her heart beat unnaturally fast. It was... too... much! And it was so... remarkably... easy.

The letter erupted into flame in her clenched fingers, and the tiles beneath her feet cracked as though punched by some terrific fist. Her hair lifted from her shoulders, and static electricity crackled within the wafting strands. The steamer suddenly let out a pained scream of a whistle, and super-heated steam erupted from it, sending chopped, scalded vegetables hurtling through the air. Water gushed from under the door of the freezer only to evaporate noisily as it rushed towards her, and the fresh herbs in their little pots in the window withered and dried.

Snape had felt it in the front room, and if that magical surge hadn't made itself known then the rolling wall of heat that had hit him would have. He carefully moved into the kitchen; his skin felt as though it singed, prickling almost painfully, and his eyes watered as the heat haze attacked them. She was standing in the centre of the kitchen, her form blurred and almost lost in the mirage-like effect of her charm. He was astounded at what she was unleashing, and not so much the power behind it, but her control of it. Fear fluttered in his chest. This was no expected consequence of trauma; it was something else, something darker and far more terrifying than her lapses into fugues. If he had had the vocabulary, he may have been tempted to use the word psychotic.

"Miss Granger," he shouted, shielding his eyes and regretting the hot inhale required to make his plea. Grimacing and forced to take a few steps back, he pondered his position and realised that he had no position. Lifting his wand, he aimed it at her back, and praying to all known wizards, gods and lesser deities, he cast his spell.

"Stupefy!"

The heat disappeared as soon as she crumpled to the floor, and the loss of water from the freezer slowed to a trickle. He licked his lips and strode over to her; the tiles felt far too warm beneath the slippers he had borrowed. Kneeling next to her, he examined her peaceful and flushed face; tears that had dried preternaturally fast had left silvery tracks down her cheeks. He carefully lifted an eyelid and felt nauseous when her bloodshot orb rolled grotesquely in its socket. He collapsed against the base units, a cupboard handle digging into his shoulder blade, and he ran a trembling hand down his tingling face. This went far and above anything he was capable of handling; it was insane to think that he could help her.

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The steady motion of the knife slicing through the shrivelfig soothed him, and he watched with intense focus how the slices, so thin as to be almost transparent, slid up the glistening blade and then limply clung to it before he gently pulled them away and laid them upon the wire rack to dry. Since putting Hermione to bed and assuring himself that she was merely sleeping, he had worked; he had attacked the task of creating usable stock with a vengeance, and after a few hours, he had enough supplies to last them the month. Bushels of drying roots and leaves hung from the exposed lathes, and various things were pickling in glass jars. It was an old habit to work until exhaustion gripped him and gave him no recourse but to sleep, and he had never needed old habits so much. The young witch had more than unnerved him, and it was only the careful and precise damage inflicted upon the kitchen that had stopped him from calling for help and fleeing.

He had spent some of the evening pondering the charred remains in her fingers, but no spell would ever repair that level of damage, and he suspected that it had sparked her outrage. He couldn't help but think that it had something to do with Potter...old habits die hard. The last slice of shrivelfig was set to dry, and the slim piece that was left, along with the stalk, was dropped into the bin beneath the bench. Straightening and wincing as his muscles protested, he cast a cleaning charm over the chopping board and knife, and then he protected the slivers of shrivelfig from contamination with a localised shielding charm. With gritty eyes that ached and arms that felt weighted with fatigue, he switched off the lamps and illuminated his way out of the attic. Work was a good balm for a restless mind, and as he slipped into the bathroom to do his bedtime ritual, he wondered if he could hold onto the mental numbness and fall asleep.

He hung his jacket up and folded his trousers neatly, and then after slipping on the borrowed pyjamas, he slid under the cool covers. His room at Hogwarts had been underground and the light within it had been magical, and once that light had been extinguished, the room had been swallowed in shadow. Here, the walls were bathed in an orange glow from the streetlamp outside the window, and the headlamps from passing cars sent row after row of marching lights across the room. He couldn't decide whether it was fascinating or annoying.

Sleep must have overtaken him at some point because he was later woken by a strange sensation. It had nagged at him for a while, and as his eyes blinked open, his mind had reeled in shock; he realised that the strange sensation was a warm body curled up against him. Grabbling for his wand, he sat bolt upright and aimed the lit tip at the slumbering woman next to him. She was lying in a ball; her hands were held palms together and under her cheek, and her knees rested against her elbows. The copious hair spilt over the mattress in soft waves, and she didn't so much as wear the oversized, lilac fleece pyjamas as be swamped in them. He closed his eyes, and once the shock dispersed, frustration settled in; he clenched his jaw and felt his teeth grind in their sockets.

She floated down the hallway; the spell he used was more sophisticated than the one Black had used to move him from the Shrieking Shack all those years ago, and as

such, she was still sleeping peacefully in her curled-up pose. Having no experience in tucking people in, he carefully placed her upon the twisted sheets and pulled the duvet up and under her chin. Satisfied that she was settled and not about to launch herself back into his bed, he padded off, exhaustion haunting him until the last few steps were such a strain that he was asleep before he hit the mattress.

Sleep didn't hold him in her embrace for long before he felt the bed dip; sighing, he lumbered out of bed and, muttering under his breath, he carried her back to her bed. Contemplating placing her under some kind of bind, he looked down upon her. It was obvious from the sheets that she had experienced some night terrors, but he wasn't prepared to put up with nightly incursions. In the morning, he would make some Sleep-ease potion. As a precaution, he charmed his door locked. He never noticed in his fatigue how his hand sneaked out across the cooling sheets, seeking the warmth of her absent form.

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Breakfast was subdued; neither spoke as they ate toast and drank coffee, and it seemed that Hermione was intently focused on some inner turmoil, and everything she did, from biting and chewing to swallowing and breathing, was done slowly and with the utmost care. Dark circles under bloodshot eyes that hardly glanced across at him declared her lack of sleep and her exhaustion; her gaze hovered between plate, mug and tabletop. He knew that he was being unfair, but he wanted her to be that annoying little know-it-all; he wanted her to be the unquenchable thirst for an answer. He knew how to deal with that.

"I was thinking that sorting through the buffer ingredients would be the best course of action for the day," he said, hoping to draw her out.

For her part, she nodded almost absentmindedly, and then her brow furrowed. "There were four buffer ingredients, but I could only see the need for two based on the ingredients." Her brown eyes looked up at him, and then with a flush, she looked down to study his chin. "I don't think that I quite followed what you were saying last night about the... spirit... of the ingredient affecting the whole resulting potion."

Swallowing his mouthful of coffee, he nodded slowly and placed the mug on the table. "It's a difficult concept, and I admit that a certain element of faith must be adopted. It can be a very personal and instinctive process, and acquiring that faith, even with the lack of knowledge, can mean the difference between being a Brewer and a Master."

"Are you a Master?" she asked softly.

"Technically, no," he replied curtly.

She frowned and sipped her coffee, as if bolstering her courage. "But you brewed the Wolfsbane Potion."

His lips quirked up in a smile, and it threatened to evolve into a feral grin as he saw her blush and glance away. Controlling his errant humour, he dropped the nibbled piece of toast on his plate and wiped the crumbs off his fingers. "A most complex potion," he said thoughtfully, "and one well outside the grasp of many potion brewers. It was both draining and exhilarating to brew. There are institutes of learning beyond the three main schools of witchcraft, and within those exalted walls, you may develop the skills and talents to gain that honour of being called a Master. My duties did not allow for me to attend such prestigious places, and as such, I am a mere, lowly teacher."

Hermione hastily gulped down her coffee and then smiled shyly at his self-deprecation.

"Would you like to learn how to brew the Wolfsbane Potion?" he queried. "I daresay that Lupin and a few others would benefit from having a reasonable brewer close at hand."

He let out a chuckle at her choking gasp as she struggled to drink and answer him. After some spluttering, she gave a small laugh and agreed. He nodded gallantly and felt relieved that some of the colour and life had returned to her face.

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She was a bundle of nerves and excitement, almost vibrating with academic alertness as she stood by the potions bench. While she had cleaned away the breakfast dishes, he had written the ingredients and procedure onto a piece of paper. That piece of paper was now the target of her intense focus.

"Everything that you need is in front of you; there are three potion-limited steps, and if you have any queries, you may ask then. Even without the first year of your NEWTs, the potion should be within your technical grasp, and we will see if what you've learnt to date has been retained." He glanced at the clock affixed to the wall straight ahead. "Read through the procedure carefully; take the time to set the potion in your mind and to determine how long you will need for each step. Look for the limited steps and work around them; use your time wisely." As he had spoken, her face had fallen from expectant glee to confused panic. "Relax, but keep focused." He handed her the paper. "You will work in this cauldron," he said, indicating the silver cauldron on the far left. "And I will be working in the centre cauldron."

While he heated some pure water, he watched her study the notes with great care, and as she became absorbed in her task, she relaxed into it. Several times, he thought that she inhaled sharply to ask a question, but when he glanced towards her, she was bent over the cauldron and notes with a serene expression upon her flushed face, and her eyes glittered as she worked the complex potion. He had no doubt that she would do well with the potion, even if the potion would be less effective, and he enjoyed the quiet solicitude with which she worked.

The Sleep-ease potion was complete, and he was busy siphoning off doses when he heard a frustrated sigh.

"It should be dark green," she mumbled dejectedly. She collapsed upon the stool and studied the handwritten notes fiercely. The last vial was filled and a bung rammed in the top; wiping his hands, he turned to her.

"A slight value variation is permissible." He placed the vial in the rack and peered down into her cauldron. "Ah!" he exclaimed softly while she cringed and nibbled her lip. "However, a hue variation is not... although it is a rather nice shade of purple."

And so the day continued. They worked and shared, talked and laughed. Hermione felt as though she was finally home, and Snape felt more at ease than he had in decades. After a few hours, Hermione learnt to follow instructions without the need to question; instead, she summoned up her own vast knowledge and tried to work out her own answers, and for the most part, she was successful. In turn, Snape became less taciturn and brusque, and he explained more about each step in the method. So it was that at nine in the evening, while the stars glittered down, they finally cleaned away the unused ingredients, scoured out the cauldrons and left the attic for the comfort of the front room and a cup of tea.

However, as the night wore on, Snape noticed that Hermione became more withdrawn, and that haunted expression ghosted back across her features. He had had little in the way of support from his peers, and not much more from those who were obliged to care for him, but he did recall one sunny afternoon in a detention with Professor McGonagall.

"Mr Snape, I cannot keep all the ills and terrors away from you, and I daresay that I will only ever imagine what those are, but I will be here to help you with whatever you see fit to let me help you with. Hogwarts has many eyes and ears, but here in this office, there are none save my own."

He had glanced round the office and noted that no portraits adorned the walls, save for one: a Muggle photograph in an oval frame on her desk.

"Some of those within my House have not treated you as well as they should, and they have been punished for their abuses and neglects," she said, continuing in that same no-nonsense voice, but her eyes had slipped from holding his gaze, as though some thought or sentiment plagued her. "As great as the Houses are, they are... also great at creating unnecessary boundaries."

Snape remained distant and aloof; he had no real need to listen to his Transfigurations professor prattle on about what she could and couldn't do, and to softly berate her own while punishing him. She knew that her House held those who caused more woe to the rest, and here she was, hiding behind the walls of the Houses and the Sorting

as if it were some excuse for the state of her own House. At the time, he had not realised that she could have been despairing of those who had made his school life a misery, and he had not seen the look of concern on her face as she spoke of divisions.

"Severus," she said softly, and her eyes seemed wide and far too focused on him for comfort. "Sometimes, all we can do is help to pick up the pieces."

Sitting next to Hermione, he wondered what Minerva had been trying to tell him; what had she suspected all those years ago? He drained the mug and placed it upon the polished coffee table.

"Despite the slight colour change and the fact that the potion would not have calmed an old and partially blind, senile house-dog, you brewed it very well." He saw her shoulders slump, and he felt a flicker of regret at his choice of humour, but then he saw her shoulders slump again and then shudder. She was laughing. He felt the corners of his mouth twitch in triumph.

She turned to him, her eyes sparkling with some inner excitement, some inner revelation. "I know why!"

He smirked and adopted his best 'unimpressed professor' expression, but his smirk slipped when he saw that his demeanour only enhanced her mirth...three days with her, and he was losing his touch.

"Do tell, Miss Granger."

"It's all about me and how I brew the potion!"

"Well done; quite the astute observation. I can see why you did so well in your lessons with a keen mind like that."

She sighed and rolled her eyes. She twisted on the sofa so that she could face him; her knees came up, and she hugged them, her socks tickling the edge of his hand as it rested on the cushion. "I mean that I brew it; I am in control of it." Her brow furrowed as she tried to summon the words to express her epiphany. "So long as I keep the same focus throughout, then the potion will be as perfect as I can make it. My pinch or handful may be different to yours, but it will always be the same for me... But there's more than that. I have to relate my measurements to the time... So the method is slightly flexible, depending upon how I work."

"Well done," he said with genuine pride. "You have just mastered the first term of your NEWT level Potions." Her grin was radiant, and he couldn't stop a returning smile.

"Now that you have that piece of theory tucked safely away, tomorrow, we shall take another look at *my* failed potion."

Her smile slipped, and her dark gaze flew to his neck; in the dim lighting, it was difficult to see the bruised-looking flesh. Shame flared within her at her feelings of achievement when Snape was working towards saving his life. Feeling nauseous, she hugged her shins and tucked her feet under her; she had failed everyone. Images of Ron running to comfort Ginny entered her mind, and some niggling thought rose up in its wake. There was something she had to do, some task that she had been asked to fulfil...

"It's Fred's funeral tomorrow."

Snape felt the buoyant feelings of companionship sink. How easily he had forgotten that there was a world beyond this house, beyond her. He licked his lips and ran a hand over his sleek hair. The event in the kitchen made some sense; the charred remains and the black soot embedded in her skin were most likely from a letter informing her of the funeral. The Weasley family marched through his head, and his chest felt constricted; he recalled how Molly had tried to make him feel welcome at the meetings at Grimmauld Place and how Arthur made it clear that he respected him for what he did and risked. The twins stormed through his reverie, the embodiment of mischief and glee as they practiced their many arts and talents...the Skiving Snackboxes had been a marvel of potion experimentation. He closed his eyes, and the memories morphed into imaginings, and he saw them as shadows of their former selves, their spirit damaged and beaten by the suffering they were enduring.

"Then you must go," he said gruffly, emotion gripping his throat.

He felt the sofa cushion dip, and then a hand rested lightly on his arm. Surprised, he opened his eyes and turned to look at her; her face was closer than he'd expected as she leant towards him, and he was trapped in her tear-filled and desperate gaze.

"I'm scared," she whispered.

It seemed that he would rebuke her, and she felt her sense of security crumble; how daft to think that Snape of all people would care! She didn't want to weep before a man who wouldn't care that she was in anguish, and she felt foolish for accepting the illusion of comfort he represented. But then, he lifted his arm, inviting her to be held, and with a sob she fell into his arms.

Actually, she practically scrambled into his arms. Her head rested against his shoulder; one arm reached round and clung to his chest like a Tentacular vine and her thighs pressed up against his. He let his arm fall to press against her back, his hand hesitating as it searched for the least provocative place and finally settling on her shoulder. His free hand, which had been tucked between his thigh and the sofa arm, came up and gently stroked her hair as it tumbled down his chest. She was warm and trembled against him, and he heard those strange, stifled, keening sounds that he recalled all too clearly from his stay in Azkaban.

"I cannot keep the anger and the terrors away from you, and I daresay that I will only ever imagine what those would be, but I will be here to help you with whatever you feel fit to let me help you with."

At his words she let out a great howl and squeezed him. "I can't control it... It comes up and it takes over, and I can't think, and it won't stop, and I don't know what I do." She wept and mumbled into his shirt. "I do things... don't I? You said that I destroyed the kitchen, and I must have done something yesterday because I was exhausted, and I had black on the palm of my hand."

"What do you remember about yesterday?" he asked.

She stirred and hiccupped a few times. "I got an Owl off Harry saying that Fred's funeral is on Friday, and it made me so angry."

"Why would it make you angry?" He could feel her tension rising with the memory, and he gave her a brief, supporting hug while he continued to caress her hair.

Why had it made me angry? she thought to herself. *Was it the lack of consideration that they had shown? Was it the idea that I'm around just to ease their troubles and solve their problems?* Could it be that she'd enjoyed the pleasant cocoon of being in the house with Snape and that letter had rudely interrupted and dragged in the real world, thus ruining her illusion? She gripped him tightly, letting her thoughts and doubts circle in her head, knowing that she had that anchor by her side.

Sniffing and with her cheek pressed up against his chest, feeling his heartbeat and soothed by the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest, she pummelled and bullied her mind until she had some sort of answer.

"I wanted to hide away from it, and that letter spoiled it, not because it reminded me that there was so much going on out there, but because I'm supposed to be there. It's always been us three together."

She shifted away as she spoke, and Snape felt a bizarre sense of loss, a feeling that was compounded by her words. *She wanted to be with them*, he thought bitterly. His hand dropped to his lap, and the hand that had held her shoulder slipped as she had moved and now rested between her shoulder blades. She was looking at him with a strange expression, as if she was wondering what she was doing by his side, and he felt stinging bile rush up. But this was about her, and not about him; it hadn't meant to have been about him at all. She needed her friends, and the idea that she should be with them when they needed each other was perfectly acceptable.

"There is nothing shameful in wanting and needing an escape from the horrors and strains of it all," he said carefully, seeing her eyes widen as he hit upon one aspect of

her ordeal that she may not have immediately latched onto...guilt! "I doubt that there is anyone who can live day by day without having somewhere to hide away from time to time."

She sobbed out, and her shoulders shook. "But I can't..."

"Can't what, Miss Granger?" he demanded with more force than he intended.

Tears dripped from her chin, and her lips trembled. "I can't see them like this."

"Like what?" he queried more softly, and yet more urgently.

"I can't cope with it, sir," she replied in a whisper. "I can't control it, and I'm scared that I'll do something, but I want to be there." She clutched at her hair and tugged harshly on it; her eyes squeezed shut against the world.

Snape watched her intently, saw how her knuckles were white as her fingers wove between her hair and pulled on the thick strands. One day wouldn't hurt.

"There is a way that you could be calm tomorrow; I can brew a potion that will reduce the intensity of your emotions."

Her eyes flew open, and she stared at him. Her hands fell from her hair, and her mouth dropped open in surprise. His heart thudded in his chest, and he felt that his lungs were squeezed as he considered what he was doing. But one day wouldn't hurt.

"Thank you," she said in an awed whisper, and then she hugged him, her cheek pressing against his.

Snape pulled the door closed; Hermione was asleep in her bed, tucked in and deep in the Sleep-ease potion that she had swallowed eagerly. He walked slowly up to the attic; his stomach roiled threateningly and a cold sweat swept over his body. What was he thinking? As he flicked on the lamps and stared into the empty maw of the cauldron, he wondered why he was risking so much for her. One day, experiencing the larger portion of her pain, hate and anger, wouldn't hurt. He comforted himself with that mantra, and he made the Displacement potion.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 7

Snape is rescued by Hermione, and it soon becomes apparent to him, that it is she who needs saving. But after confessions, cathartic breakdowns and tumultuous tempers, who is actually saving whom?

The alarm clock barely started its first high pitched wail before her hand swung out to silence it. Her fingers rested against the off button, and she stared at the softly glowing green numbers. Panic stirred within her, making her tremble, and she swallowed the rising dread, forcing that hard, bitter lump back into her querulous gut. Thoughts gathered, and her mind was a hive of buzzing impressions, recollections and fears, each one a stinging attack against her will. It was with some alarmed surprise that she saw the numbers on the digital display and realised that four minutes had slipped by.

Throwing off the covers, she sat up, legs dangling over the edge, and she stared at the shadowed carpet. *I can't do this*, she thought. *They'll all be there... everyone. Watching, looking, knowing that I'm terrible and selfish and... ill!* A small whimper bubbled up and burst past her compressed lips. *I can't do this!* Her fingers bit into the mattress, and she had the urge to crawl back into bed, pull up the covers and hide. Summoning some fortifying anger, she leapt from the bed in a flurry of grim determination and paced over to the window.

Even though it was still technically summer, she drew back the curtains to reveal a bleak day more befitting of mid-winter, and she felt the sheer oppressiveness crush down upon her. How easily her best intentions were defeated! The fabric quivered in her tight, desperate grip, and she bowed her head until her forehead touched the cold glass. *I'm useless*, she thought bitterly. Her unsteady breath misted the glass, and those thoughts that had been held at bay rose up as her fortifications crumbled. *Why is it so hard? It's over, isn't it? Dark Wizard defeated! Death Eaters hunted down.* She sobbed against the window, and her frame curled up like a dying leaf. *I don't want to go! I want to stay here... here where it's quiet and safe. I want to forget, and they'll talk to me, they'll expect me to know... and I can't... won't... don't know!*

A soft rapping at the door slithered through her dark, mental meanderings, and digging down, she found the energy to step away from the window and open the door. Snape looked as bad as she felt. Without warning or need for invite, concern rushed up, and she stepped closer to him, her hand resting lightly on his forearm.

"Are you alright, sir?"

Alright? some thought asked incredulously as he studied her pale face with its red blotches round her eyes. The potion had taken a mere hour to make, and then he had spent the rest of the night staring at the burgundy tincture and pondering the ramifications of something that looked as innocuous as red wine. Several times, he had been tempted to pour the potion down the kitchen sink; he had even held the conical flask in his hand and stood on weak legs, considering just how easy it would be to walk down the stairs...and he had found it to be the most difficult physical feat he had ever faced. The flask had sat on the bench since, as seductive as any sweet wine and as vile as any bitter poison.

"I'm fine, Miss Granger." He licked his lips and dammed the thoughts rising up at the nonsense he was implying. *Are you mad? Fine? You're as far from 'fine' as she is from 'sane'! Did you actually think beyond that need of yours to help her? Did you feel that the risks of incinerating not only the kitchen but the whole house, and not to mention your eyebrows, were worth her having a few hours break from raving?*

"I have the potion," he said softly.

Her tentative smile quietened the turbulent voice, and he indicated with a wave of his hand that she was needed in the attic. In her eagerness, she failed to feel his fingers run through the edges of her hair or the slight sting of a few strands being tugged free as she strode past. Snape felt the gossamer strands between forefinger and thumb and then twisted them up into a small, tight ball. With the smallest hesitation, he climbed the wooden stairs into the attic and paused when his eyes latched upon Hermione leaning towards the potion; her gaze was focused on the liquid, and her lips were parted in anticipation. *And why shouldn't she be?* some inner voice whispered. *You've said that it would help her, filled her head with the notion that it will make her well enough to cope with it all. The eagerness that seems so predatory to you now is solely because you've made the lure so tantalising!*

The creak of the top step made her turn her head, and as she straightened, she smiled at him. She nodded towards the flask and stepped back as he approached; if his

cool demeanour was noted by her then she showed no sign of acknowledging it. *But the potion was there, so what did **he** matter now?*

"I've never seen such a hue; did you use Deadly Nightshade in it?"

Her eyes followed his every move as he poured half the potion into a goblet, and irritation flared within him; it burnt his skin and made it itch. He handed her the simple goblet and saw her study the gently swaying surface of the disturbed tincture. *Hurry up and drink the blasted thing!* he groused silently, *before I change my mind or you figure it out and get all noble.*

"The potion will take effect about half an hour after ingestion and will last for the day," he said swiftly, hoping to smother his increasingly recalcitrant thoughts and her predictable upsurge of questions. "Your feelings will be less intense, and therefore, more manageable. However," he added, "due to that, you may seem cold and indifferent, so a little effort on your part may be needed."

She frowned and managed to drag her gaze from the glistening potion. "In what way, sir?"

"Weeping and the like at funerals... it's considered the done thing."

She bit her lip and nodded solemnly.

"Drink up!" he said with brittle encouragement while idly scratching at his tender throat.

'Placebo' was a familiar word to most potion makers and Healers, and he saw in her manner the best example of its power. As soon as the goblet had been drained and the red excess licked away from her top lip, she had seemed to effuse confidence and glow with energy. She had grinned at him and thanked him, lifting up on her tip-toes to give him a fleeting hug, and while the pipes had gurgled as she showered, he had sat upon the stool and fought the insurgent panic. Realising that he could not retract the offer now, he dropped the tight ball of chestnut hair into the empty goblet and poured the remains of the potion over it. He downed the ironically sweet liquid in several gulps and calmly walked out of the attic; he knew that he would have little chance to do any brewing or preparing today; already, he could feel her emotions creeping up... or was that just placebo? By the time she left, he could feel her burgeoning panic and guilt at facing those that she had effectively abandoned, especially in their time of greatest need, and the little, weak, flutters of anticipation bravely trying to stay afloat.

The house was disturbingly quiet without her, and he couldn't recall that the rooms had been so large, and surely the sofa had been cramped? He made himself some toast and coffee and settled at the kitchen table; if he couldn't do any practical work then he'd busy and content himself with the theory; at the very least, it would distract him from the confusing mix of emotions attacking him. The elusive and worrisome potion was laid out before him upon the paper, the ingredients trapped and the method formalised in his spidery scrawl. It was so simple! A first-year student could have mixed the few ingredients together and yielded a workable potion...the difficulty had resided in creating it. Those few days in his private study with an anxious Dumbledore pacing the narrow room had been etched deeply into his mind, and several times since, he had woken in a sweat and taking desperate gulps of air after he had dreamt of his failure.

He drew circles round the words Bushmaster Venom, Leopard's Bane, Stagshorn Clubmoss and Deadly Nightshade and linked them to Manuka Honey, alcohol, water and lemon juice. They all worked so well together, the Clubmoss enhanced the Bushmaster venom to aid the healing of open and profusely bleeding wounds, and the Manuka honey was the perfect buffer...although the chemistry definition was more refined and specific, the buffer here would act as a suitable medium to prevent unwanted interaction between the ingredients and also create a reasonable volume of tincture to work with. He rubbed his forehead and tried to discover why the potion had been an immediate success for Arthur and a dubious delayer for himself.

The focus on work was interrupted just before half past nine with a sudden and flaming hot stab of irritation, and with a derisive snort, he summated that she had arrived at the church. It would have been easier if he had been able to offer her some potion that would just inhibit or smother her raging emotions, but his foray into her mind had shown that there were two forces at work within her, Hermione Granger and the thing that rose up when Hermione slipped away. He had no specific vocabulary to describe what he had caught a glimpse of and what he suspected, but in those moments of rage, it was no longer Hermione that had dominion, but some deeper, darker thing. This disparity would make any potion that acted upon her rather unfocused, and he doubted that it would be able to keep both of those conflicting aspects mollified. Instead of creating a potion that would only be able to stabilise one facet of her fracturing personality, it had seemed more prudent, given the situation, to displace *all* of her emotions.

He tidied away his notes and moved to pour the tepid dregs of coffee into the sink; another scorching flash caught him unawares, and he snarled out at the intensity of it...how quick she was to anger! It was no wonder that she found it difficult to keep it all at bay; it wasn't a ponderous storm surge portended by rising winds and white, whipped waves, but an unexpected and silent tsunami. It seemed that his day would be spent waiting for the barrage, and then clinging on until it abated and withdrew, but he had had years of practice and experience in dealing with intense emotion.

The bookshelves held many books, many of them Dental Journals, and although learning exactly why enamel erosion was the key issue in dentistry today would no doubt improve him immensely, his eye was drawn to a leather-bound book tucked away at the very end of the shelf. Very few things appealed to him...when he realised that to show affection or an interest in something just gave his father a weapon over him, he had quickly learnt to love nothing...but books lured him in and wrapped him up. Nothing made his eyes widen, his palms itch or his heart stutter as much as a book he wanted. Hermione must have met up with someone from the Weasley family because as his fingers grazed the book's spine, he felt grief slice through him.

It battered at him! It pummelled him into the carpet of Mr Granger's office and squeezed out whimpers, moans and tears. On instinct, he curled up into a ball and pressed his clenched fists against his leaking eyes while he silently screamed.

Oh Merlin!

It felt as though some fist had been rammed down his gullet and was crushing his heart and clawing at his insides. He couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't deal with the pressure!

Oh... stop! Leave me be, please... stop... can't stand it... too much!

The strength and ferocity of it made it impossible for him to find some high ground to combat the marauding melange of emotions. Just when he had scabbled to some firm ground, another wave of grief, anger and guilt would plough into him, knock him from his feet and send him reeling once more. But he had faced this before, spent half a life-time fighting it, and that part that made him get up and face each day, that part which snarled at a world determined to cripple him and that part that held him in check was rising up. Like the wrath of angels, it stormed through his thoughts and feelings, it swept aside his feelings of inadequacy and fear, and it spread its wings and held back the terrible wave.

Gritting his teeth and breathing with exaggerated care, he rose up onto his knees and then, as though the very air pressed down upon him, he staggered to his feet. Holding onto the bookcase for support, he steadied himself; he had chosen to do this, and he took both strength and comfort from that.

How long has it been since I have made a deliberate choice? How long since I've seen someone suffer and been able to extend out my hand and save them?

He had never been one for introspection...he suspected that he would dislike what he discovered...and as such, he rarely analysed his motives, but rather the consequences of his actions. It was ironic that taking on someone else's chaotic and tumultuous emotions should make him ponder his own with more attention than they were used to.

After the initial assault, he found that he was able to distance himself from it and stifle the effects to the point that he could function. He knew that nothing he did personally would lessen the rampaging feelings, but he could distract himself. The Displacement Potion had always fascinated him, ever since he had brewed it for Emmeline Vance and Dumbledore; bile rushed up at the recollection as a result of his own bitter grief, and his eyelids fluttered closed. It had been agreed; that mantra...that disclaimer and absolver...had sustained him throughout the brewing process and even up to the point that they had drunk the potion. Emmeline had nodded curtly at Dumbledore and then had walked stiffly over to him; her eyes had brimmed with tears, but the potion had taken hold and had swiftly shifted her developing feelings, and as

those eyes blinked away the drying tears, Dumbledore had shuddered and collapsed into the nearest chair.

He had been called, summoned by his Master, and he had obeyed. Her screams had been the first thing that he had processed, and then the weak whimpers in the sudden silence. Slipping into the shadowed room and settling between two cloaked comrades, he had seen Emmeline lying on the stone floor, flopping weakly in the vomit and blood pooling around her. The Dark Lord had circled her, whispering to her in that sibilant hiss and lashing out at her with his wand. He had had a vague idea of how the potion worked: it didn't affect the mind of the person, but it isolated the emotions that the body was experiencing, all the physical responses to emotion, and transferring them. Based upon that, he knew that Emmeline had felt the rising terror and pain, dread and despair inspired by each new curse and threat before it was gathered together and deposited in the recipient.

The potion had been used at that time due to the plan, Dumbledore's Great Plan, which would have been ruined had the Dark Lord suspected that Emmeline's capture had been in some way orchestrated, and the discovery or suspicion of a potion designed to ease her suffering during her torture would have done just that. Her mind would have swirled, fractured and decayed under *His* assault, enough to confirm to him that she was *His* to destroy, and the information gleaned from her mind would have been stolen and accepted without question.

Snape had never really understood why a recipient was needed, and the potions book from which he had retrieved the method had merely blamed Karma for the need, but given that the potion had been used in ages past to assess the trustworthiness and fidelity of spouses then the author had probably felt uncomfortable with any other more complicated explanation. Whatever the reason, it was fairly moot as no other potion managed to do this level of displacement, and without the recipient, the initial imbibor had just drunk a rather sweet tasting, useless mixture of herbs.

He would argue that the main reason that he had offered to provide this respite for Hermione was that he knew how important it was for her to maintain that contact with those who loved her without the fear of instantly char-grilling someone over the smallest infraction. It was almost vital that she not withdraw away from the world, as that path led to a mental decay and corruption that would destroy her. But did he really have to go so far as this awesome thing to facilitate her wish? The tap spluttered and gurgled, an odd reminder of his impromptu kitchen repair, and he stared at the stuttering flow of water. His free hand rested on his collar bone while busy fingers scratched away unnoticed.

"You know why.

Always the same, isn't it? Think that you're a cut above and can deal with anything. That wand isn't all it was cracked up to be, is it? Couldn't save any of them, could you?

The saucepan fell from his suddenly numb fingers, and he reeled, clutching at his head. *Not now!* He moaned and tugged on his hair, using the sharp, stabbing pain to fortify him.

"Oh, you can struggle, son, but you'll never be rid of me... inside you always, laughing as you struggle and fail...soon, you'll get the idea that you're nothing. That Hermione will go the same way as all the rest; of course, this time, you may get the chance to fu..."

Pain lanced up his arm in powerful, throbbing waves, but at least it drowned out the disgusting, sneering voice. Breathing shallowly and quaking as he knelt on the floor, he slowly opened his eyes and studied his burst knuckles. The skin was peeled back like the skin from an apple, flapping loose, and blood pooled in the battered grooves. Already, the knuckles were swollen and glistening as the skin stretched to accommodate it. He purposefully flexed his fingers, the stomach-churning pain making him moan, and he forced himself to watch the blood spill over and run lazily down the back of his hand.

He must have cried...maybe he had been for a while and not noticed the steady rain of tears...because his face was slick and his head felt thick, or was that Hermione again? Healing his hand had taken almost the same amount of time as the initial injury, but there was still that strange echo of pain in the joints, the feeling that something should be there. Whatever Hermione was doing, she was beginning to feel comfortable and more melancholic than the ravaging despair from earlier, and glancing at the clock, he deduced that she would be at the Wake. This aspect was softer and yet more provocative, and he alternated between bouts of tenderness and intense regret, spiralling affection and troubled exasperation, from uneasy laughter to puzzled anger, and the sheer range staggered him. But there was one constant thing lurking on the edges, one shadow clinging to the insides of her as she thought through her experiences, and that was guilt.

The closer she became to feeling guilt, the angrier she became. It was a vicious circle; guilt begat anger and anger begat more guilt and so on until her mind just surrendered. What precipitated those terrifying rages was elusive, though, and while intimately knowing how she was feeling, she had not slipped close to that state. He knew about guilt, knew the way it wormed its way through every aspect of your life and throttled it until you were a desiccated husk. It devoured everything, and what it left was corrupted. But what had she done that could generate such fantastic levels of guilt?

Despite that, she seemed to be handling the situation well, and no destructive urges had coursed through his veins, promising chaos and devastation; she had acted, thought and felt in a generally prudent and expected manner. In a particularly tender moment which had made his guts twitch, he had grimaced and had had the odd urge to tidy his hair. Sighing and picking up the earlier dropped pan, he tried not to imagine what was going on, and he hoped that Mrs Weasley would be at her 'Mother Hen' best; the mere hint of a prelude was enough to make him shudder.

By mid-afternoon, he was on the sofa, sipping coffee and staring at his handwritten notes, trying to decipher some invisible codex and solve the conundrum of his flawed potion. Hermione was relatively calm, and the sorrow that had flooded through her was now a gentle stream as she waded through it all.

The first pang of pain hit him just before three, and panic flared; what was going on? It took a moment to realise that he wasn't feeling actual physical pain, but an analogue to her own emotional distress. Settling back and holding a cushion for comfort, he curled up on the sofa and waited for the drama to unfold.

It was impossible to examine each and every one of the myriad emotions; they clustered around him like hornets, and as he batted away one, another attacked. It was disorientating and frustrating. He lashed out at the sofa arm with his foot, he tried to release his tension by twisting and tugging on the soft fabric of the pillow, and he found it impossible not to reach up and drag his fingernails over the damaged skin at his throat.

Indignation heralded the next burst, and that was followed with an aftershock incited by pained disbelief. These little quakes of pain began to cluster threateningly, and Snape felt the back of his neck prickle. Not only was she becoming emotionally disturbed, but she was also beginning to feel vulnerable and threatened. A strong bout had him clutching the pillow frantically and burying his face in the soft fabric; what on Earth was bothering her? He swallowed nervously; Harry's letter had ignited the last conflagration!

Oh my!

The emotions bombarding him seemed to reorder themselves into one consolidated force consisting of two weapons: anger and remorse. The more he suffered and the more he thought, he began to wonder if something had fallen between Hermione and her two friends; had some misconception tainted the special friendship that had held them together? Anger and remorse were old companions of his, and he knew how to harden himself against them. Discarding the pillow, he set about looking for tasks to vent his fury upon until the potion began to lose its potency and he slipped from its grasp. He just hoped that Hermione would be home in time for him to test his theory.

oooXooo

Both he and Hermione were in agreement: they were exhausted. Lifting his head to see a dejected and weary Hermione smile weakly at him before collapsing in the kitchen chair, he managed to return her greeting before letting his eyelids fall closed for a moment. The potion was wearing off, and they were effectively sharing her feelings, although she herself remained oblivious to his involvement. He made them both a mug of coffee and placed hers directly into her hands, knowing that she craved the warmth of it in her cold palms.

"Mrs Weasley looked awful," she whispered, and Snape felt sympathy lash out at him. It squeezed his chest and made his heart lurch. "And she fussed around us all; I felt so smothered."

"I know," he muttered. "Funerals are more a test of strength than anything else."

She frowned and looked at him over the rim of her mug. "What do you mean?"

Petulance seeped through the haze of melancholic reverie, and he smirked at how easy it was to make her thoughts work against her; already, he could feel her frantic curiosity as she pondered his meaning.

"The tragedy is in itself a hardship that brings us down to our knees, and on top of that, the meeting and greeting of people that you had spent decades avoiding just adds a nasty tension to the scene. I'm sure that you noticed how the various family members would group together in tiny, exclusive cliques." He took a hasty sip and allowed her to wallow in the notion. "Traditionally, it is good manners that get many through such a ceremony and not the sudden upsurge of familial affection."

"That's harsh, sir" she scolded gently. "Fred is... was... He was a nice man, and his death has hit everyone hard."

"I agree," he said while sitting forward to rest his elbows on the table and clearing his own emotional table so that he could examine hers spread out before him. "And some will wonder if the Dark Lord could not have been destroyed earlier, thus saving Fred and countless others from an avoidable death."

He was expecting it, but what she unleashed almost knocked him out of his chair; it was awesome! The power of it snatched his breath, and he belatedly wondered at the wisdom of stirring up those murky and murderous thoughts. He moved sympathetically, his own feelings drawn in and amplifying the anger over the notion that so much could have been avoided if only that sacrifice had been more forthcoming.

He moaned out and gripped the edges of the table. *It was so unfair! He wouldn't have lost **anything!** The protection granted by his mother's sacrifice that had saved him countless times before would have plucked him from the jaws of death and at that same instant, render the Dark Lord mortal. When the time came, a child could have killed him!*

Across from him and through tear-filled eyes, he saw her push herself away from the table and stand; her back bowed under the weight of her betraying thoughts, and through the connection, he felt her suffer the angst of both loving and hating her friend. It was an impossible conundrum for her.

Harry... would she have really wanted Harry to 'die' for the 'Greater Good'? So many would be walking now if Voldemort had managed his murder in the graveyard at the Riddle house; Harry would have survived, and any number of revenge-seeking wizards could have satisfied their need upon the wasting body that he had resurrected. She sobbed, and Snape swallowed his own rising grief. But could she have asked it of him? Why couldn't someone have figured out what needed to be done sooner? Why had such a thing rested upon their shoulders? How many would be burying their dead and thinking of the Boy Who Lived and wishing that he had died?

Fury flicked a fin, and Snape realised that he was treading water in a sea of her emotions, but he knew these waters, the same waves lapped upon his shore and eroded his being. And there is it was...the thrashing and wide maw of her destructive rage! Oh, it was glorious! A gaping, devouring, mindless entity intent on purging its hate upon the mind that had unwittingly spawned it, and its appetite was insatiable! He reared back, lifting up his hands as if they could somehow ward off the thing, and he desperately sought a way out. Now that he had the answer, it would be ironic if his epiphany should be his epitaph. But nothing came.

The potion that had cursed him was now sparing him the brunt of her anger. The rage was shared and thus diluted. It wasn't enough to let that thing free; Hermione had it on a leash. Licking his lips and watching her shuddering back, he waited for her to make the next move. Pivoting on her heel, she turned to face him, and the sudden serenity that suffused her was somehow more disturbing, especially considering that he *knew* how she felt beneath that calm veneer.

"You're saying that if Harry had only died earlier, then none of this would have happened?"

He summoned his most disdainful sneer. "I should imagine that many would think that a given."

"You'd have loved that, wouldn't you?" she demanded, vitriol dripping from her words. "It would have suited you had he died years ago." She stalked over to him, close enough that her finger pressed into his chest and her face loomed up before him.

"Don't presume to understand or know my thinking on this matter, *Miss Granger*," he hissed out. *Gods!* he thought bitterly. *She's getting too close.*

"You've always hated Harry!" Her voice dropped to a waspish whisper. "Ever since the first year, you've tried to get at him; you've made his life hell, as if it wasn't bad enough that some megalomaniac was trying to kill him!"

"I doubt that a well-deserved, harsh grade in Potions harmed him, and if he wanted to fend off those cruel put-downs then all he had to do was pay attention."

"He was being hunted down by the greatest Dark wizard of our age, and you made what could have been the last years of his life a complete misery."

"He had his friends, but what he *needed* was to realise what he was potentially going to have to kill for." His own anger was roiling and screaming deep inside. "It's so very easy to die, *Miss Granger*; I have seen so many fall at his feet, but it takes great effort and will to lift up your wand and kill someone. Do you think that Potter could have done that if there had been nothing battering at his false impressions of the world?" He was livid beyond the ability to think clearly. Thoughts and impressions, arguments and rationales marched through his mind as he spewed out his own mental muck. "He needed to know that there were those who hated and despised, those that he should revile and be disgusted by...left to Dumbledore, and the world would have been all sweetness and light with a few troublemakers who just ruined it for all the others."

"And you took it upon yourself to be Harry's tutor in hating?"

"Someone had to!" he snarled back. "He rushed in, risking his life and everyone who was associated with him... he was a danger! And if he couldn't protect adequately then he would have been your murderer."

"Harry would never have allowed that!"

"Really?" he asked snidely. "So many have died so that Harry could grow and develop into the one who could destroy the Dark Lord... Harry rushed in, and they were forced to follow..."

"No!" she screamed out. "We had a choice; he never made us."

Oh! He could feel it! The realisation was on the cusp of formation as she struggled with his arguments. She was beginning to see that sometimes forces drove people; forces that were beyond their ability to understand, compelled and guided by those undeniable motives to do what their soul needed to do.

"You followed him like a lap dog; you even followed him into the heart of the viper's nest."

"You think that Harry was the only one who wanted Voldemort dead?" She shook her head and looked at him as if seeing him for the first time. "After all that *He* had done, do you think that I didn't want *Him* dead?" She mouthed silently and stepped away from him; oh, so close to that epiphany! "I wanted *Him* dead."

"Wanted it enough to suffer for it? Enough to hurt for it?" Tears streamed down her pale face, but he carried on, seemingly oblivious to her intense distress. "Enough to die for it?"

Her hands flew up to cover her mouth, and from behind her fingers, she keened and howled out her misery. Snape tried to catch the dregs of her emotions as they slipped away; the potion had run its course. Instead of her pain, he was left facing his own anger and guilt, and it was mounting a strong offensive after being held in check for so long. It rushed down upon him, incited by her words, and he sneered as he looked upon her as she cried because she had seen her errors and was still clinging onto her

ridiculous notions as if the lead weight of them would help her stay afloat. The longer he looked at her, the more frustrated he felt and the more his neck throbbed and itched.

No longer caring that the skin was fragile or that a monstrous snake had tore at the flesh, he scratched at it; his fingers clawed at it. Lost in that bliss of having the itch relieved, he didn't hear Hermione, and it was only her hand gripping his wrist that broke through his relief. How could she be so cruel as to stop him from easing his discomfort?

"How dare you touch me!" he snapped out. "You're as bad as Potter for thinking that I am nothing."

"Sir!" she said urgently, but his frustration fuelled his anger.

"Even now, you can't think of anything but him; you stand there when I'm suffering, and you're still thinking of him." Breathing hard and reaching out to grip her arm, he couldn't stop his anger. "I wanted him dead... for some time I wanted him dead. If he died then she would be safe... but he didn't and she did."

His neck erupted in pain and he fell to his knees, pulling her down with him, and that's when he saw the blood pooling on the floor. He began to feel light-headed and was grabbed by some urgency...if he was going to die then he'd die with no stain on him.

"I wanted... Harry dead, but hated myself... hated myself for it...no, let me finish!" he whispered hoarsely as she tried to press her hand against the ruptured and spewing wound. "For years... I hated... when I saw him... in the Hall... Sorting... saw his eyes, his hair... saw him..." His words dried up even as the blood gushed over her hands and her clothes, over the tiles and into her hair. He gripped her arm fiercely and waited until she looked in him the eye. "I hated him then... hated him because he could have been... could have been *mine*!"

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 7

Snapes is rescued by Hermione, and it soon becomes apparent to him, that it is she who needs saving. But after confessions, cathartic breakdowns and tumultuous tempers, who is actually saving whom?

Frantic fingers felt for a pulse. Beneath those trembling digits, she found a weak but steady flutter. It had been several hours since he had collapsed in front of her, dragging her down and clutching at her as if she could somehow stave off death, but her dread had not diminished. Using healing spells that she had only ever read about, she had managed to seal the wound, but she had seen the discolouration spreading across his neck as blood still seeped beneath his taut skin.

Driven by panic and desperation, she had left him on the kitchen floor and raced upstairs to grab the Blood-replenishing Potions that he had thoughtfully prepared after the initial opening of the wound. Returning, she had stared at him, a horrifically ironic Snow White: hair black as ebony, face pale as snow and lips and neck as red as blood. She had unstopped the flask and poured the viscous, dark green potion past his flaccid lips and down his motionless throat.

Those few moments had been a lifetime of agony for her.

Please don't die! Please don't die! Please ...

Now, she sat by the spare bed in what she had grown to consider as his room and darted out a hand to repeatedly check his breathing and heart rate. The potion had done its job, but her healing spells had not been as successful as she had hoped, and shortly afterwards, the wound had opened up again. Two small apertures had appeared; from these, blood slipped out as freely as water from a spring, her only grace being that it was a mere trickle. Suspecting that he was in no immediate danger, she had returned to the attic and made her own preparations. Thin strips of linen had been soaked in the Manuka honey, and she had carefully wound them around his throat.

I'll help... this has to help! Stay with me... please! After all that you've done, you can't die now! Sobs echoed in the disturbing silence, interrupted by shuddering sighs and the susurrus of her whispering in his ear, begging him to wake up.

To aid the potion in its task, she had taken to tilting his head back slightly and carefully pouring small mouthfuls of water down his gullet. The water would prevent dehydration and allow his blood volume to increase. And that was all she could do; give him water, check that he was still living and sit by his side, staring at him and hoping.

There was this desperate energy buzzing through her; it sang under her skin and strummed her nerves...but despite that, she felt fatigue crushing her. It was almost an unbearable struggle: her need to watch over him against her need to sleep. Sleep won out a few times, and she woke in a flurry of panic, grasping at him as he lay still in the sheets.

All that blood! His eyes... how he had clung to me... so terrifying. What happened? What happened? What happened? The question circled her head; its ponderous plodding squeezed out all other thoughts, and she found the answer impossible to discern. Instead, she rocked in her chair, her wide and stinging eyes fixed upon the fluttering skin on his throat and her heart leaping wildly in her chest.

Why had the wound opened up? Mr Weasley had made a slow but sure recovery.

Why did you just stand there and let that snake bite you? Why didn't you just run when you had the chance?

She looked down upon his smooth and peaceful features, his long nose, high and harsh cheekbones and his relaxed pale lips, and some answer wormed its way past her confusion. The duty that had held him for sixteen years had no rival; the bonds that had tied him to his purpose could not be cut, and the desire that fuelled him was unquenchable. Reaching out a trembling hand, she stroked the soft, black hair, pushing it gently aside away from his face, and she smiled down on him. Just as she had been compelled to remain by Harry's side, so he had remained by Lily's. The same force that had made her face Bellatrix's Cruciatus, made her Obliviate her parents and made her suffer the last year flowed through him. They had endured because of love, and they had done so willingly and without hesitation... and now, due to love, they would endure their recovery.

After several hours of watching him and of the looming exhaustion threatening her, she made her way into the kitchen and made coffee. The mug that Snape had repaired nestled in her hand, and she stared at the corrected spelling; a lifetime ago, it had somehow been so much more important. Her sore and weary eyes followed the pale blue lettering and tears prickled; he had done so much, and she knew that without him, she would have become lost. A few fat tears slid down her cheeks, and she traced her fingertip over the words. She just *knew* that the cure should have worked; there was no reason that it shouldn't have..*Oh my! What if Mr Weasley will face the same thing?* She stuffed a hand against her mouth to stopper the shuddering gasps. *But that makes no sense! Professor Snape's wound opened up the day after he had taken it... and*

is still opening up; Mr Weasley has never had any relapses!

Frustrated and confused, she let out a growl and thumped the worktop; she had never felt this useless and powerless. The logic dictated that the potion should work, and yet it was failing catastrophically... and despite that, he had taken the time to look after her. Loud sobs escaped, and she held her wet face in her hands; he had been right! While he was suffering, she had looked only to herself!

Stop it!

She straightened at the sudden imperative; it sounded so much like Professor Snape.

*Stop being such a brat! You **have** helped; without you he may have bled to death before now, and without your continuing help, he may not have found a place to study the deficiencies of his potion. Perhaps it has not been the most balanced trade-off, but you have the chance now to reset the balance.*

Sniffing and bent under the pressure of her responsibility, she felt a much-needed wave surging up, and as it came, she felt infused with energy and purpose. Upstairs lay a man who was as good as any Master, and she wasn't exactly an idiot; between them there was no reason as to why this conundrum couldn't be solved. Armed with coffee, she located Snape's notes and returned to the bedroom.

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"So, we can eliminate the Leopard's Bane... that doesn't seem to have any impact on the other ingredients." She scratched at the paper as she thought out aloud. On the bed, alongside his supine form, she had laid out her notes, even at one point...around his left knee...using his leg as a makeshift stand to study her hasty scribbles all the better. Stuffing the pencil in her bundled-up chignon, she sipped her tepid coffee and glared at the collection of notes.

"I doubt that the honey has any nasty surprises either," she said thoughtfully, nibbling her lower lip. "And lemon juice...I'll be astounded if *that* had anything to do with it!" She clucked her tongue and ran a finger down the list of ingredients. "It has all of eight ingredients, and the method is simple enough...even Ron could make it without panicking!" Letting out a chagrined huff, she settled back in the chair and rubbed the back of her aching neck, but her ministrations and mood were nullified by her recollections of him, and a smile curved her lips.

"He was brilliant, you know," she said breathlessly. "I always knew that there was something great deep within him, and he proved it. Did you know that he opened up the Chamber?" She glanced across at Snape and sighed. "I was so... so... thrilled!"

Nervous fingers played with the edge of a sheet of paper, and she felt a stab of regret. "I never thought that I would ever forgive him for leaving us, but I missed him so much and I just wanted him back." She inhaled shakily. "I never told him... and he left, and I felt that he'd abandoned me; after everything that we'd done and been through, and he left...it hurt!" Her voice descended into a strained whisper. "It was so hard in that forest; I thought that it would never end. I looked after that horcrux for Harry...it really hurt him, you see...but it was a vile thing." She grimaced at the memories swirling unpleasantly in her head as she recalled that troubled time. "I hated wearing it; even having it my pocket was enough for it to get at me." Bent under the weight of it, she silently wept onto the duvet, purging herself of the pain that had plagued her. "The things that I saw and thought while wearing it... horrible! It seemed to know what I feared and wanted, and it mixed them together until there were times when I feared being near to Harry. I can't blame Ron for leaving; I was so angry that he did, but I can't blame him. It was that horrid horcrux!"

Her eyelids fluttered closed, and she rested her head on the mattress. "It made me feel awful; I had to keep thinking of Harry, always Harry, and I got to the point where I wondered if it was worth it, and if it wouldn't be easier if we just gave up. I... I think that... I figured out what had to happen, and," she said between hitching breaths, "I...oh my!...wondered if it would be better to just end it there and then. I couldn't stand it! But Harry was so strong and determined, and I couldn't quite believe what I was thinking; I felt that I had betrayed him." Lifting her head, she studied the sleeping man through tear-filled eyes, and she wondered if he could understand that some of her sense of duty stemmed from a wish to ease her guilt and regrets. Puzzled by her reactions to the last year, she rested her head upon her forearms on the bed and closed her eyes.

After what had seemed like months, she had panicked about meeting up with her friends; frenzied butterflies had played havoc in her gut, but as soon as she had arrived at the Burrow, she had fallen into step as though she had never left the dance. It had been easy to become the last side to their perfect triangle, and she had settled well, all thanks to the potion made by Professor Snape. Her eyes snapped open, and she cast Snape a guilty glance before picking up the temporarily discarded notes and focusing her mind once more.

The late night had shifted into an early morning, and from outside she could hear the first drivers making headway with their day. Coffee had not sustained her; she had found the new sense of purpose an undeniable taskmaster. Under its whip, she had ousted her feelings of guilt and shifted her anger from a raging, unfocused thing into a dedicated predator, and she worked with it to track down the cause of Snape's pathology.

"There has to be some factor that we're not considering, but what's left? What difference can there be between this and the potion that was given to Mr Weasley? We've looked at the concentration differences...your notes on that were very useful, thank you...and determined that nothing would have come of that." The pencil scratched over the surface of his notes, and she felt some of the tension disperse as she firmly crossed out one of the remaining hypotheses. "This would be so much easier if you were awake," she said with mock asperity. "I touched upon Pemberton-Smythe's Second Law...that two contraindicated agents will nullify the desired effect...when studying *Felix Felicis*, but that just doesn't seem to be applicable here; nothing fights against anything else...it's beautiful."

The answer haunted and taunted her; she knew that it lurked just beyond her reach, and every time she moved to grasp it, it danced away. The soothing grace was that Snape was responding well to the potions and now seemed to be in some deep exhaustion, but recovering nonetheless. The honey-soaked bandages had slowed the blood loss beneath the skin, and she knew that its other properties would protect the open wound from infection.

"That just leaves the Bushmaster venom and the Stagshorn." She plucked the pencil from her bun and drew a circle around the two suspects. "But they seem fine," she said with a sigh. "I thought that I had some skill with potions, but I think that all I had skill with was following directions; the philosophy and theory behind it all is just so immense and... hard! I can't see why it isn't working; in comparison, brewing Polyjuice was a doddle!"

"But more likely to cause you to spit up fur balls."

Listening to her discussing the potion had soothed him immeasurably; it had pulled him back to wakefulness like light would draw a moth, but it had been nothing...nothing!...compared to the look of bewildered delight on her face. Her wide, shimmering eyes and trembling, parted lips had been a balm to his exhaustion and a cure to his pains.

"Sir!" she exclaimed happily, and then her expression slipped into agitated concern, her eyes darting over his face and neck, and Snape felt the moment shatter. "Are you alright, sir?"

A quick catalogue indicated that aside from some mild irritation in his neck, an uncomfortable pressure in his lower abdomen and the feeling of his contentment ebbing away, he was in good spirits, considering just how close he had come to becoming one.

"There are a few niggling things, but otherwise, I am fine. Thank you, Miss Granger."

He would have expected a smile, a nod of the head or maybe a 'you are welcome', so the tears and the shuddering gasps came as quite a surprise.

"I thought you were going to die!" she whispered between great, gulping breaths. "I didn't know what to do... you were still bleeding and... and..."

"And you did everything that was needed," he said firmly, hoping to forestall more weeping. "Aurors, Harry Potter, The Order of the Phoenix and the Dark Lord himself have all failed to kill me; it would have been shamefully ironic if you had somehow managed to succeed while trying to save me."

Despite having being unconscious for almost ten hours, he was exhausted, and judging by Hermione's red-rimmed eyes and grey pallor, she was just as tired, so after a few minutes of arguing, she finally relented and slunk off to her bed, leaving Snape to ponder her ramblings while she had studied furiously at his side. That elusive disparity had plagued him since he had found the potion to be flawed, and after eliminating the idea that Arthur would relapse, he had decided that the flaw rested with him rather than with the potion. It was not unheard of for a potion to have differing efficacies based upon varying users, but generally, the difference was not as extreme as what was demonstrated in this drama. The only thing that he could see as being different was that in this instance, the brewer had drunk their own potion. The perplexing thought followed him into sleep and pestered his dreams into violent and terrifying abusers.

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The drone of the neighbour's lawnmower finally broke through her fatigue and heralded both the afternoon and the weekend. Blinking uncomprehendingly at the patch of sky in her window, she tried to gather her wits. A glance at the bedside clock gave her a jolt, and she surged up and out of bed...it was two in the afternoon! Rushing across the landing, pulling on her dressing gown, she then hesitated and steadied her breathing before knocking on the spare bedroom door. No answer! She tried again... no answer. Should she just go in? She pressed her ear to the door and tried the door handle which turned smoothly, and with the sigh of wood against carpet, the door opened.

"Professor Snape, sir?"

The room was empty. Relief and fear flickered as she considered his absence; was he okay and pottering around or had he pushed too hard and lay somewhere suffering? She turned on her heel, pulled the door closed and padded off to the stairs up to the attic. It took just a second to see that the makeshift potions lab was deserted, and then she was rushing off towards the kitchen.

On the threshold, she saw him making coffee, and her mouth closed off before she could let out her automatic greeting. A pair of her father's jeans had been altered to fit him, and he wore one of her dad's cream jumpers that had been a present Christmases ago and stuffed away in a drawer never to see the light of day again. The sleeves had been rolled up while he tipped in spoonfuls of coffee and sugar into two mugs, and he seemed almost... unfamiliar. She frowned and suddenly felt awkward in her fleece pyjamas and dressing gown, even though they had crossed on the landing several times since he had been in her home, and he'd seen her nightwear before. She quietly slipped away to wash and dress.

"The Deadly Nightshade roots will need to be macerated, and as that is the potion-limiting step, then I suggest we prepare the other tinctures while that takes place."

Hermione nodded and grabbed the thick, fleshy root, placing it on the chopping board and selecting the large, heavy knife. The section of root was cut into thin, oval slivers and dropped into a mix of water and alcohol. A weariness had descended upon her; it seemed that her intense vigil had sapped much of her vim, and despite her efforts, she felt lethargic. If Snape noticed her silences or her lack of energy, he made no mention of it, but she suspected that he was talking to her more carefully and making more comments about the potion than he would have normally.

"There is little point in rushing, the potion is simple and I find that the brewing in itself to be quite therapeutic; certainly not as time-consuming or draining as say... Polyjuice." His tone had been light and conversational, but his gaze had been fixed upon her face, and he smirked at the flush creeping across her cheeks.

"Uhm... It was hard work, sir." She concentrated intently on pouring the exact amount of alcohol onto the bowl of water and sliced root and tried to pretend that they were equals, discussing some shared problem or observation.

"You brewed that in your second year, Miss Granger. How easily you forget to equate accomplishment with skill," he said rather snidely, watching her pause and then frown as she thought over his words. The way she held the flask and focused on the last shimmering drop clinging to the glass lip was quite enthralling in its own right, and he wondered what he now found more compelling...his desire to tease her over her past actions or watching her face as she struggled with his twisted compliment. Personally, he felt awkward about complimenting people directly, and it was his habit, when he felt inclined to do so, to compliment in a convoluted manner sometimes wrapped up within an insult.

It was so difficult to discern his meaning; he said one thing while implying something else and sometimes made you ponder the subtleties when he had been obvious; it was a game of strategy with him. A wonderful game of feints and thrusts with delicate footwork and dazzling lunges, but it was such hard work, and since when had Hermione Granger backed down from a challenge!

The last drop dangled precariously and then fell from its mooring; a perfect sphere as it plummeted into the waiting bowl of soaking roots. Carefully placing the conical flask away from the flickering flame beneath the cauldron, she wiped her hands on a cloth and turned to face him, or rather, study his profile as he had turned his attention back to the small amber phial held between his long fingers. She had noticed it earlier, but refrained from commenting, contenting herself to follow Snape's directions.

"What is that, sir?"

"The key to the potion! It is the Bushmaster Venom." He turned the dark crystal, watching the light glint off its smooth surface. "I needed this particular ingredient; its properties very neatly covered every aspect of the potion's requirements. I sacrificed the use of arsenic so that I could have it; not that it was a great loss as this... this is the key. It degrades quickly in the light therefore we dilute it quickly and add it at the very end."

"I still don't understand: why add a venom to combat a venom?"

Snape placed the phial back in its stand and turned to her; his eyes narrowed at her question, and she moved back as though the heat of his stare scorched her. For a while, she thought that he wouldn't answer her, and she scrambled for her own, searching her repository of knowledge, but then he inhaled slowly.

"The roots will need a good few hours to soak and the other ingredients are prepared and waiting; let's get a hot drink, and we will discuss it."

He watched her take a small sip of tea and noted how her brows slowly pulled together. It was an alluring precursor to intense thought, and he wondered if anyone else had seen the way her eyes slipped out of focus with her surroundings as all her powers of thought shifted inwards. The poor lower lip bore the brunt of her thinking as her teeth worried the supple flesh, and there was something so fascinating about the intensity of her intention. Problem-solving had never been so pleasant.

"The venom in the potion, along with its own property and the other ingredients, helps the wizard's magic to heal the wound?" she asked, turning her contemplative gaze towards him.

"Nagini is no ordinary snake...at one time, she may have been, but the Dark Lord altered her in subtle ways...and I realised that something existed within her poison which had to affect the way magic worked within the body." He gulped down a mouthful of tea to moisten his throat, and he felt a flicker of pleasure as she leant closer, eager for his words. This was how he had dreamt teaching to be, not the tedious attempt to drum knowledge into empty heads, but the delight of sharing a passion with keen students...even hardened Death Eaters could be naïve. "Mr Weasley should have responded positively to the potions and spells recommended for snake bites, yet he failed to respond; the wound failed to close. The alterations made to Nagini and her venom must adversely affect the harmony between flesh and magic."

"Her venom was inhibiting the action of the spells and potions?" she asked thoughtfully, not really requiring an answer as her mind darted off down new alleys and paths.

"In essence; yes," he replied animatedly. "Her venom has magical properties in its own right, and it seems to focus on the hindering of healing either by magical or natural processes, just as injuries by Dark Curses cannot be completely healed." He took another sip of tea and let the comfort of the evening seep into his bones; it had felt a lifetime since he had enjoyed sweet and simple companionship. "The final clue came when one of the healers tried stitching the wound closed."

"You know about that?" she asked with a bemused smile.

"I have found that when something bothers Mrs Weasley, she has this remarkable ability to ensure that *everyone* knows about it," he said with a mock grimace, "whether they want to or not...the *Daily Prophet* must envy her reaching power!"

Hermione snickered and then smiled ruefully, "She does, doesn't she."

"She was our finest propagandist. Hidden in her simple ways and approachable sociability was a woman capable of great subtlety and intrigue. Through her skill, we were able to secure allies and sources of information that would otherwise have been left to wither. I speak, of course, of that stuff which others would call gossip."

There was an awkward moment, as their thoughts lingered over Mrs Weasley and the heavy loss that she and her family had to face. Both let their minds swirl down to the edges of sympathetic despair.

The silence was broken by an irritated gasp from Snape.

"Blasted neck!"

Her eyes flew to his throat; sure enough, she could see a narrow, red streak seeping along the weft threads of the bandage as he flung back his head and extended his neck in response to the discomfort, but her tolerance had been shifted, and she merely frowned and wondered, with increasing frustration, what caused the wound to open.

"What's wrong with your neck, sir?"

"It itches!"

She licked her lips and noticed how one of his hands gripped the mug while the other pummelled his thigh, the nails occasionally moving to scratch, as if the action would generate some sympathetic resonance in his throat and soothe the damnable itching.

"You scratch at it a lot," she said slowly; her mind replaying the many past instances where she had seen him idly scratch or rub at his throat.

"It itches a lot," he replied testily.

Hermione stretched and placed her mug on the coffee table and then turned on Snape, interest charged and loaded.

"It wasn't itching a few moments ago, though," she said encouragingly. "We've been talking for a few hours now and you haven't so much as touched your neck."

Chocolate-hued eyes studied his face; watched as that pained grimace with pulled back lips and tightly closed eyes relaxed as her observation sank into his own consciousness. Fingers which had scratched madly at his thigh ceased their futile torment, and he slowly moved to look her in her twinkling eyes.

"That's quite true, Miss Granger," he said softly, engrossed in the way her eyes shimmered from her epiphany.

"Why should it suddenly start itching? What prompted it?"

Momentarily lost in her animated gaze, he had failed to recognise his rising dread at her questions and line of reasoning, and his stomach twisted at his belated recognition; if she persisted, then she may discover his deepest regrets and woes. Not even Dumbledore or the Dark Lord had peeled back his mind enough to expose those memories and nightmares that she was delicately unearthing. A flash of irritation made him recoil from her; he had been remarkably short-sighted while considering a way to lengthen his future. At her prompt, his thinking over the last three days refined down into one pure concept; he knew why the potion had failed in its intended task. It was because he had never created a potion to prophylactically protect him against Nagini's venom. He needed that potion; the one that he had dismissed as flawed had worked perfectly, but not for what he had intended... and it never would.

"That first time, we were talking about..." she frowned and bit down upon her lip as her mind trawled through those disjointed memories.

Next to her, he stiffened and stared at her, a mix of horror and dismay churning deep in his bowels. *Stop!* he silently begged. *I can't cope with you even suspecting...*

"I can't quite recall what we had talked about, but you were very upset. The next time..." she said, her thoughts marching on mercilessly.

"Enough!" he said firmly, shocking her out of her musings. He licked his lips, and while his insides burned he softened his stern expression and gave her a quick smile.

"The causes of the itch are irrelevant," he said gently. *But they aren't, are they? Why lie to the girl? She could help you... you just don't want to deal with it all... just like your mother... hide your head in the sand and hope that the bad things go away.* "We should concentrate on trying to solve the potion's inadequacies."

From behind a sip of tea, he watched her perplexed frown, and he silently hoped that she would drop her line of inquiry. His own suppositions were blooming like puffball mushrooms, exploding and spewing out their black spores into the recesses of his mind, corrupting his long-erected defences, and their mycelium burrowing from one decayed aspect to another, drawing sustenance from those black pools.

Even her breathing had stopped at his sharp imperative, and she felt the trapped air escape in a muted sigh at his explanation; perhaps her curiosity was extending the problem rather than solving it. Something about his demeanour worried her, however, and she remembered how Harry would suddenly erect a wall between them whenever they approached topics that he just didn't want to think about. She shuddered at what thoughts existed within Professor Snape after all that he had witnessed and suffered whilst spying for the Order; her heart clenched painfully at her insensitivity.

"Of course. I'm sorry."

With her head bowed, he gave in and raked his fingernails down the rough bandage, but the gentle pressure did nothing to alleviate that burn of an itch. But at least she had stopped thinking!

"Don't apologise, Miss Granger: curiosity tempered with patience can be the greatest asset anyone could hope for." He let his hand fall back to his lap, and he sighed softly. "The roots should be soft enough by now; we should complete the potion."

The procedure was indeed very simple, and they worked quietly to complete it; both were thankful for the busy silence as they pondered their own thoughts on the matter. Snape felt a peculiar vulnerability around her, as if she had some skill at decoding his thinking which rendered his evasiveness moot; it left him feeling raw and open. The fact that her ability was nascent and naïve only enhanced his wariness; what could she do if she turned her mind to the task of solving him? Yet, he knew that he had been remarkably indiscreet; he had disclosed things that he would have taken to the grave had she not had that novel insight into his spirit...were his deepest secrets being prised from him or revealed freely?

As she pressed the soggy roots against the muslin cloth with the back of a spoon, she wondered what had made Snape suddenly shut himself off. Everything about him had become stone, from his face to his tone. The transition had alarmed her, so sudden and sharp, and then she had wondered if her words had struck some long hidden nerve. Working quietly by his side, she noticed that he relaxed into the potion, treating each step as some soothing routine, and as the evening wore on, he bore the same expression that he had when they talked...contentment. How odd it was that she had formed such a sweet rapport with a man that she had once feared and for some time reviled as a betrayer. *Perhaps not*, she mused. Perhaps they were more alike than she had thought possible, each sharing similar burdens and through that trial, understanding each other all the better.

The tincture from the Deadly Nightshade was a dark green, and it had a cloudy appearance which made her think of stagnant water; the smell alone had been enough to make her ill at the thought of drinking it. Measuring out one ladle of the noxious liquid into a large flask, she wrinkled her nose and tried not to inhale as she slowly poured it over the Manuka honey glistening sweetly in the lamplight. At her side, Snape used his ladle to scoop up amounts from the tinctures of the Leopard's Bane and the Stagshorn, adding the ladlefuls to the green liquid in her flask. More of the water alcohol mix was added, and she watched as the dense green liquid swirled and shifted in value as it was slowly, reluctantly, diluted. It still looked unappetising. As if preparing some dubious cocktail, Snape squeezed in the juice of two lemons, stirring the potion carefully as the juice gushed down his hand and into the waiting concoction.

"Please continue stirring," he said efficiently as he stepped away, his arm extending to still stir the potion while allowing her to step closer to the bench.

Moving swiftly, she stepped into his vacated place, and in a move that must have been practised a thousand times by hundreds of potion brewers, she took hold of the stirring rod just beneath his fingers and mimicked his motion before he released it into her care. It must be a common thing for fingers to brush against each other and for rapidly retreating fingertips to graze the back of hands; a perfectly frequent thing for a momentary embrace as the previous brewer moves to step around the new recruit to retrieve the next ingredient in the brewing process, and that puff of escaping breath on the back of necks must be an expected consequence of the tricky manoeuvre that is changing brewers mid-potion. Hermione convinced herself of that and quickly stomped on the rising blush and gathering thoughts. *Honestly!* she scolded. *It's worse than having a schoolgirl crush; just completely silly!*

Damn hair! he thought bitterly as he stepped behind her to get the venom only to have his face netted in errant and untamed strands of hair. Reigning in his frustration, he blew away the grasping strands and moved to grab the amber phial from its stand and a thin glass tube. Unstopping the delicate phial, he dipped the tube in and carefully extracted one drop of the precious toxin before hastily resealing the vessel. It clung to the thin tube, a glittering jewel of a drop, and he watched it fastidiously as he carefully orientated it towards the potion. Tilting his hand, the drop slid down, formed into a hesitant orb and then fell, to turn a mix of plant extracts into a potion.

There was no observable difference; it still looked and smelt like stagnant water and Hermione felt a small sense of disillusionment; other potions had sparkled or fizzed, sputtered out sparks or changed colours at the last moment...this looked as magical as pond water. Snape, however, seemed deeply satisfied, and he smiled vaguely at the murky cocktail.

Fatigue had pestered her for some time before the potion was completed, and it took little effort on his part to convince her to go to sleep. Left alone in the attic, he divided the potion into twenty-eight phials and cast a Preservation charm upon all but one. He had been blind, and although his eyes had been opened, he now saw a future as terrible as the one that would have been had he not solved the problem of the potion's failure. Holding up the uncharmed phial, he studied the dark fluid within and inhaled slowly before swallowing the duplicitous potion.

The bitter drink warmed its way to his stomach and he despised it. A loathing rose up just as that life-saving elixir slithered down. Hurling the empty container across the room, he heard it shatter before vicious laughter erupted from his trembling chest. The potion designed to spare him had condemned him. In his ironic bid to survive the war, he had created a potion that he was now bound to; without it, he would die, and with it, he would never be able to heal the other wounds sustained through his life. Recovery would be his killer... and bitter, pained laughter echoed in the attic.

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 7

Snape is rescued by Hermione, and it soon becomes apparent to him, that it is she who needs saving. But after confessions, cathartic breakdowns and tumultuous tempers, who is actually saving whom?

Chapter Seven.

Someone, many years ago, had said that any answer was better than no answer, and as he trudged wearily down the stairs, he bitterly amended that spurious comment to be that any answer was better than the *right* one. At least not having an answer had given him hope. He glanced towards Hermione's door as he stepped onto the landing, and he wondered if her eager brain was ferreting out its own answers. Now that he knew, he could see that the clues were almost leaping off the pages, so eager to be discovered, and he suspected that once her mind found the trail, it would follow it to its source with the smallest effort.

The sheets were colder than he recalled as he slid beneath them, and the odd, orange light suffusing the small room that had once delighted him now seemed to be sickly and revolting...so like that amber phial! Scowling and pummelling his pillow, he slithered under the duvet and tried to block it all out. Techniques taught to him by Dumbledore allowed him to relax, and after a few minutes of steady and deep breathing, he felt soothed enough to sleep. Closing his eyes, he thought of Hermione; he recalled her in flashes, a snap-shot show of her progress from the silent and withdrawn woman and fiery fury to a strong woman accepting the harshness of her condition and finding the will to surpass it. His last thought as sleep gathered him was that she no longer needed him.

Late nights had consequences, and it was with an increasing sense of frustration that Hermione opened her eyes to another early afternoon; it was such a shift from those days where she had sprung from her bed while others still snoozed, but how could she be dismayed when the evenings were such a delight? Sipping coffee in the soft light from the lamp, listening to him share his knowledge and wisdom, knowing that he considered her thoughts and opinions to be worthwhile, sinking into the softness of the sofa and feeling more contented than she could ever recall. She would miss every sunrise to sit next to him, wrapped up and held in the wonder of those midnight conversations on the sofa.

The potion had been a pleasure to make, simple and elegant, and she had submerged herself in the complexities hiding so well behind the straightforward procedure and ingredients. For her, it was like opening *Hogwarts: A History* all over again; the peeling back of the obvious to the true awe and magic behind it all. She had held, chopped, sliced and diced, stirred, boiled, collected and decanted, and yet, she had only ever seen the ingredients and the equipment; the magic behind it had eluded her, remaining obscured by her naïve interpretation of the subject...the castle was so much more than just stone and structure; the potion so much more than just ingredient and method.

When she entered the kitchen, Snape was bent over the *Daily Prophet*; he had pinned the paper to the table with his long index finger, and his stern, intent gaze focused on some troubling snippet within. Perplexed at his consternation, she walked forwards, her eyes wide and darting over the text, trying to see what troubled him. The headline was the same Ministerial bolstering that had dominated all the other papers: how they were fighting the dregs of Voldemort's army and securing the future for a happy and safe Wizarding world! Nothing about the bold declaration seemed incendiary; not even to a Death Eater on the run and his accessory!

"It's rude to read over someone's shoulder!"

She jolted backwards; his tone had been distant, his response almost a reflex rather than a criticism, and she found herself caught between a surge of pique and a contrite murmur. Her lips worked silently and her eyes roved over his profile as she wondered which to mete out, and slowly, she realised that the bandage was gone. Enthrilled by the colour and smoothness of the flesh on his throat, she glided closer to him. Those lips that had struggled with a retort fell open, and her eyes widened. The ragged pink slashes that had evidenced Nagini's bite had disappeared, and the swelling and bruising that had tormented the fragile skin had resolved. In that moment, nothing had ever seemed quite so beautiful. Caught up in that wonder, she did something that she had never thought herself capable of: she reached up her hand and extended trembling fingers towards the healed and perfect skin.

The gentle brushing of warm fingertips against his skin sent a wave rolling out across his neglected flesh. He shuddered and yet felt incapable of moving away; that slightest of caresses held him more securely than chains. Even his lungs dared not move, and as her fingers traced patterns over his neck, following the memory of his wounds, he stared blankly at the paper, and his thoughts scattered as one large and unstoppable realisation emerged: he liked it!

Those hesitant lungs suddenly reacted, and he inhaled in a series of sharp and stuttered gasps; his eyelids fluttered closed and his hands curled into fists. The warm, tormenting fingers continued, and his skin felt as though it writhed over his bones; he didn't know whether he wanted to laugh or scream, beg her for more or beg her to stop. Behind shuttered lids, his eyes rolled up, and he knew that his treacherous, greedy chin lifted so that her questing fingers could explore more of his neck. A soft moan rumbled in his throat, and...oh gods!...was that her breath ghosting across his skin?

"The potion worked?" she asked incredulously.

It was perhaps that observation which smothered his burgeoning feelings; the realisation that she was simply too young to know how she affected him...her mind being focused solely on the healing and the potion while her eyes were blind to his reactions. His eyes snapped open, and he summoned the anger and the bitterness that had sustained him for nearly twenty years; it coursed through him, killing his affection, his pleasure and his nascent desire. He looked down upon her, and her look of awe sapped much of his enforced ire; he found it impossible to maintain his irascible nature when her eyes shimmered with tears and her lips trembled. Instead of the anger that he had expected and needed, he felt his breath snatch and his heart clench.

The hand fell limply at her side, and he looked at it as if it had some bizarre terrifying power and a thing to fear. Tearing his gaze from it, he looked up, his attention riveted to her forehead and to that patch of furrowed skin he spoke.

"The potion worked," he said softly; the lie slipping easily past his lips, and his resolve firm until she pressed a hand against her mouth and sobs burst out of her. Fat tears rolled down her cheeks, and she flung herself at him, her arms wrapping round him as she slumped against him.

Tell her! some voice insisted. Let her help you... don't suffer this alone, don't let it eat at you and take everything that you have left. You know that she'll figure it out soon enough; why not use her brain?

Dark lords and mad, old men had never caused him as much pain and torment as this girl weeping against his chest. He lifted his eyes heavenwards and cursed under his breath.

"Thank Merlin," she whispered.

"Merlin had very little to do with it," he groused as he disentangled himself from her ever-tightening grip. "The difference between Mr Weasley and myself is simply that he took the potion *after* the bite, not as a protection against it, and as such, for me, a dose was required to bolster the intended affect; it was a clumsy oversight. An oversight that I maintained by assuming that my potion had done its job."

Almost right! Even your truths are lies, that voice persisted. After all that you have done, you suddenly discover cowardice now? What is it that stops you? What is it that you fear?

Various emotions marched across her features, and for a moment, he fretted that he had gone too far, that in his confusion, he had made an error by challenging her intelligence, but her face softened, and she sniffled a few times. Inwardly, he sighed as she accepted his interpretation of the potion's sudden efficacy, but some doubt lingered, and he was only mollified by the fact that when she turned her mind to the problem, he would be gone.

Intense relief and joy had suffused her, filling her from follicle to foot, and she was giddy at the sight of his clean neck. Curiosity had erupted within her; it battered through her euphoric haze and demanded satisfaction... how had it worked? Even as her mind swirled at the amazing result, she still felt somehow... spurned that she had not been a witting partner in the recovery, and that at the last, it had occurred almost without any effort and without her participation.

Foolish, selfish child! She bit her lip and cringed at her pettiness, but she had wanted to help, to repay him for his many kindnesses and sacrifices; she felt that she had been denied, she felt that she had not worked hard enough to equal his suffering and that her debt was still extant. At his assurance that the potion had worked, she let the relief smother her grumbling bad feeling, and as it sank in that he was cured, she fell against him, the sense of release sapping her strength, and she clung to him as she cried. She mumbled her gratitude, and he pulled away from her, citing that Merlin had done nothing for him.

The cure had seemed small compared to the complaint it had resolved, and a flicker of confusion flared; something so simple to beat something so catastrophic? She felt the urge to argue and complain that it seemed so *wrong* that it should be so simple, but she recalled the apparent banality of the potion. It had seemed implausible that the dull liquid could do anything other than smell and taste foul, and yet she knew that it had healed Arthur and now had healed Snape...perhaps sometimes, it was simply that... simple! For now, she was content to wallow in the warmth flooding her...he would live.

The day had been odd. With nothing tying them together, they seemed to merely exist within the same room, smiling politely at each other and discussing rather mundane topics...safe topics. The pleasure that had warmed her was cooled by the developing distance, and some dread settled heavily in her bones: now that the potion had worked, he no longer needed her. With that sombre thought, she slowly, reluctantly, helped him sort, prepare and store the remaining ingredients, and with every packed away item, she felt all the closer to having to say goodbye.

The sense of loss was already immense; her guts stirred unpleasantly, and her chest tightened as she pondered existing in his absence. No more chats on the sofa, no more highlights of a world that she craved to know, no more sharing and exchanging, and no more him.

"If you hold that Hellebore root for much longer, you will end up with blisters."

She jumped at his voice. Ironically, while she was thinking of life without him, she had forgotten that he was standing next to her; her cheeks flamed as she realised her wasteful notions. Stuck for words, she turned her hot face away and studied the root held in her tight grip. Muttering an apology, she set about slicing the thin root and spent the time trying to soak him up; perhaps if she grabbed enough memories then they would tide her over.

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It would have suited him to slip away, but her recovery would suffer; he knew that she had drawn strength from him, just as he had from her, and the sudden loss had potential dire consequences. It was equally untenable for him to stay.

Contrary to axiom, a watched pot does boil, and as he watched the water begin to bubble, he felt that everything was moving too quickly, tasks were less tedious and time-consuming and the hours seemed less difficult to kill. Already, the sun had set, and the fluorescent light in the kitchen cast its harsh and unnatural light. And that was how it had seemed throughout the day...artificial and too bright.

At least her smile when she took the proffered mug was genuine, and he felt his lips twitch gladly in response. The lamp gave off a gentle light, just enough to help create a pleasant cocoon as they sat on the sofa, and within that safe confine he felt himself relax...one bastion had stood against the inevitable.

In the silence, their thoughts gathered like thunderclouds, and with each sip, the need to rain down their thoughts intensified. Jolts seemed to lance down their limbs, making them tremble, and the very air around them seemed charged and volatile. Neither wanted to shatter the silence, but the pressure was becoming almost a tangible thing against their sensitive skin.

"The *Daily Prophet* reported that several suspected Death Eaters were captured late last night and the people supporting them arrested." His voice was tight and his gaze did not quite meet hers. "Now that the potion has performed its required function, it seems imprudent for me to stay, placing you under unnecessary risk."

It had been hanging in the air since she had noticed the missing bandage, but even for its looming presence, it snatched her breath as it was formalised. She swallowed past a reluctant throat to halt the rising bile, and she trembled as her fears were given form. Logic was her shield, and she rallied behind it. Taking a sip of coffee to restore her nerves and collect her thoughts, she nodded slowly and, inhaling deeply, she smiled and studied his tense and pale face.

"I knew that you'd go," she said softly. "Deep down, I knew that you'd have to. But," and her voice cracked, "it never really sank in that you would." Tears prickled, and her lip quivered. "I don't know what I would have done without you."

"You'd have managed perfectly well," he said firmly, even if her deeply sceptical expression and the memory that the kitchen tap sputtered rather than ran contradicted him. "Those who love you would not have sat idly by and watched you slip under."

She smiled, letting her head fall to the side to rest upon the back of the sofa, and she studied him with unhidden affection. It would have been so easy to let himself slip into that heaven, but it was a fool's heaven...just as fool's gold tricked the greedy, so this heaven would trick the needy. While his heart pounded with eager anticipation, his mind whirled with desperation, and he called himself all kinds of fool. The consolation that kept him whole was that nothing had been committed that would rot the relationship that had bloomed between them. In years to come, nothing would blemish his recollections of five days with Hermione Granger; nothing would make her regret her generosity and faith.

"When will you go?" she asked stoically.

"The potions lab will need to be removed and the table returned to Mrs Cooke; also," he added, "unless you wish to switch Nationality, then your parents should really return to their native soil."

The colour drained from her face, and she blinked rapidly. "I know," she admitted softly. "I've been putting it off."

Hastily swallowing his coffee, he smirked and arched an eyebrow. "I'm so glad that I have been a convenient distraction." His smirk widened into a genuine grin as she flustered next to him, and he lifted a hand to soothe her worry. "Given the circumstances, having your parents return home would have caused a few comments and queries."

Mollified, she returned his grin, but then sighed ruefully and closed her eyes. "I expect that the whole situation will have caused comments and queries... I dread what they're going to say when I reverse the Obliviate." Her teeth worried her lower lip, and her brow furrowed as her imagination went wild.

Rescuing her from mental scenes of parental outrage, Snape Summoned some paper and a pen, and with a puzzled frown, she stared bemusedly at the stationery thrust out towards her.

"Write to Mrs Weasley and ask if she would accompany you to collect your parents. Even if you do not entirely need her help, I think that she would appreciate being able to help you."

Hesitating for the merest moment, she took the paper and leant over to the coffee table to compose her letter. Next to her, Snape stood and silently swept out of the room. She suspected that his suggestion was two-fold...ensuring that she would not be left alone when he departed, and also a gentle reminder that she did not suffer alone, and with the simplest of gestures, she could help alleviate the distress of others. The pen scratched across the lined paper, and with each stroke, she felt the despair morph into determination; it was difficult to accept, but life went on and, for a while at least, she would have to stumble along with everyone else until the road ahead evened out. She harrumphed under her breath at the irony of the situation; after the last few years under Voldemort's malign gaze and the recent Final Battle, she felt that she was only just beginning to grow up.

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"I suggest finishing storing away the excess ingredients then we can clean the equipment without interference and shrink them down afterwards."

Hermione nodded and waved her wand over the table, watching with mixed feelings as dried, chopped, sliced and pickled ingredients flew through the air into various brown paper bags. There was so little to do, but they both seemed to be inefficient and slow so that the meagre tasks were drawn out; several times, Snape had asked that certain things be stacked differently and declared that the glassware was still in need of a cleaning spell. The next step in the procedure lay on the kitchen table, awaiting an owl to carry it mercilessly to its destination; of all limited steps, that was the most agonising.

Despite their efforts, by mid-afternoon, the table was bare. Two piles of condensed potions equipment rested against the wall of the attic, and the hole in the roof had been repaired; save for the lingering aroma of plant material and the reliable refectory table, it was scarily easy to think that the attic had never been used for anything other than the storage of life's acquisitions.

A scratching at the back door while they apathetically stirred the cooling soup in their bowls caught their attention, and she flashed him a pained glance before slipping off the chair to open the door. A grey owl walked over the threshold and fluffed its feathers, gave the kitchen a wide-eyed study from the doormat and then launched itself onto the back of the chair. Hermione idly wondered if the delivery owls had been trained to perch on the nearest chair or if she had in some way encouraged the behaviour by not being owl-friendly. Around its leg was a small pouch designed to hold the fee for delivery, and on its back, like a tiny backpack, was another pouch for the letter. It clicked its beak, and she huffed at the bird's apparent impatience. Gathering some cat treats en route, she picked up the letter, and as the bird nibbled on its treat, she slipped it inside the backpack before sliding five Knuts in the purse. With the rasp of claw against chair, the owl extended its wings and glided away.

"How long do they take?" she asked mournfully, watching the rapidly disappearing speck before it became lost against the sky.

"It depends upon any other deliveries the owl has to make, but the service states that for a British address, it will be within twenty-four hours of receipt."

"That soon," she whispered. There was a panic building within her; it seemed that she was on the verge of flying apart, of shattering and scattering. Her grip on the handle intensified; the metal bit into her palm and the soft flesh in her fingers, and she used it, used that pain to herd her errant emotions away from danger and back to the calm fold of logic.

He represented some thread weaving through the tattered fabric of her life, pulling the weft strands together so that she could repair the warp. Without him, she would have ripped and unravelled, and the thought of losing her support and strength was discomfiting. But listening to him had opened her eyes to the immense and glorious future stretching out before her, and he had done nothing but bolster her for her place in it, all she had to do was step up and claim what was hers, without any guilt or regret. But it would be devoid of him, and that hurt.

The last strand fell in to place, and with a wistful smile, she pushed the door closed; he had ensured that he would no longer have to be responsible for her by presenting her with an undeniable responsibility...her own life, lived to the full. Whether he had indeed orchestrated her epiphany, she couldn't determine, but she would always hold him responsible.

The bread roll lay in crumbs after his nervous fingers had devastated it, and despite his protestations, he felt a certain reluctance in leaving her. He had enjoyed her company, and he had derived a great deal of satisfaction from aiding her in her struggles. It had been a remarkable balm to be able to offer himself to save another, rather than being forced to sit and watch them suffer...he felt redeemed. No matter what had happened previous to his stay in her house, he could leave it knowing that he would be thought of as something other than a murdering traitor. In itself, that was her greatest gift to him.

A serenity descended as their mood lifted, and they sat on the sofa, listening to summer rain softly striking the windows. There was nothing left to do; the table had been returned, and Snape had removed the Befuddlement Charm affecting Mrs Cooke.

"Where will you go?"

Snape turned to her, his expression thoughtful and gentle. "There are a few places where I would be safe." His eyes closed, and a small, rather sad smile tugged at his lips. "A very long time ago, I was asked that very same question... in slightly similar circumstances." The smile was wiped from his face and he inhaled shakily.

"Where will you go?"

He rolled onto his belly, and squinting against the glare of the midday sun, he looked up at her; her face was tight and drawn as she sat in the long grass, and her green eyes were laced with concern as she watched him intently. He had first thought to tease her, but her sombre expression made him sober, and he licked his lips as he rethought his response.

"There are a few places that I could go," he said carefully, but he knew that she was thinking ahead when her face darkened and her eyes narrowed.

"You're going to him, aren't you?" she demanded hotly, crossing her arms and pursing her lips.

Anger flared, and he lifted himself up so that he was kneeling in front of her. "Anywhere is better than this tent in a field," he hissed out. "Lucius offered me his home when he heard that Mum had died; I'd be daft to stay here." When her expression failed to soften he flung up his arms and sneered. "You'd have me stay here? Here in the mud and muck?" He waved his hand back towards the small, rather tatty, tent behind him. "I know that you don't like him, but I really don't have much choice. I can't go back home, school doesn't start for another four weeks and I've tried the tent for just over a week now and I just can't cope any longer with being an all-you-can-eat buffet for the local insects."

A small giggle erupted, and then she relaxed. "I know," she sighed. "If we had the room, then I'd invite you to stay with me."

He laughed, a rich sound, and Lily listened with glee to that rare music. "I can imagine Petunia's face," he said between chortles. "She'd have a complete fit if you brought me home as your latest find."

Their laughter slowly died as they studied each other and the trepidation growing inside as they sensed some parting.

"I just don't want to lose you," she admitted quietly.

Severus sighed and shuffled over to her to wrap his arm around her shoulder. "You'll never lose me," he said passionately. "We're best friends, and friends stay together, no matter what. I know that Lucius has some strange ideas, but you know that I don't share them; it's just that... it's just different in Slytherin," he finished dismissively, and Lily knew that he wouldn't appreciate further talk on the matter.

"Fair enough," she said generously and tilted her head so that her forehead touched his cheek. "I admit that I prefer the idea of you in a house rather than a tent; it's just sad that it means that I won't be able to visit you as often as I have here."

"You'll do perfectly well without me," he said swiftly, smothering his own anxiety at the impending lack of her. "In a few weeks, we'll be back at school, and we can meet up as much as we like, or as much as preparing for the OWLs will allow."

She nestled against him and closed her eyes; the hot sun warmed her back, bees droned as they flew from flower to flower and the wind gently caressed her; it was a glorious day. She wished that it would last forever.

"When will you pack up and go to Malfoy's?"

"Tomorrow afternoon," he replied, his breath warming her temple, "he says that there is someone staying with his father that he wants me to meet."

Gods!

His neck itched!

He gritted his teeth and grimaced; his neck tingled as though dozens of ants stung his skin. Quickly smoothing his features, he stood and excused himself. As soon as he turned the corner into the hallway his hand delved into his deep pocket and he fumbled for the phial that he knew was in there. Still walking towards the stairs, he withdrew the amber phial and unstopped it; with an ear out for Hermione, he brought it to his trembling lips and hastily swallowed the potion. The sensation in his skin began to feel like a burn, and he felt close to the cusp where he would have to cry out and relinquish to the urge to scratch. His hands tightened into talons, and he held them at his sides for fear that the nails would slash into the skin if he let them move freely. His jaw cracked, and a small, frustrated moan escaped; he should have known that thinking about Lily would have set it off, but he found it almost impossible not to think about her.

Even before the pungent taste had faded from his tongue, he felt the horrible sensation abate, and he sighed with intense relief as the potion worked to soothe the unseen weakness beneath his skin. Standing at the bottom of the stairs, he twirled the empty phial between finger and thumb; time had softened the impact of the potion's duplicity, and he regarded it as a dubious ally rather than a traitor. With the potion, he would have the time and chance to perfect a true and abiding cure.

Of course, he mused sardonically, unless the potion finishes me off first!

It was so clear! Now that he had the opportunity to study it objectively...of course, hindsight is twenty-twenty...he could see the major and critical flaw in his thinking. He sniggered under his breath...Miss Granger had thought his grades for weak potions in class had been severe; here he was, facing death due to a simple error. But he had fended death off, and although it lingered uncomfortably close, he had a small surge of hope that he could work his way out, and he would do it without burdening her.

*Slipping the empty vessel into his pocket, he walked back to the kitchen and avoided her curious glance by busying himself making tea. Soon she was by his side, tipping most of her uneaten soup into the sink, and he bolstered himself with an adage that had always, until now, made little sense...least said soon as mended. He wasn't even sure what he would have said to her if he had had either courage or words... What was there? They had strived together and succeeded; beyond that, there was nothing, and he would, given time, believe that. *But!* Sighing and closing his eyes, he willed away the stirring buts and maybes, the teasing possibilities and the cruel fantasies; he would leave, and she would live the life she was deserving of. It was the safest, the easiest and the wisest course of action... just not the happiest.*

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Glancing at the clock in the sitting room became a shared pastime, and the minutes seemed to march on relentlessly. They had occupied themselves with idle chatter, oftentimes touching upon the War, but slipping away from it as rain would down a window pane and trying, now, to assuage their current anxiety by contemplating the future ahead of them.

He adored her optimism, appreciated her enthusiasm and revelled in her sense of awe; it rekindled some hope within him. As he wrapped himself up in her dreams, he discovered some of his long-dead ones resurrect themselves, and the idea of travelling suddenly found itself pushed the fore, looking rather uncertain as dust was blown off it and a contemplative mind studied it. It grew bold, and he imagined himself journeying away from Wizarding Britain. Mountain ranges and placid lakes rose up in his mind; huge, glorious open spaces with no foe other than the weather, and the freedom to roam where he pleased with no leash tugging at his throat.

Their talk, musings and dreams were rudely interrupted just after breakfast by an owl flying past the window, and they shared an uneasy look before she stood and opened the window. The owl seemed to sense that its presence wasn't appreciated as it lingered on the sill, but it refused to fly away, and some dark inspiration informed her that it was waiting for a response.

He could see her hands trembling as she slowly walked back to the sofa, and his own fingers drummed a rapid, nervous tattoo against his thigh. Barely breathing, she opened the cream envelope and pulled out the thin letter within. She inhaled and read out the few paragraphs.

"It's no bother at all, Hermione, and I'm thrilled that you asked us. The Burrow has always been open to you, dear, and now, more so than ever. Ron will be so happy to see you! We all will," she said carefully, her voice thickening as her emotions gathered.

"I thought that it would be nice if we could come and collect you later on today, in time for some dinner, perhaps, and then we can plan the trip to fetch your Mum and Dad afterwards. Arthur is beside himself because he knows that Apparating that far in one go is impossible, and he has this idea that we'll go on one of those airplane contraptions." She smiled, even giggled, at the thought of Mr Weasley on an aeroplane, but it just smothered the knowledge that she only had a few hours until she returned to a more difficult life than the sweet one cultivated between sofa and potions lab.

"The owl will wait for your reply, and I look forward to seeing you this afternoon. Love, Molly.

Snape glared at the owl, focusing his sudden dissatisfaction at the feathered fiend that merely blinked slowly and stretched out its leg... almost viciously showing off the waiting pouch. Compounding his despair was the sound of a nib scratching across the rough parchment and then the sight of her moving towards that heinous harbinger.

She turned to him, her eyes brimming with tears, and her twitching lips curved up into a weak smile. "I've told her to collect me at noon."

"How dramatic," he said with a wry smile while his eyes darted towards the clock...one and a half hours left.

He had intended to leave well before that dreaded deadline, but she would say something that required his attention, and he delved into those delaying discussions with delight. The sofa was tormented by their distractions; Hermione would pick at the stitching, and Snape would occasionally tug on the zip nestled behind the cushions. When the minute hand marked that they had only a quarter of an hour, they fell silent, idle chatter stifled and casual thoughts snuffed out as their minds focused on the impending separation.

"I don't want you to go," she whispered, knowing that she had to say it, but hoping that he wouldn't hear. Her ears sang in the silence. She licked her lips and looked up at him; his head was bowed and his expression stony.

He could feel her gaze upon him, and his mind circled around concepts that he couldn't quite formalise, but she had done something remarkable for him, and that, he felt, needed defining and thanking. It was most probably the reason why he felt such reluctance to leave; she had made him feel human and whole.

"I have found a peace here that I hadn't expected to ever find," he replied equally as softly. "A redemption that I had never thought able to receive." As he heard his own words, he grimaced and squeezed his eyes shut. "I have done so many terrible, terrible things; some of them with a disgusting eagerness that should appal you, and some as a consequence of my oath to Lily. I never sought to ask for forgiveness; indeed, I never thought it right to ask... how could I?" He turned to her, and she keened in response to his haunted, red and tear-filled eyes boring desperately into her. "How could I even dare to kneel before them and beg that they forgive me for killing and hurting... and ... and... oh Merlin!" He threw back his head and pressed the heels of his palms against his weeping eyes. Gritting his teeth and breathing noisily, he tried to keep that terrible wave of rampaging emotions at bay.

Sniffing and hiccupping, she reached out a hand and touched his arm; at her touch, he lowered his hands and opened his eyes to stare at the smooth ceiling. "I don't know what you've done, and I don't want to, but I can see how you hurt because of it; I doubt that there could be a greater punishment than the one you've imposed upon yourself." Hot tears poured down her face, and she felt her heart thundering against her ribs as she witnessed his suffering.

"I thought that I was dying; I thought that Nagini had killed me, and I felt such peace." He sounded almost bitter that that sense of peace had been so transient, but as she studied his face, it seemed that he was merely struggling with expressing what he was recalling. "I lay there, feeling it all slip away, and then I noticed that something was missing," he said with a strange smile on his face. "I knew that I had given Potter all that he needed to defeat the Dark Lord, but in those moments, I gave him more, and I knew that I had given away my memories of Lily." He let out a dark laugh, and she suddenly felt very immature in her inability to understand something vital, not having lived or loved enough to fathom it. "Even at my death, she still held me captive...still made me do what she wanted."

Confused, but desperate to support him, she squeezed his upper arm. "I'm glad that she helped you."

His head snapped round towards her, and he mouthed silently as he digested her words. "Thank you," he finally managed to croak out.

"It's going to be very difficult, isn't it?" she said in a hushed voice. "Carrying on and whatnot."

"Yes," he said simply. "It is the price we have to pay for living through such a thing." He smiled at her and gently cupped her slick cheek. "You have to decide to value each day irrespective of the cost, because, at the end of the day, the dead don't really care."

The clock, beginning its deceptively soft and harmless little tune, jolted them apart, and they stared at it in horror. Fuelled by panic at the last moment, they leapt from the sofa and listened, straining, for the knell of the doorbell. Driven by impulse, she stepped forward and cleaved to him, her fingers digging into his back as she tried to collect as much from him as possible. In turn, he wrapped his arms around her, his hands pulling her closer so that he could feel her warmth, the warmth of a human in a his arms. She would never really know what happened; perhaps some thoughts exist beyond logic and understanding, but she tilted up her head to capture his face in her memory, and his eyes were dark and glittering in an intoxicating fashion as he looked down upon her. As his head bent slowly lower, her lips parted, but at the last moment he stilled.

"Say my name," he begged, his breathless whisper ghosting over her moist lips.

Without thinking, nor requiring the necessity to think, she closed her eyes and obliged...

"Severus."

She gasped and stumbled against him as his lips pressed against the corner of her mouth. Unable to stand, she clung to him, and with a shudder, she felt his hands slide down her upper arms to cup her elbows, and then she frowned and groaned as that mouth moved away. Lips still tingling from his kiss, and her elbows still burning from his touch, it took a few seconds to think on that gentle breeze that had rushed over her exposed skin. A sob escaped her, and she slumped where she stood. The doorbell pierced her pained realisation, and at the second ring, she opened her eyes to an empty room.

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Epilogue.

The letter looked innocuous enough as it lay on her desk, but the rather shabby-looking amber phial next to it hinted at perilous, but enthralling reading. Tugging off her green overcoat, she lowered herself into her chair and ran her fingertips over the smooth paper. It had been almost six years since she had seen a similar phial, and as her fingers felt the paper, she was taken back to a time when she had been overawed by a man holding the key to his potion. A key that she had discovered much later was to his prison and not his release.

How it had pained her when she had finally concluded after years of study that Snape's potion, despite their efforts over six days in her home, had not cured him of Nagini's bite. She had silently and bitterly cursed him; cursed him for letting her believe that he was leaving her for a better life; instead, she had spent five years, scouring newspapers and obituaries for news of Severus Snape's demise from blood loss.

Licking her lips, she plucked up both courage and letter.

Dear Hermione,

I read with great interest your latest publication; it seemed both revolutionary and yet so self-evident that I could imagine the great fraternity of potion masters kicking themselves for the centuries of blissful ignorance. So odd that the obvious should remain so hidden!

I know that several months have passed since you received all the glory and praise from your peers and contemporaries, but news travels so wonderfully slowly here that I

only heard of your achievements a few weeks ago...my apologies for that. I'm sure that many, myself included, were puzzled and distraught at your intention all those years ago to shift from potion mastery to Healing, but we all stand so very much corrected and humbled in the face of your accomplishments. The Wizarding world stands all the straighter and less weary and battered now. I have even heard that your research has opened up the possibility for dark curse injuries to be completely healed. I have my own selfish reasons for hoping that to be the case.

I have written similar letters countless times before, but have weakened and reduced each one to so much ash! But this time, I have no choice but to complete this letter and send it you... your thesis made it impossible for me not to.

You, no doubt by now, fully grasp the complexities of that potion from years ago; you have deduced that I left you while still suffering Nagini's bite and still in constant need of that precarious potion. I challenged your intellect once before, I would not be so bold or ignorant this time. You are quite right, if I extrapolate from your own conclusions; the potion was performing its function in combating that pain, grief and self-loathing that I had harboured and nurtured within myself. In retrospect, it is a marvel that the potion held me together long enough after the bite for me to realise my gross error. The poor potion could not have helped to fight the depths of my despair **and** the effects of the bite and so, at times, the wound would open up... as you no doubt recall.

The elusive mysticism behind potions, that ineffable philosophy behind it all, never seemed to baffle you, and I should have given in and gathered you up to help me overcome the limitations of both myself and the potion, but I was... well, arrogant and foolish. Later, I tried to ignore your finding and theories, tried to dismiss them as naïve ramblings, but I could see that you were solving a puzzle that I had hoped you wouldn't. Given your latest report, I can only cringe at my selfishness... your research will save and improve lives throughout the Wizarding world.

I would have been able to have hoodwinked myself had it not been for your changing of the name of the key ingredient; had you continued to use Bushmaster Venom, I could have quite easily maintained my blindness. Lachesis is the Muggle term for it, in certain branches of their medicine of course, and the little footnote tying it into the Fates was quite breathtaking. I was unaware of it, and it was only as I flicked through a book on mythology that I realised that my ruse had been uncovered...my potion had indeed become the determiner of the length of my life; and you knew.

For six years, I had taken that potion, but I will admit with some pride that the frequency and dosage had decreased dramatically in the later years, but my own healing had not and could not get me to the point where my dependence upon it was negated. I had studied my problem as exhaustively as I could, but I could not overcome that last hurdle of being able to wean myself off the potion by dealing with the grief that existed within. And I'm sure that you'll appreciate that popping into the local clinic for a chat was out of the question.

So, it was with some selfish wonder that I read your thesis all those weeks ago and tentatively brewed the potion that you described. I was violently ill the first two days (I do hope that you have refined the potion in these months since initial publication as the side effects were rather unpleasant), and the wound opened up several times during the next two days, but on the fifth day, I woke to a healed neck and felt better than I had in years. The next day, I started this letter and quite enthusiastically obliterated the remaining phials of my own potion.

The lachesis is yours; I have no need of it now. I daresay that the grief over my mother, Lily and the countless others who perished will still be a part of me, but now, I have the opportunity to learn to live with it.

I never thanked you adequately all those years ago for your generosity, support and assistance; it is an oversight that has haunted me.

I will take this opportunity now to thank you; without your help then, I would have died, and without your help in recent years, I would never have this chance to start to live.

Thank you, Hermione, for my enduring recovery,

Your servant,

Severus Snape