

And Ye Shall Find

by Ladymage Samiko

Injured and exhausted after the battle, Severus conceals himself, only to be found by someone who is also running away... from her memories. Written for the grangersnape100 'hide & seek' challenge.

one ~ five

Chapter 1 of 13

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He huddled in the corner, wrapped in layers of invisibility spells, and waited. He hadn't been able to help it. For one thing, he was too weak to walk, let alone Apparate. For another... Well, he was honestly curious. Who would come for him? Would anyone? Who was left who would remember him, let alone expend energy to retrieve his corpse?

No one, apparently.

He leaned against the wall, trying to ignore the smells of blood and death. It wasn't so surprising, really. And silence was a welcome alternative to students circling his body and cheering.

And yet...

No one.

~ ~ ~

Long habit awakened him at the soft sound of footsteps. The creaking of floorboards. For the first time, it occurred to him to doubt who had won. Albus had been a master strategist, but... He gripped his wand (not that he could use it right now) and waited.

She entered the room with more caution than he thought characteristic. And she was a mess— bloodstained, curse-scorched, torn clothing... not to mention her infernal cat draped across her shoulders like a furry boa. Her face appeared years older.

Her eyes widened. And then... tears... and... Was that hope on her face?

~ ~ ~

Hermione's eyes searched the room, flicking quickly here, there. No sign of his body. Had someone else...? She'd come as soon as she could get away, but... Still, maybe, just maybe... He was— is?— an intelligent man. Maybe...

It was a wrench to sheathe her wand, to remove Crookshanks from her shoulders; both were security blankets of a sort. But if it were possible...

"Crooks," she said quietly, "find him, please." One couldn't *order* a cat, of course, but he was her familiar; she could ask. With a lazy stretch, Crookshanks began his

investigation, miaowing his dislike of their environs.

~ ~ ~

His eyes followed the cat; he dared move nothing else. Gods only knew what that beast was capable of. He should've expected Granger (assuming her survival). Gryffindor's champion of lost causes.

Still... *someone* had remembered.

That somehow made it a little easier to disappear.

What else could he do?

That question became infinitely more important as twenty pounds of cat/kneazle dove into his lap and began purring. Not to mention umpteen plus pounds of Granger throwing her arms around him and bursting into tears.

He blinked at the pair of them. What the hell was he supposed to do *now*?

~ ~ ~

Hermione sniffled into an invisible waistcoat before truly realizing what she was doing. "Sorry, sir," she mumbled, backing off slightly. She left her fingers where they were, feeling the rough wool—to reassure herself or to keep him from simply piking off, she didn't know. "But..." she continued softly. "I found you, you see. You're alive. I didn't lose you."

She felt his sigh, little more than silent stir of wind. "Yes." An emotionless confirmation.

She hadn't thought she could hurt any more. She hated being wrong. "You didn't want to be found, did you?"

"No."

She hated being right.

9/12/07

six ~ ten

Chapter 2 of 13

Hermione acts... and both of them reflect...

So damned tired. He watched her crestfallen features from behind his invisibility. Too damned tired. Couldn't think. Not even a decent Obliviate left. Hell, couldn't even shove the cat off his legs.

He leaned his head back. Think, dammit, think. Before... He had planned to wait, regain his strength, disappear. Spinner's End was already disenchanting and sold. Arrangements had been made. Later... a house deep in the Canadian mountains, perhaps. Or in Cathay, Nippon, Indochina... The world had been open to him.

But now... He was faced with a girl and her cat.

He dropped his invisibility. Useless now, anyway.

~ ~ ~

He looked ghastly. It was her first reaction and though she was ecstatic to see him, the evaluation was correct. His features were haggard. His clothing had been pulled back; Nagini's bite showed horribly dark and ragged against pale skin. She bit her lip. She'd come so close to losing him. Her fingers twitched but she left them in place. She couldn't afford to lose her control now.

After a single, ragged breath, she turned to her cat. "Crooks, fetch Bubo for me, would you?" A yowled opinion, a glare, and Crookshanks leapt off of Snape, vanishing through the doorway.

~ ~ ~

Still vaguely stunned, Severus gazed at the room around him. There was, apparently, quite a bit about Miss Granger that nobody knew. For instance, the fact that she possessed an owl, an ordinary-looking thing called 'Bubo.' Or the fact that she owned- owned!- a two-story cottage on the east coast of Scotland.

She'd brought him here. A place nobody had ever seen or even known of. And he still didn't know why.

If she'd wanted him alive, she'd have taken him to the Order. If she'd wanted him dead... that would have been even easier. So why bring him here?

~ ~ ~

Hermione watched him in her kitchen mirror as she boiled water for two instant soups. Too damned tired to make anything else. She was afraid to take any potions; she only vaguely remembered what she'd been on the receiving end of- rather not think about it whatsoever, actually- and didn't want to chance an adverse reaction. It was the same reason she'd not yet given Severus- Proffes- *Snape* anything either. Not that he'd take it, anyway.

Well, then, instant soup would just have to do for now. She hefted the tray and made her way upstairs, Crookshanks leading the way.

~ ~ ~

He blinked at the white plastic bowls.

"It's got calories." Hermione shrugged. "We both need *something*."

"*Something*," he drawled, poking it dubiously with his spoon, "is precisely what it is."

She sighed, leaning back into the chair she'd pulled up to the bed. He watched her curiously. "You're exhausted," he commented.

"Oh, *excellent* observation," she replied dryly. "Being tortured by a madwoman and then fighting for your life will do that to a person, you know."

"I do."

She glanced at him. "We're both in damned sorry states, aren't we?"

He rather thought she wasn't just talking about the physical.

9/19/07

A/N: Cookies to those who recognize the origin of the owl's name.

eleven ~ thirteen

Chapter 3 of 13

The scars of battle begin to show.

The 'meal' was finished in silence and Hermione piled the things back on the tray. After an awkward pause, she said carefully, "I... realize, sir, that this was not your plan. And I... apologize. But I couldn't just leave you there, you see. Not after... And nobody else seemed to think it was important. Not Harry, not Professor McGonagall..."

"I just... couldn't *not* come."

There was a pleading in her eyes.

He sighed. "No, you couldn't." It *had* been inevitable. His own fault for ignoring that. "Go to bed, Miss Granger. We'll talk tomorrow when we can both think properly."

~ ~ ~

He awoke in the dark, early hours, Nagini's bite throbbing. Severus gritted his teeth, enduring its burn.

Harsh whimpers broke his concentration. Startled, he listened for the source - alarmingly obvious as they escalated into agonised screams. Palming his wand, he raced to Granger's room.

She was alone.

Her body arched, rigid with pain. Appalled, he stared, motionless until a streak of orange bowled him over. The cat leapt into bed, purring madly, nudging and rubbing, *soothing* the dream-haunted girl until shrieks became sobs, whimpers, breaths. Still asleep, she clung to the cat; its eyes shone, challenging, through the darkness.

~ ~ ~

Severus slowly picked himself up off the floor. He could leave now, if he wanted. Granger was obviously in no condition to stop him and he was just as obviously able to walk out the door. He could leave. He *should* leave. To stay would mean becoming involved, risking the freedom that he craved - *needed* - and meant to finally take.

His life here was over. He *wanted* it over. As Granger so amply demonstrated, there was nothing here but *pain ad infinitum*. Not to mention incarceration and/ or death. Here, he was a dead man.

He wanted to remain so.

9/25/07

fourteen ~ seventeen

Chapter 4 of 13

Hermione explains a few mysteries, while both refuse to ask questions of themselves.

Morning brought... a strange sense of normalcy. Granger, hollow-eyed but otherwise opaque, cooked another 'something' in her kitchen. Bandaged and potioned, Severus found himself presented with robes and shaving kit. *No magic*, she'd told him.

It vaguely reminded him of pleasant days far, far back in his family memories.

But why had he stayed? Severus found himself unable to formulate a reasonable answer. Instead, he focused on his hostess, watching for... anything unusual.

Though he probably wouldn't recognise unusual; this tenseness had become normal. And did he really know the girl anyway?

"What is this place, Granger?"

A reasonable question.

~ ~ ~

Hermione wondered if she had actually slept; she felt exhausted. To be expected, she supposed as she searched for breakfast-like things. Everything here was in tins; she'd known she'd never know when she'd be here. A safe house, she'd told herself.

Yet she still didn't feel safe.

It wasn't Snape; he was almost a comfort, another human presence to keep her from going mad. Or to watch her back.

No, it was the thought that maybe, *maybe*, she hadn't taken all the precautions.

The thought that *She* might come back.

No. Foolishness. She was stronger, smarter than this.

She was.

~ ~ ~

"What is this place, Granger?"

Hermione jumped at the sound of his damaged voice. *Foolish*. She plated the hash and seated herself.

And explained.

Her parents had saved money for university, she told him. Arithmancy had given her the odds; she'd opted to have a place to hide should things go wrong. Nothing here could be traced to Hermione Granger; the deed was in the name of an elderly maternal aunt. Her neighbours thought she worked for the oil companies, now booming, and traveled often. They kept an eye on the place for her.

Wizards couldn't find a magicless witch.

~ ~ ~

Snape digested both food and information slowly. No one knew where this place was, not her parents, not her friends. The only way to trace the connection was through Muggle means. He could find no flaw in her extensive preparations.

Which might mean only that he was too drained to think properly.

And that damned cat was staring, challenging him.

Even the bloody featherball upon the windowsill watched from half-closed eyes.

And Albus had always asked why he didn't keep a familiar.

She was uneasy, eyes darting at the least sound. He knew that feeling.

"You did well, Miss Granger."

6/3/08

eighteen ~ twenty-two

Chapter 5 of 13

Snape pushes, Hermione evades, and Snape pushes harder...

The silence lengthened as she stared, floored by this unprecedented praise. *You did well, Miss Granger*. The ridiculous idea that maybe she'd picked up a doppelgänger passed through her mind. But that was absurd.

"I'll go into town - into Aberdeen - today," she said abruptly, standing to clear away the plates. "We need real food and you need Muggle clothes. I've only Ron's and Harry's sizes - too small for you. I've the robes only as an emergency catch-all. Is there anything else I can get for you?"

"No."

Damn. She wished his face were as easily read as the boys'.

~ ~ ~

Snape found himself - unsettled - by her unusual evasiveness. This wasn't like the girl at all. The prattling was normal enough, but not her avoidance of the topic at hand.

She had a tendency to almost painful frankness. What *had* occurred during his isolation?

"I'll send Bubo off to Harry tonight," she continued. "Keep them from sending search parties after me - us. I needn't mention you if you don't want me to. I can't send him now, you know. Daytime owls are a dead giveaway."

"Why am I here, Miss Granger?" he questioned abruptly. "What - or whom - are *you* hiding from?"

~ ~ ~

What - or whom - are you hiding from?

Ice ran up and down her spine at the question and her words stopped. Hermione forced her hands to keep moving, keep sponging soap onto the plate she held.

"You need to recover," she said, relieved that her voice was steady. "And you don't seem to want anyone else to know that you're still alive. I'm trying to respect that. You're quite welcome to leave if you like. I'll drive you into Aberdeen at any time and you can go from there - magically or mundanely. There are no prisoners in my home, Professor."

~ ~ ~

Did she know how much she revealed? *There are no prisoners in my home, Professor.*

"Don't you think that appellation somewhat obscene at this point in time, Miss Granger?"

"What would you prefer?" She still wouldn't turn around. "Mister? Snape? Severus? Dead Man Walking?"

He shrugged, ignoring that she couldn't see him, and stood. Crossing the small kitchen, he loomed over her, uncomfortably close. He heard the small hitch in her breathing.

"That won't work, *Professor*," she said evenly. "There are worse things in this world than you."

"Are you certain?" He closed the last distance, pressing flush against her.

~ ~ ~

Her reaction was immediate and violent. She fled, oblivious to Snape sprawled, nose streaming blood, gasping as his neck flamed with pain. She didn't hear her familiars' hissing as she slammed her bedroom door, mindlessly barricading it shut.

She found herself curled in a corner when her mind cleared. She knew *-knew-* that Snape wouldn't *really*... But she'd no idea how far he'd go to prove his point. And then...

She raised her jumper, tracing the thick rope of the scar that jagged its way below her waistband. And fought, not to stop crying, but to keep from being heard.

twenty-three ~ twenty-six

Chapter 6 of 13

Both parties try to revert to type.

You're lucky to be alive, everyone said.

You'll be lucky if there's no internal damage the healer said.

Dry-eyed, Hermione watched her reflection, removing skirt and knickers to face the whole of the damage, the ripples and puckers and angry scarlet of healing skin. Cruciatus wasn't the only curse *She* had known.

It wasn't that bad, really. She was almost recovered. And she still had her mind, which had always been the most important thing, anyway. More than some were left with. And she'd never really considered her biological functions, anyway.

She needed to go into town for those supplies.

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Snape was nowhere to be seen when she went downstairs and grabbed her keys. Nor did he answer her hail. She shrugged. She'd apologize for hitting him later. A good-bye hoot from Bubo and she was on her way.

The city's grey granite and the grey sky matched each other and pretty much matched her mood as she searched for parking. The anonymity of the crowded mall and Somerfield grocery was actually a relief. No expectations here.

She treated herself to a generic chocolate pastry and an excellent cup of coffee. And wondered idly if Snape preferred coffee to tea.

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He used her absence to snoop as thoroughly as possible without magic. An annoying handicap, but he took her proscription seriously. The war was won— that was quite clear— but a few rats always escaped the trap. He'd no desire to set up a beacon for one with vengeance on its mind.

So he searched... and found nothing. A multitude of books, all Muggle. Some knick-knacks. A pair of highly incensed familiars. No hidden caches, only the one disguised cupboard from which she'd extracted the healing potions and robes.

No clues to the tripwire that he'd triggered in Hermione's mind.

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"I apologize for hitting you earlier." Hermione was embarrassed at seeing the bruising on Snape's face.

"It was my own fault," he replied courteously. "I was asking for it."

She added a few disclaimers, but there didn't seem to be much more to be said, for which Hermione was grateful. Instead, she handed Snape the clothes she had bought. She hoped they were the right size. "I stopped by the neighbours'," she told him, beginning to put groceries away, "the McGraths; they're the nearest— to let them know I'm here. I told them you're a colleague— a chemist."

"Very well."

6/11/08

## twenty-seven ~ thirty-five

*Chapter 7 of 13*

Time passes... and a crisis point approaches...

Snape studied the mirror critically. Potions— even specific anti-venin— could only do so much. His neck had been left a rather ghastly, mottled colour, almost totally disfigured. Just as well, he thought humourlessly, that he'd no physical vanity to begin with. Perhaps he, too, should grow a ridiculously long beard. No vanity didn't mean he wanted to have idiots staring at him.

These weeks, though unexpected, had proved invaluable. He had healed as much as possible, recovering strength walking along the green-blanketed cliffs. He appreciated their stark, unrelenting austerity.

He exchanged pleasantries with Granger.

And forbore from considering his future.

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Granger was hiding, and he knew it. Every morning, she was amiable. Every night, she screamed her way through nightmares. When she stopped, he rifled her drawers to discover the sleeping pills she downed.

He couldn't blame her for telling him nothing. Not his business, after all; they barely knew each other, despite the long years.

But she never traveled beyond Aberdeen, never met her friends. A few owls were the extent of her communication with the magical world. Just enough to keep them from getting worried enough to come looking for her.

She was hiding, and he wondered why.

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It was a fascinating process to watch, Hermione thought, lying in the middle of the slim rock bridge that the millennia had carved high above the ocean tides. Snape had, all unaware, changed in his time here. His perpetual stoop, used to disguise his true height, disappeared as he stalked the near-empty countryside. Skin sallow from darkness and unhealthy circumstances tanned under the sun. The tight, sharp-lined expression relaxed— sometimes even into a small smile as he read his way through her library.

She wasn't egotistical enough to think it was her doing. No, it was because he was free.

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It was common enough to see her out there upon the stone span. Tempting fate in that small way seemed to fulfill some buried need in her, like a person who walks the ledge of a skyscraper.

But today, there was an all-too-familiar prickle in the back of his skull. He set his book on the table and made his way out of the cottage.

He began to wonder if his instincts had atrophied. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary; she was calmly lying on the rock and even her over-protective familiars were elsewhere.

Then he realized that Hermione slept.

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Snape never felt the blood drain from his face. Hermione slept upon a ledge only a few feet wide. With no pharmaceuticals to stay her dreams. Above a sheer drop to unforgiving rocks only thinly veiled by swirling water.

The girl was mad.

He stepped out carefully, confident in his balance, but uncertain what might trigger her sleeping mind. The wind whipped hair across his eyes and pushed close against a body more accustomed to a buffer of billowing cloth.

After long minutes, he stood statue-still, towering over her. But he knew he couldn't disturb her without risking them both.

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Mindful of her rule, Snape's wand remained in a drawer. Waking or physically carrying her chanced her reaction and a fatal loss of balance. Legilimancy? A last resort.

He heard a tiny whimper and noticed the first tremblings that heralded her nightmares. He dropped to his knees.

"Miss Granger? Granger?" She remained indifferent and his mind raced through options.

Carefully, he shifted beside, then over her, pinning her limbs down with his weight. He continued calling softly, trying not to wake her, but to penetrate her dream.

"All is well, Granger. You're safe."

He devoutly hoped it to be true.

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How long they remained that way, Snape never knew. He knew only that she eventually calmed into dreamless sleep without reaching a crisis. Relieved, he released her, moving to sit on the green-cushioned stone.

He never thought to feel that terrified again. He had finished opposing Death. To see that ruined by a careless slip of a girl...

*A woman*, his mind whispered.

Irrelevant. She had been unforgivably thoughtless. An intelligent girl— woman— like her should act like one. She was not some brainless tart. She was *needed*; she had no right to risk herself heedlessly.

Snape continued to smolder.

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Hermione drifted muzzily from delicious sleep, moving her arms to stretch.

"Be still!" a voice barked harshly and a heavy hand weighted her chest. Instinct obeyed the order before she could consciously identify Snape's voice.

"Sir?" She opened her eyes to see his face hovering upside-down and far too close to hers.

"Do you have even the faintest notion of where you are?" he demanded, practically spitting in rage.

"I—" She paused and her eyes widened as she remembered being on the rock arch. "I didn't. Did I?"

The following stream of invective informed her that she most certainly *had*.

~~~

Snape was quite capable of berating the chit for hours on end, but knew very well that they needed to get off the damned rock before the rapidly approaching nightfall. With a sour expression and a terse order, he got the girl up and moving. When he noticed her stiffness, he gave her another, equally curt command.

"I haven't waited this long just to see you trip yourself into the ocean," he commented acidly, lifting her easily. "Unless, of course, that *was* your initial intention?" An eyebrow lifted.

She shook her head violently. "That would be letting h— *them* win."

6/11/08

## thirty-six ~ forty-four

*Chapter 8 of 13*

In trying to make Hermione face facts, Snape pushes her to a breaking point. But points of sympathy and understanding begin to emerge.

"I'm sorry." Her voice sounded softly in the silence. "I didn't mean to worry you."

"What *worries* me," he said curtly, not looking up from his book, "is your apparent lack of a sense of self-preservation. Potter's not here to rescue you, you realise."

She flinched. "That's uncalled for."

"If it inflicts some sense into your... brain, for lack of a better term... then it's entirely justified."

"I'm not a child for you to abuse anymore."

"So much the worse. Look, Granger, if you *want* to kill yourself, by all means, do so. But don't pussyfoot around it in cowardice."

~~~

He always transformed honest repentance into resentment. "I'm not avoiding it. *Suicide* is the coward's escape." Her voice was tight.

"Not so. It takes a certain amount of spine to make the determination and implement it." *His* voice was maddeningly calm. "The coward's way out is to equivocate and squirm and hope someone else— gods or enemies or what-not—takes the final decision out of your hands." His expression twisted unpleasantly. "I refuse to play your *deus ex machina*, Granger."

"I don't want to die."

"Liar."

"I don't."

"Coward."

"*I don't want to die!* She contracted into a ball and screamed.

~~~

Female hysterics. Lovely. Snape sighed and rose from his chair, looming over the shrieking girl. She didn't see him, rocking back and forth. *don't want to die! I don't want to die! I don't want to die!*

Bubo streaked into the room, aiming for Snape until stopped by a preemptory yowl from Crookshanks. The kneazle met his eyes gravely. Snape's lips thinned, then relaxed. So that was how it was to be.

He picked the girl up, and she subsided into shaking, eyes staring, terrified, at something beyond their surroundings. And now up the stairs and into her room.

~~~

Still a child in so many ways... forced to manage in an all-too-adult world. Snape's grim expression softened as he laid her on the bed. And trying to cope alone. He still wondered why she refused her friends' support; she wasn't like him, after all.

But he had to try to pull her back. "Miss Granger. You're home. You're safe. No one will hurt you. I'm here." He grimaced. Unfortunate that the trick of slapping a hysterical woman to her senses was inadvisable; it would likely drive Hermione further into her memories. He continued to repeat his litany.

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She'd fallen asleep. Eventually. Snape slumped in his chair. He'd known, about Bella and Hermione. The details were vague, but the damage was becoming obvious. Bella'd been vilely cunning in her sadism. Hermione wouldn't have died, but would have chosen to, eagerly, by the end.

Hermione shifted and Snape glimpsed the scar on her torso. His eyes widened, then hardened. One of Bella's favourites. Magic that tortuously burrowed from the skin inward. He didn't have to look to know that the scar continued down between her legs. Or that it may have destroyed her reproductive system. No more Mudbloods here.

~~~

The darkness terrified her upon awakening, her mind clouded by shards of memory and emotion. Hermione lay, motionless, as her eyes adjusted to the bit of moonlight and her mind to the reality of her bedroom. Safe. *She* was dead.

Along with so many others.

How did Snape cope? How did the others? There had been grief, yes; she'd seen that. But no one else seemed to suffer from these terrors that haunted her. No one felt evil just behind their shoulder or suffered swamping waves of loss. Perhaps she was simply weak.

"Perhaps you are simply human, Miss Granger."

~~~

He saw her freeze, the rabbit in sight of the raptor, and flicked on her nightlight. She relaxed marginally only to stiffen again. "You're using Legilimancy!" she accused him.

He shook his head, settling back into his chair. "You're broadcasting, Granger. Your emotional state has weakened your barriers and those particularly sharp thoughts are assaulting my mind's ears."

She drooped, then lifted her eyes to his. If he knew her thoughts, she had nothing to lose. "How do you manage, sir?"

He sighed, lightly pinching the bridge of his nose. "There is only one relevant difference between us, Granger. Time."

~~~

"I've had nearly forty years to come to terms with what you are learning, Hermione. Death. Betrayal. Madness. Cold, deliberate cruelty. Even colder, more deliberate manipulation. The sheer, bloody selfishness and destruction in human nature. Guilt.

"I was far from inexperienced in these lessons when I entered school. If anything, it was my love for Lily that was my mortal blow. I found myself suddenly burdened with emotions. And a conscience. A great, bloody nuisance for one angry with the world and ready to destroy it.

"When she died... I could have killed Voldemort. But I wanted to kill myself."

~~~

She didn't need to ask why. Hadn't she felt that way herself? The sheer guilt and frustration at her inability to save Remus or Tonks or Fred. People feted her for everything she *had* done, but they might be alive if she'd been faster or smarter or stronger. Her brain said she'd done her best. Her heart said her best was good for fuck-all. "Why didn't you?"

He shifted slightly. "Obligation. To Lily. To her ideals. To her son. I hated Potter for himself, Hermione. She died for him. And that meant I needed to keep him alive for her."

## forty-five ~ fifty-one

Chapter 9 of 13

Hermione begins to understand her own isolation, and Severus reveals his own feelings about the war.



Hermione stared at the bedclothes, trying to contend with the emotions this confession inspired. Sympathy, yes. Empathy. And... envy. Did she have *anything* that meant that much to her? Had she ever? She'd fought from necessity— sheer survival instinct. And she'd seen the world in black and white. Gryffindor bravery...? Gryffindor *gullibility*.

Never questioning why *children* were sent to fight.

And she the 'smartest witch of her age'.

Ideals weren't enough. Especially when they proved impossibly hollow.

Her friends were a reason. They loved her. But... they hardly *needed* her. She'd only ever *really* been 'rather useful to have around'.

~~~

She'd nearly always known. After all, what did they ever talk about? It was Ron and Harry, Quidditch and pranks, all the time— until somebody needed help with his homework. *Then*, it was 'Hermione, be a pal, eh?' The same with life-threatening situations, if on a different scale. Hardly took a genius to solve *that* equation.

But she'd been so desperately lonely. Severed from the other bookworms by House divisions, there'd been no one to even chat with. So she'd snatched at the crumbs of affection like a woman starved.

She wondered, now, how deliberately created *that* situation had been.

~~~

For all her textbooks, Hermione knew she was a romantic, dreaming of that kind of love that would overwhelm and surround her. And gone through several painfully adolescent attempts she didn't want to think about. Even Ron...

He'd smothered her before she'd gone after Severus' corpse. Always hanging about, nattering on about something or other. She'd thought it sweet; he was so concerned. Until she realised that he never asked her how she was. Never confided, never offered to listen. She'd felt pressured to keep everything inside until he'd gone. Until she'd felt the need to scream like a madwoman.

~~~

She'd run. Pure and simple. Her worry for Snape had been genuine; there'd been a possibility, however remote, that he was alive. The others hadn't thought so; his retrieval was at the bottom of their list. She hadn't been able to feel the same. And so she'd gone after him.

And she'd been right, damn it.

And when she'd realised he didn't want to go back, she'd taken the opportunity for the excuse and fled, bringing him to her house to heal.

But *he* hadn't really needed her, either. It made her feel pathetic, to find that *she* needed *him*.

~~~

She started at the sound of his sigh. "Bloody, idiotic farce." She winced, positive he'd heard her thoughts. He had and hastened to explain. "This entire situation, Miss Granger. You *never* should have been tapped for this fight to begin with. Should've been left to those of us stupid enough to choose it. It should have been that damned mercenary bastard, Albus, in the front line." Hermione stared at the savagery in his voice. "And all of us puppets to his master. Does the end justify *all* means, Miss Granger? I hope he is rotting in hell, next to Voldemort."

~~~

Snape saw her gaping expression and knew Potter hadn't revealed all. "He manipulated us all, Hermione. Albus knew every nuance of personality, played on strengths and weaknesses. *He* decided who lived or died, who was important enough to save and who was expendable. We were pawns on his fucking human chessboard, unimportant unless we could further *his* ends."

"But—" Hermione protested weakly.

His smile was ghastly. "He'll be a martyr, celebrated by all for his *noble sacrifice*. For hubristic miscalculation, actually. He'd fully intended to ensure *his own* survival. Ruthless, but not quite so clever as you thought, you bastard."

~~~

He ranted on in that vein for some time, becoming almost insane in his bitterness. But Hermione listened and pieced details together with what she knew. Everything dovetailed. All those little incidents that seemed odd: Harry living with the Dursleys. Sirius locked in Azkaban, then Grimmauld Place. Things that even she could surely have done with better forethought and consideration.

She'd thought them mistakes. But would a man like Dumbledore— powerful, experienced, intelligent— make that many fundamental errors?

She didn't think so.

And as Snape revealed his own strings, she fully understood his impotent rage. For it matched her own.

an - As I will be journeying for the next two weeks, it's doubtful I'll be able to post for a while. I'm writing; I just won't be wired. Apologies for the delay, but I shall return!

## fifty-two ~ fifty-seven

Hermione attempts to close the distance between them; Severus has no intention of allowing her to do so.

The anger died abruptly, leaving her aching forlorn. There wasn't anything to be done, after all. Dumbledore was already dead. But it was— comforting— to know she might forgive *herself* a bit.

Snape remained in his chair, expression remote, staring at nothing. Hermione wondered if— maybe— she saw something of that same lost loneliness there.

She was nothing if not determined when she chose. Creeping quietly from her bed, she settled on the floor beside him, leaning against his leg, head against his knee. Trying to give some warmth to this isolated man. And trying to find some for herself.

~~~

For long moments, he seemed not to notice her. His knee, she found, was *very* bony. She wondered what he was thinking. Still brooding over past injustices? Or the woman-girl who'd defined his life? What had she been like? Someone who'd inspired decades of devotion— she was Snape's master far more than either Dumbledore or Voldemort— and tossed it aside.

Snape, Hermione now thought, was worth ten of any Marauder, sacrificing so much more than she'd ever possessed.

Hermione knew she was broken after these years. How much greater the damage in a man who'd battled for twice that?

~~~

Snape had lied to Hermione. But then, what benefit for her to know how sharp a knife in the back was after decades of the same? Let her believe only in his anger; he would *not* tolerate pity. And anger was better than the eternal circle of regret and self-flagellation. Reliving every event that should have been different. As a young man, he'd been intimately acquainted with that cycle; he'd sublimated it into a fatalistic sense of duty— and even that had proven hollow.

Lily was no less dead. Nor was anyone who'd been sacrificed on the altar of power.

~~~

It was a shock to find the girl curled up against him— not least because he hadn't the least idea of how long she'd been there. When had he become so complacent?

When was the last time anyone had touched him without coercion?

What did she mean by it?

A mental sigh. He wanted no part of this... seething bundle of emotions beyond mending something he had helped to break. He fully intended to leave as initially planned. The idea of being free of the stifling chains of the past and its people sounded to him very much like peace.

~~~

"Severus?" He nearly started at the sound of his name. It was tentative, but there was a quality to her voice that recalled when Minerva had called him thus— and had trusted him.

"Yes?" *His* voice was emotionless.

"Would y— What happens now?" A pale, near-whisper.

Somehow, he could not admit that he would leave. "You have a life to return to, Miss Granger."

"Do I?" she questioned. "Then why was it so easy to leave? Why so little concern at my absence?" She turned; her eyes were sad, but clear. "But I believe I was asking *you*, Severus Snape."

~~~

His face was so... unreadable. She couldn't tell what might be behind his eyes.

"I believe I made my plans quite clear from the beginning," he said. His voice was equally neutral.

"I see," she replied simply. Silence. She rose to her feet; it was quite clear that her presence wasn't desired. She wasn't sure now why she'd thought it might be.

Perhaps... *he* was manipulating her with his tales. She *knew* only half the truth, if that, and he'd no real incentive to confide in *her*. And he'd been Dumbledore's left hand.

"I'll bid you good night, then, sir."

fifty-eight ~ sixty-five

Chapter 11 of 13

Hermione seeks the truth within herself; Severus conveniently ignores his own.

The waning moon gave just enough light for Hermione to find her way as she sought the cliffs. Not the rock bridge— that *would* be deliberately suicidal— but a hollow near the edge; cross-legged, she gazed out at the liquid black sea.

Harry had told them of Snape's memories. He'd said nothing of calculating manipulation. But would he have? Hermione didn't know. Could she trust Snape's version of events? He'd seemed sincere, but he *was* a spy, a consummate actor. And why had he confided in *her*?

How could she trust him when she no longer even trusted herself?

~~~

He listened to the gusting wind— thick repetition of rattling windows, susurrations of shifting grasses. Hermione had left; he wondered if he'd handled her correctly. But ambiguity would have been misleading, and she was already bidding fair to become emotional about him. Something he should have foreseen. A humourless huff of laughter. Something he'd never have expected. After all, who had ever cared about *him*? All she felt was some form of Nightingale syndrome or hero worship. It wouldn't last.

*She cared enough to find you.* He ignored the thought and returned to not-listening for the sound of the door.

~~~

Well, why shouldn't I? The thought swept through her mind, bringing her to her feet to pace the cliffs. *Why shouldn't she trust herself?* She'd kept herself and her friends alive. She'd survived Her— *Bellatrix's*— cruelty. She'd kept faith with her comrades. They'd kept faith with her. Even Snape. And even he, miles beyond her in intrigue, admitted to being duped by Dumbledore.

Besides, she thought with some humour, her cat was an infallible judge of character. He hadn't objected to *her*. Nor to Snape, confirming her own judgment. Dumbledore, she realized, had avoided Crookshanks.

Why shouldn't she trust herself?

~~~

Too much damned silence. Never mind the bloody wind; he was used to *that*. Severus tossed back his bedclothes. The interior silence was deafening. He didn't even hear that damned owl hooting.

He grumbled sourly to himself as he paced into the kitchen, prepared to make a pot of tea. Bloody awful packet tea, at that. Even Hogwarts elves used looseleaf.

No noise except his own.

Habit, he told himself. He'd always had listening spells keyed to the Slytherin dorm. He missed the constant low buzz of adolescent noise.

He conveniently forgot he'd been sleeping perfectly well for several weeks.

~~~

There were things she couldn't do. She knew that. In her head, anyway. She'd always had trouble accepting it, even when circumstances beat her over the head with it. She knew that, too, when she bothered to remember. But she'd always been so successful, for so long, that failure hurt her, far more than other people, she imagined. Hermione Granger was a genius; Hermione Granger wasn't *allowed* to fail.

And she had, spectacularly. Being captured, and tortured, and not saving her friends... Fundamental failures, far greater than a failed exam. But did that mean she should doubt everything she did?

~~~

His mind drifted to Hogwarts. He didn't like children; he knew every drop of nastiness that 'childhood innocence' masked. Adults turned childhood into some golden age, conveniently forgetting the bullying and sheer, self-centred cruelty.

Still... there were a few— precious few— brilliant lights worth protecting. Lupin had become one, genuinely good, honestly innocent without naïveté. And— eventually— willing to stand up for right. Honoria Lightwand... a student ten years gone. He'd found her a position in Cathay; she was so gentle, her soul would have died in this war even if she survived. And now Granger, teetering on that edge...

~~~

Hermione continued to pace, working through the tangles of events in her mind, ordering and reordering everything she knew, everything she remembered. Realigning it with memories Harry had shared, knowledge Severus had given her. Picking and pulling and teasing out her place in events— something she'd refused to do, telling herself the war was over and what was, was. Brooding over it changed nothing, she'd told herself, it merely encouraged the melancholia that surrounded her.

No-one else seemed to need to relive events in order to cope. They simply celebrated the victory.

But now, perhaps... perhaps it might help.

~~~

The first glimmerings of light on the water startled Hermione, who glanced up to see the sun's rim burning over the horizon. She'd been walking the cliffs most of the night, she realised. Blinking, she looked around to see where she was. Or, actually, where she wasn't. She must've walked *miles* in the dark; she'd never turned around and never stopped. She was probably lucky she hadn't twisted her ankle. But... she felt better. Better than she had in ages. It was time to go home.

Hermione eyed her surroundings. Home was at the end of a bloody long walk.

## sixty-six ~ seventy-seven

Chapter 12 of 13

Hermione returns home and begins to make decisions. Severus makes a decision that will affect them both.

Hermione was startled to find Snape slumped over the kitchen table, head upon an outflung arm, but quickly calmed when she realised that he was still breathing... and

that the cup beside him contained nothing nastier than cold Earl Grey. After a moment's pause, Hermione fetched a blanket and draped it over him; be a pity to wake him when he was seemingly as exhausted as she. And sleep was such a lovely idea... A pillow— and perhaps another blanket— and she would test the quality of her couch. After that walk, stairs were the invention of the devil.

---

"Where in the bloody hell have you been?"

A screaming Snape was *not* a thing to wake up to.

"Went for a walk," she mumbled, turning over to try for more sleep. A vain attempt, as Snape snatched her blanket away. Irritating wanker; after the trouble she'd gone through to make sure *he* stayed warm.

"You were out *all bleeding night*," he hissed.

"S'long 's I live in *my* house, I follow *my* rules," she retorted. "*You* didn't seem t' want me 'round last night, *Daddy*, so stuff your concern 'n let me sleep."

The blanket dropped on her head.

---

She had finally awakened. "Your feet are severely blistered."

The comment drew Hermione's bemused gaze from the ceiling to the man seated in a nearby chair. She blinked, then winced as she tried to flex her feet.

She'd been too upset to remember shoes last night.

"I was walking," she said, half explaining, half defensive.

"I see." Completely neutral. "You tore several of them; you'll be lucky if they don't become infected. I treated them as well as I could without magic."

She glanced down at the bandages. "Thank you. I'm... sorry if I worried you. I... Last night... hurt."

---

"*Last night... hurt.*"

Pointless to pretend to mistake her meaning. "We have been too long alone here," he replied. "And you are under great stress. It has... manufactured emotions and reactions in you that are not..."

"Real?" Hermione finished, her voice every bit as dry as his could be.

"Natural," he shot back. "Or lasting. It would be better for both of us if we returned to our separate lives."

"What life?" she queried. "Friends who don't really care? Parents who didn't know me even before the memory charm? Grudging plaudits from ignorant assholes?"

"Screaming nightmares that no one understands?"

---

Hermione stopped before she descended into self-pity. "What do you *want*, Severus Snape? You've always been free to go. You've no reason to stay."

"I pay my debts."

She gaped at him, speechless, before throwing herself back with a humourless laugh. "So I'm a debt, am I? Well, nothing new there, I suppose." She became quiet. "I'm well aware that I'm broken. But I think you've done more than enough to repay anything I've done. If you feel separation is best, then please. Go."

She'd mistaken the hand of duty for that of friendship.

Her own damn fault, this time.

---

She'd turned her back on him, pretending to sleep until long after the sounds of him were gone. She didn't dare cry. Not until he had undeniably left. She wasn't about to go check.

For once, it would've been nice for someone to give a damn. *One* person wasn't too much to ask, was it?

Well, perhaps he wasn't built that way. Perhaps he was like a one-person dog. The thought amused her and she distracted herself by figuring out what breed of dog Snape would be.

But she was quite aware of when the kitchen door shut behind him.

---

The road was lonely; unseasonable cold had discouraged sightseers. But Severus felt obliged to walk it for a spell, leaving intact Granger's proscription.

His thoughts were poor company as he walked; they seemed to feel obliged to replay every conversation from the past month. But then, little else in his head could be considered congenial. The recipe of a complex potion, perhaps? Or the never-ending list of his own cock-ups.

He knew he'd hurt her. But slicing the connection now, before she deluded herself further, was preferable. He'd done what he could to help her.

And now, he was free.

---

The ceiling was fascinating. The knobby texture, the play of light... But thinking was a too-deeply ingrained habit.

And Snape had given her plenty to think about.

Was he right? Had their time here, the help he'd given, created emotions that would eventually prove false? Or did she simply like the person she'd discovered?

Back again to the question of whether or not she trusted herself. Damn.

And the light he had thrown on the war... She was forced to question her place in it. And the place she wanted to have when— if— she returned to the wizarding world.

---

Snape accomplished his journey in easy stages: from outside Aberdeen to London, London to Paris, Paris to Istanbul. Istanbul to... Middle of Nowhere, Asia. Tired from the

multiple Apparations, he stretched out amidst the grasses, simply staring at a sky bluer than he had ever before seen.

He was alone. No one was there to make demands, not on his time, his mind, or his soul.

Severus decided to think of nothing for a while. After all, there was no one to interrupt, no particular reason to think of anything.

It was very peaceful, to think of nothing in Nowhere.

---

Severus found himself opening his eyes; he'd fallen asleep in Nowhere; day had already passed into night. But not into darkness; he was illuminated by a near-full moon and accompanied by more stars than he could imagine. Every blade of the tall grasses was stark against its shadow, shifting greys against black in the wind.

The rustling of grasses meeting each other and parting was the only sound; Severus wondered if there were another living creature anywhere. He seemed to be the only one in this... not emptiness, no... *non-human* realm. He was a mere incidental, here in this vastness.

---

Hermione was not accustomed to inaction. In defiance of the ache in her feet, she began to clean the cottage. An incongruous task, perhaps, but one that, as many women knew, would consume her physical energy while she turned her mental energy inward. All problems could be solved logically; she merely had to take the edge of nerves off in order to tackle them.

She could admit now that she needed help. Snape had helped her to understand that, other matters aside. And remaining here wasn't an option; she'd go mad with nothing to do. So... to wizards or Muggles?

---

The kitchen was spotless, and the laundry nearly finished when Hermione concluded her reasoning. She would leave wizardry— for now, anyway. Everyone there was too close to events— and it only hurt more to see others recovering far better than she. And wizards simply didn't have the resources; they believed everything could be fixed with either a wand or a potion. She needed someone with wisdom and a heart. Perhaps that was the handicap— or strength— of being Muggle-born; science and its methods still held far greater sway over her.

So she would seek out a place in Muggle society.

## seventy-eight - eighty-three

Chapter 13 of 13

Severus and Hermione walk the separate paths they have chosen.

Middle of Nowhere, Asia gave way to Middle of Nowhere, Siberia. Followed by Middle of Nowhere, Maui, Alaska, Nebraska, Greenland, Kenya, Nubia. Severus had realized that the world was open to him; he could go anywhere he liked, do whatever he wanted to do. No obligations. No manipulations or goading. Just a wand and a travel case and his own free will. And so he gathered black ice roses from a glacier. He spoke with Hawaiian *menehune*. He witnessed Jinn raising a sand storm. Severus saw places and events he'd only ever seen in musty books... and long-ago, childish dreams.

---

A warm summer's day saw Severus's return to Nowhere, Asia, perhaps the exact nowhere where he'd begun with its same emptiness. He'd felt a strange pull towards the place, a restlessness that drove him to seek out this place where he'd first felt at peace. And yet he could not now recapture that feeling; something was out of sync, something that refused to let him rediscover that one-ness he had absorbed with the eagerness of a starving child.

And the agitation only grew with his attempts to calm himself. Why, *why* couldn't he find the peace he'd purchased so dearly?

---

"You look lost."

Severus scowled. Translation spells were all very well, but he preferred to simply ignore people. Unfortunately, it was difficult to ignore several dozen people who'd happened upon you in Middle of Nowhere. "I am not lost," he informed them tersely.

"Yes, you are." He found himself contradicted by a tiny, apparently ancient woman fantastically festooned with cloth strips and metal discs and bells of all sizes. But her eyes were sharp and her expression determined. "You will come with us. We will un-lose you."

"I am not your concern."

"We are sent for you. You will come."

---

*Dear Mione,*

*It's been a while since you left. I can't help wondering why. I mean, I can guess you don't want to see us, but why not? We miss you. Hell, Ron's even got your photo by his bed. So even if you feel you can't 'come home', for whatever reason, please try to visit. I feel like we're all moving on, and we've left you behind somewhere. I don't like the feeling. You're one of us, Mione. You should be here, bossing everybody about until the wizarding world's back to normal... or better.*

*We're finally settling in here...*

---

Hermione smiled a little as she finished reading Harry's letter. She half-wished she could visit like he asked, but... no. He was right that they'd left her behind somewhere, and how could she set the wizarding world in order when she couldn't even manage herself? These past few months had been a continuous exercise in frustration. The nightmares, the fears, the helplessness and hopelessness... No one she'd seen had seemed to make the slightest difference in the way she felt or thought.

She constantly asked what the point of it all was. She had yet to find any real answer.

---

"You look lost."

Hermione looked up, startled, to see a neatly dressed woman of middle age standing before her. "No, I'm not lost," she replied, puzzled. She was firmly seated on her park bench and knew her way around.

"I don't mean geographically, dear." The woman seated herself on the bench. Her face was pleasantly lined, her hair in a practical knot, her hands well-worn. She rather reminded Hermione of Professor McGonagall, actually. "No, I meant here and here." She tapped her head and heart in turn.

Hermione looked away, embarrassed and angry with herself. "Is it really that obvious?"