

Full Circle

by sunny33

Hermione is captured by Death Eaters just before the Final Battle. Voldemort forces her to take an ancient potion he has been experimenting with, which effectively transforms her into a Muggle. Bereft of all but her memories, how does she react?

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 18

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Many thanks to my helpful, brilliant beta, ladyinthecloak, you are fabulous!

Prologue

May 1st 1998 Late Evening

"So, this is Potter's little Mudblood friend," a voice hissed. "Not particularly useful to him now, are you, my dear?"

In the flickering glow of the lanterns, Hermione could see she was in a cave, the walls glistening with seeping damp, the rock overhead barely visible in the poor light. Having just regained consciousness a moment earlier, she had no recollection of having been brought there.

The serpent-like Voldemort was staring at her, his eyes gleaming red with psychotic glee. Barely concealed, however, was a simmering rage, which threatened to spill to the surface at the slightest whim of the beast. Several faithful minions were surrounding her closely, as if the ropes encircling her wrists and ankles were not sufficient to prevent her escape.

Her last memory before being rendered unconscious was when she and the boys had Apparated into Hogsmeade and somehow become separated. She knew now that they had been set-up and fervently hoped the boys were not likewise ensnared.

As her captor contemplated his prize, he ran his finger down her cheek. She shrank from his touch, despite her resolution to appear unafraid. Chin held high, she met his eyes with a defiant glare.

"Now, what is the best way to use this fortuitous find?" Voldemort mused. "Death alone would not suffice. No, she has caused far too much trouble, aiding and abetting that troublesome boy! Perhaps the Mudblood would like to return to her origins? Indeed, as a test subject she could be useful for once in her worthless life."

The Snake Lord gestured to one of his masked subjects to bring him a vial containing a suspicious looking green substance.

"Quickly, Rookwood, time is of the essence, we must not tarry here!"

He waved his wand and chanted a barely audible incantation over the vial, which then started emitting a foul-smelling steam.

"Drink!" he ordered, holding the vial out to Hermione, who struggled to turn her face away from his noisome concoction.

"Never!" she cried, spitting at his face in defiance.

"Oh, my, the little Mudblood thinks she can defy me...*Crucio!*" he sneered.

As she collapsed to the floor, Hermione felt as if every nerve ending in her body was subjected to an extraordinarily powerful electrical discharge, causing racking pain and excruciating muscle cramps. After what seemed like hours, but was in fact only seconds, the curse was released, and she lay curled on the floor, spasmodically twitching.

"Perhaps you may like to rethink your pathetic act of defiance? Much as I would obtain great pleasure from re-educating you, time is regrettably short. *Imperio!*"

She struggled to resist with all that she had left, but was unable to smother the compulsion to drink the vile mixture. As soon as she had swallowed the potion, Voldemort released her from the curse. She slumped to the floor, feeling violated and fearing what was to come. She did not have long to wait.

A faint tingle developed along the back of her head, gradually spreading lacy tentacles into her skull and down her neck to her chest. The sensation intensified, becoming warm at first, then building to a searing heat that scorched along her neural pathways, exiting only when it reached the surface of her skin. A blazing, pearlescent light shimmered around her, initially wondrous in its perfection, but gradually mutating into the same sickly green hue of the potion. With a discordant chime, the light then withdrew back into her body, seemingly sucking all the essence from her and settling into an icy, diamond-hard kernel at the base of her skull.

She suddenly vomited violently, all over her tormentor's feet, expelling the contents of her stomach as her mind tried to grasp what had just happened.

"Well, I think we can take that as a sign of success," drawled Voldemort as he silently banished the mess. Dragging her to her feet, he looked coldly into her eyes, searching for more concrete evidence that his potion had had the desired effect.

"Not a trace, not a whisper," he murmured to himself as he let her crumple to the floor, then, laughing maniacally, raised his fists into the air in triumph. His loyal followers watched him warily, clearly having no inkling of his thought processes, and unsure whether they should be showing surprise, fear, or pride in their Lord.

"My dear Death Eaters, you have witnessed a major breakthrough in our quest to rid the Wizarding world of inferior blood. This potion was devised hundreds, nay, thousands of years ago in response to a similar threat to our lineages. In one small vial, I hold the means to visit upon the impure, a return to their filthy origins. A full circle will be their due.

"I have effectively returned the Mudblood to the worthless Muggle that she was intended to be. Her powers are stripped, as is her magical signature. She will remain unrecognisable and beneath notice to any magical person or beings, except those present in this room, and as an added bonus, her Muggle friends and family will not recognise her either. She will be unable to speak of anything magically related, including herself, to anyone magical or their relatives."

He turned to the shattered girl at his feet. "Of course, the *coup de grace* is that you will retain all your memories of your magical nature, but I suggest you keep them to yourself. You wouldn't want to be considered delusional and end up in some institution, now, would you?" Voldemort cruelly laughed at his own warped sense of humour as he carelessly snapped her wand.

Upon awakening, some indefinable time later, Hermione was greeted with the sight of the Death Eaters toasting their Lord's achievement. She caught a glimpse of greasy black hair slipping out from under a hood and realised Severus Snape was among those gathered in the dungeon.

"Aha, our guest awakes! Shall we invite her to celebrate my success?" asked Voldemort.

A few dared to snicker at his sarcasm, but were quelled by a glance from their Master.

"Yaxley, let it be known that the Mudblood has perished, that should give Potter pause for thought.

"Severus, take this filthy *Muggle* and dump her somewhere she can be found by her own kind. Make sure she *is* found though; I want her to suffer, knowing she cannot return to give her paltry aid to Potter. Don't waste any time with her, I want you back at Hogwarts as soon as possible."

Hermione gasped as the full implications of Voldemort's explanation hit home. She could not enter any Wizarding areas without magic, and even if she found a witch or wizard in a Muggle part of town, they would not pay her any attention. She knew she could not tell her story to any Muggles, Voldemort was correct, she would be locked up in a secure ward so quickly, her feet would not touch the ground. Then she realised that without magic, she could not remove the Memory Charm she had placed on her parents, and as she was the only person who knew where they were....

She was grappling with the knowledge that with one small vial of potion, Voldemort had left her with no magic, no family, no friends, no home, and no hope. Defiantly fighting back tears, she glared at the snake-faced psychopath. "I have every faith that Harry can perform the task set to him, with or without my help. Rot in Hell, you evil bastard!"

Snape grasped her roughly by the arm, dragging her bodily from the cave and out to the desolate beach beyond.

"You just can't help yourself, can you, Miss Granger?" he growled in her ear. "Always something to say, usually unnecessary."

"Where are you taking me?" she demanded, uncertain even then, of his true loyalties.

"Somewhere safe, your part in this war is over," he stated abruptly. "Now, come along!" He hauled her to his body suddenly, and then she felt the sickening whirl of Apparition.

On arriving in a darkened alleyway in some unrecognisable part of a city, Hermione pulled away from Snape. Shaking in reaction to all that had gone before, she felt weak and disembodied, as if she had left her real self behind in that dark, damp cave. She glanced at the dark man standing beside her. Could he still be on the side of the Order? Even now, he seemed protective, in his own inimical way. He seemed about to say something important, then hesitated and simply looked into her eyes. She could not turn away and, just for a moment, thought she saw a glimpse of something in his eyes. Was it regret?

In the silence between them she could feel it, feel the absence of her magic, which all of her life had been present as a low-grade thrum in her entire being, not even recognized until it was silenced. Forever. As the adrenaline that had been sustaining her subsided, her show of strength evaporated. Tears fell unheeded as her head bowed, shoulders shaking as she began sobbing brokenly, unnoticed by all, except one pair of dark, oddly glittering eyes.

Snape turned away and pulled a Galleon from his pocket. Waving his wand at it briefly, he pressed it into her hand.

"Never stop believing," he murmured and Disapparated silently away. Her last conscious emotion was that of loss of all hope.

A/N: Based on prompt 93. "Someone has his or her powers stripped away for misuse. Did he/she lose them because of actual misuse or was it a set up? How do they get

them back?"

Chapter One: Team Meetings

Chapter 2 of 18

Hermione is captured by Death Eaters just before the Final Battle. Voldemort forces her to take an ancient potion he has been experimenting with, which effectively transforms her into a Muggle. Bereft of all but her memories, how does she react?

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Chapter 1: Team Meetings

May 8th 1998

In an unassuming street, in an unmemorable industrial city, there was a shabby, brick, two-storey building, just across the road from a neglected playground. If a passerby was to look carefully, he might find on the pillar beside the gate, a small, battered brass plate with the legend, "St Barnaby's Psychiatric Hospital. Est. 1925," inscribed upon its face.

The hospital was government sponsored to care for patients who did not have the funds to check themselves into the more elegant, private institutions in the well-heeled part of town. Staffing was difficult to say the least, as the funding was not generous, salaries were lean, and refurbishment of the facilities was infrequent. The current staff consisted of some who were philanthropic souls bent on saving the world, joined by others who were too jaded and cynical to bother finding work elsewhere. It made for interesting team meetings.

"Right, folks, let's get this meeting underway. Is everyone here? Have you all got coffee, visited the loo, and brought notes? Let me see, Margaret, you are the lead nurse for this patient? Yes? Amanda... social work, Leon... psychologist. Great, on time for once! Now, who would like to start? Yes, go ahead, Margaret."

"The patient was admitted on May 2nd, after spending the night in the local Casualty Department. She had been brought in by Ambulance after having been found collapsed in an alleyway near the hospital. She is female, (yes, Leon, *obviously*), aged around eighteen to nineteen, with no identification found on or near her. Physical examination at Casualty revealed a thin, unkempt young woman, dressed casually, with assorted abrasions and contusions, mostly over her arms and face. There was no apparent injury or medical condition of significance found, and after a few hours' observation, she regained consciousness spontaneously. No, Amanda, there was no sign of alcohol or drug intoxication.

"Since then, she has showed evidence of severe anxiety, responding with fear to minimal stimuli, and has refused to speak. She was referred here under the assumption that she had experienced a serious psychologically traumatic event in the absence of any physical evidence of harm or disease. Since arrival, her vital signs remain stable; she eats little and remains withdrawn and uncommunicative. She was having some sleep disturbance with nightmares from which she woke tearful and shaking, but the sleeping medication you charted has helped."

"OK, that's the official position, Margaret, now what do you think personally?"

"Personally? I think the poor kid's had something really bad happen to her, something so bad that she doesn't want to deal with it just yet, and instead of pushing her, *Leon*, we should be giving her as much TLC as possible in this godforsaken place and wait for her to tell us when she is ready. *That's* what I think, personally, Dr Richardson!"

"Well, that's all very considerate of you, Margaret, but I am not paid to sit around on my hands, waiting for your precious patient to decide it's time to spill the beans!"

"You are supposed to be the "understanding" person in this team, Leon. Pull your head out of your arse and remember what little you retained from that fancy University of yours!"

"OK, OK, boys and girls, there is no need to get personal. Amanda, have you made any progress in identifying the young lady yet?"

"No, sir, but I have checked the missing files at all the city police stations, and none match her description. I have a friend in the Head Office doing a computer search on the surrounding areas. I am still hoping that she will be more forthcoming once she improves a little."

"Right, well, I suspect that all we can do at this stage is to provide for her immediate needs, make ourselves available should she wish to talk, and await developments. Anything else? No...? Right then, back to the front, troops!"

In a small, unadorned room, the subject of the meeting lay on the hard bed, staring at the ceiling. She appeared to be solely concerned with counting the small holes in the panels that lined the ceiling. A tray of food lay barely touched on the bedside cabinet. Her pale face was devoid of emotion, as if she was afraid to let any feelings in or out. Lacklustre hair splayed out on the pillow, framing her frail features. Her faithless hands were the only jarring factor, twisting together endlessly, betraying her inner despair.

From time to time she would let escape an almost silent whimper as a sole tear crept down her cheek, unwanted, unnoticed and unproductive.

The Healer and the Mediwitch in charge of the case were cloistered in a small room off the Dai Llewellyn Ward on the second floor of St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. Their patient, the famous, or infamous as some would see it, Professor Severus Snape, remained in a coma following profuse blood loss and neural toxicity from the bite of the defeated Voldemort's snake, Nagini.

"How is our patient today, Madam Aubrey? Has he shown any change in his aura?"

"Not at all, Healer Pye, he remains deeply unconscious. We have successfully sealed the wound, replenished his blood volume, and eliminated the toxins, but he has shown no sign of improvement. If he hadn't been self-administering the antitoxin and a blood thickener before the bite, he would have been beyond our help before he was found. As it was, he owes Harry Potter his life. If he hadn't returned to bring his body out of the Shrieking Shack, he would not have lasted much longer. I just can't understand why he has not regained consciousness."

"He had been leading an extremely stressful life prior to the final injury, he is underweight and in poor condition; I suspect his body will need more time to recover from that final insult. Nevertheless, Madam Aubrey, remain alert; if he returns to us unattended, he will not be aware of the outcome of the War and may be inclined to flee. I understand from Mr Potter that he is working to clear Snape's name, but the hearing is not yet scheduled, so be aware that some factions on either side may have a vested interest in ensuring he does not wake."

"My staff are aware of the risk. There are wards on his room to prevent unauthorised entry or exit. Mr Potter placed them himself."

"Excellent. Now onto the next case..."

The warded room was light and airy despite the lack of windows. The bed was functional, yet comfortable, but its occupant was unappreciative. His face, gaunt and sallow, showed no sign of awareness of his surroundings, his breathing so quiet one could be mistaken in thinking he had given up his tenuous hold on life. His hands lay above the bedcovers, scarred and still.

A single lily displayed in a simple vase was the only ornament in the room, placed there by the young man he had sworn, by his love for the mother, to protect at all costs.

The house at number twelve, Grimmauld Place stood as a grim reminder to the follies of pure-blood bigotry. Its original family now gone, replaced by the victors of the Wizarding War, Mudblood Lovers and Blood Traitors alike. If the house were sentient, it would have shrugged off the interlopers and taken itself off to a more aristocratic locality. However, it was just a house and so remained to host the post-war meetings of the Order of the Phoenix.

"I don't get it, Harry, why are you so bloody obsessed with getting Snape off the hook. I know he loved your mother and all, but he was still a nasty piece of work! You don't even seem to have time to miss Hermione, Fred and all the others who died!"

"Look, Ron, don't you see? If I let Snape go to Azkaban, that just makes all their sacrifices meaningless. They died to save the Wizarding World from injustice and prejudice, and isn't THAT exactly why Snape is in the situation he is in now? He made mistakes, years ago, but has redeemed himself time and again; how many times has he saved your sorry arse?"

"I know, I didn't see it either until I saw his memories, but you have seen them too. You know what he went through, how hard it was, and yet you are holding on to your old prejudices still. Wasn't it Hermione who always told us to respect him, even if we didn't like him? Didn't she suspect that all was not as it seemed when Dumbledore died? If you really loved her, then respect HER opinions, and help me with his case."

"Now, boys... sorry, young men, it is time you put your differences aside and work together. Harry, you are right; I'm sure this is something Hermione would have done herself if she had been here, and, Ronald, you need to support Harry in this. You don't have to like it, but you DO have to be fair!"

"Sorry, Professor McGonagall, I just can't forget how unfairly he treated us! But I *will* help Harry; just don't expect me to get chummy with Snape if he does wake up!"

"I hardly think Severus is likely to be feeling *chummy* with anyone for a long time yet, and likely never, going by past experience, so your feelings towards him are a moot point. Nevertheless, we all need to remember that until the remaining Death Eaters are rounded up, he will still be at risk."

"Constant Vigilance!"

"Harry! You sounded just like Mad-Eye Moody then, nearly frightened the life out of me! I thought he'd come back to haunt us!"

"Sorry, Ron, couldn't resist!"

In a well-appointed office at the Ministry, the new Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt, closed the file on his desk with a satisfying snap. Harry Potter had for once done his research thoroughly. His findings, together with the memories Severus Snape had given him before the final battle, should easily suffice to clear Snape's name once and for all. The current Wizengamot, having got rid of such parasites as Dolores Umbridge, was for the first time in years a fair and functional organisation. Just before he left the office, he turned and surveyed his domain. Maybe, just maybe, there was a future for the Wizarding World after all.

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Chapter Two: Awakenings

Chapter 3 of 18

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Chapter 2: Awakenings

June 1998

As the adrenaline levels in her bloodstream gradually subsided, the fight-or-flight response was less easily stimulated, diminishing the tremors and withdrawal that she had been exhibiting whenever anyone came near. Her appetite improved; her sleep settled with the help of a mild sedative, and as her brain began asserting itself over the raw, unchecked emotions, Hermione began to think again.

She noticed at first the room in which she had been spending all her time. It was bare of all but the necessary furniture; a hospital-style bed, a bedside cabinet, a single hard chair, and a small, battered locker in the corner. The walls were standard issue, National Health Service drab, with peeling paint on the window sills and worn linoleum covering the floor. There was a nondescript print on one wall and flimsy curtains unsuccessfully covering the windows. The usual hand basin, hand towel dispenser and call bell pronounced the nature of the room as one of many such rooms housing patients in Britain at any one time. This one was particularly tatty.

Hermione had no idea of where she was or how she had got there. The last thing she could recall was the feeling of total abandonment when Snape had left her in the alleyway. She remembered the kindly voices of some of the nurses caring for her over the last few weeks, encouraging her to eat and gently helping her use the bathroom down the corridor. She had been so overwhelmed by depression that she had taken little notice of faces or names and had passively accepted their ministrations without uttering a single word.

The doctor in charge of her case had been to see her several times, but in the absence of any sort of response, he was at a loss as to how to help her. She assumed that she had mentally shut down into a protective shell while her brain processed all that had occurred. Whilst still very depressed, she was now beginning to function more normally.

The hospital gown she was wearing was plain, but covered her decently, and her skin showed no evidence of the bruises she knew she must have sustained at the hands of her abductors. It appeared that she had been there for some weeks. She got off the bed and looked in the drawer of the cabinet. There was an unused pad of paper and a pen, the ubiquitous Bible, and a box of tissues. The small cupboard below was empty. Crossing the room, she opened the locker. Within were only her clothes and shoes.

She peeked out of the door, into a short corridor with two closed doors on the opposite wall. There was no-one visible, but she could hear voices and some soft music beyond one of the doors. Returning to her bed, she sat down and contemplated her situation. It was not promising.

Suddenly, the door swung open and a friendly, round-faced nurse bustled in.

"Oh, it's nice to see you up and about, dearie. We were beginning to wonder if you were ever going to improve. You had us quite worried, you know!" she scolded gently. "My name is Margaret, and I am assigned to your care. Is there anything you need at the moment? Dinner will be soon, and you can come and join the others in the Dining Room if you wish."

"No, thank you," replied Hermione politely. "If it's not too much trouble, I would prefer to eat in here."

"Not a problem; your meal will be brought up in a few minutes. Now, I must be off to let Dr Richardson know that you are up." Margaret finished changing the water in the jug atop the cabinet and left the room.

'Now what do I do?' Hermione asked herself as she waited for the inevitable questions from the doctor. *'I can't tell him the truth or he will assume I am crazy. I have to get out of this place, and that won't happen unless I can convince them that I have recovered.'*

The doctor had obviously decided to let her eat in peace, as he did not appear at her door until half an hour after the plates had been cleared away. For once she had eaten reasonably well and felt a lot better for it. She had formulated what she hoped was a believable explanation for her behaviour.

"Good evening, Miss... er?"

"Granger, Hermione Granger." She answered his unspoken question.

"Well, Miss Granger, I am pleased to be able to talk to you finally. You may be unaware that you have been here for some weeks, obviously suffering from some sort of post-traumatic stress. We have been unable to establish the cause of your breakdown, and I am hoping you will feel able to tell me a little about it now," he concluded gently as he sat down on the chair beside the bed.

She looked up at him sadly and nodded.

"I don't really want to go into details, but I was involved in a longstanding family feud, and because of that I have lost all contact with my family and friends. I think the last straw was finding out that things had been said... and done, which precluded me from ever returning to those I loved." None of what she had said was technically untrue if you counted the Wizarding World as her extended family.

"Is there no hope of reconciliation?"

"No. None whatsoever. What's done is done, I just needed some time to come to terms with it. I have to pull myself together and move on with life."

"There is no hurry, we won't be kicking you out of the door until we are sure you can manage. Would you like to consider a course of antidepressants or some counselling, Miss Granger?"

'Not bloody likely: the last thing I want is for my thinking to be clouded with chemicals and a counsellor to ask far too many awkward questions' she thought bitterly.

"No, thank you, Doctor. I think I would be better to deal with this myself. I appreciate all you have done for me while I have been here, but I am feeling a lot better now, although I am aware I have a long way to go yet," she admitted, to the doctor, and to herself.

"I will ask Amanda, our Social Worker, to see you. She will help you find accommodation and employment if you need it and ensure you are able to support yourself when you leave. In the meantime I want you to rest and give yourself time to recover properly, as I will not be recommending your discharge until I am quite satisfied that you are capable of looking after yourself," he admonished quietly as he left.

She flopped back on the bed, feeling drained with the effort of putting up a good front. She realised that she would have to work hard to maintain a positive outward demeanour when inside she felt a great well of hopelessness that would be so easy to succumb to again.

She refused to go back there, to that swirling abyss of despair. She slept.

The wan figure on the bed twitched, the first spontaneous movement he had made for weeks. A raw groan issued from his throat, then he rolled over and returned to his former motionless state. A ward placed on his bed alerted the attending Mediwitch to his change of position. This was the sign that they had been waiting for, the sign that his level of consciousness was lightening. She entered the room cautiously, at once disappointed and relieved to find him still deeply asleep. She waved her wand over his body, confirmed her suspicion that he was finally beginning to improve, and then went off to inform the Healer-in-charge.

Within a week, his movements in the bed became more frequent, the normal tossing and turning one would expect during sleep yet he did not awaken. His occasional

grunts and moans would startle anyone in the room at the time, as all were anxious about his reaction upon his eventual return to awareness.

The day he woke, he was thankfully alone. No-one was there to witness his sudden lurch up into the sitting position; no-one was present to hear the single word he cried out.

"Granger!"

He had been increasingly tormented by visions of the young witch as he regained consciousness. Mingled with scenes of her final humiliation at the hands of Voldemort, in a surrealistic progression, were fleeting memories of her in earlier years. A bushy-haired, overeager first-year, eyes almost popping out of her head at Sorting; that infernal hand, forever plaguing him in Potions; the fiery look on her face whilst defending Black in the Shrieking Shack, and the fear when the werewolf transformed shortly after; the satisfaction when she outshone her empty-headed peers at the Yule Ball; the unfulfilled need for acknowledgement of her near-perfect brewing, yet an underlying acceptance of the reason why it was never forthcoming; the look, that damn look of trust in her face, before he left her in that alleyway.

His eyes flew open with a start. Looking around, he realised that he was at St Mungo's. Judging by the growth of beard on his face, had been there for some weeks. He gingerly reached up and felt his neck. A long, slightly tender ridge was the only evidence of the devastating wound he had suffered from Nagini's bite. His body was thin, having been sustained magically while he was unconscious. He felt weak, but whole.

On the chair beside the bed, he noticed a copy of the *Daily Prophet*, left by some unknown visitor. Picking up the newspaper, he immediately noticed the headline.

"SEVERUS SNAPE, HERO OF THE WIZARDING WORLD."

Flabbergasted, he read on.

"Today, at the Ministry of Magic, the Wizengamot declared Severus Snape to be not only cleared of all charges that had been laid against him, but also to be considered one of the heroes of the Second Wizarding War and defeat of Voldemort. Due to the indefatigable effort of Harry Potter, Snape's activities as a deep cover spy in the Death Eater camp have been revealed. Potter has provided incontrovertible evidence that Snape's Unbreakable Vow to Albus Dumbledore, who was near death by his own hand, forced him to act in order to further Dumbledore's own plan to win the War. Furthermore, evidence given by students of Hogwarts while he was Headmaster has shown that he did his best to protect them in very difficult circumstances. For this reason Snape has been awarded an Order of Merlin, First Class."

Snape dropped the *Prophet* in shock. Since when had Potter been a champion for *his* cause? Then he spotted the lily on a small table and realised there was only one person who was likely to have brought it.

'So, Potter finally got a clue. About time he realised I was trying to protect his unworthy hide all these years. If only his mother had been there to do the job herself...' His train of thought stopped abruptly, when he recalled all those private memories that he had passed to Lily's son, sure of his own imminent demise. Studying the lily again, he contemplated the implications of its presence and Potter's work in his defence. He really needed to talk to Potter, disagreeable though that task would be. But for the moment, he had just about expended the small amount of energy he had available. On the edge of his awareness, he knew there was something else, something he had to do, but was too tired to consider it further. He slept.

Harry, Ron, Ginny, and the older members of the Order were having a small low-key celebration. They had heard the news about the Wizengamot's final decision on Snape earlier in the day and were toasting the result of their hard work.

"So, did you see Severus today, Harry?" asked Molly while deftly clearing the plates from their meal.

"He was still unconscious, but apparently has been stirring more. The Healers are very hopeful that he may waken soon. Just in case, I left a copy of today's *Daily Prophet* beside his bed. I hope that if he sees that headline first, it will reassure him of the outcome of the War and his safety," Harry replied, linking his arm through Ginny's. "You know, I appreciate the help you all have given me with this. I know some of you," he looked at Ron, "weren't convinced of his innocence at first, but despite that you gave me your full support. I really appreciate that and hope that when Snape comes around, well... he will too."

Ron nearly lost the mouthful of food he was chewing at the thought of Snape showing gratitude to his least favourite students. "Yeah, sure, Harry, and broomsticks will become self-cleaning!"

"OK, OK, I know that is highly unlikely. He's more likely to hex us with something nasty just for our interference with his nice comfortable death, than thank us, but you do see now why I had to help him?" Harry said, chuckling at Ron's discomposure.

Ron raised his hands in surrender. "I give in! He's a nasty old git, but no-one deserves to go to Azkaban just for that. I realise he did what he had to, but I still plan on avoiding him whenever possible. I just wish Hermione was around to see him cleared. She would have been a right pain because she was right all along, but I would be willing to put up with any number of *'I told you so's'* just to hear her voice again... or Fred's," he added sadly.

The gathered company sobered and silence reigned for a few moments. Then Harry lifted his glass.

"To Hermione, Fred, and all the others who gave their lives for our freedom!"

"Hear, hear!" echoed around the room.

A/N: Based on prompt 93. "Someone has his or her powers stripped away for misuse. Did he/she lose them because of actual misuse or was it a set up? How do they get them back?"

Chapter Three: Grieving

Chapter 4 of 18

Hermione is captured by Death Eaters just before the Final Battle. Voldemort forces her to take an ancient potion he has been experimenting with, which effectively transforms her into a Muggle. Bereft of all but her memories, how does she react?

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Many thanks to my clever beta, ladyinthecloak; you are the best! Thanks to the readers for all the lovely reviews so far.

Chapter Three: Grieving

July 1998

It had taken several weeks, but by the middle of July, Hermione had managed to convince Dr Richardson that she was well enough to be discharged. She had forced herself to eat the plain but nourishing meals, taken walks around the untended grounds of the hospital, and quietly chatted with the staff. She had to be careful to avoid topics such as school, family, and friends, but found that by asking people to speak about their own lives, they quickly became distracted from hers. She hid her continued depression and fear for the future under a façade of normal behaviour and activities. Leon had tried to engage her in 'debriefing' sessions, and she had skilfully made use of his lax attitude to work by the simple expedient of not talking to him. He had quickly given up in disgust and complained to anyone who would listen that there was nothing much wrong with her and he was wasting his time, which was exactly the impression she was trying to cultivate. Her magic was gone; her emotions were a shambles; but her intellect was still quite intact and capable of running circles around Leon and his ilk.

Margaret was a little more persistent. In her well-intentioned way, she was determined to find out more about the mystery patient. She would settle herself in for a good natter at least once a day and was most disappointed when her thinly veiled probes into Hermione's past were somehow deflected. Hermione gently but firmly steered the conversation away to other, safer topics. Asking after Margaret's beloved grandchildren usually did the trick.

Late one afternoon, Amanda had come to see her. It was time to sort out her discharge. Hermione had to have a place to live and a means of income before she would be released. As the in-house social worker, Amanda's task was to facilitate this process.

"Right, then," Amanda started without prevarication. "We need to find you a job. What are your qualifications and your work experience?"

"Umm, well, I don't have any A Levels or GCSE passes," Hermione had to admit. She didn't think OWLs, even with Outstanding grades, were likely to get her very far in Muggle employment.

"That's all right, I understand. Not everyone is born to be academic," the social worker soothed, assuming Hermione had sat the exams and failed.

If only she knew she was talking to the so-called brightest witch of her age Hermione thought wryly. Not only did she have to hide her past magical ability, she also had to cover her intelligence. It wouldn't do for Amanda to become suspicious as to why she had no qualifications.

"Do you have any work experience?" Amanda asked next.

That, Hermione could answer. She had done some casual work at a local coffee shop when she was home for the summer holidays to earn some spare cash for treats such as books, good quality parchment, and gifts for her friends.

"I've done a little waitressing in cafes," she admitted, then hastened to add, "but it was only casual work. I don't have any references." She did not want to answer difficult questions about the past.

"OK, that's a start. I'll see what I can come up with. Now as far as living arrangements goes, is there anyone you could stay with, even temporarily?"

"No," stated Hermione baldly. "No-one."

"Then I suggest the local Youth Hostel until you find something more permanent. Dr Richardson is prepared to write you a sick note so you can get a basic benefit until we can sort out a job for you." Amanda was all business as she jotted down notes in Hermione's file. "I'll let you know when we have things organised, but I wouldn't expect it would take more than a day or two." She produced a photocopied list. "Here are the addresses of some local hostels. I wouldn't recommend the one at Potter Place though; we have heard some disturbing reports of suspicious activity going on there," she added.

After Amanda had left, Hermione found herself contemplating her immediate future. During her time spent waitressing in previous summers, she had decided that any length of time spent in that sort of employment would drive her crazy. *Well, no crazier than I am at the moment* she acknowledged. However, with no Muggle qualifications to her name, no references, and no money, she could not afford to be choosy. At least, that sort of job would force her to interact with other people on a daily basis, which could only be a good thing. She checked out the list of hostels and decided to start making phone calls at once; the sooner she was out of this place, the better.

Severus Snape was back. He was not only back; he was back in full, acid-tongued, glowering magnificence. He was pissed off at being alive when he had for years anticipated the final tranquillity of death; he was pissed off at being fussed over incessantly by mediwitches and Healers, who told him he was not yet well enough to leave St Mungo's; he was pissed off at being regarded as some kind of tragic hero by the general Wizarding public; and most of all he was pissed off by discovering that Harry Potter now regarded him as some sort of surrogate parent now that his enduring love for Lily had been revealed. He would much rather deal with an obnoxious, irresponsible, hate-filled Potter than this sycophantic wretch who felt he owed Snape his allegiance. Potter even wanted to take him 'home' to Grimmauld Place when he was finally allowed to leave the Gods-be-damned hospital! As if he hadn't spent enough time in that dreary, unwelcoming old house over the last few years. Hell, he was pissed off just because he was alive and could be!

His wound was healed, as well as it could be. Only time would improve the scarring now. His name was cleared, and with the Order of the Merlin came a substantial lump sum payment in recognition of the contribution he had made to his community. He had his own home at Spinner's End, thankfully now free of the murine freeloader who had been thrust upon him previously. All he really wanted was to be left alone – for once in his life left to do what he wanted, when he wanted.

Snape's continued foul mood tipped the balance in his favour. The mediwitches, fed up with his complaints about the food and the quality of the potions they were administering, petitioned the Healer-in-charge to discharge the dark, scowling wizard. After all, if he could put so much energy into terrifying the staff, he could certainly manage to terrify a house-elf or two. They were unaware that Snape did not own any house-elves.

He gathered up his meagre possessions; his wand, the copy of the *Daily Prophet* with the news of his freedom, his still-bloodstained clothing, and a single lily. As he was about to leave the room, the door burst open, and in tumbled Harry Potter and Ron Weasley, followed more sedately by Minerva McGonagall and Molly Weasley.

"Oh, good, you haven't left yet," gasped Harry, still short of breath from the rush upstairs.

"Evidently," sneered Snape, awaiting an explanation of their presence.

"We just wanted to, well..." Harry faltered, pinned by Snape's gaze.

Molly Weasley took pity on Harry and took over. "We would like to invite you to dinner at Grimmauld Place, once you have settled into your home."

"And I have come to offer you your old position at Hogwarts back. Potions or Defence, whichever you prefer," Minerva added.

"My preference is for peace and quiet. Thank you, Molly, for your invitation, but I believe there will be enough to keep me occupied at Spinner's End for some time before I can indulge in social engagements. Minerva, I must respectfully decline your offer. If I don't have to teach another cauldron-exploding, ingredient-mashing fool ever again, I

will be eternally grateful." He nodded politely to the two witches, then turned to Harry. "Mr Potter, perhaps you could spend some time with Remus Lupin, he would be able to answer your questions about your parents far better than I."

His visitors glanced at each other, none eager to perform the painful duty of informing Snape of the tragic facts.

"Don't you know...? Didn't anyone tell you?" asked Molly finally, a tear forming despite her efforts to remain calm.

"What?" demanded Snape, impatient to be off.

"That Remus Lupin didn't survive the Final Battle." She turned away and sobbed quietly, her personal loss once again brought to mind.

Time seemed to stand still for everyone in the room. Snape paled and turned to Minerva. "Who... who else?"

"Nymphadora, Fred Weasley, Hermione Granger, and Colin Creevey at Hogwarts. Moody, I think you were aware, perished whilst moving Harry last summer. Dobby took a knife aimed at Harry by Bellatrix Lestrange whilst fleeing Malfoy Manor." She sadly recited the list of casualties.

"Tonks as well?" Suddenly, Snape's simmering anger evaporated as if it had never existed. He flopped down on the chair as his legs failed to support him, overcome with grief. So many good people, so much talent lost forever; his life or death paled by comparison. Lupin's death in particular hit him hard. Although he would never have admitted it to anyone, Lupin included, he had considered him as a friend. Snape could not have risked any open displays of comradeship, but the years of brewing Wolfsbane every month were not from mere duty, and his jibes at the werewolf were delivered more as a matter of form rather than with any venom. Remus Lupin had been one of the few people he had trusted.

Severus Snape wept.

A/N: Based on prompt 93. "Someone has his or her powers stripped away for misuse. Did he/she lose them because of actual misuse or was it a set up? How do they get them back?"

Chapter Four: Hope

Chapter 5 of 18

Hermione is captured by Death Eaters just before the Final Battle. Voldemort forces her to take an ancient potion he has been experimenting with, which effectively transforms her into a Muggle. Bereft of all but her memories, how does she react?

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FULL CIRCLE

Chapter 4: Hope

Hermione thanked the manager of the hostel and turned to survey her new living quarters. Her room was at the end of a short, windowless corridor, in which there was also a small bathroom for the use of all six residents of the third floor. The room that she now called home was barely large enough for the narrow bed, wooden chair, wardrobe, and rickety desk that it contained. It was all spotlessly clean, but shabby and badly in need of redecoration. She had stopped at the nearby chain store after leaving the hospital and bought a few essentials with the money advanced from her benefit; a few clothes, cheap but adequate; toiletries; basic food items and utensils, which she had been advised to keep in her room; some pens and paper.

She sank down onto the bed and finally gave in to the despair that she had been holding in for weeks. Her thoughts roiled endlessly, going over the events of the last few months. Her life at Hogwarts, her search with Ron and Harry for the Horcruxes, all seemed to be a dream. She was starting to believe that perhaps it had been a delusion; perhaps she was crazy after all. For hours, she lay on the bed, tears streaming down her cheeks as she considered her future or lack of one. Eventually, she fell into a restless, nightmare-ridden sleep.

Upon awakening some hours later, she listlessly unpacked her purchases and then had a sparse meal of bread, cheese, fruit, and water. Until her job at the café around the corner started the following week, she had to survive on the small amount of money she had left. Fancy meals were off the menu, at least for a while. She craved a nice, hot cup of tea, but could not face the possibility of meeting any of the hostel's other guests in the communal kitchen downstairs.

Hermione delved into the remaining bag she had yet to empty. It contained the few personal effects that had been in her pockets on the day she was picked up in the alleyway. She found her watch, a few old hair bands, a ragged handkerchief, and a coin. Tossing everything carelessly onto the top of the desk, she sat there looking at the paltry remains of her previous life. Suddenly, she picked up the coin. This was not just any coin, it was a wizarding Galleon, the one Snape had given her just before he left.

She stared at the Galleon in wonder. Its existence meant her years at Hogwarts were real memories, not fantasies. Harry and Ron were real people, not products of her imagination. Hermione was overjoyed to find confirmation of her sanity, but at the same time the coin reinforced her loss. There was little to be gained by knowing she was a witch, if she couldn't be a witch. She knew that her only hope lay in the dark, sardonic wizard who had given her the Galleon. Questions she couldn't answer bedevilled her. Was the War over? Who had won? Did Severus Snape survive? Did he remember?

Minutes ticked away endlessly as the group of people observing Severus Snape waited, uncomfortable at witnessing the emotional breakdown of the usually stoic wizard. Eventually he visibly pulled himself together and stood.

"I apologise, that was..."

"Understandable," interrupted Minerva McGonagall. "We have all had months to become accustomed to the dreadful losses, but we still have tears to shed."

"Thank you, Minerva." Snape acknowledged her support by placing a hand on her shoulder, an uncharacteristic gesture for him.

He turned and spoke to others. "Molly, I would be pleased to join you for dinner, but not tonight. Let me have some time to organise myself, then I will be in touch."

"Harry, I am willing to answer any questions you have about your parents. I may not be unbiased with regard to either James or Lily, but I will endeavour to be honest."

Harry simply nodded, too astonished at Snape's use of his first name to voice a response.

"Minerva, unfortunately my answer remains no," he answered her questioning look.

Together, they all made their way out of St Mungo's, Snape surprising everyone, including himself, when he stopped to gracefully thank the attending staff for his care.

As they Apparated to their separate destinations, Minerva and Molly shared a look; perhaps there was potential for Severus Snape after all.

Upon arrival at Spinner's End, Snape waited quietly on the narrow cobbled street until he was sure no other person, magical or Muggle, was present. He carefully checked for any evidence that his wards had been breached since his last visit. Once he was satisfied that there had been no interference, he dropped the magical protection and entered the dilapidated brick house. The sitting room was as he had left it: small, dingy, dusty, and full of books. He lit the candles in the ceiling sconce with a flick of his wand and dumped his bags of supplies on the worn sofa. He quickly checked the rest of the house; downstairs a kitchen, complete with the usual Muggle appliances, old but serviceable; upstairs, two bedrooms and a tiny bathroom with faulty plumbing and a leaky toilet. This was the reality of life as a War Hero. At least he had the time and money now to do something about it if he could be bothered.

Returning to the sitting room, he took the food to the kitchen and stowed it away in the cupboards and the refrigerator. With a stasis charm of his own devising he had neither the need nor the desire to use electricity, but the house was connected to the local network should he require electrical power. A Muggle bank account that he had set up years ago covered any payments required.

After a simple meal of sandwiches and his favourite brew of tea, Snape sat in his armchair and considered his future. Never before had he needed to give this much thought, always assuming that by the time his usefulness to the Order of The Phoenix had run its course, he would be dead. He had never planned for life after Voldemort and was now at a loss as to what to do. There was no way he was going to return to teaching; what he had said to Minerva was a highly edited version of how he felt about *that* course of action. With his endowment from the Ministry and the money he had saved over his years teaching, he had enough money in his account at Gringotts to live comfortably for a year or so, even after improving the condition of his home. That would be mostly a case of some judiciously applied cleaning and decoration charms, although a few pieces of more comfortable furniture would not go amiss, he decided, while shifting his bottom in the hard, lumpy chair.

Postponing the decision for the meantime, he retired upstairs to lie down on his bed for a rest. Despite his reassurances to the St Mungo's staff, he was still not fully recovered and fatigued easily. He had almost drifted into sleep when he was jolted awake by the sudden recollection of the names of the casualties Minerva had listed. *But Hermione Granger isn't dead!*

With a flood of images, he remembered the details of the dreams he had been plagued with at St Mungo's. It was Granger he had to find and rescue from her fate as a Muggle. *That* was what had been nagging at his mind for weeks, the unfinished task he could not remember. His life was no longer meaningless he had a witch to save.

After considering enlisting the Order's help in his quest, he decided against that particular course of action. Not only would no one but he be able to recognise Granger, if he could not find her and recover her magic, it would be distressing to all concerned. Better not to raise their hopes only to dash them later if he failed. This was a task that he alone could perform.

He reached into his pocket and found the Galleon that he had charmed to match its twin, currently, he hoped, still in Granger's possession. He knew she would not be able to read any messages sent by way of the Protean Charm, but he believed that even a Muggle would feel the heat generated to alert the holder of a message. By activating the charm several times a day, there was a possibility that she would become aware that he was searching for her and not give up on the Wizarding world. He touched his wand to the coin and murmured the necessary spell.

Some miles away, in the same city, a slender girl with a mass of curly brown hair felt the coin that she had taken to carrying around everywhere with her become warm, and for the first time in months, real hope set a smile on her face.

A/N: Apologies for the delay in posting. The next chapter is also betaed, tagged and on the way. Based on prompt 93. "Someone has his or her powers stripped away for misuse. Did he/she lose them because of actual misuse or was it a set up? How do they get them back?"

Chapter Five: Searching

Chapter 6 of 18

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Chapter 5: Searching

Hermione found her job at the café unchallenging, but at least it was interesting. All manner of people frequented the trendy coffee shop, from the regulars who sat at the same tables and ordered the same lattes on their way to work, returning later to pick up the office lunch order, to the passers-by who stopped for coffee or a light snack whilst shopping. The latter included groups of gossiping young mothers accompanied by small children of varying ages and behaviours; solitary older men and women who seemed to have little else to do other than sit and watch the world go by; and couples meeting for nerve-racking first dates, bitter arguments and barely concealed fondling under the tablecloth. She treated them all equally, with a welcoming smile and polite attention, but did not get involved with their transient presence in her life. Her employer was a pleasant, fair woman, who appreciated her new staff member's punctuality and diligence and asked no questions about her personal life, which suited Hermione

perfectly.

Twice a day, as regular as Hogwarts' mealtimes, the coin heated. Each time it did so, she felt renewed optimism that someone out there was aware of her continued existence. Hermione, in her usual logical manner, did some research, made notes, and considered the possibilities. She checked the local library's computerised press files. There was one brief report of unusual lights having been sighted overnight in Northern Scotland at the beginning of May, which had been attributed to atmospheric conditions, but there were no newspaper reports of unexplained accidents or murders since she had been abducted. From this she assumed that Voldemort had been defeated, but she had no way of knowing who had survived the battle at Hogwarts or whether there were any Death Eaters still at large. Whether it was Snape activating the coin, or someone else, she felt it likely that they were friend, not foe.

Hermione was almost convinced that Snape was still alive and in possession of the other charmed Galleon. It appeared that he had left her immediately before the final battle took place, and if that was the case, he would have had little time to pass the coin to a member of the Order if he had perished. Furthermore, as he had been regarded as a traitor at the time, he would have had little opportunity to do so. If her erstwhile professor was indeed alive, was he safe and well? Was he truly on the side of the Light? She could not imagine that he would have given her the Galleon if he was not. Presumably he was not locked up in Azkaban, as he had the use of his wand. He could be on the run, or if circumstances had been favourable, living free. Would he have given the charmed coin to another who would not recognise her if she was found? Every question led to more questions until her head was spinning with possibilities. Despite this, she remained positive. Someone, somewhere, was activating that Galleon for a reason.

She had considered returning to her childhood home. She discarded this possibility as soon as it had arisen; the last thing she had done, after modifying her parents' memories and sending them off to Australia, was to set several layers of wards and Muggle-repelling charms on the house. Without magic, there was no way she could safely enter. She likewise could not retrieve her parents, as only she could lift the enchantment set on them and restore their memories. Contacting her more distant relatives, of whom there were few, she had also decided against, as it would be too difficult to explain the disappearance of her parents. Although she missed her parents, she was comforted with the knowledge that they were safe and likely to be doing well as Monica and Wendell Wilkins, sans daughter. Her biggest regret was the distress her disappearance would have caused Harry, Ron and her other wizarding friends. She felt saddened at the knowledge that they likely thought her dead and were moving on with life without her. Her nascent relationship with Ron had been cut off before it had had a chance to blossom, and the might-have-beens were a constant source of emotional turmoil.

The weeks passed, as time does, with the days melding into one another in their similitude. She didn't bother finding a flat. The hostel was cheap, close to the café, and met her simple needs quite adequately. She worked hard six days a week, kept to herself, and, as far as her fellow hostel residents were concerned, was a pleasant but quiet neighbour. On her day off she was often to be found at the library, reading or searching the internet for any news that may relate to wizarding events, as she had not yet given up on finding her way back to the wizarding community. The charmed Galleon was her lodestone, her means to keep faith with the witch she had been, the witch that was still within.

One such day, she was idly sitting in front of the library computer when it occurred to her to search for the name Snape. Having assumed that there would be no references to witches' or wizards' names on the internet, she had never bothered trying before, but she had remembered the snippet of information previously gleaned about the Half Blood Prince. His father was a Muggle. She typed in *Tobias Snape* and waited for the search results. Much to her surprise, there were two references to the name. One was from a genealogical site and confirmed that the Snape in question was indeed her ex-professor's father. The other was from a local council's register of dwellings and had Tobias Snape recorded as a previous owner of a dwelling in Spinner's End, which was in the very city she was in now. Excited, she clicked on the link to the current owner none other than Severus Snape himself. She noted down the address and left the computer to peruse the large city map on the wall nearby. There, just a few miles away, was her hope of salvation. All she had to do was take a short bus ride to the area, then walk a few blocks, and she would be outside Severus Snape's home. Of course, Snape may not have returned there, and if he did, being the paranoid, untrusting man that he was, he was likely to have taken measures to avoid disturbance, but it was a start. A very promising start.

Snape was exhausted. Physically tired, mentally fatigued, and emotionally drained. He had spent the day at the Burrow, trying to make good his promises made at St Mungo's. He was still nowhere near back to full fitness, and the effort of pretending to be fit and well had been hard work, but better than Molly's infernal mothering. He had genuinely tried to keep up a pleasant demeanour and had sat down with Harry to answer his many questions about James and Lily. Surprisingly, the boy had been mature and thoughtful in his enquiry, respectfully avoiding the delicate issue of Snape's relationship with his mother.

Eventually, he had made his excuses, thanked his hosts and Apparated back home. The dreary house at Spinner's End may not have been much to look at, but it was a safe haven away from the well-meaning attempts of Molly and her clan to socialise him. He had cleaned and tidied the house, but didn't really have any inclination to change the décor. A new armchair was his only purchase; having few visitors made buying any other new furniture somewhat redundant. The purchase of some basic ingredients had given him something to do, stocking up his cupboards with medicinal supplies and other commonly used potions. He had no need to work for the next year or so and was enjoying the freedom of living his life as he saw fit, rather than to the whims of one or other of his previous taskmasters. His main mission now was to find Hermione Granger and attempt to restore her magic.

As he sat, comfortably now, in his armchair in front of the empty fireplace, he contemplated his progress. He had Apparated to her parents' home, to find solid wards and anti-Muggle measures in place, presumably Granger's work. Without magic, there was no way she could get into the house. He had visited the place where he had left her and made enquiries in the surrounding area to no avail. Nobody remembered seeing anyone answering to Granger's description. A little Legilimency applied here and there was no more rewarding. Activating the Galleon twice daily was all he could do, hoping that she was alive and well, and had not cast it aside.

Snape considered his next move in his search for the girl. She had not been in a good state of mind when he had left her, so some subtle interrogation at local hospitals, with or without the aid of a well-placed *Confundus*, was next on his agenda. He leaned back in his chair, puzzling over what had happened to Granger and why it had become so important to him to find her. Recurrent nightmares of her capture and treatment by Voldemort had continued to disturb his sleep, each time waking him with a feeling of helplessness and failure. She had become his means of redemption; he had invested in her deliverance from the non-magical world as his way of redressing some of the evil deeds he had done in his role as a spy, and earlier. Furthermore, deep down in that place where he used to have a heart, he desperately wanted to save her, to see that annoying, bushy hair and hear her ask another irritatingly perceptive question. *Don't give up, Hermione*, he thought as he touched the Galleon with his wand. *Don't give up on me.*

The bus wound its way through increasingly seedy areas of town. The houses became more rundown, there was more graffiti on fences and walls, and there was a general air of neglect pervading the streets. Eventually, Hermione stepped off the bus at the last stop on the route. She looked around her and studied the map she had bought. Spinner's End was a few streets closer to the old, disused mill she could see over to her left. *So this is the environment Snape grew up in. No wonder he is so unpleasant and foul-tempered. To experience childhood in a place like this, and later spend years teaching unappreciative, often disinterested students whilst at the same time laying your life on the line for them, spying on an unpredictable, cruel, psychopath, would take the joy out of anyone's life.*

On that thought, she set off down the footpath, looking for the sign that indicated she had reached her goal. Turning down the mean little street, she saw that the buildings all looked as if they had been abandoned long ago. The houses stopped just before the number she had written down. On closer appraisal, she could see a slight distortion in the air beside the last dwelling in the row. Suspecting that the home she sought was Secret-Kept, and thus not visible, she walked toward the exposed wall of the last house. Unsurprisingly she found herself with a strong urge to go elsewhere. Muggle-repelling charms! She smiled to herself; she may no longer have any magical power, but she could still recognise the presence of magic if she knew what to look for. Buoyed by that thought, she settled down on the dilapidated front steps of the house across the street to await any sign of the invisible building's owner.

The tall, ascetic man sitting in the corner of the coffee shop studied the staff who came and went from the kitchen without drawing attention to himself. After several days of discreet questioning of local hospital staff, he had been able to ascertain that Hermione had indeed been brought in to the local Casualty Department and later transferred

to a small, state-run psychiatric institution. She had spent two months there before having been discharged. An enlightening conversation with a mildly Confused social worker named Amanda had led him to this particular location where he was waiting to see whether his search was at an end. He did not want to alert her of his presence by asking for her, as after his talk with Amanda he was unsure of Hermione's state of mind or whether she wanted to be found. He had altered his appearance with a temporary Glamour charm in order to remain incognito. Shorter, brown hair, and hazel eyes, along with Muggle clothes, was enough to render him sufficiently different in appearance to the unsuspecting eye. He would have approached her at home, but the social worker had not been sure of her address on discharge.

By the time the café was due to close, he had determined that she was not there, but would be working the next day. Congratulating himself on a job well done, he paid his bill, left a generous tip for the talkative waitress, and found a quiet doorway from which to Apparate home.

Hermione awoke with a start as she heard the distinctive crack of Apparition. Peering across the road to the source of the sound, she caught a glimpse of a swirl of black fabric which disappeared almost immediately. She knew that by falling asleep, she had missed her opportunity to find out whether Snape was alive and living at Spinner's End, but at least she had confirmed that *someone* was using the house. Warily, she traipsed back to the bus shelter, reluctant to leave, but knowing that she should not linger in such a disreputable area for too much longer into the evening. She planned to return on her next day off.

Snape peered out of the second floor window to the street below. He had noticed a disturbance in his wards and assumed it had been from some passing Muggle earlier in the day. If he had looked further down the cobbled street, he would have seen a familiar figure with a mass of bushy hair wending her way to the corner.

A/N Based on prompt 93. "Someone has his or her powers stripped away for misuse. Did he/she lose them because of actual misuse or was it a set up? How do they get them ba

Chapter Six: Found

Chapter 7 of 18

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Chapter 6: Found

As the bus travelled its circuitous route back to the main city centre, Hermione reflected on all she had learned that afternoon. Firstly, there was definitely a magically concealed house at Spinner's End. Secondly, someone who used Apparition had entered said house. Thirdly, Severus Snape was the registered owner of a property which should be found at that end of the street. As far as she was concerned, the flash of black material she had seen could belong to none other than the man she sought. A wry smile crossed her face as she realised that had she not fallen asleep whilst waiting, she could be at that moment taking tea with her ex-professor instead of riding in a draughty bus back to her solitary meal at the hostel.

At that moment she felt the charmed Galleon develop the familiar, welcome warmth that had comforted her twice daily for the last few weeks. *Soon, Professor... soon*, she thought. Now she had some concrete evidence to follow up, she was unconcerned that she could not return to Spinner's End until the following weekend. Hermione felt confident that the house and its resident would still be waiting for her. All she had to do was stay awake long enough to attract his attention as he Apparated in or out of the street. In the event that he did not appear, she had a back-up plan prepared. She would leave some sort of message on the footpath outside the house to catch his attention as he arrived. It would need to be somewhat cryptic; she was not foolish enough to leave her name and address for any curious Muggle to view, however deserted the area appeared.

After her evening meal of cold meat and salad, Hermione cleaned up her dishes, set clean clothes aside for the morning, showered, and undressed for bed, all the while humming a cheerful tune. Despite the low-grade headache that had become a normal part of life since her unwilling audience with Evil Incarnate, who with any luck was now so many pieces of particulate matter, she felt like life had finally become worth living again. Her sleep that night was for once, nightmare-free.

Snape moved away from the window to the street, having seen nothing of interest. He removed his robes and hung them carefully on the coat-stand in the hall. Having eaten at the coffee shop an hour earlier, he had no need to cook and merely brewed a pot of his favourite, aromatic, dark coffee to sip while planning the next day's mission. His talk with the social worker had left him concerned. It appeared that Hermione had sustained deeper psychological harm than he had anticipated. She had obviously maintained some degree of wit, as she had not revealed to the staff at the hospital the true cause of her distress. For that, he had developed a new-found respect for the young witch. Snape knew that he would have to tread carefully the next day, as he did not want to cause her unneeded distress. He had already decided to use the Glamour again and simply observe her initially.

He rose and climbed the narrow stairs. Entering the small spare room, he stripped the bed and used the strongest cleaning charms he knew on the entire room to remove any lingering evidence of his last *guest*. He had every intention of bringing Hermione home with him once he had spoken with her and did not want any reminder of the rat that had been in residence the previous year. Remaking the bed with crisp cotton sheets and woollen blankets, he topped it with a cosy quilt that he had retrieved from his mother's old linen chest. The wardrobe was thankfully empty, and the desk, which used to be his as a child, was still quite serviceable. He placed parchment, quills, and ink on the desk; a towel over the chair; and a set of his own robes, transfigured to fit the girl he was seeking, into the wardrobe.

If anyone had asked Severus Snape why he was taking so much trouble to prepare the room for an ex-student he had barely acknowledged previously, he would have been unable to provide an answer. In truth, he barely knew himself. His feelings of concern for the witch's well-being and comfort were something foreign to his experience, a product of his immense feelings of guilt at having been unable to prevent her despoliation and his respect for her courage in the face of overwhelming despair.

The day dawned full of hope and promise. A few clouds scudding along on a light breeze were the only imperfection in an otherwise clear, blue, summer's sky. The sweet song of the birds formed a glorious morning chorus, bees were gathering nectar from the myriad of flowers in the park across the road, and already the air was warmed by the morning sun. People were hustling along the street, busy about their lives. The world was vibrant and alive, and for once, Hermione noticed.

She arrived at the café and, with a cheery greeting for her employer, went through to the back room to prepare for the day's work. With her hair already neatly tied back, she only had to don her cheerful red apron and stow away her bag, and she was ready. Returning to the kitchen, she hummed softly to herself as she prepared the delicious sandwiches, cakes, and muffins for the day's customers, who would start arriving as soon as the doors opened at eight.

"Hermione? Are you feeling okay?" asked Shirley, her boss.

"Um, yes... why do you ask?" Hermione turned to her employer and smiled.

"Well, it's just that you don't usually seem so cheerful. Not that there's anything wrong with it, but it's just not like you..." Shirley trailed off, obviously feeling foolish for mentioning anything.

"Oh, I just had a particularly good day yesterday," replied Hermione, not wanting to go into details. How could you explain to someone non-magical that you had spent the afternoon watching an invisible house? She quickly went out to check that all the tables were clean and properly equipped, avoiding any further questions.

The usual morning rush was soon upon them, making further conversation impossible. With her past practice at making complex potions, Hermione found brewing the perfect cappuccino a simple task and had taken over duty at the large, commercial coffee maker soon after commencing employment, much to Shirley's delight. She had been having trouble finding someone, other than herself, who could create the delicious variety of coffees they served all day long. Her new protégé's skill freed her up to circulate around the customers, ensuring they all enjoyed their visit and were likely to return.

Sometime around midday, Shirley noticed the tall, dark, and intriguing man from the day before sitting in the corner. She pointed him out to Hermione, telling her that he had sat at that table all afternoon the previous day just watching all that happened.

"He looks innocuous enough," Hermione murmured to Shirley as she passed, after surreptitiously studying the customer for a few minutes. He was, she estimated, late thirties, with dark brown hair, pale, even features, and hazel eyes. His clothing was casual, a black shirt and pants. *Vaguely familiar too*, she thought to herself briefly, but the lunchtime crowd soon took her mind off the man who seemed content to read a book while consuming a number of espressos during the afternoon. When she had served him, he had appeared to study her closely before ordering his coffee in a voice as rich and mellifluous as his preferred beverage. She looked up and met his hazel eyes, and for some reason they appeared incongruous with his voice. Shaking the feeling off as completely fanciful, she took his money and busied herself making his coffee. As he thanked her, she noticed his elegant hands, with long pale fingers, and for some reason felt a strong sensation of déjà vu.

Towards the end of a very busy afternoon, Hermione realised with an odd feeling of loss that the mystery man had left. She had intended to take the opportunity to make conversation with him once the café quietened down. He seemed to have a purpose to his visit, and she was curious to find out more. Shrugging her shoulders, she realised she had missed her chance and got back to cleaning the tables prior to helping Shirley close up for the day.

Snape waited patiently around the corner from the coffee shop. He knew that Hermione would finish work soon and had placed himself in such a position that he could approach her without attracting undue attention. Having observed her closely during the afternoon, he had come to the conclusion that she appeared physically well and not unduly distraught. She performed her duties effectively and certainly brewed a damn good espresso. *Outstanding, Miss Granger*. He smirked to himself. Once, he had reached into the pocket concealing his wand and wordlessly activated the Galleon. The brilliant smile that briefly lit up her face answered most of his questions about her willingness to be returned to the wizarding world.

Hearing voices at the door of the café, Snape melted into the shadows of the doorway in which he was lurking, waiting until the older woman walked off in the opposite direction. Hermione turned, and as she walked past the doorway, he stepped out into her path.

After helping lock up the shop, Hermione exchanged a few words with Shirley before bidding her farewell and heading for home. No sooner had she passed the next shop when she was stopped in her tracks by the very man upon whom she had been musing earlier.

"Excuse me," she politely asked the man who was now blocking her path.

"I am sorry to startle you," he replied, "but I just wanted to show you something."

Hermione began to feel uneasy. What would a complete stranger have to show her that he couldn't have done in the café? Perhaps he was not as innocuous as he had seemed. For the first time in weeks, she felt acutely the loss of her wand.

He smirked, a very familiar expression, and hastened to reassure her. "No, it's nothing like you imagine. I suspect that you will be very pleased to see this." With that, he opened his hand revealing a golden Galleon, the twin to the one she had carefully stowed in her pocket.

She stared in disbelief. "How did you get that? Who gave it to you?" she demanded, not wanting to accept that the Galleon had fallen into some stranger's hands.

"Why, Miss Granger, I have always had it," answered the man with the familiar voice and the unfamiliar face. She looked at him more closely, and as she did so, he whispered, "*Finite incantatem*." His eyes and hair slowly grew darker until they were as black as night. His hair lengthened, and his nose changed into a more prominent feature on his now easily recognisable face. She stared at him in wonder, wanting to believe so desperately.

"Oh, Professor!" Without really thinking about what she was doing, she fell into his arms, holding on as if she was afraid that if she let go he would disappear. Tears of relief and joy soaked his shirt until she realised just *who* she was clinging to. "I'm so sorry, sir. I didn't mean..."

"Shh," he soothed, "It's all right. You are forgiven." Snape drew her gently away from his sodden shirt and looked into her eyes. She returned his gaze, drinking in his appearance, the first familiar face she had seen since her ordeal. The slight quirk of his lips as he smiled in reassurance was foreign to her, but softened his whole demeanour.

"It is you? I am not hallucinating?" she questioned softly.

"It is I, Severus Snape, the Greasy Git, Bat of the Dungeons, Esq., at your service." He bowed deeply. She giggled at his attempt at humour.

"Now, I must be hallucinating. Professor Snape does *not* make jokes," she declared.

"Ahh, but the Snape you knew had a role to play. Jokes were not part of the repertoire," he answered.

"Yes, I suppose that is true. But what happened? Did anyone...?" She couldn't finish her question, not really wanting to know who had not survived the war.

"You must have a lot of questions. But first, we should take this conversation somewhere more suitable. I don't know about you, but I haven't eaten since breakfast and all that coffee..." He did look a little uncomfortable.

"My hostel is just around the corner. You could... er... use the facilities there," she invited, feeling somewhat uncomfortable thinking about her ex-teacher's bodily functions.

They walked around to her lodgings, avoiding any serious topics. She had taken hold of his hand, not even aware she had done so. He was keenly aware of her small hand in his and her need for reassurance that he was not about to abandon her again. All his protective instincts were out in full force; this young witch had brought about something that had rarely happened before Severus Snape cared.

After he had relieved himself of the effect of numerous cups of coffee, Hermione had showed him her meagre accommodations.

"It's not much, but it's all I can afford," she explained.

"I would very much like you to come and stay at my home," Snape said, watching her response carefully.

"Are you sure? I mean, we have not exactly got along well before, now, have we? What did you call me? I believe it was an insufferable know-it-all," she replied, without conviction. The thought of getting out of the hostel and living somewhere in the magical world was appealing, even if it was with Severus Snape.

"That was some years ago, young lady. I think we could manage to adjust ourselves to tolerate each other, if we try hard enough. Besides, there is the matter of your *little problem* to address. You don't think I am going to let that callous bastard succeed in what he did without some attempt at reversal, do you?" Snape's expression showed his hatred of his late, but certainly not lamented, master.

Hermione felt a great weight lift from her shoulders. Not only was Snape willing to take her in, he was prepared to put his prodigious mind to the problem of her magic or lack thereof. She turned to him and beamed.

"Give me twenty minutes to pack and let the manager know I am leaving," she asked. "Then you can take me to Spinner's End." His eyebrow quirked as he realised that she knew where he lived. This was definitely a question he would address later.

After Hermione had her few possessions organised, Snape shrunk the bags and placed them in his pocket. She settled her account and tidied the room. Once again, she placed her arms around Snape's waist as he Side-Along Apparated them to Spinner's End.

As they entered the hidden house, Snape suddenly seemed ill at ease. Hermione looked at him and, in typical Gryffindor fashion, simply asked what was wrong.

"It's not much," he said diffidently, indicating the small living area and kitchen. "There are two bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs, and a potions lab in the basement. I have never needed much here, as I used to spend all my time at Hogwarts. The place has been a little neglected over the years."

Hermione realised he was embarrassed about the state of his house. She smiled at him warmly, melting the ages-old ice around his heart and gave him yet another spontaneous hug. "I don't care what it looks like. It feels like home to me!"

A/N: Based on prompt 93. "Someone has his or her powers stripped away for misuse. Did he/she lose them because of actual misuse or was it a set up? How do they get them back?"

Chapter Seven: Safe

Chapter 8 of 18

Hermione is captured by Death Eaters just before the Final Battle. Voldemort forces her to take an ancient potion he has been experimenting with, which effectively transforms her into a Muggle. Bereft of all but her memories, how does she react?

Disclaimer : the characters aren't mine, the Potterverse isn't mine, even the prompt is someone else's!

Many thanks to my lovely beta, ladyinthecloak, for all your help and suggestions. Where would I be without you?

Chapter 7: Safe

Hermione pulled away, realising she was once again hugging her ex-Potions master. She noticed the bemused expression on his face and couldn't hold in an unladylike snort.

"If I had known that a hug was all it took make you lose the smirk, I would have started doing so years ago," she proclaimed.

"If you had started hugging me years ago, I think the two stooges would have had you immediately committed to St Mungo's," he retorted promptly without so much as batting an eyelid at her impertinence. He showed her into the sitting room. "I will take your bags up to your room. Make yourself at home while I organise something for dinner. Feel free to peruse the bookshelves," he added as he left the room.

She took the opportunity to explore Snape's modest living area. It was larger than it appeared at first sight, due to the numerous book-laden shelves placed against nearly all of the walls. The candles in the ceiling fitting were augmented by several candlesticks on the mantle over the fireplace, the desk, and some side tables. Faded, floral, seventies-style wallpaper covered the walls; a thinning carpet showed evidence of many years of use. However, the room was clean and tidy. The couch looked as if it had seen better days, but the new armchair by the hearth looked inviting. She spent a few minutes admiring the professor's extensive collection of books, then chose one at random and settled into the armchair for a browse.

When Snape returned to the room twenty minutes later to announce that dinner was served, he found her curled up in his chair, sound asleep. She looked so peaceful he was loath to disturb her. Placing a warming charm on the food, he selected a book himself and settled onto the couch to wait.

He soon found that he could not concentrate on his book. His eyes kept straying to the sleeping girl opposite, whose hair was sprawled over the arm of the chair, the wayward curls shot with amber lights from the fire. Her face was soft in repose and to his surprise, quite pretty. Snape had always been too occupied with maintaining his cruel, unjust, Death Eater persona to pay any attention to his students, unless he was berating them for their lack of prowess in class, or misdeeds out of it. This was no mere student before him; this was a talented, powerful, young witch, who had placed her faith in him her greasy, unpopular, former professor. She was so young and vulnerable; he found himself feeling emotions he had never experienced before: protectiveness, compassion even tenderness. At that moment, he realised she was awake and studying his face.

What are you thinking, Professor? Hermione wondered, having caught the warmth in his expression before he noticed her gaze.

"Ah, you are awake. Have a nice nap in *my* chair, did you?" He smirked, but the glint in his eyes told her he was teasing. Another first.

"Yes, thank you," she replied nonchalantly, stretching as she uncurled herself. "It is a *very* comfortable chair." She curbed the urge to saucily poke out her tongue at him, but was very tempted. She was astounded by her own bravado and even more so by his tolerance and good humour when he simply lifted his eyebrow at her response.

"Well, there is no need to stand there with your mouth open. Dinner is on the table." He swept out to the kitchen, leaving her with her mouth agape at his abrupt change in demeanour. *Now that's the Severus Snape we all know and love* she reminded herself as she followed.

After consuming some hot food and two mugs of tea, Hermione felt more like her usual self. It was time to find out what she had missed.

"I'm not sure I want to know this, but please tell me what has happened since you left me in that alleyway," she asked once they had cleaned up the dishes and returned to the sitting room.

Snape sat on the couch beside her, then proceeded to describe the events leading up to Voldemort's defeat, attempting to gloss over his own near-death experience in the process.

"So, Harry had to die in order to destroy the last Horcrux, but Professor Dumbledore didn't see the need to inform him of *that* minor fact? How could he have been so manipulative, so... so... cold?" Hermione was incredulous at the late headmaster's perceived duplicity.

"He always did what needed to be done, despite the costs. I resented it more than anyone," said Snape bitterly, "but I knew deep down that victory could only be gained for a price."

"And that price was nearly Harry's life... and yours," she murmured as she reached over and gently pulled his collar away from the still angry scar on the side of his neck. She tentatively ran her finger down the disfigured skin and felt a tear form as she realised how close this man had come to death. His hand clasped hers and held it for long moments as they both contemplated the fragility of life.

"How did you survive the attack?" she asked quietly.

He shuddered at the recollection of that night. "You don't spend so many years around a madman with a snake that size without taking some precautions. I had developed an antivenin after Arthur Weasley's encounter with Nagini and dosed myself as soon as I Apparated to Hogwarts that night. I passed out initially from the shock, but as the antivenin took effect, I roused for long enough to use the Blood-Replenishing potion and Dittany that I always carried, which must have kept me alive until I was found and transported to St Mungo's." He stared down at his hands, as if surprised again that he was still alive.

"I spent weeks there in a coma, but eventually woke to find Potter had become my self-appointed champion and had decided to use my memories to clear me of all my crimes."

"Memories?"

"Memories of my past, including those of my Unbreakable Vow with Dumbledore and his order that I kill him," he explained.

"I always knew you were on the right side, that you were a good person. I'll admit that I didn't always understand why you behaved as you did, but I always respected and trusted you." Hermione squeezed the hand that still held hers, prompting him to continue.

"You would be one of few." She noted a suspicious gleam in the corner of his eye as he carried on. "By the time I was allowed to leave the clutches of the Healers, I was free to return here. I didn't find out about the other casualties of the battle until the day I left."

Hermione was sobbing by the time he had informed her of those who had been lost or seriously injured and found herself enclosed in the comforting strength of Snape's arms. After a while, she realised that he, too, was quietly weeping at their losses.

Rousing himself some time later, Snape carefully lifted his now sleeping charge and carried her up the stairs to her room. Removing her shoes, he tucked her into bed and brushed her forehead with his lips. "Sleep peacefully, Hermione," he whispered, then extinguished the candles and softly closed the door.

Waking early the next morning to another beautiful summer's pre-dawn, Hermione felt well rested and relaxed. Despite her sadness about all she had learned the previous evening, the reassurance and strength she had received from Snape had boosted her morale. The fact that he had cried with her was strangely soothing. Knowing that he was mourning as much as she gave them common ground. Their relationship had changed, and it was a good change. She still felt embarrassed to have been so emotional in his presence twice in one evening, but somehow knew that this Severus Snape was a different man from the one she had known before, who would not judge and find her wanting. There seemed to be a bond of grief and succour they had formed the previous night, which was never to be sundered.

Another problem became evident as she was lying in bed thinking about her new companion. Her bladder was announcing its fullness urgently, having not been emptied the night before. She threw the bedclothes aside and dashed out into the hall. Unsure of which of the other doors lead to the bathroom, she crossed her fingers and opened the door opposite her room. A startled Severus Snape, clad only in a damp towel, looked up as she burst in, her mission obvious. "Next door along!" he called, smirking at her blush.

After her immediate problem was relieved, Hermione took a few moments to splash some cold water on her heated face. Who knew the dour Potions master had a body like that? *Just as well he is twenty years older than me, or Ron might have competition* Recalling her boyfriend immediately derailed her train of thought. How were her friends? They had been told she was dead. Had Ron moved on in the last few months? What would she tell them? Should she even contact them if they wouldn't recognise her? She groaned with the weight of it all.

Peeking around the bathroom door, she ascertained that Snape had gone downstairs. She gathered up a change of clothes and retired back into the bathroom to shower, clean her teeth, and gather up the courage to face the, hopefully now fully dressed, man below.

Delicious aromas of coffee and bacon were wafting out of the kitchen as she entered. The chef turned and indicated that she should take a seat at the small dining table. "Breakfast will be ready in a few minutes, help yourself to coffee. I have mine black," he ordered, apparently oblivious to her residual embarrassment. She poured the coffee and took her place at the table. Snape placed a plate laden with lightly scrambled eggs, bacon, and tomatoes in front of her. Catching her eyeing the amount on the plate, he quirked an eyebrow. "Eat! You need to put on some weight; you are far too thin, young lady."

"Sorry," she replied. "I was just getting used to the idea of decent food again. My wage from the coffee shop doesn't exactly stretch far enough for cooked breakfasts."

"Well, while you are living here, you have no need to skimp on meals."

"But, I don't want to be a burden..."

"Nonsense! I am quite able to feed you. Now eat!"

She ate.

After the meal, she insisted on cleaning up the kitchen. It was only fair that if he cooked, she would clean. As she put away the dishes, she turned to her host.

"Professor?"

"Severus. I have not been your professor for over a year. In fact, I am no longer teaching at all, so unless you wish to call me 'Mr Snape,' which seems a little redundant, as we are both adults living in the same house, I would suggest you use my given name. Or, of course, if you have any other, preferred epithet, feel free to use that." He smiled at her expression. "You had a question?"

"Well, I was thinking about Harry, Ron and the others. I would rather not see them just yet. I'm not sure how I feel about them not being able to recognise me the way I am, and if we can't find a way to reverse the potion..." She looked at him pleadingly.

"You would rather they didn't know you were alive," he completed for her.

"Er... yes," she agreed. "They have had several months to get used to me not being around, and if I had to remain as I am, I think I would rather return to a wholly Muggle life."

"What about Mr Weasley? I believe he was extremely distraught at your supposed demise. Would you not want to reassure him?" Snape asked gently.

"I realise it has been hard for them, with all the other losses as well, but if they can't recognise me as myself, then it won't ever be the same, will it?" she responded.

"I can see your point of view, Hermione. I will respect your wishes and not inform anyone of your presence here. I have few visitors; there is little likelihood of you being discovered. Now I presume you will need to be at work soon. If so, I will Apparate you there when you are ready. However, I suggest that you tender your resignation, as we will need to concentrate on finding a way to restore your magic. Do not be concerned about money," he added, noting her frown. "As I said before, I am quite capable of providing for you. If you want to earn your keep, I am sure I can find some household chores for you to do..."

"You obviously haven't tasted my cooking," she muttered under her breath.

"Ha! I heard that! Don't tell me there is something that Hermione Granger doesn't excel at? Never mind, cooking is just like brewing Potions. Follow the instructions carefully, be accurate with your timing, and once you know what you are doing, add a little panache. You can't go wrong." He waved his hand with a flick. "See... *panache!*"

She giggled at his sudden outburst of uncharacteristic silliness, then sobered.

"Seriously, I don't know how I can repay you for everything you have done. You could have just as easily forgotten about me," Hermione replied, once again hugging her benefactor.

Severus responded with a light kiss to the top of her head, as if to a favoured child. "Don't worry about it just now. Run upstairs and get your bag, it's time to go," he instructed.

A few minutes later, she stood in the circle of Severus' arms once again as he Apparated them to the quiet alleyway near the café. This time, she was acutely aware of his nearness, but also of the feeling of safety and comfort derived therein.

A/N: Based on prompt 93. "Someone has his or her powers stripped away for misuse. Did he/she lose them because of actual misuse or was it a set up? How do they get them back?"

Chapter Eight: Favours

Chapter 9 of 18

Hermione is captured by Death Eaters just before the Final Battle. Voldemort forces her to take an ancient potion he has been experimenting with, which effectively transforms her into a Muggle. Bereft of all but her memories, how does she react?

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Many thanks to "You-Know-Who," my divine Master, oops, beta. She now can be revealed as ladyinthecloak.

Chapter 8: Favours

After leaving Hermione at the café, Severus Apparated to the Burrow. Molly Weasley opened the door and welcomed him with a delighted smile.

"I don't believe it! Severus Snape, here on a visit of his own accord! Come in, come in. Would you like a cup of tea and some biscuits, fresh out of the oven?" Molly bustled about in her customary way, bringing out the teapot and cups before he had a chance to reply. "What brings you here today, Severus?" she asked.

"I came to let you know... no sugar, black, thanks... that I have become involved in a research project, which will take up a lot of time over the next few months. I do not wish to appear discourteous, so I thought I would let you know that I may be too busy to come to Sunday luncheon for a while," he explained.

"Now, you are not using that as excuse to turn into a hermit, are you?" Molly questioned suspiciously, her maternal instincts on full alert. "Just what is this research about?"

His years as a spy had taught Severus many things. The best way to keep a secret was to tell as much of the truth as possible. "During my time with Voldemort, I discovered he was researching ancient potions which could strip one's magic. I believe it is imperative to look into the possibility so we can develop a countermeasure, should it ever become necessary. Evil did not disappear with the demise of Tom Riddle. It is simply quiescent until the next madman takes it upon himself... or herself... to try and gain ultimate power."

"But how would you test the theory?" Molly looked concerned.

"I have no idea at this stage, but the very idea of a potion that would do such a thing is extremely dark and dangerous. I do not want any hint of my research falling into the wrong hands."

"Of course, dear. I am quite sure that you are the best person to take on the task. But you will be careful, won't you? We don't want to lose you now you are back with us," she said worriedly.

"I will be taking extra care; do not doubt it, Molly. However, I ask one thing of you. Will you explain this to Potter and the others? I don't want any inquisitive visitors interrupting what may become delicate research work."

"I will ensure that they keep their noses out of places they shouldn't be," Molly assured him. Severus smirked to himself. He had simultaneously ensured that he would not have uninvited guests, as he had no doubt Molly would spread the word that he had something *important* to do, and avoided the need to make excuses for attending the, now customary, Weasley Sunday luncheon. He was disinclined to remind Hermione of what she had lost by leaving her alone once a week while he went off and socialised with her friends. He finished his drink, thanked Molly for her help, and left for the next destination on his list Malfoy Manor.

The Malfoy residence was in its usual immaculate state. After having had his accounts frozen after the war while he was under investigation, Lucius had, with somewhat more effort than usual, charmed himself out of trouble and back home free. His scion had been exonerated, despite his attempts on Dumbledore's life and allowing the Death Eaters into Hogwarts, by virtue of his youth and the extreme pressure to which he had been subject by Voldemort. The Wizengamot had accepted that a seventeen year old with his family under threat could not be held responsible for his actions, no matter how obnoxious he had been until then. Narcissa was lauded for her aid to Potter in the final stages of the battle and emerged from the whole affair squeaky clean, gaining much sympathy from other mothers in the wizarding world. The entire family had finally realised that their previous attitude was no longer fashionable or desirable. They remained shocking snobs, but it was more on the basis of wealth, not bloodlines.

Lucius greeted him warmly. Severus was one of the few people who willingly availed himself of the Malfoy family's hospitality. The elder Malfoy, activities whilst a Death Eater notwithstanding, had remained one of the few wizards whom Severus had known as a boy; those ties were not easily abandoned. Their sincere endeavour to change their ways had allowed him to forgive, if not forget, their past transgressions.

"Welcome, my friend," Lucius said as he summoned a house-elf to bring drinks. "To what do we owe the honour of your visit today?"

Severus smiled at his host's formality. "I am looking for information. As you know, I have always been most impressed with the... *scope*... of your library. There is certain information that I suspect Riddle may have obtained from one or more of the darker texts you own, which may be useful for future reference. I wonder if I may be granted access to those tomes." He knew that he would have to tread carefully with Lucius Malfoy. His library was a source of pride and pleasure to the wealthy wizard, and he did not allow anyone, even his friends, to take liberties therein.

"What sort of information are you seeking?" queried Lucius, eyes narrowing in speculation.

Again, the truth, or at least part, was needed to convince his friend to cooperate. "Do you remember when Riddle used Potter's friend for an experiment in stripping magical powers?"

"Oh, yes, the Granger girl, wasn't it?" Lucius sneered, his new tolerance not yet extending to the witch who had, until recently, been his adversary.

Restraining his desire to hex his friend for his obvious grudge, Severus replied. "Yes, that was her name. I am concerned that if the knowledge of this potion ever came into the wrong hands," he glanced pointedly at Lucius, "it could cause all manner of havoc."

Lucius raised his hands in denial. "Don't look at me, my dear man, I have had quite enough of plotting and mayhem. I just want to live with my family in peace whilst of course becoming even more disgustingly wealthy in the process... through legitimate enterprises. Please find the books you require and any others that may be similarly tainted and remove them from this house. I want nothing left here that could implicate me in any future insurrections."

Severus remained impassive, although internally he was celebrating the ease at which his friend had acquiesced. Perhaps Lucius really was trying to make a fresh start. He supposed that nearly losing your beloved family and wealth could do that to a man. As he had experienced neither, he really could not comment.

"Well then, lead on, and I will liberate you from anything that would generate suspicion," he quipped, sweeping his hand before him in mock elegance.

Lucius lead him to the library and gave him carte blanche to browse. Several rewarding hours later, Severus had a pile of a dozen books which looked promising for his quest and two further piles of potentially dark texts, copies of which he mostly owned himself. He shrunk the former set into a manageable size and placed them into a pocket in his robes. The rest he showed to Lucius who requested that he dispose of them as he saw fit. There were to be no further tarnishes to the Malfoy name if Lucius had anything to do with it. Farewelling his newly virtuous friend, Severus Disapparated, smirking at the haste with which he had been shown the door with his dodgy cargo.

There was one more visit to make, and then his to-do list was complete. Arriving at the gates to Hogwarts, Severus looked up towards the castle and stiffened his spine. He had not been back since the final battle. Too many nightmares were associated with that day and the preceding traumatic year. Too many students tormented by the Carrows, despite his best efforts. Too many looks of disdain and animosity as he acted the part of the loyal Death Eater. That was the real reason he had not taken up Minerva's offer of reinstatement; the memories were still too raw. Steeling himself, he conjured his Patronus to send a request for entry to the Headmistress.

The silvery shimmer took shape. It was... different.

Shaking his head in puzzlement, he sent off the message and contemplated the significance of his new Patronus. Within a few minutes, Minerva herself had come to let him in the gates.

"Severus, what a lovely surprise. Please forgive the delay, as it took me a moment or two to understand the message. I had never seen that Patronus before. Was it not a doe previously? Never mind, come in. Have you had lunch?" Minerva was uncharacteristically garrulous in her astonishment at seeing Severus.

"Yes, and no," he replied succinctly, as she shepherded him up to her office. A house-elf was quickly despatched to bring tea and sandwiches as they settled themselves into the somewhat more comfortable chairs than had been there the previous year.

"I see you have redecorated the place," he remarked in an attempt to distract her from her interest in his Patronus.

"Well, Slytherin colours are not really my cup of tea," she retorted, pleased to see he had taken notice of the changes. The room was no longer full of the gadgets and trinkets that Albus Dumbledore had preferred and did not have the austere, sparsely furnished appearance that had served as his penance. Now it was smart, yet welcoming; with a large cherry wood desk; comfortable, chocolate, leather chairs; and a few of her favourite plaid cushions in red and gold, as befitting an ex-Gryffindor Head of House. The inevitable portraits of previous Heads of Hogwarts were present, hung on deep red walls. Dumbledore's was conspicuous by its absence.

"So, Severus," she began after they had their steaming teacups in hand. "What has brought you back to Hogwarts?"

"I have come to request a favour, Minerva. Well... two, in fact," he told her.

"Ask away, my dear. Anything that is in my power to provide is yours; you know that," she responded generously.

He proceeded to give her the same, almost complete, explanation that he had given Molly and Lucius. She nodded encouragingly, asking some intelligent questions as he described the problem.

"So what can I do to help?" she asked. "It is clearly a sound idea to try to find out what Riddle knew, but I cannot see what use I can be to you."

"I wish to have access to the Hogwarts library to check for any relevant texts in the Restricted Section. I would also like to borrow Albus' Pensieve."

"Of course you may use the library, any time you wish," she replied. "But why do you need the Pensieve?"

"I would like to examine my memories of the night Riddle described his research. There may be further clues to be found, things I did not think important at the time." He omitted to mention that he would be closely observing the effect the potion had had on Hermione and was planning to examine her memories as well.

"I agree. That would be useful. I do not use the Pensieve at all, so you may borrow it as long as you wish." Minerva disappeared into another room and returned bearing the heavy stone bowl. "Please be careful, Severus. Meddling with one's memories can be dangerous."

"I promise to take every precaution." Severus reassured the concerned, older woman. "Now, I must go to the library and start work. Thank you for your assistance."

He headed down the stairs after leaving his ex-colleague. A thorough search of the Hogwarts library yielded nothing of use, which was as he expected. It hadn't hurt to check, however. He had just enough time for a quick trip back to Spinner's End to deposit the Pensieve and the books from Malfoy Manor, then it was time to meet Hermione.

Hermione had once again surprised Shirley with her jubilant mood. Her boss's enjoyment was soon diminished by her protégé's apologetic resignation, effective two weeks hence. However, Shirley was a good-hearted woman, who was simply pleased that Hermione was happy and had lost her air of resignation with life. She wondered what, or who, had been responsible for the girl's sudden change of outlook.

With something to look forward to, the day passed quickly, and promptly at five o'clock Severus walked in the door. Hermione could not contain her expression of delight, which generated more than a few quizzical glances between her colleagues. Surely this dark, sardonic-looking man was not the reason for her good cheer?

Greeting Severus with a hug, she invited him to sit awhile as she finished up. Shirley brought him over a cup of espresso, murmuring, "I don't know who you are, sir, but here's a free coffee in appreciation of what you have obviously done for Hermione."

He muttered his thanks and sipped at the hot drink while he observed the young witch he had come to collect. She was efficiently wiping down the last of the tables, leaving them ready for the morning crowd. Her hair had become a little dishevelled during the busy day, and her apron bore one or two coffee splashes, but her smile was engaging, and she moved with grace and alacrity. He raised his cup in salute and was rewarded with a cheeky wink.

Once they had returned to Spinner's End, Hermione turned to him curiously.

"What have you been up to today, Severus? You look absolutely worn out."

"Gathering a few necessary items for our research. It took a bit of travelling around." He explained what he had been doing that day as he organised something simple for dinner.

"Sounds like you have a plan," she said as she gathered up the dishes to wash. "No, you sit down. I will sort these out." She gently pushed him back into his chair.

"If you start channelling Molly Weasley, I will take all those books back," he threatened with a mock scowl.

"Ah, you can't scare me now, you old fake," she retorted, "I know all it takes is a hug and you melt."

"I'll have you know I am not *old*. I am only forty; a wizard in his prime." He posed, à la Lockhart, as she threw a wet dishcloth at him with deadly accuracy. "You can't do that! I was your fearsome Potions professor," he spluttered. "Can't you be just a little terrified... or at least pretend?"

"No, sorry. I stopped being scared of you years ago when I found out that you worked for the Order. Why would you hurt us if we were on the same side?"

"What, you mean all that acting the greasy git was for naught? Dammit, woman, I could have sworn you lot were all shaking in your boots whenever I came near." He grumbled at her as they went into the sitting room.

"No, that was only Neville. He shook enough for all of us. Why did you have to terrify him so? He wouldn't have been half bad at Potions if you hadn't loomed so often in his vicinity."

"Longbottom needed to build a spine. All the mollycoddling the other staff subjected him to did nothing to strengthen him for the last battle. I tried to engender some sort of response that didn't involve trembling or making catastrophic errors, but..."

"I suppose he did repay your efforts by killing Nagini in the end," she replied thoughtfully.

"Yes, I owe him a debt of gratitude for that little service," Severus acknowledged.

"So, what is your grand plan?" Hermione asked as they drank the tea she had made.

"Firstly, I have one question. Yesterday, you knew that I lived here. How did you find out?" he asked.

"Do you not realise your name is listed in council records as the owner of the house at this address?" She explained how she had traced his address using the internet.

"You mean, all this time this place has been carefully protected by various charms, and any Muggle could have looked it up on a computer?" Severus was horrified.

"Just as well those Death Eater purebloods were too superior to use Muggle technology, wasn't it?" she chuckled at his expression.

"Do *not* tell me any more. I do not need to know what other secrets of mine are available to be *Googled*!"

Hermione couldn't help the loud laugh that escaped her at this. "I didn't... think you knew anything... about Muggle technology," she managed to gasp out between giggles.

"The rest of them may have been purebloods, but I was brought up in a Muggle neighbourhood. We did not have computers while I was growing up, but I kept in touch with developments when I could."

He noticed his companion had quietened and was rubbing her temples. "What is it? A headache?" He was suddenly concerned.

"I seem to have had a headache ever since that night with Snakeface. It's always present, but mostly I can ignore it. Sometimes it becomes worse; must have been all the laughing," she explained glumly.

Severus got up and went into the kitchen. He returned with a vial of headache relief potion. Smiling her gratitude, Hermione downed it in one swallow.

"That works so much better than Muggle analgesics." She sighed with relief.

"That headache may be our first clue," Severus suggested. "Has anything else changed since then, apart from the obvious loss of your magic?"

"Not that I am aware of, although when I was here on Sunday I could sense this house, even though it was invisible."

"You were here? On Sunday?"

"Yes. I fell asleep on the step across the road and just missed you as you Apparated in. If you hadn't found me at the café, I would have been back this weekend. Just call

me your personal stalker!"

"Unfortunately, sensing the house probably doesn't mean anything. I believe Muggles can do that; they just do not know just what it means. I think we both need to put our memories of what happened into Albus' Pensieve and study them to see what we have missed," he suggested.

"And what was happening around us perhaps," Hermione added. "I know that I wasn't in any state to notice anything else at the time."

"I will just go and fetch the Pensieve." Severus was almost up out of the chair when he found Hermione barring his way.

"I think you have done enough for one day. You are exhausted with all that Apparating around. We can start tomorrow. Tonight, you are going to bed early!"

He quirked an eyebrow at her bossiness. "What did I say about channelling Molly?" he asked.

"Molly has nothing to do with it. I spent seven years organising Ron and Harry. You don't think *you* present a challenge after those two, Mr Bat-Of-The-Dungeons? Now go to bed!" she ordered.

"Always said you were an insufferable Know-It-All," he muttered as he somewhat gratefully headed up the stairs.

"I heard that!"

A/N: Based on prompt 93. "Someone has his or her powers stripped away for misuse. Did he/she lose them because of actual misuse or was it a set up? How do they get them back?"

Chapter Nine: Fear

Chapter 10 of 18

Hermione is captured by Death Eaters just before the Final Battle. Voldemort forces her to take an ancient potion he has been experimenting with, which effectively transforms her into a Muggle. Bereft of all but her memories, how does she react?

Disclaimer : The characters aren't mine, the Potterverse isn't mine, even the prompt is someone else's!

Betas are wonderful people. Commas quail before them, sentences stand to attention, and errors are evicted. I love my beta, ladyinthecloak, she is awesome!

Chapter 9: Fear

Severus Snape had never felt this way before. He sat in his armchair staring morosely into the hearth at nothing in particular as his mind roiled with an unfamiliar emotion. Fear. Irrational, uncontrollable, fear. It wasn't that he hadn't been in situations before where he had feared for his life, or even his sanity hanging around with tyrannical maniacs does that to a wizard but always before he had just cause to be afraid. This time, he knew there was nothing to fear, but that did not stop his heart pounding and his stomach clenching at the thought of what he had to do.

This time, it was the fear of his own reaction that made his palms sweaty. He knew that after dinner he and Hermione would be entering the Pensieve to view their memories of the evening when she had been kidnapped. He also knew that Voldemort's familiar, Nagini, had been slithering around in the background that night. Nightmares of the giant snake's fangs piercing his skin, agonising pain, and blood endless amounts of blood still disturbed his sleep. Severus was terrified of losing control in the Pensieve. He was supposed to be there to be Hermione's strength, her support, while she watched what was probably the most traumatic experience of her life, and all he could think of was facing that accursed snake.

After hours of unproductive self-recrimination, Severus finally roused himself to fetch a sandwich and make a start on the books he had gathered from Malfoy Manor the day before. He sorted the books into three piles: *probable*, *possible*, and *bloody unlikely but worth a look anyway*. Most of the texts concerned ancient rituals and potions, with a few heavily imbued with dark magic. These he set aside for his own perusal, leaving the safer books for Hermione to read. Earlier in the day, he had dropped her off at the cafe, promising to make a start on the research while she was at work. He opened the first book and began reading the dry, brittle pages.

By the end of the afternoon, he was no further ahead and had developed a pounding headache. The first two books had yielded nothing of value. There was no mention of any sort of potion to strip a witch or wizard's magical power or anything else remotely useful. He found one tiny lead in a footnote of the third book which referred to a supposedly mythical elixir, the *Bind and Conquer* draught, which had been mentioned in early folklore as a way to control one's enemies. The author of the book, Ignatius Prott, had dismissed the legend as nonsensical and made no further mention of it.

Dinner that night was a quiet affair, with both Severus and Hermione wrestling their inner demons as it drew closer to the inevitable trip into the past. Without words or explanation needed, they each understood the other's trepidation and drew strength from their combined determination to see it through. The dishes were cleared away, making room for the Pensieve on the kitchen table. Severus looked at the young witch at his side and raised an eyebrow. "Shall we?" he asked.

She reached out for his hand. "It's now or never," she replied staunchly, looking him in the eye. "Let's do it."

Severus placed his wand-tip at Hermione's temple. "Bring the memory of that night to the surface. Think carefully about that evening and when you are ready, squeeze my hand." He had never retrieved a memory from a non-magical person before and was a little unsure whether the process would work. Thankfully, his wand extracted the silver threads of memory from Hermione's mind in exactly the same way as it would do from his own later. He placed the memory in the stone bowl.

"Do you think I will be able to see anything?" Hermione questioned anxiously. "Do you need magical ability to enter a Pensieve?"

"I don't know," he replied honestly. "No-one I know has had occasion to invite a Muggle to view a Pensieve memory. However, it does not require a wand to enter, or any incantation, so we will have to assume that it will work unless proven otherwise."

"I suppose the worst that can happen is that I will look silly standing here with my head stuck in a bowl," joked Hermione in an attempt to lighten the mood. "Makes me think

of the times when I was a child and Mum had me inhale steam from a bowl when I had a cold."

"Why on earth would one do that?" Severus enquired, wondering at the odd behaviour of Muggles.

"No Pepperup!" she explained succinctly.

"Right. Enough delaying tactics. Are you ready?" he asked.

"As ready as I will ever be."

He folded her hand into his, and together they entered the Pensieve. Finding themselves in the dimly lit cave where Hermione had been brought to Voldemort, they surveyed the scene. Voldemort was studying the memory Hermione and then touched her face. The real Hermione shivered and gripped Severus' hand more tightly. As they watched Rookwood bring his master the vial of potion, she felt Severus stiffen. Slithering menacingly around the periphery of the room was Nagini. His eyes were locked on the snake and his hand was trembling in hers. She reached up to brush his cheek, distracting him from the snake. "It's only a memory, Severus. It can't hurt you now. Watch the other snake instead."

With a shake of his head and a grateful squeeze of her hand, Severus turned to the scene in front of them. Voldemort was chanting something over the vial. They took close note of the dirty green colour of the liquid and the spirals of steam that emitted from it. The incantation was not audible at that distance, something they both knew they would have to allow for next time. As the memory Hermione was subjected to the *Crucio* curse it was Severus' turn to reassure the young woman beside him.

"I can't believe it was only a few seconds," she said as she turned to him. "It felt like hours at the time!"

"It always does," he replied bitterly.

They watched as Voldemort cast *Imperio*, then forced Hermione's past self to drink the potion.

"I should have been able to throw that off," she murmured to her companion.

"Not when *he* was casting it, Hermione. You were a powerful witch, but even I would have had difficulty overcoming an *Imperio* cast by him."

Observing her struggles after ingesting the potion reminded Hermione of the feelings she had experienced. The sensation of heat, travelling from her head, through her chest and out through her skin; the brilliant light display, followed by the intense feeling of pain in her skull which resulted in losing the contents of her stomach over the evil tyrant's feet, all came back to her in exquisite, agonising detail.

Voldemort's triumphant exposition of his heinous deed sickened and disgusted both observers. After her wand had been broken, they found themselves back in the kitchen, the room spinning a little as they adjusted back into the real world.

"Did you see the way the light changed?" Severus asked urgently. "It emanated from your skin, bright and pure, then became contaminated with the same colour as the potion..."

"And went back into my body," she finished. "I remember now, I felt something drawing the power out of me, but it did *not* leave my body. I know what happened to it! The headache I have had since then..." She faltered, not really sure of what she was trying to describe.

"It's still there. The potion has *bound* your magical power, not stripped it. The headache's source is likely to be your body attempting to reverse the process," Severus postulated.

"But if that is correct, then Riddle was deceiving his own followers. He clearly stated that my powers and magical signature had been stripped, not bound. Why would he do that?" Hermione was puzzled by the inconsistencies between what they had seen and what Voldemort had said.

"That was the nature of the beast, my dear. He trusted no-one. Very few were privy to his innermost secrets or plans. Such a powerful potion could have been his own undoing, should it have fallen into the wrong hands," Severus explained.

"Or the right ones..." she muttered.

"Indeed"

Some time later they had come no closer to solving the problem of unbinding her power. Severus had found the footnote which mentioned the supposedly mythical elixir.

"I think we can safely say that Prott was not as learned a scholar as he believed," Hermione had grumbled on seeing the note.

Perusal of the other books had yielded no further references to the potion. Hermione had been sitting on the couch re-reading one of the books she had checked earlier in the evening while Severus sat at the desk. She looked up and saw his frustrated expression as he leafed through one of the darker texts. Reminiscing over her days in Potions class, brewing potions while Severus scowled and marked substandard essays, she did not notice that he had stopped reading.

"What?" she asked when she finally noticed he was studying her.

"Nothing in particular. I was just wondering whether our discovery tonight has changed your feelings on contacting your friends?" he replied.

"Oh, Severus, I don't know what to do. Part of me just wants to go to them and explain everything, hoping that we will find a way to reverse this, and part of me is afraid."

"Afraid of what?" he asked gently, moving over to sit beside her on the couch.

"I'm not sure. What if things were never the same again? What if it hurts too much to be watching them all perform magic when I can't? What if Ron doesn't want me any more? I just don't know if I am strong enough to live like that." She turned to him and found comfort in his now familiar embrace.

"You are one of the strongest people I know, Hermione. Never doubt that. Whatever the outcome of this, you will endure and no doubt become even stronger." He held her as she recovered her composure.

Looking up at him, Hermione asked, "Why are you being so good to me? I was one of your most annoying students; why bother?"

"Hermione, you must understand. I have done some dreadful things over the last twenty years, not all of them for the right reasons. When I woke up at St Mungo's, I was livid at finding myself alive, having decided many years ago that I would not survive, or indeed should not survive, the final confrontation. Once Riddle was dead, my task was done, and I could rest in some semblance of peace. I behaved abominably to the staff there for a while, but when I was told of those who had perished, I felt ashamed for my ingratitude. I was alive, when truly good people had died for the same cause and I dared to be angry.

From then on I vowed, this time to *myself*, that I would try to behave in a manner that would honour their sacrifice. I suppose that attempting to find and return you to those that care for you was partly my way of thanking them for putting up with me for all those years," he explained.

"So, I am merely a debt to be repaid?" She pulled away from him, aghast that she had believed him to truly care about her wellbeing.

"No, no, no," he protested, taking her hands and not allowing her to leave the couch. "I said partly. The main reason was the look on your face when I left you in the alleyway. Your trust in me, despite your despair, was heart-wrenching, even for an old spy whose heart had been in hiding for years. For that reason alone I would have searched for you. No-one should have that done to them, especially such an intelligent, powerful witch," he declared vehemently. "I regretted deeply that I was powerless to stop what had happened and that I had to abandon you there. My only consolation was that I had left you in the same city as my home, which would help when looking for you later. Unfortunately, I was the only person able to recognise you, so your fate was left in my somewhat sullied hands."

Hermione smiled and squeezed those hands that still held her own. "You are a good man, Severus Snape, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise, least of all yourself! If anyone can help me, it is you. I feel privileged to have seen the real man behind the mask, and I hope you will let others see him too."

"I am not sure if I can live up to your expectations. I may no longer be spying with death stalking my every move, but I am still essentially a disagreeable, impatient man with few social graces," he asserted.

"Oh, rubbish," she disagreed. "You just need a good hug every so often. Everyone needs a little TLC to thrive, and you have had precious little of that over the years."

"TLC?" he asked.

"Tender, loving care," she explained. "It's a common Muggle expression."

"And you are just the witch to provide that, are you?" he teased, relaxing in the balm of her regard.

"Well, that's what friends are for," she replied.

"Friends," he repeated. "I like the sound of that."

For the remainder of the evening, they curled up comfortably together on the couch, relaxing with light conversation and a mug of Snape's Special Recipe Hot Chocolate. They had agreed that further research could wait until the following day, and another trip into the Pensieve was needed, this time to view Severus' memory of events. When Severus caught Hermione discreetly trying to hide a yawn, it was his turn to issue orders.

"Bedtime, miss!" he ordered in as authoritative tone as he could muster while disentangling himself from the witch beside him.

"Yes, Methuselah," Hermione retaliated automatically, turning and kissing him on his forehead. "Don't forget to put your teeth in to soak and take out your hearing aid."

"I beg your pardon?" he asked, dumbfounded by her suggestion.

"Don't tell me I just said that," she groaned and hid her face. "Dad used to say *Bedtime, miss!* to me and that was my standard reply as I got older.

"Oh, thanks. You really know how to wound a man's ego." Severus gave her a mock scowl as he stood up, faking an aching back and stiff joints. "Will you help an old man up the stairs, dear?" he croaked in a pathetic voice, "I'm not sure this ancient fellow can manage by himself."

For his efforts he was rewarded with a cheeky grin and an elbow to hold.

"Come along, old man. Let's get you into bed," she teased.

He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively and growled, "Your place or mine, little girl?"

For that he received a sound whack on the arm and no help at all in climbing the stairs.

"Can't blame a man for trying," he grumbled, extinguishing the lights.

A/N: Based on prompt 93. "Someone has his or her powers stripped away for misuse. Did he/she lose them because of actual misuse or was it a set up? How do they get them back?"

Chapter Ten: Closer

Chapter 11 of 18

Hermione is captured by Death Eaters just before the Final Battle. Voldemort forces her to take an ancient potion he has been experimenting with, which effectively transforms her into a Muggle. Bereft of all but her memories, how does she react?

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Chapter 10: Closer

Hermione awoke earlier than usual the next morning and tossed back the bedcovers, eager to start the day. With fresh clothes in hand, she opened the bedroom door to make her way to the bathroom. Heading towards the bathroom she paused outside Severus' door, having heard an odd sound. Listening carefully, she heard occasional soft moans from within his bedroom. Concerned that he might be unwell, but not wanting to open the door in view of her previous experience, she leaned over and put her ear to the wooden panel. A few moments later she blushed and stood abruptly as she recognised the nature of the repetitive slapping sounds, heavy breathing, and groans that had increased in frequency, then suddenly ceased with a drawn out sigh. Living in a tent with two teenaged boys, who had thought their occasional early morning stress relief was going unnoticed, left her with no doubt about her house-mate's activities. *Well, that's the final proof that Severus Snape is human like the rest of us* Hermione smirked to herself as she showered and dressed for the day.

When Severus joined her in the kitchen a little later, he was nonplussed at his companion's inability to look at him without a smug smile crossing her face.

"What?" he demanded, wondering if he had missed something while shaving.

"Nothing," Hermione replied, turning away to tend to the toast, something she *could* cook without mishap. Trying very hard to act maturely and ignore what she had heard, she eventually succumbed and collapsed into fits of giggles at the thought of the usually composed man in the room with her *spanking the monkey*. She abandoned the toast to its fate and leaned against the kitchen bench trying to control herself.

"Something has obviously amused you this morning, Hermione. I would appreciate it if you shared the joke," Severus crossed the room to salvage his breakfast.

"I... I... can't...," she gasped.

"Talk?" he suggested, smirking at her inability to speak coherently. He poured a cup of coffee and handed it to her, patiently awaiting enlightenment.

"Don't make me explain, Severus," she pleaded. "For your own sake!"

"Merlin, woman! Just spit it out. What can be so bad if it is so funny?"

"Truly, you don't want to know," she muttered, buttering a piece of toast.

"Hermione..."

"All right, all right! I have one thing to say to you. *You are not in this house alone. Use an Imperturbable Charm!*" One look at the dawning comprehension on his face and she relapsed into uncontrollable laughter. He flushed scarlet and covered his face with his hands.

"You didn't...?" he asked, not really wanting to hear the answer.

"I did," she replied, slowly calming down.

"Oh, bloody hell!" he exclaimed. Then he peered at her curiously. "What's so funny then?"

"Oh, I don't know. It's just the thought of you... doing that..."

"And am I so old that I should not have normal male urges?" he asked irritably. "Teenagers! You think anyone over thirty is past it!"

She snorted. "Well, next time you have an urge, could you deal with it behind an Imperturbable? I nearly burst in there bearing a cold washcloth and ice to soothe what I thought was a sick wizard. That would have cooled any urges mighty fast!" She laughed as she saw him flinch.

"Yes, yes. I get it. House Rule Number One: No Sexual Urges Without Charms in Place. Anything else? Want to make a decree on when we are allowed to release wind?" he grumbled, still a little annoyed at her laughter.

"No, not at the moment. I will let you know. But, seriously, I suppose it is like finding out your parents are still having sex. You know it happens, but you really don't want to think about it. It was bad enough in the tent with the boys when they thought no-one else was awake! It just seemed so out of character for the Professor Snape I knew before. I suddenly had images of you, in the Potions supply room... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you," she apologised, seeing him cover his eyes again as his shoulders started shaking. As he looked up she realised he was no longer upset with her insensitive ramblings, but was trying hard to suppress laughter of his own.

"The Potions supply room..." he finally got out. "With you lot breaking in whenever you felt the need? Hardly a place I would go for some privacy!" He gave in and roared with laughter.

Relieved that he had finally seen the funny side of the whole situation, Hermione relaxed and finished her breakfast, enjoying the sight and sound of his laughter. When they were ready to leave for the café, she put her arms around him as he was about to Apparate. "I don't think you are that old, you know," she murmured.

Later that day they prepared to enter the Pensieve, this time using Severus' memory of the incident. Much as they had expected, the scene played out exactly the same as before, only confirming what they had seen the previous evening without adding any further information. The rest of the evening was spent poring over dusty old books, reading every word, trying to find any reference to the *Bind and Conquer* draught.

"This is hopeless," Hermione complained after reading the same section for the third time. This supposed potion does not seem to exist, even though we have seen it in action! Is there any chance that Riddle developed it himself?"

"No. His potions prowess was above average, but he required my services for a reason. I doubt that he would have been capable of the patience required for such a task, even if he had the skill. There must be something we are missing!" Severus slumped back into his chair, frustrated at their lack of progress.

"Well, I don't know about you, but I have had enough of this for one evening. How about you teach me how to make your divine hot chocolate and we relax for a while?" she coaxed.

"What... let you in on one of the few secrets I have that you haven't already exposed?"

She flushed at the reference to the episode that morning. "Oh, get into the kitchen and make your top-secret brew then. Just don't complain that I don't take a turn!" she said as she gently shoved him in the right direction.

That evening set the scene for the next few weeks. Once Hermione had worked out her notice at the café, she spent part of the day cleaning up the house, the Muggle way, only enlisting Severus' aid for tasks that were too heavy or out of her reach. Severus would continue trawling through the books, twice visiting the Hogwarts library and Malfoy Manor looking for any references to the *Bind and Conquer* draught that he had missed previously.

They would re-enter the Pensieve every few days to refresh their memories and work together on the books in the afternoons, but to no avail.

The latter part of the days were spent talking and relaxing. Sharing their past histories drew them closer together, and they were often to be found together on the couch reading, talking, or listening to music. Oddly enough, they shared similar tastes, with Hermione a great fan of some of the same bands that Severus had grown up with. They loved classical music and debated over the relative merits of Tchaikovsky, Grieg, Strauss, and Mozart. Every few days, Severus would Apparate them to a park or Muggle area of the city so Hermione could enjoy freedom and fresh air with little risk of discovery. Although they knew her friends would not recognise her, they were aware that seeing Severus with a strange woman when he was supposed to be deep in important research would generate unwelcome interest.

Severus even took up the challenge of teaching Hermione to cook. Sure enough, under his expert tuition, she quickly realised that following a recipe was not unlike brewing a potion. The panache, however, she left to him. They ate well and were living in a house that was now spotlessly clean and tidy. The close living arrangements had rapidly created an easy familiarity with each other that astounded but pleased them both.

Hermione was pottering about in the kitchen cleaning up after lunch. Severus had headed upstairs for a shower some ten minutes earlier when she heard sounds of

running water lots of running water. Wondering what was going on, she ran up the stairs to investigate, tea-towel in hand.

Stripping off his clothes, Severus had turned on the shower and, after waiting a few moments for the hot water to run through the old pipes, stepped in. No sooner had he done so, when with a loud bang, the shower pipe had split below the taps. Water cascaded sideways from the large tear, covering the floor in moments. He looked around for his wand in vain; it was still in his bedroom. All his clothes and towels were saturated. There was no option he had to run for it. He opened the door to make a dash for his wand and ran straight into a very bemused Hermione. With no time to explain, he grabbed his wand from his bedroom, returned to the bathroom and cast *Reparo* on the waterpipe. He vanished all the water and turned to find Hermione leaning against the door frame shaking her head in wonder.

"The pipe burst..." he started to explain.

"I see that."

"I didn't have my wand..."

"I see that too."

"Then, why are you shaking your head?" he asked.

"I just don't think I've ever seen such a white body. For Merlin's sake, Severus, get some clothes on, or at least get some sun, the glare is blinding!" Once again she dissolved into laughter at his expense.

This time, he was prepared. "What? You don't like what you see?" he posed, unashamed of his nakedness. "I'm deeply wounded!"

"Oh, Severus. I am just afraid your magnificent body will spoil me for other men," she replied cheekily as she started twirling the tea-towel in her hand preparing to strike.

"You think to take on a man armed with a wand, miss?" he threatened, unconvincingly.

"Two wands," she retorted wickedly as she gave up tormenting him and returned to the kitchen.

"What did you delinquents get up to in that tent?" he muttered, once again amazed at her lack of embarrassment at the situation. Apart from that first morning, she did not appear at all disconcerted when she had occasionally seen him since, often wrapped in only a towel, returning to his bedroom after a shower. She treated him in the same way she had treated her two male cohorts at Hogwarts; with affection, humour, and no small amount of bossiness. What bemused him was that somehow he seemed to enjoy her friendship, something he never thought he would experience, especially with a former student. *I must be losing my edge*, he thought, *letting a teenaged girl order me around*. Then he sighed and realised dwelling on it only made him more confused. He needed to find someone he could re-sharpen his tongue against and soon.

As if by sheer force of will alone, he suddenly felt a disruption in his wards. They had a visitor. Dressing rapidly in a clean white shirt and black trousers, he hurried downstairs and silently indicated to Hermione that she needed to go up to her bedroom until he had dealt with the caller.

He opened the door just as Lucius' cane was about to make his presence known.

"Lucius. How delightful to see you at my humble abode. Do come in." He gestured to the sitting room. Please, take a seat. I am just out of the shower. If you will excuse me for a moment I will finish dressing, then perhaps... tea?"

"Or something a little stronger, if you have it?" suggested his aristocratic friend.

"Certainly. Make yourself comfortable. I will be with you in a few moments." Severus swept out of the room in as dignified a manner as his bare feet would allow. Opening Hermione's door quietly, he explained who their visitor was and advised her to stay upstairs until Lucius had left. Quickly donning socks and shoes and charming his hair dry, Severus returned to his guest, collecting a bottle of reasonable wine on the way.

"So, Lucius. How can I help you?" he asked, filling the glasses.

"I have no particular reason for calling," Lucius replied. "Narcissa remarked to me today that we had not seen you for some time, and I promised to check to ensure our old friend wasn't overworking himself. I see, however, that you are looking uncommonly hale and hearty at the moment. One would have to wonder whether a woman was involved." He raised a pale eyebrow mockingly.

"Unfortunately, I am not as well-endowed with female admirers as you, my friend. Perhaps quiet living and working in a field of my choice may have something to do with my improved well-being. You know yourself that being at the beck and call of a power-crazed psychopath is not exactly conducive to good health." He raised his glass in a toast. "To a peaceful life!"

Lucius joined him in the toast, and after exchanging a few non-consequential pleasantries, left to reassure his wife that Severus was indeed safe and well. After checking his wards remained intact, Severus called up to Hermione that it was safe to return downstairs.

"What did he want?" she asked as soon as she entered the sitting room.

"He was merely checking up on my health," he replied. "There are some people who do notice if I am not seen for a while, you know."

"Of course there are," she soothed. "It just seemed uncharacteristic of Lucius Malfoy to go out of his way for someone else, is all."

"I suppose I can hardly blame you for that opinion," he admitted. "You haven't exactly ever seen Lucius in a normal social situation, now have you?"

"That was purely *his* choice," she retorted. "I can't understand why you are still friends with him, after all he has done."

"I'm not sure myself," Severus said quietly. "I just know that he is one of the few people left that I knew as a child, and he seems to have genuinely reformed since the war. His family meant the world to him, and when they were threatened... well, let's say he, like a lot of fathers and husbands, was prepared to do anything to keep them safe."

"After he managed to convince the Wizengamot that he was not a danger to the public, his time in Azkaban having been taken into account, he was fined heavily and remains subject to some close controls on his activities. He has taken pains to keep his business enterprises above board and made a point of employing Muggle-borns as well as purebloods. I think he has actually realised that he has gained a lot of skilled workers that he would not have previously considered. Enough to say that he has had his eyes opened and is now only an elitist in terms of wealth. I don't think *that* will ever change. Besides, you are well aware of the things I have done in the past and that some of them were, much to my regret, done willingly, and yet you appear to have forgiven me. Is my forgiving Lucius so very different?"

"I see your point," said Hermione, contemplating the information. "However, I would still prefer that we didn't invite him to dinner anytime soon."

"I don't think that is likely to be an issue, my dear. Lucius would probably starve rather than eat at this poor excuse for a dwelling."

"There is nothing wrong with your home, and if he can't see that, it's his loss," she defended proudly.

"Our home, Hermione, for as long as you want to live here," Severus offered.

"Oh, Severus, you are so sweet," she whispered as she hugged him tightly.

"Sweet. Now I know I've lost it," he grumbled as he returned her embrace.

A/N: Based on prompt 93. "Someone has his or her powers stripped away for misuse. Did he/she lose them because of actual misuse or was it a set up? How do they get them back?"

Chapter Eleven: Progress

Chapter 12 of 18

Hermione is captured by Death Eaters just before the Final Battle. Voldemort forces her to take an ancient potion he has been experimenting with, which effectively transforms her into a Muggle. Bereft of all but her memories, how does she react?

Disclaimer : The characters aren't mine, the Potterverse isn't mine, even the prompt is someone else's!

Many thanks are due to a very special person, who shall remain anonymous until after the reveal. Ta Da! It's ladyinthecloak!

Chapter 11: Progress

The late summer sun was lingering overhead in a flawless sky. The gentle hum of the bees and cheerful sound of children playing in the distance provided a pleasant backdrop to the peaceful scene.

Severus was reclining gracefully on a checked blanket spread across the soft grass while Hermione gathered up the remains of an impromptu picnic into a large wicker basket.

"Mmm, this place is lovely, Severus. Tell me again how you found it." She turned to find he was dozing quietly in the warmth of the sun. "OK, maybe later," she chuckled to herself as she brushed a fly off his nose.

She studied his face, marvelling at the changes that had been wrought to the formerly intolerant, embittered man. She no longer thought of him as her teacher and enjoyed his company enormously. His intelligence, insight, and even his biting wit, which provided many entertaining moments, made him a attractive person in her eyes, physical appearance notwithstanding. Spinner's End had become her haven and the sleeping man her anchor.

She desperately wanted to restore her magic and return to her previous life, but she knew that whatever happened, Severus Snape would be an integral part of it. Sure, he would probably remain acerbic and antisocial, she could tell that by the way he dealt with people outside their home, but in private he was relaxed and open. She still felt privileged to bear witness to the man beneath the robes both metaphorically and physically although the latter had not been repeated since the infamous Plumbing Incident the previous week. She sniggered at the memory of the once stiff and formal professor posing naked for her appraisal. How could she ever have thought that he did not possess a sense of humour, warped though it was?

Just then, she caught sight of two figures walking hand in hand across the sward of grass heading directly towards them. She gently nudged the sleeping wizard. "We have visitors," she whispered.

He blinked and rubbed his face, peering in the direction of the approaching couple. "Just some passers-by," he decreed and closed his eyes again.

As they drew closer, Hermione felt a tingle of recognition. The young woman's glorious red mane and her companion's slightly scruffy black hair suddenly became recognisable.

"Severus!" she cried urgently. "It's Harry and Ginny! They can't see me here with you!"

He startled into action and looked her briefly in the eye. "Are you sure?" he asked, giving her the opportunity to declare her presence.

"I'm sure," she gasped, not ready for an unplanned confrontation.

She felt the trickle of cold as he quickly Disillusioned her before they got any closer.

"Why, it's Severus," she heard Harry remark as they became nearer. "But, where is the woman you were with a moment ago?"

"What woman, Potter? Have you been trying out too many Weasley products lately?" he replied congenially, he and Harry having developed a tolerance of sorts for each other after his discharge from St Mungo's.

"I was sure I saw a woman here," Harry persisted, unable to reconcile what he saw a few moments earlier with the current state of affairs.

"Must have been a shadow. I haven't seen any women here. Do you really expect to see *me* with a woman?" Severus attempted to distract Harry.

"I didn't expect to see you with a picnic, let alone a woman," Harry quipped.

"*Harry!*" chided Ginny as she slapped his shoulder. "Play nicely!"

"And they wonder why I call them dunderheads," murmured Severus under his breath to his invisible companion.

Carefully gathering up the picnic basket and blanket, shrinking them to put in his pocket, Severus turned slightly away from the younger couple.

"Time to be off. Research to do, you know." He excused himself as he discreetly grabbed Hermione and turned on the spot, Apparating them back to Spinner's End.

"Thank you, Severus," she said gratefully. "That was quick thinking on your part."

"You are welcome, my dear. Hopefully it will not be necessary for too much longer."

"Oh, I really do hope so," she replied wistfully as they went inside.

"You seem to be getting along better with Harry now," Hermione observed as they were preparing dinner together.

Severus stopped slicing onions and contemplated her statement. "I will have to admit that his brush with death appears to have matured him somewhat, and delving into my memories has caused a certain... er... attitude adjustment. We can actually manage to hold a conversation without any temptation to reach for our wands now."

Hermione latched onto part of his explanation. "What was that about your memories? I know you told me they showed Harry that he had to die to get rid of Riddle's last Horcrux, and he used them as evidence that you only killed Dumbledore under his own orders. Was there something else in them that changed Harry's attitude?"

Severus decided it was time to share the one thing he had avoided disclosing to Hermione the true nature of his relationship with Lily Potter. During one of their evening conversations, he had told her that they had been friends before starting at Hogwarts, but had allowed her to think the friendship had faded naturally with time.

"I thought that I was dying after Nagini attacked me. Potter and Weasley were there in the Shrieking Shack. It was essential that he had the information to defeat Voldemort. Foolishly, I believed that by giving him other memories, of the circumstances of Albus' death and my feelings towards his mother, that at least my motives would be understood after my own demise. When Potter found out that everything worthwhile I had done over the years was due to my love for his mother, he started treating me like some sort of surrogate parent. It was most disconcerting! However, once I had discovered that Remus Lupin had not survived the final battle, I realised that the boy had no-one left who had known his parents. No-one but myself. I spent some time answering his questions about them, and since then we have developed a little mutual respect."

"You loved Lily? So much that you risked your life to protect her son? So why were you so horrid to him?" she asked gently.

"I did not want him to know how I had felt about his mother. His eyes reminded me of her, every time he was near... reminded me that she had sacrificed her life for him. I also had to maintain my cover, but I freely admit that his likeness to his father made that relatively easy. I regret now that I allowed my personal feelings to influence my approach to his Occlumency lessons, although I realised later that his connection with Riddle at the time would have made it virtually impossible for him to succeed, even with a better instructor," he explained.

She finished preparing the vegetables for the stir-fry they were preparing and put them aside. Studying him thoughtfully, she asked, "Do you still love her?"

"I think I will always love the memory of her," he responded quietly, meeting her gaze, "but I realised after surviving the snake's bite that life goes on, whether one wants it to or not. I have finally accepted that Lily has gone and that she was never mine. I suppose I have put my past behind me in more ways than one." Severus smiled as he started to cook their dinner. "Now, let's move to a more cheerful topic than my lousy love-life! What have you planned for dessert?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing!" exclaimed Severus for the third time in the last hour. He ran his hands through his hair in frustration and slammed the book he had been examining onto the desk. Looking up, he realised there had been no reaction to his latest outburst.

Hermione was pacing the floor, muttering to herself hair wild, face screwed up in concentration, with a smudge of ink on her nose. Every so often she would stop and make a brief note on the parchment she was using. Finally, she appeared to come to a conclusion.

"That's it!" she cried.

"What's it?" he asked, totally confused by her behaviour.

"We need to go back into the Pensieve again," she declared.

"Again? What is there to gain? We have examined those memories so often I could describe it in my sleep," he complained. "We know every word that was said."

"But, what about the words that were not said?" she asked enigmatically.

"What do you mean?"

"Wait until we get in there," she replied, grabbing his hand. "Come on!"

Trusting her judgement to be sound despite her peculiar actions, Severus followed her to the kitchen where the stone bowl sat on the table, ready for use if needed. They entered the Pensieve as usual, hand in hand; neither would consider any other method. This time, Hermione led him to a different position, between two Death Eaters to the right of Voldemort.

"But we can't see your memory self well from here," he protested.

"No, but we can see Riddle better from here. Watch him closely."

Severus wasn't sure exactly *what* he was watching for, but did so anyway. Hermione rarely did anything without reason, and that was good enough for him.

After the memory-Hermione had been given the potion, Severus studied his former master. Suddenly, he noticed something he had not seen before, mainly because they were usually watching Voldemort's victim rather than the late Dark Lord himself. Voldemort's lips were moving very subtly but definitely moving. He was murmuring an incantation. Lowering his gaze, Severus realised that the man's hand was in his robes, probably grasping his wand.

"You see, Severus, he is using a spell! It's not just the potion a spell is involved!" Hermione exclaimed, excited that her theory had proven correct.

"That appears to be the case, but how does that help us? We cannot hear what he is saying?"

"Let's get out of here and I will explain," she said.

On returning to the sitting room, Hermione retrieved the book she had been studying. "I found this in a section I had not checked before. I only looked at it out of desperation, as I had read everything else," she told him.

"But we had already looked at it and decided it was of little use." He read the section title. "*Longevity Potions?* Hardly the sort of potion he would be giving an enemy."

"The potions in this chapter do not confer longevity upon the drinker, but upon any spell cast while the potion is being ingested. They render the curse or hex stable, even if the caster dies," she clarified.

"So you think...?"

"I don't think. I know. The potion was this one here look at the description of the colour and consistency. It matches the potion Riddle forced me to drink."

"But what of the light display?" he asked, still unconvinced. "And the *Bind and Conquer* draught?"

"Although I hate to admit it, I think Prott was correct. The draught was a myth. The lights were caused by the spell he was casting. The spell bound my magic; the potion has only maintained the effect. You were correct; Riddle was not giving his followers the full truth behind what he did, as he did not trust them not to turn the spell against their master. By letting them believe that the potion was the important factor, they were less likely to consider a spell, just as we were."

"Again, how does that help if we do not know the spell he used? I suppose we could find more books I really concentrated on sources relevant to potions, not spellwork." He frowned, considering where to locate such texts.

"Severus, think about it," she urged, grasping his hands in her own for emphasis. "Snakeface intended me never to return to Wizarding society. The spell would not be lifted, even if he lost the battle that night, thus perpetuating his vengeance beyond his death. But what can a wizard do that a Muggle cannot?"

"Magic, I suppose?" he replied vaguely, unable to grasp her train of thought.

"Oh, Severus, don't you see? It's so simple. We could have fixed the problem weeks ago had we known. How do you end a spell?" She smiled, sure of her conclusion.

His eyes met hers as he finally saw the glaringly obvious answer so basic that even a first-year could do it. He raised his wand, pointed the tip at her head, and solemnly spoke.

"Finite Incantatem."

A/N: Based on prompt 93. "Someone has his or her powers stripped away for misuse. Did he/she lose them because of actual misuse or was it a set up? How do they get them back?"

Chapter Twelve: Surprises

Chapter 13 of 18

Hermione is captured by Death Eaters just before the Final Battle. Voldemort forces her to take an ancient potion he has been experimenting with, which effectively transforms her into a Muggle. Bereft of all but her memories, how does she react?

Disclaimer : The characters aren't mine, the Potterverse isn't mine, even the prompt is someone else's!

Did I ever tell you that I have the best beta in the world? I'll tell you who she is... ladyinthecloak!

Chapter 12: Surprises

"Finite Incantatem."

They waited expectantly for some sign of success. Silence hung over them heavily as their eyes met in the flickering candlelight; the tension in the room was almost palpable.

Nothing happened.

Hermione felt no different. There were no lights, no radiance, no warmth absolutely nothing. She sat rigidly, as if sitting still and quiet could make a difference by sheer strength of will alone. A tear gradually formed at the corner of her eye. Severus gathered her in his arms and prepared to provide his strength to salve her disappointment.

She sobbed into his shirt for a few minutes and then composed herself with difficulty. "I was so sure that it would work. It must have been a spell. All the information pointed to the same answer. I'll just..." She stopped speaking abruptly as the book they had been using flew into her hand, narrowly missing Severus' head on its way past.

"What the hell?" he barked.

"I have no idea. I was just thinking about that book when it... er... arrived," she explained.

"Quick, think of something else you want. A quill, perhaps?" he suggested.

Immediately, her favourite quill flew across the room to her.

"Try something different. Levitate the quill," he ordered.

The quill hovered gently between them, spinning slowly at first, then more rapidly in one direction after another in an elegant gravity-defying dance. Next, it transfigured seamlessly into a glorious butterfly which fluttered around the room before resuming its original shape and coming to rest on the desk. Hermione's expression was a confused blend of relief, happiness, and awe.

"All right. You can stop showing off now," Severus said to the ecstatic witch.

"What just happened?" she asked. "How could I do that?"

"I believe you just performed some incredibly complex, wandless, nonverbal magic, my dear," he replied.

"Oh. I realise that," she said. "I have done wandless magic before, and I mastered nonverbal spells back in sixth year, if you remember, *Professor*. But I have only ever been able to perform very simple actions wandlessly, such as Summoning objects, never anything like that."

"I have a theory." He explained. "I suspect that the spell which bound your magic was non-selective. It bound all your magic the normal magic that you had already expressed and the latent magic that would probably never have developed. Most witches and wizards have a capacity for magic much greater than they ever use, in much the same way as we only use a fraction of our brainpower. The more powerful amongst us are either lucky to have been born with a higher degree of magical talent or have simply learned to use a larger portion of our innate potential."

"I suspect that by ending the spell, I have not only released your expressed magic but also your latent magic and that now you are one of the fortunate few able to utilise your entire magical ability. Albus Dumbledore was one other of recent times. Riddle was another, which is why they were evenly matched in a duel."

His companion sat quietly while she assimilated the information he had given her. It made perfect sense, but the thought of so much power also frightened her.

"Does this mean that I...?" she started.

"No, Hermione. It does *not* mean you will become either an evil megalomaniac or a manipulative old goat. You are who you are, and no amount of magic will change that. It is not the power we have that determines who we become, but our choices," he reassured her firmly.

"I remember Harry telling me that Dumbledore had said something similar to him when he was fretting about whether he would become like Tom Riddle," she said softly.

"And, don't forget, you can still only perform magic if you understand it," he advised. "You could move and transfigure the quill because those spells are similar to those you already know. I imagine that you will not be able to do something that you have not studied before, although, knowing you, that may not amount to much," he said wryly. "I suggest that tomorrow you run through some of the spells you know well before we decide whether you will need a wand at all. We will also need to retrieve your parents and pay a visit to some people who are missing you very much."

She looked up at him anxiously. "I hadn't even thought of them in my excitement. I feel awful! Now that they should all recognise me again, I can let them know I am still alive. I hope they forgive me for taking so long to get back to them."

"I am certain that once the initial shock is over, they will welcome you with open arms," he declared. Looking her over carefully, he asked, "How are you feeling? Have you any ill-effects from the reversing of the spell?"

"I'm feeling terrific," she replied with a huge grin. "And that awful nagging headache has completely disappeared. I'm still confused though. Why weren't there any lights or warm feelings as there was when Riddle bound my magic?"

"I suspect they were related to the potion taking effect as the spell was cast. Remember, the light surrounding you changed to the green colour of the potion before it appeared to retreat back into your body. I think the interaction of the spell with the potion caused the display, although I wouldn't discount a little showmanship on Riddle's part either," Severus postulated, regarding her seriously. "Now, we have plans to make. Hot chocolate?" he suggested.

After some discussion and a lot of planning, they decided to retrieve Hermione's parents first. The trip to Australia would take very little time with the aid of an International Portkey, which Severus would arrange in the morning. Once her parents' memories were restored and they had been filled in on the events of the past year or so, she could leave them to make any necessary arrangements before returning home. She would then be free to join her friends at Grimmauld Place for as long as she wanted without feeling guilty about her parents. As she prepared for bed, she remembered the last part of their conversation with a smile.

"I suppose you will be moving out, now that you can return to your friends," Severus had said diffidently whilst gathering up the cups.

"Do you want me to?" she had asked directly, looking him in the eye.

"No," he had murmured. "You don't need to leave. I meant it when I said this house was your home as well, as long as you want it to be."

"Well, Severus, I think you are stuck with me then. I don't plan on moving back home with my parents, and six months living with the boys in that tent was quite enough for me. I don't know what my future holds, but for now I am quite happy living right here with you," she had declared, hugging him tightly.

Hermione knew that she had made the right decision. Whatever happened in the next few months, she felt strongly that home was right there, at Spinner's End. She casually extinguished the lights by merely thinking the word *Nox* and went to sleep.

While Severus was occupied at the Ministry organising a Portkey, Hermione busied herself trying out various charms and spells. There appeared to be nothing that she had already learned that she could not do simply by concentrating on the spell required. She realised that she must have subconsciously *Accio'd* the book the evening before, as just thinking about an item did not bring it to hand. *Just as well*, she thought, *it could get embarrassing if everything I desired just came to me at a whim* Visions of entering a bookshop and being inundated by flying books had her in a fit of helpless laughter for a few moments.

"I have been thinking," she said to Severus upon his return, Portkey in pocket. "I need a wand."

"I know," he replied. "It would not do for most people to be aware of your abilities. For some it would be threatening, and it may prove dangerous if the wrong person were to take it into their head to try and exploit your power. I was considering the problem while I was, and I believe I have a solution." He produced a wand from his back pocket. "Take a look at this," he told her.

"Where did you get it, and what is it made of?" she asked, intrigued by the slightly unusual wand.

"Harrod's toy store, Dress-Ups Department," he answered.

"Absolutely. Bloody. Brilliant!" she exclaimed. "A true magical wand is likely to interfere with my innate magic, but this toy one, although it looks surprisingly real, would be purely a prop."

"With a little judicious change in colour and texture, and some 'wear' applied in the right places, I think it would pass muster to all but a wand expert," he elaborated.

"And if it didn't work for anyone else, they would just assume it was incompatible with their magic," she added.

"Indeed."

"Did I ever tell you that you are an extremely intelligent and devious wizard?" Hermione asked.

"No. But feel free whenever you have the urge," he encouraged. "We Slytherins need positive reinforcement as well, you know."

Travelling to Australia was uneventful. Severus had arranged for the Portkey to activate at midnight, which would be mid-morning at their destination. The device performed efficiently, if a little nauseatingly for Hermione, and they were deposited in the International Portkey Arrival Lounge, which was situated in a magically hidden corner of Sydney Airport. A friendly Australian wizard wearing a brightly coloured, light set of robes, directed them to the Domestic Floo Network access points. Hermione scanned the list of destinations and directed her companion to the Floo for Brisbane. "Mum always wanted to live somewhere warmer," she explained.

Upon arrival at the Wizarding shopping area beside Victoria Park in central Brisbane, Hermione and Severus took a brief respite from the unaccustomed heat in the local pub, *The Confused Crocodile*, and ordered two butterbeers.

"This is *cold*," Severus stated the obvious.

"And very fizzy," giggled Hermione who was having trouble with bubbles getting up her nose.

"I can tell you two are Poms," laughed the bartender. "Apart from your accents, we all know you lot like your butterbeer warm and flat! Name's Bruce, by the way. What are two nice magical folks like you doing in the Colonies?"

"Pleased to meet you, Bruce. My name is Hermione, and this is Severus. We are here to visit someone living in a Muggle area, Shorncliffe, although at present we don't have any idea where that is," replied Hermione, shaking the cheerful man's hand.

"That's over on the beach," he replied. "The best way to get there would be by Muggle taxi, if you haven't been there before. I can change your Wizarding money for Australian Muggle currency, if you like," he offered helpfully.

"Thanks, that would be useful." Hermione quickly made the exchange once they had finished their drinks. She caught Severus' arm as he was about to leave the pub and waved her hand down his body, transfiguring his robes into a pair of jeans and an open-necked white shirt. "Turn around," she ordered. He obediently complied. With a flick she had the slightly low-slung jeans fitting neatly to his slim form. "There, that's better," she declared. "You know, you should wear jeans more often, they do show you off nicely." Chuckling at his horrified expression, she patted the area under discussion and left before he had a chance to reply. He sighed with resignation and followed her into the Muggle part of the city in search of a taxi.

Once in the car, Hermione consulted a small piece of parchment she had tucked in her pocket and gave the address to the taxi-driver. Severus turned to Hermione. "How do you know where they are living, if you have never been there?" he asked with a puzzled frown.

"Oh, that's easy. When I modified their memories, I changed their names to Monica and Wendell Wilkins. I chose the names as they were sufficiently unusual to be found easily in a telephone book, if you knew the general area. I left them with a strong urge to come to Brisbane. Finding them again was simply a matter of G..."

"Google," he finished with a smirk.

"Exactly." She smiled.

"What do your parents look like?" he asked curiously.

"Fairly typical Muggles in their early forties. Mum had me just after graduating from university. She has frizzy hair like mine, which she usually keeps tied back in a bun. She is about my height, a little overweight, and tends to dress somewhat conservatively. Dad is starting to turn grey; I think finding out his daughter was a witch sped that up. He is around five foot ten, with a bit of a paunch. They are both loving parents in their own way, but were very busy, stressed people with little time for fun. I guess that is why I read so much as a child. It was my way of having fun, and they certainly appreciated the peace and quiet."

"Finding out that their daughter was a witch must have been quite a shock then."

"It was, indeed. I think they were still holding out hope that once I had graduated from Hogwarts, I would put all that *silly magical nonsense* away and attend a nice respectable Muggle university. They willingly paid all the fees and showed an interest in the Wizarding community when we visited Diagon Alley, but I think deep down they really did not appreciate what being a witch or wizard implies. It is not a lifestyle choice, as they believed, but simply who we are." She sighed as she remembered the frequent discussions she had had with her parents about her future. Hermione loved them deeply, but since she had turned eleven, they had gradually drifted apart.

Within a short time, they were dropped off outside a low-lying cedar bungalow with a colourful garden in a wide, gently curved street. Across the road were grassy banks leading down to a beach with silver sand and gently lapping waves. The sea sparkled in the morning sun, with seagulls swooping and gliding in the light breeze. Large, shady trees and picnic tables completed the idyllic picture. As the taxi sped off back to town, they saw a couple strolling hand in hand along the sand.

They sat at one of the tables while Hermione decided how to approach her parents. As the couple walked past, she suddenly realised that the slim, tanned, youthful looking man and woman were none other than her mum and dad. They were nearly unrecognisable. They appeared to have shed their stressed, conservative personalities with their memories. Her mother's hair was long and wavy and left to hang freely. She was wearing a multicoloured dress that floated around her bare legs and sandals. Her father had a trendy, slightly spiky hairstyle and was wearing beach shorts and a T-shirt with a popular logo on the front. She had *never* seen him in T-shirt before, let alone one with a *label*. He turned to his companion as they entered the gate and laughed at something she had said, then kissed her, his hand gently caressing her lower belly, outlining the small bulge there.

Hermione was stunned. These people were not the parents she knew. They were happy, carefree, and *expecting a baby*. Her mother had never been able to conceive again after having Hermione, but no cause was ever found, much to the Grangers' dismay.

"Oh, Severus. What do I do? How can I take them back to their previous life of stress and constant work when they are so obviously happy here? I know if I restore their memories they will feel obliged to return to their *responsibilities* in Britain, but..." She appealed to him for advice.

"It's been quite a shock for you to see them this way, Hermione. Let's leave it for the moment and go back to the Victoria Park area. We will find somewhere to stay. It is the early hours of the morning at home, you know. You need to get some sleep, and then you will be in a better state to make important decisions," he suggested.

She agreed, grateful he had understood her dilemma so quickly. Returning to Victoria Park was simply a matter of Apparating, as they knew where they were going this time.

Bruce was once again very helpful, offering them a room above the pub.

"It's not the flashest of rooms, you can barely swing a koala in there, but if you want it, it's yours," he offered. Severus met Hermione's eye in an unspoken question. She nodded; feeling too emotionally and physically exhausted to worry about sharing a room. Bruce led them upstairs, indicating the shared bathroom across the hall and let them into the small twin room he had available.

"Thank you for all your help," Severus said as the Australian wizard turned to leave.

"You're welcome, mate. Just come down later whenever you are ready, and I will rustle you up a little tucker."

Severus turned to find Hermione lying on one of the beds, fully dressed and nearly asleep. He grinned to himself as he transfigured her jeans and T-shirt to light cotton pink pyjamas, complete with cute white bunnies which periodically hopped around. *Payback!* Still grinning he dropped his jeans, climbed into his bed, and was soon sound asleep.

A/N: Based on prompt 93. "Someone has his or her powers stripped away for misuse. Did he/she lose them because of actual misuse or was it a set up? How do they get them back?"

Chapter Thirteen: Choices

Chapter 14 of 18

Hermione is captured by Death Eaters just before the Final Battle. Voldemort forces her to take an ancient potion he has been experimenting with, which effectively transforms her into a Muggle. Bereft of all but her memories, how does she react?

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Chapter 13: Choices

Hermione woke at six that evening to find Severus still quietly snoring in the bed opposite. She sat up and contemplated her new 'outfit' briefly, smiling at the antics of the bunnies. Somewhat reluctantly, she transfigured her pyjamas back into her previous jeans and T-shirt and went off to the bathroom to freshen up. Returning to the room, she decided that it was time her companion was up as well and whisked off his bedclothes. "Wakey, wakey, Sleeping Beaut... Oops!" She quickly replaced the covers as she realised that at least one part of him was definitely awake.

He opened one eye and sleepily murmured, "That'll teach you. Bloody Gryffindors... always rushing in without thinking."

At that provocation, she dragged the covers off him again and calmly conjured an ice-cold glass of water. "I'm sure I can help you with that little problem you have there, Severus..."

"*Little?*" he snorted as he got out of bed and stretched. "Always the ego boost with you around, my dear!"

"Think nothing of it. Any time you need deflating, just call on me! But hurry up, I am starving!" she urged.

Bruce served them a tasty meal of barbecued steak, salad, and chips, followed by a platter of fresh pineapple, mangoes, and bananas. While enjoying the surprisingly good coffee provided after they had eaten, Severus decided it was time Hermione stopped avoiding the choice she needed to make.

"Well, you can't put it off any longer, Hermione. You have slept, showered, and eaten; now it is time to decide your parents' future."

"I know. I have been thinking about it all through dinner. I think that I would like to go back there tomorrow and watch them again; make sure they really are as happy as they appear. I know it is probably unethical, but is there any way you could use Legilimency to find out whether they are content and if there is any chance of the memory modification breaking down?" she asked anxiously.

"I suppose if we find an excuse to talk to them it would be possible. I can't promise anything, though," he replied.

Once they had decided on a course of action for the following day, Severus suggested a walk in the neighbouring park. Hermione readily agreed, feeling the need for some exercise after the last few days' emotional upheavals. Later that night as they retired to their room, he teased her. "Would you like your special pyjamas again tonight, Hermione? They did look so... *cute*."

"Yes, thanks. I was rather taken with them," she retorted, "although I was a little disappointed that they did not come with a cuddly toy."

He smirked and picked up a cushion from the armchair in the room. With a wave of his wand, the cushion was neatly transfigured into a soft, fluffy, toy bunny. "There. Don't say I don't do anything for you."

"Lovely. Just the sort of bed fellow I need: soft, small, and silent!"

"You don't know what you are missing, woman!"

Hermione gathered up her props: a clipboard, notepad, pen, and name badge and followed Severus out into the warm, spring day. "If this is early spring, then summer must be awfully hot," she complained. "I can see why my mother would like it here. She hates the cold."

"You get used to colder weather when you have lived in Scotland for years," Severus commented. "Now, are you happy with the plan?"

"Yes. I knock on the door and invite them to participate in a Quality of Life survey. You are disillusioned behind me and using Legilimency to check out how solid the memory modifications are. I hope we are doing the right thing, but I really need to know how they feel about their current lifestyle."

"It will not harm them, Hermione. We are doing this to avoid causing them distress, not to create it. I promise not to look at anything too personal," he reassured. "Now, let's get it over with."

An hour later they were back at the pub comparing notes. Hermione had discovered that they were very happy with their lifestyle, with a good balance of work and leisure. Her mother was actually looking forward to stopping work when their precious 'first' child arrived. They lived a far simpler life than they had in Britain, working for someone else, rather than having the stress of their own practice and owned their house, thanks to Hermione's skilful manipulations the year before, enabling the old practice to be sold and the proceeds banked under their new name. She had been astounded by the casual affection they displayed openly, which was so unlike the parents she had known.

Severus was able to confirm that they were genuinely content and the memory modification she had performed was sound. She had simply obliterated any memory of herself and the magical community and set them up with different names. Any past memories they retained were real; they had just experienced them as Wilkins, not Grangers.

"So what is your decision? Have you had enough time to be sure what you want?" he asked her gently.

"I know what I want. But I think what would be best for them would be to leave well alone. Although I will miss them terribly, I must be honest with myself. After my experience without my magic, I have realised that I could never voluntarily live as a Muggle. Ideally, I would love to tell them who I am and restore their memories, but that would mainly be for my own benefit. Who knows what it would do to their relationship with the new baby, who is going to benefit from all the things I never knew: parents who will spend time with their child; a happy, stress-free home; lots of warmth, sunshine and love. Not that I am complaining about my upbringing. I knew they loved me, but it was just expressed in a more reserved fashion."

"I suspect that if they knew about me, they would either want to move back to Britain or worry needlessly about my life as a witch. My brother or sister deserves better; I have had my turn, it is now the new baby's chance."

"And what if your new sibling develops magical potential?"

"I'll cross that bridge if I come to it. I think I'd like to visit discreetly from time to time and keep an eye on things. If the baby appears to be displaying any magical potential, then maybe I will have to re-evaluate the situation." She sighed with the weight of the decision she had made. Deep down she knew it was the best she could do for her parents. Who wouldn't want a fresh start if they had the opportunity? She hoped that if she ever had to reveal who she was, they would understand her reasoning.

"I think I'd like to go home now, Severus."

"I'm ready whenever you are," he gallantly replied.

They made their farewells to Bruce, promising to return for a visit one day, and took the Floo back to the International Portkey terminal. The trip back to Britain was arranged easily, and soon they were standing at the front door of their home at Spinner's End.

"Home, sweet home," Hermione whispered to herself as they entered.

"Indeed," agreed Severus.

Two days later, Hermione had visited her childhood home and removed the few personal belongings and photos she had left behind previously. With Severus' help, her bedroom was transformed into a plain guest room with no evidence left in the house of the child who had been raised there. Her parents had already taken all of their clothes and books with them to Australia. All that remained was to send her parents' lawyer a charmed note which would activate a spell she had cast the previous year. The seemingly innocent brochure for an investment opportunity would trigger a desire to write to her parents and ask them if they wished to sell the family home now they had settled in Australia.

Now she had sorted out her past, it was time to face up to her future. They had decided to Apparate to Grimmauld Place at noon the following day. Severus knew that Molly had been planning a special dinner; even Ginny had been given special leave from Hogwarts for the occasion, and would be accompanied by Minerva. What Hermione had forgotten was that it was her nineteenth birthday the next day. Her friends had decided to celebrate her birthday as a memorial to their lost loved one. Little did they know, the *late* guest of honour was going to arrive right on time. Severus had simply told her that Harry often invited the Weasleys for dinner on Saturday nights. He and Ron lived at Grimmauld Place, with other friends often staying for a night or two.

As Hermione sat in front of the fire in the sitting room, she watched Severus covertly from beneath her lowered lids. He was reading the latest Potions journals, catching up on all he had missed while they were working on restoring her magic. His sleek, black hair fell forward onto his face and his elegant fingers ran down the parchment, caressing it almost lovingly. He really was quite attractive when he was relaxed and happy. He had been her teacher for six years; she had respected him and believed in him, even after Dumbledore's death, despite his outward disposition. She had now lived with him for nearly three months, shared his home, his food and his company. His moods, whether good or bad, were familiar to her, and she could read him like no other had ever been allowed. *I know I have become inordinately fond of him. I love him, but is it a romantic kind of love, or is it the love of a friend, a protector, a good man?* she pondered. She knew she had loved Ron before they were separated, but now she was confused. Coming to a decision, she stood up and walked over to his chair.

"Severus, could you please stand up for a moment? There is something I need to find out," she requested.

He looked up curiously, put down his work, and stood. "Your wish is my command, my lady," he declared indulgently.

At that, she garnered all her courage, moved closer to him, stood on tiptoe, took his head in her hands, and pressed her mouth to his. His lips were pleasantly soft and warm, which surprised her. He opened at the tentative sweep of her tongue, and for several minutes they kissed and explored the sensation. His hands swept up her sides and held her to his body in a gentle embrace.

When they separated, they looked at each other, both somewhat flushed. As if by mutual agreement, they both shook their heads. Hermione grinned and understood.

"Well, that answers that question," she stated matter-of-factly.

"Indeed it does. Did you expect more?" he replied.

"Not really. The thing is, I have grown to care deeply for you, Severus, and I was confused as to what that meant. You see, I didn't know whether I was falling in love with you or whether my feelings were more platonic, so I decided to kiss you to find out."

"And...?"

"Nothing, not a spark... Well, I admit it was very pleasant, but it still felt like I was kissing my older brother or best friend, and I suspect you felt much the same," she said, hoping he would agree.

"And if I felt differently? If I had been desperately in love with you?" he challenged.

"I know. I realised as soon as I did it, that it could have been very embarrassing if one of us felt that way and the other didn't, but I had a fair idea that wouldn't be the case. I'm sorry if I stepped over the line, but I had to know," she pleaded.

"You always have to know," he chuckled as he relented. "I had already worked it out, but I didn't know how you felt. I was hoping that I wouldn't have to break your heart! You know, I love you too, Hermione. You have become very special to me, but a part of me still sees you as the schoolgirl you once were. Maybe, if we were both ten or twenty years older, it would be different. You need to finish growing up, have some fun, make the most of your youth. You need to go to parties, fall in love, and make mistakes, all the things you have missed out on over the last few years. I believe there is a certain red-headed dunderhead out there who would be very pleased to see you again."

She whacked him on the arm. "Well then, Mr Know-It-All, what relationship *do* we have then?"

"Friends, Hermione, very good friends, who can rely on each other and look out for one another. After all, if you end up with Ronald Weasley, you are going to need *someone* to visit for intelligent conversation on a regular basis," he said with a smirk, earning himself another whack. "On second thoughts, it could be dangerous being your friend, if you treat them all like punching bags!"

"No, I reserve that for my *special* friends," she retorted.

"Just remember, my dear, I will be there for you if you need me. Any time, any place, for any reason. Just don't expect me to babysit!"

"I can just see that *Severus, the Sitter from Hell* the poor kids would be so terrified, they would voluntarily go to bed early!" She giggled at the thought of the erstwhile scary Potions professor babysitting small children.

They both settled onto the couch, Hermione reclining sideways, propping herself up against Severus, in her favourite position.

"There is just one more mission to accomplish," she stated, smirking deviously.

"I do *not* like the look on your face. What are you plotting?" he suspiciously enquired.

"Well, there seems to have been a distinct absence of any women in your life for as long as I have known you..."

"Death Eater. Spy. Greasy Git. Bat of the Dungeons. Need I say more?" he interrupted.

"And those are just your finer points," she retorted. "Now, there is no excuse. Here you are; an intelligent, powerful wizard; a decorated War Hero; a wizard in his prime, by your own account; a fine figure of a man..."

"You think so?"

"Well... yes. What I saw in Australia was nothing to be shy about... pretty impressive, really. Oh, stop preening, for goodness sake. I'm trying to think of a potential girlfriend for you. Start acting the libertine and they will all be scared off!" She grinned. "Now, back to the problem at hand. What about Madam Hooch?" she suggested.

"Not likely. I don't think my feminine charms are strong enough for that one," he sniggered.

"Oh... right." She flushed, not having realised that Hooch swung that way.

"I know... Sybill Trelawney, she seemed to fancy you. I remember she used to watch you on the few occasions she joined the staff table at dinner."

Whack!

"Hey! What was that for?" she demanded, rubbing her arm.

"Mentioning *her* name and mine in the same sentence. Besides, she was probably thinking up some dire prediction for my demise at the time. Wouldn't have been far off the mark either," he replied glumly.

"Pessimist! What about Sinistra?"

"Head in the clouds."

"Vector"

"BORING!"

"Madam Rosmerta? Now she looked a willing woman, if I ever saw one."

"Willing is correct. Willing to shag anything in trousers. No thanks!" He shuddered.

She gave him a sly look. "Filch?" she asked with a perfectly straight face.

"I do *not* fancy men, and even if I did, Filch is not my type." He pouted.

Hermione giggled at his offended tone and pondered some more. Suddenly her face split into a wide smile. "I've got it... perfect. All the woman you could ever want!"

"Who?"

"Dolores Umbridge! Now, Severus... put your wand down... you know I loathe that woman as much as you do... *Severus!*"

A/N: Now, all you wonderful readers out there who are about to hunt me down and AK me after this chapter, just have a gin and a lie down, and keep reading. Trust me!

A/N: Based on prompt 93. "Someone has his or her powers stripped away for misuse. Did he/she lose them because of actual misuse or was it a set up? How do they get them back?"

Chapter Fourteen: Friends and Lovers

Chapter 15 of 18

Hermione is captured by Death Eaters just before the Final Battle. Voldemort forces her to take an ancient potion he has been experimenting with, which effectively transforms her into a Muggle. Bereft of all but her memories, how does she react?

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Chapter 14: Friends and Lovers

"Are you sure I am ready?" she asked with trepidation as they arrived at the door of number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

"You are as ready as you are ever going to be. Stop worrying!"

"I hope they don't..."

"Shhh." He took her in his arms and gave her a comforting hug. "They will be so pleased to see you that they won't care about anything else."

He opened the door and entered, allowing her to follow, partially obscured by his robes. The murmur of quiet conversation could be heard from behind the kitchen door. Severus put his finger to his mouth and gestured for her to wait in the hall. As he stepped into the kitchen, she heard those gathered there greet him. He said a few words that she could not make out and then returned to where she was waiting.

"I have told them that I have a surprise and made sure they are all sitting down," he told her. "Now it is time."

She looked at him and realised that despite his reassuring words he was feeling apprehensive as well. Tenderly, she reached up and kissed his cheek. "Now it is time," she affirmed.

As she entered the kitchen, the hum of voices suddenly ceased. Total silence lay heavily upon the room.

"Hermione?" croaked Ron. "Is that you? Oh, Merlin, please say I am not dreaming!" He stood stock-still, staring at her, as if by glancing away she would disappear.

Harry was looking at her incredulously, too afraid to believe she was real.

"Who are you, and what do you think you are doing, coming here and pretending to be our darling Hermione?" an angry Molly Weasley demanded. "Haven't these children suffered enough?"

"Now, Molly, sit back down and we will explain everything," interrupted Severus before everyone started talking at once. "Hermione has been through a dreadful ordeal and needs everyone's support."

He went on to explain everything that had happened, right from the moment she had been taken by the Death Eaters in Hogsmeade. Hermione simply sat, limp with nervous tension, and leaned into his side for comfort. She did not notice Ron's and Harry's expressions as they saw her closeness with their once feared ex-Potions master.

"So, if I understand everything correctly, Hermione was kidnapped, had her powers stripped, spent a month in a Muggle psychiatric hospital, another month alone before you found each other, and the last three months working with you finding the cure. And all that time it slipped your mind to pop in and tell us she was safe?" Harry angrily challenged once Severus had finished. "How could you hide that from us?"

"Initially I was unconscious, if you remember?" Severus was losing patience, but knowing this would be hard for them to understand, he restrained his usually acid tongue. "Once I was awake and had remembered what had happened, I did not want to give you all false hope. After all you had done for me, I could not in good conscience lead you off on a possibly hopeless quest. You needed to get on with living for the future. Once I found Hermione, I'm afraid I became completely involved in researching the problem. It took both of us many weeks of hard work."

Stung to speak for the first time in Severus' defence, Hermione added, "And I wouldn't let him tell anyone until I had regained my magic fully. If the potion we created hadn't worked, I felt I would be better off staying as a Muggle and forgetting about magic. So if there is anyone to blame, it is me, not Severus!"

"*Severus* is it?" sneered Ron, overcome with jealousy. "And just what *else* did you and *Severus* get up to then?"

"Not that it is any of your business, Ronald, but we are just friends, good friends. You should know by now that I stick by my *friends*," she explained, annoyed at his inference, but aware of how things looked.

Ron settled, with help from George pulling him back to his seat with a quiet, "Not now, mate."

Molly, who had been surprisingly quiet once Severus had confirmed Hermione's identity, took the opportunity to defuse some of the tension, giving Hermione a tearful hug.

"I don't care about all that; the important thing is that Severus has brought you back to us, and we should all be extremely grateful to him. Now would you two like something to eat, as I'm sure everyone has loads to talk about. And of course, it's your birthday!"

Relieved by the distraction, Hermione returned Molly's hug. "So it is. I had completely forgotten in the excitement. What a birthday!" After a celebratory meal, a quickly whisked up birthday cake, and many questions, hugs, and kisses, Severus noted Hermione's wan face.

"Right, young lady, time to get you home to bed," he declared. "You are completely worn out!"

She immediately rose and bid everyone farewell.

As they left, Ron turned to Harry and mouthed, "*Home?*" Harry shrugged, unsure of the implications, and not sure he wanted to know, despite Hermione's assertion that she and Severus were only friends.

Outside, Hermione turned to Severus, wearily wrapped her arms around his waist, and murmured, "Take me home, Sev."

Later, as she prepared for bed, she fingered the beautiful silver brooch that Severus had given her for her birthday after they had returned home. It was a silver snake with tiny emeralds for eyes, looped into the shape of the symbol for infinity. He had told her it was to represent his wish to be her friend and protector for as long as she needed him.

Three weeks later, as is the nature of youth, it was as if Hermione had never been away. She and the boys had regained their easy banter, and she had heard about all their antics since the final battle. After an initial mourning period, there had been victory parties and memorial services to attend. The general mood in the Wizarding world was that of celebration; despite the losses, it was the first time they had been free of the threat of Tom Riddle and his minions for many years. The boys had been awarded honorary NEWTS and had been invited to join the Auror training program. They had accepted, with the proviso that they could have a year off first. They had spent the last four months since Severus' case was closed relaxing, travelling, redecorating the house at Grimmauld Place, and watching Quidditch. The annuity granted to them for their part in the war was more than enough to keep them. Their training started after Christmas, so they had two months before adult life would finally catch up on them.

"But, Hermione, why don't you want to come and live here with us?" whined Ron. "You can't be happy living in Snape's old house. What do you see in him anyway?"

"Please try and understand, Ron. We spent months there, working together night and day. We talked about everything and anything: thoughts, opinions, the past, even plans for the future. I think I got to know Severus better than anyone has before, except maybe your mum, Harry! You have to realise he has spent most of his life with the threat of death, or worse, if he said or did the slightest thing wrong. His nasty persona was partly his cover as a spy and partly a defence mechanism. If he didn't get close to anyone, he couldn't get hurt again. Now, although he can still be snarky and difficult at times, I have seen the real man inside, who is surprisingly gentle, caring, and incredibly protective. In some ways I feel the same about him as I do about you, Harry. He is my best friend, but in a different way. I didn't grow up with him; I only knew him as a teacher, and an unpopular one at that. Now I am an adult, he is like a friend, older brother, and protector all wrapped up in one package. I love him, but I am not *in love* with him.

"I live with him because I choose to. Spinner's End has become my home now, and let's face it, boys, he makes a better housemate than either of you two!" She gestured around the kitchen, where yesterday's dishes were still in the sink and the floor looked like it hadn't seen a cleaning charm since Molly was last in residence.

Ron and Harry looked at each other, suitably embarrassed at their domestic shortcomings.

"But we cook a jolly good pizza!" they declared in unison, helping themselves to a piece each. Hermione laughed and took a slice herself.

"I'll grant you that, but man cannot live on pizza alone!"

After lunch and kitchen cleaning under Hermione's strict supervision, Harry went off to Floo Ginny about their arrangements for that evening. Taking advantage of his absence, Ron turned to Hermione and asked, "Earlier, you said that you felt about Snape as you do about Harry. Er... so, what... I mean, how... do you feel..." He hesitated, unsure how to word the question that was uppermost in his mind.

"About you?" she completed for him. "I'm still confused at the moment, but I have one request. Would you stand up for a moment?" She knew it was a little soon, after all that had happened, but she had to know whether the feelings she'd had for Ron before her abduction were real or just a result of all the stress they had been under.

"OK," he said, standing, with a puzzled look.

She leaned forward and drew his face down to hers. Their lips touched, and she immediately felt a sensation of warmth and homecoming. This was what she had been looking for; this was what had been missing. Things were going to be all right.

"Well, that answers that question," she declared, giggling at the bemused expression on Ron's face.

Their courtship was by necessity a drawn out process. The boys entered the Auror program, which was a demanding two-year course, and Hermione, after extensive discussions with Severus, commenced an apprenticeship with a pre-eminent Potions Master in Europe. Of course, her glowing recommendation from Severus certainly helped.

She returned home on weekends to spend her time between helping Severus get his new Potions business up and running and going out with Ron, with or without Harry and Ginny. Harry had invested a substantial amount of capital in Severus' business; after all, if the Half-Blood Prince could get *him* top marks in Potions in sixth year, he must know his brewing! He remained the silent partner however; he was not *that* fond of Potions.

Hermione and Ron decided to take things slowly until they were at least spending most of the time in the same country. Severus remained her close friend and confidante, even acting as an impartial advisor at times when she and Ron had the expected bumps in their relationship. Their friendship became stronger every year, and when Hermione finished her apprenticeship, it was inevitable that she became Severus' working partner in the business. Their Potions work together was seamless, each often anticipating the other's needs, and they spent hours in the evenings discussing new avenues of research. She felt very fortunate. She had a caring, protective housemate and colleague, and a devoted boyfriend who understood her love for her work.

Severus escorted her to Australia twice a year to discreetly check on her family's well-being. Her baby brother, Sam, was growing rapidly and, as far as they could tell, was showing no evidence of a magical nature.

Three years after her return from the dead, Hermione was escorted down the aisle by her tall, dark, and, at times, charming friend. Severus had offered to give her away in the Muggle style ceremony, much to her delight. She looked every bit the radiant bride in a classic white sheath bridal gown, with a delicate necklace of silver and emeralds given to her as a wedding gift by none other than the man at her side.

As he handed her over to her soon-to-be husband, he reminded her of his earlier promise. "Any time, any place for any reason. If you need me, I will be there." He kissed her softly and turned away quickly, but not before she spotted a suspicious moistness in his dark eyes.

"Thank you," she whispered, and he knew she was not just thanking him for that day, but for choosing to be part of her life.

After the ceremony, Severus made a point of cornering the slightly tipsy bridegroom. "You do realise, Ronald Weasley, if you harm a hair on that girl's head, there will not be a place deep enough, high enough, or far enough away to hide from me."

"Er... I think I realised that from the moment I proposed, Severus. Don't worry, I have no intention to cause Hermione any pain; she means everything to me."

"Good, just checking. Now I suppose I should offer you my congratulations. For once in your life you have shown impeccable taste." Severus raised his glass to Ron, then quietly disappeared into the crowd.

"I just got a compliment from Severus Snape," Ron said to no-one in particular. "He's not such a bad git after all!"

"By Merlin's balls, Ronald Weasley, if you ever come near me again, I will hex you so hard you will wish you had been born a girl!" Hermione shrieked as the next contraction hit her. She batted away Ron's attempt at soothing her and gripped harder on the hand in hers. Its owner grimaced with pain and raised his black eyebrows meaningfully at Ron.

"I think she means it this time, old man. I suggest you wear steel plated underwear for a while." He smirked. "I've never seen her in this foul a temper, and I'm pleased it isn't me who is responsible. Mind you, the time she left the Jabberknoll feathers too close to the burner and ruined a week's work certainly came close."

"You obviously weren't around the day..."

"Shut it, you two! If I want a run down on all the times I've been in a bad mood, I'll ask for it. Now concentrate, another contraction is about to start." Hermione was surprisingly lucid between contractions and was not impressed by the men's attempt at easing the tension.

She didn't notice the shared look and rolled eyes that passed between them. It was just as well, they may not have survived the delivery if she had.

Several hours later, Ron was looking pale and shaky. Seeing his wife in pain, and all the associated body fluids, was really a bit much for one big tough Auror to handle. Severus was equally discomfited, but it was the necessary exposure of certain body parts of his friend that was leaving him more than a little embarrassed.

Hermione looked at their faces. "Oh for goodness sake, pull yourselves together! If you faint, Ronald, I will be seriously considering divorce, and as for you, Severus Snape, just toughen up and get over it. Surely you have seen a naked woman before!" Another contraction struck her forcefully and interrupted what was likely to have become a Class One diatribe on the inadequacies of men.

Thankfully for all concerned, within a few minutes, Rose Eileen Weasley was delivered, much to the nauseated awe of her father. Cradling her in his arms a little later, Ron was foolish enough to be heard murmuring to his daughter, "Now that wasn't so bad, now was it, my little princess. I don't know what all the fuss was about." Severus decided it was time he announced the arrival of his goddaughter to the waiting family and friends and beat a hasty retreat from the room. Conjuring his Patronus, he sent the silver griffin off to deliver the happy news to Minerva, who had been unable to get away from her duties.

Despite inheriting her father's red hair and freckles, Rose was the apple of her godfather's eye. Many an evening he could be seen at the Weasleys' house, having *volunteered* to babysit, despite all his protestations earlier. They shared a special bond, one which Hermione and Ron were pleased to foster, as they were keenly aware that they were the only family Severus had. And he was part of their family. Despite his outward demeanour appearing just as antisocial and sarcastic to others as always, with this Weasley family he was a different person. He visited often to see his little Rosie, to play an always intensely fought game of chess with Ron, or just to continue a conversation started at in the lab with Hermione. To all intents and purposes, he may as well have lived with them.

The years passed. Rose's brother Hugo was born, and this time Ron managed to last the entire labour without turning green. A discreetly passed vial of antinausea potion, thoughtfully provided by Severus, played a large part in his improved performance. However, both men again nursed bruised hands after the delivery, which led Severus to

tactfully suggest a longer acting contraceptive potion this time.

Everyone was happy. Ron was moving up rapidly through the Auror ranks, with several high profile arrests to his name. Severus and Hermione's Potions business, *Renaissance*, was renowned for providing unique solutions to witches' and wizards' problems, whether they were complex healing potions, cosmetic enhancing gels, or highly sophisticated interrogation philtres for the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Business was booming; Harry's astute financial management had their Gringotts vaults looking very respectable, and the children were flourishing. Life seemed to be perfect, that is, until one day when an innocent comment by Hugo, who was three at the time, made Ron sit up and take notice.

"Daddy, why does Mummy always look sparkly when Uncle Sev comes round?"

Ron was no longer an impulsive, hormone-ridden teenager. At thirty-two, he had matured into an intelligent, insightful man, with an incisive ability to cut to the core of a situation and see what was important. He spent the next few months using his carefully honed skills as an Auror to observe and analyse the situation. Then, he made his decision.

A/N: See! I told you to trust me.

Based on prompt 93. "Someone has his or her powers stripped away for misuse. Did he/she lose them because of actual misuse or was it a set up? How do they get them back?"

Chapter Fifteen: Revelations

Chapter 16 of 18

Hermione is captured by Death Eaters just before the Final Battle. Voldemort forces her to take an ancient potion he has been experimenting with, which effectively transforms her into a Muggle. Bereft of all but her memories, how does she react?

Disclaimer : The characters aren't mine, the Potterverse isn't mine, even the prompt is someone else's

I have a beta, ladyinthecloak. She is brilliant!

Chapter 15: Revelations

Ron leaned his rangy frame back in the chair and gloated as he surveyed the chessboard. He knew he had outwitted Severus again, but how long would it take for his opponent to concede?

"Dammit, Weasley! You've done it again. The same trap I fell for last week; must be losing my touch." Severus ran his hands through his hair in frustration and finally admitted defeat.

"Ha! So it's back to Weasley, is it? Now I know I've got you rattled!" taunted Ron.

"Another game then, *Ronald*, or are you going to quit while you are ahead?"

The redhead sobered and got up to fetch another round of Firewhiskey. It was time to finish what he had started months ago.

"Actually, I have something I need to talk with you about. It involves Hermione."

Severus reached for his glass and studied the liquor intently, but Ron wasn't fooled by his friend's carefully guarded expression. He had spent too long now as an Auror to miss subtle changes in body language.

"Tell me, Severus, do you love Hermione?" he asked calmly.

"Of course I do. You know that," the older man replied, surprised at the question.

"No. I mean, do you *love* her? Not as a friend, not as a family member, not as a protector, but as a lover would?"

"What kind of question is that, Ron? You are her husband, for goodness sake!" Severus countered, exasperated.

"I am her husband, and I love her dearly, but I can't help but notice that she's changed over the last two years. The spark, the light I used to see when we were together has gone. We are comfortable together, best friends, like we always were at school, but there is nothing more."

"Are you saying that you have another woman? By Merlin's wand, man, if you have been unfaithful to her, I..." Severus stood, shaking with anger.

"No, no, that's not what I am saying. I would never cheat on Hermione. There is no other woman, and I know she would never cheat on me. *That* is the problem," Ron explained quietly.

"How can that be a problem? I would have thought that mutual fidelity was to be preferred?" His brief flare of rage quietened rapidly, to be replaced with confusion.

"The thing is, I believe she is in love with another, and unless I do something about it, she will continue with our marriage out of a sense of loyalty and friendship, denying herself the opportunity of true happiness. Let's face it, we were eighteen when we got together, full of the passions of youth and always expected to marry by our friends and family. It has been a good marriage, but now I think there is something lacking on both our parts. I've seen Harry and Ginny together, the way their faces still light up when they see each other, the way they touch each other whenever possible. We just don't have that, and apart from the first few months of our marriage when everything was new and exciting, I don't think we ever did. We do love each other, and the kids, but not the way we should.

"I don't want her to stay with me and in ten years find our friendship and love ruined by bitterness and disappointment. I want her to be happy, and maybe if I am lucky I will find someone who makes me feel the way she appears to feel about him.

"When she is with him, she has a radiance, a quality of being, that makes her more beautiful than ever. She watches him constantly, always aware of where he is and what he is doing. I believe she is not altogether aware of this herself and will be horrified when I tell her I have noticed, but I can't let her lose this chance. I love her enough to let her go. She will always be the mother of my children and my best friend, but I can no longer allow her to chain herself to me as my wife," Ron finished, taking a large swallow of Firewhiskey. He noted the stricken look on Severus' face.

"Who... who is this man?" Severus managed to croak out.

"That's why I wanted to know how you felt about her. Can't you tell, Severus? That man is you. She has loved you for years, but now she is older, she loves you as a man, not just as a friend or protector – but as a man."

Severus stared at him, dumbfounded. He could not believe what he had just heard, and from Ron himself. He had been aware that his feelings for Hermione had changed over the years, but had carefully hidden his growing longing for her. Hermione and her family's friendship meant everything to him, and if he had to lie awake at night, his heart aching and his desire unquenched, that was a small price to pay. The possibility that she reciprocated his love was almost his undoing.

"She loves... *me*?" For once in his life, the acerbic ex-Death Eater, ex-spy, and ex-professor was lost for words. It was the glimmer of hope in his eyes, the barely restrained grin, which usually was reserved for Rose, and the overall lightening of his demeanour that confirmed Ron's hypothesis. He was about to act as matchmaker for his own wife.

Hermione was curious as to why Ron had organised the children to stay with Molly and Arthur for the weekend. Pleased, but curious. They had rarely spent time alone together over the preceding year or two; there were always the children, his assignments, her potions research, but they were content. The arguments, followed by the passionate making up, which had been a feature of their early years of marriage, had dwindled out a long time ago. Their lovemaking was infrequent, pleasurable in a comfortable way, but they knew each other's bodies well enough to ensure satisfaction. In short, they were best friends who had the benefit of regular sex. A weekend arranged especially without distractions was a rarity.

Ron entered the comfortable living room, which was still scattered with toys and other children's paraphernalia, carrying two glasses of wine. He handed Hermione her glass, then settled on the sofa in front of the fire, next to his wife.

"We need to talk," he stated baldly.

"What is it, Ron? Do you have a problem?" The serious expression on his face was creating a feeling of unease in the pit of her stomach.

"Well, it's more an issue that involves both of us," he explained. "You know I love you just as much as the day I married you, don't you?"

"Of course, but what are you trying to tell me?" She stood up, agitated, and started pacing the floor.

"Please sit down, love. This is difficult enough as it is without getting a crick in my neck trying to follow you around the room," Ron gently teased.

"What? What is so difficult?" she asked as she finally sat beside him on the sofa.

"Hermione, we have changed, do you not feel it? We were best friends in school, inseparable, and then we became a couple. It's been wonderful, being married to you, but over the last few years things have been different. We talk about the kids, the house, and our plans for the day, but we rarely ever just *talk*. When was the last time we made love? I can't remember, and the thing is, I don't really mind.

"But look at Harry and Ginny. The passion and love they share is completely different to what we have. Even Mum and Dad are more demonstrably close than we are. I love you so much, but it doesn't seem to be the same. I think we are good parents, great company for each other, and the best of friends, but somewhere along the way the passion... romance... *spark*, as you used to call it, has died. We have come a full circle, you and I." He took her hand in his and lightly stroked her ring finger with his thumb as she contemplated his words.

She sat quietly, the light from the fire flickering on her sombre face. He could see the myriad of expressions passing over her features as she mentally reviewed the nine years of their marriage.

"Oh, Ron. I can't deny anything you have said, but a marriage based on friendship is not such a bad thing, is it?"

"In usual circumstances I would agree, but there is a complicating factor." Ron took a fortifying sip of his wine and continued on. "I suspect you have deeper feelings for Severus than you will admit, even to yourself."

"Don't be ridiculous, Ronald, we went through this years ago," she replied vehemently.

"I have been watching you lately, love. When he comes in the room, you light up. You are both constantly aware of each other. Even Hugo has noticed. The other night when we had that hot chilli for dinner, you took a drink out of his glass, without even thinking about it, and you even finish each other's sentences at times. When he leaves, you lose some of that sparkle. You are so loyal that I don't think you have even consciously recognised how you feel. Think back over the last six months and tell me I am imagining things, if you can.

"I am going to fetch some more wine. Take a few minutes to consider what I have said, love." He disappeared into the kitchen, allowing Hermione some space and time to reflect.

Hermione gazed into the fire, considering her relationship with Severus. Ron was correct. Things had changed between them. It had happened so gradually, that until that moment, she had not even noticed. She remembered how happy she had been when Ron and Severus had finally given up their mutual antipathy and realised they could be friends. The chess games had helped. In those, Severus had accepted Ron as an equal and enjoyed the contest with a like mind. As the years had passed and Ron had matured, Severus had found him an amenable companion, one of the few male friends he had. Hermione smiled to herself as she recalled how at first she'd nearly had to knock their heads together to get them to agree on anything. How times had changed.

However, over the last year or so, the easy companionship between the three of them had changed subtly. Nothing she could have put a finger on, just small nuances, particularly in Severus' behaviour around herself. At work, things had continued as before; their business had been consistently busy, which kept them focussed on their potions brewing. But at home, she now realised, Severus had rarely spent time alone with her, preferring to play with Rosie and Hugo or talk to Ron unless they'd been all together. She realised now why she had been feeling so unsettled over the last six months. She had missed her long, intimate conversations with her friend, even though she saw him nearly every day.

Little incidents, which she had brushed off as inconsequential, came back to her. Occasions which, when taken alone were meaningless, but when added together demonstrated the truth of Ron's words.

She fondly recalled a morning earlier in the year.

The house seemed inordinately quiet and still when she arrived to start the day's work. Walking into the sitting room, she found Severus had fallen asleep while reading in his armchair by the fire, which he had a habit of doing at times. She couldn't resist gently brushing his hair off his face and kissing his forehead to wake him. He stirred and reached up to caress her cheek.

"You know I adore you, Hermione," he murmured, still half asleep.

"I love you too," she whispered. "Now, wake up, it's time for work!"

She had thought his flush was due to being once again caught asleep in his chair, but now she wondered.

Hermione remembered times in the lab when she had looked up to catch him studying her or when she had found herself watching him work instead of concentrating on her own tasks. Times when he had stood close beside her as they had worked together on a delicate potion, which had of late resulted in an awareness that had not been present previously. She blushed as she recalled the Vienna incident; something she had carefully avoided thinking about since it had occurred three months earlier.

They had booked, as usual, a two-bedroom suite with a shared bathroom for the annual Potions in Development conference in Vienna. As they always had a new potion to present to the gathered academic and business wizards, the use of a suite was invaluable when last minute details for their presentation needed to be hammered out.

The first morning of the conference program found Hermione's mind occupied with the day's program. She dropped her nightie and knickers in the bedroom and was rubbing sleep out of her eyes as she pushed the door open to start her morning wake-up routine. A harsh intake of breath alerted her to the presence of a very flustered, very naked Severus, who had just stepped out of the shower.

"I see you are still a fine figure of a man, Sev!" she remarked flippantly in an attempt to lessen their mutual embarrassment.

He remained mute, staring at her as if powerless to look away. Her eyes widened as she noticed his body rapidly responding to the sight of the naked woman before him.

"Er... at least that proves one thing," she observed, equally transfixed.

"What?" Severus asked as he reached for a towel to cover his traitorous body.

"You're definitely not gay!" she declared as she escaped back into her own room.

That night, she tossed and turned in bed, bewitched by recurring images of a rampantly aroused, raven-haired wizard.

Hermione shook her head as she emerged from her reverie. Ron was sitting opposite, watching her closely. He smiled the quirky, self-deprecating smile that she loved so much and awaited her comment.

"You're right, Ron. I don't know how I didn't realise it myself. Things are not the same, but that doesn't mean we should give up on our marriage. We should take some time and try to make it work again," she entreated.

"No, Hermione. I love you so much, but right now your friendship is way more important than your passion. I would rather we accept that we have grown and changed, dissolve our marriage while we can do so as friends, and keep the great relationship we do have. I have grown to care deeply for Severus as a friend over the years as well, and I can't think of anyone to whom I would rather entrust your heart. And before you ask, there is no other woman for me at the moment. Maybe some time in the future there will be, but I haven't found her yet."

She shook her head. "I know, Ron. I did not for one moment consider that. You are too good a man to have a hidden agenda here. But what about the children?"

"Rose and Hugo will understand; after all, they seem to see Severus as another father figure anyway. As long as we all remain close friends, I don't think they will come to any harm. Now, will you do something for me?" he asked.

"Anything, Ron. You know that."

"Kiss me, just one more time."

She moved closer, and their lips met, as they had many times before.

"You see," he said gently. "No spark, no fire. Now go and see Severus and try that again with him. I'll be willing to bet Harry's new broomstick that the result will be different this time."

"Ron, this is not the time to joke," his wife admonished.

"No. You are right, but at least I made you smile again," he replied sadly. Seeing her still unsure, he asked, "What is it?"

"But, what if he doesn't feel the same way?"

"Believe me, he does," he reassured her. "Now go, and if you don't come home tonight, know that I will be happy for you. The children are not back until tomorrow afternoon, so take your time and talk to him." He blushed as he realised what else may occur.

"Oh, Ron, you are such a special person. When did you get so wise?" she softly queried.

"Just creeps up on a guy, you know," he replied. "Now go and be happy."

"I love you, Ronald Weasley." Hermione tenderly embraced him.

"I love you too, but out there is someone who loves you the way you should be loved. Go!"

She left, not daring to look back in case her courage deserted her. She Apparated to the house that, deep inside, she still thought of as home. Opening the door, she softly called out his name.

"In here."

She found him in the study, sitting in his old, favourite armchair in front of the fireplace, cradling a half empty glass of wine and gazing at the flames. At that moment, seeing him in his oldest clothes, his sleek hair hanging loose, half over his face, she knew that there was no man more beautiful in her eyes. Ron was right. She was completely and wholeheartedly in love with this antisocial, acerbic, witty, intelligent, wonderful man.

"You know?" she asked.

He nodded. He turned to her after what seemed a lifetime, his eyes full of hope, love and something she had never seen before – desire.

"Come here," he invited, standing.

She went to him and, drawing close, leaned into his body. They studied each other's face for long moments and slowly, inevitably, came together in a tentative kiss. Instantly, a flame lit between them, burning intensely, as their minds and bodies finally acknowledged that which they had tried to ignore for years. They drank from each other's desire as if it were their sole sustenance. Neither had ever before felt this heat, this need to become as one. Neither would deny their feelings any longer.

"Yes," she breathed, in answer to the unspoken question.

"Yes."

Further words were unnecessary. He gathered her in his arms and, without losing contact with her lips, carried her upstairs and through the bedroom door.

A/N: Based on prompt 93. "Someone has his or her powers stripped away for misuse. Did he/she lose them because of actual misuse or was it a set up? How do they get them back?"

Chapter Sixteen: Wonder

Chapter 17 of 18

Hermione is captured by Death Eaters just before the Final Battle. Voldemort forces her to take an ancient potion he has been experimenting with, which effectively transforms her into a Muggle. Bereft of all but her memories, how does she react?

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I kiss the hems of The-Ones-Who-Shall-Now-Be-Named, ladyinthecloak, who betaed, and NotSoSaintly, who gently guided me through the mysteries of writing erotica. Love you both, girls!

Chapter 16: Wonder

Severus gently set Hermione down on his bed. Candles and a glowing fire gave the room a soft, warm ambience as she studied his face, years younger in his newfound happiness. Tilting her head to one side, she asked quizzically, "How long, Severus?"

He understood her meaning immediately. "In retrospect, I think my feelings for you changed soon after you had Hugo. I didn't understand it at first, but where previously I had seen my dear, young friend, suddenly I was looking at a sexy, passionate woman, who made my heart race when she was near, my body respond involuntarily, and infiltrated my dreams nearly every night. I hid it as best as I could, not wanting to destroy your, and Ron's, friendship with my unwanted desires."

Hermione couldn't resist. "You didn't hide it that well in Vienna!" She laughed as he blushed.

"I was confronted with the woman of my dreams, naked. What did you expect?" he retorted. "I had a devil of a job getting to sleep that night I'll have you know!"

"So did I," she admitted. "I only realised why a few hours ago. I think I have been in love with you for some time, but I have been too cowardly to examine my feelings in depth. I knew that things had changed between the three of us, but..."

"I understand, my love. It is difficult to challenge the status quo, especially when children are involved. I just thank Circe that Ron was insightful and courageous enough to realise that we were jeopardising our friendships by continuing on as if nothing had changed. I will forever be in his debt."

"He is a good man, and I will always love him dearly," she declared.

"As will I," he agreed.

They sat on the bed for some moments contemplating the unselfish act of the man who had brought them together. Hermione leaned against Severus' chest, noting the firm muscle beneath his soft linen shirt. She cherished the feel of his body beneath her hand and the fact that she was now free to touch it, which was a gift beyond compare.

"You realise that we cannot take this any further tonight, Severus. After all Ron's courage and understanding, it just wouldn't feel right to make love to you while I am still married to him," she whispered, hoping he would understand.

"Although my body disagrees, my heart tells me that it would not be honourable. Know, my dear, that I hunger for you with every fibre of my being, but I can wait until you are free to be mine completely." His kiss consumed her as it bespoke the veracity of his words. She responded without reservation, knowing he would not allow their physical need for intimacy override their respect and love for Ron. They sank down slowly, fully clothed, onto the soft quilt, into a night of tenderness and sharing which melded their hearts and souls even though their bodies remained chaste, finally falling asleep in each other's arms.

Hermione awoke the next morning in a cocoon of warmth and softness. Opening her eyes, she sensed the barely tamped fires of her wizard's desire in his intent gaze.

"Good morning." She smiled languidly.

"Good morning, my love. Do you know how often I have yearned to say that?" he asked as he leaned closer to taste her lips.

She traced the features of his beloved face with her fingertip. "You know, I realise now that I have wanted to feel free just to touch you for a long time."

"So, whacks on the arm don't count?" he asked, unable to resist teasing her a little.

"They would have all been for a damn good reason," she countered. "Some men just need to be kept in line at times."

He laughed out loud at that remark. "Well, once we are married, feel free to touch me anywhere, any time, as often as you like," he offered suggestively.

"What, even at The Burrow, in the middle of lunch?" she retorted. Suddenly, her face fell. "Oh, no! What are Molly and Arthur going to say? Will they ever speak to us again?"

"I have no doubt that they will be shocked, but I suspect Ron's support will be the key to gaining their understanding." He reassured her with a smile.

She sat up abruptly. "Ron! What will he be thinking?"

"Shh. Don't worry. I contacted him earlier by Floo when I woke and let him know that everything was fine. I explained that, while you had stayed with me, we had not been intimate. I felt we owed him that much."

"That was a very sweet gesture on your part," she told him, kissing him gently. "Now, I had better go and talk to him myself. We have a lot of things to sort out."

Hermione reluctantly departed after more tender kisses and affirmations of love. After she had left, Severus lay back against the pillows, reflecting on the last thirteen years. He realised that he did not regret the years during which she had enjoyed her youth and first relationship with Ron. He had needed that time to heal, after living so long with fear, suspicion, and hate. Through the generosity of heart and spirit of Hermione's family, he had learned how to love unreservedly, how to relax and have fun, and, most importantly, how to trust again.

In the clear morning light, the glint of a tear could be seen at the corner of his eye.

Severus Snape wept – this time with joy.

The children accepted the change in their three most loved adults' relationships without so much as blinking. As far as they were concerned, they had three parents, and as long as they continued to receive all the love and attention as before, who lived with whom was of no import. Ron and Hermione moved into separate bedrooms while they awaited the dissolution of their marriage, which, as it was mutual and amicable, was only a matter of waiting a few days for the paperwork to be processed. The three spent hours together discussing how they would manage the care of the children. Ron and Hermione slipped back into their previous relationship as best friends as if they were donning an old, much loved shoe. Neither had realised how much of a strain the last two years had become until they could relax without the fear that the other would be hurt at their lack of romantic attachment. Severus and Hermione were still in awe of the depth of their love for each other, but had decided to refrain from the physical expression of that love until they were married. They had waited for so long to admit their feelings; they felt they needed time to explore them fully before taking it to the next level, despite being sorely tempted on many occasions. Severus and Ron's friendship had been strong enough to withstand the change in their respective relationships with Hermione, and they continued their heated contests over the chessboard as before.

Convincing the rest of the Weasleys was a little more difficult. Ron spent many a fraught evening with Molly and Arthur over the first two weeks, explaining that he was not being abandoned and that he supported Hermione and Severus with all his heart. Finally, they accepted the inevitable and welcomed Hermione back into the fold. It had been touch and go for a while.

Harry and Ginny were a different proposition, both claiming they had predicted it all for years. They had been aware of the change in Ron and Hermione's relationship long before anyone else had an inkling, but until the couple had realised it for themselves, they had felt it not their place to comment.

Three months after the night that Ron made the biggest sacrifice of his life, he was escorting his best friend down the aisle. He had felt very honoured when Hermione had asked him to give her away, for it meant their relationship was whole and would prove to all their friends and family that he was in favour of the marriage. Kissing the bride as he turned to take a seat, he murmured to her, "Be happy, love. You deserve it." She beamed at him and squeezed his hand, just like the old days.

Of course, after the speeches were over, it was Ron's turn to corner Severus.

"I know, I know," pre-empted the bridegroom with mock fear, "if I harm one hair on her head, you will come after me!"

"Yes, but don't forget, you're dealing with a top-rated Auror now, not some callow youth." Ron chuckled as he opened his arms and gave Severus a congratulatory hug. "And by the way, chocolate works well for the PMS, mate!" He spotted Luna Lovegood standing alone by the punchbowl and left Severus to find the new Mrs Snape.

"Alone at last!" Severus sighed contentedly as he carried his bride over the threshold at Spinner's End. "I thought they were never going to let us get away." He smiled down at his beautiful wife, whose heated gaze evoked an immediate reaction. Sliding her slowly down his body, he deliberately let her feel how much she was affecting him.

"Mmm. I think you are trying to tell me something," she murmured in his ear. "Care to elaborate further?"

With that, he led her by the hand up to the master bedroom. Once there, he stopped and simply looked at her, entranced. At thirty-two, she had matured from the slender girl she had been before marriage and children to the curvaceous, alluring woman before him. Her hair had been arranged in an artfully contrived knot on top of her head with a few ringlets framing her face. She wore the brooch and necklace that he had given her so many years earlier. The simple, silver, silk organza robes skimmed her figure perfectly, and despite the modest neckline, the effect was extremely sensual. His chest tightened as he acknowledged the depth of his feelings for this woman. She had been his student, an annoying know-it-all. She had been his adversary, albeit inadvertently. She had been his mission, his salvation, and his purpose in life. She had been his dearest friend, his family, and at long last had become his wife. As far as he was concerned, she was his goddess.

"You are so beautiful, my own, sweet Nimue. I can't believe how lucky I am to have you as my wife," he murmured as anticipation hardened his body, passion melted his reason, and love filled his heart.

She likewise studied her new husband. Dressed in tight black trousers, a snowy white linen shirt, and a fitted black velvet waistcoat with silver trim; his lithe body, and his arousal, was displayed to perfection. His hair, long and tied back, was still jet black; his face, whilst not traditionally handsome, was strikingly masculine. Her Potions professor was long gone; she could only see her beloved husband, who took her breath away just by entering the room.

"You are not so bad looking yourself," she purred. "And, as incredibly sexy as I find that outfit you are wearing, I think you are decidedly overdressed."

He laughed and stood with his arms akimbo. "I am yours to do with as you please, my lady." He offered himself, body, heart, and soul.

"In that case..." She slowly and teasingly unfastened the buttons of the waistcoat, tossing it aside once she had removed it. The discovery of the old charmed Galleon that saved her sanity so many years before, hung on a well-worn cord around his neck, almost brought her to tears. Kissing it in benediction, she continued to explore the delights of his body, tracing the smooth skin with the tip of her fingers as it was exposed. His shiver of pleasure as she lightly brushed the trail of dark hair leading down towards the buckle of his trousers sent an answering bolt of heat to her centre. Trembling a little in anticipation, she began unbuckling his belt.

He growled as he stilled her movement in a desperate attempt to retain the last remnants of control before she removed it with her searching hands.

"My turn." His voice, roughened with desire, was intoxicating her senses.

He gently released her hair from its knot and immersed himself in her sweet-scented curls. Turning her around, his mouth worshipped at the altar of her beauty as he slowly began unfastening her robes down her back. Each soft moan in response to his kisses penetrated his senses, almost shattering his hard-won control. The robes slid to the floor, leaving only flimsy silk and lace scraps which could not hide her arousal – as evident as his pressed against her back.

She turned to release him from his remaining garments, but once again he stayed her treacherous fingers with a gentle smile. "Not too soon, my love, or I may disappoint you."

"You could never disappoint me," she reassured. "I know that you may not last long, this first time, but I find that flattering. Besides, we have all night." She kissed him tenderly, intent on removing his self-restraint with his pants.

He groaned. "You will be the death of me, woman. I am *fifty-two*, you know, not twenty-two." A few seconds later, his protests abated as the sensation of his wife caressing him through his boxers scrambled his thought processes.

"You were saying?" she prompted with a wicked smirk.

"Never mind. Just don't... ah... stop..." he gasped as she dropped his underwear, and he felt her small, adept hand encircle him intimately. As her other hand reached down to cradle him gently and her mouth and tongue created exquisite sensations on his, her pace quickened, and he knew that he was defeated. With a groan, he spilled over her hand as his body found long awaited release.

Severus' pride lamented his lack of stamina while his body rejoiced. "I'm sorry... I should have stopped you sooner." Several years of abstinence, since he had realised that the occasional woman he had dated fell far short of his expectations, simply by not being Hermione, had resulted in his perceived failure. As he apologised for his loss of control, he looked up to find his new wife sporting a self-satisfied grin.

"What?" Once again, his witch left him bewildered.

She embraced him. "You silly, noble man, I have longed to do that for you. Don't apologise for allowing me to fulfil a secret wish. It was amazing, knowing I could make you lose it like that." The evidence of her fantasy disappeared with a wave of her hand. "Now, where were we?" she asked, lighting a trail of fires down his chest with her fingertip.

"I think I was about to dispose of those excuses for undergarments that you are wearing," he growled as he swiftly removed the items in question. He gathered her in his arms and carried her to the bed, where he laid his precious gift reverently upon the quilt. Without further words, he proceeded to pay homage to every inch of her skin with his hands and lips. Her soft, breathy murmurs inspired him to find her most sensitive spots and lavish them with attention.

She opened her eyes languorously and noted that he was fully aroused again. "I think it's time that you did something constructive with that, Severus," she told her husband.

"And what would that be, my dear?" he asked between licks and nibbles.

In lieu of replying, she straddled him and rubbed her body against his. "Oh, I think we can find a use for it." His breathing became ragged as she moved slowly back and forth, tempting... teasing... intoxicating. Her every action was unravelling him once again. Before he had a chance to take control, she lifted slightly and slid onto him, enclosing him in her moist, slick heat. "Oh, my!" she gasped. "Oh, my... oh, my... *oh, my!*"

She rocked, creating an intensely erotic friction, Severus' reciprocal thrusts generating sensations beyond anything she had previously experienced, until her movements became erratic and, with a quick flip, he reversed their positions. The change of angle deepened his penetration, and his body grinding against hers where they joined was the final straw. Her rhythmic contractions around him as she came were his undoing, and with a harsh cry of triumph, he found his long sought after paradise.

A year later, it was Hermione's turn to give Ron away as he married Luna, the woman with whom he had found his spark. They had been dating since Hermione and Severus' wedding, much to Ron's friends' delight. Severus ruthlessly took advantage of his distraction when playing chess, often asking about their latest date just to put Ron off his game. Hermione had taken great enjoyment in teasing Ron about how he was all sparkly when he was around Luna. Rose and Hugo adored her and did not think it was at all strange that their daddy's new girlfriend wore radishes in her ears.

Severus gave the bride away, as her father had unfortunately died some years before in a printing press accident. Luna and Ron moved into a house near Hermione and Severus, and Spinner's End remained as the base for the Potions business. The children were equally happy with Mum and Uncle Sev, or Dad and Auntie Luna, spending alternate weeks at either house, which gave both couples plenty of time alone together for private *research*. They all shared dinner twice a week, followed by chess for the men, and on Sundays went to the Burrow for one of Molly's famous lunches. Severus wasn't altogether sure about being included in Molly's brood, but for the most part managed with good grace.

After all, he finally had his deepest heart's desire, something he had never imagined he would find – an enchanting witch who adored him and a devoted, loving family. Severus was content.

A/N: Well, this is the end, apart from a brief epilogue, which will be posted after the voting. I hope you have all enjoyed it. Many thanks for all the encouraging and thoughtful reviews. You guys are the best!

Based on prompt 93. "Someone has his or her powers stripped away for misuse. Did he/she lose them because of actual misuse or was it a set up? How do they get them back?"

Epilogue

Chapter 18 of 18

Hermione is captured by Death Eaters just before the Final Battle. Voldemort forces her to take an ancient potion he has been experimenting with, which effectively transforms her into a Muggle. Bereft of all but her memories, how does she react?

Disclaimer : The characters aren't mine, the Potterverse isn't mine, even the prompt is someone else's.

Epilogue

Standing at the end of the platform as the Hogwarts Express puffed out of view, Hermione turned to Ron. "Well, that's Rose off to school," she said as she fondly ruffled Hugo's hair. "I hope she has as much fun as we had, but *not* of the Evil Tyrant Battling variety!"

He snorted. "Do you think I would allow any daughter of mine to get tied up with a disaster-seeking, rule-breaking, impulsive pair of boys like you did? If she wants excitement, she can jolly well play Quidditch!" Laughing as she threw a mock glare his way, he added, "Or, of course, she could spend all her spare time studying in the

library."

"A lot of good that did me!" Hermione retorted. "Trouble found me, whether I wanted it or not!"

They turned together and walked arm in arm back towards the barrier where a tall, dark man was just shooting off an owl.

"Happily on her way to Hogwarts then?" he asked with a smile as he pocketed his letter unopened.

"Yes, Severus, and you *should* have come with us to wave her off," Hermione scolded.

"No, my love, you two *are* her parents after all, even if you are no longer husband and wife. I said my goodbyes at home. I will have my turn when this little one turns eleven." He tenderly laid his hand on her gently rounded belly.

Ron turned to Luna, who had been keeping Severus company. "One day, we will have one of *our* own to see off to Hogwarts. If we get to work, maybe he or she could be a classmate of Hermione and Severus' child."

"Aww, no!" interjected Hugo. "Does that mean I will have two sets of half-brothers and sisters to train?" His parents and step-parents could see his mischievous, nine-year-old brain already devising ways to torture them by means of his younger half-siblings.

At that, the adults collectively shrugged their shoulders and vowed that, as much as they loved him, they would *never* allow Hugo Weasley to spend time alone with their younger children. After all, if it hadn't been for the undue influence of his Uncle George, he wouldn't have turned out to be the consummate prankster that he was!

THE END

A/N: This story has now come to a close, but I have plans for my characters for the future. I am eternally grateful to my wonderful beta, ladyinthecloak, whose help and advice is always invaluable, and SW69, who not only made the Challenge possible, but betaed one chapter when LITC couldn't. Thanks are also due to rdholmantx, who gave me some inspiration, and notsosaintly, who guided me gently through the wedding night! Last, but not least, thanks to all the readers and reviewers out there. You guys are splendid! XXX

This story is based on prompt 93 of the Potter Place Anything Goes Challenge. "Someone has his or her powers stripped away for misuse. Did he/she lose them because of actual misuse or was it a set up? How do they get them back?"