

Journey's End

by chivalric

A rainy day in winter. Hermione, lying ill in bed, is haunted by memories of the past and makes a final decision. This is a sequel to "Unkissed".

One-shot Story

Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: This is a sequel to "Unkissed" ([Click here to read](#)). It is a sad story, and I have an urge to apologise beforehand to everyone who reads it and expected something different, something more funny, something erotic. But this is how it ends.

The title is adapted from the song "Into the West" by Annie Lennox. I recommend not listening to it whilst reading this story.

Thanks and hugs to shellsnapelover for betaing this. I know she hates me. I know she cried bitter tears. I love her because she still erased my mistakes.

And equal amount of hugs go to Dreamy_Dragon, my first beta and the one who never fails to support me.

The cold winter rain rattled against the window pane, but the woman who was lying in the big bed inside the house didn't hear it. And if she had heard it, it wouldn't have bothered her the sound of rain held lovely memories, memories so old that they seemed unreal.

The woman fragile, pale, tiny beneath the duvet and the quilt was too busy trying to keep breathing to be concerned with anything else but her failing body, her treacherous lungs, her aching bones. She was dying, and it was painful. Hating it and fearing it, she only wished it were already over.

Death had lurked in the room under the attic for weeks. He was hiding in the shadows; he stood behind the door. She could taste him in every bite she forced down her rough throat and in every sip her husband made her drink. She could hear Death whisper entrancing words in her mind; he was there when she slept, and he waited patiently when she was awake. In some ways, Death had become a friend, but an unreliable one he refused to claim her. He lingered and laughed, he made her wait and beg, and maybe he wasn't that close a friend at all.

The nights were endless, and being awake was torture, to say the least. The illness she was suffering from ate away the flesh from her fragile frame, left her weak as a kitten and had made her eyesight fade. If Severus hadn't read to her daily for hours, she would have gone mad a long time ago she was nothing without her beloved books by her side, but she couldn't even hold them herself anymore.

The illness had sneaked in a couple of years ago, quite unexpectedly. It had claimed her strength first, then her bones and organs, and finally it had caused her to lie down as every step she made turned into brilliant, clear, raw pain.

Severus had realised fast what was wrong with her and had picked up a fight against the illness, had spent months in his potions lab and had brewed one potion after another to keep Death at bay.

And it had worked in the beginning. The illness had backed off, had decided to hide in a dark corner of her body. They had hoped it was gone for good, but both knew that that was simply impossible – it was one of the few illnesses even wizarding medicine couldn't cure.

When the illness came back with a vengeance, Severus as well as Hermione accepted that finally, after a lifetime, Death was only a few breaths away from her.

Three months ago, she had gone to bed and hadn't been up since then. Severus had stepped down from his post as Hogwarts' Headmaster to be there for her full time.

Taking a deep sigh, Hermione stared out of the window and finally became aware of the rain that washed the world outside clean. It was not her world anymore – she hadn't been outside for a long time, not even before she had given up standing on her own legs. She didn't know how her garden looked, she didn't know how the summer had been, and she knew with certainty that she wouldn't live long enough to see snowdrops and daffodils in bloom again.

Damn.

She didn't really want to die, but there was no other way out of this. Constant pain sang in her body, not really bad pain, but nagging, nerve-wracking, sleep-stealing pain. Thinking had become hard, if not impossible, and it scared her that sometimes she didn't even know anymore if it was day or night, morning or evening.

Sometimes, it took her a minute or two to remember her name. Sometimes, she opened her mouth to greet her husband and couldn't get the words out. It made her cry, all of it. It made her wish Death would finally stop messing about and take her.

All she wanted to do was sleep, but sleep fled her whenever she so much as thought of it. Night after night she would lie awake, listening to the deep and steady breaths of her husband. She listened to his heartbeat as well when he pulled her close, and this, sometimes, lulled her over into dreamland.

She could hear his steps on the stairs now. His steps, so light and fast, nearly inaudible, but then, she had been waiting for him, had been longing to see him for more than an hour. She missed him whenever he was out of sight, which was ridiculous, really, after a lifetime of marriage. But still, she felt lost without him, without his hand in hers. He had been there nearly all of her life, since she had been eleven years old and had raised her hand for the first time in his classroom. He had scolded her, back then, had scolded her endlessly over the years, had given her detention, and she had deeply mistrusted him, had even hated him at times.

She smiled, her pale, bloodless lips curving with the shadow of humour. Her hate hadn't lasted after she had taken on a special project in her last year, after Voldemort's defeat. They had worked closely together; he had, after a while, allowed her to see that he was human after all, that he got tired and bored, that he owned the blackest sense of humour, and that he was able to make her laugh with his sarcastic comments. She had started to like him, back then, more than half a century ago when she had been young, healthy, and innocent.

Had she really been eighteen years old, once?

Oh, yes. Eighteen and still a virgin. Eighteen and hopelessly in love with her professor. Eighteen and brave enough to give him a Valentine – a rose to show her affection. And he had taken it.

Carefully, not to strain her weak muscles, Hermione turned her head. On the windowsill, she could make out the crystal vase with the rose she had picked from her father's greenhouse once. It was preserved with a spell and still as beautiful as it had been all those years ago. When she concentrated, she could even make out the swift fragrance – a smell of youth and hope and promises. The yellow, orange, and red colours of the perfect petals lit up the room like a tiny sun.

Of course, things continued differently after I had given him the rose, she mused. She had been immensely happy that he had accepted her Valentine's gift, had stared at the open window all night, up in her Gryffindor dormitory, and had day-dreamed about Severus Snape, Potions master at Hogwarts. She had considered taking up a bit of flirting with her forbidding, bitter professor, maybe trying to lure him into asking her out to dinner. She had fantasised about kissing him.

Instead, Harry and Ron had laced his tea with a potion that had sped up things massively. The night she had spent with the drugged Potions master had been incredible, and it only had taken her three years after that night to realise that she wanted him, that she loved him, and that he, for Merlin's sake, better accept it if he didn't want to get hexed to pieces by a lovesick witch.

Hermione smiled at the memory and sighed a moment later. That had happened so many, many years ago. Soon, this would be over, and no one would be left who could remember her with hair that wasn't streaked with grey, a face without wrinkles, and a body strong enough to walk upstairs without help.

Silently, the door to the bedroom opened, and her husband stepped in, carrying a tray with tea and sandwiches. Maybe she would take a sip and a bite, but she might as well not – her stomach didn't approve of food anymore. She was only skin and bones; sometimes, when Severus lifted her up to place her in the chair in front of the window, he remarked that she didn't weigh more than a wet sparrow.

"Good morning, my love," he said, placing the tray next to the bed, and she briefly closed her eyes to return the greeting. She tried to avoid speaking whenever possible – her voice sounded horrible, and she wasn't able anymore to utter too many sentences in a row. Quite a catastrophe for the babble-mouth she once was, she had to state that much.

Hermione looked at her husband and couldn't help but think how gentle time had been on him. He was haggard like a scarecrow, his nearly waist-long hair was white, but in his face just a few crinkles around the eyes were visible, left there by laughter and happiness.

And sorrow, lately. He was worried about her, but tried not to show it. Hermione, though, knew what he dreamed about as she was lying next to him in bed and felt him toss and turn, felt him moan, heard him call for her. She knew the dream he dreamed – he had dreamed it many years ago, had first dreamed it after he had thrown her out of his dungeons. He dreamed she was lying in his arms, but when he reached for her, she vanished into nothingness. Once, one morning after she had as good as raped him in his own garden, she had seen him dreaming this dream, and it had been heartbreaking.

Back then, it had taken little more than a kiss to send the dream away for good. Severus hadn't had it for decades – instead, he had married her, had made her part of his life so she couldn't vanish ever again.

Unfortunately, she would be gone soon – and this time forever. No chance he would get her back this time.

Gods, how much she still loved him. Had someone asked her at twenty, she would have denied the possibility of a couple being in love for more than sixty years. Together, yes. Her parents had been together until the day they had died. But love? This all-consuming, heartbreaking, mind-twitching love? Never.

But here she was, ill and only a shadow of herself, ridiculously old, and loving her husband as deeply as on the day they had married, about a year after their daughter had been born.

She even desired him still, after all those years. Until recently, they had shared physical love and had enjoyed it. Only because her body was behaving so stupidly, they had stopped love-making.

Regrettable. Really and truly regrettable.

"Do you remember the storm?" Hermione whispered, her eyes closed. The bed dipped when Severus sat down. She could smell the tea he had brought – Rooibos and Vanilla – and she wished she were strong enough to just take the cup and down it. But she wasn't, and so her husband slipped his arm under her head and helped her to take a sip.

"Of course," he answered. His voice had darkened over the years, had become a bit hoarse and more mellow than when he had been younger. Hermione loved his voice; it still sent shivers down her spine.

"The thunderstorm? When we were in the garden? The night I came to tell you how much I hated you?" She knew she was barely audible; still, she wanted him to talk, and the best way to make him talk was to ask him questions. He still was a teacher, although he had given up teaching more than fifteen years ago, concentrating on leading the school instead.

With a light caress, he wiped a drop off her chin. She hated that, this dribbling; she hungered for his touch, though. "I will never forget that night as long as I live, beloved," Severus answered. "You came back to me that night. You claimed me as yours. And you left grass in my bed. I still think I should have spanked you for that."

"You did. Repeatedly," she murmured, and more felt than saw his smile.

He had learned to smile, she had to admit that, although it had taken him a while to smile when people could actually see it. For years he had only relaxed in her company, and when he was with his few friends. Albus had been a regular guest in their house as well as Tonks and Remus. They had eaten together, and she had found out that the man she loved was not only a marvellous cook, but enjoyed being the host as well.

She had enjoyed it, too. Severus had shed his solitude for her, and she had eventually given up her job in Italy for him. Finding employment in England hadn't been easy, but it had been worth it. After their daughter had been born, travelling to Italy and back on a nearly daily basis had proven to be too stressful for all of them, even with the help of a baby-sitter.

"I love you," she croaked, not sure if he could hear her. But she needed to say it. It would be the last time.

Severus pecked a kiss on her shallow cheek. "I know. You are mad. I told you that before, but you never believed me." Gently, he pulled her closer until her head rested on his chest. She could hear his heartbeat and was, as always, reminded of the first night they had spent together. Back then, she had listened to his heartbeat for the very first time. Ever since, she had slept badly when she didn't hear it.

She ran her tongue over her dry lips, and Severus, seeing it, took a tissue, dipped it in a bowl of water and wiped off her face. Her throat tightened at the tenderness of his touch. "I'm not mad," she said and weakly grabbed hold of his wrist, entwining her fingers with his. "You were stupid, throwing me out of your rooms we would have had three more years together. I would give everything if I could have as much as three more days with you. Even three hours..."

"Shhhhh. Don't talk, love. I know it hurts, and we have said everything there was to say a while ago." With one arm, he reached for the bedside table, picked up a tiny glass and held it so she could see it. "Are you sure?" His voice, so wonderfully dark and rumbly, sounded casual only on the surface. Hermione could hear the pain in his words, but she nodded.

"I cannot stand this anymore," she managed. "Too much pain. Too much effort to breathe. Too much... it is simply too much, and I am ready. You know it. So please..."

He embraced her, hugged her against his bony chest. Today, he didn't wear his usual pair of jeans, but light, woollen trousers and a white shirt instead of a jumper. Formal clothing, perfect for a burial. "Yes, I know. And I agree. It is time. I cannot watch you suffer anymore. I cannot help you, either my potions don't work in this stage of the illness. Here. Drink this."

He held the glass with the pale liquid and didn't let go of it when she reached out for it. Instead, he steadied her hand and helped her bring the glass to her cold, pale lips. He bent his head to see what he was doing, and a long, white strand of his hair brushed her cheek.

One swallow, and the liquid was gone. One tear dropped onto the bright, colourful quilt that covered the bed.

The rose on the windowsill lost a petal, the first one since it had been picked so many decades ago. In slow motion it floated to the windowsill, and an unseen breeze blew it to the floor.

"I don't want to die, Severus," Hermione whispered. Her head rested at her husband's shoulder, and she could feel him tremble. This was not easy for him, she knew that. But he had promised to end her pain when she was ready.

Today, life had finally proven to be unbearable for her. Today, she had asked him to get the potion that would end her pain. He had brewed it weeks ago, knowing she would ask him for it sooner or later.

"I should have said goodbye to Sam," Hermione ripped her eyes open and struggled. Sam, who had looked after Sasha for years. Sam, who now lived in Southern Germany with his wife and children. She hadn't seen him in...

"Sam was here last week, Hermione," Severus said calmly and kissed her temple. "The silly boy cried his eyes out after he came downstairs again I had to dose him with a generous swig from my best port before he was able to leave. You did say goodbye. To him, to Tonks, to Sasha, and to Luca and Gabriel. You can go in peace."

Now then could she hear tears in her husband's voice? Slowly, Hermione turned in his arms until she could face him. Yes, definitely tears. "You never cry," she stated, surprised. "In all the years I have known you, you've only cried twice when Albus died and when Remus died."

For a long moment, he looked at her. "And now you die. I love you more than I can ever tell you. For most of my life, you were there. And in another few minutes, you will be gone. Don't you think I am entitled to tears?"

That made her smile. "You will find someone else," she teased him, her voice already fading. "Someone young and beautiful. Someone strong, someone who can handle you."

He snorted. "Not that many witches around who are willing to live with a grumpy, hundred and twelve year old dungeon bat. Actually, you were the only one who ever even thought about getting anywhere near me."

"I and Rita Skeeter," she objected, and this time she could hear him chuckle. That Rita had been after him had been a constant joke between him and Remus.

Had the sun already gone down? It was so dark in the room, but then, darkness was fine. Hermione could smell the scent of their rose, she could smell the shampoo Severus had used in the morning, she could smell the candles and the tea. Nice, friendly smells. Maybe dying wasn't that frightening after all.

She didn't notice that her husband reached out again, found another glass and drank its contents. She didn't miss the new smell, though, sharp and a bit bitter. The very smell that matched the taste still lingering on her own tongue. She wanted to protest. She wanted to drag him to his workroom and make him drink the antidote.

But... they had talked about this, and he hadn't been open to reasoning. And after all, if she had the right to decide when and how to die, so had he.

"You shouldn't have done this, beloved." Dreamlike, the words dropped into the silence of their bedroom under the roof. "Sasha will be devastated to lose us both on the same day. The children... Luca and Gabriel..."

"They will understand," her husband said sternly. "And the prospect of Rita Skeeter coming after me again after you have passed on is truly far too terrifying, even for me. She looks even older than Minerva."

Hermione grinned, a pale shadow of her once so beautiful and sometimes mischievous smile. "Had she as much as touched you, I would have come back as a ghost, chasing her to hell and back," she murmured. "You shouldn't... you are healthy... you might have lived for many more years..."

"Without you, it would not have been a life worth living, Hermione. Simple as that. Accept it. We will die together. Today. Now."

Death stepped into the room and looked at the couple on the bed, then swung his scythe and cut the bond that bound them to the world with a swift move. He very much

appreciated that those two held each other close when they took their final breath.

Downstairs, the door opened and a voice called out, "Mum? Dad?" Dust motes danced in the light the sun had come out after a rainy morning, and the earth finally smelled like spring. Sasha dropped her bag and stepped into the kitchen, where she searched for a vase. In her hand she held a small bunch of flowers daffodils, having bloomed too early in the outer corners of her garden and she wanted to get them into water before taking them upstairs into her parents' bedroom. Her mum loved the colour, and it would be a nice surprise for her.

Today, her children hadn't come with her. Her daughter Luca was at the university, teaching. And Gabriel's twins were ill, so he had stayed at home.

Sasha, a tall, dark-haired woman, frowned at the silence as well as the clean kitchen. Her father spent a lot of time in here, and there were always pots bubbling and cups standing around. The kitchen was the heart of the house, but today, it seemed uninhabited and abandoned.

She didn't like it. Usually, the kitchen was a bright place even at night.

Not today. Everything was clean, all things tidied up. No books were lying around. The kitchen seemed dead.

No. Rubbish.

"Mum? Dad?" Sasha called again and ran her hands through her short hair. She refused to be worried. Having inherited her father's cool, logical mind, she decided to go upstairs to check on them before she started to worry. After all, they could be having a late morning nap or...

Slowly, she put the daffodils onto the workbench and went upstairs.

In the bedroom, without the preservation spell that had protected it for more than half a century, the last petal of a once beautiful orange rose dropped to the floor and shrivelled to dust.

□

Lay down

Your sweet and weary head

Night is falling

You've come to journey's end

Sleep now

And dream of the ones who came before

They are calling

From across the distant shore

Why do you weep?

What are these tears upon your face?

Soon you will see

All of your fears will pass away

Safe in my arms

You're only sleeping

What can you see

On the horizon?

Why do the white gulls call?

Across the sea

A pale moon rises

The ships have come to carry you home

And all will turn

To silver glass

A light on the water

All souls pass

Hope fades

Into the world of night

Through shadows falling

Out of memory and time

Don't say: «We have come now to the end»

White shores are calling

You and I will meet again

And you'll be here in my arms

Just sleeping

Annie Lennox, Into the West