

The Light at the End

by pelespen

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Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 2

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"I want to move out." Ginny's voice was gentle but firm.

"WHAT? Why?" Harry turned from the ancient kitchen counter where he was pouring himself a cup of tea.

"He's not getting any better with us here, and well... I just don't feel comfortable with the idea of bringing our child home to... this." She waved her hands around vaguely.

"What do you mean, to 'this'?" his voice held a note of defensiveness.

She sighed. "Look around us, Harry even without the mood swings and drinking habits of your godfather, Grimmauld Place is not where I want to raise our child."

Harry's jaw clenched briefly, but when he saw the pleading look on his pregnant wife's face, he knew this wasn't just another argument about Sirius's behaviour. Ginny was right. He was going to be a father soon, and as much as he hated having to make this kind of choice, his new family had to come first.

He sunk into the chair next to his wife and sighed. "Who's going to take care of him, though? He's going to be here all alone again."

"Harry, Sirius is a grown man, and-"

"She's right, Harry." Sirius's tone was bitter but resigned as he entered the kitchen. "I am a grown man and I can take care of myself."

He forced a thin smile, his eyes flicking to Ginny's swollen belly. He nodded, adding softly, "And Grimmauld is no place for a child to grow up. I should know."

"But, Sirius-" Harry tried to interject, but he was stopped.

"Harry, if I have to, I will throw you out. You need to focus on your family *your* family now. I'll be fine."

Harry stared at his godfather for a long moment, frowning. *What a load of shite*, he thought angrily. Sirius had been back for three months, and he had barely left the house for anything more than restocking his liquor cabinet. Harry knew he could never fully understand what his godfather had been through, but Sirius didn't seem interested in even trying to actually live. He vacillated between sullen brooding and drunken rages, both usually within the confines of his bedroom, but the latter Harry and Ginny could frequently hear from all the way down on the first floor.

Still, Harry had stayed, hoping against hope that Sirius would snap out of it, would want to actually participate in life a little. Even his motorcycle, which had been Harry's

welcome-back gift to him, sat untouched in the back alley. He knew that once they left Grimmauld Place, there would be no one else to try and help Sirius.

And now, he was essentially being kicked out with one last subtle "fuck you." Deep down he knew that, while in theory the reasons they should leave were valid, this was more about Sirius' bizarre desire to stay shut away from everyone, combined with an underlying dislike that had formed between his godfather and his wife.

Harry just shook his head and muttered, "Well, nice to see you two finally agree on something."

He stormed out of the kitchen, leaving Ginny and Sirius in a tense silence. They didn't like each other, and they both knew it, but they at least tried to keep things civil, for the sake of peace, and for Harry's happiness.

In a rare show of human emotion, Sirius smiled sadly at his godson's wife. "I'd like to help, if I may," he said. "I know Harry has plenty of money, but it would please me if you would allow me to have some things for the baby sent to your new home."

Ginny looked down at her hands on the table. "That would be nice. I'm not sure how Harry would feel about it right now, but I'm sure he would appreciate the gesture at some point."

Sirius chuckled under his breath and shook his head to himself.

Despite her blandly gracious words, he knew full well what Ginny Potter thought of him. He had ~~heard~~ her, heard them, every time, no matter how softly they whispered. He could hear every muted argument between her and Harry and every not-so-muted rant session Ginny had with her mother, on the rare occasion the Weasley matriarch came to Grimmauld. She was becoming more and more like Molly every day, and Sirius only hoped it was just pregnancy hormones, for his godson's sake.

Most of the time, he couldn't bring himself to feel hurt by it. Usually he was too busy trying to drown them out, drown everything out. Still, while he couldn't give a rat's arse what the two Weasley witches thought of him, it pained him to hear Harry come to his defense, every single time, excusing his irrational behaviour and reclusive tendencies. Harry understood nothing, just like everyone else, yet he still hung around, waiting fruitlessly. Sirius couldn't stand it.

There were times when he hated them all, hated everything. He hated being able to hear their whispers three floors up, and he loathed the piercing laughter and occasional raised voices and most of all the godforsaken wireless that was always tuned to some grating nonsense whenever the redhead was in the house. The food they tried to fix tasted like salt and sand most of the time, and Sirius wondered if it was him, or if Ginny really had never managed to pick up on her mother's finest skill. Harry seemed to stomach the stuff well enough. He loathed the way they insisted on having the curtains pulled in the parlour, but thankfully most of the house was designed to be dimly lit and shadowy.

Most of all, though, he hated the smell.

For the most part it was just the girl. Something about the flowery fruity perfume she wore, or perhaps it was just her shampoo, combined with her natural chemistry and it just set his teeth on edge. In all fairness, he wasn't too crazy about the smell coming off of his godson either, but in Sirius' more bitter moments he attributed that to the lingering scent of Ginny that stuck to him.

Harry could never understand. It was simpler just to let him believe that his godfather returned from the "dead" as a sociopath and an alcoholic than to try and explain to him. Sirius cringed at the thought of the pity and obligation that would result if Harry knew.

As he headed back up to the fourth floor, Sirius could hear Harry slamming things around in the room he shared with his wife. He paused, struggling briefly with the impulse to try and make things right. Sighing resolutely, he continued to the dark confines of his bedroom and private study.

~oOo~

He couldn't take it.

Cursing himself for his own stupidity and pride, Sirius threw back another shot, wincing at the foul taste that never seemed to diminish.

A patronizing sigh emerged quietly from one of the few paintings in the house that didn't originally feature a human occupant. Sirius looked up to see Phineas Nigellus sneering at him, casually tossing a ruby red apple he had plucked from the bowl of fruit that usually sat alone in the still-life. Sirius shifted angrily away from his deceased relative, his chair legs bitching against the kitchen floor as he did so.

He poured and slammed another shot and thought blackly about his predicament.

He wouldn't crawl. He refused to go to Harry and ask them to come back. He wouldn't be that pathetic - or selfish. Bitterness may have coloured his words at the time, but they still rang true: Harry needed to move on and start building a better life with his new family, and not waste his time waiting on his demented godfather to miraculously be human again.

Another shot, then frustration at its lack of effect. *Why the bloody hell wasn't it helping?* All he wanted was some dullness, to not feel strangled and scratched by something as simple as a fucking shirt.

He snarled in frustration, yanking the tee shirt over his head, then shivered when the cold air hit his skin.

Now, instead of the annoying whispers and overheard conversations, the sounds of his environment grated at him. The soft creaks of the house settling at night, acorns falling onto the roof of the back porch, someone slamming a car door five houses down, all sounded like gunshots to him. The silence was almost worse, reminding him of the nothingness that made him this way.

He reached the bottom of the bottle, and still - nothing. Not even drunk.

The growl that had been building as he paced the kitchen finally broke loose as he hurled the empty bottle at the kitchen wall, taking a kind of twisted pleasure in the painful sound it made as it shattered.

"Hello? Is anyone home?"

Fuck.

Someone decidedly female had managed to enter the front door of the old mansion just then. And here he was without even a fucking wand. Sirius had assumed that with Harry and Ginny gone, there was no one left with any call to come to Grimmauld Place, thus he never gave a second thought to magical defense. He still hadn't made it to Ollivander's for a new wand, since his old one had not made the return trip with him.

"Hello?" The voice came closer, accompanied by clean but soft-sounding steps in the hallway, softer than he was used to. She was heading towards the kitchen, and he'd be damned if he was going to be caught hiding in the dark from some bird. If she was an enemy and took him out, well, he supposed he'd be out of his misery once and for all.

He pushed the kitchen door open and climbed the stairs up to the dimly lit front hallway.

The first thing Sirius noticed was the obvious, especially to a man who had been marooned from humanity for half his life: whoever this witch or woman was, she was beautiful. Not "gorgeous" in the centerfold-piece-of-meat sort of way, although he could imagine if she was dressed for the part she'd easily fit the bill. But beautiful nonetheless - dark curls spilling from the clasp at her neck, tall and slender with curves in the right places, angelic face but with the kind of lips that inspired filthy thoughts.

She was dressed like a Muggle, but nicely so, and she didn't have a wand in her hand which made him all the more uncertain as to how she got in.

The other thing he noticed was that she was looking right at him with only mild curiosity, as if she had every right in the world to be waltzing into his house uninvited.

Sirius frowned. His voice low with a note of warning, he demanded, "Who are you, and what are you doing in my house?"

The female cocked her head at him then, her lips slowly turning up into a delighted smile.

"*Sirius?*" she asked softly, although she seemed to already know the answer, as a split second later she let out a small squeal and ran up to him, throwing her arms around him unabashedly.

He stood frozen for a moment, completely taken aback. Then, *she* started permeating his senses. Her silk blouse felt cool and soothing against his chest and arms, and her body... *Merlin* it felt amazing to be touched and held by this strange creature. Sirius wrapped his arms around her, taking advantage of the chance to feel... feel something good for once.

He let out a silent sigh. She even *smelled* good. He was starting to think it wasn't possible it seemed like everyone he had been in close proximity to had such an unpleasant stench to them.

Something in his senses quirked as he inhaled her scent again. Something familiar.

Sirius quickly prodded at his sensory memory, and it hit him.

"Hermione," he whispered finally.

She pulled back from him in response, an amused grin on her lovely features. "You just now recognized me, yet you let me throw myself at you in the meantime?"

Something of his old self stirred in him just then, and he felt an almost unfamiliar pull in his face before realizing he was smiling, really smiling.

"Now, love," he replied, "I never was one to deny a pretty witch, you should know that."

Even in the dim light of the hallway, Sirius could see the blush that painted her cheeks as she looked first down at his bare torso and then away, dropping her arms. He suddenly realized foolishly that he was just flirting with Hermione, his godson's best friend.

Clearing his throat and stepping back slightly, he asked, "Can I get you a cup of tea?" steering her towards the parlour.

Once she was settled with a couple of smaller lamps lit, Sirius returned to the kitchen. Quickly pulling his shirt back on, he set about cleaning up the mess of shattered glass from his tantrum while waiting for the kettle to boil.

After waiting longer than she was used to tea taking, Hermione peeked into the old kitchen to see what Sirius was up to. She heard the scraping of glass across stone floor coming from the corner and spied him crouching with a dustpan and broom, muttering under his breath.

"Sirius, what are you doing?" she asked, allowing herself a split second to admire the slope of his muscled back and strong shoulders before reminding herself just whom she was ogling.

He leaned back on his haunches, flipping his black hair out of his eyes as he looked up at her with a half smile.

"I ah, had a small accident just before you arrived. Careful of the glass over there." He nodded to the corner by the door where there was a pile of broken whiskey bottle remains.

Her lips twitched quizzically. "I see that, but why are you doing it that way?"

Sirius looked down at the broom and dustpan in his hands. *Damn.* "Oh, my wand isn't... down here. Just thought I'd take care of it this way's all," he answered.

The water in the teakettle started roiling, steam billowing from the hole where the lid would have gone, so he stood to fill their mugs. Hermione shook her head and cleaned the mess with a wave of her wand.

"Thanks," he said, smiling sheepishly over his shoulder.

As they headed back into the parlour, Sirius noticed the luggage in the hallway.

"What's with the suitcases?" he asked.

"Oh." Hermione frowned. "Erm, well I just finished my residency in the States, and I'm not due to start at Hogwarts for another month, so Harry said I could stay here in the meantime. Didn't he tell you?"

Oh dear, Sirius thought. He decided to skim over the larger concern but answered her question honestly.

"He probably did, Hermione, but I'm afraid I haven't been the best at paying attention or remembering things," he admitted.

She smiled warmly. "Well, I suppose that's to be expected. It's just good to have you back. I was so excited when I finally got the news. How long has it been?"

"Since I got back?" he asked. "A little over three months... when did you find out?"

"Only a few weeks ago," she said. "Communication is a little spotty over there. The Bureau has a lot tighter regulation than we do."

Sirius chuckled and shook his head slightly. "The 'Bureau'? What the hell were you doing in America, anyway?"

Hermione blinked and reminded herself it was unlikely Harry would have had much to say about her to Sirius.

"Well," she began, "after the war, I began studying as a Healer. I finished up training in a couple of years and was about to sign on as a MediWitch for St. Mungo's, but a new exchange program opened up that would let me train in America as well. Their schooling system is quite different from ours very modern, and it includes some Muggle medicine and emergency care. Not enough to earn a full doctorate, but enough to incorporate a lot of new practices to benefit both worlds during emergencies. I'll be starting a teaching position at Hogwarts this year with a new course in Healing Fundamentals for sixth- and seventh-years."

She paused at the unreadable look on Sirius' face and cleared her throat. "But, I suppose that's probably more than you needed to know."

"What?" He shook his head at her. "No it's just... you're... "

"...Not a kid anymore?" she finished for him, smiling.

Not quite what I was going to say, he thought, amazing, incredible, beautiful, perhaps...

"I supposed you're not," he agreed lamely. "So how long have you been away?"

Hermione looked down at her hands. "Three years," she replied quietly, wondering to herself if it was long enough.

While she was secretly grateful for the chance to delay the inevitable, it was getting late, so she asked, "So, where are Harry and Ginny, anyway?"

"Well..." He hesitated, taking a deep breath and looking away. "They moved out, actually," he answered.

Sirius hazarded a glance at Hermione and cringed at the look on her face.

"Oh..." she replied in a small voice. "I see. I how silly and presumptuous of me, I'm so sorry, Sirius. I... I'll get a hotel..."

"What?" Sirius interrupted her, exclaiming, "You'll do no such thing! There's more than enough room in this house, Hermione. Too much room for one person, I might add."

She gave him a doubtful look, so he pressed on while trying to keep his own desperation out of his voice. "The entire second floor is yours if you'd like. The main bedroom might need some dusting, but it has its own bathroom and everything. Really," he added softly.

Hermione swallowed the lump in her throat. She was mortified, touched, and hurt at the same time. "Thank you," she whispered.

Sirius visibly relaxed back into his chair then. "I suppose there was no way for anyone to tell you, and it was rather short notice anyway."

"What happened? I don't understand why-?" she asked. Harry had kept Grimmauld Place after the war, and while he had mentioned in his letter that he returned the title to his godfather upon his return from the Veil, she was under the impression they were still going to live there.

"Well, you know Ginny's quite far along by now," Sirius explained softly. "And well, she didn't feel comfortable with the idea of bringing their child home to this dark old place to raise it."

Hermione hummed and responded with a mutter. "More of Molly's wonderful influence I'm sure."

He raised his eyebrows in surprise but couldn't suppress a small smile before continuing diplomatically. "Perhaps, but I'm inclined to agree with Ginny. This is no environment for a child, and a fresh start would be best for them. It really is for the best. Harry needs to focus on his own family now."

Sirius stood up to take their empty cups back to the kitchen. "They're staying in a little flat downtown while the work is finished on their new house in Godric's Hollow, so they're not on the floo network yet. But I'll get you their address in the morning, hmm?"

Hermione nodded and forced a small smile, secretly relieved. As she looked up at Sirius, her eyes lingered briefly over the blue tee shirt that now stretched over his expanse of chest, before traveling over his neck, bearded jawline, those lips that were full but still so masculine, and then finally meeting his eyes, which were watching her closely. The intensity of his gaze made her feel like a cornered mouse. Neither of them moved for a moment as they regarded each other as simply man and woman, forgetting briefly the ties and boundaries of family and friends.

Merlin, she wondered briefly, *was he always this handsome?*

A small muscle twitched in his jaw, distracting her just enough to break their staring contest. Her lips twitched wryly as she looked away.

"What is it?" Sirius asked, reaching for her teacup.

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him. "You look younger than I remember, Sirius. And I like the beard." She grinned now, feeling somewhat triumphant with her own daring.

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. He shook his head with a low chuckle before turning away. "Go upstairs and pick out your room, little girl. I'll bring your things up in a bit."

She felt a warm flush at the way he called her 'little girl', the tone implying anything but the fatherly affection one might expect.

Pushing the thought away, she ascended the familiar old staircase and poked her head into the room off the landing she and Ginny once shared in her fifth year. It had been changed, the two small twin beds removed and replaced with a four-poster king-sized bed. Hermione wrinkled her nose, realizing it was probably Harry and Ginny's former master suite. She continued up the stairs to the second floor and found a less familiar bedroom at the end of the hallway, with a connected bathroom that would suit her needs. She lit a few lamps and cast several cleaning charms to make it livable for the evening, deciding to pick up some fresh bed linens tomorrow.

"Andromeda used to stay in this room when we were children, you know. 'Bella and Cissy' always took the ones on the third floor."

Hermione jumped a little at the sound of Sirius' voice. She frowned quizzically when she noticed he'd carried her luggage up the stairs by hand, yet she hadn't heard him at all. She watched as he gently set her belongings inside the door and turned to go.

"Thank you again, Sirius," she said softly.

He paused without turning back. "It's nice to have you here, Hermione," he replied, before slipping out into the hallway.

~oOo~

Hermione awoke with a start some time in the dark, early hours of the morning. She didn't know why until she heard it again. Somewhere from above came an almost inhuman moan, then a male voice crying out in agony. Her heart jumped. *Sirius*.

Slipping out of bed as quietly as possible, she grabbed her wand and crept into the hallway. More sounds, less sharp but just as unpleasant, drifted down from the fourth floor. Hermione padded as quickly and softly as she could in her bare feet up the stairs. When she reached Sirius' bedroom door, she paused, wondering briefly if she was mistaken and not wanting to walk in on something else that would cause odd noises in the middle of the night. Her thoughts were answered by an almost dog-like whimpering and a guttural "No..." from the other side of the door.

She bit her lip and slowly opened the door, cringing at the vision before her, but setting about quickly to help.

The moonlight seeped in through the partially closed curtains covering the floor-to-ceiling windows, offering enough light to make her way to Sirius' bathroom. She dampened a washcloth and crept to the huge bed where he lay, covered in sweat with sheets tangled around him. He arched off the mattress, another agonized moan escaping him, his lips pulled back tight in a painful grimace.

"Shhhh..." Hermione whispered, easing herself gently onto the bed and softly brushing the hair from his forehead. He was ice cold, so she did a quick charm to warm the cloth in her hands before gently bringing it to his face. "Sirius," she murmured soothingly. "Sirius, it's alright, I'm here, it's just a dream..." she cooed to him while tenderly caressing his face, shoulders and torso with soft fingers and the warm cloth.

He quieted down relatively quickly, his body relaxing slightly, still tense but no longer racked by whatever was haunting him. Hermione continued her care of him, whispering reassuringly as she worked to bring him to a state of calm, hopefully without ever waking him up.

As Sirius' breathing slowed and the tension drained from him, Hermione set the washcloth aside and rested her hand lightly on his chest. She sat there for several moments, still lightly stroking his brow as she felt his heart beat normalize under her fingers. She took the opportunity to study his features unhindered, her fingertips absently following her eyes over his forehead, down his temple, across his cheek and over his bearded jawline where the coarse hair tickled her fingers.

He really did look younger than she remembered, although she suspected that was more a result of her own growing up than anything. There were still tiny creases at the corners of his eyes. And his lips she hesitated, wondering what they felt like. They looked soft, yet lacked the smooth perfection of youth.

With a soft intake of breath, Sirius' eyes suddenly fluttered open, glinting silver. Hermione started to pull away, straightening slightly, when a strong hand grabbed her wrist and held it in place.

"Don't-" he whispered, his voice slightly hoarse as he leaned his face into her touch, closing his eyes again as he sighed.

She relaxed her hand against him, understanding, and continued to lightly stroke his face as he lay back into his pillow. As she watched his acute reaction to her gentle touch, her heart broke a little. *What must it be like to go through this alone, and for how many times?* She knew if he were even slightly more conscious, he'd be furious with her for overstepping the boundaries of his pride, but she didn't care. She'd deal with that if and when it came up, and she'd do it again however many times were necessary.

Hermione stayed until well after Sirius' breathing had deepened and she was certain he was in a heavy sleep.

When the darkness started to fade from the room ever so slightly, bringing the first paleness of daybreak, she eased herself up from the edge of the bed. She paused, looking down at the dark-haired wizard who was still sleeping peacefully. *He deserves so much more*, she thought as she leaned over and pressed her lips to his forehead before quietly exiting his bedroom.

Hermione bypassed her new bedroom and headed towards the kitchen. She had completely missed dinner the night before, and now her stomach was rumbling. She moved silently through the old basement room, assessing the current inventory with disappointment. She frowned in frustration, wondering what Sirius had been doing for food. Finally giving up, she returned to her room and got dressed as quietly as possible. She made up a quick list and slipped out of the house, hoping fervently that the little grocer two streets up that she remembered from her last stay at Grimmauld was still there.

~oOo~

Sirius awoke to a painfully bright light spreading across his bed from the open curtains. He shielded his eyes and stumbled over to the window, angrily yanking the heavy material shut against the offending rays before realizing that he had actually been *woken up*. Which meant he'd actually been deeply asleep. Usually he dozed fitfully between nightmares at best. He kept the curtains in his bedroom partially open because he was always awake well before dawn and took a small pleasure in the slow dim light before it got too bright to tolerate.

The feeling of being well rested was foreign but pleasant as he stretched and, breathing in, he stopped, frowning curiously.

There was a smell, several smells actually, and his stomach grumbled in response. Four floors below him, someone was cooking, and for once in the time since he'd returned, it smelled divine. He quickly pulled on the jeans that had been kicked across the floor last night and yanked open his door, inhaling deeply. Before he stepped into the hall however, he paused, wondering just who was doing the cooking. The only witch or wizard he knew who could cook worth a damn was Molly Weasley, and surely she wasn't slaving away in his kitchen.

He picked up the sound of a feminine voice humming to herself and suddenly remembered Hermione. He slowly backed into his bedroom, his brain picking through the remnants of sleep fog. Images of the dark-haired beauty who had appeared in his hallway like an answered prayer last night had all but obliterated his old memories of the brainy little swot she once was.

Glancing in the mirror on the way to the bathroom, Sirius cringed. What was it she said? 'I like the beard'? He considered his pale reflection for a moment then decided on a quick shower and shave. He wasn't crazy about the beard, but he'd compromise by at least neatening it up. He was quite proud of his ability to handle a Muggle razor at this point, getting by with only one minor nick on his neck.

Picking up the damp washcloth from the side of the basin, Sirius suddenly recalled the reason why he was so well rested. He was flooded with memories of a sweet, soft voice and tender fingers that had managed to slip into his nightmares, systematically dissolving them until he'd opened his eyes to catch an angel looking down at him.

Sirius felt his stomach twist with a mix of emotions, the first of which was humiliation. *Damn fool*, he thought bitterly to himself. Here he was cleaning up for the one witch who had every reason to laugh in his face or worse, pity him for his weakness.

And yet, he couldn't deny wanting more of it. Since the moment she'd tackled him in the hallway last night, he'd felt pleasantly drugged by Hermione's presence. He'd been in a feeling-less limbo for seven bloody years, and upon returning, every thing and every one had been nearly unbearable for him until she showed up, and now he hungered for more of it. *Pathetic*, he thought with disgust. She had acted as a concerned friend and a Healer, and he was licking it up like a starved dog.

In the end, Sirius' stomach finally decided for him, and he pulled on his last fresh pair of jeans and one of the few decent-looking shirts he had left. He made a mental note to find some way to do laundry today, and with one last look in the mirror, he headed downstairs.

He stopped just outside the kitchen door and braced himself for the inevitable confrontation about his nightmares. Knowing that it was exactly that - inevitable, Sirius took a deep breath and pushed the door open.

Hermione had just set a bowl of warmed fruit compote on the large wooden table when he entered the kitchen. She smiled up at him, her chocolate eyes meeting his stormy greys with no hesitation. "Good morning," she greeted him warmly with no fanfare before turning back to the stove.

"Do you like crepes? I was also thinking of making an omelet," she called over her shoulder.

He took in her slender but curvy frame, admiring the jeans that hugged her hips, and the fitted soft blue shirt that rode up slightly, exposing a strip of flesh at her waist as she reached above her for a couple of mugs. Her hair was pulled back at her neck, she had tied a dishtowel around her waist as an apron, and she commanded the kitchen in her bare feet. Sirius sighed hopelessly.

"I also picked up some coffee beans because you were pretty low," Hermione continued as she stirred a pan of sliced bananas in sauce. "I wasn't sure how strong you liked it though, so you'll have to make your own."

"You didn't have to do all this," Sirius said quietly.

"Hmm?" she responded absently. "Oh, I do this all the time, Sirius. Trust me 'breakfast is the most important meal of the day,'" she recited with a grin, sliding a thin, delicate crepe onto a large plate. "Not to mention one of the most delicious."

She turned to him, holding the plate expectantly. "Well?"

He blinked in confusion.

Her eyes sparkled cheerfully as she clarified, "Did you want a crepe, Sirius, and if so, would you like bananas or compote?"

His mouth watered and he stood dumb with indecision.

"Both, then?" Hermione began spooning the banana filling into one half of the pancake, then the compote before folding it neatly and setting it on the table with a small flourish. "That will stay warm while you make your coffee." She added teasingly, "I think you need it."

"Thank you," Sirius mumbled, trudging past her to the kitchen counter. It was then that he noticed the familiar strains of a melody ever so softly coming from the far end of the kitchen.

"Is that Miles?" he asked as he poured the Italian roasted coffee beans into an old hand grinder.

She looked at him strangely. *How did he even hear that?* She wondered. She had set the small modified CD player at the far end of the kitchen and had been listening to it with the volume set low while she read the paper earlier. But now, at the other end of the kitchen, she could barely make out one or two notes of the familiar music, and only if she strained to hear it. *Maybe Padfoot's senses...* she reasoned with a mental shrug.

"Kind of Blue" she nodded as she ladled more batter onto the round griddle. "I hope you don't mind?"

He merely grinned to himself as he turned the crank on his beans.

"Wait I didn't know you listened to Muggle jazz." Hermione turned to him, squinting suspiciously.

"I could say the same for you," he tossed back, emptying the fresh grinds into the stovetop percolator and pulling open the side drawer for the matches. "Besides," he continued as he turned the gas burner on and struck a match to light it, "that album was a classic before you or I were even born."

He grinned as he turned to her, but was stopped by the slight frown on her face as she eyed the matches and hand grinder on the counter.

"Sirius," Hermione said quietly, stepping over to him. She glanced down at his neck and recalled the Muggle razor she had noticed on his bathroom counter the night before. She absently swiped the tiny nick that was still bleeding before looking back up into his eyes.

"Sirius," she began again softly. "Where is your wand?"

Her eyes were solemn and concerned, but he couldn't find the pity he expected to see there. Habit and instinct should have moved him to make something up like usual, or to tell the young witch to sod off and mind her own damn business. Instead he opened his mouth and the truth stumbled out.

"It didn't exactly make the return trip back with me," he replied quietly. His shoulders dropped as a small weight felt as if it had been lifted from them.

"And you haven't bothered to get another one?" she asked.

"Your pancake, Hermione." Sirius nodded to the griddle behind her.

"Damn!" she exclaimed at the bubbling mess before sweeping it away with a wand motion and ladling another scoop of batter in its place.

"To answer your question, no, I haven't been to Ollivander's yet." Sirius sighed. "Haven't been quite up to dealing with Diagon Alley, to be honest." *It was* the truth, he reasoned, and he had no obligation to share the details anyway.

"I suppose that's understandable," she replied, checking the oven while the crepe pan tilted itself around. "I mean, Diagon Alley can be a bit much even for someone who hasn't spent seven years stranded on the other side of a drapery..." She levitated the large cast iron skillet from the oven to a trivet on the table, then slid another crepe onto the plate next to the griddle. When she turned back to him, he was watching her with an unreadable expression.

"Sirius?" she asked cautiously, worried she might have offended him somehow.

He cleared his throat. "Yes, I suppose you're right," he replied. "Is there something I can help with?" he asked, changing the subject and looking around.

Hermione nodded to the table. "Eat."

Sirius pulled out a chair and sat, blissfully inhaling the aromas that swam around the kitchen before picking up a fork to dig into his crepe.

Hermione's back straightened with a slight shiver at the ecstatic moan that rumbled from the man behind her. She turned, raising an eyebrow as she watched him take another bite, eyes closed and a euphoric expression on his face. She wasn't sure whether to feel embarrassed or flattered, but the noises coming from him were practically erotic as he ate. She ducked her head and turned to the stove where the coffee was doing nothing. With a wave of her wand, the brew was percolating, and she poured two steaming mugs for herself and Sirius before seating herself across from him.

He opened his eyes as she plunked the two mugs on the table and smiled contentedly at her while chewing happily. Hermione gave him an amused smirk. "There's omelet as well, you know."

"Hermione, you are a goddess," Sirius mumbled wholeheartedly through another bite of food. He swallowed, then took a sip of the rich black coffee, relishing in its bitter contrast to the sweet crepe. He saw her raise her eyebrows skeptically and thought with amusement of how she had no idea. He could nearly have wept with joy over how utterly *good* it all tasted. In one single dish he had proof that the life he'd returned to wasn't utter shite as he'd come to believe.

Knowing she'd never understand such an overreaction, he simply said, "I had no idea you could cook."

Hermione gave him a half-smile as she dished some omelet onto her plate as well as his. "I couldn't, actually. But my roommate in the states was a Culinary Witch. I must have gained fifteen pounds the first year we lived together, but she taught me a lot in exchange for some help with her Potions course work."

He dug into the fluffy blanket of eggs, mushrooms, ham, tomato and cheese, groaning in another round of culinary bliss. Hermione couldn't help her laughter at this point.

"Sirius! It's not THAT good," she chided.

He shook his head. "You have no idea. I could marry you for this, you know."

Hermione felt her cheeks flush. Her stomach gave an unreasonable twinge, but she replied teasingly, "Well I wouldn't put you through that. But it is the least I can do to repay you for letting me stay here."

He furrowed his brow, his tone serious. "There's no payment needed for that, Hermione. You are always welcome in my home. I want you to understand that."

She simply smiled in response and sipped her coffee before changing the subject.

"I'm actually going out to Diagon Alley this morning, as well as a couple of Muggle shops. You're welcome to join me if you like."

Sirius peered into his mug regretfully. "Thanks, but I'm not really-"

"It's okay," she interrupted him in her effort to not pressure him. "But when you feel up for it, I'll be happy to go with, if you want company."

She stood, taking her dishes to the sink. "Can I pick anything up for you while I'm out?"

He regarded her back silently for a moment before answering. "Actually, would you mind picking up a pair of sunglasses for me?" When she turned to him questioningly, he grinned and added, "You know, something sexy."

Hermione shook her head and chuckled. "Sure, Sirius. Anything else?"

"That should do it," he replied, thinking to himself that perhaps it would be a start. He might be able to at least tolerate the daylight enough to get out of the house and do some things for himself, like laundry.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 2

Hermione confronts Harry and Ginny, and more truth comes to light.

Hermione was livid. She was so angry in fact, that she had the Muggle taxi drop her off ten blocks away from Harry and Ginny's address. She only hoped that walking the remainder of the distance would cool her temper to a manageable level before she finally confronted her old "friends."

How could they be so utterly heartless? She fumed inwardly. Well, Ginny she could understand, but Harry? His own godfather! "He's the only family I've got," she bitterly recalled him saying of Sirius so long ago. *Oh, how things change...*

Her heart hurt for the dark-haired wizard as she thought of him trapped once again in that godforsaken house. Now, however, he was simply trapped by his own overly acute senses, and had been for three whole months. Did they not know? Sirius hadn't exactly volunteered the facts of what he was going through, but it wasn't that hard to figure out.

After breakfast, she had gone to Diagon Alley to pick up a few items mostly potion supplies for a Dreamless Sleeping draught she hoped might help Sirius. She had also done a bit of shopping in Muggle London to purchase bed linens and a sleek looking pair of dark sunglasses.

It had been a slightly odd request, but she had assumed it was just an offhand item that he hadn't felt up to tolerating the crowds in order to get. Now that she knew it was because he literally couldn't tolerate the daylight without them, however, she was furious.

It made perfect sense to her that after all Sirius had been through he would be having a sort of sensory overload. But because no one had bothered to address it, the man had been left to feel like a damned invalid when he was anything but.

~oOo~

Earlier that day...

Hermione's suspicions had been building throughout the morning as she recalled all the odd little details of Sirius' behaviour while she shopped.

At first she'd thought he was being silly and overly-flattering about the breakfast she'd cooked, until it became apparent that he was quite genuine in his enthusiasm.

And she knew, *knew* that the little CD player in the kitchen had been turned down to just barely above zero, because she'd only had it on loud enough to hear while she was sitting right next to it. Yet he had heard the music clearly enough to identify the album at the other end of the large room, over the clatter of dishes and cooking noises. She knew he might carry some residual sensory sharpness due to his Animagus form, but even that was pushing it.

He had cringed, almost painfully, when she'd started to open the curtain in the parlour to let some reading light in after breakfast. He hadn't said anything, but his shoulders had visibly relaxed when she'd dropped the tieback and let the heavy material fall back into place.

And she couldn't be certain, but after she had emerged from her room, showered and dressed to go out, as he paused in passing her on the stairwell, did he *hem* her?

Her thoughts started piecing themselves together into a theory as she fingered a set of high thread-count sheets in the linen store. They were her favorite, not too fancy or sleek, but incredibly soft. For some reason she had a fleeting thought of the coarse, twisted sheets in Sirius' bed from the night before. She glanced up at the price marker and was delighted to find they were on special, a two for one deal. She paused for barely a moment before grabbing four sets total, as well as a few fresh pillows.

Hermione chewed her lip contemplatively as she continued shopping. She didn't know exactly where Sirius had gone when he fell into the Veil in the Department of Mysteries. It was just always assumed that, being a doorway to the "other side," it signified death. Wherever he had been, it had been seven years since he'd fallen in. The return would most assuredly have been a shock, both mentally and physically. Harry hadn't mentioned anything about it in his letter, however.

She browsed through the display of sunglasses, a smile playing her lips as she pictured him. "Something sexy," he'd said with a grin. She found a sleek dark pair she thought would be perfect and took her purchases to the checkout.

When she returned to Grimmauld place, it was to find Sirius sweating over a large steaming cauldron in the old kitchen. She teased him about making her lunch, but quickly discovered he was stirring laundry. He smirked and rolled his eyes. "I know, I know..." he muttered, waiting to hear the lecture about getting a goddamn wand.

Instead Hermione shook her head. "Doesn't your wardrobe take care of that?"

"What?" he asked dumbly. It wasn't the question he was expecting.

"Your wardrobe, Sirius..." She drifted off, realizing that the wardrobe in his bedroom was probably older than he was, built long before the latest charmed wardrobes had become a common wizarding household item. But hadn't Harry seen to that?

Hermione blinked and cleared her throat. "Sirius," she explained, "they make charmed wardrobes now that clean everything for you. I went to school with the girl who invented the charm for them, actually. Would you mind if I?" she asked, motioning upstairs.

It took all of five minutes to charm the ancient old wardrobe to clean his clothes for him while he stood in the doorway to his bedroom watching with admiration and a touch of envy. When she was finished, she noticed the twisted bedclothes half-hanging on the floor and remembered her purchases. He tried to decline the new linens but she pushed them on him, insisting that she had no use for so many sets and besides, they were free.

"Bamboo?" he read the label with a skeptical look.

Hermione grinned wistfully with an emphatic 'yes' and tore open one of the bundles. The fabric spilled over his sensitive fingers and he fought back a sigh. He schooled his

expression into a subdued smile and shrugged casually. "Pretty nice," he mumbled while his hands plunged greedily into the bundle of cool soft material.

With a quick glance at his hands, her suspicions were nearly affirmed.

Hermione prepared a neat lunch of sandwiches, brie, and fresh fruit from the stand up the street. She was torn between regret and fascination over her purchase of the sack of large, nearly black cherries. Witnessing the relish with which Sirius would bite into each fat fruit, his teeth slowly piercing the dark flesh, his lips slightly sucking at the juice before he would chew one half of the meat away from the pit, and then the other it was positively indecent. And he seemed utterly oblivious to the effect it was having on her.

"Oh," Hermione said, remembering suddenly. She reached into her bag, pulled out a pair of sunglasses, and pushed them across the table to Sirius. He paused halfway through a cherry and looked up at her with a pleased grin before licking the juice from his fingers and reaching for the shades.

"These are great, just perfect!" he exclaimed and slid them on his face, giving her a teasing smirk before jumping up from the table and bounding out of the kitchen.

After piling the dishes into the sink to clean themselves, Hermione found Sirius in the back yard. He was seated with his back to an old stone table, arms spread on either side of him, his face upturned to the sun. Her breath caught in her throat at the look of sheer joy on his face before she noticed just how pale his complexion was.

He hadn't noticed her yet; the bench where he was seated was at the far corner of the large back garden, and she was certain his eyes were closed as he basked in the warm sunlight. Hermione licked her lips and, without really considering it, she muttered his name, her voice no louder than a whisper.

Sirius immediately straightened and turned to her, his smile faltering slightly as he noticed her wide-eyed expression. He gave a resigned sigh and nodded as he patted the bench next to him. She was probably the brightest young witch he'd met since Lily Potter, so it came as little surprise that she'd figure it out sooner or later. As she crossed the lawn, he tried to brace himself for all of the impossible questions that were surely coming.

Hermione tucked one leg under her so she could face him as she sat down on the warm stone. She tilted her head, her brown eyes regarding him intently for a moment before she asked in a quiet voice, "Sirius, where were you?"

It was such a vague sounding question, yet he knew exactly what she was asking. Harry had asked him what was on the other side of the Veil. The healers who had examined him when he was found had asked him to describe everything he remembered. His one very brief experience with the press had consisted of a sea of irritating voices all asking some variation of, "what was it like?" And he'd faked them all out, usually shrugging it off as not remembering, or simply slamming the door in their face. His damaged state left him feeling like enough of a basket case without having to explain why. Yet for some reason, as she peered at him through the black lenses, searching for his own grey eyes, he felt the truth come tumbling out.

"Nowhere, Hermione," he replied. "It was Nowhere."

Her lips had parted slightly and a tiny crease formed between her eyebrows as she noticed the slight emphasis he placed on the word, like it was an actual place. He continued before she could ask.

"When that bitch knocked me into the archway, everything just went black and silent, and I felt nothing." Sirius looked over Hermione's shoulder, recalling.

"It took me a while to realize that I wasn't actually dead. I had no sense of form, no sense of anything. The only thing I could experience at all were my own thoughts, and the cold." His gaze returned to her. "That's all it was."

His lips twisted sardonically. "It wasn't until I found myself asleep and dreaming that I realized I was somehow alive and still me. I mean, the dead don't sleep, right?"

Hermione remained silent as he continued. "I didn't know long I was stuck there, picking through every memory I've ever had, more than I was left with after Azkaban." He shook his head slightly. "But at some point, I had this feeling of being... not finished. The next thing I knew, I was standing in front of the archway, completely starkers, looking out into the room where the whole thing had happened. I knew if I looked behind me it was over, so I stepped through."

Sirius smiled wryly. "By chance I was found by that little blonde witch who was with you all when I fell in; she was working in the Department of Mysteries... Lovegood, I think. She sent for Kingsley, I got poked and prodded at St. Mungo's for a few hours, and now here I am."

Hermione licked her lips hesitantly. "You spent seven years in Nothing, Sirius?"

He gave a flippant smirk and turned his face to the sun again. "Yep."

"And that's why you haven't been to Diagon that's what you meant when you said it was too much," she whispered.

He let out an involuntary sigh, his tone thick with unexpected relief. "Yes."

He couldn't look at Hermione just yet. It felt surprisingly good to know that someone, specifically *she*, now knew the reason for his behaviour. He wasn't ready to taint that with the look of pity that was doubtlessly swimming in her eyes.

"Is it all five senses, or just sight and sound?" she asked, her tone almost clinical.

"It's everything," he replied.

"What did the healers say?"

"Oh, nothing I faked them," Sirius answered casually.

Hermione smirked. "Can't say I'm surprised," she muttered. "Just how... sensitive are we talking about?"

Sirius turned to her and considered for a moment before answering softly, "I know how late you stayed up reading last night because I could hear you turning the pages of your book."

She blushed. "Oh. Oh... I'm so sorry. I'll I can cast a Silencing Charm..."

"Please don't" he interrupted. "I mean, not on my account. Obviously if you want your privacy, but..." He cautioned a glance at her to see her reaction.

"I guess the last thing you need is total silence," she finished for him quietly.

A shy smile played the corners of her mouth as she pondered something.

"What?" he asked.

"Well, I suppose I'm even more flattered now that you liked my cooking."

Sirius exhaled a chuckle. "Hermione, love, you can't possibly know. I thought I'd never enjoy a cooked meal again."

Her eyebrows shot up. "I take it Ginny's gotten no better in the kitchen then? It's a wonder you haven't wasted away completely..."

"Oh, so it's not just me Harry seems to like her cooking just fine, and I couldn't understand it."

Hermione laughed. "Harry has been charming the food she gives him for years. George taught him how to do it. He never had the heart to tell her he didn't like her cooking."

When their laughter died down, Sirius tilted his head toward her. "You charmed these, didn't you?" he asked and touched the glasses on his face.

She gave a small smile and nodded once.

He shook his head and hauled himself off the bench, muttering something about giving Lily a run for her money before turning to Hermione with his hand extended. Once she stood up, he gave it a quick squeeze.

"Thank you," he said softly and strode back into the house.

~oOo~

Hermione paused in front of the building, glancing down at the scrap of parchment with their address written in Sirius' scrawl. She ascended the concrete steps and pressed the small silver button next to their flat number. Harry's voice crackled over the tiny speaker.

"Hello?"

"Harry, it's Hermione," she said into the metal panel. A second later she heard the buzz of the door permitting her access.

When she reached the second floor, their door was already open, and he was leaning against the frame waiting for her. Her stomach gave an unpleasant lurch at the conflicting emotions that hit her; gods how she missed her *friend*, and the smile that started pulling at the corners of his mouth made her heart ache slightly. But she also felt horribly betrayed and let down. He stood there, a personification of everything she'd missed for the past three years, and everything she'd fervently hoped and wished she could find again. But she knew that was a delusion. Everything had changed, long before now. She could have walked away with her own feelings protected, but now apparently the same sort of cruel detachment was being extended to Sirius as well. Anger flared in her again as she neared the famous wizard.

Harry's smile widened as she got closer. "Hermi--"

He was abruptly cut off by the sting of her hand against his cheek.

"OW! What the--"

"How could you, Harry?" Hermione's voice wavered but was low and fierce.

Realization dawned prematurely on his face. "Oh, Merlin, Hermione, I'm so sorry everything was so rushed and I didn't have any way to reach you. You can stay the night here if you like..."

She frowned and shook her head. "What? You think this is about lodging? He's your *godfather* -- you're the only family he has, and you just left him there in his condition without even a wand? I didn't think you could be that cold."

Harry flushed angrily. "Cold? *He's* the one who tossed *me* out, Hermione. Three months and not a single effort on his part to even try to live. He's done nothing but wallow and sulk and drink that whole time. You have no idea what it's been like..."

"I have no idea? Did you ever once stop to think there might be *reason* he wasn't getting out? Did you ever even bother to ask him?" Hermione's voice raised in pitch and volume but she was cut off as she caught a movement out of the corner of her eye and whipped her wand out, disarming Ginny from whatever she was about to attempt.

"Hey! No wands, you two!" Harry snarled. Hermione smirked and sheathed hers in her belt.

Ginny came to the door, her face matching her red hair and her lips curled in a sneer. "What *do* you care what happens to Sirius, Hermione? His life meant less to you than your precious house-elf rights, after all. Now you dare come here and criticize us for getting away from Mister Bitterness?"

Hermione stopped, her mouth agape in confusion. "*What?*" she asked, incredulous.

Harry merely pressed his lips together and shrugged.

Ginny continued, her mouth curving smugly. "Oh, I believe the way you put it was something like, 'Sirius was horrible to Kreacher and ultimately paid for his poor treatment of house-elves,' like he deserved death for being unkind to the little wart who betrayed him."

The breath left her chest for a moment as she recalled the conversation to which Ginny was referring. She, Ron, and Harry had pieced together where the real locket had been in their hunt for Horcruxes. In trying to appeal to Kreacher, they had found some insight into the psychology of house-elves, specifically that their behaviour was strongly based in emotional loyalty towards their families, particularly those who treated them best.

Sirius was horrible to Kreacher, Harry, and it's no good looking like that, you know it's true. Kreacher had been alone for such a long time when Sirius came to live here, and he was probably starving for a bit of affection. I'm sure 'Miss Cissy' and 'Miss Bella' were perfectly lovely to Kreacher when he turned up, so he did them a favor and told them everything they wanted to know. I've said all along that wizards would pay for how they treat house-elves. Well, Voldemort did... and so did Sirius. That was what she had told Harry years... years ago. And somehow it translated into this twisted accusation and yet another black mark against her?

Her wide eyes darted from Ginny's smug face to Harry, who was now looking down at the dingy hallway floor.

"Is that what you honestly think, Harry?" Hermione whispered, appalled. "That I felt Sirius deserved to die because he was mean to Kreacher?" She cleared her throat as horror turned to anger. "Sirius also 'paid for' being a so-called blood-traitor to a family of lunatics. Did he deserve that? Harry, did he 'deserve' Azkaban did your parents 'deserve' to be murdered, because they ultimately paid for underestimating Pettigrew and not keeping him closer to their fold?"

Harry was looking at her now, his face filled with shame. He opened his mouth but nothing came out.

Hermione shook her head. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. I mean, I'm already the Wicked Witch of the West for dumping Ron and then letting him die in my arms. But you've been holding on to this for five years? And you call Sirius bitter? At least he has a reason to be."

She took one last look at the Potter couple Ginny's face was frozen at the mention of her deceased brother, and Harry's face was a mask of shame and anguish. Neither spoke.

Her tone was ice cold now. "What do I care what happens to Sirius, indeed. Well maybe you should ask yourselves why cold, heartless Hermione gives more of a damn than you two obviously do."

With that, she spun on her heel and strode out of the building.

She was grateful for the ability to Apparate back to Grimmauld Place because as it was, by the time she reached the doorstep of number twelve, the tears were already

streaming down her face. She took a deep breath, opened the door as quietly as possible, and made her way to her bedroom, pushing the door shut before collapsing onto the large bed and curling up for a good cry.

~oOo~

Sirius heard the front door open and close, the soft steps up to the second floor, and then the sound of the larger bedroom door opening and closing. He figured Hermione would head down to the kitchen after a bit, so he decided to put some water on for tea. He was stopped, however, by the stifled little gasps and sniffles that he recognized as crying. Without a second thought, he ascended the staircase, stopping outside her door.

He gave a soft rap and called in, "Hermione?"

When she didn't answer, he continued. "I'm coming in unless you tell me not to."

At her silence, he slowly opened the door to see the back of the brunette witch curled on the large bed. The mattress sank slightly beneath his weight as he sat on the edge and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Hey, do you want to tell me about it?"

Hermione turned to him, and a fresh set of tears sprang to her puffy red eyes. "Sirius... how much did Harry tell you about what happened with Kreacher?"

Sirius was completely taken aback. He vaguely remembered Hermione's stint with house-elf rights when she was in her fifth year. Was that what had her in such a state now?

"Err..." He searched mentally. "He mentioned something about him playing a role in the final war..."

"He didn't tell you that it was Kreacher who betrayed you, that he implied you'd gone to the Ministry that night, convincing Harry to go after you?"

Sirius' eyebrows shot up and he paused thoughtfully for a moment. "Well I suppose I might have asked for that. Should never have underestimated the little--" He cut himself off, clearing his throat.

Hermione frowned. "Don't say that. You didn't deserve to go through what you did."

"Perhaps not, Hermione, but I was the one who was so wrapped up in my own bitter memories of this place that I gleefully took it out on Mother's house-elf. We never did get along he was brainwashed by my family to be just as blood-obsessed as the rest of them. But you know what they say about keeping one's enemies close." He eyed her curiously, absently wiping a tear from her cheek with his thumb. "That's not what this is all about, is it?"

She sniffled and shook her head.

"Things didn't go so well with Harry, I take it?" he asked softly. He'd suspected something had happened to their friendship over the years; Harry hadn't said more than two words about Hermione in the time Sirius had returned, and Hermione hadn't been in any huge rush to go see him when she'd gotten back from the States.

"Everything is so different now," she whispered. "Ever since Ron died..." She closed her eyes as more tears trickled out. She took a deep breath and shook her head again. "We had broken up just a month before."

Sirius rubbed her back. "I'm so sorry, Hermione."

She attempted a weak smile and failed as everything started pushing forward in her head. "They all thought it was because I never forgave him for leaving Harry and me when we were on the run. Apparently that's what Ron told everyone. He was so angry with me he was going to propose and I ruined it." She looked down at her hands. "Everyone was furious."

He interrupted her, frowning. "He left you and Harry? When did this happen?"

She told him the brief story of their hunt for Horcruxes, explaining the toll the locket had taken on the three, and Ron's impulsive departure and inability to find his way back to them for weeks. "That wasn't why, though, not really. Although I suppose it was an indication of why we weren't meant for each other. I just, I didn't love him, not in *that* way. After the war was over, I kept seeing how Harry and Ginny were together they were so in love, and even Ron's mum and dad. And I realized that we *didn't* have that. Everyone expected us to be together, and it felt like that was the only reason we were."

"Do you think Ron felt differently?" Sirius asked.

"Oh, I know he saw it the same way. I just didn't know for certain until..." Hermione swallowed.

She took a shuddering breath. "The day Ron died, he had asked to meet me for lunch. We were in downtown London, and he told me he was in love with someone else, really in love, and that he wanted my blessing before he announced it to everyone.

"He had the engagement ring he'd bought for me and was going to trade it in. It was all so quick, but he was crazy about the girl; I could see it on his face. I'd never seen him like that before, over me or anyone else. He was going to go to a Muggle jeweler, because he wanted to keep it a secret, and of course everyone in the wizarding community knew who he was. I helped him make sure he had the right amount of money and everything." She grimaced at the memory and whispered, "I should have gone with him..."

"It wasn't a very nice part of town," Hermione continued, "but being an Auror, Ron thought he'd be fine. I was three blocks away when I heard the sirens. It was an armed robbery. I think the thieves were confused when Ron pulled a 'stick' on them, and they they shot him. Several times."

"Oh, Hermione," Sirius whispered, pulling her into his arms.

"I couldn't do anything, Sirius. For all of my Healer's training, for all the magic in the world, I couldn't stop it. His blood was everywhere, and all I could think of was that there were bullets in him, and how do I fix this? They don't train you for bullet wounds in the wizarding world. Trying to remove them would have killed him, and leaving them in would have done the same, and he he died there, in my arms." She was sobbing freely now. "He had so much ahead of him, and I couldn't stop it. I couldn't save him, Sirius."

"Shhhh, it's alright, love," Sirius cooed as he held her close. "It wasn't your fault, you know that, right?"

After several moments, she calmed down enough to pull away. Wiping the mass of curls and tears from her face, she sniffled and looked up. She inhaled and hiccuped slightly. "Sorry I, I haven't spoken about it, well, ever really."

"That's why you left, isn't it?"

She nodded and her lips curved bitterly. "Molly would have had my Healer's license if she could. I actually tried to turn it in myself. Adolphus, my mentor, wouldn't have it, though. He was the one who recommended the exchange program to me. Getting away for a while seemed like the best option.

"They'll never forgive me, though," she said softly. "I was even barred from the funeral. And poor Susan Bones..."

"Do you forgive you?" Sirius asked pointedly.

"Sure," Hermione replied uncertainly, after a moment of considering. "Aside from just getting away, the big lure to America was the Muggle medicine program. The official St. Mungo's report was that there was nothing that could have been done to save Ron, but--" She gave an unimpressed sigh. "Our practices are a little archaic in all areas, if you ask me. I had to know for certain. Not just for my conscience but because this could happen to anyone. Being magical doesn't make us invincible.

"I know for certain now that in Ron's case there hadn't really been a chance of survival. But in places like America, Canada, Japan, and Switzerland, there are more advanced treatments that incorporate magical and Muggle medicine. Even if Ron's wounds had been less critical, it's likely he still would have died under the care of our medical system." She grimaced in anguish at the thought.

"Hermione, I can't believe Harry would hold this against you. Molly Weasley is a bit daft, and she's lost too many children, so I'm not surprised about her. But whatever has happened, Harry still cares for you," Sirius insisted.

"Maybe, Sirius, but people change. Everything is so different now... "

"You're telling me," he said, his eyebrows slightly raised.

She blushed. "I guess you would know better than anyone, and here I've been blubbing at you."

He smiled warmly. "Any time, love."

Just then the grandfather clock in the hallway chimed the nine o'clock hour and Hermione's eyes widened. "Merlin! We're late!"

She jumped up from the bed and pulled Sirius with her. "Come on!" she exclaimed, tugging him down the stairs in a mad rush.

"Where are we going at this hour?" he asked, chuckling.

She turned to him as she pulled open the front door. Quirking an eyebrow at him, she grabbed his muscled arm once they were on the stoop. "You'll see."

She was counting on the rush to be like ripping off a band-aid, giving him no time to hesitate or argue. As she turned, pulling him with her in a side-along Apparition, she was successful.

~oOo~

Diagon Alley was dark and nearly deserted, the majority of shops having closed hours earlier. Two figures appeared suddenly outside of a very old structure. The taller of the two, a male, stumbled slightly and cursed. "Couldn't you have warned me, at least?"

The slighter, feminine figure with a mane of wild curls whispered in reply, "Sorry, there wasn't time."

The man looked around them. "Is this Diagon Alley? Great Merlin, it's been..."

He was interrupted by the rapping of the witch's knuckles on the old wooden door before them. After a brief moment, the door swung open and a familiar young blonde witch stood in the dim light of the shop, a soft smile on her lips.

"Hello, Hermione, Sirius." Her voice had a dreamy lilt to it as she ushered them in.

"Thank you so much for doing this, Luna." Hermione smiled, setting her bag on the floor next to a rickety wooden stool.

Sirius took in his surroundings. It had been decades since he'd last been in the old wandmaker's shop, yet he remembered the day with uncanny clarity. The only thing that was different was the person behind the counter. He gave her a confused frown.

"Lovegood, isn't it? I thought you worked at the Ministry..."

Her eyebrows shot up. "Oh, not technically," she replied brightly, "but we don't talk about that."

Luna turned to the shelves stacked to the ceiling with long narrow boxes and started pulling several down while chatting animatedly over her shoulder. "Now, of course I know why you're here Mr. Ollivander was sorry he couldn't make it, naturally, but he only works in the shop part time anymore. I've been assisting and apprenticing with him since the war ended, you know. We were both expecting you much sooner than this, Sirius, so when Hermione stopped by this afternoon and explained your predicament, of course I agreed to meet you here after hours."

She paused and looked at him sincerely. "I can't say I'm surprised that a house so old would have such clever narguls, sealing the entrances until after dark like that. Harry was probably only fending them off just enough to get himself out during the day. They're not easy to rid completely, but without a wand of course, it would be hopeless." Luna glanced at Hermione and smiled. "I'm sure Hermione knows how to eradicate them, but if you continue to have problems, let me know..."

As she turned to select several more wands, Sirius gave Hermione a mystified look and mouthed, *Narguls?* To which she simply shrugged and shook her head. He felt a little pull in his heart that the brunette witch had kept his actual 'predicament' a secret.

"Okay, let's give these few a try, shall we?" Luna smiled at Sirius.

It took all of six attempts before the wand found its rightful owner. The delighted grin on Sirius' face as that familiar warmth spread through him when he picked it up was nothing to the joyful laughter that broke from him when he swished the wand and a shower of dazzling white and gold sparks shot out. He turned to Hermione and impulsively lifted her into a bear hug, swinging her around as his laughter infected her. When he set her back down, his arms lingered around her waist and his eyes danced over her prettily flushed features.

"Thank you, Hermione," he murmured, his voice warm and thick with feeling. Reaching up to brush an errant curl from her face, he opened his mouth as if to say something more, then closed it, shaking his head with a strange smile. "Thanks," he whispered again before turning to Luna to pay for his new wand.

Hermione watched with wonder as they made their way through the darkened streets of Diagon Alley. She remembered well enough when Harry's wand got broken, and then when she had been without her own wand, how bereft she'd felt. And yet she was still amazed at the difference that one enchanted stick of wood made to a witch or wizard's sense of self and well-being. It was like a missing piece had clicked into place with Sirius.

He twirled the thirteen and a half inch length of mahogany between his fingers, whistling a soft and vaguely familiar tune to himself. With his arm crooked through hers, they meandered down the uneven street at his request, stopping in front of darkened shop windows to peer in at the dimly lit displays. She felt a pang, suddenly wanting very badly to see Sirius taking in the world in full daylight. So many little things seemed to enchant him; it was like watching a child at Christmastime. His appreciation for everything was infectious and inspiring... Again, she felt her chest twist slightly at the thought of such a bright spirit being shuttered away for more than half his life. She made a silent vow then and there to do whatever she could to right things.

Hermione hadn't realized they had a destination until they reached a very small shop on a narrow corner that was open and lit from within. The sign above the doorway was battered, yet newer than some, and read, "Cappy's." Peering into the dirty glass windows, she saw it was something akin to a wizarding package and convenience shop. Sirius slipped his new sunglasses on and gave her a mischievous grin, jerking his head to the door. "D'you mind?" he asked.

"Oh! No, of course not. Actually, I meant to pick up a few things for cooking earlier," she replied, slipping in after him and heading toward the wine shelf.

Sirius paid for his three bottles of firewhiskey as well as the wines Hermione picked out. Like a child pushing the buttons for a lift, he delighted in shrinking the large sack of alcohol down to a lightweight and manageable size before they left.

When they returned to the doorstep of Grimmauld Place, Sirius laid a hand on Hermione's arm, stopping her. He held out his hand in front of him, closed, facing up as if he held something. When he extended his long fingers they revealed a small, smooth grey stone resting in the center of his palm. Hermione's eyes met his questioningly, and he merely flicked his gaze back to the stone, indicating she should do the same. With a very small wave of his wand, the stone transfigured into a miniature lotus blossom, pale, satin-like, and perfect in the faint moonlight. He held it out to her, his lips curling upwards at the corners as she cupped it gingerly in her small hands.

"Thank you. It's beautiful, Sirius," she said softly, her voice tinged with awe.

"It never gets old, does it? Magic, I mean," he spoke, admiring the innocent pleasure that lit her face as she shook her head in reply. "Thank you for giving that back to me," he said simply, turning and opening the door to the old house.

~oOo~

The small, white flower sat in its new place of esteem on the nightstand by Hermione's bed. She absently shifted her bare legs under the cool softness of her new sheets while filling the notebook in her lap with details and lists. Tomorrow she would go to the Muggle library downtown and use the computers to email her American colleague. She would have to convince Sirius to let her run some diagnostic scans of her own on him, and then she could start fleshing out the theories that were bouncing around in her head.

Just as she was capping her ink bottle for the night, she heard it again. She bit her lip and, with a grimace, slid out of bed, wand in hand, and crept up to the fourth floor. Her movements were swift with familiarity this time as her wand cast a faint glow, just enough light for her to see by. She silently moved Sirius' wand out of reach as a precautionary measure, and noticed the tumbler and nearly empty firewhiskey bottle on his nightstand. Hermione frowned and made a mental note to herself about it before easing her weight onto the bed next to the thrashing wizard.

She fought back a gasp as a ragged cry escaped his lips. With cool, sure fingers she gently brushed the hair from his brow, mimicking her movements from the night before.

"Shhhh ... Sirius, it's alright. I'm here ..." she whispered, hoping once more to ease him without waking him.

Her movements were halted by an iron-like grip on her wrist, his other hand swiftly reaching up and wrapping itself in her hair. She froze, her eyes wide, but he didn't awaken. She could see the rapid movement of his eyes behind their lids. His mouth quivered and his jaw clenched briefly before he inhaled deeply, nostrils flaring slightly. Then, very suddenly, his frame relaxed while his hands pulled her close, forcing her down to lay with him. An almost imperceptible whisper escaped his lips. "Angel..."

His fingers released their grip in her hair, drifting down her back and resting on her hip. His other hand loosened its hold on her wrist and fell to his chest, where the rise and fall evened out with his breathing. Hermione took a deep, silent breath and gazed up at Sirius' face, still slumbering, now slack with relief.

She could justify her actions easily enough, but she couldn't completely deny the part of her that freely drank in the sight of him now. He was beyond handsome; the wizard laying next to her was... *beautiful*. This wasn't the rather failed paternal figure from her childhood; no, this Sirius was like some kind of tragic angel himself, dark, pale, and perfect.

She softly traced the frame of his face with the backs of her fingers. His raven black hair curled slightly against her hand, softer than any man's hair should be. She wondered absently, as her fingers reached the coarser hair at his jawline, if now that he had his wand he would keep the beard.

Sirius' eyes fluttered open but he didn't move, and neither did Hermione. They stared silently at each other, coffee coloured eyes meeting those the colour of smoke. He blinked slowly but she remained. His exhausted brows barely crinkled, and he licked his lips before whispering hoarsely, "I didn't want you to see me like this."

"It's too late for that," she whispered in reply. "Now sleep."

His eyelids drooped heavily as her fingers continued their sweet, relaxing paths. "We'll talk tomorrow," he murmured as he drifted off, his hand still wrapped comfortably around her waist.