

The Traveller

by Somigliana

Hermione has deviated from an obvious life. She has moved down a challenging and divergent, but ultimately lonely, path. She meets Severus Snape by chance one day, and she has some difficult choices to make.

One

Chapter 1 of 11

Hermione has deviated from an obvious life. She has moved down a challenging and divergent, but ultimately lonely, path. She meets Severus Snape by chance one day, and she has some difficult choices to make.

A/N: Written for Absolute_tash for the 07/08 Winter SSHG Exchange.

Thanks a million to Gelsey for beta reading!

"I am not the same having seen the moon shine on the other side of the world."

Mary Anne Radmacher Hershey

12th March 2004

Hermione is 31

Today is my thirty-first birthday.

Not if you're following the Gregorian calendar, of course. But it's still the unfortunate truth. According to the hours and minutes and seconds recorded by my Chrono, I have lived for thirty-one years.

And I can read it in the tiny lines that feather from the corners of my eyes. I stare into the mirror, and I prod at the telling lines. My reflection scowls at me, barely recognisable as the young, eager witch I used to be. Time has changed me. Inside and out.

The last time that I had a proper birthday party was during my NEWT year at Hogwarts. Harry and Ron came up from London, and Neville shaped the Room of Requirement into a beautiful garden gazebo for me. For one, perfect afternoon, I was happy. I forgot that I was *so* lonely at Hogwarts that my heart would echo with emptiness in the quiet of the library sometimes; that I was desperately worried about what I would do with my life when I finished my NEWTs; that Ron didn't visit me as often as I wanted him to, as often as Harry visited Ginny. I sat between Ron and Harry and we were *solid* again, with Ginny and Luna and Neville completing the silver knot of friendship.

Since then, I've begged off on any birthday celebrations, and year by year the firm knot of true companionship has unravelled. Now, the ties that used to bind us flutter in the breeze, fraying and loose. Sometimes the bonds get tightened again when we owl each other.

That happens because I'm selfish. You see, I can't bear to sever the ties completely...like I should, like Julia has urged me to, time and time again. Even ~~after~~ this time...and I've had so much longer to distance myself and heal...I can't bear to make it final. Because they are the bonds that tie me to who Hermione Jean Granger was. And because I feel like, sometimes, I've lost myself in Time.

I'm afraid that if I really break the ties to my old life, I'll drift away.

I stop sulking (I try, I really do) and get dressed...all ready to Travel in a non-descript and boring set of robes with Muggle clothes underneath them. I pick up my Chrono from my dressing table and fasten it around my wrist. I don't look at the display. I think I've explained that it's just a depressing exercise today.

While I'm inhaling a cup of coffee, which has become my number one vice...like a sailor with a girl in every port, I have to have a favourite coffee spot in each place I visit...I read the *Daily Prophet*. The current news never really draws me in like it used to; I'm more involved in the past, shall we say.

But today, there's an article that draws my eye and really stabs at my heart. Professor McGonagall is retiring. There's a big photograph of her above a blurb that lists all her achievements like they're a grocery list of accomplishments for the modern woman. She's not smiling, but there's that slight tightness in her lips that means she *wants* to smile.

I know that because I spent a lot of time with her during my last year at Hogwarts. By the end of the year I'd sort of become her unofficial aide. I helped to organize the Yule Ball and the very first Freedom Day celebration that May. She had even invited me to visit some of the next year's Muggleborn students with her, and I'd been thrilled. As it was, I never did make that outing. That was mostly her fault, though.

If I'd known what would come of my meeting with Professor McGonagall that day, I might have turned around and run the other way. I'd have packed my trunk as fast as I could, boarded the Hogwarts Express for the very last time and gone on with an obvious life. I'd probably have worked for the Ministry of Magic; married Ronald Weasley; freed the house-elves; had two or three or maybe even four red-headed children and bought a Crup to guard them all; lived in an ordinary house with broomsticks in the hall and a sedan in the driveway; had weekly dinners with Harry and Ginny and their brood. And in the end I'd have died an old woman with my family around me, and my tombstone would have read: Here lies Hermione Weasley. Beloved wife and mother. Brightest witch of her age.

But I was too full of righteous yearning that day (that whole year, for that matter), too eager ~~to make my life count~~ I wanted to be *extraordinary*; there was a fire in my soul to be *more* than a hard worker and a wonderful friend. I was nineteen for Merlin's sake! Helping Harry defeat Voldemort couldn't *possibly* have been the pinnacle of my achievements. I had my *whole life* ahead of me, and there *had* to be something better.

Crookshanks had taken to sneaking into Professor McGonagall's office, so he was there that day, too, curled up on my lap with his eyes half-closed as I complained to the woman I'd come to view as my witchy role-model, my mentor.

25th May 1999

Hermione was 19

"I've been offered a post at Beings and Beasts and with the Unspeakables, but..."

"And there is always a teaching post waiting for you here," she said with a hint of wry amusement.

She'd been hinting that the school would need a good Transfiguration teacher in the next few years, and I think she had genuinely hoped I'd consider taking on an apprenticeship like Neville was going to do with Professor Sprout.

"I *know*," I whined, sounding half my age and maturity. "But...*I know Hogwarts. I don't want to work for the Ministry or Hogwarts or St Mungo's. I want...*"

I struggled to put to words and coherent thought the magnitude of the desperate *longing* I felt, to adequately explain what I wanted because I hadn't even defined it for myself. It was like the secret of my future was hidden on a high shelf and I wasn't tall enough to grab it or even see it and yet when I reached for it, I could sense its warmth and promise just shades away from my questing fingertips.

But she leaned forward in her chair and regarded me with wise eyes and an astute expression. "You want *more*," she said, rolling the sounds of the last word in her broad Scottish brogue so that it sounded rich and inviting.

More!

"Yes," I said with a longing sigh.

And then she rested her chin on steepled fingers and *stared* at me for a long time, as if weighing and measuring something very carefully. I started to shift under her intense scrutiny after a bit...Crookshanks meowed his discontent and jumped off my lap to lie in a slant of sunshine...and I really had to bite my tongue in a sincere effort not to bounce in my chair and say, "What, what?"

Eventually (after an eternity), she seemed to make up her mind. "I have... a friend who I could give you an introduction to," she said slowly.

Who is she? What does she do? Will she fill this hole inside me? But I forced myself to sit still and be mature, in case she changed her mind.

"She has never taken an apprentice..." She twisted her Gryffindor ring on her finger, and it seemed like she was still considering whether to tell me or not.

"What does she do?" I asked quietly, but my voice wavered with suppressed excitement and interest.

Professor McGonagall sighed, and she stuck a finger under the edge of her glasses to rub at her eye.

The longer she stalled, the greater my conviction became that whatever this friend of hers did was brilliant and groundbreaking and truly extraordinary. I wanted to fall to my knees and beg her, clutch at her robes, plead for her to tell me the secret of living a full and meaningful life.

"I... do not know, exactly," she said carefully.

What? My mouth fell open as my hope spiralled downwards, headed for a crash landing.

"But..."

My spine straightened again and I gazed at her with huge, pleading eyes. *Tell me, please!*

"...I have a vague idea. It is... She leads a very... interesting life." Professor McGonagall pursed her lips.

Yes! I leaned forward in my chair, wishing with all my might that I had been a Legilimens so that I could ~~pluck~~ the secret from her mind and hold it to my chest.

"But I do not think that it is an... easy life, Hermione." Her voice held a grave and sombre warning, but I didn't hear it.

"I don't mind," I said, and I was close to falling off my chair I was so close to the edge, now. "I just...*Want*."

She nodded. "Very well."

And *that* was the moment that my life changed forever.

I fold the *Prophet* neatly and make an entry on my to-do list to buy Professor McGonagall a retirement present. I sigh. My thoughts about Hogwarts and my life there have made me nostalgic. That, and the fact that it's my birthday and I'm alone, leaves me *yearning* for Britain. My quill hovers above my travel log and in an impulsive moment of whimsy, I scratch a line through my planned trip.

I have to be careful when I travel to Britain. So, I flip through a calendar and choose an innocuous-looking mid-week day. After I've made sure I've got my brolly, I close my eyes, touch two fingers to the tiny Saint Christopher charm that hangs on a silver chain around my neck, and I Travel.

Two

Chapter 2 of 11

Hermione has deviated from an obvious life. She has moved down a challenging and divergent, but ultimately lonely, path. She meets Severus Snape by chance one day, and she has some difficult choices to make.

"An involuntary return to the point of departure is, without doubt, the most disturbing of all journeys."

...Iain Sinclair

17th March 1988

Hermione is 31

Platform nine and three-quarters is practically empty. It's odd to stand here without crowds and crowds of Hogwarts students teeming around in a shroud of engine steam, hauling trunks and waving wands and saying goodbye to their parents.

I was always surprised to learn that the Hogwarts Express travelled the roundtrip between London and Hogsmeade once a day. I'd always thought that most people would Floo or Apparate. But I'm here, aren't I, longing for the calming metallic click of the train against the tracks, the familiar scenery speeding by. Looking at the train, now, I can see that there's another reason for the trip: there are only two passenger carriages attached to the engine... a long row of cargo carriages stretches out behind them, already covered and ready to go. I suppose that it's the easiest way to transport bulk magical goods to the shops and the school without having to resort to Shrinking things.

I buy a one-way ticket to Hogsmeade, and I slip into an empty compartment, watching the steam drift past the window. People stroll up and down the platform in sedate fashion. It's a good time for the wizarding world... the quiet before the second storm, and people go about their business with no idea that Voldemort is alive (although not so well) in Albania right now.

Sometimes I imagine what would happen if I were to, say, track down Scabbers and wring his ratty neck or slip some poison into Bertha Jorkins' tea or maybe travel to Azkaban and murder Barty Crouch, Junior in his sleep. And then because I'm usually in a self-gratuitous mood during those imaginings, I wonder how *satisfying* it would feel to track Dolores Umbridge down and Crucio her until she bled out of her ears.

But that sort of thing is strictly against the rules. Taboo. Rule 1: Don't do anything to change history.

Pity.

The door of my compartment slides open, and I'm suddenly faced with Rule 2: Don't talk to or contact anybody whom you know.

It's Severus Snape. His black, oily hair obscures half of his face, and he's gazing down at me with a twist of annoyance pulling his lips into a thin line. He looks healthier than I ever remembered him; his cheekbones aren't sharp enough to look like they're straining to cut through his skin, now.

He's *so young*! Even younger than I am, I mentally calculate.

"The other compartments are full of snivelling children... Do you mind?" he asks, making it sound like I'm a barely-acceptable second alternative.

I should get up and leave. I should go straight to the loo and Travel home. I shouldn't sit here and gape at him like I've seen a ghost. But in a strange and obscure way, I *am* seeing a ghost.

"No," I manage to say with a tight smile. "It's fine."

He sits down opposite me, pretends I'm not there and opens the *Daily Prophet*, leaving me with shaking hands and a galloping heart as the train lurches to movement beneath us, vibrating under the soles of my boots.

He's *supposed* to be at Hogwarts mid-week. That's why I chose a Thursday morning to Travel to... because I wouldn't be faced with people whom I'd known long, long ago. I'm lost in my dismay as the train pulls out of King's Cross station.

Because don't think I've never *wanted* to Travel to speak to people who were lost in the Battle. I'm *just not allowed*.

Once, after I'd spent an afternoon at Harry's house playing with Teddy, I had the urge to Travel to see Tonks and Remus, to tell them *tôve*, maybe even to leave a cryptic note in their home that would tell them to stay the hell away from the Battle of Hogwarts so that they could live to see their tiny, clever son.

This man sitting opposite me now has always been *abig* temptation because I've always been curious to know what happened to him.

Because he is the biggest mystery of them all.

3rd May 1998

Hermione was 18

I was exhausted the morning after the Battle of Hogwarts. Exhausted but exultant.

We'd won! Voldemort was dead and Harry was alive. And I was in love with Ron and we ~~were~~*together* at last!

Exultant but sad.

So many people whom I'd loved or respected were dead. Fred. Tonks. Remus. Colin. Little, tiny, annoying Colin. And Snape.

He gave his life to help Harry defeat Voldemort. The ultimate sacrifice. How could that sort of thing not make you feel awed to have known a man like that? Oh, he had hidden it well, and oh, how wrong we had all been about him!

I gazed at the long line of corpses, lying cold and still on the floor. Ron was just about holding me up I was so tired, and my head was resting on his shoulder. His arms were wrapped tightly around me, and I felt safe for the first time in months and months.

"We have to go and fetch Snape's body," I whispered.

"Yes," Harry said gravely. I could see the respect and gratitude in his filthy, tired face.

But when we arrived at the Shrieking Shack, his body was gone. A huge, dark pool of blood was all that had remained to prove that we had not imagined his gory and bloody death.

"Maybe he's alive," Harry whispered with so much hope in his voice that it made my heartache.

"No," I said, shaking my head. "He lost too much blood; the snake severed his carotid artery, I think."

Harry trembled with indignation and rage next to me, and Ron stood, gaping at the spot where we'd seen Snape die.

"I'll find who took him," Harry vowed. "And I'll make sure he gets a proper burial."

But we never found his body. We never laid him to rest.

Where did you disappear to after you died?

That's what I want to ask him. But this Severus Snape wouldn't know...he's never even met Harry Potter or Hermione Granger. Not yet.

I should get up and leave, I tell myself again. But I'm frozen in my seat, staring at his long fingers curled around the edge of the newspaper, the way the hem of his robe has lifted slightly to reveal the toes of dragon hide boots. I smile. When I was a first-year at Hogwarts, Snape was... terrifying and so intimidating. After the incident in the bathroom with the troll, when Harry and Ron started being friendly rather than avoiding me, they'd told me their theory about how they thought Snape didn't have feet... how they thought he floated instead. It's ironic that they were right, in a fashion; Snape did know how to fly, in the end. I sigh softly. I miss Harry and Ron. Sometimes I wish that I could tell them what I really do; that I'm not doing 'secret Charms research' for a private magical company. I'd love to take them on one of my trips. Over the years I've come to realise that adventure and Travel is very lonely when you've got nobody to share it with.

Snape shifts in his seat, and then folds the paper in half, then in half again. He starts to pat at his robes distractedly, and then he scowls. It's an expression I remember so well, but instead of being scared or dropping my head to avoid being pierced with his sharp tongue, I revel in its familiarity. I cannot tear myself away. He's so alive, now; I can feel the annoyance in his magic aura. It grows stronger and stronger until he snaps his head up and gazes at me with those deep, black eyes. For a thrill of a moment, I feel like I am twelve again.

"Do you have a pen that I may borrow, please?" he asks.

"Yes," I say, still in student mode and eager to please the most difficult teacher of them all. I hand him my favourite pen, but as he inclines his head to examine the brushed-steel surface, I realise I have made a mistake. Rule 3: Never carry anything with you from the future that has not been invented yet or could give a clue to your identity.

Shit. That pen was a gift from my mother (Every woman needs a proper pen when they start working, darling), and it has my initials engraved on it...HJG...in an elegant and flowing script.

"Thank you..." He raises his dark eyebrows in question.

"Hope," I lie, hoping his Legilimency is quiescent at the moment.

Hope, Faith and Charity. My own little joke. If anybody ever asks me my name when I'm Travelling, then I'm a martyred virgin saint.

"Hope," he says with nod. His voice caresses the word in a low, smooth stroke, and I suddenly feel a jolt of sadness that there is no hope for him. The coming years will be so hard for him: Harry Potter will arrive at Hogwarts; Voldemort will rise again; he'll kill the man who gave him grace and a second chance; he'll die to save us all.

I clench my teeth together, hard, but I still can't stop the tears that well in my eyes and blur my vision. Scotland is rushing past, now. I know this journey by heart...each curve of the track, each hill that we will pass.

He's busy doing the crossword puzzle, now. He's frowning so hard that his brows draw together and shadow his eyes. He taps my pen against his lips. And I cannot tear my eyes away. I can understand Julia's warnings, now. Before now, I've stood on the edge of history and simply watched it flow past like a river. But I know this man's past, and his future. I'm immersed. I'm no longer an objective observer. I'm drowning in a rising tide of emotion.

When he snarls angrily, I jump, drawn from my overwhelming freefall. He tosses the newspaper aside and hands me my pen. It's warm from his fingers, like a part of him has leached into the metal. I caress my thumb over my engraved initials. "Thank you..." I trail off, leaving a vacuum of question in the air for him to fill. I know his name; it's carved deeply into my past, but I want him to say it.

"Severus," he says after a short pause.

I smile at him, and gratitude fills my heart: that he's allowed this small, personal detail to slip between us; that he holds such honour and bravery in his heart; that he's so fiercely loyal that he's going to die for a woman he loved his *whole* life. A sudden, irrational stab of jealousy lances through my chest, and I realise that I *hate* Lily Potter with all my heart. Nobody has ever loved me with such passion. And then I remember that passion can also mean 'intense suffering', and I know that, in Severus Snape's case, this is absolutely true.

I stare out of the window for the rest of the journey, mindlessly watching the hills fly by, trying not to reflect on how my life has flown by, too. Eventually, the sound of the train shudders to a slower *click-clack* as we approach Hogsmeade station, and before it's come to a complete stop, he's on his feet and sliding the compartment door open.

"Hope."

I lift my head to say goodbye, but he's already gone.

"Severus," I murmur. He's left his *Daily Prophet* on the seat, and when I pick it up and tuck it into my bag, I break Rule 5: Never bring anything back with you.

But I figure it's a fair enough trade this time. After all... I seem to have lost my heart somewhere along the train journey.

Three

Chapter 3 of 11

Hermione has deviated from an obvious life. She has moved down a challenging and divergent, but ultimately lonely, path. She meets Severus Snape by chance one day, and she has some difficult choices to make.

"There is no difference between Time and any of the three dimensions of Space, except that our consciousness moves along it."

H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine*

13th March 2004

Hermione is 31

I've never been overly superstitious about Friday the thirteenth, but I'm feeling very guilty about my trip yesterday, and it feels like a bit of a bad omen.

When I got back from 1998, I spent the day in bed, alternately scolding myself and then sulking about being scolded. I finished Severus' crossword puzzle...he isn't (wasn't) very good at History of Magic, it seems...and then I buried the newspaper deep in my bottom drawer, like I was hiding a horrible secret.

It isn't until I sit down to fill in my travel log that I realise that *am* going to secret him away. I stare down at the page for the longest time before I pick up my pen...cold, now...and write: *17th March 1988/5.2 hours/Cornwall, England.*

More than half of it is the gods-honest truth, I soothe myself, and suddenly I find myself *treasuring* Julia's weekly visit. Childishly, I wish that it were possible to Travel to the future so that I can see if she is going to be suspicious. But it doesn't work that way...the future is something that writes itself hour by hour and is yet to come.

Julia West is my teacher. She, along with my own mother and Minerva McGonagall, are the women whom I've built myself upon...each of them, in their own way, are role models for me.

My mother reflects the balance that I will never have. She's a wife, a mother and a professional, and throughout my entire life she seems to have kept those roles flowing in synchronous harmony. All right, so she buys more frozen meals than most women would admit to, and she doesn't vacuum under the couches, but in the end she seems to have her life mostly figured out.

Professor McGonagall reflects my idea of the perfect witch. She dedicated her entire life to pure magical research and the education (mine included) of magic folk. She is talented. She is strong. She speaks her mind and doesn't let anybody intimidate her.

Julia reflects all that I should be. Disciplined. Brilliant. A patient teacher. A Traveller who embraces all the challenges and facets of her chosen role. A Traveller who never breaks the rules.

Each woman has shaped a decade of my life, strongly influencing part of who I have become. First my mother (Hermione, the Muggle), then Professor McGonagall (Hermione, the witch), and then Julia (Hermione, the Traveller).

It is an honour and a privilege to have been chosen as a Traveller, and the first time I ever met Julia West really did feel like the test that it was...

5th August 1999

Hermione was 19

I arrived at Julia's house via Portkey from Professor McGonagall's office.

"Not even I know where she lives," Professor McGonagall had said as she pressed the cool, round Sickle into my palm. "You're walking into a secret, my girl...are you sure?"

I nodded because my faith was concrete: I was meant to do this, I was meant to follow this path.

Normally when you arrived somewhere, you could roughly sense where you were. The Secrecy Wards were so thick beyond the little garden that I felt like I was drifting on a cloud, disconnected from earth.

I smoothed my robes nervously, and then I started to walk up to the little cottage...utterly charming beneath a bright and fragrant growth of wild roses. But a voice calling my name halted my stride, and I whirled around, my heart beating wildly.

Julia sat in the shade of a large tree at a white-painted, wrought iron garden set. A bone-china tea set and a plate of scones were set on the table, but my attention was riveted on *her*. She was old, like I'd expected... about as old as Professor McGonagall herself, but that was where the similarity ended. Julia West had her robes rucked up to her knees, and her wrinkly, blue-veined feet were bare, her toenails painted a vivid scarlet to match her robes. Her mouth was a bright red pucker, and little chips of diamante glinted in the frames of her glasses. Her eyes were green, like Harry's, and crystal sharp.

"Sit, sit, my dear," she said in a voice that might have belonged to a woman half her age. I felt my cheeks warm as I abandoned my stiff and straight posture of greeting. She had greeted me like I was an old and welcome friend, but instead of setting me at ease, her warmth and open friendliness made me nervous.

"So... Professor McGonagall has seen fit to send you my way, has she?" she said, pouring two cups of bergamot and citrus scented tea without asking if I wanted some. I found it odd that she didn't call her friend by name, but perhaps she was formal in that regard only.

"Yes, ma'am," I said, accepting a cup of Earl Grey. Her fingernails were painted red, too. It was like she'd saturated herself with colour, like she'd made every effort to be bold and bright.

I expected her to launch into a job description then, to detail what sort of secret research I'd be involved in. To be honest, I'd probably expected the job to be a private sector type of Unspeakable. That was as far as my rigid and organised mind had managed to take me.

"You arrived via Portkey," she said. It was a statement, yet I couldn't help but feel the weight of a question in her words. "Tell me... how does a Portkey work?"

My mouth fell open and my tea sat untouched as I wove my fingers together in a parody of a prayer. I floundered because it was such an unexpected question. I couldn't help but feel woefully stupid and unprepared.

"Um...The *Portus*... encrypts the object with a destination and it... it takes you to that place at a preset time?" There was a note of query in my own voice then, because I wasn't sure what she wanted to hear. Unease made me shift in my chair, and I had the sinking feeling that I'd failed on some basic level.

But she merely blew across the surface of her steaming tea and narrowed her green, green eyes thoughtfully. "And can you tell me how Apparition works, too?" she asked after a long moment in which I thought she was going to send me back to Hogwarts, to set me on the obvious path.

I brightened. I was *good* at Apparition: top in my class when we'd taken lessons from Wilkie Twycross. I sat up a bit straighter and smiled before saying, "Destination, Determination and Deliberation. Concentrate very hard on these three fundamentals and step across space, light as a feather."

"Bah!" she exclaimed loudly, and I jerked with alarm, my eyes widening. "Twittering Twylie strikes again!"

No... that wasn't wrong...I'd given her the answer from Apparition for Beginners verbatim.

She sighed dramatically and rolled her eyes as if I'd made a fundamental error in my statement. This interview wasn't going at all like I'd dreamed. In my dream she had been impressed with my flurry of O's and she'd oohed and aaahed at my complex and pretty spellwork. She'd welcomed my brilliance with open arms.

My eyes must have been wide with alarm and consternation because she flapped a crimson-tipped hand and smiled kindly. "The Ministry has taught that claptrap for years and years, Hermione... Don't you worry yourself that it is all you know...nobody has taught you better, after all." Her smile took on a sly edge, then. "Although you're Muggle-born... haven't you ever approached it analytically before, wondered about the mechanics of it?"

My mouth dropped open because the answer was a resounding *no*. When I'd arrived in the magical world, I left Muggle science far behind. Latin incantations, wand flicks, runes and arithmantic matrices, the History of Magic... those had become my new world. "No," I said fearfully, my voice small and ashamed.

"Never mind, my dear. I have a doctorate in Physics, and I still don't understand everything there is to know..." She rubbed her gnarled hands together. "I'm going to have to *Obliviate* you if you don't want to study with me after I've given you the facts, dear. What I am going to share with you is an incredible secret... something that could destroy the world you and I know if it were discovered by the wrong people. You're a bright witch, with a good mind; I'm sure what I will say will be difficult to grasp at first. But I do hope that you will accept the challenge. I've gone for too many years without having somebody to Travel in tandem with."

I nodded numbly, then. My mind was already having trouble grasping the meaning that skidded under the surface of her words. What did Physics have to do with magic? Was everything I'd been taught wrong? What, what, what had Professor McGonagall been thinking? But on the other hand, the idea of gaining a vast and secret knowledge was intoxicating, compelling.

"What would you say if I were to tell you that I was born in 1970?"

I chuckle. I'm sure I'd given Julia the best afternoon of entertainment she'd had in decades, sitting open-mouthed and bewildered through her explanation of how Apparition *really* worked.

It took me a very long time to get my head around it all. I run my finger along the spines of the Physics textbooks that share a shelf with my magical ones and the volumes upon volumes of observed history I've written.

It's quite an abstract notion, in the end.

What it boils down to is this: Space and Time are not disconnected. They are woven together in a four-dimensional fabric that encompasses us all. When magic folk Apparate, they create a wormhole in this fabric and use it to travel through Space along a single line of Time. Sure, magic folk *have* managed to travel through Time, too, but only via Time-Turner, which is basically like using a thread of Time as a glorified bungee cord (Julia's words, not mine). And then there's the inconvenience of having to live through each moment of time again until you get back to where you started.

But here's the beauty of it: If you know *how*, and if you unclutch your brain from all its preconceived notions and you have the key, you can Apparate (essentially create a wormhole, yes?) and travel backwards *and* forwards at will and whim through Space and Time.

I can't remember if it was Dumbledore or Peter Parker who said: With great power comes great responsibility. But they were right.

That's why there are so many rules that come with this knowledge. I can't even start to imagine what a Dark wizard would do with this sort of ability. Now I remember why yesterday's trip was so dangerous. I didn't just endanger Severus Snape's future... I endangered the future of *everybody*.

I vow to put the encounter behind me and to follow the path of the righteous Traveller once more.

Four

Hermione has deviated from an obvious life. She has moved down a challenging and divergent, but ultimately lonely, path. She meets Severus Snape by chance one day, and she has some difficult choices to make.

"Like all great travellers, I have seen more than I remember, and remember more than I have seen."

Benjamin Disraeli

24th April 2004

Hermione is 31

I am so tired.

I have not had a good night's sleep since I lied to Julia. A lie by omission, yes, but a whopper of a lie nonetheless.

I can't see that my chance encounter with Snape has rippled into the future, except in my mind. It's almost like I woke the ghost of Severus Snape that day, and now he's haunting my dreams.

I've been very diligent with my Travels, veering far away from the British Isles and the time period that calls to me like a siren. I tried to dull my mind, sitting through drawn-out days and dreary hours of negotiations as the minutia of the Statute of Secrecy were debated. And then I lived through it all again in my Pensieve, taking detailed notes while the mind-numbing officiousness of it all anesthetised my brain.

Julia is *delighted* with my work. And that makes me feel even worse.

And yesterday afternoon she gave me my next assignment. Oh, the irony of it all! I'm positive that she gives me all the crap jobs that she doesn't want to do: those that are boring and those that are uncomfortable. It's a mentor's privilege, I guess.

She wants an objective recounting of the Death Eater trials.

That means that I have to go back to London and back to Snape.

8th December 1981

Hermione is 31

I *hate* Travelling back to winter. Despite the Warming Charms woven into the very fabric of the Ministry walls, the sub-levels are still chilly. Maybe my foul mood is making things seem worse than they actually are. I feel uncomfortable in this person's skin; she's smaller than I am, and I feel more insubstantial as an observer than usual. Gaining access to restricted Death Eater trials takes a bit of subterfuge and not a small amount of Polyjuice Potion... not to mention the Obliviates I've been doling out like sweeties. Fun fun. And before you ask...I asked it myself, once, long ago when I had the energy to enter into a long and technical debate with my mentor...doing that doesn't change history, no. According to Julia, it's a Traveller's loophole if you do it just right, *apparently*.

This is one of those times when I wish I could whip out my wand and AK each and every piece of Death Eater scum who were on trial. It's harder to record history when you've got a personal stake in things. These... people impacted so strongly...will impact if you really want to get bloody technical...on my life. The jagged curse scar on my chest itches even though I'm not wearing my own body. I know and hate most of their faces, except I remember them being older and Azkaban-thin.

I will never, ever admit it again, and I think it's because my brain was looking for any sort of diversion, but yesterday I noted that Rabastan Lestrangle was quite hot in his day. Of course, he wasn't quite as broodingly sexy when he was found guilty and hauled off screaming and snarling to Azkaban. The authorities aren't much better. I've come to hate Barty Crouch, Senior and his Aurors. They're every bit as arrogant and ruthless as the Death Eaters, only they have the backing of the MLE. This is almost worse than watching the horrible, reprehensible things that Grindelwald did back in the 1940s.

Dumbledore looks so much younger. And haunted. It's easy for me to forget that James and Lily Potter were killed only months ago, that Dumbledore has just left Harry on the Dursleys' doorstep. What would happen to history, do you think, if I got up right now, went to Surrey and stole him away? Julia would confiscate my Chrono so quickly my head would spin, I bet. I'm saved from that temptation when the tribunal files in, followed by two large Aurors, each with a beefy hand clamped on Severus Snape's elbows.

Logically, I know that Dumbledore is going to stand up and vouch for him; he's going to be *that* taciturn man on the train; he's going to be the strict and sarcastic teacher I remember; he's going to be wizardingkind's saviour. But the way he looks now wipes all of that certainty away. He looks like the walking dead, like he's already been Kissed. His expression is blank, and his eyes are dead. It's like Lily Potter died and took his soul with her.

I sit through his trial with my lost heart suddenly back in my chest, and it's *saching*. Severus Snape made his deal with the Dark and the Light, and now he has been lost to the shadows between.

I used to think that I was strong enough to bear the Traveller's Oath, but my conviction is wavering. I have to remind myself that my feelings on the matter are irrelevant. That the rules are set in steel, that one man's life is of little consequence in the long run.

It's always all about the rules...

3rd April 2000

Hermione was 21

Travelling turned out to be much harder than I'd imagined. I'd aced basic Space Apparition...how hard could surfing the tide of Space and Time be? Very hard.

Julia made it look easy on the times she took me through event horizon after event horizon to give me the grand tour. God, I lived on cloud nine for months! It's so easy to talk about Travelling back to witness the past; it's another thing to stand and watch something...be *inside* a history that's vivid and bright with smells and sound all around you...that Professor Binns had had watered down to a two-dimensional and soporific monologue.

I had the theory mastered in a few months. Theory is one thing, though. Books and learning, I always said. This time it was easy to say, "I told you so." Weaning myself off the 3-Ds was a long process because it'd become second-nature to Apparate like that. Reaching into the very fabric of the world and using my Chrono to create a bridge in the quantum foam to where and *when* I wanted to go took a lot of practice and even more patience.

I had to give Julia kudos: she had *alot* of patience. Especially on the day I landed us in the middle of the Caribbean Ocean, with not a speck of land in sight.

Just before I was ready to take my very first solo trip, she reiterated the rules for Travelling:

Rule 1: Don't do anything to change history.

Rule 2: Don't talk to or contact anybody who you know.

Rule 3: Never carry anything with you from the future that has not been invented yet or could give a clue to your identity.

Rule 4: Don't stop any person in any act.

Rule 5: Never bring anything back with you.

And, of course, I was never allowed to tell anybody what I was doing. I suspected that Professor McGonagall had guessed the nature of what Julia did...she had been her teacher, after all...but she certainly didn't know the mechanics of why her student appeared to have aged fifty years in a decade.

"I had one question, Julia," I said after we'd gone through the rules and various examples of what not to do so many times I'd lost count.

She barked her throaty laugh. "Just one?" she asked dryly, her emerald eyes glinting with amusement.

We were sitting in her garden again, just like when we'd first met. Today, she was wearing orange... all over. I'd come to learn that as a Traveller, being inconspicuous was important; I suppose Julia overcompensated when she lived in the present.

"I've done some reading..."

Another highly amused laugh from her made me duck my head in slight embarrassment. I think she just delighted to have a companion, to be honest... somebody to share her experiences with. We'd already spoken about how difficult the path of the Traveller was... how lonely it could be. I didn't imagine, then, that I'd feel the effects of that so acutely in the years to come.

"Well," I said, "I understand that all the rules are in place to preserve the integrity of the Time thread. The Grandfather Paradox and all that..."

She tipped her chair onto its back legs, swinging on it. It was difficult to forget that, once upon a time, she'd only been ten years older than I was. "Yessss?"

"But what about all of the multiple universe theories?" I asked with a consternated frown. So many of the time-travel theories I'd read postulated that if you changed something in the past it wouldn't matter to the future you'd come from because the universe split with each decision anybody made. According to what I'd read, there were thousands upon millions of universes that existed side-by-side. The change you'd made would just affect *you* because you'd have to go back to the universe that had arisen and flowed forward from the change you'd made. It had all boggled my mind a bit.

I'd expected her to laugh, but she was serious as she stopped swinging on her chair and nodded. "I have been expecting this question, Hermione, and I am glad you have asked it." She spread her liver-spotted hands on top of the table. "Those are just quantum theories, understand, hypotheses by Muggle scientists who tried to make sense of something very intangible," she said slowly. "But I have found in my years of research that any quantum universe that is ever momentarily created always collapses back into this one. So, in the end, there is just this universe and its timeline of events. That is why it is so important that we preserve the sanctity of history, keep the past immutable and remain silent observers, never leaving footprints where we walk."

"Oh," I said, slumping back in my chair as the gravity of the truth settled on my shoulders.

I'm supposed to be an impartial and objective observer, dispassionately watching and recording. But today my soul is bleeding, and history is no longer a vivid painting to walk through...it's a place where my heart can break, where I can buckle to my knees under the weight of it all.

five

Chapter 5 of 11

Hermione has deviated from an obvious life. She has moved down a challenging and divergent, but ultimately lonely, path. She meets Severus Snape by chance one day, and she has some difficult choices to make.

"And now here is my secret, a very simple secret; it is only with the heart that one can see rightly, what is essential is invisible to the eye."

...Antoine de Saint-Exupery

5th August 2004

Hermione is 32

I am so weak.

After I attended Severus' trial in 1981, the dreams got stronger and more vivid. They shifted in nature, too. Where we used to sit and play chess or fill in the crossword or talk and talk for hours in the calm and restful dreams, suddenly I was panicked and desperate. I saved him from death each night, faced nightmare creatures and impossible circumstances so that he could be safe in my arms before I woke. And his gratitude in the dreams was overwhelming: he'd fill me and cover me so that sometimes I'd wake and run my hand down my arm, wondering if he was under my skin.

It got to the point where I couldn't bear not to go back with the express goal of watching him, until his face was more familiar than my own, until I lost my heart to Time again. And then when even that was not enough to fill the yawning hole in my soul that grew from my ever-growing longing, I did something even worse.

23rd March 1989

Hermione was 31

In all the time I'd spent watching Severus Snape behind a slew of glances and Polyjuiced faces, I'd discovered he'd adopted an indulgence... perhaps something to drag him through the long years, the quiet and silent years, of indentured service under Dumbledore.

He didn't have classes on Thursday afternoons, and more often than not, he'd hole himself up at a corner table in the Hog's Head and slog his way through the daily crossword with the help of some tea or some (or more than some, occasionally) Firewhisky.

I ran through scenarios in my head the entire morning, like:

a: I sway my hips slightly as I walk across to the bar. I glance over my shoulder nonchalantly. He looks up from his crossword puzzle and gapes. I smile in a sultry fashion. He almost falls over his feet in his haste to buy me a drink.

b: I pointedly ignore him until I'm seated... in his line of vision, of course. He glances up and a spark of recognition gleams in his dark eyes. He stands up and walks over. "Hope," he says in that chocolate and chilli voice of his, "I've been hoping to run into you again."

What really happened didn't involve a sultry me or a pickup line from heaven.

I ordered a Butterbeer from Aberforth, pretending that I wasn't aware that this simple action might haunt me in my past and in my future. Severus didn't so much as flicker a glance in my direction. Trying not to walk with slumped shoulders under the weight of my disappointment, I sat at a halfway across the room from him. The Butterbeer was bitter on my tongue, as if the makers had forgotten to imbue it with warming magic. I sighed and opened the *Daily Prophet*, and then, in a silly notion, I began to fill out the crossword puzzle, as though our linked actions would bring me closer to Severus.

Perhaps, I told my sore, sore heart, it was better this way: if I did this for much longer I was going to lose my soul to time, as well.

The sun fell through the grimy windows in long, meagre slants, and my Butterbeer was almost a memory in its bottle when Severus grunted with disgust. "Five across?" he muttered, and for a moment I thought he was grumbling to himself, until he raised his raven-dark eyebrows at me when my gaze flickered up.

Hope, like my false name, glittered like Felix in my heart and suffused through my veins until it warmed my cheeks. "P-pardon?" I stammered.

"The answer to five across," he repeated slowly, and his lip began to curl into a sneer that told me I was perilously close to achieving dunderhead status.

"I'll trade you for three down," I said after a moment's hesitation.

His lips quirked and there was an amused glint in his eye. "Very well," he said smoothly. Well played, Slytherin, said his appraising expression.

I'm afraid that addiction is a slippery slope. From then on, I made deals with myself: I'll trade you five days of recording this or that dead-boring historic event for just three hours of another Thursday afternoon with him. I gave a weak pretence of arguing with myself about it, but I knew that I was just fooling myself.

I hid the stolen hours recorded by my Chrono within the other trips I made, adding an hour or so to each of my other Travels until my time was in perfect reconciliation.

My lies to Julia started to feel less heavy on my tongue, and somewhere along the line my guilt eased into a dull, background pulse. For a while I was worried that she'd figured it out; she certainly sensed that *something* was wrong.

4th June 2004

Hermione was 31

Julia closed my travel log and placed it on top of my latest notes. She beamed at me...a huge smile to match her sunflower-patterned robes. "Well, you have been diligent, my dear. Those centaurs can talk in endless circles, can't they? I must commend you for making sense of it all... I always thought it a great pity that the Ministry never gave them their due."

I nodded distractedly and gave her a weak smile. "They... had some good points, yes." I sat with my legs tucked up underneath me, a cooling cup of tea in hand. My mind had drifted, thinking of Severus, while she'd scrutinised my week's efforts, although I'd slanted a watchful eye as she'd glanced at my travel log. Week after week my stomach would curl itself into a tight ball and I'd just wait for her to spot some small inconsistency in my accounting.

She frowned and gave me a concerned look. "Are you... all right, Hermione?" she asked.

I tried to smile more genuinely, but my effort wasn't good enough because she shifted closer to me on the couch.

Perhaps the tenuous hold I kept on everything, like trying to keep a huge armful of wet laundry from dropping to the soil, was slipping. I didn't feel remorse for Travelling to see him (it was the only way I knew my heart could still beat), but I felt horrid for lying to Julia.

"Oh, Hermione," she said in a voice full of empathy. "I know how hard it can be sometimes... how lonely. You should have said something to me sooner." She smiled kindly at me.

To my absolute horror, tears began to well in my eyes. I swallowed hard and shook my head.

She rubbed my arm. "It will get better with time, *I promise*. It is always difficult to let go of friends from your life, friends who love you and will not let go easily." She sighed softly, like there was some secret pressing against her lungs.

And then my heart lurched so painfully I put my hand to my chest. I hadn't owed Harry or Ron in months and months of the present time, I realised. I'd just forgotten in all of the rush and excitement of having Severus. But what actually hurt more was that they hadn't owed me, either.

And... my problem wasn't who I was letting go...it was who I was holding on to.

He was my secret, and I think, I was his. I was a diversion outside of the life that leeches the vitality from him. I was easy. I didn't ask him for anything. I sat in my chair across the bar each week and waited for him to come to me, like a child baiting a timid dog.

I won't lie to myself and say that he fell desperately in love with me during that time; the promise that he'd made to Lily was like a dense shroud around his heart. He carried her with him in the shadows that haunted his eyes; the reticence of his infrequent conversation; in his absence from the Hog's Head for three whole weeks after Halloween.

But sometimes, just sometimes, I saw, mostly with my soul, who he could be to me, if only I weren't an intruder who was sneaking into his life when I shouldn't, stealing time where it wasn't meant to be stolen.

22nd February 1990

It was a Thursday afternoon, much like all the others I'd Travelled back to. Hogsmeade was still bitterly cold, and the wind clung onto winter with long and icy fingers. It was worse that I was coming from the lovely and warm summer of 2004, but I gritted my teeth as I ducked my head into my hood because nothing could warm me more than the first glimpse I'd get of him through the greasy front window of the Hog's Head.

I was getting better at lying to myself: I deserve a little break from the goblin treaties; it's just a little conversation; no harm can come from this; I just like doing the crossword with somebody intelligent.

My mind just wouldn't accept what my heart and soul already knew: I was in love with a man who was condemned by Time to die.

When I drew close to the Hog's Head, I didn't notice the difference at first because my head was dipped low and my hair whipped in the wind, tugging loose from its plait.

"Hope."

I squeaked with surprise and jerked my head up. He stood, leaning against the wall of the bar, waiting for me, apparently.

"Oh," I was gaping like an idiot. "Um... hello, Severus?" My greeting was more of a query about the change. It's odd how quickly I'd become accustomed to the quiet routine we'd built around these afternoons.

He stood up straight and gestured toward the dense woods that fringed and cradled the small wizarding village. "I have something to show you," he said, and he began walking in that direction without glancing over his shoulder to check if I would follow.

I would follow him, yes, wherever he wanted to go.

I finally caught up with him...he had long legs and an efficient and measured stride. "Um... w-where are we going?" I huffed. Sitting on my arse at so many historic events had made me a little unfit.

But he didn't answer or stop until we reached a clearing just a few minutes into the verdant forest. And there, at his feet, taking shelter in a stiff and shivering copse of grass were the prettiest white flowers I'd ever seen. "Oh, how lovely," I said, bending to brush a fingertip to their velvety petals. A soft and melodic tinkle wound its way around me like a lullaby. "Oh! They're Snowbells..."

"Yes," he said brusquely. "I came across them yesterday when I was harvesting knotgrass."

I squinted up at him from my kneeling position. His arms were crossed over his chest, like he was waiting impatiently for me to finish. Like I was being an imposition on his time.

And then I realised: I'd told him I was a Herbologist. He'd brought me here to see these very rare flowers. I glanced back at the Snowbells, and suddenly I couldn't breathe through the intensity of my emotion. I struggled through my awe for several long moments, steadying my emotional response.

And then I stood again and nodded, my smile carefully neutral. "Thank you."

And then we went back to the Hog's Head and resumed our usual routine like he hadn't shown me a glimpse of his heart through all of that hurt.

I have to remember that for me it has all come in a four month rush. It has escalated to the point where steal a piece of Thursday for my heart almost each and every day of the week, now.

In Severus' frame of reference, I have been around for almost two years. I'm not quite sure what I am to him. Perhaps a History of Magic reference; a friendly face once a week; a woman who (amazingly enough) does not push him for personal details about himself (I know them all already, anyway).

He's never made a pass at me...I don't think his broken heart has space for another epic and tragic love story...but I know that in his own way he's become fond of me. Our friendship, for that is what it has become, has shifted over time. Severus has never invited me up to the castle, nor to any other private space. But perhaps every second or third Thursday, he waits for me outside of the Hog's Head and we do things that oddly distant friends do. I pretend to bitch and moan when he drags me to a potions exhibition, and he pretends to get hay fever and sore feet at the botanical gardens. I yawn and roll my eyes at the art gallery, and he snores rudely at a matinee.

But I am ever aware that my stock of Thursdays is running out fast; they are rushing like a river towards the first of September, 1991. That was always a golden date for me: the day I first stepped into the magical world and grasped at my destiny with clutching and greedy hands.

I get a fist-sized knot of nerves in my stomach when I think about it. Will he see beyond the round and childish face of an eleven-year-old and recognise my eyes at once?

Or will I agonise and fret while my younger self matures and grows into her face?

Six

Chapter 6 of 11

Hermione has deviated from an obvious life. She has moved down a challenging and divergent, but ultimately lonely, path. She meets Severus Snape by chance one day, and she has some difficult choices to make.

"We go through the present blindfolded... Only later, when the blindfold is removed and we examine the past, do we realize what we've been through and understand what it means."

—Milan Kundera

7th October 2004

Hermione is 33

Today is the very last time I will Travel to him. Only, I've told myself that every single day for the last two months, now.

In our timeline of Thursdays, it is late 1994.

My younger self is fourteen and caught in the buoyancy of a secret romance with Viktor Krum. The Triwizard Tournament is in full swing, and Hogsmeade swarms with Slavic boys and pouting Beauxbatons students, even during the week. Barty Crouch, Junior squats in Moody's body like a spider spinning a trap. The Dark Mark itches and burns like a warning beacon on Severus' arm.

I have watched Severus grow bleaker since Harry arrived at Hogwarts, and his promise to Lily and Dumbledore has drawn his affability to paper-thin dimensions... He's shorter tempered, and he doesn't smile as often as he used to. I'm sure that he can *feel* that something Dark is lurking on the horizon, that life is not going to get any easier for him from here on out.

No wonder he hasn't noticed that Hermione Jean Granger looks a lot like Hope Grant does.

12th November 1994

Hermione was 15

It was the best day I'd had in a long while. Even though Harry and Ron werestill not talking to each other, I was in a brilliant mood.

I carried Viktor's library smiles like a bright star in my pocket; Professor Vector had given me an O+ for my latest essay; the sun had broken through the November gloom to shine through the corridor's windows and warm the world.

For a moment I forgot that I was worried about what the upcoming First Task would be, that dark scowls and stares would follow me when I talked to Harry. I loosened my hair, and my curls spilled over my shoulders. I stopped next to a bright and warm piece of sunlight and smiled, tipping my face into the light.

When I opened my eyes, Professor Snape was standing statue-still not five metres away, staring at me like I'd grown a pair of cat's ears again.

He didn't look angry; he looked horrified.

I hurried down the corridor past him, and when I glanced back as I turned the corner, he still hadn't moved a muscle.

12th November 1994

Hermione is 33

It is such a beautiful day when I arrive in Hogsmeade. It's a surprise because November is usually caustic in its cold. Beyond Hogwarts I can see the mast of Durmstrang's boat, and I smile. I stopped writing to Viktor long before I started to Travel, but I have such fond memories of him. He gave self-confidence in myself as a budding woman; I changed from a little girl to a teenager aware of her feminine wiles under his besotted, heavy-lidded gaze.

Severus is leaning against the wall of the Hog's Head as I approach, and I smile because it looks like we're going somewhere else today. But his face is dark and tightly drawn between his dark, long hair, and the lines of his shoulders are tense and tight. I frown slightly, wondering what has him in such a mood. Has Karkaroff been in his face again... has Barty Crouch spitefully upended his stores?

"Hello, Severus," I say, and I expect him to answer in turn and then make some comment about how the sunshine might justify a trip somewhere nice, where we can share an afternoon of solitude and quiet companionship.

But he just pushes up off the wall and starts to stride away towards the woods. He's walking so fast I have to almost jog to keep up with him.

"Where are we going?" I ask, and I clutch at a stitch in my side just below my heart.

It looks like we're going back to the Snowbell clearing, and I grin when I'm right. Does he have another surprise for me, another beautifully stoic gesture of friendship?

I glance around the clearing; it's bare and the grass is grey. All the flowers have retreated into themselves, and it's so quiet I can hear my expectant heart thud in my ears. I frown at him. He's standing still, with his back towards me. I take a step closer and open my mouth to ask him why we're here again.

"Why are you here, Hermione?" he asks.

"Because..." I start to answer, but then horror fills my mind and freezes in my veins like black ice.

He turns to face me; anger has etched deep lines into his face, curled his hands into fists. His nostrils flare, and his lips are pulled into a thin, white line. Fury races below his jaw at his pulse point, and I can tell he's ready to explode.

I take a step backward under the ferocity of his glare. "I'm...so sorry," I whisper through the hard and tight lump in my throat.

And then I turn and I Travel back to my present, and Time squeezes so hard around me I feel like the world is falling apart.

13th November 1994

Hermione was 15

I couldn't stop crying, even after Madam Pomfrey had Reduced my beaver teeth, even after my childhood overbite had disappeared into magic's beyond.

I lay on the bed in the Hospital Wing, and I curled into myself, drawing my knees up to my chest with my hands pressed over my heart as if that would take the hurt away.

Professor Snape's cold and hard voice echoed in my mind over and over: "I see no difference."

How could he have been so cruel to me? I had been hit by the hex; I was an innocent bystander. It was all Malfoy's fault, and it was so unfair!

I had done *nothing* wrong at all.

Seven

Chapter 7 of 11

Hermione has deviated from an obvious life. She has moved down a challenging and divergent, but ultimately lonely, path. She meets Severus Snape by chance one day, and she has some difficult choices to make.

"I postpone death by living, by suffering, by error, by risking, by giving, by losing."

...Anais Nin

7th October 2004

Hermione is 33

I cry until my breath comes in heaving, soundless shudders from somewhere deep in my soul, until I can't breathe through my nose and the world is a meaningless blur through my tear-swollen eyes. My head is so sore, and my brain feels like it's thudding against my skull with each beat of my broken heart. I curl up in a corner of my couch, my knees drawn to my chest, and because I can't cry any more, I keen softly in a high-pitched lament.

I am too devastated to even lecture myself on how I should have *known* this would happen...that it was an inevitable punishment for meddling with Time, flouting the rules, loving without reason. I am too lost to find the energy to lie to myself, to tell myself that there is a way to fix the damage that I have done.

And when all of my energy feels like it has drained from my body and my limbs feel like rubber, I press my forehead against my knees and I fall into dreams.

3rd September 1992

Hermione was 32

Severus was in a particularly surly mood. His magical aura radiated from him in an irritated and jagged miasma that was so intense I could almost see it. It spiked to alarming levels when we walked past Hogsmeade's bookshop. I turned my head to look into the window and saw what had caused his reaction: Gilderoy Lockhart's new book, *Magical Me*, was boldly featured in the window, along with a full-sized magical photograph, which winked and waved at us. I couldn't help the giggle that bubbled up between my lips.

"I suppose you think he's Merlin reincarnated, too," he said sourly, quickening his pace.

"Oh, no... I think he's a pompous arsehole," I said honestly. And then I realised the source of Severus' antagonism was that Lockhart had just started to teach DADA up at Hogwarts, now.

He muttered something about Sprout and Vector and besotted fawning before veering into a side-alley, which led to Hogsmeade's little park. A mother pushed her little witch on a swing, but otherwise we were alone. When the weather was warm, like today, we often sat here at the little wooden tables at the park's edge. We'd played chess once or twice before Severus had declared me logically incompetent; now, he only suggested playing chess when he was in an absolutely foul mood and keen for a sharp and vicious victory. He pulled out a faded pack of playing cards.

"You still owe me five Galleons and seven Sickles," he reminded me with a smirk.

I sighed; he was very good at Rummy, too. "Yes, yes," I murmured. I had to be careful not to bring back money during my Travels (against the rules, and all); it would hardly do to have Galleons with a 2003 date stamp floating about ten years before they'd been cast.

He shuffled the cards expertly and dealt them with practiced ease.

I arranged my hand, humming to myself. "So, school has just started, then?" I asked with an amused smile as he discarded his teaching robes, laying them neatly across the back of his chair. The warm afternoon sun was obviously murder through the heavy, black wool.

He scowled over the edge of his cards at me. "Yes."

I lifted my hand to hide the way I had to press my lips together to prevent laughter. "Oh, come on, Severus... it can't be that bad!"

Usually he'd just say something like, "Yes, it damn well is," or he'd snort and roll his eyes. And that would be the end of any Hogwarts discussion, and we'd move on to more neutral topics or debate about Ministry politics or Muggle affairs.

But I'd forgotten that just two days ago, Harry and Ron had flown to Hogwarts in that old, blue Ford Anglia and made a spectacular crash-landing into the Whomping Willow.

"Potter," he spat, snapping down his first card. He drummed his long, elegant fingers against the wooden table, indicating that it was my turn and that I was taking too long to make a decision about which card to play.

I glanced up cautiously, feeling discomfort wind through my nerves like oily smoke. Harry wasn't something he'd ever really brought up before, and it felt too close to home. I was already taking a place in history where I did not belong. At this very moment, little Hermione Granger was up at the castle, revelling in the challenge of second-year magic. Hope Grant, interloper, did not belong here in 1992.

I picked up a card, biting my lip.

"Surely you know who *Potter* is?" He made Harry's name sound like the worst kind of swearword, even worse than the c-word, which I never uttered, let alone thought in the confines of my mind.

I tried to feign nonchalance, not sure how to handle this, and I chucked a Jack of Spades away. "Sure. Who doesn't?" I said.

A triumphant smile tugged at the corner of Severus' mouth for a moment as he snatched the card up, and then the sneer returned.

"Well... he's not the little saint everybody imagines."

And then he launched into a diatribe about what Harry and Ron had done, winning two hands of Rummy because I couldn't pay attention through it all. I nodded and made faces and commiserated about the Whomping Willow, and I searched frantically for a way to change the subject.

Obviously his spike in temper had made him hot because he started to roll up his sleeves, now complaining about how McGonagall had intruded upon his punishment of the brats and let them get away with murder.

He reached out to pluck a card from the pile and then he froze in place. His gaze flicked to the faded Dark Mark that was clearly visible on his left arm, and his jaw clenched tight as he turned his black gaze on me. Perhaps he was waiting for me to recoil, waiting for me to push back from my chair and run away as fast as I could.

But I glanced at the quiescent tattoo for a moment, and then I jerked my head at the cards. "It's your turn, Severus," I said. I kept my eyes riveted on my cards and away from his searching eyes.

His face pulled into a scowling grimace as if I was a particularly difficult student, and he refastened the cuffs of his shirt with meticulous and deliberate focus.

"Everybody makes mistakes," I murmured quietly.

Slowly, his expression slipped from its tight, angry lines, and he pressed his index and middle finger to his thin lips for a moment, his eyes focussed far, far away. I think, for the first time in his life, somebody had surprised him in a pleasant way. I could practically hear the gears grinding in his mind while he absorbed the weight and meaning of my statement. He rubbed his lips and then nodded.

"Yes, I suppose they do," he murmured as he spread another winning hand across the table. He glanced up and smirked at me. "You lose again."

I wake up, and it feels like I've got a hangover of epic proportions. My throat is still thick, and it's scratchy, like I've swallowed a wad of steel wool. It's late in the afternoon already; the sun steals across my lounge in long, golden-bright parallelograms as if it's oblivious to my misery. I can't mourn for him here, where I have spent so many hours recounting pleasant memories of our stolen friendship, where his dry chuckle can echo in my mind to fill the silence of my life.

I Apparate (with the three D's, just like in the beginning) to Hogwarts' gates. They recognise me as alumni and shimmer gold for a moment before opening to admit me. I realise that I haven't been back here since the end of my NEWT year...before I met Julia; before I became a Traveller; before I lost my heart to Time. It has been five years in the linear passage of Time, but according to my Chrono, it's about *fourteen* years!

I am not the same young woman who passed through these gates with her idealistic and lofty hopes and dreams. Minerva McGonagall's warning seems to have lingered on these grounds because I can hear her voice so clearly, feel the weight of her words come back to haunt me: "But I do not think that it is an... easy life, Hermione."

When the castle was rebuilt in 1998, a section of the newly-constructed wall was devoted to a memorial. The dead were buried with their families, scattered across the British Isles and beyond, but their memories remain here. I walk into the shade of the castle, where the warmth of the day passes into an apt coolness. Each large stone block is inlaid with a plaque: the memorial stretches a devastating six blocks high by fifteen wide. I trace my fingertips over Tonks' plaque, like I'm greeting an old friend, and then I drop to my knees at the foot of the castle with my head resting against the bronze plaque that bears Severus' name.

I'd thought my tears had all been wrung from me, each and every last one. But now I find that misery wells up again inside me like an endless tide, and I cannot hold it back. The waters have eroded into my soul, and I'm drowning in my loss.

Headmistress Sprout finds me a long while later. I'm still frozen in the same position, and the cold of the early evening has chilled my skin so that I'm cold and clammy like the dead. I don't resist as she leads me up to her office through a staff entrance. I barely recognise the office with its bright greenhouse of plants. Only the portraits on the walls are the same.

Portraits!

She turns to make tea for us as my eyes flick from frame to frame to frame urgently. Why didn't I think of this before? Obviously Severus has a portrait here, and he would tell me what I can do to make it *all right again!* My heart cinches into a tight knot when I see him hanging next to McGonagall. My old mentor's portrait is still and static; she's still alive and her soul's essence has yet to breathe life into her likeness. Severus' portrait captures his face...his beloved face...perfectly. Each shadowed plane of his face is a vivid and heartbreaking memory. But there's something strange about the portrait, and I step closer to it with a frown.

"Here you go, dear..." Professor Sprout sets a cup of tea on the desk, and then she takes a step closer to me. "Ah... you've found Severus," she says with a large degree of fondness in her voice.

"What's... wrong with him?" I ask. It's like the paint is slightly translucent, like the edges of him are blurred with some indefinable movement. He doesn't move like the other portraits do, but neither is he still.

Professor Sprout sighs. "I don't know, Hermione, dear...he's *always* been like that. He doesn't talk or move properly. All I can presume is that the artist did something wrong with the spellwork. It's like Severus is neither here nor there..."

Neither here nor there... My mouth drops open as I watch the strange, flickering quality of the movement. Professor Sprout's words make something click in my brain like a proverbial Lumos has gone off to illuminate the truth.

Did you know that if you open your eyes when you're Travelling through the event horizon, it's enough to make you feel nauseous for days. Because everything looks like it has been stretched into long strands of light and colour around you; the sea of quantum foam is blurred into long trails of movement.

"Have some tea, Hermione. We all need to grieve eventually. I understand." Perhaps she has seen many other mourners at the wall, rescued many other lost souls and warmed them with tea, too. She may not have healed my soul, but suddenly I can see a way to find the other half of mine! I sip my tea and she lets me sit quietly with my whirring mind.

I know, now, what it all means.

2nd May 1998

Hermione was 18

There was so much blood.

It soaked into his black robes and spread across the floor of the Shrieking Shack, draining his life away with it. His blood-stained memories swirled in the vial, glinting like copper in the Lumos light. After so many years, his job was finally done; his promise to Lily was fulfilled. He was free. His face started to go slack, the deep lines etched there by years of stress and worry and heartbreak softened.

"Look... at... me..." He clutched at Harry's robes like he was desperate for leverage... like he was straining to turn his head.

Straining through his last words and his last breath to look *at me*.

And then he collapsed.

It's amazing how a memory can change when you see it from an altered perspective; it's like I've never remembered Severus' death properly before. What makes my heart race is this: Was he trying to tell me that he had forgiven me? Or am I looking for absolution where none exists?

Here's what I think: His portrait is blurred because he's in the in-between. If he were to Travel with me from 1998 to whenever I had left in 2004, wouldn't he be moving in a blur that looks just like the world has been stretched around his edges? He *would* be neither here nor there, for lack of a better description. Nothing else makes any sense to me.

I know (I feel it in my heart) that I am the one who moved his body.

I smile at Professor Sprout and put my tea cup down again. "Thank you, Headmistress. I think I'm all better, now."

Eight

Chapter 8 of 11

Hermione has deviated from an obvious life. She has moved down a challenging and divergent, but ultimately lonely, path. She meets Severus Snape by chance one day, and she has some difficult choices to make.

"I carry your heart with me (I carry it in my heart)"

...e.e. cummings

8th October 2004

Hermione is 33

Adrenaline and excitement kept me awake all night. I couldn't get away from Hogwarts quickly enough yesterday, and I was distracted through Julia's visit this afternoon, so much so that she told me to take a break for a couple of days, that my travel logs were impressive, but it wouldn't be good for me to collapse for the sake of history. I'd nodded vaguely and said I'd see how I felt.

Although I wanted to Travel to him *straight away*, I knew that intensive preparation would be wise. His portrait is *moving*; he isn't dead. So, I know that I am going to stop him from dying. Otherwise I'd just be burying a body later today, a secret and devastating memorial. Despite the fact that I must concede that I've been a little obsessive about him during the last few months, I would *never* steal his lifeless body so that I can fill my own deep need to mourn.

I'd never paid much attention to healing charms before; we were never taught many of them at Hogwarts. I smile as I remember a little snippet from the Prince's sixth-year potions book: *If it's bleeding, chuck some dittany on it.* However, I was not convinced that dittany was going to fix a severed artery, so I spent all night doing a little research. I think that a Stasis Charm is going to work best until I can get him here to heal him properly...at least *that* part should be easy. The Stasis Charm makes sense, too: The Stasis Charm will render him unconscious, which fits with the events of that morning, when he collapsed.

But this all means that I'm going to have to Travel to the Shrieking Shack in the midst of a battle; avoid detection by Voldemort; avoid detection by a younger and desperate (and wand twitchy) Trio; and cast a Stasis Spell without it being noticed. It would have been a daunting thought, except that Time is funny that way: I've *already* achieved it, so I know that it can be done.

After I was sure I'd covered every contingency, I tried to sleep, but after tossing and turning for over an hour, I realised that I had one last thing to do, one last preparation to make.

13th November 1994

Hermione was 33

When I arrived in Diagon Alley, I groaned to myself; I'd forgotten that Friday was market day. The narrow, cobbled alley was made narrower still because each shop had a display table set up under their shop's awning. Witches and wizards and children, lots of children, pressed around the tables, seeking the bargain of the week.

Perhaps it was for the best; at least the streaming crowd made me anonymous.

The Owl Post Office was less busy, but there was still a queue. While I waited, I unfolded the letter I wanted to send. My handwriting hadn't changed much over the years. If Severus set this letter beside a fourth-year essay of mine, the tight loops and hasty and off-centre dots would match.

Dearest Severus,

The first time was a surprise; I should never have returned to visit you again. I came back because I wanted to, because Thursdays with you were where I felt like I belonged, where I fit exactly right.

I can't explain where or why or how. But I can tell you that our friendship means the world to me; that you're the best man I know; that I love you.

I am desperately sorry for any hurt that I may have caused; it was never my intention, please know that.

Always carry hope with you, Severus.

Always,

H.

There is so much more that I want to write, to tell him: I've never felt like I belong more than in a Time where ~~he~~ is; my soul is weeping for the loss of its perfect match; I

have dreams where he is my midnight lover and that he fits inside me so perfectly that it feels like we're halves of one piece; the bitter and uncomfortable truth... that I wouldn't change what I've done for the world even though it has hurt him. But I force myself to seal the envelope once more. He might Incendio the letter on sight, but at least I've tried to tell him.

Every time I Travel, I carry him with me, in my heart.

2nd May 1998

Hermione is 33

Usually it's easy for me to watch history unfold, to be an impartial observer of events as they flow forward into a known future. But it's different, now. Even worse than the Death Eater trials. A million times worse.

I want to leap up from my dark corner, where I hide under a Disillusionment Charm, and strangle Voldemort until his bone-white face turns blue. I want to tell Severus to *run*! He sounds so desperate to find Harry; I can sense his urgency to get away from here, sense his feeling of impending failure. He thinks that Harry is out of reach; that he's never going to be able to tell him what he needs to know. He thinks that hope is futile. I swallow hard and wipe at the tears that tickle down my cheeks.

I cannot bear to look when Nagini strikes. I cover my eyes with shaking hands, but I can still hear the sucking bubble of blood, the thud as he collapses to his knees. Oh, God, I wish that I could prevent it, but I know that it would change *everything*.

When I open my eyes again, I see my younger self rushing towards Severus, clutching Ron's hand so tightly. God. I look so young, so earnest, so naïve about what Time will bring me...that it will close the circle and bring me back to the beginning. My hand tightens around my wand. I want to cast the Stasis Charm right now, but I have to wait for Harry to collect the memories he needs.

When Severus speaks his last words, I cast the spell, and his head falls to the side; he looks deadGo, *go, go*, I think at my younger self. I have no way of knowing if Severus has lost too much blood to survive.

As the footsteps fade back into the tunnel, I rush to Severus' side, oblivious to the blood that seeps into my robes beneath my knees. He's *so* cold and so still, I note with dismay that makes my heart ache and hope.

"Please," I murmur. "Please..." A sob hitches in my throat, and I'm crying again. "Please, please, please," I croon as I stroke hair back from his face. I'm asking Time to spare this man...my soul's other half. But I've deceived Time and betrayed the Traveller's creed, so as I take his still, white hand and prepare to Travel, I'm not sure if my heart's plea will be heard.

9th October 2004

Hermione is 33

In Severus' frame of reference, more than three years have passed without me, and they show. It's like Voldemort's second coming has leached something essential from him. Or perhaps it was Dumbledore's demand or Lily's vow that have stretched the skin so tightly across the bones of his face, made him look like he's been fuelled on malice and vinegar.

I want to pull out my wand and Ennervate him; it would be a shock to his system, though, and it's best to let him float to consciousness rather than be jerked into the shock of 2004 like a fish gasping for water.

I sit curled up in an armchair next to my bed. The mid-morning sunshine is warm on my back, but I still tuck my hands in to the sleeves of my jersey because the icy stretch of silence makes me shiver with apprehension and dread.

What will he say to me when he wakes? The knot of dread at my core twists hard, and I cover my mouth with my fingertips because my lips are trembling. I'm starving but I can't make myself go to the kitchen to get something to eat. I can't fight the feeling that if I blink or move, he'll be gone.

But still, despite myself, I dare to hope.

9th October 2004

Hermione was 33

I held my breath when I lifted the Stasis Charm; if he didn't live then I didn't want to take another breath, either!

When his chest began to rise and fall, I let out a long, wavering breath and traced the thin, pink scar that ran from just below his ear down to the hollow between his collarbones. And then the other one roughly parallel to the first, which had been a deep and deadly gash that had sliced clean through his artery.

When I'd really had a chance to see the extent of the damage Nagini had done to his neck, I thought that the odds were very slim that he'd survive, that he'd been just heartbeats away from death when I'd put him under the Stasis Charm.

Fate and Time are strange and magical creatures. I had to believe that they'd collaborated towards the very moment when I reached for the precious crystal vial that I'd sworn I'd keep for a vital and much-needed moment.

I had helped Madam Pomfrey to heal the injured from the Battle of Hogwarts before the St Mungo's Healers had arrived. I used the last drop of the dittany, and I stood up and looked at the long line of people who still needed help, and I'd dropped to my knees and *cried* for my helplessness. A soft gasp from the people around me had roused me from the depths of self-pity, and I saw that Fawkes had appeared in a flash of scarlet and gold. I'd thought he'd soar to Harry, but he wheeled around the Great Hall once before tucking his wings in and plummeting like a streak of fire to land at my knee. When he'd healed all the wounded, he'd filled my vial with pearly tears.

"But I don't need them, now," I'd said to him with a perplexed expression.

Fawkes warbled softly and tilted his magnificent head as if to say, "Not yet."

Surely I was meant to save Severus; Time and Fate and even magic seemed to agree.

The phoenix tears worked miracles; the skin and muscle had knitted themselves together. But he remained ashen and still, and I realised that the biggest danger was the loss of blood he'd sustained. I had bought several vials of Blood Replenishing Potion, and I had prayed that they'd still work on a body under stasis; they had to, didn't they, for there'd surely been patients at St Mungo's with critical injuries and blood loss?

Like a miracle, the colour returned to his body by small degrees, like life had infused into him and was spreading from the inside out. Finally, even his fingertips were no longer the grey and dead colour they had been.

I moved to check his other hand, and it was then that I noticed he was clutching something in his fist. Carefully, I unhinged the clasp of his fingers, exposing his secret: a folded piece of parchment. Blood had stained into the very fibre of it, and it had been folded and unfolded so many times it was paper-thin and fragile.

As I unfolded the letter I'd sent him only yesterday, I wondered why he hadn't put some sort of Impervious Charm on it.

And then my heart interpreted its greatest hope for me: he hadn't done that because when he traced the lines of text with his long and beautiful fingers, he liked to imagine where my own hands had touched the parchment and he didn't want to spell my presence away.

Finally, his fingers twitch slightly.

I lean forward and suddenly I feel nauseous with dread and apprehension. I have broken all of the rules and risked everything; what if he hates me for what I have done? What if all he really wanted to do was to die and join Lily beyond the Veil?

I don't think my heart will go on if he opens his eyes and all I see is disgust.

I am frozen in place, now, with the horror of what could happen. I yearn to move to sit next to him, to take his hand, but I can't.

He makes a soft noise, almost a protest that he's waking up. That thought just makes me feel worse, and my hands curl into tight fists, my whole body tenses, just waiting for him to hate me so that I can throw myself to my knees and beg for forgiveness.

When his eyes slit open, an involuntary sound bubbles up my throat...it's a soft gasp of hope that sighs into the air. Slowly, he turns his head to look at me. All I can see in his eyes is myself, reflected in his dark, dark pupils.

He swallows as if he's trying to catch his feelings and mould them into words. "Hope," he murmurs, and then he falls back into unconsciousness.

Nine

Chapter 9 of 11

Hermione has deviated from an obvious life. She has moved down a challenging and divergent, but ultimately lonely, path. She meets Severus Snape by chance one day, and she has some difficult choices to make.

"Come out of the circle of time,

And into the circle of love."

...Rumi

14th October 2004

Hermione is 33

I'd expected anger and resentment, accusations and bitterness, angst and betrayed snarls from Severus: the stark and violent intensity of the betrayed. The image that had come to mind again and again was of Severus confronting Sirius and Remus once upon a long time ago. Their betrayal had been incontrovertible to his mind, then. Did he feel the same way about me? In the quiet and dark hours I'd waited for him to wake again, my own mood swung back and forth like a lead pendulum...from blind hope to bitter dread to sweet, aching longing. The soft gasp of my name on his lips echoed in my mind over and over, sometimes sounding like forgiveness, sometimes like a final condemnation.

I should have known that life rarely lives up to expectations, that reality usually different than imaginings and dreams. His continued silence is, in a way, far worse than any rage I'd envisioned. It leaves a vacuum in the room that I don't know how to fill. His face is a mask; I can't see behind it.

I open the door with my hip, balancing the tray carefully... the cups tinkle against the saucers softly, and he turns to glance at me. He's sitting in an armchair at the window, and he was staring out at the stormy sky before I'd come in. The autumn wind howls mournfully at the door, scratches at the windows, but I've Charmed the house tightly so that it is kept at bay.

I set the tray on the table and sit in the armchair next to him. "Tea?" I ask quietly, not really expecting an answer. His silence is my punishment, now. It's uncomfortable and expectant, but I bow to it because I *deserve* it.

He watches me for a long moment...there's a beautiful depth to his gaze like his soul has flickered to life behind the dark pupils...and then one corner of his mouth lifts slightly as if he's trying to remember how to smile.

"The crossword is best with tea, yes," he murmurs; his voice is still somewhat hoarse, but some of the beautiful, rich timbre is returning already. He flicks his long fingers at the *Daily Prophet* I'd left on the table for him earlier. It's folded open to the crossword puzzle, but he hasn't started to fill it in, yet.

Oh, I realise as my heart swells impossibly large in my chest... he was waiting *forme*.

And then I am locked in a *familiar* moment with Severus, one that *burns* with promise and sends a thrill of expectation tickling through every nerve.

7th October 1993

Hermione was 32

Severus had been in a shockingly bleak and snarling mood for the last few months. To his mind, Sirius Black...murderer, traitor, betrayer of Lily...had escaped from Azkaban and was threatening the sanctity of Severus' promise to protect Harry.

He bolted shots of Firewhisky down with almost taciturn determination, perhaps trying to numb the anxiety and sense of impending horror. We were playing chess today,

and he made each move with predatory skill, as if my black chess pieces each bore Sirius' face. I struggled to find a conversational foothold without betraying my insight into his gloom, so we played in tight silence, and I took the crushing defeat with uncustomary grace. I reached across the board and tipped my king over; it fell with a clatter. "Well done," I said in a strained voice.

Oh, how I wanted to tell him that *Iknew*, to let all my secrets and the details of future days tumble from my lips like a gushing waterfall. But I'd already made such a tangle of Time, and although I couldn't imagine that I was going to get out of the corner without tripping over the intricate web of lies I'd woven, I still couldn't bring myself to see the shock of horror in his eyes, to be despised and hated... like Severus hated Sirius.

He stared at the fallen chess piece, the sharp planes of his face tight and drawn. "Do you ever wish that you could live another life?" he asked suddenly, and his dark eyes snapped up to capture mine in an intense gaze.

Yes, yes, yes. I thought behind the strong mental wall that bounded all my secrets. I wished that I'd been born in another time, that I really was a woman named Hope who cultivated rare magical plants, that I could mesh myself into his life completely and open myself up to him like a flower. I wished that he could love me like I loved him. "Yes," I whispered. Although my thoughts were locked away from his uncanny gaze...the seeking, probing gaze of a Legilimens...some of my hope must have leached through to my eyes.

An answering flash of hope warmed his black eyes, and a small frown etched between his eyebrows. "What is it that you want, Hope?" he asked. There was something stretched between us in that moment, the unspoken and tangible bond that threaded through a hundred Thursday afternoons.

A thrill of possibility enveloped me, setting all my nerves vibrating and tingling. I opened my mouth to tell him everything, but my mouth was dry with want, the words wouldn't spill out. The silver Chrono on my wrist felt like ice.

"Nothing," I murmured eventually, and the longing in the air between us recoiled so quickly that I almost gasped at how bereft I felt.

He never asked me again.

"What is it that you want, Hermione?" Severus asks quietly. Tension is tight across his shoulders; it draws his mouth into a thin line.

I feel like I am being drawn into him, like the magnetic draw he's had on my heart for so long is pulling all of my soul towards him in long, glittering ribbons of hope. There are no barriers, now: Time has come full circle, and our lives are flowing in the same direction towards something that I have no power to stop.

He can surely see into my mind, now...see the stark lines of my need drawn clear and bold. My lips tremble, and the words barely squeeze past the aching in my heart and my throat. "You," I say, with tears spilling over as I am laid bare in front of him. "I want you..."

He is all I have ever wanted for so many years now, that I cannot remember ever having wanted anything else. I can't believe he never saw it through all the years, how I loved him beyond the boundaries of Time: My love for Severus has always been as sharply clear and painful to me as slivers of glass.

11th October 2004

Hermione was 33

My body ached with uncomfortable tightness. Stress and lack of sleep made my head throb, and I was so tired of jerking to my feet with each movement he made in his healing sleep. I couldn't sustain the nervous and gut-twisting anxiety for long; the tension stretched and loosened with each dragging minute. Each time I curled up in the armchair and dozed fitfully on a hazy level just below wakefulness, I was afraid that he'd wake up.

I tried to read at first, but the words were just an incomprehensible crawl of black ink across the page. I stared at the far wall, imagining what would happen when Severus woke up...a hundred different ways my life could play out. Eventually, my mind was too tired to sketch out yet another scenario, and I pressed my cheek into my palm and cried silent tears for no good reason at all. I pressed my forehead to my knees and rocked gently, but it was an empty comfort.

"Why?" His voice was a sandpaper rasp in the silence, and my heart lurched with surprise.

A high squeak squeezed through my throat; I was on my feet in a flash, hovering next to the bed. "Severus, you're awake!" Words tumbled from my lips like a river. "Do you want water? Something to eat? What can I get you? God, I'm so glad you're conscious... does it hurt? I did the best I could with what..."

It took him a moment to adjust to my blur of movement, to catch up with my stream of words. "Why?" he repeated more clearly. He was so pale, and his black hair tangled limply across the pillow. Dark circles bruised under his eyes.

My mouth hung open in mid-babble, and I frowned in confusion. His question wasn't angry...there was a world of weariness in the one word, the depth of defeat almost made me sink to my knees under its weight. "Huh?" I managed to breathe.

He coughed dryly and glared at me, obviously not liking that he had to look up at me. "Why did you save me?" he asked. His voice took on a robotic, monosyllabic rasp; it sounded almost metallic. "What do you want from me?" He coughed again, touched a long, spidery hand to his throat.

Automatically, I reached for the glass of water on the nightstand and offered it to him. What did he mean? I wanted him to live, of course. But there was deep distrust in his eyes as he eyed the glass of water, hesitating, like he thought it might be poisoned or drugged. I sighed softly and took a small sip of it, then offered it to him again. This time he took the glass, but the line of his jaw tightened; I could see he *hated* to need what I offered.

I turned and pulled the armchair closer, sat down so that I was at eye-level with him. He put the glass back onto the side-table and pulled himself into a sitting position, grimacing fiercely. I didn't dare offer my help when it seemed to be so unwanted. Sadness spooled through my veins and pierced my heart. I shook my head in answer to his question.

His lips twisted into a familiar sneer. "Secrets and lies, *Hope*. I should have known you'd have them, too. Dumbledore and Riddle and Lilyall had their secrets and lies... they all *wanted* something from me, in the end. So, spit it out... What do you want from me?"

And then I understood: All his life he'd been used, served one or more people's wishes, bowed under the weight of his promises, ever ignoring his own desires. It made sense that what I'd done would slot neatly into his expectations of people, now.

I pressed my lips together for a moment as tears feel involuntarily. Were they tears for him, or tears for me?

"I just want," I said thickly, my voice wavering, "you to live."

And in the face of his blank and stunned incomprehension, my secrets and lies spilled into the air, and I talked and I talked until my throat was sore and my heart felt like it'd shattered all over again. And all through it, he was silent, gazing past me at the leaden sky with a blank and neutral gaze.

"When you're better, you're free to leave, of course," I finished, although it was the last thing I wanted. "You don't have to stay... I don't want... anything from you at all." I paused for a moment as I stood, and I closed my eyes and fought the new rise of grief. And as I let him free with my words, he was dead quiet and still.

"Everybody makes mistakes," I whispered softly. And then I left him to his silence.

His gaze holds my fragile hope suspended as my heart is laid bare. I can't breathe. He can see all of me, now, and his heart and mind is opaque as the night to me. And still, hope flutters against my chest like a trapped bird longing to fly.

"I want," he says, and it's like he's *savouring* the taste of the unfamiliar words he's never been free to utter, "you, too."

Ten

Chapter 10 of 11

Hermione has deviated from an obvious life. She has moved down a challenging and divergent, but ultimately lonely, path. She meets Severus Snape by chance one day, and she has some difficult choices to make.

"It's human to have a secret,

But it's just as human to reveal it sooner or later."

...Philip Roth

15th October 2004

Hermione is 33

Yesterday's storm has passed, and the morning sunshine is warm and beautiful as it shines through the window and spills across my bed, gilding the bare skin of my back. I can feel the heat of his skin beneath my cheek, hear the steady beat of his heart so close to me, but I'm irrationally afraid to open my eyes. Maybe I'm dreaming and all of this will evaporate into the sun if I dare to look.

The deep rhythm of his breathing changes as he wakes, and his fingers shift against my spine, then start to trace soft circles through the sunlight on my back.

Dreams never feel as real as this. I can open my eyes, now.

Sunlight feathers through my eyelashes. I gaze at the sharp line of his jaw. He's *real*. His pulse throbs beneath the thin skin of his neck in time to the comforting thud of his heart. My gaze shifts from his neck. His chest is white and thin. The rippled corrugation of his ribs just beneath his skin as his chest rises and falls with each breath makes my heart *ache* for him. It's like stress and unhappiness has stripped every superfluous part of him away until just the core of him has remained. A dark line of hair trails from his navel across the convex stretch of his stomach, down to the line of pubic hair just visible above the edge of the sheet with the bulge of his morning erection evident beneath it. All my nerves tighten, and something warm and tight flips lazily in my belly.

"Good morning." His voice is low and husky and perhaps somewhat tentative. There's something breathless about waking up with a new lover...even with declarations of want or love shiny and bright in the air, there's that uncomfortable moment of uncertainty before you gaze into his eyes to see if he's actually sorry or embarrassed to be intertwined and naked with you.

I prop myself up on one elbow...my round, silver pendant slides to nestle between my breasts. His dark eyes follow its path for a moment before they lift to meet mine. His gaze is calm and clear and open... my heart begins to beat again; it feels like it had stopped for a moment, anticipating being shattered and torn. He moves his hand from where it covers mine on his chest and touches one, long finger to the traveller's saint. "Traveller," he murmurs. It sounds like acceptance rather than accusation.

"Yes," I agree with a slight smile. Slowly, I lean forward to brush my lips against his. He meets my lips halfway. Then I lean back and say, "I came across Time for you, Severus. I love you; I always have."

He quirks an eyebrow at me and his lips twitch, and suddenly, in one smooth movement, I'm trapped beneath him, and his cock is pressing hard against my thigh. His lips are hot at my ear. "You *stole* that line from *Terminator*," he growls, and I giggle, caught out.

"Doesn't mean it's not true," I return artlessly, squirming with delight as his lips trail past the shell of my ear and down my neck.

The chime of my doorbell freezes my joy. Realisation and fear lance through me like ice. It's Friday!

12th October 2002

Hermione was 26

I'd always *loved* Friday afternoons with Julia.

Travelling was exciting and exhilarating and fascinating, but sometimes the solitude became unbearable, like my thoughts became too loud for my mind to bear. Julia was *more* than my mentor; she understood my unusual life, my unconventional path. Tea and company... it was never truer than on Fridays, when my thoughts could spill over into the air and there was somebody to listen to my ramblings and my fears.

"Sometimes," I said, examining a wayward strand of hair for split ends so that I wouldn't have to look into her knowing, wise eyes, "I feel like I'm bursting with the... the enormity of it all. I wish I could..."

"Hermione," she cut in, setting her teacup down, "we have already spoken of this *length*." Although her words were harsh, her tone was gentle. "You walk a very different and divergent path from your Harry and your Ron."

Sometimes the path felt too narrow and razor-sharp, with no room at all for love or companionship.

"I know," I said with a sigh. I left no footprints in the past...I Travelled the divergent and lonely path.

I glanced up at her, then, and I could have sworn I saw an echo of my pain, some flash understanding that went far beyond empathy.

15th October 2004

Hermione is 33

I close the bedroom door behind me as I rush into the living room, pulling my snarled hair into a tight ponytail. The doorbell chimes again. I glance at my desk: my travel log remains untouched; on top of it my Chrono glints in the beam of sunlight that slices across the room. She told me not to Travel for a few days; I'm not sure I'll get away with claiming a whole week! My heart is heavy with dread as I open the door; I afraid that I can't scrape a convincing smile together that will fool Julia.

Her cloud of perfume...it's spicy and strong and exotic...makes me feel dizzy when she gives me a hug. "Such a beautiful day!" she enthuses as she breezes past me. I close the door and then smooth my robes; I didn't have time to put on underwear under them... I feel exposed and vulnerable. I press my lips into a hard line for a moment and take a deep breath. When I turn around, tears are threatening already, swelling my chest with a hard and tight ache, but I tighten my resolve and prepare to lie again and again.

I can *feel* Severus' presence in the flat...can Julia sense him, too? Can she finally sense the deceit in me after all of this time?

"Tea?" I ask with as much normalcy as possible as I turn.

Julia is staring at me intently. "Do you remember," she says slowly, "when we spoke of how the path of the Traveller was different and divergent?"

I have to fight the urge to flee: She knows! "Ah... yes?" It feels like my feet are frozen to the floor. My fingertips twitch, and I fight the urge to clench my hands into fists. I have to make myself walk over to the couch. I sit stiffly across from Julia, waiting for the axe to fall.

Julia twirls a strand of beads around a gnarled finger. "Well... that much is true." She sighs. I don't understand where she is going with this. "~~Now~~*now* we have spoken of the nature of Time and preserving the integrity of events..."

My head droops on my neck under the weight of my guilt. I cannot look at her.

"...but we have never talked about *Fate* before."

My clasped hands are blurred. My heart is sick, sick, sick with dull and blunt horror. How far would I go to protect what I have with Severus? I couldn't hurt Julia, could I? Could I bring myself to Oblivate her? Where is my wand? I'm sure I left it on the tea tray yesterday.

She chuckles and continues with her monologue. "Fate is a strange creature, Hermione... even stranger than Time herself. Sometimes Fate will be so strong she will spiral around Time, transcend it..."

"I... I don't... understand," I say eventually. The tear that streaks down my cheek is cool against my flushed skin.

She leans forward and touches my hand. "*I know*... I have *always* known."

"Ahhh." Surprise escapes my lips in a bubble. I glance up into her wise and wrinkled face, looking for answers there.

She sighs softly. "Yes." She shakes her head. "I'm sorry that I could not tell you or support you these last months, but my interference would have been unwise, I think; if you had known..." She shakes her head again.

"How... did you know?" I manage to whisper tightly. The dread has gone, and it is replaced by a strange, uncomfortable notion that I've been drawn along to this very moment in an inexorable tide of destiny.

She smiles, now. "Oh. Perhaps it was chance... perhaps not, after all." She shrugs and her scarlet-tipped fingers flutter. "When I Travelled to Sydney several years ago, I met a very interesting witch and a wizard there. I have returned to visit with them often; they are very dear friends of mine, now."

Tingles of foreshadowing tickle down my arm. I rub at them vigorously.

Julia smiles at me, her lips stretching wide. "And they told me their story, their fascinating, intricate love story. And it was *ightly* woven with my own story, in the end. You and Severus have a lovely home in 1955, my dear. I love visiting you!"

The world is hazy again. It feels like the world has turned itself inside out. I can't quite grasp this new reality, and I flounder to find appropriate words. "I... er..." I sigh loudly. "I thought it wasn't allowed," I blurt out, all my pent-up anxiety spilling out like a secret. "How..."

Julia rolls her eyes at me. "We have *just* discussed Fate, have we not? You'll have a lot of time to think about things in the sunshine Down Under, anyway. It'll give you something to do." She sighs, too, now. "The rules are an impossible ideal, and humans...with our hearts and souls interfering...well, we make mistakes. Time and Fate take advantage of that, perhaps. Who knows."

For a long moment I wonder if her story is larger than I'd ever imagined. Fifty years is a long time. Did she lose her heart to a man out of Time, too? Then, before I can ask her if I'm the only one, Severus steps into the living room looking bemused; he's obviously been eavesdropping, and he's as bewildered as I am.

"Severus!" Julia says, standing up in a flutter and whoosh of vermillion silk. "It's been a while." She beams at him.

He frowns and stares at her, and I can see the gears turning in his head, like he's taking the pieces of her and trying to place them into a hole that just won't fit. "Julia West... but I *taught* you."

Julia grins at him, her wrinkles creasing deeply into laugh-lines. "Of course you did, Professor Snape," she says with a loud laugh. "I didn't like Potions much, by the way."

Faced with the twists and ironies of time, Severus looks floored. I can imagine why: the woman standing next to him looks at least fifty years older, yet she was younger than him only a few years ago! I thought that my time with him as Hope had inured him to the obvious side-effect of Travelling, but it's staring him in the face, now, bold as brass.

Severus takes several moments to compose himself. It looks like he's Transfigured a set of black robes for himself with my wand; he looks pale but handsome. I'm floating in the knowledge that he and I will be together... in the *past*. It's so much more than I'd ever hoped for, so much different than I'd ever envisioned!

"You blew up seventeen cauldrons during your tenure in my classroom, Miss West," he informs her with a smirk.

Julia snorts and turns to me. "This one is a real keeper, Hermione," she says dryly. "Now, perhaps you'd like to pack and get organised to Travel for the last time?" She reaches into her robe pocket and pulls out a silver bracelet.

I gasp. She's holding my Chrono in the palm of her hand. It seems I'm going to give up my Travels.

I've found my place in Time. I've found my heart.

Epilogue

Chapter 11 of 11

Hermione has deviated from an obvious life. She has moved down a challenging and divergent, but ultimately lonely, path. She meets Severus Snape by chance one day, and she has some difficult choices to make.

“May the circle be unbroken.”

—Country gospel song

16th January 1990

Hermione is 10

It feels like I'm cheating; it's probably snowing back home and here I am at the beach, and the sun is shining so brightly it feels like it will never be cold again. Mum and Dad have retreated under the brolly; they're bright red already. Mum doesn't understand why I haven't become red and crispy, either, but I told her it's simple: “I don't *want* to burn.” She rolled her eyes at me and told me there's no way to will yourself not to burn.

I wander down the beach a little. A group of kids are playing cricket, and they shout to each other in a broad, Australian twang. A toddler chases a big, fat seagull, but it's too fast for him, and he falls onto his nappy-padded bum. He sticks a handful of sand into his mouth, and I think that I'll never want to have children: I'd rather become a scientist or a doctor, thank you very much.

Right at the edge of the beach, where the bay curves away into headland, there's an old couple sitting under a brolly. They're both reading, and I smile. I'd like to get married one day, if I could have a man like that to read with, I think. Somebody intelligent. Not like the boys at my school. They're not talking, but there's some aura of quiet companionship between them that draws me to walk closer to where they are sitting, up away from the tide line where the sea had been sucking at my ankles.

The woman glances over the edge of her book. She's got grey, curly hair. It bounces like a spring in the wind. God. I hope my hair doesn't look like that when I'm old; mine is also curly and bouncy. I hate it. The sun is warm on my back, and the sand on my skin itches suddenly. I shrug my shoulders, trying to get rid of the strange tingle. The wind gusts suddenly and a hat cartwheels across the sand towards me. I bend to pick it up, and I carry it over to them.

“Thank you very much, young lady,” she says in crisp, clear notes that sound like home, smiling. She's got lovely warm eyes... so friendly and so knowing.

“You're welcome,” I tell her. “Are you also from England?” I ask.

The man drops his book, now, and gazes at me with black, black eyes. His hair is long and grey, his nose is very big; he looks like an old hippie, I think. “A long time ago,” he says to me. His voice is low and deep and smooth, like chocolate.

“We're just on holiday,” I inform them. I scratch at the tingle on my arm again. I shouldn't be talking to strangers, but there's something so familiar about them... something that itches under my skin, hides just around the corner.

“A traveller,” the woman says, smiling at me. Her teeth are even and straight; Mum and Dad would approve. I'm going to have to wear braces to straighten my horsey teeth, I think sourly. “Well... all travellers need a guide,” she says, reaching behind her neck suddenly. Then she stretches out her arm; she's dangling a silver chain from her fingertips. “Please... take it; I don't need it any longer.” She smiles at the man like she's sharing a private joke with him.

I hesitate for an instant before I let the silver pool into my palm. There's a small, round, silver charm on the chain.

“Saint Christopher,” she explains, “is the patron saint of travellers.” She smiles at me kindly. “So, you will always travel safely and find your way home.”

I slide the chain on over my neck, and the charm settles against my skin with familiar ease. “Thank you,” I say, astounded by the stranger's generosity.

“Travel safely,” the woman says.

I turn to walk back up the beach, and I hear the man chuckle softly. “And so the circle remains unbroken,” he says.

I turn and wave goodbye. The sun is warm on my skin again; the tingling is gone.

~~~The End~~~

---