

The Hidden Heart

by eilonwy

A fairy tale retold.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Once upon a time. The inevitable beginning.

It was a harsh time of year and equally, a harsh time to be alive, though the war was winding down. The dark-haired girl trudged home, her senses dulled by the steady, creeping onslaughts of extreme deprivation. She was spent. Finished. Didn't think there was much more she could take. There had been too many losses already.

She approached her flat, and something caught her eye as she drew nearer, something pale that fluttered from the door. The parchment slipped easily from the nail that had secured it, and she broke the seal, apprehension clutching at the pit of her stomach.

We have your parents.

Give yourself up, and we will let them go in exchange.

LM

A gold ring fell into her open palm from the folds of the parchment, and she clutched it, almost fearing to examine it more closely, knowing somehow what she would find if she did.

To TG from AG Love always 16-07-75

Her mother's. This was the real thing. There could only be one place they'd take her mother and father. For years, they'd been trying to lure her there on one pretext or another, and she'd always found a way around it, a means of avoiding the trap. But this...she couldn't ignore this. She knew she was viewed as a foolproof means of getting to Harry. She was only surprised, on second thought, that they hadn't done something like this sooner.

The seal on the back of the parchment confirmed her guess. It was the real thing, no question. She slipped the ring onto her middle finger for safekeeping.

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She arrived at the large, forbidding house at six in the evening, carrying one small bag containing just a few essentials. She was fully prepared, but for what, she wasn't entirely sure, if she were going to be completely honest with herself.

The heavy door swung open, and a house-elf stepped aside to admit her.

"Come this way, Miss," he said and turned, beckoning her to follow.

Down a series of semi-dark corridors she went, trailing behind his small, rapidly moving form. Overhead, arches met in Gothic peaks, small, carved stone heads staring down blindly from the common joints at their bases. There was an iron-hinged door at the far end of the last corridor. Through this, the diminutive house-elf beckoned her.

Suddenly, the girl found herself in a large room lit by flickering light from the fire that blazed in the large, stone hearth at the far end. The room appeared sparsely furnished, but a wooden settle stood before the fire, inviting the wary "guest" to sit and warm herself. An adjacent table was laden with platters of steaming food, fragrant and inviting. She hesitated a moment...but only a moment...and sat down, ravenous. Everything was delectable. As she ate, it occurred to her, somewhat vaguely, that the dishes were all her favourites.

A beautiful, spacious room had been prepared for her, and gratefully, she sank down into the large, four-poster bed that dominated the space. Its silken sheets soothed her weary limbs, and she fell asleep almost immediately, her last conscious thought of her parents and how glad she was that at least they would be safe now...if she could trust the bargain into which she'd entered.

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The next morning, she awoke to a shaft of sunlight crossing her face as she lay amongst the soft pillows. On the table at the foot of her bed was a small, crystal vase containing a single yellow rose, its petals on the verge of opening. There was a note propped up against the vase, along with a photograph of her parents. The picture, taken from behind her father, revealed that they were unaware of being photographed as her mother greeted him at the door. Her ring finger was conspicuously bare as she embraced her husband, her left hand resting on his back. The girl absently touched the ring on her middle finger as she stared at the photo, tears filling her eyes. Then she turned to the note.

Your parents have been released. You may not inquire after them. However, rest assured that they have been returned safely to their home.

You will find that breakfast has been prepared for you and is waiting on the terrace adjoining the dining room. A Warming Spell has been placed around it for your comfort.

Please enjoy all the hospitality of the house. You may go anywhere you choose with the exception of the dungeons, in which you would surely lose your way, and the north wing, which must remain private. Please respect this request.

It was penned in a hand that was vaguely familiar...there had been someone she had known once who'd written certain letters in just that unusual way...but she couldn't recall who it was. All she knew at that moment was a sense of overwhelming relief and a fierce longing to see her father and mother again, even if only for a moment.

Days passed. Each morning, a fresh rose appeared in the crystal vase, accompanied by a brief note. She found her wardrobe filled with lovely clothes she'd never have been able to afford on her own. And then there were the small gifts that appeared serendipitously from time to time, each one an object of fanciful pleasure that delighted her senses or her imagination.

That first day, it was a rare, old book of fairy tales waiting on her bedside table, its delicate Arthur Rackham illustrations bringing a smile and soft exclamations of wonder. On the second, she found a small, intricately carved teakwood box waiting on the dining table next to her place setting. Inside were ten polished stones of varying sizes, shapes, and colours. Her favourite came in a small, velvet jewel box on the third morning. Opening it, she discovered a delicate silver chain, at the end of which hung a small heart of rose quartz, bound with thin silver vines and filigreed leaves. She held it for several long minutes, bringing it up to her mouth and pressing the cool, smooth surface of the stone to her lips. Wondering at such an impulse, she started to return it to the box when she noticed the small piece of parchment. Its message was brief.

I hope this necklace pleases you.

She hesitated, feeling once more the strangeness of the circumstances, and examined the stone and its chain carefully. Finding nothing amiss, she slipped the chain over her head. It really was lovely. What harm could there be in wearing it? The stone came to rest between her breasts, cool against her skin and comforting, somehow. Pausing to touch it once more, she shut the box and put it on the dresser.

On the fourth day, she decided to venture out and explore the house a bit more. She'd been given permission, after all. This was the day she discovered the library. Walking along a narrow passage, she found a set of tall double doors. She pushed against them, and they gave way finally, revealing a vast, high-ceilinged room in which every wall was covered, top to bottom, with bookcases crammed with volumes of all sorts. The room appeared not to have been used in quite some time. Everything seemed to sleep under a coating of dust.

The girl spent much time in that room in the days that followed. The books became her almost constant companions, entertaining and consoling her in the long hours between waking and sleep.

Even so, she was lonely. Was this to be the shape of the rest of her life, a solitary imprisonment in a luxurious gilded cage? Nobody else knew she was there. Was mere isolation the punishment her captors had meant for her when they'd kidnapped her parents and used them as bait to lure her here? Surely not. Every day she waited...but for what, she wasn't certain.

Before dinner on the evening of the seventh day, she bathed in the scented water of the massive, sunken tub of gleaming marble in the en-suite adjacent to her bedchamber, as was her habit. Afterwards, she chose one of the fine, silk frocks she'd found in the wardrobe, as she did every evening, and slipped into matching pumps that were exactly her size. On a whim, she threaded this day's rose, a vibrant red one, into her hair, tucking it securely into her chestnut curls. Its fragrance wafted around her as she moved, a constant reminder of its beauty.

When she arrived in the dining room for her evening meal, she found the usually bright room lit only by a scant handful of candles and the flickering light of the fire in the hearth. She began to sit in her usual seat at one end of the long table when suddenly she noticed, for the first time, another place setting at the opposite end. Her heart quickened, and she gazed around wildly, peering into the shadowy recesses of the large room to find evidence of another human being...anyone.

The voice came from the darkness just beyond the reach of the candlelight. She could see the faint outlines of a man in the shadows.

"Hermione." The voice was soft and velvety, very nearly a whisper.

"Who are you?" she started, suddenly afraid.

"A friend. No!" he said abruptly, anticipating her impulse to take up a candle and see him better even as the thought was occurring to her. "Please. Don't." His voice trembled, and he paused. "Sit and enjoy your dinner."

"What about you?" she asked and then wondered at herself for asking such a question of a perfect stranger. Her hand found its way to the stone heart nestled between her breasts beneath the silk of her dress, its chain visible as it sparkled against her skin, and she heard a small intake of breath, a pause, and then a quiet chuckle.

"I'm really not hungry. I would just like to sit with you, if I may."

She assented, feeling inexplicably drawn to the stranger...to something in his gentle tone, despite the wistfulness that seemed to cloak his words. The meal was marked by an awkward silence, broken only by his whispered "goodnight" as she rose finally from the table at the end of the meal.

He began joining her for dinner each evening, always insisting on the protection and anonymity of the shadows, quiet at first and then, as the days went on, gradually engaging in shy, rather tentative conversation. Eventually, he met her at breakfast too, but with the imposition of a new condition: she must submit to being temporarily blinded whenever they were together in the light. The stranger seemed desperate to conceal his identity. A small thing, really, she reasoned, a price well worth paying for his companionship. What difference did it make if she could not see him, as long as he was kind and pleasant? And he had promised he would reveal himself in due course, when the time was right. He must be confined to this house as well, she decided, though she could not begin to imagine the circumstances, particularly as he did not seem to be without some power at his disposal. After all, it seemed clear that he'd had everything to do with the small comforts that had made her enforced stay so

much more bearable, even pleasant...that he must be the one responsible for the various gifts. Why, she could not fathom. It was an enigma.

Winter slipped quietly into early spring. The sun had strengthened, and the girl found herself drawn to the extensive gardens, in particular the rose garden. There were as yet no flowers in bloom...it was far too early. But small, tightly furled buds had appeared, just a hint of their colour visible. She realised, then, how he must be managing to provide her with a fresh blossom every day even in the dead of winter and why the flowers had lasted, every single one. He'd chosen buds from the most beautiful and rare of the roses and then enchanted them to bloom early and stay perpetually fresh. There were now several pots of fragrant flowers in her bedroom; she'd kept them all, right down to that first one.

It came to pass one day that she found herself in the rose garden after a long walk past the outdoor pool and its marble statuary. She'd grown tired and had dropped gratefully down on a stone bench between the bushes. Turning, her hair had caught on the thorns of a nearby branch and she'd pulled, increasingly frustrated, to free herself, but in vain. Suddenly, gentle hands reached to untangle her hair. Instinctively, she began to turn around.

"Wait. Please." As always, the voice was soft almost to the point of a whisper. "Do not turn around, I beg you. *Visum defluo!*" Instantly she was as one blind. And then she felt his hand resting lightly on her shoulder. "All right. Now."

She turned to face him, sensing him beside her, so close that she could reach out and touch him if she wished.

On impulse, her hand darted out, fingers extended, questing. They found his hair first, brushing over it with shy curiosity. It was soft and fine and long as it fell about his face. He sat perfectly still, but she could hear his breathing becoming shallow and more rapid as, emboldened by his acquiescence, her fingers continued their journey from his hair to the smooth skin of his face. She traced it delicately, her fingertips skimming his eyelids first. His lashes were long. They fluttered beneath her fingertips and then rested again on the smooth skin of his cheeks. Grazing his cheek gently, her fingers traveled along his nose, straight and finely formed, and then trailed slowly across his mouth, resting there for a moment. His lips were warm and soft to the touch. Embarrassed suddenly by her forwardness, she withdrew her hand.

"Please tell me your name," she begged, blushing. "You know mine, but I have no idea who you are."

"Perhaps you know more than you realise," he answered cryptically, and she could hear a trace of a smile in his voice. "But it isn't time for me to tell you my name, not yet. Let's walk, shall we? Give me your arm."

Together they moved through the many angled paths of the rose garden, her arm tucked into his as he guided her along.

"Are you a prisoner here, like me?" she asked presently.

He sighed and waited a moment before replying. "Yes... and no. In some ways, I am a prisoner as surely as you are, and have been for far longer." He sighed again and fell silent, his footsteps crunching on the gravel of the path as he walked.

"I don't understand."

"There are many types of prisons, Hermione. Some of them we build around ourselves, stone by stone. The mortar is made of our own mistakes, our own foolish choices, our anger, our... stupidity." His voice seemed tinged with profound regret and something more: disgust.

He seemed unwilling to elaborate, and she knew not to press him further, much as she found that now, more than ever, she really wanted to know more, to understand.

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Three months passed. The garden had finally burst into riotous bloom everywhere, and the warm sunshine brought bees and butterflies questing for pollen and nectar amongst the blossoms. To her surprise, the girl found that her days had slipped into an indefinably content rhythm she had never expected to find in this place and under such circumstances. Each day was one of quiet discoveries and small satisfactions, all of them involving the stranger, though he seemed in so many ways a stranger no longer. His many kindnesses and his attentiveness made her feel cherished in a way she had never been before. She still wondered from time to time what her purpose was in being there and when her captors would reveal their hand, but in truth, she wondered less and less as time passed.

Every morning upon rising, she drew the rose quartz out from inside her nightgown, holding it and bringing it to her lips and then letting it fall back inside. She hadn't taken it off once, and in all that time, she'd noticed two things: first, that the stone itself seemed warmer to the touch than she would have expected from simple contact with her own body heat, and second, that its colour seemed gradually to be deepening over time. In addition, there was now a small, blood-red spot in the centre, and sometimes it looked almost as if it were pulsating. She wondered if her eyes were playing tricks. Nonetheless, looking at it and holding it had become a sort of ritual she couldn't really explain, but one she felt compelled to observe. The changes in the small stone continued, and she was fascinated by them even as they mystified her, often finding herself touching it without being aware she was doing it.

One evening after their meal, the girl and the stranger repaired to the library together. She had discovered in the course of conversation at dinner, several weeks before, that in fact, he loved books as much as she.

"Why do you not use the library then? When I found it, it was covered in dust!" The girl had been perplexed and had strained, once again, to see his features. They had remained hidden, as always, in the shadows at the far end of the table, just beyond the pool of candlelight.

"There was a time when I did, often. It was my favourite part of the house. My refuge, in fact," he had answered quietly. A sudden movement had told her he must have turned away. "Then I became... ill... and books lost their charm for me. Everything did. But now...now I think I should like to go back again. Will you come with me?" His voice had revealed an eagerness that had disarmed her. They had spent the entire evening there, he reading to her from his favourite books. As always, she had been Spelled blind, and so the words he had read created pictures in her imagination that were all the more lush and intense.

Now they sat on a leather sofa together in the centre of the cavernous room, surrounded by books that beckoned to them with the force of their age and the seductive fragrance of old paper and bindings and ink and the worlds of words they contained. She sat quietly in the enforced darkness, her head cocked slightly to one side, listening as he opened an anthology of poetry.

"This one is my favourite. I'd like to share it with you," he began shyly.

"Yes, please," she smiled and closed her sightless eyes, leaning into the comforting warmth radiating from his physical proximity to her. His voice was low and tremulous.

When the white flame in us is gone,

And we that lost the world's delight

Stiffen in darkness, left alone

To crumble in our separate night;

When your swift hair is quiet in death,

And through the lips corruption thrust

Has still'd the labour of my breath...

When we are dust, when we are dust!

Not dead, not undesirous yet,

Still sentient, still unsatisfied,

We'll ride the air, and shine, and flit,

Around the places where we died,

And dance as dust before the sun,

And light of foot and unconfined,

Hurry from road to road, and run

About the errands of the wind.

Forgetting himself, lost in the beauty and power of the poem, his voice gradually gained in strength, its timbre rich and deep as he continued.

And every mote, on earth or air,

Will speed and gleam, down later days,

And like a secret pilgrim fare

By eager and invisible ways,

Nor ever rest, nor ever lie,

Till, beyond thinking, out of view,

One mote of all the dust that's I

Shall meet one atom that was you.

Then in some garden hush'd from wind,

Warm in a sunset's afterglow,

The lovers in the flowers will find

A sweet and strange unquiet grow

Upon the peace; and, past desiring,

So high a beauty in the air,

And such a light, and such a quiring,

And such a radiant ecstasy there,

They'll know not if it's fire, or dew,

Or out of earth, or in the height,

Singing, or flame, or scent, or hue,

Or two that pass, in light, to light,

Out of the garden, higher, higher...

But in that instant they shall learn

The shattering ecstasy of our fire,

And the weak, passionless hearts will burn

And faint in that amazing glow,

Until the darkness close above;

And they will know...poor fools, they'll know!...

One moment, what it is to love.

"Oh..." she breathed, sudden tears clogging her throat and pricking at her lashes. "Oh... that was... that was just..."

"Beautiful. I know." His voice was once again the familiar, feathery whisper. "Brilliant, really. It's called 'Dust.' Rupert Brooke wrote it nearly a hundred years ago." He laid the book open-faced in his lap, resting his hands on the pages. "...I have always wanted to know that sort of love. Do you..." He hesitated. "Do you think it's real?"

"I don't know," she answered honestly. "But I'd like to believe it is." She reached out, searching for his hand; finding it, she curled her fingers over his longer ones and squeezed gently. She had no way to see the momentary fear and surprise and then the shining wonderment that passed over his face.

He covered her hand with his other one and turned to face her, leaning closer. She could feel his warm breath on her cheek, and then his lips brushed hers oh so softly. And then again.

Heart pounding wildly, she sat there and simply breathed him in, her remaining senses a hundred times more keen with the loss of her sight. There was a scent of soap,

delightfully clean and fresh. The tastes of chocolate and cream were on his tongue, as it probed delicately at her lips. She opened her mouth to receive him, her hand rising to find the nape of his neck and sliding into the soft hair that fell there.

"Hermione..." he whispered against her skin, overwhelmed by their sudden intimacy. "I want..."

"Yes," she said softly.

No other words were said. With a full heart and a complete absence of fear or guilt, she allowed herself to be led by the hand up the stairs and into his bed.

The kisses were sweet and then almost harsh with desire. It had been so long for both of them. Clothing fell away, and then there was nothing but electric skin on skin and tongues leaving molten trails on heated flesh, teeth biting, lips pressing kisses wherever they could reach, hands running sinuous paths up and down each other's bodies, discovering secrets and hidden delights, quieting fears. At last, raw with need, he opened her fully to himself, filling her again and again and again with a tender fury. And she filled him, in turn, in a way that he had not believed would ever be possible for him. And then they slept, wrapped in each other's arms.

In the morning, she awoke first and found her sight returned, the spell having run its course. He had not remembered its limitations in the intensity of their coupling. Momentarily confused as she took in her new surroundings, a sweet ache between her legs suddenly recalled to her what they had shared the night before. Marks on her breasts, belly, and thighs were further testaments to his passion. She knew there were more on her neck, from the tenderness of the flesh there. Turning, she gazed for the first time upon her dear companion, lying asleep by her side. He lay facing away from her, partially obscured in a tangle of bedclothes and pillows. Suddenly, murmuring something she couldn't understand, he kicked at the coverlet, pushing it off his body into a crumpled heap at the foot of the bed and then rolling onto his back, his arms and legs splayed open, fully exposed.

She drew in a sharp breath. Lying there, beautiful in his utter vulnerability, was the one person for whom she had spent years of her young life feeling only intense dislike and disdain. And he was glorious in his nakedness, leanly muscled everywhere, his skin smooth and milk-pale. Small nipples stood erect on his hard chest, and a smattering of fine, dark-blond hair trailed from his navel down into a luxuriance of curls surrounding his penis, proudly erect against his taut belly. His long, fair hair was tousled, his face open and relaxed. There was a soft smile on his face as he slept. He was dreaming. Turning his head slightly, he murmured her name once and rolled over onto his belly, hugging the pillow.

A sweet pang shot through her at the sound of her name on his lips, and then her gaze was arrested by the beauty of his long, smooth back and shoulders, his thighs and buttocks, all so perfectly proportioned and firm.

Then she saw it. Blackly insidious, like a spider perpetually extending its long legs to gather in its prey, the Mark covered the flesh of his left forearm, marring his perfection. She hadn't known he'd actually taken it, only wondered at the possibility when he hadn't returned to school.

Sudden fear and then anger joining her shock and confusion, she reached out and touched him. He awoke with a start and froze when he saw her staring directly into his eyes.

"Malfoy! It was you all along. *You. WHY?*"

The momentary cloudiness in his eyes was gone as he sat bolt upright in the bed, instinctively reaching for her but then pulling back, looking almost frightened.

Exhaling sharply, he covered his eyes and then slid his fingers agitatedly through his hair. "Hermione, I'm so sorry! You've got to listen to me. I can explain."

"Explain then." She draped the coverlet over herself and waited expectantly, not caring that he was left exposed and had started to shiver involuntarily.

He glanced down at his arm and then back at her, trying to read her expression. It remained guarded. He took a breath. "I...I took the Mark when I was seventeen, the summer after sixth year. I was forced to. I didn't want it. But I couldn't get away. I had to do... things..."...he shuddered at the memory..."that I did not want to do, things that sickened me even to imagine, much less carry out, and yet I did them. Until I couldn't do them anymore. I had a... a... breakdown. There was a very long period I don't remember at all now. It started after they killed my mother. They killed her, did you know?" He looked at her suddenly, searching her eyes. "I was completely useless. I expect... I expect the Dark Lord finally realised I was no longer good for much of anything. He said I was beneath contempt, not worth anybody's tears, that nobody would even miss me if I dropped off the face of the earth...and then he left me here to rot. Alone. And cursed to be alone forever. He actually laughed and said that if ever somebody did care, the curse would be broken, but that nobody ever would. Even my father is dead now. Not that *he* cared."

She hadn't known that and wondered when it had actually happened. "Go on," she said evenly.

He drew a deep breath, expelling it in a ragged sigh. "I've been so lonely, Hermione. You cannot imagine how lonely."

Her heart twisted, hearing this, but she resolutely pushed the feeling away, hardening herself.

"For some reason, I began to see you in my thoughts and in my dreams at night. I don't know why. You haunted me. To be honest, I think I've always..." He turned away, colouring slightly. "Always wanted you, always felt drawn to you. For years, really. Though I never admitted it, even to myself. And suddenly... I don't know, suddenly I had the idea that just maybe you might be the one person who could save me. That seeing you, being with you, could make things right somehow. I know it was crazy. It was the illness talking. I know that now. But you were always so strong, so sure of what you believed, so loyal to those you cared about. Even when you really got under my skin, I had to admire that. And then I had this mad idea..."

"*To kidnap my parents?*" She threw it back at him, her voice shrill.

He flinched at the raw fury in her words. "I never did it! I wouldn't have done, ever! I just... I just wanted you to think they'd been kidnapped and brought here by my father. I had to find a way to get you here. You would never have come otherwise."

She nodded. That was true enough. Then a fresh wave of anger brought the bile back into her throat. "But what did you expect would happen? What did you plan to do with me, keep me here against my will forever? And what about my parents? Where are they? And how did you get *this*?" She pulled her mother's wedding ring off her middle finger.

"Your parents are fine. They are at home where they belong, unharmed. I had the ring stolen. It was a simple enough thing. I don't know what I planned to do with you. I didn't think that far ahead. I didn't think much at all, I suppose. I just knew that I wanted you here. I thought... I thought if only you were here and could get to know me for myself...not the Draco Malfoy you *thought* you knew...I hoped that maybe you could... you know... learn to love me just a little." He turned away, swallowing hard. "I'd always planned on telling you. Just not this soon. I wanted more time with you. I was afraid you'd run away if you knew. I thought... if I had just a little more time..."

"That's why you never showed yourself, why you blinded me." She shook her head, incredulous at all that had happened.

"Yes."

"You lied. And kept lying. Knowing...you *must* have known!...that I really *had* come to care for you."

"Yes." He hung his head, unable to meet her gaze. "I hoped you had, anyway."

"You haven't changed." Her throat constricted painfully as she gritted out the words. "You're still the same. I cannot trust you. You lie. The ends have always justified the means for you. I could never love somebody so unscrupulous, someone who is such a *liar!*" She choked out the last word as tears of rage and pain welled up, spilling out even as she tried furiously to wipe them away. "I have to go. I just have to go!" Turning abruptly away, she ignored his desperate, anguished apologies and stooped to find

the dress she'd worn the night before.

Pulling it over her head haphazardly, she snatched up her underthings and ran straight back to her bedchamber, stuffing the few items she'd brought with her back into her bag. It had all been a sham, a horrible, cruel lie. She had been kept a prisoner against her will under completely false pretenses. And such selfish ones! He had been using her and lying to her the entire time. She could no longer believe or trust what she had thought were his feelings for her any more than she could tolerate her own for him. She could not begin to make sense of any of it and did not want to try. All she wanted was to be gone.

Finally, she changed into the clothes she'd arrived in and then, standing in the centre of the bedchamber, bag in hand, took one last look around the room that had been home to her for the past four months. Her gaze fell on the dressing table where all the little gifts he'd given her stood in a cluster: the book of fairy tales, the pots of roses all blooming brilliantly in the morning sunshine, a comb and brush of ebony inlaid with mother-of-pearl, a delicate bracelet of small, white shells, the carved wood box with the beautiful polished stones, and finally, the empty velvet jewel box. Her hand flew to her chest and cupped the rose quartz heart that lay against her skin. She looked at it. The red spot in the centre throbbed insistently. Fresh tears of shock and betrayal blinding her, she slipped it slowly over her head and back into its box. After a moment's hesitation, she dropped the box into her pocket. Grabbing her bag, she Apparated home, her own heart shattered.

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Life went on. Her parents tried in vain to find out what had actually happened to her. They'd been frantic with worry and fear, assuming the worst. But she stubbornly refused to tell them. Others who wondered where she had been were placated with a lie about a sudden illness for which she had been sent abroad.

The war had come to an untidy but ultimately victorious end in the time she'd been away. Voldemort had been vanquished, and Harry still lived. The wizarding world was in the process of picking up the pieces and trying to affect a semblance of normalcy amidst the residual chaos. Slowly, very slowly, order was being reestablished. She found a job in whose work she could hide. Every morning when she awoke, before the reality of what had happened came crashing back into her consciousness, when she was still in that half-sleep twilight between dreams and awareness, she saw his face, his haunted grey eyes large and storm-dark against his pale skin.

Each morning, she looked at the stone heart resting in its velvet box. Inexplicably, this remained a comforting ritual. Somehow, seeing that red spot pulsing reassured her and made it possible to put the necklace away again until the following morning.

Three weeks passed quietly. A certain lassitude settled over her daily life, a lethargic calm that settled in and dulled all the edges. She expected no more nor did she seek it.

One morning, her alarm clock failed to go off, and she awoke to discover she was terribly late. Swearing, she leapt out of bed and ran to get dressed. She did not check the rose quartz that day. It lay forgotten in its small box.

Nine days passed. Each day, the stone heart receded further into memory. Twice, she thought fleetingly of it and then firmly pushed the thought as far away as she could, quite deliberately not thinking about what it had meant to her...what *he* had meant.

On the morning of the tenth day, she awoke with a sense of ill-defined dread. Apprehensively, she moved to the jewel box and drew out the necklace. Its stone lay ice-cold in her palm, drained of all colour and empty. Sick with fear, fingers closing tightly over it, she shut her eyes, suddenly guessing the truth. Somehow it had been enchanted to hold a tiny piece of his heart. And now that was utterly gone.

She had to go back.

Hurriedly, she slipped the necklace over her head, clutching the chilled stone tightly, and squeezed her eyes shut. Opening them moments later, she found herself back in her own familiar bedchamber at the Manor. All was as she had left it, with one exception. The roses had died and were slumped over pathetically in their brightly coloured pots, their dried petals scattered on the dresser beneath.

Her heart lodged in her throat as she ran down the long corridors, past all the familiar doors, to the north wing. Bursting into his bedroom, she was horrified to discover it empty. The room was a shambles, and there were books and papers and broken crockery everywhere. The mirror on the wall had been shattered. Shards of jagged glass littered the floor.

She turned and ran wildly this way and that, not sure where to turn next. And then suddenly...suddenly, she knew.

Throwing open the huge double doors, she burst into the library, scanning the darkened room. The drapes had been drawn nearly all the way, and a fire burned low in the grate of the cavernous hearth. In the dimness, she almost missed his still form slumped over in the chair facing the fire. A small, brown bottle lay empty on the floor.

"Draco! Draco!" she screamed, grabbing his hands and horrified to find that they were as ice-cold as the stone that lay against her chest. "Oh gods, please! Wake up! Wake UP!"

Frantically she chafed his hands and then grabbed his face. He slumped forward into her arms, unconscious. She laid him down on the floor, ripping open his shirt and putting her cheek against his bare chest. It was warm, even though his hands were so terribly cold. His heart was beating, she could hear it, but it was thready, and even in that dim light, she could see that his skin had an unnatural, waxy pallor. There were dark smudges beneath his eyes, telling their own story of sleepless nights full of despair and too many to count.

"What have you *done*?" she shrieked, and then she remembered the small bottle on the floor.

Reaching around, she grabbed it and sniffed at the opening. Draught of the Living Death. She was certain. It could be nothing else. The smell was unmistakable. Draco had always been exceptionally good at potions-making. He could have made it easily enough, altering the ingredients just a bit... just a small change to the ratio of asphodel to wormwood...

She could save him...*she could do this*...but did she have time? Suddenly all she wanted in the world was a brief parcel of time, five precious minutes. That's all she would need.

"Draco, hang on! Please don't die! I'm coming back!" she whispered and kissed his forehead, already chilled and clammy. Squeezing her eyes shut, she Apparated back to her flat, taking off at a dead run for the hall closet, where she kept a box of emergency supplies.

"Come on, come on!" she muttered to herself, her fingers feeling like all thumbs as she pored through the contents of the box, searching, searching. Finally...the small vial of bezoars! Pocketing it, she sucked in a deep breath and Apparated back to the Manor library where Draco lay by the hearth, grey-faced and barely breathing, the fire down to mere coals pulsing in the grate.

Shoving a sofa pillow under his head to raise it, she straddled his legs and slipped the bezoar into his mouth, clamping it shut and then massaging his throat to force a swallow. "Please, please," she whispered desperately, tears slipping down her cheeks. "Don't die! I haven't had a chance to..."

Suddenly, he gave a convulsive, little gulp. Almost instantly, faint colour began to return to his face; two small spots of pink burned high on his pale cheeks. Slowly, he opened his eyes. They were unnaturally bright, feverish-looking. She gazed down at him, relief wrenching open the floodgates so that now she wept unashamedly.

Glassy-eyed, he stared at her in hazy disbelief. "Hermione... you came back," he said hoarsely, his throat raw from the poison as well as the antidote he'd just swallowed. "Why?"

She nodded, hiccoughing, unable to speak, finally taking a breath to steady herself. "I had to. I... I was wrong. I must have hurt you at least as much as you hurt me...maybe more, in a way. I was angry and hurt that you had lied. But you were honest when you could easily have lied again to keep me from finding out the rest of it.

You betrayed my trust, but I betrayed yours as well. You... you told me things that took a lot of courage to confess, and still, I judged you unfairly. You gave me so much!"

Her throat closed, and she swallowed painfully, almost unable to continue. When she did, it was in a near-whisper.

"You gave me *yourself*. And I... I ran away. I condemned you based on who you once were, instead of who you have become. I couldn't see that. I couldn't see past what you used to be... past the Mark. But that's not really who you are, is it? Not anymore. I know that now. The man I've come to know these last months is somebody else. Somebody I..."

She looked down at her hands, embarrassment flooding her face with a hot blush as she realised what she'd been about to say. Rubbing roughly at her eyes, she tried to stop the tears that were coming again. Her pride would not let her show him her pain. What if he no longer wanted her?

When the silence became too much to bear, though, she slanted a quick look at him.

He had raised himself up on one elbow and was regarding her thoughtfully. And then he reached out to the stone heart, now suffused with a rosy brilliance, gently threading his fingers through the silver chain around her neck and drawing her closer.

"Somebody you...?" he whispered, smiling against her mouth, and then his lips, no longer cold and pale, pressed tenderly into hers.

Slowly, he drew her down beside him on the cold floor and held her close, never breaking the kiss. She could feel his heart beating. Or it might have been her own banging madly in her chest. She couldn't be sure.

Finally, she curled against him, her head under his chin. One of his hands buried itself in her hair while the other traced light circles on her back. She pressed kisses to his skin wherever she could reach, breathing him in.

She was suddenly so *glad*. While she couldn't have put it into words, exactly, she had the feeling that a balance had been righted, that she was precisely where she was meant to be.

He was so tired. She could feel it. But beyond the exhaustion, there was joy. It was shining in his eyes.

"I love you so much, Hermione. You came back!" He sighed, elated. "You came back..."

"I did. And I'm not going anywhere. I love you too, you know." She lifted her head to kiss him again, smiling shyly. "Draco." She found herself liking the way his name sounded on her lips.

He smiled back sleepily. "Tell me again. Please. I've waited so long to hear you say it."

She nestled against him, murmuring words of love, and they lay there together contentedly as the shafts of pale, early-morning light that found their way past the heavy drapes deepened into the pure gold of mid-morning. Outside the tall library windows, the garden glowed with the vitality and colour of the life burgeoning within it.

Lying there, Hermione gazed at the many books that lined the walls, all of them keepers of knowledge, fanciful imaginings, endless journeys and possibilities. And then she turned to the man in whose arms she sheltered, the man with whom her greatest journey was only just beginning. His eyes were shut, and he seemed to be dreaming. Snuggling closer, she dropped a kiss on his smiling mouth. His grey eyes opened, warming her, and he wrapped her more securely in his embrace.

She was home.

Fin

A/N: Perhaps you may have recognised the fairy tale that inspired this story: "Beauty and the Beast." Additional inspiration came from a closely related Greek myth, "Cupid and Psyche." I recommend reading both. They're wonderful!

Thanks and hugs to my lovely and brilliant betas, kazfeist and floorcoaster. Karen and Laura, what would I do without you?

Disclaimer: All proper credit to JKR as well as old fairy tales and myths, all of which inspire me! I make no money from this story.

Here are front and back photos of the enchanted rose quartz necklace that Draco gives Hermione.



It can be found at:

[Rose Quartz Pendant](#)

Another photo of rose quartz stones, which shows just how variegated the colours can actually be. Rose quartz is a heart chakra stone and aids in healing.



"Rose quartz is a crystal with a variety of metaphysical uses. It can make negative experiences or influences less harmful while strengthening the positive ones. It has a sympathetic nature and attunes itself quickly to the emotional needs of whoever possesses it. This stone amplifies love, helping us realize that all change is important. Good for going within so that we can accept situations that would normally be painful. Its ability to enhance love in ourselves and others makes it a good choice for most people and it is one of the best all around stones for a new age."

[Rose Quartz](#)

"Dust" by Rupert Brooke is one of my very favourite poems. It's incredibly poignant and transcendently beautiful, and I've been saving it, hoping for a chance to use it in a story. To me, in this context, it's a perfect expression of Draco's deepest longings. I've included a link to a site where you can hear a little bit of what Danny Kirwan of Fleetwood Mac did with the first two stanzas of the poem, when he wrote a hauntingly lovely song based around them for the album "Bare Trees."

[Fleetwood Mac](#)