

The Price of Need

by kizzy7

How far is Hermione willing to go to save her husband?

one-shot

Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N I wrote this for anonymous_plume, who requested scary SS/HG. A little pre-Halloween fright fest, if you will. Thanks to the ever-lovely TPP admins and to Nom for the prompt!

Hermione hurried across the uneven cobblestones of Knockturn Alley, pulling her scarf tightly round her face. The cold, angry wind and several unwanted, lecherous stares demanded she be somewhat anonymous today.

Never had she really explored here before. Harry had his tales, of course, and Severus went two times a month to purchase the more malicious potion's ingredients.

Severus.

Her heart hammered uncomfortably. She clutched her pounding chest with an old, wrinkled hand, pausing by a flickering lamppost to catch her breath.

She needed to find it.

She would do anything.

The Elixir of Eternal Life was believed to be a myth...yes, even Severus, his voice weak and unsteady, had told her so, told her just let him go in peace. But she couldn't. Hermione loved her husband beyond all reason, and he would *not* die, not yet. Not for years and years, well after she herself passed.

Again, she stopped to catch her breath, leaning against a rough expanse of brick as the wind whipped her hair into her eyes, her mouth. Surely somewhere, a book or perhaps a list of ingredients... Anything. *Please, please. I can't lose him...*

Hermione squeezed her eyelids shut, forcing gathered tears to trail down her cheeks. But then...

There. That shop, there.

The windows were boarded up, rusted nails hanging haphazardly from rotting wood planks. Peeling black paint, greyed with age, spottily covered the heavy door, and a corroded brass doorknocker...the shape of a lion's head, mouth gaping with teeth...beckoned her forward. Hermione took one tentative step towards the shop, a shop of which she had neither seen nor heard.

Details bloomed into life the closer she ventured. The windows were not boarded...how silly of her to imagine that. Only shuttered. The paint wasn't peeling, but newly

coated; she could almost smell the tang of paint in the air. A sign now wavered before her disbelieving eyes. *Heart's Desire*, read the placard in swirled, elegant script.

Beneath the title, *We have what you need*.

"What I need!" Hermione said aloud, glancing nervously down the street. But this corner of Knockturn Alley appeared to be deserted, just her, the wind, the rustling leaves, and this pulsating sign.

What you need... what you need... It flashed over and over in bright, yellow light, like a Muggle advert.

Smaller text still read, *Satisfying customers since the Beginning of Time*.

"Please have what I need," Hermione prayed before reaching forth her shaking fingers and curling them around the lion's head. It moved and shuddered in her grasp, and then the door opened.

Inside, the shop was dark, inky black. Only the flashing sign from outdoors provided any light, pulsing flashes of sickly yellow that momentarily illuminated rows and rows of dusty bookshelves, cobwebs and fat, red-eyed spiders. A stuffed, long-winged crow, its glassy eyes staring at Hermione.

The eleven inches of supple vinewood beneath her robes reassured Hermione as she treaded across the carpeted floor. "Hello?" she called, her voice hitching in her throat. "Is anybody here?"

"Can I help you, madam?" came a voice, a voice that sounded to Hermione like crackling flame and shadows in the night. She jumped, losing all pretence of bravery and pointing her wand ahead of her.

"Who's there?" she asked, skimming her widened eyes across the small store.

In the corner materialised a man, tall and gaunt. "Forgive me," he said smoothly, "for I detest the light. But for customers, of course..." A single oil lamp near Hermione sputtered to life.

The man tapped his pale fingers against a cracked pane of glass. Hermione studied him...high, curved cheekbones, bloodless lips, black eyes that reflected the gathered light in tiny pinpoints of red. His hair was slicked back across his head, revealing a wide forehead and tiny, pointed ears. He was dressed in black suit...all black but for the crimson red of his bowtie. Rocking on the heels of his feet, he grinned a cheerless grin at her regard.

"What can I help you with today, Mrs. Snape?" he said in his creepy, insinuating voice.

Hermione shivered. "How did you know my name?"

Another smile that did not touch his eyes. "I make it my business to know my customers. Now tell me... what do you need?"

Though her heart was still pounding fiercely and the palms of her hands were clammy with irrational terror, Hermione sheathed her wand and stepped forward. She wondered if she was perhaps speaking with a vampire, but if he knew of a way to save Severus, she would do whatever he asked.

"My husband," she began, "is... d-dying. The Healers say there is nothing they can do. Just old age, they say." Another few steps closer to the man, and she placed a withered, entreating hand against his chest. "Please help me!"

He laced his fingers together behind his back, regarding her clenched fist with his steady, black-red eyes. Hermione recoiled, withdrawing her hand and mumbling apologies whilst she thought, *My God, no heartbeat, no heartbeat beneath my palm*.

Nodding, the man moved behind a glass counter, picking up and discarding corked bottles of moving liquid. "And you desire him to live?"

"Yes!" she cried. "Yes, I want for us a long life ahead."

Bottle after bottle until finally he stopped, bringing a clear, twisted flask up to his nose and sniffing delicately. The liquid inside was green, dark green tinged with black, and it curled and curled inside the glass. "Enough for two," the man declared, smiling a toothy smile at Hermione, his small, perfect teeth clenched together.

"How... how much is it?" she asked.

"Oh, a heavy price indeed, Mrs. Snape. Heavy indeed."

Hermione reached for her handbag, fumbling through the pockets for her Galleons. "I will empty my account at Gringotts, if necessary," she said.

He chuckled, a deep, throaty sound that sounded like a wounded, dying animal. "Not a monetary price, Mrs. Snape."

She paused in her rummaging, confused. "Then...?"

The man shrugged his shoulders, again tapping long, sharpened fingernails against the glass countertop. "Not even I know that. Not yet. But you must be willing to pay the price, when I come to collect."

Extending her arm, Hermione snatched the bottle from his hand. "I will," she said, meaning every word she spoke to the depths of her very being, "pay you anything for my husband's life."

"Then enjoy," he said, gesturing in one, fluid motion towards the door. "I wish you both a long and happy life."

Sunday, she tipped the fluid down Severus' throat. He was no longer conscious...he lay as if already dead, his long, white hair fanning out across the pillows of their bed. She forced the potion down his oesophagus, massaging his neck still scarred from Nagini and crying fresh tears onto the bedspread.

"Please work," she whispered before draining the rest of the liquid herself.

Monday, Severus woke and touched her cheek, his eyes bright with recognition.

Tuesday, he was out of bed, eating and reading by the fire. Their daughter...the Transfiguration professor at Hogwarts...came home and cried on his shoulder as the flames died into embers. That night, he kissed Hermione, and they stayed up all night, talking and laughing and debating. It felt... it felt like the beginning again.

Wednesday, they made love for hours on the thick rug by their hearth, and Severus whispered, "I love you, Hermione," in ragged gasps as he came.

Thursday, Hermione glanced in the mirror and cried out with shock. Her hair...grey for years now, for years...was brown. Brown and curly and crazy. She laughed with her husband as they stood staring before the speechless mirror, marvelling at their smooth, youthful skin and their eyes bright with life.

The next week, Hermione whistled cheerily in the kitchen, dancing on her feet from the refrigerator to the counter, chopping bright peppers for tonight's dinner. Severus popped the cork off a bottle of wine, pouring liberal amounts into two stemmed glasses.

"Do you remember the first time I fucked you, Miss Granger?" he whispered into her ear, placing two hands on her arse.

"Severus!" she said, blushing.

"Yes... It went something like this, I believe?" He pushed his erection into her bum, and she wriggled against him.

He nibbled at her earlobe, trailing his hands up her waist, and...

An urgent tapping at the window interrupted him. Severus swore under his breath, tickling her ribcage before going to let in the owl. "This better be important," he said, grinning cheekily.

Hermione returned to cutting peppers, throwing the slices into a large pan on the stovetop. She couldn't look at Severus, didn't want to know what news the owl brought. Her husband had never asked her about his miraculous recovery, and she had never volunteered the information. But still, every knock on the door and every tap on the window filled her with cold dread that trickled slowly through her stomach, as if she had swallowed a cube of ice. Always worried that he would come at last to collect...

"Hermione," Severus said, sounding faraway. "Wh-what... It says we need to go to St. Mungos immediately. Hermione... it's Althea. Our daughter, Hermione. Our daughter."

"No," she replied resolutely, still chopping peppers. "No."

Severus grasped her fingers. His skin was cold. "Our daughter," he repeated, his voice cracking and his face crumbling.

"Lavender, Lavender, *let us in there!* It's our daughter in there. It's Althea!" Hermione flailed against Lavender's chest, her voice edged with hysteria.

"Hermione, I will. I just have to inform you and Professor Snape about... about her condition."

"No!" Hermione cried. "She's too young; she doesn't have a condition. I just saw her a week ago. She was fine, fine."

Severus stood stonily at her side. "Mrs. Weasley, be so kind as to inform us what the *fuck* is wrong with our daughter."

Lavender inhaled shakily, twining her long, white hair around her ear. "I've... never seen anything like it. Althea is young... just forty-five?"

Hermione nodded, clutching the Healer's arm until Lavender fidgeted uncomfortably.

"Well," she continued. "I'm sorry, Hermione. Severus. So, so sorry. It appears she is... dying. There is nothing more we can do. A day, maybe two."

Hermione swayed on her feet and would have fallen to the floor had it not been for Severus' arm around her waist.

"Dying of what exactly, Mrs. Weasley?" Severus demanded. "You forget that I am a Potions master. Perhaps there is something I can do..."

Lavender patted his shoulder. "It appears... and I don't understand it... she is dying of old age," she whispered. "She is not responding to any potion or spell. Of course you can try, Severus, but I do not want to get your hopes up. Her heart is giving out. I would... say your goodbyes. I am so sorry. If Ron and I can do anything, anything at all..."

"I would like to see my daughter now," was Severus' cold reply.

Lavender led them into the stark white room, closing the door and warding it to give them privacy. Althea was lying unconscious on the bed, her black hair now grey and thinned. Wrinkles marred her lovely skin, her chapped, roughened lips deeply embedded with painful cracks. Hermione stroked her daughter's arm, the flesh soft with age.

Severus pressed a kiss to Althea's forehead. "Is *this*," he said, trembling with unconcealed rage, "what you did to save me?"

By the lamppost again, but this time, just boarded windows, rusted doorknocker. No flickering sign, promising to provide what was most needed. Hermione pounded on the boards with her young fist.

"I know you're in there, you bastard!" she screamed. "Open this *fucking* door!"

Severus placed a hand on her shoulder. "Hermione... there is no one here. Hasn't been for a long time."

"No, Severus, this was the place." She turned towards the throng of people crowding Knockturn Alley, shrieking at them. "Where is the shop that was here?! 'Heart's Desire'? Where is he?!" Wizards and witches shot her worried glances, quickening their steps to hurry past her. "Please!" she cried. "There was a shop here!"

"There hasn't been a shop there since well before you were born," said an old woman crossing the street. "You're chasing after myths, my dear."

"Severus," she said, still pounding on the wood. "It was here."

Her husband sank on his knees to the cobblestoned ground, burying his head in his hands. "How am I supposed to forgive you, Hermione? You've killed her. You've *killed* her."

It was cool and dark where he lived. He didn't like the light.

Home.

It was always good to be home. He slithered out of his suit and his skin, scraping his clawed feet along the stone floor of his cave. Water dripped, dripped into a puddle, the only sound for miles.

Still, his black eyes reflected in pinpoints of red.

He found his chair in the dark, settling his scarred, hooked body into the comfort of the stretched human skin and chiselled bone.

A good week.

Yes, he thought, opening his toothy mouth and bellowing laughter. The sound, like children burning alive, sent spiders and bats and mice scurrying in mindless fear.

Another satisfied customer.
