

The Slings and Arrows of Outrageous Fortune

by Merry Grace

What happens when the blood of a witch and wizard mingles in the forging of a Life Debt? This story is written for the 50 Art of Words Challenge. A psychological dramedy, this story deals with mature themes.

To Be or Not To Be

Chapter 1 of 10

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To Be or Not To Be

Chapter 1

A harvest moon floated in the sky, illuminating the brilliant night. Even the stars seemed closer than usual. It was also very chilly, though everyone in Hogsmeade was asleep, wrapped in their warm blankets for the night.

Everyone except the man who made a determined, though erratic, path to the gates of Hogwarts.

"Another drink," he mumbled, lifting the half-empty bottle of Firewhiskey to his lips.

Flashes of light..

"No..."

Chunks of earth exploding..

"Fuck," he muttered.

Snake shooting at his neck..

"Come on, you shtupid liquor!" the man yelled, upending the bottle into his esophagus. After rising from his fall, a natural consequence of swallowing seven ounces of Firewhiskey at once, the man resumed his bourn to the looming castle.

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A hissing from the wall sconce's flame in the library wakened a grateful Hermione Granger from her uneasy slumber. Sleep was not something Hermione enjoyed anymore.

She assumed there was something about epic battles, blood, and death, which did that to a person.

As she stretched out her creaky joints, Hermione bit her lip to keep from crying out. The Cruciatus, she feared, had left her nervous system damaged beyond repair. Now her joints felt like that of an eighty-year-old witch, and it didn't help that –

She shook her head. Now was not the time to think of that. Sometimes she wondered when it would be the time, but that thought just made her crazier.

Sighing shakily, she put her head in her hands as she scooted to the edge of the armchair. Her parents had taught her their Muggle deep-breathing exercises. Perhaps she should utilise those now.

"AGH!"

Hermione's head shot up, a twinge of pain running the entire length of her spine as she did so. Who was that? It was a man's voice. Drawing her wand from the pocket of her denims, she slipped off her shoes quietly and trod, sock-footed, along the bookshelves, making as little noise as possible.

As she drew closer to the main entrance, she heard mumbling. She paused. Drunk mumbling. She paused again. Cursing, drunk mumbling.

"Fuckin' Albus Dumbledore... bloody Machiavell... damn you... makin'... me... Lily... fuckin' 'Arry Potter... Bloody..."

There was no denying it. Even smashed to the gills, there was no mistaking the dulcet tones of Severus Snape.

Wasn't he supposed to still be at St. Mungo's?

Feeling her heart speed up, Hermione stepped quietly out into the open, approaching her... Was he still her professor? She lowered her wand.

He was standing in front of Madam Pince's desk, shuffling papers around with the palm of one hand and holding a bottle of Firewhiskey in his other. Hermione, without drawing her wand again, tightened her grip on it. Why would Professor Snape be wearing Muggle clothes? He was supposed to still be in hospital. Why, instead, was he pissed out of his head in the Hogwarts library?

She came up behind him, giving a good ten feet of space between them. "P-Professor?"

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It would have to be that bushy-headed altruist who found him. It couldn't be Poppy or Minerva or someone who might actually do something useful or who could be reasoned with to let him finish himself off.

"Miss Granger," he said, grandly, then stumbled.

"Professor, I think perhaps we had better—"

"You think too much," he snapped. "If you would be so good as to allow me to finish my sentensh... my sentence... it's possible we shall get on rather better."

There was a pause, while he concentrated on not swaying.

"Professor?"

"Always interrupting," he snapped again. "Now if you'll excuse me, I intend to enjoy the remainder of my drunkenness alone," he snarled.

Unfortunately for the former professor of Hogwarts, there was a table situated rather inconveniently in his way, which, if the library hadn't been so dark, or perhaps if he just hadn't been so drunk, he would have noticed. The library was dark, however, and he was quite drunk and consequently fell into Hermione, who grabbed his emaciated biceps and gasped as they careened into the many chairs and tables in their way.

Severus' brain exploded.

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Hermione's brain exploded.

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Everything was fuzzy... he couldn't tell what was going on. Nagini had just bitten him, of that he was certain. The numbing effects of the poison would soon fade and leave him in excruciating agony, of that he was also certain. Lily... no, Harry. Lily! No... Hermione. Pain... pain... pain, *pain, pain, PAIN!*

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Hermione was thrown back as if it were happening again. The memories, the battle, Harry dead, then alive... going back to find Snape, feeling his pulse, panicking, attempting to suck the venom from his neck, spitting it out, feeling the vial in his coat pocket, pouring it down his throat. She had called for help; then, as exhausted as if she hadn't slept her whole life, she lay down next to her most hated professor and let a few warm tears trickle down her dirty face.

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Severus was suddenly completely sober.

"Damn," he muttered. "What the deuce, girl? Let go of me."

"Sorry," she whispered, releasing her death grip and rubbing her temples. "What was that?"

Wandering back to where he had dropped his bottle of Firewhiskey, he asked sourly, "What was what?"

Sounding irritated, Hermione rejoined, "You know bloody well what. Come to think on it, why are you out of hospital? And wearing Muggle clothes, no less?"

"Why are *you* out of hospital and wearing Muggle clothes?"

"Because I'm – I asked you first!"

He sighed heavily. He no longer had the energy to be irritated. He just wanted to go to his chambers and sleep, if he could.

"I exited St. Mungo's without the Healer's written consent, and I am wearing Muggle clothes because they were the first ones I found."

"But you have to go back, you..."

"I have to do nothing of the sort," he snapped. He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Miss Granger, I am rather tired. As it seems my plan of drinking myself into oblivion has

been foiled, my next recourse shall be a Sleeping Draught. I would suggest you do the same. Good evening, Miss Granger."

"But Sn – Professor..."

Sighing, he turned back. "Yes?"

"Did – didn't they tell you what happened?"

He debated lying. "Yes, they did. Good night."

That Is The Question

Chapter 2 of 10

In which we find out what was told to Hermione and Severus in St. Mungo's.

That Is The Question

Chapter 2

"Hermione? What's the matter, dear?" A very sleepy Madam Pomfrey held her lit wand to illumine Hermione's face.

"I'm sorry, madam, I wouldn't have disturbed you, but... but..."

After watching Hermione shuffle her feet, cross and uncross her arms, and look everywhere but at Poppy's face, Poppy finally reached out an arm to put around Hermione's shoulders and ushered her into her chambers.

After lighting the room, Poppy gently pushed the distressed young witch onto a thickly-cushioned claw-footed chair and set about making tea in her own little kitchen, waiting for Hermione to begin.

"I was in the library," Hermione began as she slowly started to lose the tension which had been gripping her, "I was in the library and - well... I heard someone, and it turned out to be Professor Snape and... well, I'm not going to deceive you, he was totally pissing drunk."

The vulgar euphemism seemed to exorcise the rest of the constraint in Hermione. She slumped in the chair and sighed, exhausted.

"I have absolutely no idea what he's doing here," she said. Poppy handed her a cup of tea. She cupped her hands around its warmth as she continued unraveling her confusion and worry. "I know for a fact he's still supposed to be in St. Mungo's because I talked to the Healers before they discharged me, and they said it would be a long while before he was up and about again."

"Severus is still in the castle, then?" Poppy asked, her brows creased.

"Yes, he said he was going to bed."

"Good, then, we needn't worry about him again until morning," she said dismissively and sipped her tea. "Go on, dear."

"Well... I'm not really sure what else there is to say." She paused. Poppy waited. "I don't know, I mean I'm obviously worried about him... physically... but...well you know that I... that I..."

"Saved his life?"

Hermione exhaled gratefully. "Well, yes. There's that and also...there's also another matter... which... which... well, it's quite delicate, you could say..."

"Hermione," Poppy said firmly, looking her in the eyes, "you have assisted me wonderfully in the past few weeks, with St. Mungo's overflowing with patients and the extra ones they've sent here... well, it's been a nightmare. However, you have handled the stress with the maturity and grace of someone much older than yourself. I have learnt to trust you a great deal. I hope you have learned to trust me as well. If you should choose to place your confidence in me with regard to anything, I promise that trust shan't be misplaced."

Hermione smiled mistily, attempting to cover her sentiment by taking a sip of Poppy's spice tea.

"Thank you." She paused. "After Harry and Ron and I found out that Snape I mean, Professor Sna-"

"That's quite all right, dear."

Hermione giggled. "When we found out that he had been a double agent against Voldemort all that time... and that... well, that he..."

"That he loves Harry's mother?"

Hermione gaped. "You knew?"

"I know many things about Severus," said Poppy as she sipped her tea.

Hermione shook her head, assimilating the new information. "Yes... as I was saying, when we found out... well, to be quite frank, it shook a world that was already shaking violently. I felt horribly guilty for thinking so badly of him all those years and I didn't know what to do... All I knew was that a man who... who had... done that... mustn't... ought not ...to... to die like that! It was...it was terribly, fiercely wrong!" She attempted to still her shaking and wiped her face with her sleeve. Poppy moved to the chair beside her, taking her hand.

Hermione continued. "When I found the vial, I was so... so relieved that... I felt suddenly so tired that I... I must have blacked out, because the next thing I remember was waking up in St. Mungo's..."

Poppy got up, replaced her own cup in the kitchen and refilled Hermione's with the soothing spice tea. Sitting down again, she peered into Hermione's face as she took a

long, slurping sip.

"The... Healer told me... after I woke up... I remember he had the strangest look on his face... Well, it was a million to one shot that it could have happened. But it did. It did happen. In the process of... of saving his life, our blood mixed. I had quite a few wounds myself and, well, there you have it."

"Dear, Severus... he has not communicated a disease to you?"

"Oh, Lord, no! No, nothing quite so... Well, in short, the Healer said that it may be possible that we have created a... a Lifebond."

"A Lifebond?"

"I had never heard of it, either. That's what I was trying to find in the library tonight. Apparently, it's very rare. I'm hoping that that hasn't happened with... with Snape and me... but... but I think it has. Except it might not have, because how would I know what that would even feel like?"

"Do they have no magical tests for this sort of thing?" Poppy said indignantly.

"Well, according to the Healer, the last medical record of a Lifebond occurred in 1528." Poppy smiled as Hermione began to sound like herself again. "The mixing of blood and the actual moment of salvation have to occur roughly within 3.33 milliseconds of each other. In addition, there has to be some sort of communication between both subjects, in order for the bond between their respective magicks to arrive."

"Did the Healer say anything about the likelihood of the two of you having created a Lifebond?"

Hermione looked down at her tea. "He said that none of their testing apparatus could possibly show anything other than the fact that it appeared that the magical properties of both Snape's and my blood have altered... somewhat."

"Somewhat?"

"A bit."

"A bit?"

"Dramatically, was what he actually said," Hermione relayed in a small voice, apparently trying to shrink into her tea.

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"Well, Poppy? How may I assist you?" Severus Snape drawled.

"You may assist me by sitting down and eating precisely everything on this plate," replied the older woman, pushing him forward to the chair in her office.

"I have already partaken of breakfast," Severus said silkily, looking down at her underneath his heavy eyelids.

"Oh, you have in fact eaten?"

He glowered.

"We can have this silent debate of wills as long as you want, Severus."

Silently, he sat and slowly began to eat the eggs in front of him, clearly showing his distaste.

"It's true, Severus," Poppy said, going around to the other side of her desk. "Breakfast is not just coffee." She sniffed. "And it is certainly not brandy!"

"I had a headache," he said, blandly.

"Hm... I wonder why," she said, pursing her lips and raising her brows.

He smirked and slid his fork from between his lips smoothly.

"That's quite a trick," Poppy said, dryly. "Now, Severus, we have other matters to discuss."

He swallowed. "Such as?"

"Such as the matter of a brilliant young woman to whom you may or may not have recently contracted a Lifebond."

He choked.

"There are worse things, Severus."

He wiped his mouth and sneered. "Very true. I suppose I could have contracted a Lifebond to a Blast-ended Skrewt."

"Severus," Poppy said, sharply.

"Very well," he said, silkenly.

"Just so," she replied, primly. Getting to the point of their tête-à-tête, Poppy added, "The two of you must talk. Hermione!"

Hermione entered quietly.

"Please attempt to behave like an adult, Severus," Poppy said and exited.

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It was just like Poppy to leave him alone in what promised to be deucedly uncomfortable situation.

"Well, Miss Granger," Severus said, consciously taking Poppy's chair behind the desk, straightening the sleeve of the robes he had obtained from the house elves. "Are you also of the opinion we should discuss this tragedy which has befallen us?"

"Yes, sir," Hermione said bravely, consciously standing beside the desk. "I do."

"Very well, then."

Hermione fidgeted.

"Sometime this century, Miss Granger."

"Oh, you're quite busy, are you?" Hermione said tartly.

Severus glowered, biting back the urge to subtract points from Gryffindor. "Shall we spar, or shall we talk?" he inquired slowly.

"I believe talking might be a better use of our time," Hermione agreed. There was an uncomfortable pause. "Well, let's get right down to it, then." Hermione sighed. "The Healer said there was a dramatic change in the magical properties of our blood, but that's all they know. Have you felt anything different?"

"Not markedly," he said succinctly.

"Neither have I... at least... no, not markedly."

He ignored her hesitation. "I suggest we do our best to live without each other."

She blinked. "Oh... yes... Yes, why don't we do that?"

"The matter is settled, then." He stood and bowed. "Miss Granger."

Exiting the room, Hermione's sigh of relief reached Severus' ears. He smirked bitterly.

Whether 'Tis Nobler

Chapter 3 of 10

In which Hermione and Severus live without each other.

Whether 'Tis Nobler...

Chapter 3

1 year later

Hermione stood just outside the ivy laden brick wall, which served as a fence, and which, Hermione privately thought, indicated a serious subconscious need of self-defence.

She looked around at the vast expanse of unearthly green hills and wrapped her soft, grey wool sweater closer round her shoulders, pondering back at the events of the past year which had brought her to this place.

She had been relieved to hear Snape's surprisingly simple suggestion that they live without each other. It sounded easy enough. Why make things more difficult or complicated than they had to be?

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The 1st Quarter

Unfortunately, resuming her life had not been so easy. The Ministry was, quite frankly, in tatters. Kingsley Shacklebolt, the new Minister of Magic, had all he could handle to keep a lid on the budding insurrectionists who wanted to declare total anarchy. Cornelius Fudge and Rufus Scrimgeour had left quite a mess indeed, and Kingsley wanted the Golden Trio to be spokespeople for the Ministry, to inspire people to have another go at organised government. Seeing as they all felt a reasonable degree of trust in Kingsley's capacity to govern wizarding Britain, they agreed. It was an easy enough job go where Kingsley says, and always agree with him.

Hermione knew that Ron and Harry were grateful to be able to go more or less on auto-pilot for awhile. For awhile, she was as well. However, she soon began to worry. What was going to happen to her seventh year of schooling? Would the Ministry come up with another job for her after this one was over? Did she really want to work for the Ministry longer than she needed to? Did she want to go to university? Didn't she need to officially graduate Hogwarts to do that? Did she really want to go back to Hogwarts so soon? What did she want to do with the rest of her life, anyway?

These were all questions she pondered as she traveled with Ron and Harry all over Britain, making speeches, occasionally signing autographs, and always shoving the Lifebond to the back of her mind.

It crept up on her so slowly; she didn't notice it at first. Then she attributed it to the stress of always traveling. However, after three months of not being able to sleep without a glass of wine or a Sleeping Draught before bed, she began to wonder, but finally decided that she would wait awhile before making any decisions, abiding by her mother's old adage that it would either get better or it would get worse.

Unfortunately, it got worse. Hermione could barely sleep; when she did, it was from pure exhaustion, as she refused to become dependent on either wine or Sleeping Draughts. She felt constantly anxious, never at ease as if she were waiting for something important, like her NEWT results.

Part of her stress and anxiety she attributed to her worsening relationship with Ron. She felt as if what she thought of as their "normal" relationship got on fine that is, their regular friendly camaraderie they had always had; however, their romantic relationship was disintegrating daily.

Ron didn't want to talk. Hermione needed to talk.

She knew his reticence was because of the war. She knew he was recovering. She knew that he needed to be silent, to think. However, she needed to talk. She needed to relate. And, she privately thought, if their needs were so radically opposed, how could they work a real relationship?

Meanwhile, her ability to sleep was continually eroding, as her anxiety and stress were continually mounting. One morning after three more months, she woke up very sore. She couldn't remember doing anything particularly strenuous the day before, but she shrugged it off, stretched and waited for it to pass.

A week later, her achiness was not better, but worse, and she went to the nearest Healer. According to him, there was nothing wrong with her a good Sleeping Draught wouldn't cure. After that, she decided to try her parents' physician. That was a dead end, also. Determined to find a solution to her problem, she went back to the Healer and asked him to run all manner of tests.

When she went back to talk to the Healer about her results, she had a disturbingly striking sense of déjà vu: The look on Healer Applegate's face was identical to the look that had been on the face of the Healer who had told her she may have "developed a Lifebond."

"Well?" she asked, nervously.

Healer Applegate sat down slowly on the stool in front of her, his face working on a perplexed expression. After a long silence, he heaved a sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Well." He sighed again and said, "There simply isn't an easy way to put this, Miss Granger. It appears that the magical properties of your blood are changing."

"What!?" Hermione squawked. "That's impossible!"

"It certainly ought to be," agreed Healer Applegate. "Unfortunately, that's what's happening to you."

"But... but..." Hermione spluttered, "that... that... what do you mean, it's changing? Not 'changed'? Not 'might change'? It's changing?"

"Precisely," said the discombobulated Healer, pinching the bridge of his nose again.

"What do you mean, it's changing?!" Hermione demanded.

"Everybody has magical properties in their blood, which are rather similar to their DNA," explained the Healer. "They are unique to each person, just as each person's blood is also unique to them. Yours are, quite simply, changing. They do not appear to be changing into something else you're not going to become a centaur. They appear simply to be changing into... well, a different version of you."

Hermione breathed in and out, gripping the edge of her seat. "Does that mean... I'm going to change?" she whispered.

Healer Applegate pinched the bridge of his nose. "I don't know," he said, frankly.

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The 2nd Quarter

Hermione, infuriated with the dead ends to which her search for information in the wizarding world had led to, grimly determined to make use of a magic no wizard had ever before dared to attempt the Internet.

Her simple search for "lifebond" initiated 2,500 hits. She clicked on the Wikipedia link.

Lo and behold The Legend of the Lifebond.

What she found there did not please her.

Her next step, she knew, must be to tell Harry and Ron especially Ron. Unhappily, it was also the step she liked least.

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The 3rd Quarter

"A Lifebond? With Snape?" Ron cried, jumping up from his seat, his fists clenched. Harry looked too stunned to move.

Hermione sat very still. "Look, it's not like I chose to form a Lifebond with Snape of all people! I didn't want this to happen!"

"Well, you didn't have to..." Ron shoved a hand through his hair.

"I didn't have to what, Ronald? Save his life? Save a good, brave man from an agonizing death?"

"You know I didn't mean that," he muttered.

Hermione sighed. "I know. Look, I... I just wanted you both to be prepared for... for whatever happens."

"It'll be all right, Hermione," Harry said, putting his hand on her shoulder.

"Thanks, Harry." Hermione smiled gratefully.

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Final Quarter

"Well, dear, and what can I help you with?"

Hermione had finally bitten the proverbial bullet and gone to her last source of help Madam Pomfrey. They sat over cups of a very familiar spice tea by the window at the end of Poppy's sick ward. Hermione spread one hand over the smooth surface of the little oak table and said,

"Thank you for meeting with me. I wasn't sure what else to do."

Poppy waited.

"You see, I've been having health problems. Most of them are directly connected to lack of sleep..."

"Yes, I was going to ask you what in Merlin's name you were doing with yourself to have those shadows under your eyes," Poppy interrupted. "You've lost weight, too. Eat that scone, don't play with it."

"Thank you," Hermione said, dryly, but she ate the scone. "As I was saying, most of my health problems are connected directly to lack of sleep."

"Take a Sleeping Draught, dear."

"I tried that at first, and wine, but I was taking one or the other so often, and my ability to sleep wasn't getting any better, so I stopped. I didn't want to become dependent on them, you understand."

"Hmm... yes..." Poppy sipped her tea thoughtfully.

Hermione then went into the sordid details surrounding her information from Healer Applegate and from the Internet, expecting Poppy to gasp in horror, or at least show some sign of surprise, but contrary to expectation, Poppy simply sipped her tea, raised a brow every once in awhile, and listened.

Finally, as Hermione finished her narrative, Poppy set down her cup, sat back and said calmly, "Well, dear, it seems to me that your next step is clear."

"Please, tell me," Hermione said, her head now in her hands. "I have no idea what to do."

"It is quite apparent that you must find Severus."

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Hermione started from her reverie and flicked a blade of grass from the knee of her jeans.

After her conversation with Poppy, the latter had given her Severus Snape's current address. He was now residing in a smallish, brick house at the top of a very large hill in Doolin, County Clare, Ireland.

Having overcome every bit of pride in her soul, Hermione now stood at the back of the house, hesitating to approach the iron gate in the brick wall. She had knocked at the door for several minutes, without an answer and she was fairly certain if she didn't see this through today, she would lose her nerve.

Finally summoning another blaze of Gryffindor courage, Hermione unfolded her arms, marched up to the gate, and through it, saw Severus Snape... who was sitting in the midst of a beautifully landscaped rose garden.

In The Mind To Suffer

Chapter 4 of 10

In which Hermione and Severus discuss their situation further

...In the Mind to Suffer

Chapter 3 Part 2

Severus Snape sat in his elaborate rose garden and breathed. He concentrated on the oxygen going into his lungs and rushing back out. He focused on the smell of the petals wafting through the air. He pondered the feel of the breeze on his cheek.

This was his hideaway, a place where he could relax, find solace and above all it was a place about which nobody knew. If it were ever learned that Severus Snape needed and enjoyed his rose garden... he shuddered.

But everyone needed their own hideaway, their own private spot for relaxation and contemplation. He especially needed it nowadays.

It had not been a good year.

Not that, reflected Severus, many of the years which made up the sum total of his nearly forty, had been particularly good. He brushed off his thoughts of the past. Severus was not a man who enjoyed dwelling on past things.

He only liked to think of Lily.

It was both a treat and a punishment: the one he could not resist; the other he knew he deserved.

The year had been very quiet for Severus, and intentionally so. He ignored the owls from the Ministry, refusing to accept his status in society as war hero. He did not want accolades or parades; he certainly did not want to travel merrily along with the Golden Trio (just the thought of that ridiculous title produced a satisfying smirk), proclaiming the gospel of Kingsley Shacklebolt.

No, he had got his legal affairs taken care of as tidily as possible and had packed himself off to the hills of Ireland. There, he had started a small business as a private Potioneer, his credentials as one of the few Potions Masters in the western world enabling him to specialize only in the more complex, difficult, and therefore rare, potions, and to have few clients.

The rest of his time he spent reading, walking the hills and thinking.

He wasn't sure when it had happened; he rather thought it had been about three months after his short, though no less distasteful, conversation with Miss Granger. He had been in the midst of an extra counter-clockwise stir in the Wolfsbane when he realised he was stressed. He couldn't think why. Wolfsbane was a complicated Potion, but not so complicated he couldn't do it in his sleep. He was not overworked. He had nothing pressing.

Six months later, he thought about going to a Healer, but decided against it. He chose instead to rely on Occlumency until such time as greater need presented itself. Until then, he would resort to a nightcap before bed and, not being a stranger to pain or discomfort, would muscle through that which he could not ignore.

Another three months had brought him to today. There were potions he needed to begin, but the night before he had not been able to block the anxiety and stress; consequently, it had kept him up all night, in spite of the nightcap. Therefore, he sought refuge in his rose garden, breathing their soothing properties and resolutely emptying his mind, blocking the strain and tension which sought to beleaguer him.

"I'll be damned," he muttered, eyes closed, "if, after everything... I'm to be brought down by a girl."

"You... *prick*," said an astonished, disgusted voice. For one insane moment, Severus thought it was Lily's voice. Its oddly sweet and melodious tones at odds with the words it pronounced was quite typical of Lily, especially when she was talking to him. He whipped his head around, seven thousand emotions warring in him for primacy, as his orbs detected... Hermione Granger... who was standing behind the iron gate.

She whipped open the gate so that it bounced off the brick wall behind her and marched towards him.

"How dare you come here?!" Severus shouted, enraged at her intrusion into his sanctum. He rose wrathfully and stormed to meet her in the middle of his normally peaceful garden.

"No! You don't get to talk," Hermione said in a low voice, shaking her finger in his face. "First of all," she said, shaking, "I'm not a girl... anymore. I'll remind you," she blinked back a few tears, "I'm a war hero, just like yourself, who just so happened to save your bloody war-hero life."

Severus, though still intensely angry, blanched.

Hermione backed away, lowering her finger. "Yes... and... and... and... I'm a woman," she finished somewhat anti-climactically, turned on her heel and left.

Severus sat down again, attempting to calm himself. "Nicely handled," he muttered, smoothing his robes.

Suddenly, a jolt shot through his brain, then through his body. He must find her. And he must apologise.

"Damn."

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He had searched every pub, inn, and bed and breakfast in Doolin. Granted, there were precisely two pubs, one inn and one bed and breakfast in Doolin of the wizarding kind. He sighed, exiting the last pub, bitterly wondering what in Merlin's name he was supposed to do next. He frankly resented the fact he was chasing after a girl no, he thought resignedly, a woman - with whom he candidly did not wish to associate. However, he was compelled to apologise.

"Ah-ha," he said, stopping in his tracks, "of the wizarding kind..."

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The next day, he entered the second Muggle bed and breakfast on his list Dubhlinn House. Approaching the front desk, Severus said, "Pardon me. I am looking for a young woman. A Miss Hermione Granger." He hardly knew what to do with his hands. What was one meant to do with them, in Muggle clothes, anyway? He missed his voluminous robe. Finally, he settled for folding his arms and raising his chin, looking down at the clerk from under his eyelids.

"Is that her, sir?"

He turned round and saw Miss Granger, poised on the middle of the stair, bags in hand, looking as though she were thinking about going back up. Finally, she pursed her lips and exhaled grimly. Coming purposefully down the stairs, she said, "Wait one moment," as she passed him, then seemed to negotiate the minutiae of her departure with the clerk.

He stood by the stair and waited, stiff as a ramrod.

A few minutes later, Miss Granger turned round, looked him in the face and said, "Well. Let us talk then, shall we?" With that, she led the way out of the door.

He followed her at a sedate pace to a picnic table across the small, provincial road from Gus O'Connor's pub.

After Miss Granger had positioned her bags by the table, and settled down, she folded her hands and sighed, looking past Severus to the massive incline of land behind him. Severus sat sideways at the end of the bench, spine straight, as always one arm on the table, palm flat, as he turned his head slightly to examine the Muggles who milled in and out of the pub.

It was a damnably uncomfortable situation.

"Miss Granger..."

"Before you say anything," she interjected, "I must apologise. I completely lost my temper yesterday. I'm really not certain what came over me."

"You are a Gryffindor," Severus said helpfully.

Miss Granger bit back a laugh.

"Yes, well... I just wanted... to apologise."

"If you have quite finished," Severus said smoothly, "I also..." He became uncomfortable again. "I also must... beg your pardon. If nothing else, I do owe you my life. I ought to have exhibited a greater degree of respect than I did," he finished stiffly.

There was an uncomfortable pause. Finally, Severus said in a half-exasperated, half-amused tone, "I suppose we should discuss why you have come to Ireland, presumably simply to find me."

Now she looked uncomfortable.

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Hermione was frustrated. It was just like Snape to ask such an abrupt, jarring question without giving her any time to think or to regroup.

"I... well... I think I've been having symptoms."

"Symptoms?" Snape repeated, frowning.

Hermione told him all about her year. When she finished, he murmured, his brows knit together fiercely, "Yes... Very similar..."

"Similar to what?"

"To some... ah, 'symptoms' of my own. To a much greater degree, however."

Hermione put her head in her hands. "What are we going to do, sir?"

"I shall be fine," Snape said stiffly. "However, I do practise Occlumency." He paused, swallowed as though he were choking down a hairball and said, "How have you been?"

She didn't want to tell him. She didn't want to let him know how weak she was, especially not when he seemed fine, if a little tenser even than normally. What she did want was to run far away and pretend that no man such as Snape had ever existed.

On the other hand, something deep within her marrow compelled her to tell him. There was also the logical voice in her head which never slept, telling her that things weren't going to get better without Snape's help.

Finally, she said in the calmest voice possible, yet without meeting his eyes, "I can't take it much longer."

Startled at her unequivocal statement, Snape snapped his head to look at her penetratingly; she could feel his gaze upon her, but she couldn't meet it for more than a second.

There was another long, uncomfortable pause. Fortunately, Hermione was getting used to them.

Finally, Snape relaxed and stood up, turning to look at the hills behind him as the sun slowly sank in the sky. Turning his head over his shoulder, he asked, "Are you

certain?"

"Yes," Hermione said quietly. "If I go much longer without sleep and in this level of pain, I'll end up in St. Mungo's. I've already been to the Healer, and there was nothing he could do for me besides prescribing Sleeping Draughts. I don't..." she choked a bit, "I don't know what will happen."

Snape nodded, slowly. Then, seeming to resolve himself, he said in his usual silken but commanding manner, "You shall board with me for," he paused, knitting his brows in contemplation, "six months or so. If your condition remains the same, we shall know it is not the Lifebond. Otherwise... we must cross that bridge when we come to it."

Hermione couldn't decide if she felt more relieved or disappointed.

"Very well. I'll owl Kingsley, Ron and Harry immediately. And... thank you."

"Please don't consider it," Snape said shortly. "I owe you my life."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "'You're welcome' would have been sufficient."

Ignoring that, he picked up her bags and said, "Let us sort out this puzzle of our lives and see whether it is nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing, end them."

"You know *Shakespeare*?" Hermione demanded, bewilderedly following him down the road.

The Slings and Arrows of Outrageous Fortune

Chapter 5 of 10

In which Hermione and Severus discover the joys of living together

The Slings and Arrows of Outrageous Fortune

Hermione stood still, breathing in the countrified air of the Burrow, the sweet smell of grass and the smell of Molly Weasley's baking bread. Everything was so familiar here; the always slightly overgrown garden, the house bursting with life, the garden gnomes cackling at each other in the roses, the... Was Mr. Weasley milking a cow?

"It's Dad's newest Muggle obsession," Ron said, approaching Hermione's Apparition point. "The Amish. Apparently, they're like a Muggle cult or something."

Hermione laughed as Ron took her hand. "It's hardly a cult, Ron. It's just a different way of life, that's all."

"People choosing to live in the past? Sounds like a cult to me." Ron grimaced exaggeratedly, then laughed at the expression on Hermione's face. "I'm only kidding, 'Mione," he said, then as she slowly smiled, he kissed her mouth lingeringly.

Hermione could feel her heart slowly bruising, as she tried to concentrate on the feel of the sun on her head and Ron's warm mouth on hers. Nothing was going to be the same.

"Come on," Ron said. "Mum's trying out a new recipe."

As they walked hand in hand over the sun-drenched grass to the house, Ron asked, "So, what's the emergency? The owl you sent Harry and me sounded... well, it was short. That's fairly unusual."

"Yes." Hermione gave a short laugh. "Let's wait till after supper, shall we?"

Ron shrugged. "All right."

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"Hermione, Harry, we're so glad you two decided to join us," Mrs. Weasley said, hugging Hermione with one arm as she cleared her plate with the other.

"Of course," Hermione said faintly as Harry smiled through a mouthful of steak and mashed potatoes. Her headaches had been better since she'd talked to Snape, but she was still sore all over and almost couldn't stand even the affectionate, medium pressure Mrs. Weasley demonstrated.

"Come on, 'Mione," Ron said, standing up and reaching for her hand. Hermione took it, pausing for a moment, savoring the feel of his large hand covering her smaller one, storing it up in her memory...

As they entered Ron's old room, Harry and Hermione both stood in the doorway and looked around for a moment.

"Man..." Harry said.

"Yeah..." Hermione echoed his sentiment.

"It's been ages since we've all been in here, mate," Harry said, coming forward and plopping on Ron's bed. "Ah, home sweet home."

Ron laughed. "I know; tell me about it."

"So, Hermione," Harry said, "what's the trouble?"

Hermione gulped. "Promise me you won't kill me."

Ron and Harry exchanged a look. "We promise," they said in tandem.

"I'm sort of, uh... moving in with Snape."

The boys looked at Hermione, looked at each other and burst out laughing. "Ron... Harry!"

"I'm sorry," Harry choked, wiping the tears from his eyes. "I'm sorry, it's just that's the funniest thing you ever said!" With that, their laughter redoubled.

"Harry, Ron, I'm serious!" Hermione shouted.

The laughter died a tragic death.

"What?" Ron hissed, starting forward.

"Mate..." Harry said, frowning, laying a hand on Ron's shoulder.

"I don't have a choice," Hermione trembled, choking back a few tears. "You know I've been sick or something, whatever it's been, the last year." She paused. "I just couldn't take it anymore. I went to see Snape. He's been having some of the same symptoms. We decided to try this out, just for six months or so. We'll see what happens, but... I had to do something. I can't risk... whatever might happen if my health continues to deteriorate as it has done this year." She finished her ramble by plopping on the floor and bursting into tears.

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Later that night, after many more tears on Hermione's part, many protestations on Ron's part, and much silence, confusion and attempted understanding on Harry's part, the three of them trod back to the Apparition point.

"You don't have to go right away," Ron said shortly.

"I still have to see my parents and let them know what's happening," Hermione reminded him spiritlessly.

"Lay off her, Ron," Harry said. "It's hard enough for her as it is."

"Yeah. Sorry."

"Promise you'll write?" Hermione asked them both.

Harry laughed. "You know I won't. I'll try, but you know it won't happen."

Hermione laughed. "Ron?"

"Yeah. Sure."

Hermione's smile faltered.

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"Good evening, Miss Granger," Severus said stiffly, opening the front door. Taking her bags from her, he said, "Allow me to show you your chambers."

"I have chambers?" Hermione questioned, following him down the hall.

"Yes, I have prepared a few rooms for your particular use."

"Oh. Oh good... Thank you."

"Don't regard it."

"I'll take that as another 'You're welcome'," Hermione responded wryly.

"You may do so if you wish," Severus said, raising a quelling eyebrow. Just because they shared a Lifebond didn't mean that they were on terms of levity yet.

Yet? There was no yet. They would find a cure for Hermione and for him. There would be no yet.

Would there?

Severus opened the mahogany door and ushered her into the room. He rarely used this part of the house. As small as the house was, all he used was his own bedroom, bathroom, kitchen and library, in addition to the basement which he used to conduct his small but flourishing Potions business.

He set her bags down by the bed. "If you have need of me, I shall be in the kitchen. You should have no difficulty locating it." He bowed gracefully a surprising contrast to his stiff, uncomfortable manner and exited the room.

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Hermione half expected him to billow his robes behind him, but he did not. After puzzling for a moment, she set to unpacking.

She had certainly not expected her own set of rooms, she mused, and certainly nothing on this scale. She had expected a bare, extra room and not much else.

One glance at the bedroom alone, however, made it clear that he had taken at least a modicum of effort to Transfigure a part of his house for her. The room was beautifully furnished, with large windows facing the front garden, adorned by brocade curtains. The massive mahogany sleigh bed, placed with its headboard against the windows, was covered in the softest duvet imaginable. True, the décor was almost entirely green, but as much as she would never admit it to Ron or even Harry, Hermione rather liked this shade of green, and she doubted that Snape had decorated her room so beautifully just to spite her with the colour.

Having deposited the contents of her suitcases in the closet and sideboard, she ventured into the connecting bathroom.

"He didn't," she gasped.

The bathroom was beautifully lit, with sky windows, polished green and gold tinted granite surfaces and, right in the middle, a gold-lined Moroccan bathtub.

Hermione almost cried.

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She wandered through the foyer and found her way into the kitchen, where Snape was preparing supper, robe discarded over the shiny, forest-green tiled counter, white sleeves of his typical collared shirt rolled up.

She sniffed the air. "Salmon for dinner, then?" she asked, quietly.

"Yes." Just as she was about to open her mouth to ask if she could help, Snape said, "There are vegetables over there which you may dice for the salad."

"Oh... Thank ok." Hermione shot a covert glance at him as she moved to the other end of the counter to commence her dicing.

He glanced at her. "Do you always insist on wearing Muggle clothes?"

Hermione made a split second decision at that moment: if they were going to cohabit together, she couldn't treat him as a feared professor. She had to treat him like a bloody roommate.

This flashed through her mind in a nanosecond, and in another nanosecond she blurted, "Do you always insist on wearing wizarding clothes?"

"Wizarding clothes are normal," Snape replied dryly.

"So are Muggle clothes."

"Only in the Muggle world."

"You're living in a bloody Muggle house," Hermione said calmly.

"Language, Miss Granger," Snape remarked serenely.

Hermione froze. Had Snape just made a joke?

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Severus froze. Had he just made a joke to Hermione Granger?!

This was unacceptable.

"Ten points from Gryffindor."

Damn!

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Hermione had to put down her knife because she was shaking so hard.

"Miss Granger? Are you well?"

"I yes," she gasped, "I'm sorry, it's just so ridiculous," she giggled.

He turned back to seasoning his salmon.

After a period of silence, Hermione said quietly, "Thank you for the room. It's quite, er... quite lovely."

"It was nothing," he replied in clipped, cool tones.

Hermione flushed in impatience. Was he utterly incapable of graciousness? She tried reminding herself of his kindness in regards to her room, but was unable to stifle her irritation.

A few minutes later, having constructed the salad, Hermione wiped her hands on her jeans and said, "I'm going to wash up. Would you call me when supper's ready?"

Without turning from his task, Snape said, "Very well."

Hermione paused uncomfortably, turned and left.

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Strolling through the door connecting her bathroom and her bedroom, she yawned and tucked her towel closer round her. Mid yawn, she realised she was ravenous. She hadn't wanted to eat so badly since... about a year ago. At this realisation, she experienced an odd thing it was as if she ought to be getting a sinking feeling, but wasn't. She ought to feel disappointed, even horrified that, somehow, against both of their wills, Snape's presence seemed to have become the only thing in her life which could relax her enough to have an appetite.

Just as she was about to drop her towel, there was a knock at the door.

"Don't come in," Hermione called.

The door opened as Snape said, "Supper is..." Eyes widening, he whipped around, exclaiming, "I thought you said, 'Come in!'"

"I said, 'Don't come in!'"

"I apologise, I..."

"Just leave!" Hermione said firmly.

Without another word, he exited the room.

Hermione pressed her hands to her hot cheeks.

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Severus stormed out to his rose garden, came to a sudden stop and breathed in and out, clenching his fists.

He was, to be quite candid, furious; partly with himself for being fool enough to go to her room (although, what else should he have done sent a bloody Patronus?) and partly with Miss Granger although as he contemplated this, he realised reluctantly that he did not actually have a reason to be angry with her. Primarily, he was angry at God if there ever were such a being. Such a truly horrifying occurrence of events should never have been allowed to happen.

He breathed once more, in and out, then turned. The salmon needed to be taken off the grill.

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Hermione couldn't decide if she was more angry or humiliated. It wasn't as if he had seen anything; her towel had given her full coverage. Still, she felt exposed. She was angry at Snape for having made her feel exposed, even though she knew it wasn't his fault; he had said he had misunderstood her.

She was still angry.

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Severus sat at the dark pine desk in his library, chewing his salmon. As he chewed, he slowly realised he was not thinking about salmon he was thinking about sex.

Disgusted with himself, he spat out the formerly delicious salmon.

Severus Snape was not a man who chose to live as one ruled by his impulses. He had certainly made a few choice decisions in his youth and with the Death Eaters which he had later regretted violently, but as a rule he preferred to control his baser passions with an iron will.

Therefore, he did not believe the peculiar stirrings taking place within him at that moment were the result of the commonly used, vulgar phrase, "It's been too long." What he believed was that he was a human male in possession of the normal, anatomical parts who had just seen a young girl in a towel, even if it was (he shuddered) Hermione Granger.

He moved to contemplate his chart of Ancient Runes in an effort to quell the undesirable phantasms swimming through his brain. Dragging a hand over his face, he exhaled, attempting to also quell the rage, indignation and anxiety coursing through him. If there was ever a damnable conundrum of a situation to be unwillingly tossed into... He snarled at his Ancient Runes chart.

As he tried to relax, he pondered taking up smoking to relieve the tension he foresaw to be ensuing in the next six months.

He exhaled again. This was going to be more difficult than even his powers of cognition had foretold.

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Hermione paced by her bed, twisting the sash of her bathrobe round her fingers. She was so frustrated she could feel hot, angry tears bristling behind her eyes.

It just wasn't fair! She had just undergone the most traumatic year of her life, hunting down and defeating the forces of evil and had wanted to spend a quiet year or two recuperating with Ron and Harry, then explore her secondary scholastic options slash job opportunities.

She had not wanted to spend the rest of her life attached at the hip to Severus Snape.

"Just for six months," she muttered, resuming the twisting of her sash feverishly.

Oh, who the bloody hell was she kidding? Her life was over.

She flopped on her bed and screamed into her pillow.

Perhaps, she reflected, she ought to take up smoking as a way to relieve the tension she foresaw to be ensuing in the next few months.

She rolled over on her back. This was going to be even more difficult than she had allowed herself to imagine.

To Take Arms Against a Sea of Troubles

Chapter 6 of 10

In which Hermione menstruates, and the trial period comes to an end.

The next morning, Hermione awoke with a crick in her neck and the rest of her joints creaking like hundred-year-old floorboards. The damage from the Cruciatus was always at its worst immediately after she'd slept. Groaning, she realised she had fallen asleep during her cry last night, facedown on her pillow. As she rolled over and propped herself up on her elbow, she massaged her neck with her other hand. Her face felt stale from the dried tears. Half-blind, Hermione fell out of bed and stumbled to the bathroom to wash her face.

Staring at her glistening face in the mirror, she dragged a towel over it, the fluffy terrycloth rubbing a little zest and colour into her formerly dull and sleepy visage. After staring at herself a while longer, she set her chin defiantly at her own reflection and ripped her half-wet curls out of their messy ponytail. In a moment, she was dressed and ventured carefully, though creakily, into the kitchen.

Severus was already there, making coffee in a large press. After glancing at her, he finished the coffee while she stood uncomfortably in the doorway, and poured it into two large china cups, handing one to her.

"There is cream and sugar on the table," Severus said as he moved toward said table, seating himself gracefully as he sipped his coffee. Hermione noted, as she poured milk into her own coffee, that Snape drank his black.

Settled in her armless cushioned chair, Hermione took notice of a platter of steaming scones on the table.

Seeing her eye the scones out of the corner of his eye, Severus smirked slightly and remarked, "Please, partake of as many scones as you desire, Miss Granger."

Having finished her scone and coffee, Hermione poured herself another cup and re-seated herself, eyeing Snape uneasily.

Having waited for her to finish eating, Snape put down his newspaper and said baldly, "I am of the opinion, Miss Granger, that the worst has passed us."

She started a bit and flushed.

"Clearly, neither of us were at fault; the fates seem simply to have wanted us to suffer. I believe it would be best to put this uncomfortable situation behind us."

Hermione sat stiffly, staring into her coffee.

"If it helps, I saw nothing," he smirked, "of an incriminating nature."

Hermione glowered at him for a few seconds, but failed and started to laugh.

"Very well," she said, sighing.

"Bon," Snape said silkily and stood, Scourgifying his dishes and floating them back to their respective cupboards.

"Ehm... May I ask, ah... where you're going?" Hermione asked timidly.

"I have a business to attend to," Snape said. "I shall be in my lab in the basement for most of the day."

"Oh... Could I help?"

Snape gazed at her penetratingly.

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... Six months later ...

Hermione woke from a deep slumber with a feeling of dread nestled deep in her stomach. As she pushed the lovely green duvet off herself, she stretched her morning kinks out and tried to think what it was that unsettled her so.

Sliding off the edge of the massive bed, she felt her nightgown slide back down around her thighs as her feet hit the floor. She lifted her wand from the nightstand and opened all the windows, breathing deeply the sweet Irish breeze that ruffled the thin material of her nightgown against her body.

On her way to the bathroom, Hermione's eye was caught by her wall calendar, today's date circled in a bleeding scarlet felt pen.

Oh, yes. Today was, technically, the last day of her stay.

While she felt that she and Snape had developed a sort of cool understanding over the preceding six months, she did not feel that she was at all fond of him. Yet... and yet... she felt that to leave could possibly rip her asunder. No, she wasn't precisely fond of Snape, but she did feel unbelievably comfortable and secure in his presence.

She didn't want to leave, but she was pretty certain Snape would want her gone.

What was she supposed to do?

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Severus Snape was not accustomed to having no idea what he was about.

One moment, Hermione Granger was an irritatingly innocent Gryffindorian chit; the next moment, she was a quiet, companionable young woman and a very capable Potions assistant who was slowly beginning to understand his own very, very dry sense of humour.

Unfortunately, she also had her own sense of humour, which again was irritatingly innocent and Gryffindorian, though it was seasoned with her own wit and intelligence.

Today was the last day. Against his will (it seemed most things that happened nowadays were against his will), the date had become earmarked in his head, as if it were some momentous occasion.

Such a thought was ridiculous because the day Severus needed or even wanted Hermione Granger to serve any capacity in his life, was the day

"Oh, shut it," he snapped at his reflection witheringly and splashed his face liberally.

The fact was, he reflected bitterly, however much he craved independence and solitude, this cursed Lifebond had clearly made such a concept a thing of the past.

He would talk to Poppy. Probably, he should speak with Hermione Miss Granger first, but he did not believe himself equal to such a taxing conversation without fortification.

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"I have a few errands to run. I shall return by dinnertime."

Hermione looked up from her chair in the library, resting her thick tome on her knees. "All right."

"Very well what are you reading?"

"Oh it's your favourite Potions text from university."

"How did you know it was my favourite?" he asked, intrigued.

"It has the most notes. It's more worn than the others."

"How do you know the notes do not indicate it is my least favourite?" Severus challenged her.

"Your least favourite one has more cross-outs."

The right corner of his lips curved upward a fraction... "Carry on, Miss Granger."

"Oh, by the way, would you mind picking up some tampons for me? My favourite brand is Witchtex, but anything will do."

"Certainly." He left.

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"Witchtex, Poppy. Witchtex!"

"Dear me, Severus," Poppy remarked mildly as the hysterical man burst into the infirmary where a frightened student stood receiving a pass from Madam Pomfrey.

"I refuse," Severus snarled, "I unequivocally refuse to accept either the burden or the responsibility of being eternally fused to a green, irritating, know-it-all of a chit!"

"Hermione said she refuses to accept either the burden or the responsibility of being eternally fused to an emotionally constipated, sour old coot of a man," Poppy replied, dismissing the third year who scampered out of the infirmary gratefully.

"She said nothing of the sort."

"No, she didn't, but she should have." Poppy sighed. "What's all this about, Severus? What are these ravings of Witchtex?"

"She asked me to buy her tampons. What is worse, I acquiesced without a demur. It did not even occur to me how inappropriate it would be until I'd already Apparated into Hogsmeade."

"You are living with her, but buying her necessary hygienic equipment is inappropriate?"

"We are hardly 'living together' as you so salaciously put it," Severus almost sneered. "We board under one roof but occupy separate chambers."

"I would hardly say I was implying salaciousness, Severus. I was merely pointing out semantics."

Severus followed Poppy into her office and sat in the chair opposite her desk, sighing.

"I'm at my wit's end, Poppy," he said in a low voice. "To say truth, I'm desperate. I haven't the faintest idea what to do."

A plate of steaming food appeared on the desk before him.

"You can start by eating that."

"Poppy..."

"I know it's a losing battle, but that doesn't mean it's not worth fighting," Poppy said primly as she put her tea on.

Severus picked up the fork and grudgingly ate.

"Severus, we've been having these little chats more or less since you first began spying for Albus. I have enjoyed and appreciated them immensely, and I have always done my level best to be honest with you. However, I have never been quite as honest as I am about to be.

"You are, without a doubt, one of the most noble, yet flawed men I have had the privilege to know. It is because of this that I am quite fond of you, Severus."

"Poppy, please, this display of emotion..."

"Oh, Severus, do be quiet. As I was saying, if I didn't have a sincere affection for you, I would not be so forthcoming.

"You are being an unbearably arrogant, narrow-minded coward."

Severus choked on his buttered asparagus.

"While you and Hermione Granger undoubtedly have your differences, I shall take this opportunity to declare that her main fault has been associating with Harry Potter, whose main fault was being born of James Potter, whose main fault was being a thoughtless and insensitive clod.

"Hermione is a first-rate young woman and the only witch under sixty-five who can match your own considerable breadth of brain.

"The advice you have come seeking is this: Pluck up, stop whining and be a man. You have suffered. So have we all. You are not specially privileged to withdraw from the world, disdaining it. Hermione Granger could be the best thing to happen to you since... Well, there you are."

The muscle in Severus' jaw worked convulsively. "I see," he said stiffly, standing up. He strode to the door and, gripping the knob tightly, paused and said huskily, "You are undoubtedly correct. Thank you for... the advice."

"Wait, Severus. Here's a spare box of Witchtex."

"Thank you. My menstruating assistant shall be thrilled."

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Hermione felt that it had been mostly a blur. Snape had come home (when had she started thinking of this place as home?), and with much hemming and hawing and stiff, uncomfortable pauses, they had somehow arrived at the decision that Hermione would remain with Snape indefinitely, working as his assistant.

She felt relieved.

She also felt that her life had ended.

This wasn't what she wanted. She wanted Ron back, but Ron wouldn't write to her, wouldn't respond to any of her letters. Instead of warm, easy-going, goofy Ron, she had cold, stiff, implacable Snape.

She lay down on her bed, holding the tears in.

And By Opposing, End Them

Chapter 7 of 10

In which Severus contemplates both Lily Evans and Hermione Granger.

"Hermione Granger could be the best thing to happen to you since..."

Severus knew what Poppy had been going to say. He knew.

She had been going to compare Hermione Granger to Lily Evans. However worthy Miss Granger was, she was not, nor could she ever be Lily.

He yanked on the faucet of the shower, and as the flow of the water slapped the marble in a soothing rhythm, he ripped his clothes off, balled them up and threw them angrily at the mirror.

If she had completed her thought, dared use Lily's name, he didn't know what he would have done. He might have gone over the proverbial edge, he thought, and sneered at his retreating reflection as he stepped into the cold shower.

However, Severus was no self-deceiver; in one aspect Poppy was correct. Hermione was, in fact, a fine young woman, far superior to either Potter or Weasley, despite her unnatural attachment to both. In addition to being much less stupid than either of them, she was proving to be a superb record keeper for his business and quite a dab hand

at Potions. As he scoured himself vigorously, he pondered the possibility that she was gleaming from his own talent. She had never shown a marked predilection or skill apart from her usual acumen for Potions while at school, therefore he thought it a fair possibility that she was taking on a trait of his as a result of the Lifebond. He had suspected from the first that they would glean traits or talents from one another, especially after what Hermione's and his own Healer had said about the magical properties of their blood changing. He himself, over the past few months, had found himself having positive even chipper thoughts, for no reason which was immediately apparent.

He sighed, concentrating on the glide of each droplet of water down his body. His life had decidedly taken a turn for the weird.

OoOoOoO

"Supper's almost ready. I've just got to baste the chicken again. Would you slice the bread?"

"Yes," Severus said, tiredly, moving to the cutting board.

Carrying the bread to the table, Severus took a piece and bit into the thick slice. As he seated himself in his place, he curved his fingers round the stem of the glass of wine Hermione had already placed there.

The two of them may not have shared a strong affection, but they had got used to the other's habits and had learnt to accommodate them.

Hermione joined Severus at the table and sifted through their pile of correspondence as she took a swallow from her water glass.

Severus closed his eyes and leaned his head back, contemplating. He felt drained. It had, after all, been an emotionally trying day with Poppy and... Lily and... Hermione... Lily. After all this time, he still remembered Lily's eyes and smile as clearly as if she stood before him.

Finally, feeling that familiar swelling in his throat, he opened his eyes and saw Hermione smiling over one of her letters. He shifted, the swelling in his throat dying as he contemplated Hermione's lips framing her teeth... They were rather nice teeth, actually, he reflected, reasonably straight and white...

"I'm sorry," he blurted out.

Hermione looked up and blinked. "About...?"

Damn it all, was he gaining the verbal grace of a Gryffindor as well?

He gritted his teeth. He'd rather die.

"What I meant to say was that I was reflecting upon the aspersion I once cast upon the state of your teeth and I would like to apologise."

"Oh! It's been ages since I thought about that. Anyway, that's hardly the worst actually, that might be the worst thing you ever said to me."

"Yes," Severus agreed. "Either way, I apologise for the plethora of insults. You have garnered more than your fair share through six years of Hogwarts with me." He shifted in his chair. "In my defence, I was largely playing a role, however... I apologise."

Hermione gazed at him. "Thank you. I accept your apology." She looked down at her hands, then slowly stood and moved to the oven to baste the chicken.

Later, over their meal, Severus said, uncomfortably, "There simply is not an easy way to put this. I think both of us have been rather resistant to the idea of being well..."

"Eternally fused?" Hermione supplied, a touch of gloom in her voice as she pushed her peas onto her baked potato.

Severus blinked. "... Er... yes. As I was saying, I have come to the conclusion that short of death, there is very likely not a way out of this. Therefore, I believe it expedient to make slightly more permanent arrangements." He paused in order to gauge her reaction. She had frozen with her fork halfway to her mouth, but her overall look and posture was generally favourable.

He continued. "Seeing as you have been a commendably meticulous accountant for me, I thought it would be suitable to start paying you for that position. Seeing also as you seem to have been developing a hitherto unsuspected gift for Potions, I may take you on as my Apprentice, so that you will be carving out some sort of an education for your future as well. Are you amenable?"

"You have got to be joking," Hermione said, quietly as she finally lowered her fork.

"No. Not at all," Severus said, bristling immediately.

"You're going to take me on as your apprentice? But... you don't take apprentices!*Potions Monthly* quoted you as saying you'd never seen anyone remotely qualified!"

Severus' bristles died as he re-gathered his thoughts and took a deft swallow of an excellent sauvignon blanc.

"To address your first question: Yes. That is my plan. To address your following protestation: I have never previously encountered anyone with the remotest speck of apprentice-worthy material in them. Since we have been... 'Lifebonded', for lack of a better term, you have gleaned some of my own talent and probably will continue to do so. It is thus that you are suitable for an apprenticeship with me."

Hermione chewed thoughtfully, then swallowed. "I'm okay with that," she said, happily twinkling at him.

He raised an eyebrow, the left corner of his mouth twitching slightly.

"To question your protestation: you read*Potions Monthly*?"

"I don't have a subscription to it, but it's a very informative periodical. Of course I read it," she replied dismissively.

Severus smirked and returned to his meal. "Of course. So, we are agreed?"

"Yes. Quite agreed. I'll write to my parents and..." She looked down.

"Weasley?" Severus just kept himself from sneering.

"I don't know. This... situation... hasn't been particularly pleasing to him."

Narrowing his brows, Severus said icily, "Naturally, it's been a constant dose of Felix Felicis for the rest of us."

Hermione flushed. "Of course not. He's being a git, I just... I miss him."

Realising they had just shared information of a personal nature, they both turned their attention solely on their food.

Later, while cleaning dishes in the sink, Hermione asked Severus, who was drying, "You know, I keep meaning to ask, but I've kept forgetting. Why is it you live in a Muggle house?"

"It is more inexpensive than living in a wizarding house and this particular house is very isolated. Also, there are remaining Death Eaters who would love to watch me die as slowly as possible. The last thing they would expect would be my abiding permanently in a Muggle residence."

Hermione was suddenly gripped by fear.

"You needn't worry; I've placed extremely powerful wards on the house."

She relaxed, but her frown remained. "Still... I never really realised how much you were still in danger."

"Miss Granger, please feel no anxiety on my account. I haven't not been in danger since I was fifteen years old. One becomes accustomed."

She smiled slightly. "Of course."

Severus finished drying the last utensil, put his wand in his pocket and began to move away to his nightly ritual of reading when Hermione said, "Wait."

He paused. "Yes?"

She fidgeted for a moment. "I just... Well, thank you."

He frowned slightly. "No thanks are necessary, Miss Granger."

Narrowing her eyes, she said, "One of these days, I'm going to teach you to say, 'you're welcome'."

He raised a brow. "We shall see. Good night, Miss Granger."

"Good night, Mr. Snape."

He raised both his brows, but she walked briskly past him to her own chambers.

The Thousand Shocks That Flesh Is Heir To

Chapter 8 of 10

In which Hermione becomes familiar with a few of the thousand shocks that flesh is heir to

The next few months proved to be interesting for poor Severus. Before his fateful visit to Poppy, he and Hermione had mostly tried to stay out of each other's way, except for mealtimes and when they dealt with the records or when she helped with extra potions orders.

Now, however, in view of their long-term agreement to be roommates and employer/employee, they almost unconsciously began to develop a flow to their everyday interactions. When they worked together in the kitchen, they moved seamlessly around each other, sensing the other's rhythm. If Hermione dropped an egg, Severus caught it before it hit the floor. If Severus forgot the olive oil in a recipe, Hermione put it in.

Nothing like this had ever before been experienced by our man, Severus. While he found it fascinating from a clinical standpoint, from a personal view it alarmed him to no small degree. He had never shared any level of intimacy deeper than this. His experiences with his bastard father and weak mother had led him, extremely early on in his childhood, to the conclusion that love and intimacy were highly dangerous things. Unfortunately, he was too late in reaching that conclusion, for before he had had proper time to develop the necessary shields against such treacherous movements of the heart, Lily had swept into his life in a grand rushing of wind from which he had never been able to become entirely unruffled.

Though he had loved still loved Lily wildly, deeply, purely (some had said obsessively), the memory of his mother's weakness in her slavish love for his father kept him from letting Lily through the portals to the deepest parts of his soul. Sometimes, after she had forever closed herself to him on that bitter night outside the Gryffindor common room, he felt justified in his desperate measures for self-preservation. Other times, when he lay awake at night, recalling every moment in her presence, every breath taken near her and groaning under the weight of his pain, he cursed himself in every tongue he knew.

So for better or for worse, Severus, now at the brink of forty, had never experienced anything like intimacy, and while his relationship with Miss Granger had not yet caused him to reveal the deepest secrets of his soul to her, or vice versa, the rhythm they now had in sensing each other's movements made Severus believe that they were communicating, if not telepathically, then worse, on a preternatural, visceral level. With deep foreboding, Severus could not imagine that this would not lead to far worse things. Perhaps they would stay up late, swathed in tissues, relating their heartfelt experiences to the other. He sneered, then whitened and grimly resolved to keep such a blasphemy against the natural order of things from ever occurring.

He vaguely wondered if Miss Granger ever worried about such nebulous things as possible emotional intimacy in the very distant future.

In fact, Miss Granger, while she did spend an appropriate amount of time devoted to pondering such things, rarely worried about them. Emotional intimacy was something with which she was quite familiar and comfortable. She even desired such things, which if Severus had known anything about women, especially nineteen-year-old women, he would have already deduced.

No, Hermione did not worry about emotional intimacy. Hermione, in fact, was lately worrying about a somewhat different kind of closeness: just a few of the thousand natural shocks her flesh was heir to.

She wondered if there was something wrong with her. She had gone through puberty with the rest of the girls her age, developed the extra little (or sometimes, not so little) bits here and there at a reasonably average time along with the rest of them, but while Lavender and Parvati were immensely concerned about boys, and who liked whom and other such trivialities, Hermione had been immensely concerned with school, knowledge and learning everything her greedy brain could possibly absorb.

She knew about sex, and the sex drive, and sex organs and where everything went, but she simply figured she was one of those women who didn't have a spectacular sex drive.

It turned out, however, she was just a late bloomer.

The bloom had started around the time when she and Harry and Ron had gone in search of the Horcruxes, but she hadn't had much time to think about what was going on inside her, and indeed, she had attributed many of the odd chemical surges in her body to stress and near-death experiences. The attributions were misplaced, however. In

the following couple of years, Hermione realised resignedly that she was finally developing a libido. It was very uncomfortable. She wasn't at all sure that she liked it.

She was especially uncomfortable when she started randomly wondering what certain people looked like naked, wonderments which she immediately banished from her brain, but which left their mark on her in the form of brightly stained cheeks.

Hermione sighed. There was only one thing to do.

A few moments later she was in Severus' study, moving her eyes very carefully over every title on every shelf. She sighed exasperatedly. Severus did not appear to have any books regarding what a young girl should do when beset with an onslaught of hormones, surprisingly enough. Finally, she settled for a thick book, one of a set of encyclopedias of the human anatomy, which covered the reproductive system. Opening the book at the very first page, she sat in Severus' favourite armchair and swung her legs over the left arm.

"Interesting reading," said a deep voice, leaving a tingle at the base of Hermione's spine. She looked up.

"I suppose so," she replied. "I was curious."

"Yes, I see," Severus said, moving to his desk.

Hermione attempted to switch positions in the chair, but was foiled by a shot of pain tearing through her spine and traveling down her legs. She gasped, tears starting in her eyes.

Severus was by her in a moment. "What's wrong?" he rapped out.

Taking deep breaths and closing her eyes, she said slowly, "It's nothing... I just... leftover from the Cruciatus... My nervous system is somewhat damaged."

"Have you been to the Healer about it?"

She blinked. "Well... no. It's Dark Magic, isn't it? You can't heal Dark Magic."

He frowned severely. "Perhaps." He paused, appearing to be thinking very hard, then said, "Are you all right now?"

"Yes. Thank you."

He nodded, then moved, still frowning, back to his desk, where he pulled a very old book out from a drawer at the bottom.

Hermione, shrugging off the incident, returned to her book. They co-existed thus quite peaceably for half an hour or so, until Hermione raised her eyes to study Severus from behind her book. Eventually, she broke the comfortable silence. "Professor?"

He looked up. "Yes?"

"I'd been meaning to tell you... my parents' last owl said they would like us to visit them over Christmas."

"Us?"

"Yes."

"I see."

"I don't think they'll like to hear no."

"Of course not," he sneered.

"Don't be like that," she snapped. "They're my parents. Respect them."

There was a heavy silence, thick with unuttered thoughts. Finally, Severus quelled his raised eyebrow and said quietly, "Of course. I apologise."

Hermione relaxed. "Thank you. So, will you please come visit my parents with me over Christmas?"

He paused a moment, contemplating the possible purport of such a visit, then said urbanely, "Yes."

As Severus returned to perusing the volume so ancient Hermione could smell it from her chair, she started to go back to her own book, but was instead arrested by the almost ferocious intent with which he scrutinised his text. She canvassed his face, noting for the first time its contours. The angular cheekbones presided over the sharp jaw line, and the thick, straight, black brows jutted out over inky black, deep set eyes and the puissant, aquiline nose. As she watched, a long, strong, pale hand came up and rubbed the bridge of said promontory.

Hermione suddenly felt light-headed and realised it was because all the blood in her body was rushing to her pelvic region.

Sweet Merlin. This wasn't happening to her.

Sinking in her chair, she put her book over her face and whimpered. It seemed as though the world recently known by Hermione Granger was fast reaching its apocalypse.

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Severus had been afraid of this.

A millisecond before Hermione had cried out, he had almost done so himself, though more from shock than from pain. A twinge had run down the entire length of his spine, through each vertebra, split at the tailbone and proceeded down both legs. It was a jarring experience, like nothing which had ever happened to him before, except...

And then Miss Granger had uttered a strange cross between a gasp and a whine, his legs had carried him to her side almost before he knew what he was about and she had explained, albeit unknowingly, what had just happened to him.

They were indeed communicating on a preternatural, visceral level: more so than he had dared to think possible.

Blood and soul magic be damned; he would find a way out of this. There may have been a thousand natural shocks that flesh was heir to, but he would lay his life there was nothing natural about this.

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"Severus, are you coming?" Hermione called impatiently as she pulled on her mittens next to the fireplace in the library.

Tapping her foot and crossing her arms, she looked up as Severus came through the door, cloaked and booted, as though ready for a more extensive journey than that which they had planned to take through the Floo.

He swallowed noticeably. He had been thinking about this for the past month. Either he could forego his Christmas Eve tradition, or he could take Hermione along. Leaving her alone wasn't an option, as she would simply have pestered him about it anyway, and he could no longer lie to her without experiencing considerable pain or without her simply seeing through him as though he were a picture window.

"Miss Granger..." He swallowed again, then stiffened his resolve. "Miss Granger, I know we had planned to arrive earlier than your parents expected us, as a surprise... but there is something I would first like to show you."

Severus waited for her to go through the necessary idiosyncrasies: the biting of the lip, the wrinkling of the nose, the shifting of the weight. Before she could round it off with the capstone question, however, he cut her off and said, "I wouldn't suggest it if it wasn't... important. You won't regret it."

Hermione paused. She felt as though she ought to object, as though Hermione 15 months ago, or even 6 months ago would have objected. Instead, it seemed the most natural thing that ever natured to trustingly take his arm as he Side-Along Apparated them.

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"Where are we?" Hermione asked, her quiet voice swallowed up in the huge open space, blanketed by sheets of snow.

"The Cliffs of Moher," Severus answered, his voice disappearing as well.

Hermione slowly stepped forward, not releasing his arm. It made Severus uncomfortable that this didn't make him uncomfortable.

Looking back at him suddenly, wonder and delicious excitement colouring her face, she opened her mouth, but looked as though she couldn't say anything.

As much as he hated to admit it, he had been worried about sharing this with her. It was something he had done every year on Christmas Eve for as long as he could remember. He hadn't been sure if sharing it with someone else would be too unbearably personal or not. Hermione's happiness, though, somehow created a safety net for him. Her evident delight filled him with confidence.

He strode forward, toward the edge of the annually disintegrating rock.

"What are you doing?" Hermione asked, tagging along just behind him, still holding the crook of his arm.

"I am striding manfully to the edge, Miss Granger, as should be obvious to you, considering our proximity."

"But what if you fall?" He knew the tone. She was going to start asking questions. Nagging questions.

"I won't fall."

"What if I fall?"

"I shall catch you."

To his surprise, that seemed to be enough for her. She happily skipped along to his strides until they reached the barrier. Severus lifted her onto it, then climbed over quickly. Taking her arm again, they trod softly to the edge.

"You do this often?"

"Every year," he uttered his words succinctly, hoping his tone would discourage further questions regarding the Potions Master's sentimental habits.

"Why?"

He pursed his lips, his sane self warring with his new, spill-everything-to-Hermione-Granger self.

"This was a mistake," he muttered under his breath. "Come, then," he said aloud, "your parents await."

As they turned, though, Hermione said, "Wait." She had stopped in her tracks; he pivoted forty-five degrees, utilising his bat of the dungeons, penetrating stare. He suddenly felt trapped and wanted only to get out as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, his bat of the dungeons, penetrating stare seemed to no longer have the desired effect on Miss Granger. Indeed, she barely seemed to notice it at all. Instead, her cheeks flushed with pleasure, in spite of the cold wait. Pleasure?

He had pleased her?

He had pleased her? Nonsense...

Nonsense.

"Professor?" She still called him Professor. He wasn't her Professor, anymore, but still, that was what she had called him for six years; he supposed it seemed a shame to her to stop now. Unless, of course, she were annoyed with him or taking him to task; in which cases she used his first name.

Shaking himself, he answered her. "Yes, Miss Granger?"

She blushed. "I would like to show you something, too."

He groaned inwardly, but not knowing how to refuse (and as much as he hated to admit it, he desired to avoid hurting her feelings), he merely inclined his head almost imperceptibly and said, "Very well, Miss Granger."

No doubt swaths of tissues are forthcoming, he thought sourly.

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Hermione couldn't believe she wanted to show Severus Snape where some of her happiest, most joyful memories had taken place. She thought she might be going insane, but it was only just. He had shared something with her which was clearly personal, and though she had some misgivings, it was only right that she reciprocate.

She sighed inwardly. Sometimes she cursed her Gryffindor spirit.

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Curse the Gryffindor spirit, Severus thought, as they Apparated onto a curvy black road, striped by slush and snow. There was a bright building ahead of them, people toasting each other on the porches outside, cheery music emanating from the inside.

He looked at Miss Granger sharply. "This is a Muggle place," he stated.

"Yes," she said, quietly. "We're in Bunratty. That's Durty Nellie's."

He sneered.

Checking to make sure no one was watching, Miss Granger discomfited Severus greatly by wordlessly Transfiguring his robe into an overcoat.

"Come on," she said softly. "It's beautiful. My parents used to take me here every Christmas when I was a little girl. Before Hogwarts. We would go to church and then here. In a way, this was almost like second church for me."

Following this cryptic statement, he trod reluctantly after her.

Once inside, Severus quickly ordered a Guinness, partly to have something in his hand that wasn't his wand, partly to take the edge off. Miss Granger, much to his surprise, ordered a Smithwick's.

"Come here," she instructed him. "The music sessions are always over here."

He followed her to the right of the bar, where an eclectic assortment of musicians sat, engaged in a lively session.

Miss Granger fearlessly wove through the bodies standing around and sat next to a middle aged woman playing a flute, sipping her Smithwick's contentedly.

Suddenly Severus felt acutely uncomfortable. He had got rid of Spinner's End and removed to Ireland for the solitude of the lonely, untamed hills, not so he could hobnob with the friendly Irish folk. Cursing the forethought which had prompted him to develop an antidote to deadly snake venom, he downed half of his thick foamy beer in ten seconds. Glancing around, he made his way around the corner, ten feet away from the musicians and Miss Granger. Feeling more or less comfortable in his relative seclusion, he proceeded to drink the rest of his beer in peace.

Or so was his intention until an old gentleman sat down beside him, groaning slightly under the weight of the massive accordion he held.

"I trust I'm not disturbin' ye," the old man said, laying to rest by his feet the creakily ancient accordion. "'Tis always like this on t' eve before Christmas. All t'e folk in Bunratty like a pint and a song..." the old man, sighed happily, then started. "Oh! Where are me manners at? Sean Hamish," he said, extending a hand.

Severus was certain that he had been exuding as unfriendly a vibe as he could muster in his depressed state and was about to tell the blighter to take himself off when he realised this expulsive urge rose out of habit he didn't actually want to bark at the man to leave. The vitriolic words died in his mouth.

"Severus," he responded neutrally, shaking the man's hand.

Such a small gesture... now Severus felt as though his world had been turned on its end once more. When was the last time he had shaken someone's hand? When was the last time he had merely shaken someone's hand in cordial, respectful, casual greeting? Ordinary men enjoyed this small contact, this small exchange of pleasantries, daily without pause. For Severus, it almost brought tears to his eyes.

Hermione Granger could be the best thing to happen to you since...

"Not from 'round here, are ye?"

"I hail from England, yes."

"Ah, t'at explains t'e sour expression on your face."

Severus smirked.

"Ah, truly, I'm sorry," Sean Hamish said ruefully. "Me wife has tried to cure me o' my wayward tongue, but me tongue wants none of it. Come, let me buy y'a pint."

"Thank you," Severus said, blinking as the old gentleman handed him a dripping pint of beer a few minutes later.

"My pleasure. So, what brings ye to Durty Nellie's? Ye're not a regular, I take it?"

Severus was about to answer him, when the instruments stopped and the ensuing applause died, distracting him.

"Who's got a song to share?" shouted a man playing a bohdon.

A voice then rose, acapella. Severus realised it was Hermione. He kept his face carefully passive as he suddenly found himself listening intently.

Her voice was not precisely beautiful, nor trained. Yet it held a rich, sweet, wistful quality that reminded him of someone he had known... Suddenly, he felt a lump in his chest.

"That girl you hear over there. A former pupil," Severus finally responded, sneering bitterly at himself.

The old man paused, giving Severus a calculating glance. "Ye know," he began, rolling up the sleeves of his knit, kelly green shirt, "it's nights like t'ese t'hat remind me of a trut' me wife taught me." Relaxing against the back of his chair, he took a long draught of his Guinness.

Finally, Severus decided to take the bait. "And that is?"

"It's t'e people in yer life t'at count."

"Indeed." Severus knit his brows, the corners of his mouth turning down.

"It doesn't even matter how much you like 'em. Each person has a soul wort' respectin' and lovin'. Each person you meet can bring ye closer to yer understandin' of God, and in so doing, enriches, builds up, fills yer own soul, makin' ye a proper human being.

"A wise woman is me Mary."

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"Professor," Hermione said softly as she brought a large glass of brandy to him in his favourite library chair, his legs stretched out before the fire. After handing it to him, she curled up by the foot of the chair and continued, "I wanted to thank you for being so kind to my parents. They feel so much better about my our situation."

"I was hardly kind," he said stiffly.

"You were for you," she said with an amused smile, closing her eyes and leaning her head against the cushion.

Severus regarded the lion's mane beside his knee and felt an almost overwhelming compulsion to lay his hand on her head, as one would do a faithful golden retriever. Overcoming, as he always overcame his compulsions, he tuned in to what Hermione was saying.

"My parents are very perceptive. They could tell you were being kind."

At a loss for anything to say, Severus swallowed his brandy.

"Anyway... I just wanted to thank you for a lovely Christmas."

"No thanks are necessary."

She suddenly twisted around to balance on her knees and face him. "Just say 'you're welcome'. I dare you."

A reprimand was on the tip of his tongue... but he was caught by her steadfast gaze... the warmth of the expression in her sweet, honeyed brown eyes...

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Hermione thought she might drown in the blackness of his gaze... She suddenly felt the increasingly familiar flip flop in her stomach and the heat that flowed in all directions from it. Tearing herself away, a severe blush mounting in her cheeks, she murmured a hasty "Good night" and half ran to her rooms.

An hour later, ensconced in her huge, soft bed with a book, there was a knock at the door. Sinking down into the bedclothes, as if they would protect her, she called warily, "Come in."

Severus entered. After a strained pause, he said, "I have been working on a potion."

"Yes?" Hermione prompted him. "And?" This is new for you?

He pulled a small phial from the pocket of his robe and came slowly forward, saying, "When I discovered you were suffering from Cruciatus residue in your nervous system, I began researching ancient homeopathic medicines and tried combining them with variations of Dark Magic repellants."

Towering over her, he handed her the phial. She smoothed her thumb over it, reading the handwritten label: "HGCR: #33".

Dumbstruck, it was a few moments before she found her voice. "You've made 32 trials before this one?"

"Number 33 is also a trial; however, I believe it will prove to be beneficial. We won't know until you try it. Inform me of the effects after a week or so, and if needed, we will try again."

Much to her astonishment, she felt tears burgeoning; she blinked them back desperately. "Thank you," she said shakily.

"For Merlin's sake, Miss Granger, compose yourself. There is nothing to be thankful for."

"Will you just say, 'you're welcome'?" she snapped, causing one tear to fall over the edge.

He turned and, pausing by her door, added, "I have also deemed it wise to begin research on a remedy to our situation. We will start the day after tomorrow at the regular time."

"But... I..." she trailed off, her remarks falling uselessly on a closing door.

To Die, To Sleep Part I

Chapter 9 of 10

In which Severus reflects on his childhood and Hermione saves the day

"So we are agreed," said the rough, husky voice. "The target must be taken out New Year's Eve."

The four men huddled together in the thickest area of the woods, their black cloaks rustling as they shifted, attempting to warm themselves during this, their final secret rendezvous before their first big mission.

"Rowle, you have all the schedules?"

"Yes," Rowle grumbled.

"Good. Everything must be perfect. That is all, gentlemen. Until we meet again for our first project."

Putting their wands together, the four tips sizzled as they said, their voices conjoined, "The Golden Trio will pay."

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Severus looked up from his own impeccable dicing to covertly watch Hermione as she carefully stirred the bubbling liquid in one of the older No. 4 cauldrons. Her form appeared to be holding; he doubted he would have to take over for her for another fifteen minutes or so: while her strength was improving, it was not yet equal to the task of stirring one of the longer-brewing potions.

She reached up to tuck a wayward spiral back into her bun, which was already frizzing out around her head like a halo. Careful not to disturb her rhythm, she wiped a bead of sweat off her small straight nose, just keeping it from dripping off and ruining a month's work. Severus smiled slightly. She was getting much better about that.

She looked uncomfortably hot, Severus mused. He would have to make sure she imbibed plenty of cold water during their break, he thought as he regarded the flush in her cheeks. Very smoothly contoured cheeks, they were. Indeed, her features were remarkably even. How had he always thought of her as, if not plain, then uninteresting? Her mouth was perfectly curved, the bottom lip just a touch too full, the only imperfection in her otherwise symmetrical face. Her eyes were wide and well-lashed, and set at a reasonable distance from each other. Her forehead was neither too large, nor too small. She could wear fringe across that forehead if she wanted to, Severus thought, though she certainly didn't need it. Her jaw also was very fine, neither too sharp nor too broad, the planes connecting in a firm chin which supported her full lipped mouth very well. Too, her neck was long, slender and graceful; in truth it looked too fragile to hold up her appalling hair.

In addition to the heat already in her face from the steaming cauldron, an extra tinge of red began slowly to creep up her cheeks and spread to her (perfectly shell-shaped) ears and neck. She had become conscious of his gaze.

Damn. Damn damn damn.

Refusing to behave as though his hand had been caught in the proverbial cookie jar (though, in fact, it had), he calmly resumed dicing.

What the hell was wrong with him?

During their fifteen minute break from the hot, stuffy lab, Severus poured two glasses of icy cold water and shoved one into Hermione's hand. He was determined not to give her any reason to think he admired her. Because he didn't.

Not seeming to notice that he had almost spilled the water down her T-shirt, Hermione said, seating herself at the table and fanning her face, "Well, I think the new LGS potion is coming along very nicely. I was extra careful stirring it today. It ought to be ready for bottling tomorrow."

"Perhaps," he sneered.

She blinked, and he could see the knot forming in her throat where she was fighting back words and angry, hurt feelings. Silently, she gulped down her water.

He forced another glass on her. She took it absent-mindedly.

"Professor, when will I be able to brew a potion by myself?"

"Probably never," he said, ruthlessly.

There was a long, painful pause, while her mouth hung open.

Unable to stop himself, he continued, "A mind saturated so long in the Gryffindor idiocy and clumsiness will most likely never be fit for anything subtler than battle and Quidditch. No matter how much of my blood it may have imbibed."

As she stood up, he just caught the shine of tears as she turned and walked to her rooms, saying as she left in a voice wobbly though clearly trying to be even, "I have a headache. I'll be lying down the rest of the afternoon."

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Damn it all! He threw his glass into the fireplace in his library, where it shattered very satisfactorily. Waving his wand clumsily, he ignited a much larger fire than he had intended; the flames roaring to life. He strode to the window and slapped the flats of his palms against the panes, staring out at the mocking noonday sun. Swearing again, he flung the heavy winter curtains closed, plunging the room into darkness, save for the roaring fire.

Grabbing the decanter of brandy from his desk, he ripped the top off and threw it also into the fire. Sneering at himself, he said to the fire, "Yes, I do bloody well plan to get roaring pissed at noon. It's about time, too." With that, he knelt rather anti-climactically to the thick carpet and sipped the brandy.

"Truly," he murmured morosely, staring into the fire, unblinking. "Everything I touch turns to dust."

The deeper he drank, the deeper he sank into regret. If only he could change the past... he would never have become a Death Eater. He snorted, choking a little on his brandy in the process. Wiping his nose and mouth clumsily, he took another long pull. No, he would never have become a Death Eater. Not knowing what he knew now. Not at the cost of losing Lily. He growled to avoid sobbing, taking yet another desperate swallow. Not at the cost of killing his best friend. He choked, remembering... *"And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?"*

"You alone know whether it will harm your soul to help an old man avoid pain and humiliation."

He had both loved and hated Albus for giving him... a way out. A way out of the guilt for another death. So many deaths he was responsible for, either directly or indirectly, but it was all the same, wasn't it? Was standing by and letting Charity be killed any better than mustering up the hate to power the curse which had ended Dumbledore's life?

But the remembrances didn't stop there...

His earliest memory was of both intensely longing for his father's love, approbation, respect and friendship and vehemently despising and loathing him, of taking blows meant for his mother and subsequent blows meant solely for him. When he found he had a means of fighting back, even if he couldn't always control it, he used it. He spent hours practising, harnessing what he would later come to find was magic, a practise which, had he but known it, would stand him in great stead in later years. It was the beginning of the greatest self-control and thence, the greatest Occlumetic skill known to the modern wizarding world.

He exulted in his newfound defence, using it to protect his mother. When he discovered his gift was shared by his mother, but not used by her to protect either herself or him, it was the last of his hope in people until he met Lily. Unfortunately, Lily, while ultimately the inspiration for his nobility, was not enough to restore his faith. It was up to Albus Dumbledore to plant those seeds.

By the time he made it to Hogwarts, he was the veritable poster child of neglect. Lucius Malfoy, the older, wiser prefect, however, saw beyond the small, almost ridiculously bat-like child in over-large shabby robes, to his enormous, burgeoning talent and control. He took him under his wing. What Severus had thought at the time to be the only blessing God had ever bestowed on him (if such a Being had ever existed - if He didn't, it was surely to spite Severus), proved to be the Devil's own blueprint.

If Severus bore distinctive features in manhood, as a child he had looked positively weird. He was shunned by most everybody for looking weird, for frankly being weird and for being Slytherin. Lucius, and the friends Severus made through him, provided acceptance from boys his own age. When he was introduced to Tom Riddle, he'd thought it was exactly what he'd needed - a father. A mentor. Approval. Affirmation.

"The more fool I," Severus half-growled, half-yelled at the unoffending flames.

He inched closer to the fire.

He had hurt her. He had meant to hurt her. Simply to shield himself from a moment of vulnerability. He was truly damnable. As the paradoxically soggy burn rose in his chest, he tucked his head to his knees and gasped.

"No one should ever have to be shackled to such a broken creature. Especially not her."

Standing up a bit too fast, he stumbled backwards, righted himself, then staggered towards the potions lab. He ought to be able to avoid any tendons and major arteries.

Granted, he was drunk. But he didn't really care.

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Hermione lifted her face from her soggy pillow and dragged her feet to the mirror. Lifting a soft, folded handkerchief from the dressing table, she began to pat her face dry.

"Bastard," she whispered, the epithet making her feel mildly better.

She had felt him gazing at her earlier. She had flushed heavily, wondering what imperfections he was finding to scorn, either in her appearance or in her stirring technique. Then, trying to brave through that, she had thought to make some mildly amusing chit-chat during the break before lunch, and... the lump rose again in her throat as she wiped fresh tears away. She hated how sensitive she was.

"You're a Gryffindor, for Merlin's sake," she told her reflection, exasperatedly.

The truth was she wanted his approval desperately. She had always wanted it. He was the only professor at Hogwarts to ever not give it to her. He was undoubtedly the most brilliant Potions Master in several centuries and one of the few existing in the western world. This caused her to positively run herself ragged her first few years in Potions. After second year, however, she gave it up, albeit reluctantly, as a bad job. She would have to settle for Minerva McGonagall's and Filius Flitwick's praise.

Once she'd gleaned some of Severus' own talent, however, she'd thought... maybe, finally...

She pursed her lips, shaking her head violently, as if to expel the pathetic thoughts. "Get over it, Hermione," she told herself sternly and proceeded to the loo to splash her face with cold water.

Cold water and her face, however, were not to meet that day. Halfway across the room, Hermione's left forearm began to throb. Startled, she grasped her wrist, examining her perfectly smooth, healthy looking dermis. She paused, confused, gazing blankly ahead, then slowly began moving to the door. Opening it, she broke into a run, sliding across the kitchen floor, flinging open the door to the lab and clambering down the stairs to find one Severus Snape, a small sharp knife in his right hand, dexterously slicing out what remained of his Dark Mark.

Hermione paused, horrified. There was blood... everywhere. Bits of carven flesh lay twitching, scattered across the stainless steel table.

Severus, without turning his attention from his task, said through gritted teeth, "Burn the remains."

"But... but you..."

"Burn them! NOW!"

Hermione quickly grabbed one of the smaller iron cauldrons and reached for the first lump of twitching Dark Magicked flesh, unthinkingly reaching into his blood...

The children screamed as his fellow cloaked and masked Death Eaters laughed loudly. Rowle kept his wand trained on their small heads, forcing their eyes to stay open as Crabbe Crucio'd a man in Ministry robes and Goyle raped a woman with no robes, holding her legs over his shoulders, thumping her back on the cold ground.

"Melissa," the woman cried, "Freddie... I love you. Your father loves you..."

Her voice was cut off, however; Goyle slit her throat slowly as he reached his climax.

Hermione thought she was going to throw up when Lucius touched her shoulder and said, "Severus, it's your turn to cast the Mark."

Her face remained impassive, save for a slight smirk, even as her stomach roiled and tears burned somewhere deep behind her eyes. "*Morsmordre*," she said, her strong voice sounding foreign to her ears.

"Burn them, girl!"

Hermione's knees buckled, but she grabbed the rest of the former pieces of Severus, tossed them in the bucket and quickly set fire to them with her wand.

She turned to him, the knife buried deep in his forearm, sweat beading his forehead. "Professor, you've got to stop," she protested.

He cut out one more slice, which Hermione grabbed

"Do you love me, Severus?"

Hermione knelt and kissed the robe of Lord Voldemort, then kissed his claw-like toes. "Yes, my lord. Of course." She made her voice break. "Must you ask?"

"Oh, yes, Severus. I fear I do not trust you as much as I would like. Fortunately, I have devised a way to remedy this..."

"Anything, my lord. Anything."

"Lucius?"

The platinum-haired wizard brought out a young girl of about fifteen. She didn't struggle, oddly enough. She looked Voldemort directly in his red eyes, her face crumpling in a mix of disdain and pity. "I'm not afraid of you," she said, softly.

"You, Mudblood, have no need to be afraid of me." She cocked her head at him. "It is dear Severus you must fear."

The blood in Hermione's veins went still.

Then Voldemort's high, cold voice said simply, "Kill her for me, Severus."

Without a blink, Hermione stepped forward, saying calmly, "*Avada Kedavra*."

When she came to again, Severus was carving out the last of his forearm. Quickly, she gathered the rest of the carnage and burned it.

"Professor," she said shakily as tears streamed down her face, "tell me you have Blood Replenishing Potion on hand."

Severus nodded his head to a small bottle, letting the knife clatter to the floor, resting his flayed arm limply on the table. Hermione grabbed it. There was only half a bottle left. She tipped it down his throat.

"Professor... Professor, listen to me!" she snapped as his head nodded. She held his head and said, leaning her face close to his, "Did we ship all of our Blood Replenishing Potion to Madam Pomfrey?"

He nodded limply.

Her voice shook as she ground out between her teeth, "You daft prick!"

With that, she Disapparated them both.

0o0o0o0

White-faced and wanting to vomit but she couldn't, because she'd already vomited everything in her stomach Hermione waited in Madam Pomfrey's cozy office, pacing slowly. She was too anxious to sit, but her stomach was still too tender to pace quickly.

Eventually, Madam Pomfrey entered, closing the door quietly behind her. Meeting Hermione's tired, worried gaze for a moment, she then closed her eyes and leaned against the door, sighing heavily.

There was a long moment of silence, in which it seemed to Hermione that the ticks of the grandfather clock echoed resoundingly through the room. Finally, Hermione asked in a small voice, "How is he?"

Poppy wiped her brow, coming forward wearily to her desk. "He'll live." She lowered herself to the chair, the effects of rheumatism in her joints evident. "Again." Placing her forehead on the base of her hand, "Severus has more lives..."

"I don't think he was trying to..."

"No. Not that hard, anyway."

"Professor... he... doesn't want to die."

Poppy gazed at her for a moment, then relaxed back into the chair. "Do you have any idea what caused him to do this to himself? Has anything changed recently?"

"We've both changed a fraction every day, I suppose," Hermione began wearily. "But there haven't been any drastic changes... except... well, I suppose this morning, but..."

"What happened this morning?"

Hermione perched on Poppy's side of the desk, facing her. "We've been getting on rather well lately. Quietly, but amicably enough. Neither of us has a strong affection for the other, but I think... I believed there was a mutual, if grudging on his side, respect. Then this morning he scrutinised me for the better part of half an hour, then... before lunch he said some... he said... cruel things. I went to my room and maybe three quarters of an hour later, felt a premonition and found him..." she trailed off.

"I see," Poppy said finally.

Hermione shifted. "May I see him?"

"Yes, I think that would be best."

Choosing to overlook the cryptic statement for the time being, Hermione exited the cozy office and entered the stark, long room full of hospital beds, the one at the far end containing a Severus Snape who seemed somehow thinner even than normally. Hermione attributed it to his blood loss.

"You fool," she said gently to the almost comatose man as she sat down in the comfy chair Madam Pomfrey had placed near his bed for her. Filled with confidence during his slumber, she reached out and placed his right hand on her left, stroking it softly with her other. She shuddered as tears seemed to fill her being. "What would I have done if you had managed to kill yourself, you fool? You bastard? You blockhead?" Replacing his hand, she bent to rest her head by his shoulder and sighed shudderingly. Her voice muffled, she said, "I have something to tell you." She sat up again. "I wish you would wake up, so I could." After a pause and with voice trembling, she continued, "Although, perhaps you might receive it better in your sleep, anyway, so here it is: I forgive you."

"Firstly, I forgive you for saying those nasty things to me today. I have deduced from following circumstances that you had things on your mind and probably didn't really mean them.

"Secondly... Well, something happened, Professor. Yes, I know, how astute am I, the woman you chose to be your apprentice. When I touched your blood, I found myself experiencing one of your memories, not as an observer, but as you. Well, it happened twice, actually," she choked on the tears and snot accumulating in her face, "so I experienced two different memories. And of all the memories for me to experience... I was there with you during two of what have probably been some of the worst things to ever happen to you... some of the worst things you've ever had to do." Her voice broke, then she resumed.

"This is what puzzled me at first, Professor: Why those memories? Why not boring memories of a classroom? Or memories of Order meetings? Why the darkest moments a person could imagine? I have several theories for her to experience... but we can talk about those later. My ultimate conclusion is that I think I was meant to see those things, because... because they give me the courage to... to..."

"I forgive you, Professor.

"I forgive you for all the horrible things you've ever had to do for the sake of the war. I forgive you for killing that brave, blonde girl. I forgive you for smiling while the Death Eaters - those pigs - maimed people's souls. I forgive you for killing Dumbledore.

"I don't know what my forgiveness for all these things can do. What I hope it can do... I hope you will finally exonerate yourself. You've paid your fair share of dues.

"I know, I'm only twenty-one and what do I know of paying dues? That's the point, Professor. I'm linked with you now. What I didn't glean from your memories, I gleaned from your blood in my veins. I know you better than anyone, now, I think. I know your regret. I know why you nearly de-limbed yourself today."

She sniffled. "As the Muggles say, it all 'clicked' for me, just this afternoon."

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Severus Snape was not asleep. Nor had he been since Hermione had sat down beside him. He had merely been resting his eyes, but when his apprentice had approached, he deemed it better for her to think he was asleep, than to deal with whatever questions she might have.

He also didn't think he could face her.

However, she started talking... and soon he couldn't think of anything but that he must keep his eyes closed so that she would keep talking.

The dichotomy Severus Snape lived with always reared again.

She forgave him!

She forgave him? Who the hell did she think she was? How was her forgiveness supposed to mitigate years of murder, poison, torture, betrayal and double play?

She forgave him.

Even if she did, what did it matter? What did it matter that he had one person's forgiveness?

It mattered infinitely. It mattered that of all people, she forgave him.

He felt tears leaking from under his eyelids.

"No," he said, making his voice hard as stone to compensate for the weakness.

"Professor?" Hermione was surprised.

"You don't know all of it."

She sat silent and reached for his well hand again. He snatched it away from her, finally opening his eyes and meeting her gaze.

"I created the spell, Sectumsempra."

"Yes, I know," Hermione responded, perplexed. Why was he telling her information to which she was already privy?

"I created that spell before you were born. I was sixteen. My heart was full of dark things, disgusting things. I joined the Death Eaters shortly thereafter. Tom Riddle wanted me because of my dark talents."

"Professor..." Hermione grabbed his hand and grasped it tightly, refusing to let go, "I know."

Madam Pomfrey and Minerva McGonagall rushed out of the office and toward them both.

"Hermione, Minerva just Floo'd in..." Poppy said breathlessly.

"Hermione..." Minerva said, approaching her slowly. "It's your parents."

To Sleep, Perchance to Dream

Chapter 10 of 10

In which Severus searches for Hermione and finds her.

"Hermione, it's your parents."

Hermione could count on one hand the number of times she'd seen Minerva McGonagall cry. When she did, it usually meant there was a forthcoming apocalypse.

"Professor... what about my parents?"

"There's been an attack... the renegade Death Eaters..."

Hermione was sprinting out of the room before McGonagall could finish her sentence.

OoOoOoO

By the time she arrived at her parents' house, Aurors had already cleaned up most of the mess.

She stood immobile on the edge of the lawn, gripping the flag on the mailbox.

As she drank in the sight of witches and wizards garbed in Ministry robes filing in and out of the house, Obliviators gathering gawkers in the distance and floating quills scribbling hastily on pieces of parchment, she wondered if she'd ever felt quite this way before. She felt as though her brain was calmly gathering supplies, preparing for a terrible storm.

"Perhaps," she mused, "perhaps they're all right. Maybe the Aurors got here in time. There are so many Ministry workers because of the number of dead Death Eaters."

Minerva McGonagall's misty eyes rose in her mind.

Her brain continued in its preparations.

Her movements, as she made her way through the busy, babbling Ministry employees, felt surreal. Each step was heavier, though more numb, than any she had ever taken.

She entered the house.

"Mum?" she called.

There was no one in the foyer.

"Mum?"

No one in the kitchen.

"Dad?"

The loo and dining room were empty.

"Mummy?"

OoOoOoO

"Poppy," Severus met her eyes with all the force behind his black gaze which he could muster, "remove your hands from my person."

Poppy pursed her lips, but took her hands from Severus' shoulders, allowing him to sit up the rest of the way.

Slowly, he stood up, cradling his arm. "My wand. And robes."

Minerva interjected, "Severus, you must rest."

"They're in the office, Severus, but..."

Severus gestured, his wand and robes flying out to him. "I must go to Hermione."

The two elderly witches stood side by side, glancing at each other.

"It appears you must," Minerva said.

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Severus Snape, ex- Death Eater, former member of the Order of the Phoenix, triple agent between Albus Dumbledore and the fallen Lord Voldemort, now embarked upon the single most terrifying adventure of his life and all because of one single element: hope.

At first, Severus could not at all account for the strange lightness of being he felt because it was so at odds with Hermione's sorrow and the sorrow he felt on her behalf (he could not tell where one ended and the other began). Somewhere in his search for Hermione he rather thought it was between her house and St. Mungo's he finally realised it was hope.

With Voldemort there was certainly never hope; a lust for power there was, certainly, then later only hate and determination. With Albus, there had been work. Work for redemption, for peace, though Severus had been grateful for it.

Thus, Severus set out on the single most terrifying adventure of his life.

For what was he hoping, anyway? A wave of fear washed over him at the question, images of Hermione rising in the corners of his mind.

She forgave him.

Forgiveness doesn't mean acceptance.

It's a start.

All this time spent shutting others out, just to let her in?

"It's time," he muttered.

Perhaps the Severus of nearly two years ago would have martyred himself into a lonely and early grave. In fact, before his situation with Hermione Miss Granger that was exactly what he had been doing. However, the Severus with a bit of Hermione's magical blood properties... found himself either not able to fight his fondness and gratitude towards her or unwilling to. He was not yet certain which it was, but in either case, he was done playing the fool what good was precious dignity if it helped nothing, created nothing, loved nothing?

Smirking wryly, Severus thought he must thank Sean Hamish sometime.

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She was not at St. Mungo's. Neither had she been at the scene of the crime, though he knew she had been there; the Aurors had told him of the wild scene she had created. He stiffened at the thought, feeling his vision cloud darkly. He shook it off. Empathy for Hermione was not going to help her. Not yet. First he must find her.

He was directed to St. Mungo's; the Aurors again had instructed him thither. Apparently, the Ministry was still as full of incompetent lightweights as ever it had been because she was not there, nor did it appear that she had ever checked in.

He scoured the house in Doolin for her, but it was despondently empty.

He searched the pub in Bunratty, but again, she was not there.

He doubted she would go back to Hogwarts. There was one last place his powers of deduction were capable of figuring, then his resources would be exhausted.

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Hermione stood in the cold night wind, staring at the abyss in front of her. Slowly, she dragged her toe along the edge of the cliff, a few ragged stones and clumps of dirt scraping off, never to be seen again. Her knees buckled, sending more debris over the edge. Lowering her limbs gingerly, she sat on the precipice, staring down at the dark water, crashing. The waves were so far away; their sound hardly reached her ears.

Perhaps she was merely dreaming this whole thing anyway.

She began to rock a bit, attempting to excise the pain in her body.

For some pains, there are no words.

For some pains, there is no capacity.

For some pains, Hermione mused in quiet desperation, perhaps there is only release.

This pain was rather like a replacement organ, whose tissue was incompatible with her body. It was being rejected.

Hermione convulsed again, her brows knitting together. Still, there were no tears. What good were tears? Tears would not make her stop hurting. Neither would they wash away the visions of her parents' twisted, desecrated bodies.

If she kept staring at the dark, crashing water, so many kilometers away, perhaps it would keep the atoms of herself from exploding, from rejecting each other, like the bad organ.

If she were to get closer to the water... to join the water... the pain would stop. However, she also would not be able to make her parents' killers suffer...

Her thoughts were then disrupted by the only welcome voice in the universe.

"I know what you're thinking."

Tilting her head back, she let the deep, dulcet tones wash through her, a healing balm.

She didn't respond.

"Miss Gra..."

She felt him approach, kneel beside her, then speak softly in her ear, "Hermione."

If only he would keep talking... if only his sound would continue to minister through her, perhaps she would be able to move again. Already, she could feel her muscles relaxing.

"Hermione, the Cliffs of Moher have seen too much injury. Do not add to its memories."

She managed to jerk her shoulder a bit towards him, which was incentive enough for him to rise, grasp her from behind by the shoulders and lift her up, turning her to face him.

She looked up, half wild, half-numb, and looked... and looked... and looked... his eyes were black... deep... soft... velvet... if his voice was balm, his eyes cushioned her.

"You musn't go to that place, Hermione," he urged her, holding her in the vise of his arms. "You are untainted."

She looked confusedly at him.

"Revenge is never as sweet as one thinks it to be," he murmured, softly, as he slowly raised her just enough so that her toes lifted off the ground, and moved backward, away from the steep edge. "Neither is death. I ought to know," he laughed, grimly.

"But..." the word came out from her throat breathily, harshly.

"Our souls have mingled, Hermione," he vociferated firmly. Then, softer, "Your pure one has given relief to my tired, grey one." He paused and she thought she might have seen the glint of a tear forming.

She paused, clinging to his sturdiness, his velvet voice. "Take me home," she whispered.

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After they Side-Along Apparated back to the house in Doolin, Severus prepared to set her down on the doorstep, when Hermione whispered, pathetically, "Please don't leave me alone tonight."

Pausing, hardly knowing what he was about, Severus merely scooped her up in both arms and carried her into the library, where he would sit with her as long as she needed. "I won't."