

Once Upon A Time

by Anastadne

Ariadne and Anastasia's SSHG Exchange Fic: Something is calling the older Muggleborn witches into the Forest; all but one have returned apparently unharmed. After years in exile, Hermione returns to set things right. Written for lanthe Waiting.

Once Upon A Time

Chapter 1 of 1

Ariadne and Anastasia's SSHG Exchange Fic: Something is calling the older Muggleborn witches into the Forest; all but one have returned apparently unharmed. After years in exile, Hermione returns to set things right. Written for lanthe Waiting.

Ariadne's Author's Note: Thank you to lantheWaiting for such an evocative prompt, which is included at the end to avoid spoilers. A million chocolates to Annie, Indy, Karelia, Dicky, and Scoffy for their contributions to the story and its writers; a bow of acknowledgment to Gustav Klimt, whose painting provided the base image for the cover art; and, as ever and always, my profound gratitude to Anastasia, who lent her inestimable magic for a very crucial scene.

~ Ari



Part I: Episodes 1-5

1: Hermione's Field Journal

2010.04.10.1 12:01 a.m. En route London -> Hogsmeade; Hogwarts Express (special run).

Can't sleep.

I would never have imagined coming back here. It took me six years to learn what he'd done and another three to determine what he'd become.

"Take it across the water. Quickly," Bane had said when I'd rushed into the clearing, running headlong from the Shack, the killing grounds, into the forest. "Your stars are wrong," he'd said, notching an arrow to emphasize his point that, for reasons I couldn't understand and which he refused to elaborate, I was no longer welcome at Hogwarts.

"But I want to stay here it's my home."

"These skies are not for you."

"What?"

"Just go. Across the water." He'd drawn his bow, and, for the second time that night, I'd fled.

I, who'd never fled a challenge in my life.

So many dead. Harry had beaten Voldemort. And in a fit of delayed conscience and hand-wringing guilt, I'd gone back to the Shrieking Shack, wondering, hoping that the professor still lived.

It did.

Yes, "it." And yes, I know that fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself. In other venues I might hedge, protesting that I don't know to which name it properly belongs now but however true that might be, what truly scares me is although I can classify it according to the nicest, most accurate catalogs and indices in the annals of magical creatures, I'm not sure which pronoun best applies (His? Its?), and even after twelve years, even only in writing, I won't use his name.

Make of that what you will.

I don't know whether "it" would have died if I hadn't gone back to the Shack that night. I've replayed that night in my dreams, of course as is only natural; "part of the healing," the sisters told me in the convent where I went for supplies and to send the odd owl during that first summer away. In the good dreams, I didn't go back, and ended up with a clear conscience and some kind of amnesia that somehow manifested itself in a houseful of squalling, squabbling red-headed children.

And those were the good dreams. That should give you an indication how bad the others were the ones where I did go back. The ones that always ended the same way my time at Hogwarts had: with me held at bow-point by the centaur.

Bane wouldn't answer any of my questions clearly - he'd just intoned his hollow mumblings about how my presence was forbidden, I was too early, blah blah... the whole time tracking my chest with his eyes, following it through the darkness with his arrow.

My shoe was broken, and I bent to fix it, catching the point of his arrow on my cheek. Something in the poison the centaurs use resisted the sisters' best efforts... To this day I don't know which of us was the more responsible for the scar.

But he mended my shoe.

I was already crossing the Channel before my hair caught on something and I looked down to where the professor's cufflink dangled, a small pendulum hanging from my only remaining button.

The cufflink, the button, and my dignity my sanity - hanging from a thread.

A nice, shiny target for a centaur's arrow.

I'd ripped them off and stuffed them into my pocket, taking what remained of myself across the water, under different stars.

It was years before I'd known what that meant.

I made my way eastward across the Continent. I couldn't stand people their eyes, their whispers, their superstitious gestures whenever I approached so I spent the summer camping in the Carpathians.

Bit of an apt choice, that, although I didn't appreciate the irony at the time. It wasn't until I stumbled across a clue the Polidori papers in the university at Genoa that I began to unravel what had happened in the Shrieking Shack.

Odd that I didn't figure it sooner I was there, after all. But I didn't know what it meant, or what it would continue to mean.

Something in Nagini's bite changed him. It would have been better, perhaps, if he'd died, however awfully. Or merely become a vampire. A hunk of garlic and a bit of wood; end of problem, leaving me free to raise a host of Weasley brats as though nothing had ever happened.

But it didn't work that way. You don't contract vampirism from snakes, however poisonous, however the snake itself might be poisoned by a shattered remnant of a madman's soul. You become something else altogether. If you're lucky, if that's how you define luck.

If I hadn't been there...

Well, I was there, wasn't I?

So no, not a vampire. He had become something, though, some "it" that even now I'm not certain merits a different pronoun. The Polidori papers contained a clue to what that "it" might be something older, something that by the Middle Ages was only a rumor a forbidden fairy tale, a decoration on the curling edges of an ancient map.

I needed Viktor not because he had any expertise, but because I thought he might help, if only by not dismissing my questions out of hand so I went to Sofia, to another wizarding school under other stars. Bane would have approved.

Sofia. An ancient name meaning "wisdom." And Bane is an ancient name meaning "burden."

Writing these names makes me see their irony. It's hard not to laugh at how apt they all are. But bugger objectivity when you're speeding through the dark toward a place you'd've sold your soul to avoid, especially when it's your blood on the line.

Well, mine more or less. Mine's long gone spattered against the wall of the Shrieking Shack by my former professor. But after carrying this around for twelve years, I suppose I can call it mine, even if it didn't start out that way. Even in the wizarding world, possession is a good percentage of the law not that the Wizengamot would touch this question.

No, resolving that is my job. The job I was sent away to learn, to train for.

The blood in my veins whether it is mine or not is probably academic after this long has its own clear ideas about where I should be. It's been keening since the boat docked in Dover.

Or maybe it's my imagination.

Home. The last place on earth I thought I'd willingly return.

After twelve years of exile, something called me home, and I couldn't say no.

The sisters would call it healing. I call it blood. You can call it duty, or obligation, or anything you like it really makes no difference.

It came in the form of McGonagall's letter.

Doesn't it always...

2: The Headmistress's Letter

Dear Miss Granger,

I read with interest the story in the *Prophet* of your recent return from the Pyrenees. Even allowing for their usual lack of fact-checking and tendency to overstate the sensational, I'm certain that your venture was a resounding success. Hagrid is going about telling anyone who will listen (not that one can help it when he gets going, as I'm sure you remember) that you were his star pupil. There was a time when I thought to see you in Transfiguration, but of course things change; I will merely add that we are all proud of you. To think that such creatures have been under goblin control for so many centuries right under our noses of course you would discern the truth and see to it that they should be provided with a secure reserve in their proper environment, wrangling the political niceties to a satisfactory conclusion....

But I digress, with you unaware of my object in writing. As you may have read, if you still take the *Prophet*, there have been several incidents concerning Hogwarts students and the Forbidden Forest over the last few years. Hagrid and his contacts in the outer Forest have investigated, of course, but they've learned little certainly nothing conclusive. I'm turning to you because these incidents are escalating both in frequency and, now, as of just last week....

Despite all of our precautions and admonishments, one of our sixth-year students a young witch by the name of Chastity Purview slipped out of the castle between study hours and curfew, but unlike those before her, she did not return, either that night or the next morning.

The centaurs delivered a bracelet to Hagrid this morning. Her housemates confirm it as hers.

To you, I will admit that we are starting to fear the worst. I've kept this latest incident out of the papers for now her parents are exceptionally well-placed in Muggle Society and prefer to avoid publicity but even with the assistance of the Ministry, we've turned up nothing.

I'm writing to ask to beg your assistance. I fear that Miss Purview will not be the last. With over a month remaining in the term, I would prefer to keep our students here at school, but if these incidents continue, I shall have to send the young witches home with the academic year incomplete.

Please, Miss Granger. I know it's been many years since we've seen you, and that what happened in the war has left its permanent scars, but Hogwarts needs you.

Minerva M. McGonagall

Headmistress

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

3: Hermione's Field Journal/Minerva's Office

Field Notes: 2010.04.10.2. Hogwarts/Forest. Arrived Hogsmeade last night; met with Headmistress this morning.

When Hermione Granger entered the Headmistress's office at sunrise, Minerva suppressed a gasp.

The girl she had known all determination and fluffy hair was gone.

Before her stood a lean, hardened figure in serviceable grey; her once rampant hair shorn painfully short; a long, pale scar running along her cheekbone beneath her left eye; four silver earrings running up the side of one ear the only indication that she might be female.

Calm brown eyes revealed recognition, nothing more, as the woman nodded a silent greeting.

Minerva's pleasant greeting shrank to a small "Thank you for coming, Miss Granger."

"Of course."

Sighing, Minerva sat. "I know it can't have been easy for you to return."

Hermione Granger did not sneer, but her cool, level gaze carried with it that impression nonetheless. "Have you records of the previous attacks?"

Minerva paled at the word, and Hermione's cool stare noted that change.

"I've prepared copies of my notes regarding the previous incidents..."

"Attacks."

"You speak as if you know what sort of creature is behind them."

"Please." Hermione held out her hand for the sheaf of parchments, and Minerva handed them to her. Hermione tucked them into the worn brown satchel she wore slung close across her chest.

"That's custom work," Minerva said, noting the stitching on the strap.

Hermione nodded and said nothing.

"I've had rooms prepared for you in the castle, of course..."

"No. I prefer to stay in the field. There's no telling how deep in the forest my work will take me."

"As you prefer."

Hermione turned to leave as the Headmistress was saying, "We're so grateful to you..."

"No." Hermione turned, fingering the strap of her bag. "I'm not doing this for you. This should have been done long ago, as you well know."

"I realize how difficult this is for you..."

"No, Minerva. You don't. You can't."

"You... you suspect it's him, then?"

Hermione rested her hand on the heavy iron door latch. "Why else would you have contacted me?"

Flustered, the older woman half rose. "For your expertise with magical creatures, of course. I'm so grateful Durmstrang allowed you leave this close to the end of term..."

The look Hermione spared the headmistress lingered with derision on her fluttering hands.

Minerva tried again. "There may be another explanation...."

"Is naivete a requirement for this office, then?" Without another word, Hermione left.

The door thudded shut, and Minerva sat weakly in the aftermath. *At least she's here. At least she's here.*

4: Hermione's Field Journal / The Forest (I)

Field Notes: 2010.04.10.3. Forest. School records indicate expected pattern: 6th&7th years, female. Muggle-born. Headmistress in denial. Departed castle 1400 hours; will make contact with Centaurs before nightfall.

The ring of poplars marked the gateway into the forest proper, still-bare branches clattering sharply in the biting air of early Spring.

Hermione strode into the middle and waited, her eyes narrowing as she took immediate note of the forest noises to establish a daylight baseline against which to measure the night. Her nostrils flared slightly as though she were a wild creature, scenting the wind.

Inwardly, she knew it for rage, but outwardly, her face remained impassive as she stood once again where she had least intended to come least, that is, except for one.

She stood in the spot where she had last spoken with Bane.

She looked at the clearing with hard eyes.

5: May 2-3, 1998:

After the Final Battle

She had stumbled blindly into the forest, responding to an impulse deeper than any she'd known before. A branch had caught her eye and she'd pressed her back against one of the poplars in full leaf then closing her eyes hard against the scratch.

"The progress of the stars foretold your coming," he had said. "But you are early. These skies are yours no longer; you are forbidden."

She'd squinted into the darkness through stinging, watering eyes and seen Bane reaching for an arrow.

"You must leave this place."

"B-b-b-but it's my h-h-home," she'd protested through chattering teeth, her jaw aching from the blow, the blood on her face smearing away as her eyes watered themselves clean of debris.

"You have lost place here, human."

"I'm not human... I'm a w-w-w-itch," she'd protested.

"Perhaps. But you are too early, and it is forbidden. You can go no further into the forest tonight."

"So where am I supposed to go, then? I can't go back!" She'd flung the question at him, but he'd held her steady in his sights, following her with the point of his arrow.

"Away."

She'd dropped her head then, noting with quiet detachment she would later identify as a symptom of shock that the sole of her shoe had separated. She'd reached automatically for her wand and bent down, only to feel the barbed point of Bane's arrow pressed sharp against her cheek.

She flinched, and the arrow grazed the skin under her eye. With a small cry of protest, she froze. "I'm not here to harm you!"

"You will do no more magic tonight."

"I was only going to "

"You are forbidden."

She'd wiped her hand across her cheek. It stung, badly, and her hand came away bloody, too bloody for such a small scratch. She looked up at him and felt her mind snap. "Damn you! Damn you all!"

"You cannot damn a Centaur," he replied calmly.

She'd gripped her wand.

The point of his arrow pressed once more into her cheek, catching the edge of her wound.

She'd stepped back, pushing his arrow aside. It caught, and her skin tore. "You won't kill me."

"You humans are very trusting."

"No; *this* human is very logical. If I'm early, then you can't kill me, or whatever it is will never happen, will it? But it's foretold, so now I am going to fix my shoe." She bent down.

"Not with magic," he'd whispered, his hand closing around hers. "Please. Don't make me hurt you worse than I have done."

She'd stared at him.

"To prevent far worse," he explained.

Startled, she'd hesitated. "Why can't I use magic?"

"You do not know your own blood; you cannot control what might happen. In due course, you will learn." He'd murmured something in a soft, almost musical cadence; her shoe mended, and her cheek stopped bleeding, but the cut did not close.

She'd stared at him. "What do you mean I don't know my blood?"

"I have fixed your hoof. Go."

Blinking up at him, tears falling unbidden, she'd whispered, "I can't go back."

Bane had shaken his mane.

"But what should I do?"

"Go."

"Where?"

His gaze had raked her face. "Away. As far as you can, until you can go no further." He'd walked toward her then, and she'd backed up. His long strides soon had her scrambling backward, branches snagging in her hair, tearing at her robes.

Once she stood outside the ring of trees, he'd halted, fingering his bow.

"Bane, please," she'd begged. "I know you've no love for wizards, but I'm still a child. A... a foal. I don't know what's happening to me."

"The damage is done."

"What happened to me?!"

The look he'd given her had been unreadable.

"Just tell me how to make the burning stop?"

"It burns because it is forbidden," he'd said, then turned and galloped away.

"PLEASE!" she'd shouted.

As he disappeared into the trees, she heard him call back to her. "Water. Water will stop it, for a time."

Part II: Episodes 6-11

6: The Forest (II) / Hermione's Field Journal

The absence of sound brought Hermione back to the present, instantly alert. She bent to the ground and placed a hand on a patch of moss, feeling for the first vibrations of hoofbeats that would herald a centaur's approach.

Nothing.

Her hand closed on her wand, but even as her eyes swept the trees, the forest noises returned.

She spread her cloak over the damp moss and sat, withdrawing her field journal from her bag.

To all appearances, she was absorbed in her writing.

Field Notes: 2010.04.10.4. Forest. Arrived centaurs' clearing.

Being watched by centaur scout. Possibly by the other; probably not yet, although it doubtless senses my presence.

Awaiting Bane.

Best to appear unconcerned under possible scrutiny; will therefore summarize research concerning the creature called the "cora" for such it has become.

Cora: From the Latin, *cor* ("heart [organ]"); cf. *anima*/-us, also from the Latin ("heart [force/e.g., courage]"). According to Polidori, the first and only reported creation of a cora occurred in Africa sometime in the third century.

The account probably more of a legend by the time it made its way to Europe states that a tribal elder was defeated in battle by a giant serpent but forestalled his death by cleaving his physical being from his magical one, forcing his eldest son to bear his blood, the transference somehow negating the effects of the poison, leaving the elder an empty vessel.

An empty vessel. How apt. And how unscientific of me to say so.

The effects on the elder, based on very occasional sightings, were thus: no change to outward appearance; retained ability to do magic; intolerant of social contact; actions limited to those of long-established habit and the instinctive acquisition of basic needs (breath; food).

I suspect the before and after differences are minimal in the particular case at hand.

Also unscientific.

The effects on the son are unknown; Polidori's margin note on the son's fate reads, in full, "Rumoured to have had average lifespan; after died, sightings of creature ceased."

Thus is my understanding of what, if anything, I have become. A margin note on a lost scroll; a rumor of a legend.

Once upon a time, I rather expected more.

Whatever the creature was called by his tribe, Polidori's notes truncate the translation as "cora" after "cor," one of several Latin words for "heart." Best translation = the organ of the heart.

I suspect the original name was somewhat longer.

I bear its blood, but I am not its child.

I know what it wants.

7: Bane

At the feel of hoofbeats, Hermione tucked her journal away and rose, brushing last year's leaves off of her cloak.

Bane entered the clearing, saw her, and stopped.

"Stars still wrong?" she asked drily.

"Your return was foretold, that night," he said, taking a step closer. "You know what he became."

"A cora."

"You know, also, what he seeks?"

Hermione ignored the question. "Have you seen any sign of the girl?"

"The foal broke free and is cowering in the rock formations near the stream. We have kept watch over her but not approached."

"Is she harmed?"

"Not outwardly."

When Bane said nothing further, Hermione's eyes narrowed. "And otherwise?"

"Her stars remain the same, as have those of the other foals he has called."

"All but one."

Bane nodded. "All but one."

Settling her cloak on her shoulders and restoring her bag to its accustomed place, she said, "So where can I find the cora?"

"He sleeps in the cradle made by the stream before it falls."

Hermione gazed at him flatly. "A bit more concrete, if you please."

Bane gestured toward the southwest. "A day's walk. For your kind, maybe two."

"Have you spoken with it?"

Bane looked at her mildly quizzically. "No. We herded him toward safety and left him in peace; we provide such requirements as seem needful for one who sleeps as much as he. He has not sought our company nor expressed gratitude for our assistance."

"Does it still do magic?"

"More asleep than awake. Perhaps awake, as well."

"Without a wand?"

"Have you learned nothing?"

Hermione shifted her weight slightly, and the rustling of leaves on the forest floor silenced the birds again. "Is there anything else I should know?"

"He waits."

"I know."

"For you."

"Not for me. For what I carry."

"I have told you where he sleeps. My part is done." With that, Bane left the clearing.

8: Hermione's Field Journal

Field Notes: 2010.04.10.5. Forest. Interim camp.

I've got too much use out of this tent. Its walls don't shield me from anything, but there's nothing worse without than I carry within.

I found the Purview girl in the rocks and sent her back to the castle.

She can go back she never even saw the cora. Just felt its call in her sleep. No memory of leaving the castle.

No memory. A blessing. She will not only survive but recover. It helps that she wasn't the one.

No. That role is taken. Has been since the beginning.

Lucky me.

The girl was hiding, as the centaur said, in a crevice between stones. Scared, dirty, still in her dressing gown. Chilled to the bone.

The centaurs will see her back safely enough.

Once I convinced her she wasn't imagining me, she told me her story. No memory of leaving the castle came to her senses, at least partially, deep in the forest, off the path. Said she'd heard a voice in her sleep and had to follow almost a compulsion.

I know it too well; still can't sleep.

"What did the voice say to you?" I asked her.

"At first nothing at least nothing I could make out clearly. Just a sound, you know?"

"Like a whisper?"

"No; more of a murmuring. A... a beckoning." She stared at me for affirmation, eyes wide. Already the tale she will tell eclipses what really happened.

Save me from teenagers.

"What did the voice say?" I prompted her.

She rambled a bit, sniffled a great deal, but eventually I learned the content of the compulsion: a single word. "Come."

It stopped when she neared the stream. Points for cleverness, or perhaps instinct; she made it across the water before she hid in the rocks.

Gave her my spare cloak, some socks, my old trail boots.

She will recover.

I can't sleep.

Should try, though, if only for scientific purposes.

Call me, you bastard. I'll come.

9: The Forest (III)

The absence of sound brought Hermione to her elbows. She'd managed to sleep using the breathing exercises the sisters had taught her, which she'd not had to do for years.

She awoke at every sound, only to roll over and will herself back to sleep.

"Come."

Her eyes flew open.

The forest was silent.

"It's about time," she said.

She rubbed her hand over her shorn hair and eased out of the tent, wand at the ready.

There was light at her campsite where no light should be. A flicker, as of a single torch, coming from behind her.

She wheeled around, falling instantly into defensive fighting stance, and the light went out.

She heard, or imagined she heard a chuckle.

She ignored it, rounding the tent, every muscle taut, her eyes straining through the darkness.

A hushed sound - up, to the left.

Nothing. Only starlight, blocked by a tangle of branches.

Her eyes adjusting to the darkness, she moved slowly, if not silently, to a place where her line of sight was clear.

The shadow of an owl, floating on silent wings to land on a nearby branch.

As she watched, its wings burst into sudden flame, igniting the tree in a magical onslaught of fire.

She threw up her arm to shield her face from the heat, and the flames went out.

10: Hermione's Field Journal / The Forest (IV)

Field notes: 2010.04.11. Interim camp.

The bastard is toying with me.

I am not his toy.

If it didn't mean my almost certain death would it? I'd kill him properly.

In the darkness outside the tent, a pair of empty, intelligent eyes reflected distant stars.

11: Somewhere

She is home... she, who has carried my blood in her veins for all this time... she is home, here with me, at last... so close... close enough to touch...

I touched her too roughly last time... it was the only way; she was young; I was desperate; I had no thought other than death until she appeared... she cared... she came... and she has come again...

Home...

She cut her hair...

... but mine has grown. I shall wrap her in it, a falling softness like silk, and she will breathe for both of us...

... if she lets me.

I would have written, but what to say? How to contain the force of what I have become, what I always could have been, on mere parchment, stiff in an owl's claw?

Each time I tried, I dissolved the paltry, insufficient words with a thought my thoughts will burn, or soothe, or solve, at her will...

This thing I have become... purified by her sacrifice, although I forced it on her a slight body to carry within it such a burden but as the blood left my veins, the poison wisped away like the finest powder, rising like dust into her blood on the walls... all that stands between us now is...

There was me, and there was her, and now my blood runs in her veins... I should remember...

But with the poison, out flowed the last of my destiny, my importance to the matters of the world finally complete, and she, replete with what remained of my honor, my courage, living for so long bereft of my touch...

... for only with my touch can the burning cease.

She had no choice...

She is my grief, my honor, my regret... but she has come.

She is here.

She is home.

Part III: Once Upon A Time

Forest (V)

When Hermione rounded the curve made by the stream, she heard the falls and stopped moving.

In a clearing in the pale Spring sunlight, she glimpsed a neatly-kept dwelling of wood and stone that seemed to emerge organically from the tumbled rocks at streamside. Spotting a well-tended garden plot surrounded by a small orchard of budding fruit trees, she blinked rapidly, having expected, at best, a shelter of rotting skins; perhaps a hermit's cave.

She moved quietly around the edge of the clearing, instinctively remaining behind the tree-line as her senses stretched taut, aware of every sound, seeking any sign of life.

The cora would know she'd arrived; the blood in her veins seemed to crackle with the fall of the water on the rocks below.

It would know, but she preferred to spot it before it spotted her.

"I stand behind you."

Fingers tensing on her wand, she drew herself upright, exhaling and centering before turning around.

When she did, she saw nothing but the rocks and trees. "Stop playing games."

He moved, and only then could she see him, her mind sharply criticizing that she should have seen him before, if only she'd been looking properly.

Adjusting his cloak around his shoulders, he seemed to ripple into visibility as though drawing his being from the substance of the forest itself. He nodded formally to her, saying, "I have become so accustomed to solitude that I often lose myself in my surroundings."

Hermione's mouth tightened. "You were ever a chameleon."

"Indeed; the outcome of the war depended on that more than once." His tone was mild, and he inclined his head again, conceding the point, but his eyes seemed to rebuke her with some quiet disappointment.

"So," she said, standing straighter, "what do you mean by attacking Hogwarts students?"

"I would never "

"Don't lie to me."

" again cause intentional harm," he finished simply.

"Don't lie you cannot hide what you are from me, of all people."

"I wouldn't dream of trying."

She spat, "Don't toy with me I know very well what you are."

He seemed to measure her words with his gaze. "Do you?" he asked, his tone devoid of judgment.

His lack of censure unnerved her, and she attacked. "How could I not know, after what you did to me?"

"Rather easily, in fact." His tone carried with it an echo of regret, a concession, almost an apology.

Her only response was a flinty stare.

He closed his eyes once, slowly, but said no more, gesturing for her to precede him out of the trees.

She returned that gift unopened.

He dropped his hand. "I swear by my honor that I neither can nor will do you more harm than I've already done."

"Your 'honor.' You'll forgive me if I don't lend that much credence."

"So much rage." His voice was quiet.

"After you," Hermione said, stepping aside and gesturing with her wand.

He nodded and led the way into the orchard, indicating a small stone bench for her, "should you care to rest after your journey."

She remained standing, rolling her wand between thumb and fingers as though memorizing the feel of the vinewood.

He broke the silence. "Tea?"

She blinked.

"You expected perhaps a hermit attired in stinking pelts, with bits of twig and muck in his matted hair?" His words were pointed, but his tone remained mild.

Her eyes flashed. "Actually, yes."

"Then I apologize, however awkwardly, for exceeding your expectations."

The word "apologize" hung in the air, but Hermione countered, "You're not at all what I expected. You're nothing. You're just... a cora. A monster."

"And you, Miss Granger, are far, far more than a margin note scribbled by an opium-addled writer of sensational fiction."

She exhaled slowly. "How do you know about Polidori?"

"If you think you can refrain from killing me until after I've prepared our tea " His eyes bespoke quite amusement.

"I am *not* here to kill you, and I don't want any damned tea!"

His lips twitched slightly, but try as she might, she could detect no note of mockery or derision in his expression.

"Yes, you do want tea. You're thirsty, and the warmth will calm you. If you would grant me the small favor of not killing me before I can provide it, I shall explain how I know about Polidori."

Hermione glared at him but sat stiffly and rather pointedly on the stone bench, saying nothing.

"Ah." He turned toward the cottage.

To Hermione's ears, he sounded almost sad. "As he ought, at the very least," she muttered, watching the door close behind him.

Then: The Shrieking Shack

Her fingers tremble on the rough wood... listening... no signs of life from above except the crack of dead wood in a trailing gust of wind.

"Professor?"

The door falls away from her hand, swinging inward then slipping its hinge to hang helplessly askew. Long trails of disturbed dust mingling with frantic footprints across the floor, leading to the far side of the room where, in the shadow, a pool of ink-black robes...

A peeling sound, halting her hesitant step; looking down, small cracks growing to wild streaks splaying into stars up the boards of an upended table.

"Sir?"

Peering through silted air, the smell of copper, the scent of rage rising, stronger, as she approaches...

The sight of him sitting motionless against the wall, head tilted, his flat dark eyes fixed directly on her the breath she holds tearing from her throat in a moan. His hand a claw at his collar, a frozen hook over the gaping hole where his throat had been, the weight of his own arm pulling him brokenly to one side; a running strand of congealing blood swaying in a puff of air coming through a crack in the wall.

She groans and moves closer, her mindless hand clutching her own throat in primal empathy.

Crouching down, she reaches out, laying her slight hand over his, her fingers carefully tracing his cufflink a serpent reeling back, coiled to strike; its eyes, inlaid emeralds, opaque with dried blood...

She sighs and moves to stand to help, to seek for help, she doesn't know; she never will know searching his face, freezing as his eye moves; a fraction of a flicker.

Now

"Your tea."

She tries to hide her trembling hand by sweeping a curl behind her ear, but that curl was cut long ago.

His hand patiently holds the cup.

She exhales and takes it from him. "So you know about Polidori how?"

"I see what you see, I feel what you feel, I know what you know, even if you will not admit that you do."

Her teeth chatter on the cup, and she sets it beside her on the bench.

"It's not your actions that betray your fear, Miss Granger."

"Then what does?" she snaps.

"Your heart."

"And how do you know that?"

"It's what happens."

"When you become a cora."

He nods. "When I became your cora."

Her words come out in a growl: "You are not mine."

"Drink your tea."

Her mindless hand obeys.

"I regret what I did to you, Miss Granger," he begins, his words but a low murmur in the quiet trees. "The transformation was already upon me when you came."

"Don't tell me you didn't have a choice."

"Had you not come, I would have stayed empty no blood, no heart, no force, no will."

"You should have done."

"Perhaps," he agrees. "But your eyes said yes."

She chokes on her tea. "I was a child."

"Yes."

"You took you *stole* something from me you couldn't even ask?!" she accuses him wildly.

"No."

She slips unknowing into childhood words: "Rubbish!"

"I had no throat at the time."

She blinks, blushing.

His eyes soften. "So pretty."

"It's your blood in my cheeks, you bastard."

"I refer to your eyes, Miss Granger. When you remember, they do not hate me, and no more do you."

She doesn't know what to say.

"You offered me an option when you appeared that night, and I took it. The transfer removed the venom."

"So you say."

"So I know; you didn't die."

"No, but you should have."

"A cora halved cannot die."

"Halved?"

"Without its heart."

"You still have a heart, surely."

"I do, by your coming, even if only as a metaphor."

She frowns. "That's backwards. 'Cora' refers to the organ; 'animus' to the more metaphorical aspects of the heart."

He raises his hand as if to touch her shorn hair and traces a finger through the air by her ear; he does not touch her. "Can you deny you took my rage?"

Her face a mask as she struggles to say, "Yes," but she is ultimately too logical to bother with lying. Instead, she snarls, "Can I not even have my own rage? Must everything be yours?"

He whispers, "Your heart was ever big enough for us both, Miss Granger."

She opens her mouth to speak, but he finishes for her, "Even as a child."

Then

Before she can draw breath to scream, his hand clenches around hers, his nails, torn and bloody, tearing her; she bleeds.

He drags her to him, too close, his wide eyes locking with hers.

He grips her other wrist.

She tries, blindly, to throw herself backwards away flailing to escape.

Her shoulder rams into the wall as her shoes lose traction in a slow, sickly slide; his fanged cufflink digging into her wrist as she sags, slipping down the wall...

"No... please... Professor..."

Now

Hermione swallows.

His eyes trace the beads of perspiration over her lip; they follow her tongue as she licks them away.

"So your heart..." she begins.

"... is literally empty. What Polidori didn't know couldn't have known, Miss Granger is the gift of the anima."

"Gift," she repeats flatly, her eyes narrowing.

"The gift of the anima is this: In recompense for the heart's loss of literal purpose, its other purposes courage, honor, regret expand."

"I gave you no gift." Her eyes bespeak her lie.

"You did, by your coming."

"I wish you'd died."

"Your gift was harder than death."

"Good." Her word a curse.

"You've never realized what killed Voldemort."

She shrugs, indifferent; it was so long ago.

"Conscience."

She snorts. "Please."

"If you want to punish evil, Miss Granger, you need only give it a conscience."

"That didn't happen."

"You don't know what happened. Not really."

"Harry never mentioned it."

"Subtlety was never his strong suit; I doubt if even now he understands how things really happened."

"Don't start on Harry."

He inclines his head in acquiescence to her wish. "Can you not imagine, Miss Granger, what your gift did to me?"

"Why should I?" But he knows her well, and already her mind seeks understanding.

He waits.

Her expression changes, and she stares at his chest as if his conscience were a visible thing.

"I presume you no longer wish to kill me?"

"I never said "

"You did; consult your field journal."

She cannot look him in the eye; she looks down, away. "I didn't mean it."

"You meant it more truly than you realize."

"Really? And you know this how?"

Again, his hand lifts to cradle her head; again, he does not touch her. "You cut your hair."

"I... what?"

"My throat was unavailable." He smiles, a small smile.

"The last time I saw you, it wasn't there at all."

He inhales softly. "Rage and fear a devastating combination." He means it; his eyes have grown gentle.

She flashes, hostile: "What do you imagine I'm afraid of?"

"I need not imagine, my anima; I already know."

She lifts her chin in challenge. "Fine. What do I fear, then?"

He sips his tea. "That I'll kiss you again."

Her eyes fly to his she cannot stop them. "Again?"

"And that I won't." He replaces his cup and saucer on the grass and leans his elbow on his knee.

"Wait... what do you mean 'again'?"

"And what you find even more terrifying..."

"Than kissing you? Please." She tosses her head as though she still has long hair.

"... so terrifying that you refuse to remember that it ever happened ..."

She stares at him numbly, her voice dying in her throat.

"... the fact that you liked it."

Then

His gaze rivets on her, his panicked expression echoing in time with hers. Drawing up to his full height over her, the tendons of his torn throat flexing naked as he moves, he pauses, an endless moment in fleeting time then a sudden decision.

His lips curl in rage, in disgust, in horror, and with a single, fluid motion he pulls her up, shocks her against the wall, pins her body with his...

Raising her arms above her head, twisting her wrists, with terrible gentleness he lowers his forehead to hers, closing his eyes...

... betrayal by the betrayed...

... his lips touch hers, a softness, a darkness, in agony, in despair, helpless and desperate the release of her breath warm into him...

His hands release hers to splay on the wall, and, overcome by magic more desperate than hope, her hands seek his hair and she feels his warmth slipping away...

Without breath, he brushes her wrist with fleeting affection before she knows nothing but blinding, searing pain; he is forcing his cufflink into her skin, tearing down the length of her wrist. He leans against her, pushing her harder, dragging the serpent's fangs downward, slicing the length of her veins, drinking her gasps, her screams into his body with lips soft as night, kissing her deeply as her screams fray into the howl of the dying...

... betrayal by the betrayed...

Her blood flows down their joined arms, pulsing with her wild heartbeat, first a stream, then a torrent raining between them, more blood than one slight body should contain bursting outward, covering the walls, and still he holds her, his lips on hers, begging her with his soul for forgiveness, for release, his hips pinning hers, helpless...

She is dying, she is bereft, and still she seeks his touch, the only anchor left her...

He breaks the kiss, catching her arms, her body as she falls; cradling her against him in triumph, in agony, hesitating for an unmeasurable moment as life begins to leave...

Her eyes losing focus, she slumps, spineless over his arm, her head falling back as if in ecstasy, and maybe, maybe...

He stares into her dimming eyes, a feral, blazing hunger as he lifts his head and seems for a moment to pray, raising his gaze to the ceiling, to the fathomless night beyond.

Her eyes as they're dying say yes, and he raises her wrist to his throat.

He bares his teeth against what will follow.

And his blood rushes into her body; silent, empty, he watches as she returns to gasping life.

And she smiles a smile of ancient sadness as he lowers her to the floor.

Eyes wild, he freezes, cowering the shape of her a visible memory of his holding her, strong, alive against the wall, her empty silhouette the only thing unbloodied, unstained.

He assures himself she breathes her eyes, confused, ask him to stay, to explain.

He runs.

Now

"I'm sorry."

His voice brings her back to the present, and she finds she has risen, pressing her back against a tree as if it's all that stands between her and falling.

She cannot speak for breathing.

"There may be a solution," he says, "a partial one."

"Tell me," she rasps as though her throat is as injured as his once was.

"Give it back."

"Give... what back? Your blood?" Instinctively she presses herself harder against the tree as though she can, by force of will, slip into the wood. "No. It's mine now I need it."

He shakes his head, watching her with shadowed eyes. "A symbolic exchange; a drop will suffice."

"And that will dissolve this bond?"

"No."

"I thought you said..."

"It will restore some portion of my humanity and, I hope, relieve some of your burden. I shall remain your cora until I die; that is irrevocable. Incontrovertible."

She takes a step away from the tree, but one hand lingers on its bark, its smoothness certain in the sudden onslaught of possibility.

"How do you know this when I don't, when all you know you learned from my research?"

"Polidori neither spoke nor read Tarifit; no more do you."

"I don't follow."

"Tarifit," he repeats, standing. "A Moroccan dialect; the language of the original cora legend. And of several of the earliest known Potions texts."

She eyes him skeptically. "Polidori's source was in Latin."

"I know both languages and have had ample time to consider the ambiguities of translation."

"So through my readings of Polidori's notes regarding a lost text in Latin, you somehow arrive at a partial resolution based on... on mistranslation?"

"I have also had ample motivation."

She steps carefully away from him, ready to put the tree between them should the need arise. "That being?"

"I would help you if I can."

Her eyes accuse him with the force of his own memories.

He does not need to see the disbelief on her face; he feels it as she does. "I feel what you feel, Hermione, but if you will not believe my remorse, perhaps you will trust my self-interest. Lessening your burden will lighten my own."

She tilts her head sharply, and her eyes lighten with a rapid decision. "Done. What do we do?"

"Return a drop of my blood, by whatever method you choose." He stands before her patiently, awaiting her justice.

She fingers the strap of her bag before lifting it over her head. With a neat gesture, she restores the buckle to its original form.

His face registers the serpent shape of his cufflink, and he cannot hide his appreciation for the neatness of her chosen means.

She reads his admiration in his eyes and hesitates. "What will happen?"

"I'm not entirely certain. I only hope; I do not know."

"That's just grand," she mutters, nonetheless touching the serpent's fang to her finger, piercing her skin.

He watches, his eyes alive as a drop of their blood swells over the whorls on her skin.

She feels her blood keen, and her eyes darken as she steps toward him, her finger rising toward his lips.

He makes no move.

She turns her finger and rubs her own her lip.

He inhales, paralyzed in foreknowledge a moment before her hand slips under his hair and she draws herself upward to brush her lips quickly too quickly against his.

Shaken, he stares at her.

The memory of a smile crosses her lips. "You did say 'symbolic.'"

He doesn't dare breathe; he doesn't ever want to move again.

But the magic of the cora arises within her, and her eyes widen as she feels his emotions exploding into her heart, expanding until she feels as though her very skin is irrelevant, non-existent; how else can she possibly encompass the scope of the sky?

She staggers and drops to her knees, her hand rising to her chest, and he is there, crouching beside her, his hand near her shoulder lest she fall. "How?" she gasps. "How do you live, feeling all of... that? How do you keep standing?" She drops her hand to the ground as though last year's leaves can breathe for her.

He knows he cannot help her any more than he already has. "Polidori would say it is merely habit."

She stares at the pattern of veins in the leaves beneath her hand. "I don't know how you live with this."

"Conscience is the only punishment for what I've done. I ask for nothing more."

"Don't you?"

"To hope is not to ask."

"Hope," she repeats. Her breathing steadies, and she remembers herself, and she stands, leaning against the tree.

His hand falls to his side.

Her face registers the knowledge behind facts she's long known. "You *called* those girls into the forest."

"Yes."

"Seeking a *mate*."

"I regret their discomfort, but they were never in danger from me."

"They were terrified. McGonagall is terrified for them."

"They were in no danger because..."

"... they aren't me," she finishes.

He lowers his head but not his gaze. "Yes. You know it now. You can feel it."

"I felt your call as soon as I touched British soil. You must stop that."

"I cannot. A cora will ever seek its anima."

"Cannot.' What a fascinating word for 'don't want to.'"

He grabs her wrist and spins her hard, pinning her back against the tree with the full length of his body. "You know I cannot. Now you know what I know; you feel what I feel. You know it happens in my sleep. You know I will always call to you. Always."

"Your heart yearns for me." She snorts. "How puerile."

"No. My heart calls to its blood; it knows you now."

She shakes off his hands, and he steps back but doesn't move away. "Your problem. Not mine."

"Hermione, I've lived in you for a dozen years."

"Your point?"

"My point is that I hope."

"Hope... for what, exactly?" She twists away from the truth. "You cannot hope for love."

"No." He shakes his head, and his hair brushes her cheek.

Gently.

She remembers his terrible, shocking gentleness on that long-ago night; she remembers softness and darkness, and she shivers.

"You know what I hope," he says softly.

She closes her eyes and knows his wordless wish to absorb her rage, to erase her fear, all in the service of one small, infinite hope that she might, someday, want again to let her hair grow long.

She shakes her head at the absurdity of it. And yet...

She inhales, exhales, the centering breath the sisters taught her.

That she might once again want to let her hair grow long.

Not absurd at all.

Whatever else might follow, she knows his hope is for her.

"So you see," he says quietly.

"Pretty sentiments." Her words are sharp, but they have lost their sting.

He dares to place a fingertip beneath her chin; she feels him want her to look him in the eye.

It is a small enough thing, and she does.

His eyes mark his thanks. "I have found that the truth can be pretty, indeed."

She looks at him for a moment, but the moment ends, and she steps away, reforming the buckle from his cufflink and making a business out of reattaching it to her bag.

"You'll stop seeking your mate amongst Hogwarts' under-aged Muggle-borns," she says, not looking at him. She already knows it's true, although it will be some time before she can accept why it is.

"Yes," he says, knowing his words are unnecessary.

"All right, then." She gives him a searching, sidelong glance, taking in the fall of his hair, the seriousness of his eyes, the orchard around him.

He knows what she knows and feels what she feels.

It is too much, too early, and too impossible. For now, she will choose to leave.

She turns.

"May I write to you?" he asks.

She turns to deliver a cool look. "Will it prevent your compromising any more students?"

"The blood exchange already has done."

She shrugs, but it is a shrug of acceptance, not dismissal. "Write if you wish; I certainly can't stop you. Although as I'll already know what you've written as soon as you write it, there seems to be little point in exploiting the owls."

"You will find no small comfort in the conventionality of such a courtship."

She pauses, adjusting the strap of her bag. "Perhaps I will." A small smile, admitting only slight possibility, nothing more.

He nods slowly.

"Just promise me something." She knows before he replies that if it is in his power, he will promise, and her smile, still small, takes on a touch of amazement, a touch of satisfaction, and an awareness of self-discipline of the likes even she has never known.

Although neither need speak, he says it aloud: "I promise. No more flaming owls."

She nods. She does not know what to say.

His eyes hold hers, the distance between them as impossible as the intimacy they cannot change. "Perhaps, after an exchange of letters, you will visit again?"

She holds up her hand, but he persists. "And perhaps next time "

"If there is a next time, Severus Snape, you'll have to earn it." She turns and walks away, slipping into the forest as if it is hers by right.

He knows that she knows that she feels what he feels.

Standing quietly in his orchard in the early spring, he raises his face to the thin sunlight and smiles.

Finite

Original prompt: Original Prompt: AU, EWE, Severus' body is never found after the events of that May night, however he is presumed dead due the sheer amount of gore and blood left in the Shrieking Shack. Years later (exact number up to the author), Hermione returns to Hogwarts (reason up to author) and becomes involved in investigating the attack of a student who wandered too far into a generally unexplored part of the Forbidden Forest. The attack is magical in nature and not by an animal. The more Hermione investigates, the closer she comes to finding the truth, the closer she comes to Severus. Is he mad? Has he been protected or rejected by the denizens of the Forest? I prefer mystery, adult situations, angst, and an ending where Severus will not have to be reintroduced to the world at large.