

Cast Out

by *windwings*

The war is over, but there are still battles to fight.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: This is not a regular story. The unusual thing about it is that I did not write it. I have translated it from Russian, and originally it is written by the author named **Mad**. I do, however, have her express permission to translate it into English and post to archives.

I'd like to thank two wonderful people (and best betas a fangirl can get) who helped me with this **Larlope** and **Melusin**. Your advice, corrections and opinions were invaluable!

Now, on to the reading. Tell me what you think, my lovely readers! Your opinion matters a lot, both to me and to the author.

~o~

There is no wind, which is good. Winter wind is much worse than the actual cold: it chills to the marrow and deprives a rare Christmas snowfall of any joy. Funny, what they call winter wind: piercing. Sounds like something the young do to their ears and noses, but doesn't make you think of bold hoops or diamond studs; rather, it has the ring of something lifelessly cold and pain-inflicting.

The calm makes the snowfall thick and languid as if someone up above were sifting snowflakes like flour. In the park, the children are immersed in imaginary winter cook-outs...too little frosty substance still for snowmen and castles so, someone has suggested making snow cakes, and the game has quickly become popular with the girls. The boys, of course, are occupied with a snowball fight, but Hermione spares them not a single glance. Her five-year-old daughter squats and rakes up some snow into a pile, her hands clad in patterned, hand-knitted mittens. A few minutes later, two little girls, pattering about, stop to stare enviously at a dainty house where Madge is currently outlining a window with her finger.

"But that's not a cake," one of the girls states accusingly.

"No, it's not," Madge replies with a smile. "It's Santa's cottage."

"Of course it's not, silly!" the girl keeps cavilling. "Santa lives in a magical castle, with fairies and elves!"

Hermione makes it to her daughter before the girl's smile fades from her face.

"Hey, we haven't paid a visit to the ducks yet, Madge!" She forcefully turns the child towards her and peers into her huge brown eyes with fear. "Why don't we start for the pond, dear, in case they all decide to hide from the blizzard?"

Honey-coloured locks that have escaped from Madge's woollen hat are frosted white, and the tips of her tiny fingers are red with cold. She turns to her mother, seeking warmth, but even when Hermione blows hot air on her daughter's hands, it helps little. It's so cold it seems if they clasp hands together, the freeze will glue them to each other.

The two of them leave the playground and stroll towards the pond. Madge is fond of watching the ducks, but she never tries to feed them. About a month ago, Hermione even brought a few slices of bread along, following the example of the numerous bird lovers that frequented the park. But her daughter was not impressed with the way the ducks and seagulls fussed noisily over the breadcrumbs. She would mostly stare at the place in the middle of the pond where the ducks swam, diving in to feed, their tails floating still like feathery fishing bobs.

Hermione prefers staring at the trees. Their bare branches, darkened by the cold, spring up and look like roots that delve into the sky, connecting it with the earth. Right now, their twining pattern is blurred by the swirl of snow that sticks to her eyelashes, stinging her cheeks and forehead with frosty pecks.

~o~

The white flakes swarming in the air that day weren't snow. They were myriads of petals from the wildly blossoming apple trees. Ginny's and Hermione's wedding dresses were almost identical, and both of them had their hair adorned with fleur d'orange. The Golden Quartet...the famous trio plus the newly-fledged Mrs Potter...greeted the cheering crowd at the entrance to the Ministerial Marriage Registry Office. The four of them exuded happiness. Even the uncomfortable shoes and the way her clumsy husband kept stepping on the hem of her dress were inherent parts of the shining new world before her: white ribbons, the off-white of the apple blossom blizzard, and the many marble steps down to the square, the stones looking even whiter in the bright spring sunshine. She walked down cautiously, watching her step all the time, and that was why she missed the spell flash. When she turned round, startled by Ginny's shriek, her friend's dress looked like a fancy tulip: white, with an intricate scattering of red specks. Harry's unseeing eyes stared up into the blue brilliance. Hermione hadn't been crying before, so it took her a while to figure out the source of the warm moisture on her cheek. Turned out, those hadn't been tears, but blood.

~o~

Hermione procrastinates over the visit to her child's future school for as long as it is humanly possible, but Madge absolutely has to start attending classes after Christmas. The Headmistress, Mrs Carson, is so eerily reminiscent of McGonagall that Hermione is uncomfortably ashamed of the *Confundus* she had to resort to.

"Would you like a small tour, Mrs Weasley?" the Headmistress asks.

"Oh, that would be lovely," she replies politely.

She has been scared that drawing a comparison with Hogwarts would be inevitable, but it does not happen. After all, before she learned she was a witch, she had been an ordinary schoolgirl in a similar establishment. The school comprises just a few long corridors with rooms on each side, nothing like Hogwarts.

"We don't really have many well-equipped classrooms," Mrs Carson informs her with a regretful sigh, "but I can say, we are most definitely proud of our arts room and our chemistry laboratory."

The source of her pride becomes understandable when Hermione peeks into the chemistry classroom. Yes, most definitely far removed from archaic cauldrons, wooden workbenches and alcohol lamps. Hermione's eyes scan the high-tech-ish looking work tables, locked stands with reagents, cabinets with neatly arranged flasks and measuring beakers and other equipment she isn't competent enough to name. She soon discovers that the only out-of-place element in this pristine sanctuary of science is the chemistry teacher.

"Oh, afternoon, Mr Snape! I'm just here on a little promotional tour with Mrs Weasley, the mother of one of our new arrivals."

Hermione discretely sticks her hand in the pocket of her trousers and pinches herself. Hard. Snape does not fade away from view.

She is surprised, even though she shouldn't be. After the war ended, Snape was hardly society's most favourite wizard. First, he was sacked from Hogwarts and then was altogether banished from the wizarding world during the massive "witch hunt" launched immediately after Harry's death. His fate doesn't look so bad, compared with what befell many of those suspected of dealing with the Dark Lord, Death Eaters or Dark Magic in general. But honestly, a chemistry teacher in a Muggle school?

Ye fates, your ways are inscrutable.

Not a single thing in Snape's appearance betrays his prior knowledge of Mrs Weasley. He simply nods a silent greeting to the Headmistress and continues on with his business. If he is as surprised as she is, he is much better at hiding it, as usual.

~o~

Hermione isn't exactly poor, but she's stretching it. They don't starve, but decent clothes and housing are beyond her means. She can barely afford the rent for two rooms facing the back yard in a shabby, three-storey terraced building. The ground floor houses a flower shop, named 'Camellia'. Monsieur Moreaux, the Algerian immigrant who owns the shop, beams cordially when he sees his two neighbours.

"What a wonderful day it is, Madame Weasley! Young mademoiselle, I have just had a delivery of fresh marguerites that look almost as pretty as you."

A smile lights up Madge's face, but Hermione frowns; this is so not the perfect time for the good-natured florist to entertain her daughter with pretty blooms of all sorts. If he insists on their coming in, they will be late. And it's not just about timing. Of late, Hermione finds it increasingly difficult to be sincerely cheery around Anna, the shop-keeper's assistant, especially when she leaves her regular place behind the counter and her gently rounded belly becomes visible.

~o~

Ginny looked as lifeless as a waif, wan skin and ugly smudges of purple under her eyes. She hardly ate and was seldom able to hold down whatever she did manage to swallow, a fact that no pregnancy toxemia could justify. With frightening tenacity, she continued accepting the multiple do-gooders who kept coming in to commiserate on her loss. She crossed her thin arms over her bloated belly and wallowed in her own grief. Hermione struggled to understand why her sister-in-law was so insistent about this twisted form of self-flagellation and failed. Ron tried to talk to her, but failed as well; she would only look at him in exactly the same way she looked at her visiting mourners and weepers and keep the same listless silence. After Harry's funeral, Ginny couldn't be called talkative in general, but the words she had to say to Ron and Hermione were particularly few. Over the six months that had passed since Harry's death, she'd only spoken to them twice. One of those two instances was when she'd croaked, "Why him?"

How was Hermione even supposed to answer that? Harry had been the target. His murderer's alleged ties to Voldemort or Death Eaters were never proven. It was just another madman seeking fame through killing The-Boy-Who-Lived. Of course, that didn't make Harry's death any easier to accept or justify. He'd lost so much, and he'd deserved love and happiness like no one else had. Hermione felt like somewhere behind Ginny's "Why him?" lingered "Why not you?" She probably was a better grab for the Grim Reaper...Ginny wouldn't be wishing death on her own brother, would she? Considering that she'd already lost one.

~o~

It's been two months since Madge started school, and Hermione hasn't seen Snape once. She doesn't seek him out, of course; he could hardly pass for someone she'd enjoy having a conversation with or reminiscing about 'the old days', and really, there isn't anything to talk about. Yet, sometimes she experiences a strange pull to peep into the chemistry laboratory. As if she would find him there mixing ingredients with those remarkable hands of his.

Miss Marston, Madge's teacher, intercepts Hermione in the hall.

"Oh, Mrs Weasley! And here I was looking for you. I'd like to talk to you about Madge. You know, she is such a curious and gifted girl."

"Yes, that she is," Hermione answers carefully, smelling a rat.

"Mrs Weasley, pardon my asking, but you are bringing up your daughter... alone, aren't you?"

"What kind of question is that?" Hermione fumes, but her emotional reaction is eloquent enough.

"Oh, please, don't misunderstand. It's just that... you see, we are having this special programme this year..." Miss Marston's cheeks take on a decidedly beetroot shade of red.

"Excuse me," Hermione cuts her off curtly, "but I'm in a hurry."

"The school council is arranging lectures this year... about teenage pregnancy and sexual education," poor Miss Marston shoots out helplessly, "and single families are often liable to... It is a proven fact that children with single parents become sexually active earlier than their peers and... please, you don't have to go yourself, but maybe Madge's father..."

"Madge's father has left this world. For good," Hermione grinds out angrily, ignoring the teacher's utter mortification. "And she is only six. Don't you think it's rather early for a sexual education class? This way, she will have forgotten everything by the time she does have need of such knowledge."

"It's just that we would like all the single parents whose children go to our school to get involved and..."

The teacher is obviously babbling. "I'm sorry," she croaks and looks at Hermione helplessly.

"So, these sexual education *classes* are actually for parents?" rages Hermione and then turns on her heel and leaves the teacher, who keeps staring at her back with compassion.

Teenage pregnancies, my arse. Bureaucratic idiots. Damn them and their demographic crisis and teenage pregnancies Hermione thinks as she walks back home, disgruntled and riled up. What does she even mean, 'single-parent families are liable to...'? Whatever was it that she meant to say? Righteous arse.

~o~

Eventually, getting pregnant had become the one thing she was scared of the most. Ginny would never forgive her the very ability to have kids with the man Hermione loved. It had become an unspoken rule at the Burrow not to laugh or joke in Mrs Potter's presence or generally to speak of anything that did not concern the blessed memory of Harry. Molly kept clucking over her daughter and supporting the capricious order of things she had established at home. Sometimes, it occurred to Hermione that she might be sleeping and seeing an endless nightmare. The question of 'Why him?' popped into her mind with frightening frequency.

At first, Ron was very receptive towards the idea of contraception, but when Ginny had the twins, James and Sirius, he declared that he wanted to be a parent, too. Hermione was puzzled by the sudden change in his opinion, but then it dawned on her: this was his desire to have a normal life manifesting itself.

As if they could.

~o~

Despite it being the middle of March, the pond is still icebound with a single dark spot of unfrozen water in the middle. There are no seagulls, and only a few ducks venture out to take a swim.

"Mum, will a duck drown if it falls asleep in the water?" Madge asks.

"Ducks don't fall asleep in the water, dear," Hermione says, absently staring at spiky knots on the trunks of sycamore trees.

"So, they stay awake for a few days in a row?"

"What makes you think that?" Hermione sounds surprised.

"Well, because they can't get out of the water. The ice edges are too sharp, and they will cut their feet off if they try." Her daughter's answer puts Hermione in a momentary stupor, but the girl's attention has already shifted to something else.

"Oh, Mummy, look! There's that teacher from our school. Georgina Smith says he's a psychic, but he's really just a chemistry teacher. He can do tricks with reactions," Madge says knowledgeablely.

"Reactions," Hermione corrects automatically and, with the same unthinking automatism, walks towards the dark figure.

Snape stands still at the side of the pond, hiding his hands in the pockets of his coat. She suddenly realizes that there's no apparent reason for her to approach him in any way, but he's spotted her already, and if she turns around and leaves now, she'll look like an unmannered fool.

He never turns or otherwise acknowledges that he is aware of her presence behind him. When he speaks, it's as if he were addressing the ducks.

"Ask whatever it is you feel obliged to ask and piss off."

Well, it's not the friendliest beginning of a conversation. The fact is, Hermione has nothing to ask. All those possible "Why are you here?" and "How does it feel, to live without magic?" questions seem unnecessary, and, truth be told, she's not really interested in knowing.

This is where he does turn to her, apparently taken aback by her silence.

"Is that Potter's child?" he asks callously, staring at Madge like she is a museum oddity.

Hermione recoils, as if slapped in the face.

"Fuck you, Professor."

She doesn't see Snape's perplexed face as she drags her daughter away from the pond so fast that the girl's little feet stumble and catch upon themselves.

"Mum, you know him?" Madge asks, looking coy.

"And how did you guess that, smartypants?"

"You only say the f-word to the people you know, like Grandmother, or Dad, or Uncle George..."

"I hadn't noticed that." Hermione shrugs. "But you, young lady, are absolutely not to use that word with anybody."

"But you say it sometimes!" Madge nags.

"I'll try to resist the temptation from now on," Hermione says with honest regret. "It's better never to say such words at all."

"Like spells?" Madge asks, and a frown creases her sweet, round face.

~o~

The first anniversary of Harry's death was marked by heavy rain. Molly, holding the six-months-old James and Sirius to her bosom expertly, was trying to talk her daughter, sprawled over the gravestone, into going home, but in vain. She finally gave up and took off, lest the babies should catch cold, leaving Hermione behind to hold an umbrella over Ginny while she cried inconsolably and blindly patted the writing on the stone. Rain repellents did little against the downpour, and Hermione was soaked to the bone. Ron stood next to her for a long while, his eyes glued to the inscription, Here lies Harry James Potter, beloved husband and friend. You gave your heart for us, and we shall keep you in ours forever.

Later that evening, as she left her husband shedding drunken tears in the company of George and Arthur, Hermione felt like she was coming down with the flu, despite Pepper Up's valiant attempts at holding it at bay.

When Ron finally came up to their bedroom, she was half-conscious with fever, and that was why, when he practically forced himself on her, drunk and oblivious, the experience seemed completely divorced from reality.

A week later, she'd fully recovered from the flu. Four weeks later, she learned of her pregnancy.

~o~

Easter spurs a fountain of celebratory activity at school. Older forms are staging an amateur showing of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and many youngsters are involved as extras in mob scenes. The obnoxious Miss Marston pesters parents with various preparatory tasks: Hermione becomes obliged to whip up five pairs of angel wings.

The teacher takes Hermione by the elbow and drags her along the corridor, blathering on about some requirements for stage props. As Hermione wracks her brains for a way to escape the annoying woman, she misses the fact that they've walked directly into the chemistry classroom.

"Oh, did you know," the teacher chatters, leaving the angel wings alone, "that our chemistry teacher has a very unusual name? Severus, of all things. But I think it suits him well. He *is* severe. And such a mysterious loner, as well."

The owner of the unusual name picks that moment to come out from the laboratory, which is adjacent to the classroom. His movements do not resemble the smooth swirl of black that Hermione remembers from her school days. Perhaps this is due to the absence of his billowing robes. His colour preference, however, hasn't changed, she notes.

"Mr Snape! You're just the person we need," Miss Marston exclaims, and Hermione hopes to use the switch in the woman's attention to her advantage and get out of her sight discreetly.

"See, we would like the water in the basin to froth and boil when the blood touches it...it would make such an impression!" the teacher says excitedly.

Snape plasters something akin to a very sour smile over his face as he greets Miss Marston, but Hermione sees how he steals a few covert glances at her as she hides behind the teacher and moves backwards.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," he mutters.

"Oh, but you know, the scene where Pilate washes his hands of Jesus? He will be doing it quite literally, I mean, but the audience won't be able see how the water is streaked with blood, and that's the whole point, so we thought if you could think of a safe reagent to recreate the effect of the boiling blood..."

Hermione wonders if the 'bloody' effect is to be recreated as well.

~o~

Her waters broke when she was barely thirty-six weeks along, and then it was just blood, pouring freely out of her. She had no idea that her body held so much blood. Her rapidly worsening state prevented her from being Apparated to St. Mungo's, so Ron and Molly fretted around Hermione frantically, waiting for a midwife Mediwitch to arrive. Ginny, on the contrary, remained calm, as if what was happening to her sister-in-law was nothing less than her due.

Later, when everything was over, she learned from the insipidly smiling Mediwitch about her extensive blood loss, internal injuries and her pelvic bones that were all too narrow. For a month, she had been surviving on Potions, weak as a kitten. Blankets cuddled her, and Warming Charms blanketed her, and still, she couldn't get warm, even when the bright sunlight of early spring flooded her room. During the day, the cold was tolerable, but as soon as night claimed the world, it seemed that the darkness was so dense that it would break the window pane any moment and drown her in the ice-cold sea of endless black. She closed her eyes, trying to escape the horror, but there was only darkness behind her closed lids. Darkness and cold. Maybe Ginny had been right all along. Maybe it should have been her; she should have gone back then. But she hadn't, and now darkness and gripping cold, the ever-present companions of Death, had come to get her. They wouldn't leave because they had come to claim their due, and it seemed to her that if she didn't give in, they would take her husband, take her daughter.

~o~

The heel on one of the shoes (the only decent pair she owns) has been loose for a few days already. Her boss is very firm about the company's dress code so, in a vain attempt to put less pressure on the unfortunate shoe, Hermione limps slightly, trying to catch up with Madge. However, a fluffy bundle of angel wings prevents her from looking properly where she is going, and right at the bus stop, her loose heel catches between the bars of a drain. She pulls her leg frantically, trying to free her foot from the drain, but only manages to lose her balance. Feather-covered wings fly around, and she prepares to land flat on her back, but instead finds herself caught by a pair of strong hands. Familiar strong hands, at that: long-fingered, pale and narrow.

"Falling out of the sky?" Snape asks, observing the wings with a sour face. "Didn't your mother teach you to watch your step?"

"Yes, and why don't you take points from Gryffindor while you're at it?" she spits half-heartedly, dazed by the way Snape's black cloak flares around him in the wind.

"Tsk, ts, Miss Granger, such dreadful manners again, now that you have perfect impunity."

"It's Mrs Weasley," she corrects him reluctantly.

"Really?" Snape's eyebrow crawls up his forehead in surprise. "Well, I can't say I'm surprised."

Hermione looks at the broken heel of her shoe, which is now sticking out impudently from the drain, and sighs. Madge runs over to her mother and starts picking up the scattered wings, peering warily at Snape from time to time.

"Unfortunately, it's outside my abilities to help you with your shoe. I'm not allowed to use magic," Snape says with an absolutely straight face.

"No!" Hermione yells as soon as she hears the word 'magic' and recoils with such fervour that she almost falls again. "There's no need. Thank you for your help."

Madge pales.

~o~

When the Potter twins turned two, Ginny lost the very ability to sleep at night. She just cried, quietly at first, but it obviously did not help to loosen up the black knot of despair inside her because muffled cries soon became wails, as if she had thought that turning up the volume to the level of mad hysterics would help her to share her pain, to make everyone see how she was still bleeding inside.

James and Sirius had identical green eyes and mops of unruly dark hair. Sometimes, Ginny's despair reached such heights that she could barely stand to look at her children. If it hadn't been for Molly's valiant attempts at keeping things together, the Burrow would have long ago turned into a mad house. Three toddlers and a bunch of adults, each with their own quirks and baggage, did not constitute a healthy environment. Arthur, using his job as a cover, invented one excuse after another to come home late, or even spend a night at work. George started coming to meals with a large mirror, which he placed in a chair in front of his seat, and talked to it, calling his own reflection 'Fred'. Ron perfected the process of pretending that nothing was going on to a fine art. And every single night was filled with Mrs Potter's agony-filled wails.

Ginny's despair was a torture for everyone, but Hermione took it especially badly. Cold and stifling darkness became her constant followers, and though Molly patched her room up with charms almost every evening, as soon as the night enveloped the house in the sea of black, icy wind entered her room in dozens of little draughts, and visions of Harry, answering to Ginny's calls, and Fred, walking out of the mirror, lurked in every shadowed spot.

When Arthur, who happened home late (as usual), stumbled upon his daughter and his son's wife, standing with bloody hands among the shards of the broken mirror, Ginny was taken to St. Mungo's ward for mental maladies. Hermione kept it to herself that it was actually she who had broken the damned mirror.

The cuts healed, and the nights were now mostly filled with fussy children crying, but with Molly's skill, they never cried for long, and most certainly, there was no desperation in their brief little sorrows. The Cold and the Dark retreated somewhat.

Little Magic Allison Weasley, unlike the two rascals, James and Sirius, was a calm and thoughtful child. By the age of three, she could read in English and also some Latin, count to a hundred, and she knew the Tales of Beedle the Bard by heart. Everyone was sure she had inherited her mother's intelligence.

At about the same age, it had become maddeningly clear that little Madge did not have a single magical bone in her body.

~o~

When Hermione remembers her Divination classes at Hogwarts, it is always in relation to Sybil Trelawney's words about her inner eye being completely blind and her utter lack of foreseeing capabilities.

Just like today. The day has started out all wrong from the early morning, but she hadn't felt a single hint of a premonition or even just the general bad feeling that even Muggles are apt to experience and take as a warning.

Miss Marston's gleeful squeals are caused by the way the angel wings have turned out. When she is ready to talk coherently, she informs Hermione that one of the 'angels' is down with something, and Madge is going to play the part.

"She will make a perfect little angel!" the teacher coos. "I will see you there, Mrs Weasley!"

The hall where the show is staged is stuffy...and *stuffed* with people. All the seats are occupied, and Hermione has to stand in the passageway at the entrance. 'The perfect little angel' appears on stage towards the end of the play. Madge is wearing a long, white, and baggy costume, and her wings are strapped to something like a... Hermione smiles, despite the throbbing head and lack of air, and it takes her a while to realize that Madge is, in fact, wearing safety gear. As the final song roars across the hall, five little girls in white, with feathery angel wings, soar up, suspended by climbing ropes.

Madge is afraid of heights, and Hermione does not stop to think why Miss Marston is not aware of it because the sudden rise makes the girl go mad with horror. Hermione panics, and her daughter's desperate cry is followed by a flash of blue from her mother.

"No, Mummy!" Madge's horrified yell pushes out the other sounds of worry around her from her head, and then all the lights go out in the hall. A few seconds later, the illumination is back, only to let Hermione see that Madge is hanging still and looks as lifeless as a rag-doll on her suspension rope. Two more seconds, and Hermione slumps down in a dead faint.

~o~

The Burrow burst with joyful havoc: James' and Sirius' birthday was celebrated with happy zeal. Bare tree branches sported fairy lights which created dainty shapes of various colours on the heavily laden table below. About a dozen little children were running amok in the garden, impatient to enjoy the last sunny bits of an unusually mild November. Birthday boys were showing off their shiny new brooms, and the rest of the group observed them with fascination and envy from the ground. Madge, who could not fly and hated to run about, did not participate in the fun.

"Why is your baby cousin sitting all alone?" one of the adult sympathizers yells reproachfully to the twins.

Neither Madge nor the boys were particularly fond of each other or willing to play together, but the grown-ups insisted.

James and Sirius must have already been quite talented back then because a mere moment later, the girl was on top of the roof, screaming her little heart out...and, judging by the smug look on the cousins' faces, it was definitely not a spontaneous burst of magic.

Madge, shaking and wailing, was brought down, and Hermione watched with dawning comprehension the way Molly gently reprimanded the rascals. She cast a meaningful glance at her husband, but Ron merely shrugged his shoulders and smiled apologetically...

~o~

"Granger, wake up!" Hermione is being gripped painfully by the shoulders and shaken a few times.

Snape.

For a single, crazy moment it seems to her that she has fallen asleep in Potions class. Fear holds her back from opening her eyes immediately, and the weight of what has happened sets on her shoulders fully as soon as she comes to.

"Madge!" Hermione cries out in horror and looks around...when she finally gathers enough courage to open her eyes.

There are plenty of people in the hall, but no one on the stage. The rigging swings back and forth eerily, but Madge is not there.

"Madge," she repeats in a whisper, feeling the Dark and the Cold creep around her heart steadily. "Madge, Madge..."

"She's fine," Snape says and releases his hold on Hermione. Her knees buckle under her, and he grabs her again. "Merlin, Granger, or whatever your name is now, do get

a hold of yourself, or I'll slap you back into consciousness!"

Hermione can't really tell if he's acted on his threat, but suddenly colours and sounds start to seep back into the world as she finds herself seated in a chair. She is still in the auditorium, but it is empty now and dimly lit. Snape walks over to her and hands her a glass of something.

"Drink this."

"What is it?" she asks dumbly. As if he were able to slip her Veritaserum. "Where is my daughter?"

"She's receiving first aid. Oh, for Christ's sake, just don't faint again. She's all right."

"You don't understand!" Hermione's hands are shaking so badly that the water in the glass splatters around. "Madge is afraid of heights. And she can't be around... She can't stand magic!"

She chokes on her water and snuffles helplessly.

"Nothing there that is too difficult to grasp. Your daughter is a Squib, and you haven't told her a single thing about the wizarding world and your abilities or place in it."

"It's not like that! And it's none of your damn business, anyway."

"Cool down, Granger, this is ridiculous. She *will* find out sooner or later. From her dear daddy, most probably. Where is he, by the way?"

Snape's face reminds her of a sneering mask in the half-light of the hall.

"Fuck off, Professor."

~o~

James' and Sirius' pranks did not end with the roof incident. Madge's favourite toys and books caught fire suddenly from time to time, and her plate would spill its contents all over her at least once a week. She took it all to heart, which only inspired the twins.

Minute tricks on family members (though not always safe) had never been a cause for worry in the Weasley family, so at first even Hermione did not connect the dots between Madge's nightmares and poor appetite and the Potter twins' idea of fun. After all, there were always potions for every occasion: an upset stomach, tantrums, sleep loss. Except that Madge didn't even read any longer. She just sat at the window listlessly all day and stared outside. Neither talking, nor shouting, or even threatening could cause her to react. The only thing that broke through her shell was magic. Whenever someone performed a spell around Madge...any spell...she had a massive breakdown.

~o~

A small coffee shop is something of a rarity in the part of the city which abounds in dubious pubs and other shady establishments. However, someone did have a bright idea to open it here, right next to *Camellia*, the florist's, which ranks the same on the scale of oddness with the coffee shop in the backwater district where Hermione lives.

Madge, demonstrating an amazing consistency for a child her age, keeps asking for hot chocolate and ice-cream, and today, Hermione orders it for the tenth time. However, the little place has surprisingly good coffee so she can't attribute the fact that they have been stopping by every day for a week-and-a-half already merely to coddling Madge's whimsy.

Hermione can't get rid of the feeling that the incident that day during the Easter school play happened mainly because of her. She'd panicked and had a spontaneous burst of magic, and Madge had felt it. When it was over, and the ruddy-cheeked aide, who looked very much like Madam Pomfrey...God, was this school somehow affiliated to Hogwarts or what?...took her to her daughter, the red-eyed (but dry-eyed) Madge stated that she wanted a stroll in the park and an ice-cream. It's been ten days, and the pattern hasn't changed once. Each evening, they go to the park and then spend some time in the tiny coffee shop.

On the seventh day, Snape joins the two of them. He is standing by the pond, leaning on one of the tree trunks when they see him, and as they pass him by, he nods a greeting, moves forward and offers his elbow to Hermione in a rather old-fashioned manner. The three of them start walking along the park alleys together.

Oh, this is not good. Not good at all, Hermione thinks to herself. *I have a load of problems as it is. I need to forget, to start over... and his very presence reminds me... of that other world, the one I long for so badly, the one that is closed to me now*

"What of your parents?" Snape asks cautiously when they have seated themselves at a table in the coffee shop.

She shrugs.

"I wasn't in a hurry to give them their memories back after the war was over. At first, I was just overwhelmed by everything... Ron, and all the new beginnings... Then, it was simply hard to cook up a suitable explanation as to why I had done this to them. And later... later, when everything happened... What kind of a daughter would I be if I just popped into their well-established lives now, with a kid in tow, asking them to take me in? Madge is my own responsibility. Mine alone. And please, no questions about Ronald, if you don't want me in another snit."

~o~

The fashionable restaurant in the West End was a half-cocked attempt to lure Ron with the attractions of Muggle life. With the money from selling her parents' old house, Hermione hoped to settle in the city and could afford being a little extravagant once in a while.

"Mione, whatever will I do here?" Ron's expression shifted from scared to annoyed in the shaky candlelight.

"We'll think of something," she said pathetically and gave him an ingratiating smile. "You could study, you know. Get an education, a job. Just look around! People do live here."

"That's exactly it! People. Muggles. And I'm a wizard. Just a wizard with an unfinished magical education. And it was you who dragged me forward, in all those subjects that I could only use in this world if I wanted to become a... some kind of a street buffoon!"

"But I used to live in this world! I am from this world!"

"And that's why you'll adapt, maybe." Ron pushed away from the table as if he were subconsciously trying to put more distance between himself and his wife. "You might even succeed. I won't," he added with a dreadful finality.

"But Madge! What about... You know she can't..." Hermione couldn't finish the sentence as the niggling feeling of futility slowly dawned on her. What was she striving to accomplish? Why was she still trying to talk him into it, if it was simply above his head to understand the situation?

"Listen, Mum's had a good idea. Why don't you and Madge live here, and I'll visit? She is better off with Muggles, you're right. And I'll come and see you often. I'll come and see you all the time! It's the best way out of this."

"No." *Hermione's voice rang with steel. "Even if you come and Apparate home every night."*

"What? I'm not following you..."

"You are part of the magical world, Ron. You are magical. Every time, when you come to us, you will bring exactly the thing that causes Madge so much pain. You will bring magic. You're just going to have to choose. Once and for all."

"Hermione, this is insane!" Ron banged his fist on the table, making the crystal glasses clink lamentably. "Is she mad, why do I have to move into a madhouse as well?"

"How can you..." *Hermione's words got stuck in her throat for a moment as she was choking on her own anger. "How dare you say such a thing? She is not mad!" A little more of this, and Ron might have got himself cursed.*

"That's right. She's not mad. She is just magically retarded. And you know whose fault that is?" Ron's narrowed eyes danced with insane, cruel flickers. "Yours! You did not want her! You didn't get your way, and you maimed her life for that. And now you want to do the same with mine!"

Slapping faces was for weaklings. Hermione's fist broke her husband's nose.

~o~

The winter sun sets early, and it's getting dark. A single streetlamp (the only one for a hundred yards around) lights up outside.

"It's getting late. We'd better go." Hermione gets up, smiling confusedly, and motions for Madge, who is hanging around the stand with cakes, to come.

She is relieved that she won't have to offer Snape to 'come up for coffee'; they have already had several each. It's the third evening in a row that he has met her and Madge in the park and accompanied them to the coffee shop. Hermione does not feel the slightest hint of awkwardness around him, though the situation itself is decidedly strange. There is an unspoken agreement between them not to discuss anything related to the one thing they have in common...their magical past; however, one look at his face is enough to spur a whirl of thoughts about said past in her head.

When the door of the coffee shop closes behind them, Madge and Snape nod solemnly to each other, and Hermione sticks out her hand to her former professor.

"Well, I'll see you soon!" she says brightly as she shakes his hand and immediately catches herself *Damn it, what am I blabbering about? See him indeed... Okay, Hermione, that's it. No more 'coincidental meetings' with Snape, starting tomorrow*, she chastises herself mentally.

Approaching *Camellia's* lit-up front window, Hermione shakes her head at her own thoughts and suddenly makes a childish agreement with herself: if she turns around now and Snape is not watching her, she will not take his elbow tomorrow.

The dark figure in the flapping coat is walking away without looking back, and Hermione doesn't know whether it is relief or regret she is feeling.

"Mum, you promised Monsieur Moreaux that we would take a look at the daisies." Madge's whining interrupts her musings.

"Of course," Hermione agrees and pushes open the heavy, glass door, which makes the small bell on top of it ring invitingly.

She doesn't see the way some unknown force makes Snape turn his head at that moment and look for the young woman with a child. He only manages to see the hem of Hermione's winter coat disappearing behind the door and then starts to turn back around.

"Hey, watch where you're going, you old fart." A man with a husky build and a shaved head bumps into him from behind.

"Yeah, don't stand in the way, arsehole," another voice says.

Two more bulky morons with the same non-existent haircuts join in the barking laughter and swearing. Snape hears a bell ring once more. Magic prickles at his fingertips, ready to form curses. He turns around, but his offenders are already gone.

A loud bang of the door makes Hermione look up from the marguerites. The trio that has barged in is definitely not here to pick up flowers for their girlfriends. A welcoming smile melts off Monsieur Moreaux's face, and Anna's eyes swim with fear. Hermione walks backwards, trying to shield Madge, who is curious enough to peep out from behind her, with her body.

"Get the cash, camel jockey," one of the goons says and pulls out a baseball bat.

"I... I... h-hold on a m-minute," Monsieur Moreaux stutters helplessly, and the attacker sweeps a bunch of daffodils in a plastic container off a shelf.

"Fucking Arabs. They come here, take our jobs, marry our women, and don't even bother to learn the fucking language!" another one explodes and reaches for his gun. "Stop muttering! We need the money! Understand?"

He points the gun at the poor shop-owner, but is suddenly stopped by the third attacker, the one who is fingering the handle of a large knife.

"Hey, no good being rude in front of the ladies. Can't scare the birds, can we?" he says and winks at Anna, Hermione and, finally, Madge.

Hermione thinks that she could have whipped out a Shield Charm, despite the presence of Muggles and Madge, but her wand is tucked away at home. Then she thinks of her magical outburst at school. Right now, she's no less scared, but one cannot will a spontaneous burst of magic into creating a shield.

The pounding of blood in her ears almost muffles the sounds of the shop-keeper fussing about and Anna breathing shakily. Madge is suspiciously quiet.

It seems that the temperature in the room begins to drop suddenly, and soon the usual moist warmth maintained at the florist's is completely gone. Each breath becomes a torture because of the stinging, creeping cold. Hermione is afraid to blink...what if the darkness of the fleeting moment when her eyes are closed remains when she opens them? The Cold and the Dark...they are here again. They have come for her.

There's a shadow of movement outside. The night hasn't settled in completely yet, but the light inside the shop makes the darkness on the street thicker. Hermione notices a flash of a pale face by the glass door.

Professor! Hermione's heart beats impossibly fast. *He will call for help!*

Severus Snape chooses this very moment to enter the shop.

Ginny's bloodied dress did not look like a tulip, Hermione realizes. If anything, it reminded her of royal-red pelargoniums, or storksills, with their amazing contrast of white and red. A pot of pelargoniums falls down to the floor, swept off its stand by the man with the large knife. Chunks of dark-brown soil scatter about, leaving the flower roots naked and defenseless.

"Hey, I've seen that mug somewhere before." The criminal with the bat stares at Snape. Snape stares back at him, not breaking eye-contact for a single moment.

"Move, Dracula. Hey, Johnny, watch the fucking doors. Looks like this shithole has suddenly got popular."

His mates laugh at his wit, and the one called Johnny glances out of the window from time to time.

It's all in vain. We're doomed, Hermione thinks, watching Snape move covertly closer to where she stands. *He doesn't have a wand, and these pigs aren't even hiding their faces. We're dead.*

Monsieur Moreaux finally produces a thin wad of notes and places it on the counter.

"That's it?" The thug is obviously not pleased. "Not much, is it? We'll have to check if you have a hidden stash somewhere, Abdul." He swiftly crosses the room and hits the unfortunate shop owner across the face with the gun butt. Monsieur Moreaux slowly slumps down with a squeal.

"Get out from behind there, darling, and show us where he's hiding the cash," one of them says to Anna, dragging her out from behind the counter.

"Hey, look, she's up the duff!" the man with the bat drags out, seeing her belly. "Spreading your legs for fucking Muslims, are you, bitch?"

Anna instinctively crosses her arms over her belly in a protective gesture.

Ginny's thin arms over her large stomach, and a lifeless look in her eyes. Anna's eyes shine with a living horror. But living...for how long?

Hermione starts to shake. Not in fear, but because she is cold.

Just keep your eyes open. Just keep them open, never close them, not for a millisecond, even if the terror seems to be swallowing you whole. Inside her head, she pep-talks herself (or maybe her daughter) into not letting her eyelids drop.

The thug with the gun keeps searching the counter; the one with the bat eyes Anna with unbridled disgust; Johnny watches the door.

"All right, lady. You and Dracula, pass us your wallets and turn out your pockets and bags," orders the Gun.

Hermione obediently reaches inside her handbag. Anna tries to turn out her pockets with shaking hands. She's wearing a dainty gold chain with a pendant around her neck, and the Bat stretches his hand out to rip it off her. Anna recoils, and he raises his bat at her.

"Gentlemen, I think you're getting slightly carried away here." Hermione hears the voice not of Mister Snape, but of the master of Potions...that same tone, which used to make even his Slytherins cower.

The trio's attention switches to Snape immediately.

"Whoa, Dracula showing off his fangs?" the Gun chuckles evilly. "What, you gonna bite us or something?"

"Unfortunately, no. I don't eat *rotten* things." Snape steps back to the shop window with an eerie smile.

"Johnny, Ernie, look, this shit thinks he's too good for us," says the Gun. "Too good for you, eh? Well, how about we break your fangs, fuckwit?"

He approaches Snape angrily and swings the fist with the gun, but Snape is very agile and dodges the blow easily. The other two run up to them, eager to take part in the fight, leaving the women and Madge alone. Snape's fingertips scintillate with multi-coloured sparks of magic, and Madge watches them, bedazzled. As soon as Snape catches her staring, the sparks fade. Hermione grabs her daughter and Anna by the hands and runs to the backdoor. Someone is chasing them, but she doesn't stop to look. She hears the sounds of slaps and something heavy falling behind her back, and then there's a single gunshot. Anna starts to scream, and Madge joins her.

~o~

The artificial light of the hospital is blinding, and she's not scared to close her eyes any longer. Madge, sprawled in a large armchair, dangles her legs, bored. Hermione nags the woman at reception with a barrage of questions, but the nurse gives back as good as she gets, so it's not exactly clear who is questioning whom.

"Are you a relative?" the nurse asks, shifting her gaze between a stack of documents and the annoying woman in front of her.

"No... he has no relatives." Somehow, this statement makes Hermione instantly sad. "He is my... he is a good friend of mine. Tell me, how is he?"

"I need his address." The nurse holds her pen at the ready, waiting for Hermione to dictate.

"I don't know it. He's just moved. Just tell me how serious his wound is!"

The woman's 's disdain is almost palpable.

"Is he employed?" The nurse's pen ticks off boxes on the list.

"He's a teacher," Hermione answers, at the end of her tether. "Look, can I just go to him?"

"A teacher?" The nurse seems profoundly surprised; her brows crawl up to meet her hairline. "Of what, fencing?"

"No, chemistry!" At first, Hermione is confused, but then it hits her. The scars. That damned war hero.

The nurse clears up a few other minute things and then magnanimously informs her that they won't be allowed to visit.

"He's not fully recovered from the anaesthesia yet, Madam. And when he is, the police are there, waiting to question him. Go home. It's ungodly late; don't make the little girl sleep here. The doctor says he's going to be all right: the wound is not that bad, and the bullet went right through. Your... *friend* can tell you the rest when he chooses to."

In the morning, *Camellia's* windows sport cardboard instead of glass, and the spot in front of it is surrounded with yellow police tape. The landlady tells Hermione that Anna is all right, and Monsieur Moreaux has a concussion and a broken jaw. She is also bursting at the seams with curiosity as to who their mysterious dark-haired saviour, the man that ventured in alone against three armed criminals, was. Hermione merely shrugs her shoulders instead of giving an answer.

She comes to visit Snape in the hospital three times, and each time she's terrified at the sight of his marked pallor. She can't bring herself to talk to him about the serious things she needs to say when he's lying there, whiter than his bed linen...so lonely and so bloody ... *heroic*.

~o~

Having made her decision, she couldn't leave the magical world for good without saying her goodbyes.

"See, Harry, what has become of us all?" she whispers, caressing the cold, dead stone, set to honour the warm, lively Harry. Why hadn't anyone had the idea to plant a tree there? "Sometimes, I envy you a bit; you don't have to deal with all this. Ginny says it shouldn't have been you. Care to trade places?"

Ginny was constantly doped up on sedative potions. They made her very weak...a wan shadow of her former self. She rarely got out of bed, but at least she had plenty of

sleep and didn't cry anymore.

"I'm sorry, Ginny," Hermione whispered, pressing her forehead to Ginny's listless hand. "I'm sorry it wasn't me."

When she raised her head, she saw the smallest flicker of perplexity ghost over Mrs Potter's ever expressionless face.

"I do not need your life and your happiness. I have nothing to forgive," were Ginny's parting words to her. Hermione and Madge left before the first snow fell so that they didn't leave any footprints...a visible trace of their departure.

~o~

After the Easter holidays are over, Madge becomes something of a school celebrity...at least until the chemistry teacher is back at work. In his absence, the school slowly fills with swooning teenage schoolgirls, and it becomes a firm belief among the younger students that a cupboard in the chemistry lab holds a superhero costume and all the appropriate gadgets. A myth about Snape's lover, who fell victim to a serial killer long ago, and Snape, who has been searching for the murderer for years, fluctuates around the school. Using his sudden popularity to her advantage, Hermione learns his home address under some excuse from the Headmistress.

His private quarters at Hogwarts must have been equally ascetic. Hermione is absolutely not surprised to see that his flat consists of a tiny kitchen and a small room, furnished only with a narrow bed and a table. And books. Stacks upon stacks of books against the walls, some of them reaching the filthy grey ceiling.

Following the owner of the flat to the 'living room', Hermione greedily stares at the book titles and then stops, feeling uncomfortable, in the middle of the room; the only surface available for sitting upon is the bed.

It looks like Snape is back to his normal health...regular meals at the hospital and lots of sleep have done him good. Somehow, Hermione is sure that on his own, he tends to overlook the issues of taking care of himself. No, he has definitely not gone to seed, and neither does he look frightfully neglected, but it seems to her that he is rather... uncared for. She finds it hard to attribute an appropriate word for the feeling that thought causes.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" Snape says and keeps standing, either being a gentleman or simply not wanting to sit on the bed. "Finally found the guts to have that conversation?"

"Yes, maybe," Hermione agrees, "and I also have to thank you."

"You *have* to?"

Hermione discovers that Snape's smile can be attractively ironic.

"I *want* to thank you," she corrects herself.

"Don't bother." Snape turns away from her and stares out the window. "And don't make the mistake of thinking I was being noble. Believe me; I am bereft of any hint of nobility."

"Oh, like you would confess doing it for..."

"I can't name modesty among my fortes either, Mrs Weasley," he interrupts.

"So, your decision to stand up for us was purely selfish. Is that what you're saying?"

"If I was standing up for anyone," he says with a dismissive shrug, "it was myself. Those trolls had insulted me, and I had no inclination to leave them unpunished."

"And that was why you went up against three armed men on your own?"

"I admit to being a little impulsive."

"Your female students are in for such a disappointment." Hermione chuckles.

"Even better. I like to keep up with my customs."

Snape keeps looking out of the window, and somehow, Hermione finds it easier to say what she has come to say without looking into his eyes.

"You know, it was such a surprise, meeting you...*here*, in the Muggle world... and I think I got a little carried away... seeing you."

He does turn to her then.

"It's not at all easy for me, and I wouldn't want to complicate our..." Under the weight of his look, Hermione loses the last vestiges of her confidence, and the words she has meant to say lump up in her throat.

"Are you under the impression that I am courting you?"

Oh, damn, he is going to laugh in her face. Hermione wishes that the earth would just swallow her whole. Gods, how could she ever think of something like this? However, his next words shock her.

"And what if I were?"

"But why?" Hermione says and immediately thinks that she couldn't have come up with a more idiotic response.

"How can I put this better..." He paces to and fro, as if he were lecturing a class. "I was no less surprised to see you here. At first, I had a suspicion that you'd found me out of curiosity or worse, pity. And then it turned out it was just a coincidence. But it intrigued me...I know why I am here, but what are your reasons for living among Muggles?"

Hermione remains silent. It seems to her that this conversation is going to take time, and she has a nagging need to sit down...standing in the middle of an almost bare room, shifting from one foot to another, starts to get very awkward.

"Since suspecting you of aiding the Dark Lord's cause is quite an impossible feat, I thought your daughter was Potter's offspring, and the enraged widow somehow managed to exile you."

"Don't say that about Harry... and Ginny!" Hermione tries to sound rightfully furious, but it comes off rather pathetic.

"The child's age didn't seem to fit the idea," Snape goes on as if he hadn't heard her at all. "And it intrigued me even more. I've come to realize that I want to hear your story. You know what they say, 'tell me of your sufferings, make me happy'. Sounds a little sadistic..." Snape trails. "I had no chance of surviving the war, and yet there I was. Just when I'd started to hope for a life where I could leave teaching behind and devote my time to research... And I do not need much: a modest account in Gringott's, my father's house in London, and my books. And then it happened...our precious golden boy gets bloody killed, quite literally, and I am immediately on the Ministry's shitlist. My savings are confiscated, my house is sealed, and I am cast out. No wand, no money, no right to ever return. I have always loved the magical world, even though the feeling was never mutual. Pardon me this little lyrical digression, Miss Granger. I recall your eyes shone as well when you first arrived at Hogwarts. I cannot believe it

was your choice to come back and live as a Muggle."

Hermione sighs and decides that sitting down on the edge of the bed is worth daring.

"So, there is justice in the world? You, Miss Granger, that is, Mrs Weasley, Potter's best friend, and his best friend's wife, a praised student, a gifted witch, a lauded war hero... and me, a traitor, a Death Eater, a murderer. And we're both stuck in this shithole of a life."

Hermione tries to swallow the lump in her throat: Snape's words are too laden with pain and self-mocking regret.

He sits down next to her without even sparing her a look.

"And then, putting it in your words, I got carried away a little... seeing you, talking to you and so forth. *Am* fond of being alone, but loneliness... not that. A castaway, an alien in this world, that's what I am. And you are the first familiar face after years of... What I'm trying to say is that it is a weakness on my part."

"Such a familiar sentiment," Hermione says, also without looking at him. "And that's why I want to stop. Weakness is an extravagance I cannot afford. I don't deserve... for me, it is..."

"So, it's self-flagellation then?" Snape asks, and Hermione does not see, but *feels* how a crooked smirk spreads over his lips. "Let me guess. You should have saved your friend Potter or at least died trying, and your daughter is a squib, again, because of you. So tell me, does your hair shirt help?"

Hermione is afraid to answer, as if saying the words will make them true. *Don't say anything*, she thinks *at* him. She does not need Legillimency to make her plea for silence clear, just presses her fingers against his thin lips. Thank god, he understands the meaning. But, oh, Merlin, he kisses her hand. Light, feathery touches from her fingers down along the hollow of her palm, to the wrist where her pulse beats madly. It does not even feel like seduction, just a little bit of desperate tenderness.

"Sir..." Hermione obviously remembers her manners at the most inappropriate moment as it is now Snape's turn to press his fingers against her lips, eloquently asking for silence.

He is right, she thinks. There's no need to say anything. Words will only invite the Cold in, and she's felt like she is covered with hoarfrost on the inside for too long. She yearns for warmth, no, for heat.

And Snape is heat...white flame...fierce, relentless, burning out everything in its way. Just like fire, he burns fast and past the point of no return. A kiss to her cheekbone, a nip at her neck, wet breath at her nipple, hands on her buttocks, too much of everything; it all feels too good, and Hermione has trouble separating it into stand-alone sensations. Maybe he is reading her thoughts? Nonsense, all her thoughts are gone from her head the moment his tongue flattens against her clit. She doesn't even have the time to offer a reciprocal caress; her hands only manage to drag along his shoulders invitingly, and he is already inside her, pushing forward and holding still with a hoarse groan when he is all the way in.

Maybe it is because she hasn't had sex for so long, or the spontaneity of the situation, but somehow Snape's groans make her delirious with want. The sheets, unpleasantly cold at first, now lick the skin of her back with heat each time he presses her into the mattress. Or maybe it is all his, his own male heat that envelopes her, takes her in, burns her on the outside and pours warmth into the deepest, coldest corners of her being.

He tries to move slowly, holding himself back from finishing it too quickly.

"It's ok, it's ok," Hermione breathes, squeezing his shoulders, her mind registering the raised skin of the scar on his left arm and remembering his most recent wound. "It's ok, I'm about to..."

The ending of the phrase drowns in her own moan and overwhelming explosion of an orgasm.

It seems like her arms aren't hugging him any longer, and his body covers hers completely, yet she doesn't feel the weight of it. His ragged breath tickles her neck, sending an impulse of pleasure down her spine. The final accords of their lovemaking are his groans that crescendo into one long howl, and she shares her second orgasm with him, pounded into the mattress with his speeding hips.

And then it is as if she were sobering up too quickly. What the hell was that? What in the nine circles of hell has she been doing with a man from her past? The past she's sworn to leave behind? The man she shouldn't have even thought of.

Snape's face...yes, it's Snape's again as Severus has given way to his *alter ego*...reflects neither disappointment nor regret or embarrassment. Hands behind his head, Snape watches her dress.

"Why did you sleep with me?" Hermione asks at the door. Her winter coat is left unbuttoned. She is not cold anymore.

"I don't want to always signify something that you've lost. And I don't want you to stand for what I've never had."

"Inverted sublimation?" Hermione chuckles. "And will we even need each other without all this... symbolism?"

"I've always enjoyed taking a risk," he says, standing up and striding towards her.

I'm so going to be late to pick Madge up, Hermione thinks, shrugging off her coat *and* her blouse with one movement.

~o~

The liquid silver on the surface of the pond is the light effect, created by the bright May sun. The unusual sunny weather for this spring day draws a lot of visitors to the park. Hermione and Madge sit down with their plaid picnic blanket as close to the water as possible. She looks at the trees, covered with young foliage, and screws her eyes shut like a sated cat.

"Mum, Mrs Marston wants to have a talk with you," Madge says.

"What have you done this time?" Hermione answers, turning to face her daughter, and Madge lowers her head, looking guilty.

"Georgina Smith's older sister said you sleep with Mister Snape, and I said the f-word because she is a liar. You sleep at home, and Mister Snape comes for coffee...and coffee makes you stay awake."

"Magic Allison Weasley, what did I tell you about swearing?"

"But you swear!" Madge's eyes shine with righteous anger.

"I do not!" Hermione is on the brink of exploding.

"You do too! I've heard you say it!"

"When was that?"

"The other day, when you and Mister Snape were talking in the kitchen. You told me to stop eavesdropping and sent me to bed, and I wanted a drink of water. I heard you

weren't talking anymore and went in, so I wasn't eavesdropping. And then you said... that word. And Mister Snape heard it, too...he was upset and even turned away from you and looked at the window."

Hermione does not answer and turns a painful shade of pink.

"Tell him I understand it," Madge says knowingly.

"Understand what?" Hermione asks, scared.

"That magic does not have to hurt. He can use it around me if he wants. I know he's a wizard. And in the shop, he didn't use it because of me. He thought I would be upset..."

Hermione smiles and lies down on the plaid blanket, stretching. When she closes her eyes, there are colours behind her closed eyelids: whirls of warm orange, spots of shining yellow. The Cold and the Dark are gone.

FIN.