

# As Morning Falls

*by TeddyRadiator*

On Boxing Day in the Forest of Dean, Hermione is visited by the one person who holds the key to her future. More or less DH canon compliant, then AU. Rating is for later chapters.

## One: As Morning Falls

*Chapter 1 of 5*

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**For Arwyn**

**Chapter One: As Morning Falls**

*It seems we're lured together by an old desire to satisfy, and complex emotions to sustain.*

*It's sad, and yet it's marvelous, when Nature comes to visit us.*

*When morning falls, we find ourselves again.*

*There's nowhere else I'd rather be, moments lined with ecstasy, a solitude of two that time suspends,*

*Simple things can mean so much; a smile, a sigh, a knowing touch, the morning's light reminds this, too, will end.*

*As morning falls, so do our defenses,*

*We feel the light released by night, full of hope and dreams and second chances that arise as morning falls.*

*Memories shared we can't forget, protected by our hearts and yet, the thief of time can steal them all away.*

*We try to save our best for us, while others get the rest of us, we find ourselves and rise to face the day.*

*Morning Falls Jay Wright*

-o0o-

The Forest of Dean was so quiet and still it felt like she was the only person alive left on earth. For all she knew, she was.

Hermione Granger, friend of Harry Potter and the Dark Wizarding world's most wanted witch, groaned as she stumbled gracelessly into the tent she and Harry now shared.

Bone cold and exhausted, she yearned for a hot bath and a kebab, two things she knew she was just going to have to live without. *Happy Christmas to me*, she thought.

She also thought about a quick shower in the tent's bathroom. Thinking that the Minister of Magic probably wouldn't be stopping by tonight, she decided to make do with a cleansing charm. Truth was, she couldn't be arsed. Harry had just relieved her for the night watch, and the snow and cold air had permeated her bones so much she thought she might never feel warm again. The shower's water supply simply wouldn't get hot enough, no matter how many warming charms she cast.

Hermione yawned and shivered, trying not to feel sorry for herself. For what seemed like years, they'd been on the run, living in this extendable tent. She would not chastise herself for longing for the softness of a bed. A real bed. Her childhood bed had been so comfortable. And the beds at Hogwarts... oh they had been so magically soft that she only had to lay her head down on a pillow and...

She shook her head impatiently. *Don't be stupid*, she thought. *The house your parents lived in is no doubt crawling with Death Eaters, and if you showed one hair of your frizzy head at Hogwarts, not only would you be dead before daybreak, but several of your friends would be as well.* She tried not to think about what was happening at her old school. She tried not to think of her parents, unaware of her existence, living in Australia; of her friends, of her professors... mainly she tried very hard not to think of him.

Especially him. Strange that one person could generate so many emotions. With everyone else, Hermione could easily compartmentalize her feelings into neat and tidy categories. Harry was her friend, and brotherly in his affections. Ron was like a child, easily bored and constantly needing to be entertained. Her parents were her foundation, and her school was the place that had given her the identity she would carry throughout her life, however long or short that might be now.

But him... He encompassed all of the above and more. Since they'd become lovers, she had felt soaring passion and crushing sadness, mindless ecstasy and a knowledge so voracious that no question was left unanswered. He was her protector, her child, her master, her slave, her teacher, her burden.

She thought that she more than likely knew him better than any person on earth, yet she sometimes wondered if she really understood even the basest truth about him. He could bring her to her knees with desire; he could make her feel like a goddess with a slaving supplicant at her feet. He was confidante, disciplinarian and acolyte. He was domineering, selfish, passionate, clinging, demanding, beautiful, generous and fragile.

She had seen him drawn into a rictus of misery trying to throw off the aftereffects of the Cruciatus Curse, whimpering in agony and allowing her to baby him until he could regain the use of his mental and bodily functions.

She had watched and obeyed him even as he blazed down over her, commanding her to do things to him or to herself so indecent, she would often blush furiously for days afterwards at the memories. It never occurred to her to deny him anything... ever...

She was a bit intimidated by his knowledge yet allowed him to cling to her like a baby. There was nothing black or white about him except his manner of dress. He was as constant as smoke, and she wondered as much about him laughing at her behind her back as she did how to make him believe the true depth of her love for him.

Oh, he'd tortured her at first. He'd made her wait until she was of age, slowly but meticulously drawing, flirting, mashing, digging the truth of her feelings for him out of her like squeezing pus from a wound. He railed at her. He did not 'do' students, especially not 'children', he would sneer at her. He'd been angry with himself for wanting her, and even angrier at her for wanting him in return. "Don't you know there's a bloody war on?" he snarled, even as his crooked teeth worried at her neck, marking her for the first time as his own.

He'd gleefully sought her out when she'd technically come of age via the bloody Time-Turner, and pounced on her so classically he actually thought he'd been the one doing the seducing. She had set him straight on that count soon enough. He'd approached her afterwards like a man headed for his own funeral, hating himself, yet still unable to stay away from her. She'd been the same. They eventually gave in and accepted their desperation for one another.

She knew he needed her more than he wanted her and wanted her more than he loved her. The awful tragedy or joy of the matter, however you chose to look at it, was that he did love her. It was a terrible, reluctant love, one that he could no more prevent than he could the inevitable course of the war. It irritated him that they were so much alike. It infuriated him that he envied her the friendships she'd made. It pleased him that she was as intelligent, as lonely, as determined and as loyal as himself.

He was big on loyalty, even though he really didn't trust it. "You'll leave me eventually," he would gasp painfully, sometimes even as she was panting through her climax beneath him. She'd never known anyone so unaware of his own magnetism. He was an amazing mixture of ruthless masculine sexuality and razor-sharp self-deprecation. His hold over her was something he still didn't quite trust or understand. Not that he had much time to ponder it nowadays.

Hermione shook her head. Thinking about him was a sure way to madness and extreme discomfort. Sometimes, she missed him so much she would toss and turn all night, rising thick-headed and depressed. Only her duty to Harry would keep one foot trudging in front of the other. Taking care of 'the boys', as she thought of them. *And let's face it*, she thought to herself traitorously, *the boys take me completely for granted. Yeah, we're doing fine as long as Hermione's here to make sure our shoelaces are tied and we have enough to eat.*

*He* would never expect her to do everything. He would pull his share. Hadn't he already done enough to prove that?

Yes, she positively ached for him. There were nights she was sure she would die if she didn't cast a Silencio charm and touch herself surreptitiously under her blanket, soundlessly calling his name as she found an unsatisfying relief. Afterward, she usually cried anyway. She sometimes thought he would drive her mad in the end his revenge for the unpardonable sin of loving him too much.

Tonight, there would be no furtive fingering beneath the blanket. Hermione just wanted to get warm and fall asleep. If she stopped to think, her thoughts might just bear down on her and crush her. She was already very close to the crushing point, and it wouldn't take much to finish the job. *Horcrux hunting is not for pussies. Get a grip, Granger*, she told herself. In her mind, she could hear his voice echoing the same sentiment. The thought brought a ghost of a smile to her lips.

She had to admit to herself that when she, Harry and Ron had gone on the run to find Horcruxes, she hadn't thought things would take this long. Hermione had thought Dumbledore would have at least given Harry a clue about what to do, instead of willing to them a lot of cryptic hints disguised as useless junk. It wasn't a sodding treasure hunt, but Dumbledore had treated it like one.

Hermione was tired of running and not knowing what to look for or where it might be. She missed her parents, who didn't even know who she was. She missed her old life. She missed being just Hermione Jean Granger, swot extraordinaire. She missed being clever. Running around England and hiding in a tent had a way of knocking the cleverness right out of her at times. Mostly, though, Hermione missed him. Like the best of mazes, all roads in her mind led right back to her center: him.

When Ron, doped on hormones and Horcrux backlash, left her and Harry, Hermione thought it might actually be for the best. Ron had come to think of her as 'his', and she didn't know how to stop his gradual insistence that they 'consummate their love'.

"We could be caught tomorrow, 'Mione," he would say, his large blue eyes earnest with pleading. "Do you really want to face death and not know how it feels to be, well, loved?" He would dip his head, a crooked smile playing on his lips, thinking he looked irresistible enough for her to agree with him. He thought she was a virgin. She let him think it.

When he'd pulled his strop and prepared to stomp off into the sunset, he'd fully expected her to come with him and leave Harry to find the Horcruxes alone. When she'd made it very clear she had no intention of abandoning Harry, Ron had treated her like the worst camp follower.

So he'd left, chucking his toys out of the pram. Hermione felt like she'd spent the afternoon inhaling nitrous oxide. Her parents called it 'laughing gas', and sometimes used it in their dental practice, but Hermione saw nothing funny about it at all. It always left her feeling nauseous with a thumping headache and a bad taste in her mouth. Lately, so did Ron.

Without Ron, she and Harry made a quiet couple, rarely speaking about anything of import other than Horcruxes, the disaster at Godric's Hollow or the freezing weather, which meant that light, warmth and other necessary resources would be in even shorter supply. Luxuries like food were getting harder to come by.

The two of them passed from thin into gaunt and were heading quickly into emaciated. Hermione had always assumed starvation would be a real passion killer. That was before she'd had to live without *him*. Desire for him gnawed at her far more hungrily than lack of food ever would.

Hermione wasn't unduly worried when she peeked out of the tent and found Harry was nowhere to be seen. He frequently walked around, testing the perimeters of their wards, checking to make sure there were no weak spots, no places where the Snatchers could penetrate. Harry desperately wanted to do the right thing. He missed Ginny, though he tried not to talk about her too much. His obsessive hatred of Severus Snape, his determination to find the Horcruxes, and his belief that he had to kill Vol - The Dark Lord, she reminded herself, was all encompassing, and he daily tried to ease Hermione's burden, even though he just didn't really know how.

Hermione looked around their tent and sighed harshly. They had been on the run for so damn long it felt like a way of life. If she didn't think about it too much, it could almost be a strange sort of holiday. If she thought about it at all, she was reminded that she and her two best mates had a price on their heads, and to come in from the cold would most likely result in a very terrible, very public, and very painful death.

As she stood there, her heart started pounding as she felt the familiar shimmer of *him* against her formidable wards. She began to tremble, and her body felt the pull of him as surely as if he were the moon and she the tide. Her face flushed, and her body dumped so much adrenaline into her bloodstream her skin ached and she felt dizzy. Severus Snape was breaching her wards.

He was the only man who could.

Hermione quickly ran to the loo and looked at herself. She cringed at her messy hair, her over-many ribs, her overall haggard state. There were dark pits beneath her eyes, and she was ashamed for him to see her like this. But even as she felt the disgust at her own unattractiveness, her body called for him; she wouldn't let something as insignificant as pride keep her from him.

She walked back into the main body of the tent, and he was waiting for her. Severus Snape had his back to her. From her position she saw a tall, thin man in a dark, swirling cloak, ramrod straight, waiting for her to stop titivating long enough to come to him.

He turned to face her, and their eyes locked. He was dressed in his customary black frock coat and trousers. Lines of buttons marched down his chest, his wrists, even down his legs to his slender, dragon hide-clad feet. A snowy white shirt peeked from his throat and wrists. His long black cloak framed his body like the wings of a dark angel.

His black hair hung in a lank curtain from his widow's peak, framing expressive brows drawn together with intensity and eyes so dark they glowed like black opals. Hermione felt her heart rate increase, her body drawn to him. Oh gods, how she had ached for him.

She saw that he, too, looked haunted, too thin, sleep deprived, exhausted. His forced tenure as Headmaster of Hogwarts was slowly grinding him down into powder, and her heart cramped again.

If he would only speak!

As if he'd heard her thoughts (and there was nothing to say he hadn't), he cleared his throat quietly and said, "Happy Christmas, Hermione." His voice was soft, and the silkiness of the sound of her name issuing from his lips was nearly enough to drive her to her knees. He faced her fully and, to her great relief, held open his arms to her slowly, expectantly. There was a stillness, a quiet hope in his face, that indicated that even after all this time, he was still not sure he was truly welcome. Hermione felt a swift hatred for the person who had abused this man's trust and love. That person deserved to burn in hell.

## Two: All On A Misty Morning

*Chapter 2 of 5*

All on a misty morning, I come to you with love...

**Anti-Litigation Charm: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. All characters are property of JK Rowling and not me. If they did belong to me, Severus Snape would be alive and well and snarking his way through Hogwarts even as we speak.**

**For Arwyn**

*I come to you when you least expect, I call to you to come with me now*

*I ask of you to drop all things of absolution and whatever may be in your hands*

*All on a misty morning I come to you with love*

She tried to be dignified, told herself not to act like a child. At his quiet voice, speaking her name so gently, his arms opened wide in invitation to join him; her sense of propriety abandoned her, and she all but flew into his arms, sobbing her relief at seeing him. "You've come. Oh gods, you've come."

He enfolded her into his arms, and their mouths met frenziedly, hungrily, their pleasure at being together again almost painful. How could it not be? He broke her kiss and looked down into her face searchingly.

"Merlin's arsehole, witch, haven't you been taking care of yourself? You look like you've been dragged through the Forbidden Forest backwards." He tried to smile, but it came out as a grimace of pain. "How can I bear it, knowing you're wasting away?" Before she could form an answer, his mouth all but tore hers open, his need a grasping, selfish, greedy thing that made his natural poise oddly clumsy and off balance.

He growled deep in his throat, a sound that inflamed her lust for him like a match to paper, and she pressed her body closer to his, breathing in his scent deeply. There were the familiar warm smells of cedar and spice, enhanced by the night air. She could smell the delicious scent of his skin, and she answered him with a feral moan of her own. She felt the rasp of stubble on his face and the hard planes of his cheekbones beneath her fingertips. He pulled away to look at her again and graced her with something like his old familiar sneer. It held no mirth, no joy. It was a look of possession, of very great need for that which he wanted to own.

As she embraced him, he moaned, a desolate, pitiful sound which she answered with a comforting response, like the coo of a dove. He took her hand and placed it on his

straining erection. It was hot through his clothes. Everyone thought him so cold. How could she explain to them the heat of the man how he could scorch her to pieces with his gaze? How he burned as incandescently as Fiendfyre when they made love?

Already, he was pulling her toward her bed. "I can't wait," he whispered, and the anguish in his voice was palpable, an apology. He closed his eyes as her hand cupped him through his trousers, squeezing him gently. His brows furrowed together as if in pain.

"It's alright," she said, trying to sound as if she believed it. He was here, wasn't he? Did anything matter as long as he was here, moving her toward her bed, tangling his hands in her nest of hair, pulling her toward his beseeching mouth? She had seen him in many aspects as a lover: menacing, demanding, gentle, playful, cruel, and tender, but she had never seen such melancholy desperation.

She allowed him to unfasten her jeans, his hands growing frantic as he pushed them down her hips. "Take your knickers off," he urged, after unceremoniously yanking her jumper over her head. Then he was over her, pushing her down on the mattress, on top of her, his kisses needy and desperate, his voice harsh with want. His clothing scratched her bare skin, but she didn't mind. He moaned as her arms went around him, and Hermione understood enough to know that, at this moment, he was seeking comfort, not sex. Sex was just the only way he knew how to accept the comfort he sought.

*I talk to you as a lover should with a voice close to your ear*

*If I may get so near enough you might hear what I hear*

*All on a misty morning I come to you with love*

"My sweet, little kitten," he crooned, nuzzling her with his large nose. He kissed her over and over with light, sipping kisses, as if to draw some secret elixir from her mouth into his. She reached down and unfastened his belt and trousers, and he gently but deliberately pushed her hands away, releasing his rigid cock. As he rubbed the weeping head of his sex between her labia, sliding against her swollen clit, he was stunned at the moisture he found waiting for him. His face crumpled, and he almost wept. "So wet," he whimpered, as if he couldn't believe her body was as ready for him as he was for her. He looked into her face, helpless with need and incendiary desire. "So wet for me, love?"

"Yes, Severus," she whimpered. "Please. Please..." His eyes rolled back as entered her slowly, his face a mask of painful pleasure. He looked down at her, shaking his head. Hermione felt her own eyes fill with tears. It had been so long since they'd touched, so long since her dark lover could claim her...

He settled into her deeply, his breathing harsh and rasping, as if he'd run a long way. He took a long, shuddering breath and, drawing back, he plunged into her welcoming heat, and he whimpered her name. He actually began to weep, then. At that moment, Hermione knew that Severus truly believed he didn't deserve this pleasure. It broke her heart that this fine man, this hidden soul, could think so little of himself.

"I love you," she whispered, and pulled him to her, covering his face with kisses. "I've missed you so much it hurts. Make the pain go away, Severus, even if it's just tonight. Let me take your pain away."

His only reply was to move inside her, to start that sweet rhythm that nature had fashioned to bring life together. It was exquisite and he sobbed, his tears dropping on her face as he moved. *Gods*, she thought. *What hell is this man going through that the kindness, the simple act of making love can destroy him sđ*

"Oh, my sweet girl," he moaned, gasping at the pleasure of nestling within her. "It feels like you're melting around me," he breathed, and finally, finally, he accepted this gift of love and desire gratefully.

*Let my hands be nimble, let my tongue be quick, let my loins move slowly against your skin*

*Let my face and mind disappear for a while, let my kisses rain down like silk*

*Let our spit and sweat mingle into one let it form a stream of union that would always run forever on*

*It would have no start and know no end*

*All on a misty morning I come to you with love*

As Hermione's body soothed his, the lines that ran deep in his face softened, and the scowl loosened. His face relaxed, and with each stroke, he seemed to grow younger, stronger, calmer. He smiled for the first time as he increased his movements, and he could feel his lover's climax begin. He looked down at her glowing face.

Her concentration and intense expression slackened, and he thanked the gods gratefully that he still had the ability to give her this pleasure. The beauty of her complete surrender almost always unmanned him. He could feel her body gathering around him, pulling him into her and he moaned, his voice rising with his impending release. "That's it, my good girl. Come for me... Come for me, now, Hermione, now!"

She cried out her pleasure, calling his name over and over, pulling him down to her, even as his own orgasm found him and turned him inside out. His hoarse shout of completion echoed in the small tent. He trembled with each thrust. His wail of relief was painfully sweet, and he collapsed on her, his body and mind overwhelmed. His body shook so hard the entire bed shuddered.

Hermione kissed him over and over, licking the tears from his face, giving him her love. When they were together they were free to give the best of themselves to one another. Everyone else could take what was left. They had so little to give, and each was the best recipient for the other.

The madness that had gripped them had been appeased, and as he looked down at his lover and stroked her hair from her sweaty face, he tenderly smiled at her in this, the first sane moment since he'd arrived. "We don't have much time, Hermione." He touched her lips briefly with his own. "I don't have much time."

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From his robes, he drew out dozens of potions. Pain Potions, Blood Replenishing, Vitamin Replenishing, Pepper Up, Dreamless Sleep, Essence of Dittany, Calming Draughts. Bezoars, phoenix tears, unguents, salves, lotions, philters. Bottle after bottle was withdrawn from his robes, and catalogued and stored into her beaded bag. He was so proud of her and that bag. She explained in detail how she'd done it, and he gave her a look he'd never graced her with before. It was an expression of admiration, of pleased respect. It was an admission of his esteem she would live on for days.

He produced a small package, laid it on the table, and enlarged it. It contained dried foodstuffs, everything from freeze-dried beef to Pot Noodles; enough to keep them going for almost the entire winter. "I raided a Muggle camping store. The sell-by dates are always much further out," he said, watching her transport the food into the bottomless beaded bag.

Hermione remained quiet, allowing him to look around. He nodded approval at a certain ward she'd used, frowned at another, weaker protective spell. He enforced some and added more of his own. She knew she had questions to ask, but her tongue seemed glued to the roof of her mouth. Finally, she spoke.

"How did you find us?"

Severus smirked and nodded toward her beaded bag. "Headmaster Black overheard you tell Potter you were in the Forest of Dean. It was a matter of detecting your magical signature and coming to find you."

"But Harry is on watch..."

"Potter and Weasley are no doubt finding the Sword of Gryffindor. I wasn't told exactly how it would be of use, but I have an idea." As he explained Dumbledore's orders to bring the sword, Hermione filled in the blank spots regarding the locket. One thing stood out and she latched onto it.

"Ron's here?" Hermione said, shaking her head. "Did you bring him here, too?"

Severus walked toward her, shaking his head. "I'm afraid Weasley blundered his way back on his own. I'll not be held accountable for his untimely return. Right now, they are doing what needs to be done, and when they return, they will feel an overwhelming urge to check the perimeters, not to mention avoid you. Each time they approach the tent, Weasley will feel a terrible dread in having to face you, and he and Potter will no doubt sit outside all night long catching up."

Hermione nodded, and reached out to touch Severus' forehead. In the few months since Dumbledore's death, its horrific aftermath and Severus' induction as Headmaster, he had seemed to age years. Hermione's heart ached for the man who had become her lover.

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She burned with shame, remembering those hideous weeks of uncertainty when she questioned his motives and listened to Harry plan his revenge on Dumbledore's murderer. She'd been very proud of herself when the pieces finally fell into place, and before she, Harry and Ron had been forced on the run, Hermione had managed to sneak off and meet with him to test her theory.

He had been as shuttered as she could ever remember him in those dark, dark days. His guilt and remorse was pitiful, and he fretted that he had split his own soul in freeing Dumbledore's. "How could you, when you feel this remorse, this pain for what he forced you to do?" Hermione had cried, silently begging him to open up to her. It had been the worst week of her life, wringing from him the story, his ghastly role in Dumbledore's little morality play called, *The Greater Good*.

Only she had watched over the broken man who'd sobbed inconsolably all night, like a heartbroken child. Only she had been there when he woke the next day, angry at being used, the scales of guilt fallen from his eyes, staunchly resolving to save his own soul and Hermione in the process.

It had been Severus' idea to modify her parents' memories, and get them out of the country. Under the guise of spying on the Grangers, he had helped her with the spellwork to ensure it could be reversed. If Hermione was unable to get to them, they would lead a perfectly happy life without any knowledge they'd once had a daughter.

At that point in time, Severus was making her no promises. He was a wreck, encased in a black suit of dark armour. A wraith disguised as an assassin. He hid even from himself, lest his fear eat him alive. Hermione had never known someone so brave and so afraid at the same time.

She knew she was intelligent; she knew she was a pain in the arse, who covered her lack of self-confidence by sounding like the smuggest know-it-all in the world. She also knew just how vulnerable she was as the friend of Harry Potter. Determined to succeed where Harry had not, she had secretly come to Severus near the beginning of their sixth year and begged him for Occlumency lessons, and he'd grudgingly granted her request.

It was during those lessons she accidentally revealed her feelings for him. He'd been furious, of course. She now knew his secrets and spent untold hours strengthening her Occlumency skills, so that no one would ever learn of Severus' double life, due to her capture or carelessness.

It was a pity, or a blessing, that she was never quite able to keep her true feelings hidden from him. He was too hypersensitive, too ready to see negative aspects of himself deep within her psyche. Once he found himself within her mind, it was just a matter of retracing his steps, until he saw the exact shape, breadth, and size of the throne on which she'd placed him in her heart.

"You're a bloody student, Granger," he'd growled, pacing nervously around her, determined to frighten her away. "I'm a bloody Death Eater!"

"Was a bloody Death..."

"I still am, you foolish child look!" He'd jerked the cuff of his sleeve back so forcefully, he'd popped the buttons, and they clattered blamelessly onto the floor. He had thrust the Dark Mark under her nose, and she looked up at his face defiantly, and grabbed his wrist. He had tried to pull away, but Hermione was stronger than she looked.

"Do you think this mark defines you? Are you honestly standing there, telling me that this tattoo sums up the heart and soul of Severus Tobias Snape? Honestly, Professor, you'll have to do better than that to scare me away." She had grabbed his forearm, careful not to touch the Mark, and kissed his palm. He had hissed as if she'd burned him. She stroked his fingers tentatively, and when he didn't pull away, she threaded her fingers with his.

"These hands tell me more about Severus Snape than any Dark Mark." She had touched his index finger, tracing the scar of a knife cut from many years ago. The palm of his hand showed a neat, crescent-shaped mark left by grabbing Neville Longbottom's cauldron during their first year, seconds before an impending explosion. There were calluses from holding his knife just so. His nails were neatly trimmed, but there was a torn cuticle here and there, which gave his hands the appearance of being oddly vulnerable.

"These hands are the hands of man who has served and created, and performed his duty with determination and skill and care. These hands administered a potion you created to release me from a basilisk's stare. They've shielded me from a werewolf."

Severus had looked at her strangely, and his fingers had almost imperceptively curled around hers. Sensing she had the upper hand, Hermione had pressed on.

"These hands have protected me and my friends since I was eleven years old. I trust you with my life." She took a deep breath and looked into his onyx eyes. "These hands have cast protective spells. They have taught me what a true wizard is, not by what he says, but by what he does. I can only know you by your deeds, not by your past."

Wordlessly he had nodded, still wary, still as skittish as a Thestral colt, but he hadn't pulled away. Hermione went in for the kill.

"These hands tell me so much about what you are, Severus. All that Mark tells me is about what you *were*."

Suddenly both hands had grasped her and pulled her close to his chest. For a breathless moment, Hermione had thought he would kiss her. Instead, he had embraced her roughly and sighed.

"I'm old enough to be..."

"My lover. My companion. Let me help you, Professor!" Hermione had pulled back from him, and with more confidence than she actually felt, she said, "You and I are perfectly suited. Search your heart and you will know I'm telling the truth. When you finally admit that I'm right, I'll be waiting."

She had risen on tiptoe and kissed his cheek, and her arms had encircled his neck in a quick, fierce hug. "I'll be waiting," she repeated, giving the words the hidden meaning she knew he would hear perfectly. He was still as stone, his obsidian eyes unreadable. She stepped back and his arms slid away from her waist, to be captured in her hands. "Goodnight, Professor."

On the way out, she spotted the button that had flown from his shirt in his haste to reveal his Dark Mark. She picked it up and quietly placed it on his desk. He had not moved one centimeter. She smiled softly as she drew herself up to full height. "Goodnight, Severus."

Early in their relationship, he had confessed he was irritated with her beyond measure for picking up that button. He had waited weeks before approaching her, and only then it was done so grudgingly he might as well have been preparing for a Dementor's kiss. He began his reluctant relationship with her, and together they had started building the first steps toward an understanding of how to defeat the Dark Lord. Hidden within were the baby steps toward an understanding of their love for one another.

He was still awkward; he still frustrated her and baited her, snarked and bullied. He had also shown her moments of tenderness. As vehemently as he could vent his

spleen over a carelessly ruined potion, he could also explode with heart-stopping moments of passion that would take her breath away with their heat and intensity.

He could kiss her into insensibility in one minute, and the next berate her so callously for a simple mistake she would be fighting tears. She could make him smile with her leaps of intuition and send him into a rage with her hesitation faster than the blink of an eye. The very fact they were so much alike both aggravated and ennobled him.

She didn't care. If her brain power helped to keep them alive and find what they needed to defeat the Dark Lord and keep Severus safe, he'd just have to learn to live with it. Severus would just have to learn how to live, full stop.

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Song is All On A Misty Morning, by Paul Weller. A beautiful version of this song can be found here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5bq-FDKbdk>

It is a spell in and of itself.

## Three: A Soul For Sale Or Rent

*Chapter 3 of 5*

I'll protect you from the hooded claw, keep the vampires from your door; when the chips are down I'll be around with my undying, death-defying love for you.

**Anti-Litigation Charm: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. All characters are property of JK Rowling and not me. If they did belong to me, Severus Snape would be alive and well and snarking his way through Hogwarts even as we speak.**

**For Arwyn**

**Thank you for all the lovely reviews. I'm relatively new to the fanfic world and I appreciate all comments and suggestions. Thank you!**

For the next few hours, they held each other and spoke little. He did not volunteer any information about Hogwarts, nor did he ask her anything about her plans. They lay on their sides, facing one another. After their first frenzied coupling, he'd been unable to relax, until he checked her inventory and reinforced their wards.

Once he'd convinced her that Harry and Ron wouldn't be disturbing them during the night, she undressed him and made him lie down with her. She now lay curled up with him and felt warm for the first time in weeks. She snuggled as close to him as humanly possible, and he in turn wrapped his arms and legs around her, giving her his warmth.

"I wish we didn't have to be who we are," she murmured, dreamily. It was a silly statement, and she instantly wished she hadn't spoken her thoughts aloud.

He smirked and reached out to tuck a wayward curl behind her ear. "Who would we be then: Darren and Martha? Jules and Cynthia? Howard and Hilda?" He raised one elegant eyebrow in challenge.

She chuckled. "Somehow I can't quite picture you as either a Darren or a Jules, or a Howard for that matter, but you get the idea."

He uttered a short, sharp bark of a laugh, then sobered. "I suppose it doesn't matter, as long as we don't have to be who the world demands us to be. Even if it's just for a few moments in time." He sighed harshly. "I confess that right now, I'd give anything if I could relinquish being Severus Snape to anyone who wants the aggro."

"So you could become Darren or Jules or Howard?" She was trying to distract him and he knew it; he was grateful to her for the attempt. He rewarded her by roaming his hands over her body, his touch soothing and life affirming. Whoever they were or would ever be, they knew each other so well.

He had freely admitted he was not a terribly experienced lover, but he was a very quick learner, and Hermione had come to him as a virgin with no expectations. They had taught each other, and being the single-minded swots they both were, used their formidable powers to develop the ability to be what the other wanted and needed. They even learned how to surprise one another, and to Severus, this had been a revelation. He had thought himself beyond the scope of being pleasantly surprised by anything.

He leaned over and placed a gentle kiss on her nose. This segued into a longer, sweeter kiss upon her lips, and his warm tongue played gentle insistence against hers. Each kiss deepened, until their limbs entangled and their mouths fused together, battling for supremacy. Severus pushed her onto her back, his body glowing in the soft light of the tent like a fallen angel, seeking any available heaven. "Perhaps it's time to forget for awhile, love," he murmured, stroking her cheek with his fingertips. Hermione felt her heart bloom. Her secret Severus, who called her *love*.

Hermione opened herself and welcomed him, her nipples drawing to an aching peak at the mere thought of his hands on her. His eyes were shining and full of desire. His gaze lowered to her breasts, and an almost fond smile played about his lips. "I love these little buds," he said softly, his voice rich and warm and full of promise. His fingernail scratched and teased the crinkled tip of her peachy aureole.

"Sweet little buds... so hard and warm and begging to be sucked," he crooned, giving each word gravitas and meaning with his purring, mesmeric, silken cadence. Hermione cried a soft, endearing sound of gratitude as his warm mouth nuzzled her nipple. She heard the intake of his breath as he inhaled her scent against her skin, teasing her, making her wait.

She pleaded with him, imploring for the soft suck of his lips, the cradling tongue, the sharp nip of his teeth. He growled possessively as he placated her, feasting on her swollen flesh as she writhed beneath him.

He lowered his body until he reached the apex of her thighs, and smiled up at her. He enjoyed watching her watching him, as if she could take her eyes off him as he sought to give her pleasure. Hermione held her breath, as he parted her labia with long slender fingers and lowered his mouth to her turgid flesh.

He took his time giving her pleasure, enjoying the sounds wrenched from her, almost against her will. His tongue was long and as sensitive as his nimble fingers. He flicked it across her swollen and jewel-bright clitoris, his movements practiced and precise. He knew her body completely and his finger slipped into her slick folds with all the gentleness of a man who eagerly waits to hear his lover's gasps and cries of pleasure.

He became more abandoned, more selfish in his own arousal, and his tongue laved against her clit, even as he nipped and sucked it into his mouth, flicking it with his tongue. She grabbed his hair and pulled none too gently, and he smiled in spite of the pain. It was a sure sign she was about to come. He inserted his long, slender fingers into her tight sheath and pumped one, twice, and Hermione screamed her orgasm to him, calling out his name over and over.

He lifted his head and watched her coming, his fingers worrying her clit relentlessly. He rewarded her with a smug smirk, clearly pleased with himself, and her. He slithered up her body, living up to his House's mascot admirably. His mouth, warm and musky with her juices, covered hers, his tongue lashing into her mouth so lasciviously she made a growling noise, which he answered with a soft hiss of his own.

He sat back on his haunches and pulled her to him. "I want your mouth on me," he commanded. She responded so quickly, she almost threw him off the bed, and he laughed at her eagerness to please him. In a single graceful movement, she enveloped his cock in her warm, welcoming mouth, conjuring from him a secret sound he'd only ever made for her alone. As she licked and nipped and sucked the tip of his large cock, she reveled in the scent and taste of him. He was so beautiful, all pale and glowing in contrast to his dark, wiry pubic hair.

Hermione was also a fast learner and memorized his every reaction, so that she knew how to pleasure him before he even asked. She stroked his heavy sac in the way he'd taught her. She rubbed and cupped and squeezed his balls, before sliding past them to press her fingers to his perineum. He whimpered, a sweet, boy-like sound that made Hermione vow to do whatever it took to make him moan like that again.

He leaned back, propping himself up with his hands as she knelt before him, her hands and mouth sure and knowing. His head rolled back and he closed his eyes to the bliss of the young woman worshiping his cock with so much devotion. She stroked and sucked him, pausing on the upstroke to lightly pinch the edges of his foreskin over his glans. He gasped at the sensation, a soft, mewling sound escaping his lips. Hermione played with his glans and foreskin before continuing to suck him, and his hips rolled sensuously, languidly.

Her movements became stronger, swifter and harder, and he rose up on his knees to thrust his hips against her stroking hands and sucking mouth. Hermione continued to stroke his balls and perineum as he began to rock against her. Gently, Hermione's fingers slid back between his legs and tenderly rubbed along his anus. He spread his legs further as a single slender, strong finger, then a second, entered his rectum, and he shuddered and thrashed as she finger-fucked him. He was helpless now.

His fingers threaded through her hair, moving her head with his body, his thrusts growing faster, losing control. It seemed that tonight, she would be denied another orgasm, but she didn't care, as long as she could make him shiver and beg and whimper again.

Even as Hermione thought he was about to lose his control and his balls tightened, Severus roughly pushed her away from his cock and down onto the bed. Eyes blazing, he rose over her and entered her with a hard, slamming thrust that took her breath away. Rearing above her, he placed his large hands over her abdomen and uttered a low incantation. Hermione opened herself to him, her arms above her head, her body and mind completely abandoned to him. She could feel his magic flowing into his hands as he stroked and pressed them against her vulnerable belly.

As he began his slow dance inside her, his calloused fingers traced mystic symbols over her stomach, and he chanted the soft incantation over and over. She could not understand it and did not care. His body felt so damn good, filling her perfectly, taking her where he pleased. He cleaved into her, and each time it was as beautiful as the first time.

He moaned with pleasure and lowered himself to cover her with his body. Soon he would be so close he would meld with her, and he would become aggressive. His voice grew ragged with power. He slipped his arms behind her back and hooked his hands over her shoulders and began to drive her hard into the mattress, moaning ceaselessly. His face was slack, eyes closed, lips parted, utterly and beautifully abandoned.

In that moment he growled, "Love me, Hermione." It was a plea and a command, and she could no more deny it than her next breath.

"I love you, Severus," she whispered automatically, feeling their magic gathering around them. "More than anything. More than my own life," she cried, feeling her orgasm building like a great wave.

Again he muttered his incantation, but it was in a language Hermione did not recognise. He chanted it in time with his lightning-like thrusts, fucking her mercilessly, his voice rising in cadence with hers, begging her, commanding her to love him.

An orgasm like no other rose in Hermione, and for a moment it frightened her, as if coming would mean her own mortality. His body fused against hers, and she wanted this to never end. "I'm so close," she sobbed, lost in a delirium of sensation.

"No, love. No, no, don't let it end yet," he begged, shaking his head, knowing it was too late. He felt exquisite, pounding into her, his hips bruising and bruised. He looked into her eyes and knew she was lost, and he mourned his own impending climax. He put his chin against her shoulder, knowing he, too, was losing to his own sweet release.

Then she shattered apart and screamed her love for him over and over, ashamed of her own screaming yet delighting in his...

-oOo-

She promised herself that this time she wouldn't cry when he left. It was unseemly. She promised herself she wouldn't.

They had spent most of the night talking, making love, touching. Hermione thought momentarily about Harry and Ron, sitting around a campfire and a warming charm, and she tried to feel a little guilty. She couldn't do it. Tomorrow, perhaps, but not now. Now Severus was getting dressed and preparing to leave, and her heart was trying to remember how to keep beating.

"I'm holding everything together by a thread," he said, his voice harsh, irritated, as if he was somehow blaming her. "Mr. Longbottom and Miss Weasley are all but planning mutiny. The other Professors despise me. Minerva has pretty much sussed out Dumbledore's plan, but she can only do so much. I had to force her to make an Unbreakable vow to keep the status quo."

"Oh, no!"

Severus made a dismissive gesture. "It was either that or Oblivate her, and I couldn't make myself do it." He looked at Hermione almost sheepishly. Well, sheepishly for Severus Snape. "It helps a little to know one person in the world isn't staring daggers into you every moment of every day."

Hermione stroked his arm gently. "I don't."

He smirked. "I don't see you every day. If I did, I truly would give myself away. It seems, my dear," he roughly kissed her hair, "I'm very transparent where you are concerned. I spend nearly all my time in the Dark Lord's presence nowadays hiding you from my mind."

Hermione gasped. "Oh Gods! I'm sorry, Severus. I've been so selfish. If he were to see me..."

"Oh, he has."

Well, that shut her up. He almost laughed. "Oh, I'm quite the degenerate, didn't you know? He thinks I fantasise about capturing you and making you my pet." He gave her an exaggeratedly lecherous look and twirled an imaginary mustache. There was an underlying bitterness in his banter. "He's promised to reward me with you as a prize. Apparently, I have plans to keep you chained in a room to rape at my leisure. A spoil of war." He sobered. "Bastard. He thinks I've been lusting after you since the Yule Ball during your fourth year. They all do."

He turned and looked at Hermione, his eyes bleak and shamed. "I never did, you know. I don't think of students in that way at all. Especially you."

"I know, Severus." She rested her head against his chest, hearing his steady heartbeat. "Believe me, I do know." She could feel his shame. He ~~had~~ had thought of her often. He *had* noticed her at the Yule Ball. How could he, one of the most observant wizards alive, have failed to notice the budding rose?

"Anyway," she retorted playfully, looking up at him with a mischievous expression. "Tell me about these plans for this room of yours. Bristling with chains, you say? It sounds a little kinky to me, Professor Snape."

Severus rocked back, bemused, then something like the old snarkiness returned to his countenance. He smirked, drawing his robes around his body imperiously. "And what of it, Miss Granger? Fancy a little time being chained to the wall at the mercy of the Greasy Bat of the Dungeons?" he purred, not above a little self-deprecating humour.

"Oh, stop it," she said and snaked her arms inside his robes again. Unable to resist, she slyly added, "Who said anything about chaining *me*?" It was worth the look on his face. She laughed and kissed him. He chuckled darkly and returned her kiss, grateful they could laugh about the Dark Lord, albeit a dark sort of laughter.

"In any case, I need to return to Hogwarts. I couldn't pass up this opportunity to see you. I was, as they say, in the neighborhood." He shrugged. "I had only intended to bring you the potions and the food, but---" He sighed and tugged his ear. "I couldn't help myself. I miss you. I'm a man." He shrugged. "The opportunity presented itself that I could be alone with you." His smile was sad. "I wanted to wish you Happy Christmas."

"I'm glad, Severus. I've missed you so much. I think about you constantly."

"I make myself *not* think of you. It's the only way I can function anymore. That's why you have to take better care of yourself. I can't afford to worry myself sick over you."

Hermione nodded, unsure what to say. "What is the Dark Lord's plan?" She'd learned never to say Voldemort in his presence. His Dark Mark all but bled when the very name was mentioned.

Severus shrugged. "Right now he's just trying to gain full control and gather his troops. You three are the main priority. Britain is being combed now for you."

He turned to her in that swift and sudden way Hermione knew so well and grasped her arms almost painfully. "Whatever you have to do to find these godsdamned Horcruxes, hurry up and find them, Hermione!"

She huffed. "That's just it!" she cried, her frustration welling inside her. "Bloody Dumbledore told us nothing! We're just stumbling around out here!" She sat down and rolled her neck stiffly. It made creaking noises, like car tyres crunching over gravel. "All these clues, all these cryptic messages. Why didn't he just tell us?" Hermione heard her voice rising in fear and anger and frustration, and Severus took pity on her.

"I don't know. He told me nothing as well." He sighed and scrubbed his face with his hands. "I'll do what I can. I'll try to find some time to do a little research, if Ginevra Weasley and Neville Longbottom will stop using their vigilante tribe to stir up trouble night and day. I have to sleep a little as well sometime." The first vestiges of self-pity sounded in his voice, and Hermione's heart went out to him. He hated feeling sorry for himself.

Hermione sighed, casting about in her mind for a solution. "Get Minerva to call them off. Surely as a member of the Order she could do that in the guise of trying to protect them."

He nodded. "I've thought of that. In the meantime, I'll help when I can, but it's all coming to a head. I give it a matter of a few months or so."

Hermione stared at him, and her blood turned to ice in her veins. "So soon? What will happen?"

"I don't know. All I know is that the Dark Lord grows more afraid and paranoid with every passing day. Nagini, his familiar, is his constant companion. He uses the snake more than his own spellwork now." Severus looked around, his face grey with exhaustion. Now that he was preparing to return to Hogwarts, he looked like a man returning to the gallows. Hermione felt fear creeping into her bones.

There was something singularly fatalistic about his demeanor that had troubled her since he arrived. He'd deliberately distracted her from it, but now that he was dressed and ready to leave her, the veneer was cracking. Hermione couldn't put her finger on it, but it terrified her. Then he turned and looked at her, his expression naked, and she felt her heart slamming in her chest and she gasped in understanding.

Hermione flew to his side, clutching at his robes. "Severus, listen to me. Listen to me carefully, please *Please*. Don't go into his presence without some sort of precaution. A bezoar, anti-venin, something." She looked into his face, her expression frantic.

Severus looked at her blankly. For all his reaction, Hermione wondered if he had actually heard her. "Severus, please. Don't go to the Dark Lord without being prepared. Promise me."

Severus smiled slightly and nodded, stroking her cheek absently. He said, tiredly. "You must know by now, my dear one, I don't hold out a lot of hope of surviving, don't you?"

"Don't say that!" Hermione all but shouted. *Don't cry*, she thought, even as the tears pricked her eyes. "Don't you dare walk out of this tent planning on dying and leaving me with this shit! I've had enough! How am I supposed to do it without you?"

"Hermione---"

"No!" She was past caring now. If he wasn't going to listen to reason, by the gods, she'd force it down his throat. "You always taught there was another way. That there is always another chance. That we fall back and fight again and never give up."

Severus' shoulders slumped in surrender. "Perhaps I don't have any fight left, Hermione. Perhaps..." he looked past her. "Perhaps I'm not meant to stay. Perhaps I have another chance to make things right with---" He tried to stop himself, but the damage was done, and he saw the desolation in her eyes. She began to shake as understanding dawned. He lowered his head, contrition and guilt shadowing his features.

He took a hesitant step towards her. "Hermione, I don't know what to say---"

"It's alright," she said, soothingly, and something like grace settled on her shoulders. She took his hands in hers and kissed them. They were cold. "I understand." At this his head shot up and his haunted eyes searched hers accusingly.

Hermione stood her ground and nodded. "You can't stop loving her, Severus. And," her voice broke, "I can't stop loving you." Tears spilled out from her eyes and Severus watched her, his black eyes pain-filled. She didn't have to be told who 'she' was. There was always a 'she' with a man like Severus Snape. *Why*, Hermione thought, *just this once, can't that 'she' be me?*

Finally, Severus pulled her into his arms and held her so close she could hardly breathe. Hermione broke then and sobbed like the motherless child she was. She kneaded his coat, twisting the fabric in her hands. "Promise me," she gulped, her sobs so hard it was difficult for him to understand her. "Promise me you won't go into this, whatever this is, like a lamb to the slaughter. Promise me that, with or without me, you'll chose to *try* to live. I can live without you in this world if I have to as long as you're alive and---"

Severus groaned. "Hermione..."

"No! Promise me, Severus," she said, tears streaming from her eyes. "Promise me you will try to live." Her selfless façade broke and she thought *to hell with being noble*. "Promise me you'll at least give us a chance. Promise me that you'll just let me try to make you happy."

His response was to hold her until her tears subsided. Finally he tipped her chin up so that she looked into his eyes. "I can't promise you that I'll survive. I will promise I'll



try."

"That's not good enough!" She cried even harder, knowing she was being unreasonable, and unable to help herself.

Severus frowned, but his expression softened. "It will have to do for now. I am more worried about you." A ghost of a smile graced his lips. "How could I survive, knowing you'd done something foolish like gotten yourself captured or killed?"

Hermione held onto him harder, and he had to push her away gently. "It's time. I have to go."

"No!" she cried, panic making her shiver. Her eyes were wild and fearful. "Not yet, please!" She clutched as his sleeve. "I'm so frightened for you! For all of us!" She was shaking, trying to read his inscrutable expression. "Severus, I'm so bloody tired of being hunted. I'm tired of being the brave one!"

He shook her gently, forcing her to look at him. His eyes were as bleak and desolate as she felt, but his voice rolled from him like a deep river, steady and dark. Even at its silkiest, there was a strand of steel, finely spun and binding. "You must be brave, Hermione. It's the only way I can survive Hogwarts and the hell my life has become. If I can just picture you, safe and alive, then maybe..." His voice grew softer. "Maybe I can be safe and alive as well."

She held onto him until she knew he'd start disengaging himself, and still she clung to him anyway. "Here now," he said, almost indulgently and smiled down at her. "It's almost dawn. Your man-cubs will no doubt want to come in soon, my little lioness. Right or wrong, they need you. You have to greet them as if I never happened."

He kissed her then. A sweet, passionate kiss that told her more than she knew, that asked more questions than it answered, raised more feelings than it quelled. His soft lips and tongue battled against hers, his soft moans of longing and sadness breaking her in so many places she knew she'd never repair them all.

His kisses covered her forehead, her cheeks, her chin, the satiny hollow of her throat. "By all the gods, Severus Snape," she whispered, shivering to feel his mouth gliding over her skin. "If you are certain of nothing else, know this: you are loved. I love you, Severus Snape." She felt the tears threatening again, but she bravely fought them. She didn't expect him to reply. He had declared his love with his box of food, the traveling apothecary he'd made for her.

He'd shouted his love with his body, the unknown, protective spells he'd cast with his semen. For whoever ~~she~~ was, Hermione accepted the simple truth that Severus Snape, no matter how much he had initially fought against it, loved her and would keep her and her friends safe.

When at last his lips moved away from hers, he rested his forehead against hers, holding her still. "Get rested and keep yourself well fed and healthy," he said, his voice brisk and businesslike. "I expect to see you at Hogwarts as conquering heroes, not ragamuffins."

He placed a hard kiss on the top of her head. "Stay alert. Don't forget for one moment that you are in danger. Trust no one." He kissed her forehead gently. "Don't forget, I'm waiting for you."

In an unguarded moment, he raised her hands to his lips and kissed each one. He pulled back from her and looked down at her hands with a scowl. He rolled his eyes and drawled, "Merlin, Hermione, use that skin salve I brought. Your hands are like sandpaper."

In spite of her sadness and fear, she smiled. She knew him enough now to interpret his words. They were Snape for, "I love you."

"I will. Don't get dead."

"I won't." He walked toward the door and hesitated, breathing hard. Almost against his will he turned back. "I won't see you until it's over. If it goes against us---"

"Don't!" she all but shouted and put her hands over her ears, knowing it made her look immature but unable to stop herself. "Please don't say it." She lowered her hands and looked at him beseechingly. "I can believe we'll win as long as you don't say we won't." She was shaking.

He almost laughed. He settled for a smirk. "Gryffindor. Typical. Be well, Hermione." He turned away from her again.

"I love you!" she sobbed, but she spoke to the opening of the tent. She felt the trembling emptiness of his presence, moving silently through her wards.

On impulse, she peeked out of the tent window. Dawn was just breaking, and the Forest of Dean was a water colour portrait in greys and browns and blacks. He would have looked at home there, silhouetted against the misty morning. Suddenly, she wanted, more than anything, to see him again.

Hermione had once heard that you always remember your first kiss, but you never remember your last, because you never know which one it will be.

She wondered if she'd just shared her last kiss with Severus, and it fretted her that she hadn't paid more attention to it. She should have studied his face more, watched his eyes slowly close at the touch of her lips. She should have imprinted on her mind the softness of his mouth, the texture of his skin, the feel of his hair sliding through her fingers. She should have paid greater attention.

She crawled into the bed that smelled of him and the love they'd made. Hermione cried until she fell asleep, the evidence of his passion and his protection drying between her thighs.

~~~~~

Title from Save Me, Queen

Words from The Power Of Love, Frankie Goes To Hollywood

## Four: The Slate Will Soon Be Clean, I'll Erase The Memories

*Chapter 4 of 5*

When it comes to matters of the heart, there is nothing a fool won't get use to...

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## For Arwyn

**As I am relatively new to the fanfic world, I welcome any and all comments and suggestions.**

---

Phoenix tears, bezoar, Blood-Replenishing Potion, Pain Potion, Anti-Infection Potion, antivenin, skin salve. She plied them all, her hands steady, her expression resolute. He shuddered in pain, gasping, choking on his own blood. But he was still fighting Death, holding Him at bay. She poured potions down his throat; she dropped phoenix tears on his wound; she kept him warm and safe and alive.

She had pretended to follow Harry and Ron from the Shrieking Shack. She'd known she was no warrior. The Battle of Hogwarts was crashing all around her and she was where she was supposed to be, defending her lover, fighting for his life. This was the only battle she stood the possibility of winning.

Phoenix tears, bezoar, Blood-Replenishing Potion, Pain Potion, Anti-Infection Potion, antivenin, skin salve. She would do this until he was out of danger. She would do this for them. For the little one he'd put in her belly. She put her hands on her stomach protectively. This was the other reason she refused to join the battle. Harry had to do this alone. Ron didn't need her. Severus did.

If the worst were to happen, she concluded, she was NOT going to jeopardize the life she'd been entrusted with on the night Severus had cast the spell to bring their bodies together to make a child. She had looked up the incantation he'd chanted that night. A fertility spell. Sneaky, snarky, sly bastard. He'd only gone and done the one thing she would have wanted; to have a bit of him should he not survive.

After she'd found out, she'd gone into a wooded area, telling the boys she needed some *ahem* personal time, and cast her most powerful *Muffliato* spell. Then she'd laughed, cried, jumped around, kicked leaves and made all sorts of wand oaths to her impending stranger. She would keep them all alive, including his insufferable, irascible, pain-in-the-arse father. Non negotiable. No way. Uh-uh.

She was just beginning to show, and she reminded herself NOT to tell Severus some of the things she'd done in the last few days. He would be apoplectic! *A pregnant witch riding a dragon? Have you lost your mind, woman?* She made a mental note to herself that one day when this was all over, she would tell the little stranger and his father about retrieving Helga Hufflepuff's cup at Gringotts. They would laugh about it. They *would* laugh.

She lost track of time. She dozed unwillingly, starting awake to make sure Severus was still with her. At one point she smelt burning flesh and watched in sick fascination as Severus' Dark Mark sizzled and began to fade. Venomous-looking green-brown pus oozed from the mark and dripped onto the floor. It was foul, thick and acrid smelling. It stank as it hit the nasty floor of the Shack. After the last of the Mark receded into a faint shadow of its former self, Severus breathing eased, and his heart beat strengthened. A cautious feeling of hope pricked her heart.

"Severus, I think the Dark Lord's been defeated! Your mark is fading!" Severus, unconscious, moaned slightly in his throat, and Hermione decided now was the time to move him. As a precaution, she started again: Phoenix tears, bezoar, Blood-Replenishing Potion, Pain Potion, Anti-Infection Potion, antivenin, skin salve...

There was a slight noise behind her, and Hermione placed a protective arm around her lover and twisted around to raise her wand to whatever was coming for them. *Non negotiable. No way. Uh-uh. Do your worst, you death-eating fuckers. We're not going gently into that dark night.*

---

Luna Lovegood sat on the steps of Hogwarts with Harry. The battle was over, the dead cooling in the Great Hall. Ron was with his family as they gathered around their lost son, Fred. Harry could hear the terrible, personal sounds of Molly Weasley's grief. Harry himself was still stunned.

"Where's Hermione?" Luna asked, as serene as always. Harry thought that life, death, destruction and whatever weird beast of the week could pass her by, and Luna would still be the same sweet, dreamy, slightly odd duck as always.

Her question, though, was anything but serene. Harry thought for a moment. "I-I don't know, Luna. Wait here for a moment."

Reluctantly, Harry approached the Weasley Family. Molly was the first to spot him and threw her arms around him.

"Harry, my dear! Are you alright, love? Do you need to see Madam Pomfrey?" *Even in her grief* Harry thought, *she still thinks of me as her son as much as Fred. What a woman.*

"I'm fine, Mrs. Weasley. I'm sorry to disturb you all..."

"Nonsense!" Molly smiled at him through her tears. "You're family, Harry. And that's what families do. They look out for one another. They protect each other..." Emotion overcame Molly, and Arthur Weasley put a comforting arm around his wife. He looked as if he'd aged ten years since...since Fred.

"Actually, I just wanted to know if anyone had seen Hermione." Harry looked sheepish. "I don't remember seeing her before the final...well, you know."

"Well, you were a bit busy at the time, mate," Ron quipped. He thought for a moment. "To tell the truth, it's all a bit of a blur once we left the Shrieking Shack."

The two young men excused themselves from the Weasleys and went to the Infirmary. They scoured the Great Hall, the Gryffindor Tower, the library, the Room of Requirement. They checked the toilets, the classrooms and the dungeons. They searched the other houses. Panic set in, as person after person was asked, and no one could remember seeing Hermione Granger.

Out of desperation, they made their way to the Shrieking Shack. Entering the ancient building, Harry and Ron grimaced at the coppery smell of blood. There was a sickeningly sweet stench in the air. It was the smell of death.

They entered the room where the three of them had left Severus Snape dying on the floor. "*Lumos*," they whispered, as one, looking around the room.

To their shock, the body was gone. The only evidence of the hideous events of the previous night was a great bloody stain on the floor and Snape's discarded over-robe. It was saturated with blood. Snape, however, was no place to be seen.

"He couldn't have survived," Harry puzzled as they looked around the room. "He was dead. I saw him die."

"Maybe the Death Eaters nicked the body," Ron said quietly. They were perversely speaking in whispers, as if loath to be heard by anyone. "Dad said some of the Death Eaters escaped when You-Know-Who died. Some of them were still *compos mentis* enough to Disapparate from the grounds."

Harry frowned. "I thought you couldn't Disap..."

"Wards, mate," Ron said with an uncharacteristic Hermione-like flourish. "Snape lowered the wards when he left the castle. We have to face the fact that there are still some Death Eaters on the loose. They could have come and taken Snape's body."

"Why would they do that?"

Ron shrugged. "Harry, now that everyone knows he was Dumbledore's man, the Death Eaters aren't too happy with him." He grimaced. "Do you really want to know what they might do with his body, mate?"

Swallowing hard, Harry shook his head. The events of the last twenty-four hours were starting to crash down on him, and he was not surprised to see his wand shaking in his hand. "Let's go. Hermione's probably back in the Great Hall looking for us."

Nodding, Ron turned to join his friend, then froze. "Bloody hell, Harry!"

Harry looked back at Ron's ashen face, then followed his gaze to the far corner of the room. Partially hidden by the edge of the old bed, Hermione's beaded bag lay on the ground on its side, its contents spilling from the opening. It lay on a familiar looking swatch of fabric, and Harry recognized it as the hooded top Hermione had been wearing when they first came onto the grounds. It was torn and covered with sticky blood. Next to it lay three splintered pieces of slender wood. A wand. Hermione's.

His heart pounding, Harry rushed over to Hermione's bag and began to search through it. *Accio Headmaster Black's portrait!* He heard a rush of air and swore under his breath as the corner of the huge frame dug into his palm.

Pulling the portrait from the bag, Harry cried out, "Headmaster Black! Headmaster Black, please! We need your help!"

For a moment, Harry thought the Headmaster would ignore him, as was his wont. Finally, a low, subdued voice answered, "Whatever you want, it's too late. I have nothing to say to you."

"Sir, it's me, Harry Potter! Please!" He looked up at Ron, who was shivering with trepidation.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, the imperious Headmaster walked into view. Looking at Harry solemnly, the Headmaster quietly intoned, "What do you want? What could you possibly want now?"

"Sir, please! Do you know what happened here tonight? Did you hear anything?"

The portrait eyes narrowed and grew angry. "Oh, now you're concerned! And where were you, Mister Potter, when the Death Eaters came to claim Headmaster Snape and found your friend here with him?"

Headmaster Black shook his head, closing his eyes. "Where were you when the screams began, Mister Potter? Where were you when they took their revenge out on your friend?"

The portrait looked at Harry with righteous anger. "Where were you, Mister Potter, when they killed your friend, Hermione Granger?"

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The day of the mass funeral was cloudy and rainy, unseasonably cool for June, and the mourners in attendance almost instinctively huddled together. They stood quietly as Minerva read the roll call of the dead. It seemed to go on forever, and each name carved itself upon Harry's heart as surely as if it were being written by Delores Umbridge's writing pen. Instead of 'I must not tell lies', it wrote, 'I must not forget'...

Over fifty names of members of the Order were called. The names droned on and on. Many he didn't recognize. For a moment he wished not to recognize any of them. Then he chastised himself. The desire to forget them would be the greatest insult to their memory. No, he had to remember. Everyone had to remember so that another Tom Riddle wouldn't gain a foothold in the Wizarding World again.

Headmistress McGonagall's voice droned on until Harry's ears pricked at the names, "Alastor Moody, Auror; Charity Burbage, Hogwarts Professor; Bathilda Bagshot, Wizarding Historian.... Amongst those killed during the battle," Nymphadora Tonks, Auror; Remus Lupin, Member of the Order of the Phoenix; Colin Creevy, Gryffindor House; Fred Weasley, Member of the Order of the Phoenix; Vincent Crabbe, Slytherin House..."

Minerva took a deep breath and her voice shook. "Severus Snape, Headmaster." Her voice faltered. "Hermione Granger, Gryffindor House." The Headmistress stopped and turned away from the crowd, tears streaming down her face.

Harry, Ginny and Ron held each other and wept. Hermione, their brightest and best, gone, her body spirited away like Snape's, to be defiled, no doubt, by the remaining Death Eaters. "I don't understand it," Ron said, over and over, tears streaming down his face. "She was right behind me. What could have happened to her?"

Harry felt Ginny's arms around him, and he stopped trying to hold back his emotions, his anger. For days now he'd watched Snape's memories over and over in the Pensieve, and it sickened him. Dumbledore, pushing, always pushing him, then keeping Snape in the dark for the most important pieces of information. His taunting words:

***"I prefer not to put all my secrets in one basket, particularly not a basket that spends so much time dangling on the arm of Lord Voldemort."***

***"Which I do on your orders! You have used me...."***

***"But this is touching, Severus. Have you grown to care for the boy, after all?"***

***"For him? Expecto Patronum!"***

***"After all this time?"***

***"Always."***

Dumbledore had used them all. For his godsdamned Greater Good. Harry felt that he'd never really known the older wizard, that he'd used Harry and Snape in the exact same way. Sacrifices had to be made, and they were the ones to do it. Once again, Harry had to wonder if they'd be here right now if Dumbledore hadn't given in to the lure of the ring and sealed his own fate and thus Snape's and Harry's as well. The portrait had attempted to engage with him several times. Harry refused to listen to or even acknowledge Dumbledore's painting.

And then there was Hermione. Yes, they'd taken her genius for granted. He and Ron had automatically thought she would be the one to find the Horcruxes, and she did. She'd been the one keeping them alive, the one who found food when they were so hungry rubbish bins started to smell like filet mignon.

Hermione had been the one who carried their lives in her beaded bag. Only she would have thought to create an Undetectable Extension Charm so that their very existence was safer. She had the medicines, the clothing, the preparation, the brains to keep them alive....

Harry's mind echoed with the words of Headmaster Black. "Where were you, Mister Potter, when they killed your friend, Hermione Granger?"

*I was saving the Wizarding world,* a truculent, petulant voice retorted. Harry despised himself for that voice. It may have been the truth, but it was a bitter truth, and it gave him no comfort. It was Dumbledore's voice.

---

The night of the final battle, Headmaster Black returned to his portrait in the Headmaster's office. He gave Dumbledore's portrait a withering look.

"Well, the deed is done, and I do think from now on I'll stick to this frame. I'm a little weary of treading the boards."

"Why, Phineas?" quipped Headmistress Berthalia Bibble, 1754-1827. "I had no idea you had thespian leanings."

"Do try to keep up, Bertha," Dumbledore replied. He turned to Black. "And the Headmaster?"

Black put on a long-suffering expression. "Dead as a very dead thing. So is the Mudblood girl."

Dumbledore had the grace to look sorrowful. "A great loss, Phineas. Both of them. But sacrifices must be made in these desperate times."

"Yes, you would think so," Black retorted testily. "But all's well that ends well. For the Greater Good. Isn't that what you've told him all this time, Albus?"

Dumbledore nodded enthusiastically. "Always for the Greater Good, Phineas. Always for the Greater Good."

The portraits settled back to their naps. The goings on of the outside world meant little to them now. The war fought on their doorstep was a minor distraction, a break in the routine at best.

For Phineas Nigellus Black, it had been a little different. He could not explain to his fellow former Headmasters and mistresses of his adventures of the past year with the three Gryffindors. The portraits would have listened attentively, of course. They had nothing else better to do, but it wouldn't have made any impact. They hadn't been there. They hadn't been anywhere in so long they'd forgotten how it felt to be anywhere but in their frames, smug in their safe haven of the Headmaster's chamber.

Headmaster Black settled down for his nap. *Greater Good, bollocks.* He permitted himself a little smile and a reminiscence before the lure of the painting faded the memories.

*The Mudblood girl was covered in dirt and blood as she faced his portrait for the last time. "I heard you moving around. You were almost blasted into little canvas pieces," she said. "I thought you were the Death Eaters."*

*Headmaster Black looked offended. "As if I would sully myself with those fools. Gave us pure-bloods a bad name. I merely came to let you know I've been meandering around the halls of the castle, and I overheard..."*

*"With all due respect, get to the bloody point, Headmaster," Hermione said through gritted teeth. Her nerves were still on edge and she was jumpy. "Do you know if anything's happened?"*

*"The Dark Lord is dead," Black said. He watched the young woman sag slightly, her relief visceral and overwhelming. Indulgently, he drawled, "I suggest you either get the Headmaster to a hospital or turn yourselves in."*

*She looked at him as if he'd gone mad. "I'm not going to turn him in to anyone." The Mudblood's eyes snapped with fiery indignation. "Severus has been through enough. I'm not going to take the chance the Ministry will try to make him the scapegoat for all of this shite." She shook her head and stood, a look of grim determination on her dirty face. "No way. Uh uh." She turned to go.*

*"Wait!" He held his breath until she turned around impatiently. "What on earth do you plan on doing now?"*

*She frowned and looked down at him with contempt. "What do you care? Look, Headmaster, if you've got something to say, either say it or fuck off. I've got to get Severus to a hospital."*

*"Such impertinence! Totally uncalled for." Black scowled at her imperiously, and his expression was so reminiscent of Severus' that Hermione laughed unwillingly. Her reaction seemed to please the Headmaster in a way.*

*"Strange," the man in the portrait pondered, stroking his lips with a slender, painted finger. "But I almost understand why Headmaster Snape finds you so worthy of love." His expression soured. "Almost."*

*Hermione gave him a look of pure turpentine. "Headmaster..."*

*Black softened his tone. "I don't want the Headmaster vilified any more than you, my girl." The 'girl' looked slightly mollified and Black smiled, knowing just what to do. "But I also don't want you going off half-cocked. You and I need to devise a plan, Miss Granger, before the Death Eaters do decide to pay you a visit."*

Yes, it had been a long time, but he was satisfied he was not too old to remember adventure. Or intrigue. Or the thrill of being clever. Headmaster Black settled into the painted chair more comfortably, feeling rather smugly pleased with himself.

He was a Slytherin, after all. And Slytherins look after their own.

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A/N: Words in bold italics are direct quotes from Harry Potter and The Deathly Hallows by JK Rowling.

Title is from the Queen song, "Save Me", by Brian May.

Summary is from the song, "Matters Of The Heart", by Bonnie Raitt.

## Five: I Clothed Myself In Your Glory And Your Love

*Chapter 5 of 5*

As simple as breathing, I picture your face, all tangled in daydreams, and shielded with grace; I feel you beside me in this place...

**Anti-Litigation Charm: Nothing you recognize belongs to me. All characters are property of JK Rowling and not me. If they did belong to me, Severus Snape would be alive and well and snarking his way through Hogwarts even as we speak.**

**For Arwyn and Jong\_Khan, for their encouragement.**

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*Nineteen years later*

Harry and Ginny Potter stood on King's Cross Station, platform nine and three-quarters, preparing their sons for departure on the famous Hogwarts Express. Harry marveled, as always, at some of the manner of dress witches and wizards sported, thinking how 'Muggle' they looked. A more motley crew could seldom be found, except of course, on this day, on this platform. For this was the day all underage witches and wizards boarded the train to take them to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Yes, platform nine and three-quarters was a loud, cramped, thrilling place to be, and it always took Harry back to that first day so long ago when he closed his eyes, pushed his way into the platform and saw the big train for the first time. Was he really ever that young?

After their son James started school the previous year, Harry and Ginny realised they had enjoyed this family excursion so much they made a promise to be here every year to see off their children and the children of their extended family. It made Harry feel like a kid again, before the dark, dark days, when he was just Harry, the boy who lived under the stairs at his aunt and uncle's house on Privet Drive.

His brother-in-law, Ron Weasley, and wife, Lavender, along with children Hugo and Rose, had just spotted them and were making their way through the crowded platform to join Harry and Ginny. It was Rose Weasley's first year, just the same as Harry's middle son, Albus. Lily, Harry's youngest, would have to wait another two years before she could join her brothers at Hogwarts.

As he looked around, taking in all the sights and sounds around him, Harry saw Draco Malfoy, his lovely wife, and their son, Scorpius. He was the same age as Harry's own Albus. Hmm. Perhaps they would become friends. It would be nice to think so. Draco gave Harry a stiff nod of acknowledgment, then turned away. Harry sighed. Then again...

The platform, if possible, grew even more packed and noisy with students, owls, familiars and parents there to see them off. The huge train belched steam and smoke, as if impatient to start its yearly journey. Students meandered around, boarding the train: some slow and reluctant, some, like Harry had been, eager and excited about the mysterious journey.

Many were reuniting with friends to discuss the summer hols and compare notes. The boys chatted about the new Firebolt Ultra 7XXX, supposedly the fastest broom on earth, and the upcoming Quidditch World Cup. And girls, of course. The girls gossiped about makeup and The Black Daggers, a new goth Wizarding band, hailed to be the best new group since The Weird Sisters. And boys, of course.

In the midst of all this good-natured chaos, Harry looked down the long platform, and his heart actually stuttered in his chest. Through a thick cloud of steam vapour, he saw a tall man, with long black hair, striding down the platform away from him. Dressed completely in black, the apparition's floor-length robes billowed out behind him like the wings of a giant bat. There was no one on earth that moved with such menacing grace except...

"Hey!" Harry shouted, and Ron, Ginny, and his family looked up in surprise just as Harry took off down the platform at a trot. A billow of steam obscured the man for a moment, and Harry picked up the pace. He was running now, trying to catch up with the phantom that had haunted many a night's dreaming.

He was almost upon the figure and shouted, "Professor!" The figure continued walking, and Harry put forward a burst of speed and grabbed the man's arm. The figure spun around and faced Harry head on, a familiar scowl on the dark face.

"Oi, you..." His face froze in shock, then changed to stunned, delighted surprise. "S'truth! You're Harry Potter!" The man graced Harry with a fantastic smile full of straight, white teeth. Harry gasped and shook his head in disbelief.

The man standing before him was Severus Snape. Or rather, Severus Snape if he were eighteen years old and spoke with an Australian accent. Harry gaped at him. It was too much of a coincidence. He had the same long, lanky black hair and large nose of Severus Snape. Where Snape had the sallow, pale skin of a man who rarely saw daylight, this young man was tanned with the healthy glow of someone who enjoyed being out in the Australian sunshine.

The younger man thrust his hand out, and Harry took it like a sleepwalker. Beaming at Harry, shaking his hand enthusiastically, he said, "Jared Mulholland, sir, and it is an honour to meet you! I can't wait to tell my folks I'm shaking hands with you! Mum!" The Snape/Mulholland boy called out to a woman in front of them. It was obvious she had been the one Jared was striding toward when Harry intercepted him.

"Mum! Look who I've run into! It's only *the* Harry Potter!" The woman turned toward Harry slowly, and it took all of Harry's years of Auror training not to react. She was, as they all were, nineteen years older, but Harry would know Hermione Granger anywhere.

"Mr. Potter, this is my Mum, Catherine Mulholland," said the young man, and Harry and Hermione faced each other for the first time in almost twenty years. They were frozen, staring at each other in shock.

For a moment, Hermione looked at Harry with an almost fearful look in her amber eyes. She shook her head as if remembering herself, then favoured him with a brilliant smile and held out her hand. "Harry Potter! Well, this is an honour. I can't tell you how grateful we are for what you did for our world."

She was playing her part perfectly, and Harry fought the impulse to scream at her, "What the bloody hell do you think you're doing?" Instead, he took her hand and said, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Mulholland." He stared at her. *Say something, Hermione*, he thought. *Say bloody something.*

Hermione smiled. She looked around the platform. "This is a little overwhelming. We haven't been back here for years, not since our oldest son came to Hogwarts. We don't normally come to England to see Jared off, but since it's his last year we wanted to make it special." Her pride was genuine even if her life wasn't. "Ravenclaw. Head Boy, top in class, Quidditch scholarship. We're very proud of him.

"Although," she added, giving her son a pointed look, "he was supposed to have his hair cut before term started. He's been staying in France this summer with our oldest son, and he supposedly forgot. His father was *not* amused." She said it disapprovingly, but there was no real fire to it. Jared returned her look, albeit sheepishly. He looked at Harry and winked, smiling ruefully.

*I'll bet your father wasn't amused*, thought Harry. With long hair, Jared was the spitting image of his father. The Snape Harry had seen in the Pensieve. The Snape who had loved Lily Evans. There were still many in the Wizarding world who would see the resemblance and wonder...

In the midst of these thoughts a light bulb went off in Harry's head. "Wait a minute. Mulholland" He turned back to Hermione. "Your oldest son is Skyler Mulholland, the Quidditch star?"

Hermione blushed and nodded, but it was Jared who answered. "Righto, Mr. Potter. He plays in France with the Lyon Lions. Seeker." He was obviously proud of his famous brother. "I spent the summer training with the Lions."

Harry was stunned. For the past few years he'd watched Skyler Mulholland's career with interest. Seemingly coming out of nowhere in the back of beyond in Australia, the nineteen year old had been nicknamed "The Hawk" in Quidditch circles. He'd earned the moniker because of his ability to swoop out of the sky in a death-defying drop to snatch the Golden Snitch literally out of the grasp of his opponents.

None-so-charitable teams said his nickname was based on his rather large beak-like nose and his sharp features. They called him the Ultimate Quidditch Bad Boy. He was one of the few players as popular with witches as with wizards. He was fearless, ruthless, charismatic and snarky. Who did that sound like?

Harry's mind reeled with the implications. Hermione and Snape had run away together. They had escaped Death Eaters, the Ministry Aurors and death, and moved to Australia. They had changed their names, their lives and had children.

And that fucking Phineas Nigellus Black had covered for them, pouring it on so thick that Harry had been sick with remorse for years *Where were you, Mister Potter, when*

*the Death Eaters killed your friend, Hermione Granger?* He'd looked Harry in the eye and lied his head off and not once in the subsequent nineteen years had he so much as changed a jot or tittle of his story. Fucking Slytherins. Thick as thieves.

Harry did the math and realized that, during that mind-bending last year on the run, Hermione had been pregnant with Skyler. She had faced danger, dragons and survived Bellatrix Lestrange's Cruciatus Curse while carrying Snape's child. And Snape's child had survived as well.

To be honest, that didn't surprise Harry so much. Snape had always seemed so indestructible when they were younger; his death had been the hardest to accept. No wonder Skyler Mulholland was such a tough player. He'd tackled worse opponents than Victor Krum at the height of his powers. Harry didn't know whether to laugh or cry, to congratulate Hermione, or have them arrested.

Hermione was now smiling up at her handsome son. "Jared's just received a scholarship from the Lions. Chaser."

With no other choice than to recover, Harry floundered for a moment for something to say. Finally, he smiled at Jared. "My son James was telling me all about you last year. He's a huge fan of yours. It just didn't click for a moment. You pronounce your last name a little differently than he does."

Harry turned to Hermione. "You must be very proud, Mrs. Mulholland." Jared was rewarded with a beaming smile from his mother. Apparently Snape's children were very aware of their parents' feelings towards them.

At that moment, Hermione sensed what Harry was thinking and quickly changed the subject. "We're also here because it's our youngest son's first year at Hogwarts. We had to make sure he was settled in properly. He's a little skittish. Not like Skyler or Jared. They couldn't wait to get to Hogwarts." Hermione lowered her eyes. "Jasper's our shy one."

"Speaking of, where are Dad and Jazza, Mum?" Jared said, looking around. His eyebrows flew up. "Ah. There they are. I want Dad to meet Mr. Potter. "

Hermione looked a little panicked for a moment. "Oh, that's alright, son. No need to detain Mr. Potter any more than necessary. Your father's just seeing to Jasper..."

"Dad!" Jared was already calling, and Hermione dropped all pretense and gave Harry a look that said *Harry, please don't give us away*.

The crowd parted as Jared walked over to a tall wizard whose back was to Harry. Jared placed a gentle hand on his father's shoulder and said, "Dad, bring Jasper over. There's someone I want you to meet."

When Snape turned around, Harry half expected his dark brows to furrow and a sneer to come to his lips. He was sorely mistaken. Snape approached Harry with a pleasant expression on his face.

"Merlin's wand. Harry Potter." There was no mistaking the deep, melodious voice of Severus Snape even overlaid as it was with the thinnest veneer of an Australian accent. He held out his hand. "Dane Mulholland. What a pleasure to meet you, sir." Snape released Harry's hand and gently drew his youngest son forward. "I see Jared's already introduced you to my wife. This is my youngest son, Jasper Mulholland." He looked down at the boy protectively and smiled. "Jasper, this is Harry Potter. You remember his name, don't you?"

The younger boy was the spitting image of Hermione, bushy hair and all. It was like looking at a male version of the precocious young witch Harry had met the very first day on the train. He couldn't help but smile down at the lad, who was looking up at Harry with unabashed hero worship. "Hello, sir!" he piped, his voice high and excited. "I've read all about you in..."

"Hogwarts: A History." The entire Mulholland family joined in with Jasper, and they all had a chuckle at it. Harry was shocked into laughing with them. He leaned forward, took the young boy's hand and shook it gravely.

Harry said, "It's nice to meet you, Jasper. Don't let this lot give you grief." He looked up at Hermione. "I used to have a friend who knew that book from cover to cover. She got us out of a few scrapes because of it."

Jared explained, "Jaz is the swot of the family. Already got all your textbooks memorized, don't you, Sprog?" he ruffled his younger brother's wild hair affectionately.

Hermione instinctively drew closer to her husband. Harry had to admit that they looked relaxed and happy, for all the present tension in Snape's eyes. Harry realised the four of them looked good together. Snape looked so different it was hard to believe he was the same person. His hair was longer than Harry remembered and worn in the old fashioned wizarding style, gathered at the back and fastened with a silver clasp. It no longer looked lank and greasy, but there were a few streaks of iron grey shot through the once raven's wing black.

He had grown a goatee beard that was also iron grey. Harry couldn't be sure, but he thought Snape might have had some work done on his teeth and nose as well. Though he never thought he would entertain such a thought, Harry realized Snape was actually a handsome man. Perhaps happiness, or love, or living free had changed him. He certainly bore little resemblance to the drawn, bitter, unhappy man Harry remembered from the war. Nor did he look like the self-conscious, sullen, abused youth that had known his mother.

Wordlessly, Harry cast a silent detection spell often used by Aurors. Sure enough, there was the shimmer at Snape's throat; he was using a glamour to obscure any scars no doubt left by Nagini's bite. Perhaps his children knew about it, perhaps they didn't. It wasn't Harry's place to judge.

"Yes, my friend was very smart," he continued, looking pointedly at Hermione. "Her parents, I believe, moved to Australia many years ago. I sort of lost track of them over time." That part was also true. After the war, Harry had gone in search of Hermione's missing parents. Hermione had told him she modified her parents' memories and convinced them to move to Australia as Wendell and Monica Wilkins, but Harry never found them.

He was afraid to ask about the Wilkinses. For all he knew, the boys knew their grandparents by that name, and it might raise more questions than Hermione and Snape might be ready to answer. Harry looked at them closely and made a decision. He smiled at the two boys.

"You know, Jasper, I have a son who's starting Hogwarts this year, too. Perhaps you two can become friends. He's a little nervous. His name is Albus." He straightened up and looked Snape in the eye.

"Albus Severus."

Snape smiled at him. "An impressive name, Mr. Potter." His trademark eyebrow rose delicately. "A lot to live up to, or down to, if I may say so."

Harry shrugged. "I wanted him to know that he was named after the two bravest men I knew. I wanted him to remember it's alright to be afraid, but you can still be brave."

Jasper, unaware of the hidden messages, tilted his head and bit on his lower lip. It was so Hermione-like Harry almost laughed. "Jared says getting sorted into the right House is important. Does Albus know what House he would like to be sorted into, Mr. Potter?"

Jared winked at Harry. In an eerie imitation of his father's vocal inflections and timbre, Jared interjected, "Oh, I dunno, Jaz. Mum was a Gryff, Dad and Sky were Slyths, I'm a Raven. You might get sorted into Hufflepuff and we'll have the entire set!" Jasper's horrified look made even Snape chuckle darkly.

"Don't bait your brother, Jared," Snape chastised mildly.

Harry saw the uncertainty in the boy's face. It was so like his own son's concerns. It was, Harry realised, the same concerns he'd had sitting on the stool, waiting for the Sorting Hat to decide his fate.

He gave the boy and encouraging nod. "I wouldn't worry, Jasper. I told Albus it really doesn't matter which House. After all," he winked at Hermione, "the Sorting Hat won't put you in a House you really don't want to be in."

"Exactly true," Snape agreed. He looked down at his youngest. "I've already told you, Jasper. Your mother and I are proud of you, full stop. You will be an enhancement to any House, son. Don't worry about it. We don't care." He said the last three words slowly and precisely, and Harry was again reminded of the Potions master of his school days.

It suddenly occurred to him that Minerva McGonagall, as Headmistress of Hogwarts, must also know the truth. Well, enough of it to fabricate Dane and Catherine Mulholland's school records as a Slytherin and a Gryffindor. Harry thought back and remembered how upset Professor McGonagall had been about Snape's death. She must have known the truth about Snape all along. And he thought Slytherins were schemers. Loyalty, Harry realised, was no respecter of House, any more so than love.

The Hogwarts Express whistle blew and everyone straightened up. Jared said, "C'mon, Jaz, you can walk with me while I do my rounds." He hugged Hermione and kissed her, then gave his father a hug as well. Harry was surprised how openly affectionate Snape was to his own children. It was patently obvious they loved their father very much.

"Now, son, first Hogsmeade weekend, that hair is going," Snape warned. Now *there* was the scowl Harry remembered of old. Not completely changed, then. "If not, you'll be doing yourself no favours on the Quidditch pitch. It's hard to block a Quaffle through a curtain of hair."

Jared rolled his eyes, smiling, "Yes, Dad. I promise. My first stop will be Twiddle's Tonsorial Parlour for a snip. Word of honour." He turned to Harry. "I keep telling him the sheilas love it but he won't have it."

They shared a reluctant laugh, then Jared held out his hand again. "I suppose it's time for us to start boarding, so I'll take my leave. Goodbye, sir. It's been the highlight of the year meeting you, Mr. Potter."

"And you, Mr. Mulholland. I look forward to seeing you in action next year with the Lions." He turned to Jasper. "I'll tell Albus to look you up on the train, Jasper. My niece, Rose, is starting this year as well. I hope you'll all become good friends." He looked up at Hermione. "Who knows?" Harry said with a wry smile. "Maybe this will be the beginnings of a new Golden Trio."

"Merlin forbid. From what I've heard, Hogwarts barely survived the last one," Snape drawled lazily. Harry looked into Snape's face, and it was as if the years had melted away, and he was a first year again. Snape was smirking at him, eyebrow on the rise, drawing himself up to full height. Then Harry saw it: a swift, bright gleam in the dark eyes.

*Blimey*, Harry thought, *all these years and I never realized he was funny* Harry felt a wistful sadness for a moment for the friendship forever denied by time and circumstances. Snape, he realized, had been a person worth getting to know, and only Hermione had realised it.

Jasper, his small hand already clasped in his older brother's larger one, smiled and waved. Apparently he was used to his father's dry humour. "I hope so, Mr. Potter." He turned to his parents, his expression suddenly anxious. Wordlessly, Snape held out his arms. Jasper threw himself into his father's embrace, bravely trying to fight tears. His large amber eyes searched his father's face. "You'll write and send me books? You promise?"

Snape's voice was more gentle and kinder than Harry ever thought possible. "We'll owl every day. Promise. Now, mind your brother and listen to your teachers and work very hard." He gave him another hug. In the softest of whispers, he said, "Your mother and I love you very much." He pulled his young son's arms from his neck and stood quickly, rubbing his nose conspicuously.

Harry watched the young boy walk off, holding onto Jared's hand. Harry then turned back to Hermione and Snape. They both looked as if they wanted to cry themselves. Hermione made a little moue of apology.

"He's our youngest, and our home is going to seem very empty without him." As he boarded the train, Jasper turned around and waved at his parents, trying very hard to remain stoic. As they waved back Jared gave them a smile and a nod, and the brothers disappeared onto the train behind a roil of steam.

Harry smiled. From behind him, he heard Ginny calling him. Startled back to the present, Harry looked at his dear friend, at his old enemy. He took a deep breath. "Mr. and Mrs. Mulholland, it's been a pleasure to meet you and your boys. I wish you a safe trip back to Australia."

Hermione and Snape exchanged glances. Finally, she said, "Actually, we're in the process of moving to Great Britain to be near the kids. It's a little less expensive than Portkey-ing back and forth, you know."

"Oh, really? Whereabouts?" The moment the words left Harry's lips he felt like kicking himself. "I-I mean, I hope you find it to your liking. It'll be a bit different than Australia."

"So we've heard," Snape replied with a slight smile. "Still, it will be worth the change to be near our sons. I'm sure that will more than make up for the weather."

"Oh. Yes," Harry replied, feeling more like a horse's arse with each passing second. "Well, I'd better get back to my family." He swallowed. "Good luck."

Both of them looked relieved as they shook his hand. "Thank you, Mr. Potter," Hermione said rather primly. There was sadness in her eyes, tinged with regret, and for that Harry was grateful. It would have been much harder to know that Hermione wasn't glad to see him.

"Likewise, Mr. Potter," Snape echoed with a small, dignified nod. He put a protective arm around Hermione, and they turned to go.

"Wait!" Harry said impulsively. They turned to look at him, their eyes wary.

He felt a bit foolish, and took a deep breath to steady his resolve. He stammered, uncertain what to say, but feeling that something must be said. "I lost a brilliant, wonderful friend in the war. I saw a brave, misunderstood man die a senseless, horrific death. I've never gotten over losing them. Either of them."

For a second, they were all silent. Snape said quietly, "Unfortunately, those things happen in wars, Mr. Potter." Snape looked him directly in the eye. He placed his hands on Hermione's shoulders and caressed her gently. "Sometimes the only sane answer is to start over."

"Yes, I know that now," Harry said. He struggled to voice his thoughts. "It's just that... I wish I had the chance to tell them how much they meant to me." He looked at Hermione and Severus beseechingly, all pretense aside. "I want to tell them how grateful I am for what they did. Not just for me, but for all of us. For our children." He looked at Snape. Really looked at him. "For *their* children."

Hermione and Snape looked at one another, and Hermione looked away, visibly moved.

Snape looked Harry in the eye. Really looked at him. He, too, was moved. Finally, he said quietly, "They do know." Something like a smile played about his lips, and his hand unconsciously moved over Hermione's stomach. "And so do *their* children, Harry."

"Harry! C'mon! The kids have to leave! C'mon if you want to say goodbye!" The voices behind him were calling Harry back to his life, and he turned to look back at Ginny.

"I'll be right there!" Harry turned back to the Mulhollands. "Anyway, I just want you to know..."

Harry found himself facing an empty platform. He looked around for Hermione and Snape but they had given him all the time they were willing to give. Harry smiled sadly and turned back to his family. He hugged Albus tightly as he and the rest of his family caught up with him.

Ron, his mouth full of ice cream, said, "Who were you talking to? I couldn't see them clearly. Somebody we know?"

Harry looked back where Snape and Hermione had stood and shook his head. "No. I thought I recognized someone, but I was mistaken."

~FIN~

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A/N: The title of this Chapter is a line from an old Queen song called "Save Me".

The quote is from a lovely song called "Wherever You May Be" on Bonnie Raitt's *Silver Lining* album.