

Darkness Past

by Annabun

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Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 5

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"Luna, you're crazy."

The new owner of the large house on the hill just smiled as she opened the door for Hermione Granger. Piles of loose paper and dust bunnies gently drifted in the breeze, and it took all Hermione's self-control not to ask if there were Puffskeins hiding in the wainscoting. A slight sour smell from the nearby river wafted past, but the house itself was light and airy, quite different from the industrial town huddling at the bottom of the slope and stretching out to the north as far as one could see.

"It is rather large, Hermione, but just think. We'll be able to fit in all the children, and their pets, and hopefully there will be some healing at last." Luna Lovegood's voice was quietly sad, her normally buoyant state still to recover properly from the losses of the war. "There's fourteen orphans, including the three whose parents are at St Mungo's; and several people have offered to come and teach. Andromeda Tonks wants to help and bring Teddy, and I think it will do her good." She looked around the reception hall and grimaced. "But we've got to get the place cleaned and furnished before then. And I don't want it to look like a hospital."

"And neither do I." Hermione walked over to the largest wall space. A few tattered lists were stuck to its surface, the yellowing tape showing their age. "What was this before?"

Luna shrugged as she ran her hands along the top of the old iron central heating. "Some sort of short-term foster care. Children whose parents needed a break, or who were in the Muggle government care for a while. Like if their dad was away and something happened to their mum. It has a sad feel to it. And there's some old papers in the office and then ..." She held up a small stuffed toy, unrecognisable as any form of animal but obviously much loved at one stage. "There's a dormitory upstairs, but it's nowhere near as nice as Hogwarts."

They wandered through the ground floor, torn posters from the 1970s urging people to "*never let another Maria Colwell happen*" hanging off corkboards under layers of grime and water stains. Their footsteps echoed off the lino floors and the glass corridor windows, the "institutional green" walls mocking any attempt to be cheery. Hermione shuddered at the complete soullessness of the place. "It must have been pretty grim then."

"I wouldn't want to have come here." Luna replied. "But I've read some of the stuff in the office. You only came here if there really wasn't anywhere else to go, and at least they tried. The dormitories have pictures on the walls, and there were a couple of old bedspreads in the linen cupboard that would have been pretty at one time." She opened the door to what must have been the kitchen, and Hermione was pleasantly surprised to see the equipment, while old-fashioned, was still clean and looked in good condition. "I think if we cleaned the place up and re-painted it, it could be something special." Luna's enthusiasm started to creep through, and, as if by magic, her small smile lit up the hallway and lifted the gloom a trifle.

"Working bee."

"Is that like a baby Heliopath?"

Hermione stifled a giggle and hugged her friend. "Not quite, but it involves friends, a weekend, and pizza. And before that, I'll come in a couple of days and see what I can do."

Two weeks later, a very dusty and grubby Hermione was sitting on the floor of the old Matron's office, surrounded by boxes of papers. To her left she was carefully putting some of the previous children's artwork, to be framed and used around the place to brighten it up. But it was the file box of old residents' dossiers that had her transfixed.

She hadn't meant to pry. Not really. The box had started to fall apart as she lifted it up, and the folders inside had spilled out, papers and photographs scattering across the floor. At least one of the photos had her wincing at its dark, evil bruises over a child's back, and she flinched at the sores that abounded on the arms and then cried when she learned they were cigarette burns. At that, she had to know the child's fate, and had delved into the ancient papers that accompanied the horrible sights.

Luna came in just as she was wiping her eyes for the fourth time, and wordlessly passed over a box of tissues.

"Thank goodness this place was here, Luna. You should see what state some of these children were in when they came here." Hermione stifled another sob and laid out the photographs of previous abuse. "Beaten, starved, neglected this poor one burned her hands when she was left alone at age five while her mother worked and her father decided to go to the pub instead. And this one..." She picked up the shots that had started her tears, and the hopelessly sad eyes of a small boy looked up at her and Luna, the black ring around one just emphasising the bright eyes. He had plaster on one arm and another bruise of unimaginable darkness on his chest. Hermione's finger ran down the child's cheek, wishing she could actually touch him and hold him.

"But what happened to the children?"

"Most of them actually did rather well once they were here." Hermione's voice was calmer now, the information having reassured her. "Many of them stayed long enough for another family member to be located, and they went off to a new life. And some just stayed for a few weeks to make sure they got better, then went to foster families who actually cared for them. Look at this one."

The smiling, laughing boy was almost unrecognisable as the same one in the first pictures. He was a few years older, filled out and looking cared for, and gladly holding the hand of the foster parent who very obviously loved him back. The smear of chocolate ice cream on his cheek said so much more than any report could. "No, the saddest ones are the ones who were only here for a couple of days, and whose parents convinced the courts that the neglect was a temporary situation. Some of them were back five or six times before the courts could make some sort of other arrangement. Or seemed to be dumped here every Christmas and Easter."

Hermione gestured towards a folder she had put aside, the contents spilling out onto the floor. "It's Christmas wishes from the children. Have a look."

Luna picked up the bundle and leafed through the crudely written letters, the crayoned requests echoing the hopes of children long past. Some had pictures on them of the children's wishes, the usual mixture of bicycles and horses, but some again were truly heartbreaking. "Oh look, Hermione. I hope this boy got his wish."

"What did he ask for?"

Luna silently handed the paper over, and Hermione found herself biting her knuckles to stop the crying again.

Dear Santa, Daddy says I was bad. I will be good. For Christmas may I have a new Daddy who won't hit me. SS.

"Tell me he got his wish, Luna."

"I can't tell." The blonde leafed through the rest, pulling out two more pages. "I don't think so, judging by these. It's the same child, and he was here for two more Christmases. The next year, he wanted his mother to run away with him and live with Santa, and then three years later ... Oh. You'd better look."

The letter this time was brusque, neatly written and still completely heartbreaking.

Dear Mr Clause,

The last few times I wrote to you, you didn't give me what I wanted. I don't think you really exist anyway, but they told me I had to write a letter to you. So here's the story.

Spinners End is a dump. My parents hate me. My mum goes weird and starts acting strange with knives, and they take her away again. Then my dad hits me. He doesn't hit me in front of her any more, but when she's not there he goes for it. He broke my toy Zokko that it took me four months of paper rounds to save up for. And he won't give her any money for clothes, so the other kids laugh because I look odd. I wish I'd been picked for the Home Children and sent to Australia.

So please, Santa, send me somewhere new. Send me somewhere where I'm not the odd one, where people don't care that I can do different things wear old clothes, and where no-one will hit me if I say I can make things move without touching them just because they say I'm telling lies.

My mum said I would be going away to school, but she says a lot of things when she's completely loopy and out of it sick. Besides, she can't afford new school uniforms or anything for me anyway. But it would be bostin if I could go away to school because then I could start again.

Also please could Lily Evans come too, because she's been my only friend.

Sev Snape.

Hermione read the name once, then carefully again. "Oh. Hell." She looked up at Luna with heartbroken eyes. "No wonder he's such a grumpy blighter. Imagine growing up like that. What does the file say?"

"Hang on a second." Luna leafed through the pages, skimming the notes. "Six times here if there had been one more, he would have been taken away from the family for good. Occasional unexplained bruising, and once he had a broken arm that he wouldn't say how he got. His mother was frequently being committed involuntarily, so he was often just in the care of his father. And it says here that every time he came, he was in desperate need of food, a wash and clean clothes that fitted."

The women looked at each other sadly, then back at the files.

Luna spoke first. "We shouldn't have looked."

"No, we shouldn't have." Hermione gathered up all the official papers and threw them back into the box beside her. "These get burned. Now. And we only keep the pictures."

"Agreed."

That afternoon, a pall of smoke hung over the old Children's Home, and a darkness lay on Hermione's heart as she scrubbed the old bathrooms and washed down the grubby walls. In her mind's eye, she saw the young dark-haired child standing in the reception hallway for the third time, defiant and bedraggled, and wished she had been able to do something then. Finally, the absurdity of her wish caught up to her, and she laughed at herself for wanting to change something that had happened ten years before she was even born.

Luna was still learning the vagaries and variations of Muggle life, so Hermione slipped down to the town for some takeaway Balti and promised to take her friend next time. Now, she just wanted to grab some food and head back.

Hermione had spent the time since the Great War catching up with Muggle life as well as magical. She'd taken her driving test (and passed with full marks, of course) and made frequent use of her parents' car. They had been restored to home and memory after a long six months of searching for them, and while it took them a quite a while to forgive their daughter for her actions, they did eventually concede that it had been for their own good. The thing that finally decided them was the look of sadness in her eyes when she finally restored their memories; a look which had them realise that their little girl had truly grown up.

They'd encouraged her to take a break from her studies, and she'd enjoyed the next few months of frivolous behaviour until Luna had contacted her for help in dealing with Muggle real-estate firms. And the result the old Children's Home looked like just what Luna needed to bring back her own joy.

Luna herself had been uncharacteristically quiet since her imprisonment in Malfoy Manor, and had felt quite differently about her father ever since she heard of Xenophilius' betrayal.

"I need a break, Hermione," the young witch had said over a well-deserved afternoon tea the day the Home became hers. "I feel like I owe the community something, that I need to help rebuild people's lives. There's so much pain, such sorrow..." And at this her eyes closed, her soul echoing the same pain in some deep, dark recess. "I know *He-Who* is gone, and most of his followers, but I still don't feel safe. But perhaps doing this, making a safe place a haven will make ~~me~~ feel safe too."

Hermione had already located three enormous boxes of brightly coloured curtain material in her parents' attic that they swore they would never need again. The day Luna staggered into the Home, almost lost under a tower of paint tins of bright hues, was the day Hermione knew "therapy" was working for her friend. And one afternoon, Hermione found herself in old blue overalls, on her knees painting fantastical snails and butterflies and frogs on the entrance hall wall, and she laughed and realised her friend's "treatment" was working for her too.

But those files ... Hermione cursed the dark cloud that was threatening her own soul, and drove carefully down the winding road towards the town. Soot-covered buildings lined the streets, and the clouds overhead (not all of her own making) had left an oily sheen on the cobblestones of the narrow roads. She vaguely remembered seeing an Indian Takeaway in the first few blocks, and she was watching more out the side window than the front as she turned a corner and almost hit a tall, dark figure who was starting to cross the road.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 5

Luna, her soul still damaged after the final battle, has bought an old Children's Home outside a grubby mill town.
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Severus Snape, only two nights out of St Mungos and still very shaky on his skinny legs, cursed the idiot driver who almost knocked him over and steadied himself before heading for an old and favourite takeaway. He'd exhausted himself the day before, unpacking old boxes and trying to make some sort of order out of the chaos that was his old house in Spinner's End, and today he was determined to take things a little easier. And that meant not cooking. But while he'd often visited the house while he'd been teaching at Hogwarts, he'd not been out for a meal for at least six years, and a lot can happen to an area in six years. The streets were the same, but the little shop around the corner where he'd bought milk and bread (when milk still came in bottles) was now an interior decoration salon. He'd stood in front of it yesterday, his eyes wandering over the "subtle gold prints" and "tasteful faux-fur covers" draped artistically in the window, then he'd cursed silently and headed home.

Today, though, he was starving. His hidden stash of biscuits had almost run out, and there was nothing else in the house except some very tired tea leaves. The mice had even got into the boxed home-made Christmas Cake Hagrid had insisted on giving him two years before, when he was still a member of the Order of the Phoenix. At least that helped explain why there weren't any mice any more.

So now the wounded warrior pulled a long black overcoat around his shoulders and headed for the brighter lights towards the city centre. He hoped the old Fish and Chippie was still there a chip buttie would go down very nicely, and Merlin take the inevitable indigestion afterwards. If pressed, later, he might have admitted that his mind wasn't 100% on the traffic, but more like 99% on the impending hot and greasy repast, but that didn't stop him shaking his fist at the car that had come so close and restraining his own desire to cast a fast *Crucio* on the driver.

To Severus's surprise, the car slowed and then stopped. With a slight wiggle on the way, the driver backed the car up to beside him, and the window hummed as it wound down.

"I'm terribly sorry, sir, I w... Professor!"

"Miss Granger. I should have known. I would take points from Gryffindor for your reckless behaviour, but I fear the gesture would be wasted."

Hermione engaged the brake and hopped out of the car. She walked around to the footpath where the man stood, unable to believe that he'd appear so soon after she'd been reading about him. For a long moment she looked at him, until his beetling brows met and his scowl became almost palpable.

"Have I grown an extra nose, Miss Granger, that you find my face so fantastical after all this time?"

"N... no, sir. I just wasn't expecting ... of all people ... although I suppose it makes sense, it's just that no-one would believe me." Hermione realised she was babbling and took a deep breath. "I do beg your pardon, sir. I wasn't watching as closely as I ought to have been, and I'm rather glad you've not been injured."

"As am I, Miss Granger. Now leave me to go about my business."

She hesitated at that dismissal, unwilling to leave the man in the cold like this. "Could I ... Perhaps I could drive you somewhere, Professor."

Severus Snape would normally not have even considered such an offer. And especially from a young lady who had so very nearly hit him. But his back was aching, and his strength, not yet recovered from Nagini's bite, was fading fast. He shook his head at his own frustrating physique and then looked up with the most supercilious stare he could muster (one he had borrowed in its entirety from Lucius).

"You may. This once. Take me to the Fish and Chip shop on High Street, next to the old Library, then you may drive me back afterwards." And he walked slowly up to the car and allowed her to open the door for him and help him into the passenger seat.

Hermione got back in the car, still dazed by the encounter. She drove carefully, turning into High Street then scanning the road left and right for the expected shopfront. Halfway down, though, they both spotted a sign that told them the shop's fate.

Council redevelopment. This Library will be closed and relocated to the Riverside Drive complex as of July 1998.

And to the left of the old Library lay the Indian takeaway Hermione had remembered from her previous trip. Past the library lay the remains of the council buildings, dark and forbidding under the sombre February skies.

Severus's head sank onto his chest, the last of his strength ebbing out with the hopes of the longed-for meal. He would later blame the tiredness and the pain, but a small tear edged out of his eye and he didn't even notice it. But Hermione did. She knew he had been in hospital for eight months, although she hadn't heard he'd been released. But she also knew, from her contact with other casualties of the War, that the healing (both physical and mental) would drain the body quickly of whatever energy it had. Her mind made up, she backed the car in a perfect reverse-park manoeuvre into the one remaining spot outside the "Balti Botti" and pulled on the handbrake as she moved the gearstick into "Neutral."

"You don't like Indian food?"

He sat in silence for a few heartbeats, the question sinking into his brain until he realised he was supposed to answer it. "I've not had it very often. And I'm not fond of spicy food."

His companion, seeing the dark circles under his eyes, knew what was necessary. "Will you excuse me, then, sir. I'll fetch something suitable, and you can come back and eat with us. This food's best when it's shared between people. And I don't think I should leave you alone tonight until you have eaten. You look like a puff of wind might knock you over." She let herself out of the car, shivering as the cold of the evening sank in, and wrapped her scarf around her neck tightly as she hurried into the brightly-lit shop.

Five minutes later, Severus was bored and starting to get cold himself. The lights in the takeaway beckoned him, and he let himself out of the car and walked slowly and purposefully into the warm area and over to where Hermione was balanced on a chair and perusing a tattered copy of some womens' magazine from several years before. *(How Will Maggie keep busy with no Politics? Kids love Charlie and the Chocolate Factory more than the Five! Princess Diana's AIDS funeral compassion. Lose a stone before Christmas!)*

"Does that rubbish really amuse you?" he drawled, then jumped back as she leapt to her feet, her hand holding a thin stick out past him. For a moment he thought it was a wand, then he saw she was pointing the car key at the window.

"If you're not in the car, I have to lock it, or someone will steal it." She watched for a double flash from the blinkers, then sat back down and looked up at him. "You might as well sit down. They'll be another ten minutes at least."

He sat opposite her, and she smiled at him over the magazine which now lay between them. "And no, for the record, it intrigues me." She waved her hand at the glossy coloured pages, currently open to a display of womens' makeup. "I can't understand why so many women spend the fortunes they do on this stuff. Most of it just replicates what a decent diet and exercise will do anyway."

"People want to find fast solutions," he surmised. "They want in a moment what would otherwise take weeks. Your 'diet and exercise' requires commitment and discipline a tube of lipstick and a wave of powder take a couple of quid and a mirror."

"You're right. But it's still scarily fascinating." She shut the magazine and rested her elbows on the table, her knuckles cradling her chin. "I'm surprised also to see you living back here, sir. Does the town hold as many good memories as it does bad?"

He looked deep into her eyes to determine whether she was stirring him, but saw only compassion and care. "Miss Granger, my house is here. I have nowhere else to go. And my parents are long dead and their pain with them the house is only a repository of books and clothes now." His eyes almost managed to convince her, but a touch of pain behind them told her the bitter truth that he tolerated the memories only because anywhere else would be worse. His voice continued, though, the acrimonious note marring its velvet tones only slightly. "They said they couldn't do anything more for me at St Mungo's, and while I was exonerated and cleared at the trial, for some reason the Council won't let me teach at Hogwarts. Not for a few years anyway. And I don't think I'm quite up to teaching again yet. So I'm at home. Reading. Resting." And becoming bored out of my skull. "But enough blather. Miss Granger, you ought to be at work. Or teaching. Or studying. Why aren't you?"

Her eyes, which had looked into his honestly and candidly, flicked away, and he was surprised to realise it discomposed him. He did not look away himself, though, and waited until she brought her gaze back to meet his, then held that gaze until he knew she was incapable of lying to him.

"I'm lost."

He said nothing. Years of observation had taught him that the less he said, the more people tended to talk. It had stood him in good stead for gathering information for He-Who-Was-Now-Dead, and Severus was not going to change a tactic that worked so well. And it did once more.

"I fought so hard, for so long." Hermione was losing herself in that look, which she knew was reading the secrets of her soul from the backs of her eyes. She couldn't look away from him. She could feel things moving, stirring, being dragged from the depths of her heart where she'd locked them almost a year ago, and unbidden they rose to the surface and revealed themselves. Thoughts she'd not realised she had. Thoughts she'd not realised she'd buried deep and dark, where they should have been safe. And now...

"I did what I could. Helped Harry. Searched. Put my own needs and wants aside while we fought. And when it was all over, there was this big, bleak darkness ahead of me, and I didn't know what to do. I'd been the 'smart one' and 'that clever girl' and suddenly I didn't need to be that. And Ron wanted us to marry and settle down at once, but I didn't want to be a wife and a mother straight away either. So I ran.

"And I ran away from magic, and away from the Wizarding World, and tried to be a normal person for a while. But I couldn't do that either."

She bit her lip and brutally suppressed a sob which was trying to rise in her. Severus hadn't realised, but his hands had slid across the table to take hers, and she was clutching his fingers like someone drowning. The darkness in her soul called to him, and he willed her to continue, but the moment was lost when the proprietor bumped into their table and jolted them out of their trance.

"Yer dinner, Miss. And yer drinks." The young Pakistani cook smiled to see two people so caught up in each other and waved the dinner containers under their noses.

The two lost souls blinked simultaneously, and Hermione turned and smiled at the proprietor, who handed her the bags. She rose and started for the door, then turned back and looked at Severus.

"All right, Miss Granger. Just a moment." Severus pushed himself stiffly out of the chair and started towards the door, which he held open for the young woman. She fumbled at her keys until they set off the door locks, and Severus opened the rear left side door for her to gently place the takeaway, then let himself in the front door while she went around to the driver's side.

Hermione slipped in and fastened her seat belt, then put the key into the ignition. She paused then, thoughtful, then turned and faced her old teacher.

"It's Hermione. And as we're no longer at school, may I?"

"You may, Hermione."

"Thank you, Severus." And she started the car and headed to the old Children's Home.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 5

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Severus did not ask which way Hermione was driving, but her brain finally worked enough that she realised she ought to at least warn him but how, without revealing what she had read? She reached for the radio and turned it on low; a soft blues singer crooning into the space between them. Rain started falling heavily, thudding like fingertips on the roof and windscreen, and she increased the wiper speed in a half-successful attempt to see.

"Dammit, we won't be able to paint tonight if it's so damp." Hermione threw out the line in frustration, then glanced at her passenger, sitting damply beside her. She tried not to let her voice get too bright as she continued, "Luna Lovegood has bought an old Children's Home outside the town, and we're doing it up for the orphans from the War. It's hard work though that's why I'm bringing us dinner." The black figure beside her sat absolutely still, and she ploughed resolutely on. "It looks like it was half-reasonable once. But I should think it's been closed for years."

"Seventeen."

She looked at him, then back to the road. It was as if the word had come out of a stone statue, but she needed to make this look natural, so she kept going. "That long! It's easy to believe the kitchen looks like something out of 'Oliver Twist'. Was it very busy, when it was running?"

"I don't know." The blatant lie slipped far too easily out of his lips, and he wrapped himself in his darkness even tighter. "The records should show. If they still exist."

"No, not any more." *Too fast, he'll suspect something.* "The place was nearly empty when we got it just a few old counterpanes and posters. I hope it closed for the best reason."

"And what exactly would be the best reason?" He didn't add *you insufferably curious know-it-all*, but she could feel it hanging in the air between them.

"Oh, that the children all got to go back to their families, or to somewhere where they were loved, and the services weren't required any more."

"I think you'll find, if you were to go through the town newspaper archives, that it closed because the laws changed." Severus shifted in his seat, the dampness across his shoulders now an ache that heralded early arthritis. Or rheumatism. Or something. "The authorities weren't allowed to take the children away any more, not even if the kids were getting beaten or had their hands ironed or if they were being made to live under the stairs like your friend Potter. Only in the worst cases, and then they'd go straight to a foster home. So this sort of a halfway house became redundant, and they closed it."

He turned his face to the window, the town landscape now replaced by the grey hedgerows dripping in the downpour. "And good riddance, too."

The car pulled into the driveway of the Home, and Hermione braked carefully against slipping down the slope. Severus made no move to get out, though, and was still staring out the window at the entrance that he hadn't seen for twenty years. Except in his nightmares. She gently laid her hand on his shoulder, horrified at how damp it was that coat was no more waterproof than a paper napkin. The warmth of her hand seeped through the fabric and touched a small part of his brain as well he shook his head and turned to her.

"Hermione, don't lie to me. You *knew* I had been here. Did you bring me here on purpose?"

"No, I brought you here because it's where I'm working. Do you think I deliberately sought you out on the streets of the town, stalked you and followed you so that I could drag you here?" The cold and her hunger gave her voice an edge he had not heard in some time, and he smiled that it was being directed at him for once, instead of complaints behind his back. It was not a nice smile.

"Then I'll come and eat your food, and spend time with Miss Lovegood, and see the old place. But don't expect that I'll like it. Any of it." And he shook off her hand and opened the door into the rain, pausing only to grab the dinner from the back seat before he dashed up the stairs and into the entrance hall.

Luna came out of the old staffroom, rubbing her hands in anticipation. "Goodness, Hermione, I'm so glad you're back I could hear plimpies in the walls, I'm sure of ... Oh my! Professor!" She looked the newcomer up and down with avid curiosity and a complete lack of dislike. "Won't you please come in? You're dripping, and I have the fire going. Did you come with Hermione?"

"I have your dinner." He held out the bags, their contents issuing a light and spicy odour of total deliciousness, and Luna restrained herself from leaping at him and grabbing the lot. Severus's hand was beginning to get numb from the plastic handles digging in, and he pushed brusquely past the young woman and into the room she had emerged from.

In all his years of attending the Home, Severus had never actually been into the staffroom. His entire knowledge came from the occasional opening of the door as he had passed, and once when he had been sent to find Matron when two of the other children had beaten him up again he'd stood in the doorway that time, but he hadn't been in a state to notice it. Now, though, he walked in and mechanically placed the bag on the table in the middle, then turned around slowly and saw the artwork that had been a very recent addition to the walls.

Three of the walls were painted a light blue that had no resemblance to the Institutional Grey-Green he had grown up with. The cornices were picked out in gloriously-bright yellows and pinks, and vines of an assortment of green twined down the walls, around the windows and over to the door in Art-Nouveau-style. Pixies and elves peered out from behind the vines, their mischievous eyes catching his, and small flowers dotted the creeping green. None of it moved it wasn't imbued with the same enchantments that kept the portraits at Hogwarts animated but the whole thing seemed alive, as if the joy of the artist had infused the work with her own joy.

It was the wall against the corridor that held his gaze for the longest. In a style that some might call Luminism, a scene of distant mountains and a lake were illuminated by a light that seemed to make the entire thing glow. Perched at the side of the lake was Hogwarts, its reflection only slightly broken by the merpeople depicted frolicking in the waters. Deer walked down the sides of the hills to drink in the waters, and in the foreground the Whomping Willow peacefully shaded rows of neatly-sewn plants, and small creatures frolicked in its branches.

"Do you like it, Professor? It came to me in a dream, and I know it's not realistic..."

Severus turned to the blonde, his eyes brimming with tears that had not been allowed out since he was a child. "It's beautiful. You truly have a gift." He paused a moment, unwilling to say more while his heart spasmed with feeling, then turned back and silently started unpacking the food.

Hermione followed with a tray of drinks he had forgotten and looked at Luna, who was smiling beatifically with the joy of praise deserved. Shrugging, Hermione placed the drinks at the table and then headed back out to the kitchen for the extra plate and cutlery that was now necessary with their unexpected guest. Her mind, though, reeled at the praise she had heard. In all the years at Hogwarts, or in Grimmauld Place, she had never once heard Severus give anyone (but the occasional Slytherin) any sort of compliment.

Her hunger started to make itself seriously annoying now, and she hurried back with the implements and sat herself at the end of the table beside Luna. Severus had a plate piled with food and was poking at the Lamb Korma with suspicion, and Luna was explaining the various dishes. Hermione noted with amusement that the two had also progressed to a first-name basis.

"You'll be wanting to try the Butter Chicken, Severus. It's not spicy at all, and it's very satisfying. And the yellow rice grains - they use saffron." Luna made sure the condiments were close by, then tucked in herself with gusto. "It took me a while to get used to all this colour, but the taste is rather lovely, don't you think? And I'm wishing Hogwarts had a more varied diet now - surely the Patil sisters could instruct the house-elves."

"And this green substance, Luna?"

"Dhal. Hermione, I can't remember what's in it?"

"Lentils, cooked with spices. It tastes a lot better than it sounds", she replied. "Although that very much depends on the cooks." Hermione laughed at herself, as one of the meals she had tried to cook while the Trio were on the run had been dhal. She'd managed to burn the bottom, and all the spices she could add didn't disguise the flavour, but Harry had managed a bowl and Ron didn't seem to notice at all. She'd barely been able to choke down three mouthfuls and had been horribly hungry the next day. "I've always wondered why we don't have cooking lessons at Hogwarts. Or art, or writing or drama."

"There's far too much to learn anyway, Hermione," Snape responded. "I remember you had to resort to a Time Turner in your third year, and that was wearying enough. And most of those skills are either covered by Charms, or taught to students by their parents. No, there's a full curriculum in just teaching young Witches and Wizards to control and make suitable use of their magic; teaching those who have come from Muggle backgrounds like yourself, taming those from full magical backgrounds who have been learning all sorts of bad habits from their parents. But I take your point - there is a loss of the creative arts, and perhaps we have suffered for it." He reapplied himself to the food, pleasantly surprised at the flavours and textures, and ate solidly for the next few minutes.

The food, the warmth from the fire, and the absence of those he would call "dunderheads" brought Severus back to himself eventually, and he lay his fork down and drew himself upright in an attempt to maintain his dignity and hide his obvious enjoyment of the food. His gaze swept over the two women in front of him, who were discussing the placement of the children's paintings they had discovered, and they became aware of his regard and looked up. Drawing a deep breath, Severus spoke.

"Luna. Hermione. I apologise. I am not myself these days and have a far-too-sensitive emotional trigger. I snapped at you, Hermione, because I immediately suspected you of meddling when all you were doing was trying to be helpful, and I was very rudely silent earlier when we started eating. I can only blame my own tiredness and the state my body is still in after all these months. Please do not take it amiss that I have been tiresome, and I shall try to be a better guest." The women looked at him, then at each other, and Hermione reached across and took Severus's hand.

"Apology accepted, Severus. And we're all rather scarred, too. It's too easy to forget that, but it's true." She paused, then continued. "And I have not been totally frank with you either. We did discover you had been here. It really shouldn't have been such a surprise to run into you in your own home town. But neither of us will tell a word."

"No, not a word," Luna responded. "But we'd be happy to have you stay here, or visit. Would you like to help?"

Severus was going to say "No, thank you." He was going to have this as his last moment ever in the Home that had been a refuge and a disappointment at the same time. But the tentative offers of friendship from the two women facing him were too precious to ignore, and their hospitality had drawn him into a place where he would be welcome.

For too many years he had been "the grumpy Potions Professor" that no-one had befriended. His bitterness had left him rejecting the few offers he had had (he still regretted ignoring Lupin's hand when the werewolf had come back to Hogwarts to teach), and it had been a lonely existence. And these two knew it all. Every last little part of his past, his lost love, his pathetic mother and the bastard that had been his father, and they were still offering to be his friends.

His mouth opened, and words he never expected to say tumbled out. "Yes, I'd like that very much. What needs doing?"

"You could advise us on the boys' dormitory," Luna responded in her usual blithe fashion. "There's so much I don't know about boys, and you do. And didn't you spend some time there?"

"I don't care to remember it." The grump was back, but not quite as convincing as before.

"Then perhaps you can make it so that it's not such a sad memory for the lads." Luna reached for the last piece of naan and used it to clean her plate. "I'd do one of my pictures, but I don't think they'd be quite suitable. And I'm not certain that nargles are the right colour for a boys room. And then there's the play room."

"Nargles..."

"Yes," Hermione jumped in. "You mustn't use nargles. Completely unsuitable." And the light in her eyes danced as she tried not to laugh at Severus's attempt to be polite and not snap at Luna for her creatures. A rattle on the window had them all look to see the rain now pelting against it. "I should drive you home now, Severus - it's far too far to walk, and you'd just get wet again." She started to gather the empty containers, but Luna stopped her with a hand on her arm and started to shoo her out.

"You brought it all - I'll clean up. I'll see you in an hour or so." Luna piled the plates up high, and with a quick guilty "swish", she enchanted the empty plastic holders to follow her down to the kitchen while Severus put on his still-damp coat and Hermione her own macintosh.

They walked back down the hallway in silence and out to the porch. The rain was driving at an angle, lit up by the front light in an eerie cone of luminosity, and beyond the light sat the car. Hermione's key once more lit up the blinkers as the doors unlocked, but somehow she felt hesitant to run through the rain. The evening, while starting awkwardly, had been surprisingly pleasant, and she was reluctant to end it.

Hermione turned to Severus just as he looked down at her. She stepped towards him, her hands reaching for his shoulders.

"Severus..."

"We're not going anywhere."

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 5

Luna, her soul still damaged after the final battle, has bought an old Children's Home outside a grubby mill town. Hermione is helping her turn it into a refuge, but someone who had been there as a child comes back. EWE, Opaljade's TPP bid win

His blunt statement surprised her, and she stepped back in shock. "Not ..."

"No. Your front left tyre is flat." And peering through the rain, she saw that indeed it was. He continued, looking up at the black sky. "I have no doubt you have a replacement in the rear, but we would both get soaked trying to change it in this rain, and I don't believe magic would work on a mechanical device. Not, that is, unless you know some enchantment that can overcome the influence of such a contrivance."

She sighed in agreement. "I've tried a couple of times, but I have to be touching the items in the process, and I'd prefer not to. Shall I call you a taxi... oh bother."

"Bother?"

"The phone hasn't been connected yet. I can't. And there's none of that mobile reception up here either, not that either of us has one."

"Nor I. And Apparating is out of the question too."

The young witch turned to him, her eyes widening. "You can't?"

He paused, and swallowed nervously. "I can't. My magic has been ... affected by the injuries, and my Apparating skills are so pathetic that I doubt I could move from one side of this door to the other without splinching myself. And the other option for you to take me requires you to have a knowledge of my house that I'm not yet ready to share." He looked out once more at the rain, then continued. "I'm quite prepared to sleep one more time in the boys' dormitory, if you don't mind. This rain should be gone by the morning, and we can change the tyre then." He shrugged and opened the front door again to let Hermione back in and away from the icy wind-blown spray that was the rain bouncing off the front steps.

Luna didn't seem surprised to see them come back into the warmth of the staff room, and she accepted the explanation without a question, and with just a quick glance at the window. Silently looking back at the two, she smiled and walked out the door, coming back moments later with three bowls of blueberry ice cream.

"Where...?"

"Last time I went shopping, Hermione. It sounded so strange *blue*-berries. And they're not at all like blackhearts." Luna spooned up the mixture, and inspected it closely. "And they're not blue, either. They're a sort of dark reddish colour."

"Blackhearts?" Hermione poked at her ice cream with her spoon, the dessert looking wonderful but her stomach was so full that she didn't think she could handle another bite.

"Bilberries." Severus switched easily into Professor mode, and used his spoon to excavate one of the mysterious berries in the dish. "We call them *Blackhearts* here in the north, and I have no doubt Luna's people do too, but they're not quite the same as these. Although they do have a blueish tinge to them when they're on the bushes." He grinned as he pulled one out, and ate it. "I should experiment with these in the potions instead of bilberries. The results could be quite entertaining."

"Entertaining?" Hermione wasn't sure she wanted to know, but she took a bite of the ice cream, and then another.

"I remember a book when I was a child, where one of the naughty children ate blueberry chewing gum. I think they turned into a blueberry, but I'm not sure what sort. Perhaps I should go into research at the Weasleys' shop selling things like that." He laughed, not at all seriously, and within minutes put down the empty bowl.

The wind shook the window, and Luna looked over in concern. "I meant to tell you though, Severus. I don't think you should sleep upstairs."

"Is the old dorm haunted?"

"No. It's freezing. We haven't got the central heating going yet, and the only room with any heat is this one. You could sleep in here with us." Her ingenuous look at the older man completely dumbfounded him, and he looked at Hermione then back at Luna. "We moved a couple of the mattresses down here last week, and some bedclothes. You'd freeze up there, sure and it's cold as the grave. And none of the other rooms have beds just dusty frames and lots of mucking huge spiders."

Hermione nodded, but Severus stared in disbelief at the two, then the smile dropped and the "grim" visage locked back into place. "I have better endurance than either of you. Are there bedclothes up there already?"

"They're piled on the bed at the end," Luna replied. "Only I haven't replaced all the light switches, so it's a bit dim."

He stood, swaying a little before he pulled himself together. "Then I'll bid you good night, ladies, and see you in the morning. I seem to be rather tired." He headed out and as he opened the door, the blast of cold air he let in scurried across the floor and made the flames of the fire flicker on the wall. Luna looked at Hermione, who had already stood and silently followed her old master.

Severus made it as far as the bottom of the stairs before he needed to stop and rest. Hermoine ducked back behind the wall when she saw him stop, thinking he had found her, but then she peeked back and saw him clutch the finial as he gathered his breath. She held hers while he recovered, but then he started on his slow way up the stairs, each step obviously an effort. It took him stops at the landing and the top, but he made it and staggered down the corridor to the old boys' dorm, oblivious to the young witch silently creeping up behind him. He opened the door, the darkness beyond giving him pause, then gathered his courage and stepped in. As the door closed behind him, Hermione decided to give him the privacy he obviously craved; she headed back to the staffroom and the welcome warmth.

Luna had finished cleaning up from their meal and had dragged the pair of mattresses out from where they were propped. A mixture of blankets and pillows showed that this wasn't the first time the two women had bedded down here, and the warm flannel pyjamas Hermione pulled from a bag confirmed the fact. They changed quickly, as the air was not as warm as the firelight made it seem, then dived under the blankets like a pair of teenagers on a sleepover.

Hermione lay back on her pillow, watching the firelight flicker on the ceiling. Her thoughts were wandering hither and yon and mainly up the stairs to the other dorm. *Was it*

cold up there? Was he comfortable? Did the room hold any nightmares for him, or was it by contrast one of the few safe places he had known before Hogwarts? Her musings were interrupted by Luna's soft voice, almost part of the oncoming sleep.

"Poor man, he's lost and no doubt about it. Sure and he's heard the *Cóiste Bodhar* a-rattling and the banshee a-wailing, and he's stopped his ears and made a bargain with the dark ones to stay a little longer. Or maybe he fastened his soul on a corbie and sent it flying away, and all that's left is the darkness and the hollow emptiness." Luna's voice had a sweet, sing-song quality that lulled Hermione's tired mind to sleep, the stories echoing as she fell. "And then perhaps he's been beset by the Demon Bride and cannot get back to the churchyard, as she left him for another and has lost his heart on the way. Or the *lianhan shee* called him and stole away his love, and he must find her and stay with her a year and a day without falling for her charms..."

The darkness enclosed Hermione, and her eyelids lay softly on her cheeks, but her mind held the tales and worked on them as she slumbered. Dark shadows ran past, flickering on the backs of her eyes, and in her dream she was walking through the streets of the old Town down the hill, trying to find the house with the small child to save him and take him away from the pain before it was too late. She dreamed she was pushing through heavy crowds outside the derelict Library, and could see ahead of her an aged man, leaning on his staff. His arm was thin as bone and his face sunken and withered, and he stood outside a carriage. She knew both of them had come for Severus. The sound of the coach wheels was like iron on cobblestones, although she could see the asphalt on the road, and the horse was black with eyes like dark red embers that tossed and turned and moaned in the night.

And then she was awake, seeing the last of the red glow of the fire on the staffroom ceiling and hearing the heavy breathing (and occasional snore) of Luna beside her. She sat up slowly and reached for her wand, nerves still alert and able to push her to full consciousness in a few moments thanks to the troubles she had lived through. She sat, silently, listening for what had woken her.

Then she heard it. A cry, from upstairs.

Jumping to her feet, Hermione grabbed her macintosh where it lay beside the makeshift bed and wrapped it around her pyjamas. She'd left her socks on, but eschewed shoes as she crept across the floor, opened the door and listened again. A shift in the light behind her told her the draught was affecting the fire (and chilling the room), so she slipped through the doorway and closed it behind her. She then reached for the light switch beside her that would turn on all the corridor lights.

click

Darkness still. And another cry, of loss and loneliness and the scared note of a small child.

Ten seconds more had her up the stairs, her wand lit in front of her and illuminating the way. She sought any sign of movement, but the steady gleam from the *lumos* spell showed nothing.

A cry.

More of a sob. The sound a very small child makes when they're so tired, so exhausted, but still so terrified that they can't do anything about it. Hermione's feet sped along the corridor to the dormitory door and opened it swiftly. The sounds had surely come from here, but the walls had muffled them and she wasn't certain.

But then there was only one other person in the building. Someone who had been a small child here. And she cursed herself for not insisting he stay down in the staffroom with them, away from his nightmares.

Hermione tried the light switch here too, but again there was no effect. Either the fuses had gone or the power lines were down in the storm. The slight noise hadn't woken the occupant, though her wand-light showed a bundle huddled under a pile of blankets on the bed nearest the window at the end, and she crept down to it to see what distress he was in. Holding her wand high, she approached the bed with cat-like tread, expecting to see her old Potions master restlessly turning.

But no. He lay fast asleep, not a scowl nor a frown on his brow. He'd managed to wind one of the blankets uncomfortably around himself, and she smoothed it and tucked him in a little better. The bed was a little small, and he was rather hunched up in it, but he'd left his shoes neatly at the end, and removed his coat before climbing into the warmth. Or rather, the relative warmth this room was much colder than those at the other end, and Severus's breath was steaming slightly as he slept.

She tried. She really tried to resist it, but Hermione couldn't help gently stroking his brow. But the old Death Eater's nerves were as well trained as her own his hand shot out and caught hers, as he grabbed his wand with the other. In a second she had been pulled down onto the bed, and he loomed over her with a look of suspicion, his full weight holding her down.

"Snooping, Miss Granger?"

She refused to be baited by the switch back to formal names. "Something woke me, Severus. A noise. I thought it was you."

His look changed from doubting to querying. "What sort of noise?"

"A cry. Like someone who was scared. I ... I thought you might have had nightmares about this place." She shivered, half from the shock of his reaction and half from the cold.

"And you thought you had condemned me to sleep in a place where I had been miserable and unhappy, and you felt responsible. How very much like you." He eased up off her, and the cold hit her harder than before. It was then that she realised that her coat had come open in the struggle, and her pyjama top had ridden up quite some way. Hermione went to pull it down, but Severus still had her arms held and did not relent. "Was it your intention, then, to sneak in with me? To slide your body beside mine and comfort me? To use your wiles on me?" He lowered his face down with each question, until he was mere inches from her face.

"I never thought of that. I didn't think that far. I just wanted ..."

"Yes?"

"I just wanted to make sure you were all right." She looked into his eyes, her face showing the truthfulness of her response, but she felt the slightest ripple and an opening and then it felt as if he were searching her secret places.

Something! I heard something! A child, a scared and tired child waking from a nightmare, or hurt and in need of comfort. And Severus. Severus who is so hurt and all I want to do is to make him safe and sound and let him feel like he can relax and be himself and I wish he'd let me help him and care for him and love him...

She gasped and something in her mind clanged shut, blocking him out, but his eyes widened and he drew in breath, and she knew he had read the deepest thoughts she had buried down there. Hermione opened her mouth to protest, to apologise, to say something...

And then he kissed her. Softly, at first, hesitantly, as if he could barely believe what he had seen as well, and then a little harder. His wand fell down and the light faded from it, and so did hers, as Hermione wrapped her arms around him and pulled him gently down to lie atop her in the darkness. His kisses inflamed her like she had never felt before not from Viktor, not from Ron, not even the couple of times she and Luna had experimented and she found herself running her fingers through his hair like she had dreamed of doing so many times before. Severus's tongue gently probed at her mouth, and his hands snaked under her and held her so tightly she could barely breathe, until he used one to pull a blanket from under them and throw it over the pair so that they could keep warm.

And that action was, alas, just enough to tip the balance. The bed, originally built to hold one small, possibly underfed and certainly less active child, was not able to hold the combined weight of two adults, for all that one was rather scrawny and the other could have afforded to put on a couple of pounds as well. The bedbase split with an almighty "crash", and the entire thing tipped sideways, unceremoniously dumping its occupants onto the floor in a tangle of blankets and perishing kapok.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 5

Luna, her soul still damaged after the final battle, has bought an old Children's Home outside a grubby mill town. Hermione is helping her turn it into a refuge, but someone who had been there as a child comes back. EWE, Opaljade's TPP bid win

Hermione and Severus lay there stunned in the wreckage of the bed for a minute, waiting for Luna to call out or come and find the source of the noise, but there was nothing but the howl of the wind, whistling through a few cracks in the window and rattling the window panes. When they finally moved, they spoke at once.

"Are you all right?"

"Are you hurt?"

Severus conjured a light again and stuck his wand this time in a crack in the wall, charming the light to remain until he doused it. Together they surveyed the wreckage of the bed, the blue-and-white ticking of the mattress split in several spots and the bedframe beyond saving. It was Severus who laughed first, a muffled sound that soon spread into a full belly-laugh that Hermione could not have imagined if she had tried. It was also incredibly infectious, and while she tried very hard not to, she found herself laughing hard as well, with both of them ending up clutching each other to try and keep from rolling around with the guffaws.

A good five minutes later, when things had calmed down to a mild giggle from time to time (and both of them responsible for the giggles, and setting the other off again), Severus sat up and looked around at the damage more closely.

"I'm thinking a small change in venue might be in order."

"What would you suggest?" Hermione lounged back on the wrecked mattress, uncaring now that her pyjama top was completely open and barely covered her breasts. Severus stood up and held his hands out for her, helping her to stand in one fluid movement. His original intention had been merely to assist her in getting up, but this brought her into the circle of his arms once more, and he pushed back her hair and kissed her, once, twice, and then again with passion. It was a few minutes later, when the cold had seeped back into their bodies, that Hermione pulled back a little and looked up at the tall, dark man.

"You had a plan?"

"Plan? Oh. Yes. A plan." He waved his arm in an arc that gestured towards some of the other beds. "We leave this disaster area to its own devices and move to the other end, near the door. We relocate two of the mattresses to the floor, add these blankets, and then get warm. "

"Warm?" She'd asked the question innocently, wondering why they didn't move downstairs, but then realised what she'd said just as Severus's eyebrows went up and a rather wicked grin started to spread over his face. Hermione blushed, and would have buried her face in his chest if the cold hadn't become rather more severe. She pulled free from his arms instead, and marched to the other end of the dormitory.

Five minutes later, the pair of them could barely be made out under the pile of blankets and coats on top of the pushed-together mattresses. Hermione was lying in Severus's arms, the knowledge that they had the whole night together now holding off the desperate passion of earlier for just a little while, as she tried to learn who this man was that she was now lying with. His left arm was underneath her while his right hand slowly drew rings around her left ear, sending her heartrate up just a little for each circuit. She pushed his hair back off his face and looked into his eyes by the light of the wand they had set up in the bedstead above them.

"I really thought it was you I heard, crying in the darkness."

"Contrary to your belief, Hermione, I wasn't unhappy here. I was brought in and cleaned, given warm clothes, good plain food that I could eat without someone fighting beside me, and a warm bed I could sleep in in safety. While they weren't wonderful memories here, they were safe ones. And that was what I craved. The safety." He kissed her forehead, softly and sweetly, recognising that she too wanted him to feel safe. "My home was a disaster. Mam and Da were either fighting, or himself would be out drinking and Mam would be hiding in my room, waiting to hear how he was when he came home. If he was singing, 'twould be all right he'd be a happy drunk, and she could go down and serve him his late dinner and he would joke with her and the house could rest. But if he was yelling, she'd have to go but she'd ... she'd not want to. And in the morning I'd see the bruises." He sighed, the pain of those years still rankling. "And if he was silent, that was the worst. She'd creep down ... and I'd hide under my bed and put my pillow over my head and hope that he didn't come into my room. It was those times he was mean, when he'd ... he didn't know what he was doing."

Severus held Hermione tight for a minute, then kissed her forehead again. "And so the times I ended up here were actually much better than being at home. I could go to sleep without having to keep half an ear open for my father to come home. And I could play, or read, or just sit in the corner and feel like I was being looked after."

"And didn't you miss your parents? Your mother, at least?" Hermione's finger drew down his nose, unconscious of what she was doing until he took her hand and kissed the fingers.

"I did the first time, but not as much as I thought I would. And certainly not enough to cry at night. My mother was 'touched' not entirely normal. It's hard enough living in both worlds - you'd be well aware of that and it was too much for her. One hot summer she wrapped herself in just a blue sheet and ran down our road, trying to call the rain down. Another time she forgot that the lamppost outside our house ran on electricity, and she spelled it to burn. And then she'd keep wandering away and getting lost." He entwined his fingers through hers and clung gently to her. "And then I found out she wasn't always getting lost. Sometimes she was getting taken away."

"But you see, coming here was a break. I knew what I was supposed to do."

"Then..."

"The wind, Hermione. The wind through this old place really does sound like a cry, coming as it does straight off the moors." And as if in response to his words, the wind started up again, and Hermione heard now the eerie wuthering as it forced its way through the window frames. The old blinds vibrated, almost moaning, and when they stopped it was with a sob that recalled other lost boys who had cried themselves to sleep in this room. But not him.

Hermione reached up and kissed him, hard. "Enough of the blarney. Finish what you started."

"Blarney? You've been hanging around Luna for far too long."

"Maybe." She kissed the tip of his nose, then his ear, then bit very very gently on the side of his neck. "Less talk. More action."

He growled and rolled over on top of her, pulling the blanket back over their heads. A listener outside would have heard that growl, followed by a giggle. There wasn't anyone outside. But downstairs, in the staffroom, Luna put another log on the fire and smiled as the giggle echoed down the hallway. She'd seen the emptiness in Hermione as well, and was very glad that her dear, close friend had found someone who fitted the hole in Hermione's heart. She snuggled back down in her own blankets and watched the light on the ceiling again until her own eyes closed and she dreamed of a lady in grey who would come into her own life in due time.

Although the wind kept up all night, the rain eased and was gone by sunrise, the feeble winter rays gleaming through the windowpanes and into the rooms. Hermione and Severus lay in each others' arms, deep in the sleep of exhaustion that comes not from physical exercise, but from the release of pain and tension and sadness and loss that allows the mind to recover and start anew. Luna was up too, and walking around the outside of the building as the sun tried to dry out the puddles. Her eyes searched for any signs of broken windows or damaged gutters, and when she came back inside with a face red from the cold breeze, it was also with a happy smile at knowing that the building could still withstand a rough night. She came down the hallway to the kitchen just as Hermione was coming down the stairs, and Luna walked straight up to her friend and hugged her, hard.

"You're not ... angry? Upset?" Hermione ran her hand through her bed-hair, and looked hard at Luna.

"And aren't you the confused one," Luna replied. "I love you dearly, Hermione, but as a friend. And I'd have worried if you thought I was anything more. You're sweet, and soft, and lovely, but you and I are just too different to be together. You're meant for a mind that can think, and a heart that knows it can feel, and I'm for someone who can see the brightness and talk to the wrackspurts instead of letting them inside their head like you have." Luna leaned over and kissed Hermione full on the mouth, then turned and headed to the kitchen, then stopped and turned back. "But I must tell you, if you're meaning to not talk with me any more, it would hurt me."

Hermione blushed and shook her head. "No. Never. Luna, I ... You stood by me, and brought me out of my darkness. And it's a journey I had to make. Someone else will be with me for the journey now, but you will always be my friend. No matter what."

"Oh good. Now tea." And Luna headed for the kitchen, leaving Hermione to shake her head again in sheer wonderment at her friend, then head back to the staffroom for her clothes.

An hour later, the worst of the dampness gone and the wind eased off, the car headed down the bumpy lane and away from the Home. Severus, warm and content and full of tea and toast, peered through the muddy windscreen as Hermione navigated around the worst of the potholes and back to the main road. She looked at him briefly then back to the windscreen, and he stirred himself in response.

"You're after directions, I take it."

"Directions and directions, please, Severus. I still don't know where all this is going." She stopped at a traffic light, guessing that the place where she had almost hit him the night before was roughly on the way to his house.

"Right at those next lights, please, then follow the river until the roundabout." He paused and considered the next part, while Hermione coaxed the cold and recalcitrant car along the correct street. Silently he pointed the rest of the way, finally indicating that she should stop outside a sooty terrace in a dingy street, the curtains at the front in dire need of a washing. She killed the engine, then waited.

Severus took her hand off the gearstick and turned it palm-up, the fingers splayed. Slowly he kissed them, then the palm and finally the wrist, and Hermione closed her eyes and found herself transported back to some of the moments of the previous night, moments when she had clutched his back and screamed his name into his mouth as he kissed her hard as she came. Shuddering with desire, she opened her eyes again and looked up at him with undisguised love.

"Hermione?"

"Yes, Severus."

"We've ... I've ... "

She waited.

"Things started rather fast tonight. And while I know you, I would like to get to know you fully as an adult. As a woman." She shuddered again, and he continued. "Would you, please, give me permission to court you, to spend time with you, to walk during the day and talk in the evening, and once in a while if you desire it to spend the nights together and learn each other more?"

She closed her eyes once more, the cold and hard centre that had been there for months melting a little more than she thought it ever would. Tears came unbidden to her eyes, and when she opened them, one tear escaped and gently ran down her cheek. She looked into Severus's eyes, and while Hermione had never studied Legilimency, she could read the truth in him now.

"If you would let me do the same for you, Severus, I would like to. Very much."

And they kissed.