

# The Essence of Sunset

*by shefa*

My chambers are dark, lit only by the glow of the midnight moon.

The castle creaks with rawness of stone and antiquity of magic, filled with the power welling up from beneath the mountain and the fire of intention fuelled by our four vibrant streams of magic, combined.

It is nearly impossible to recognise this expanse of land from just six months ago: pristine grasses as far as the eye could see, cresting on a tidal wave of green, the shadow of grey stone a skeleton underneath. A spider's web holding together an enterprise that, tonight, feels like folly.

I had expected to feel exultant.

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This story is ten chapters, and complete. I will be posting one chapter every couple of days. :)

## Chapter 1

*Chapter 1 of 10*

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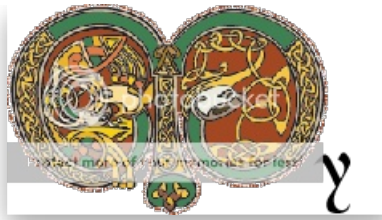
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The Great Hall is nearly complete, large enough to hold hundreds of pupils.

*Hundreds.*

I fill my lungs with air and my mind with the possibilities. Imagining.

Our dream...to throw open the doors of the castle, to embrace young witches and wizards. To educate them. My dream...to bring them together, no matter their origin.

My stomach turns.

I look around the enormous hall, at the tables that line it and at the expanse of windows that arch up to meet the ceiling. My eyes rise with the line of glass and I gasp. She has finished it, then, and it is magnificent...a fitting capstone to this room, with all its intrinsic promise.

Today, for the first time, the soaring ceiling of the Great Hall reflects the sky beyond the castle. We bring childrens here from far and near, together under one roof, it means to say, but we never forget our connection to the world outside. And today, the day of the culmination of all our work, the heavens are a perfect blue, white clouds cavorting across the morning sky.

So *innocent*.

I pause for a moment just inside the threshold to watch Rowena puzzle through one of the documents Salazar left with her last night. We are nearly ready for the final and most important layer of the enchantments we have woven into wood and stone and glass, preparing the castle for the children who will one day live here. Rowena has taken on the job of blending our magics together: balancing our strengths; compensating for each of our weaknesses.

Right now she's obviously vexed, twisting a dark curl around her finger and tugging hard. Even from here I can see the shadows beneath her eyes. She must have been up all night again, sifting and organising the endless array of threads that must be woven together in order for everything we are building to hold fast.

She sighs, putting the parchment down, and glances towards me.

"Break your fast, Helga?"

Rowena moves her parchments aside and gestures to the table laden with plates of fresh fruit and elf-made breads. It's a peace offering from her, I think, after our most recent skirmish. Unspoken acknowledgment that giving safe haven to the elves had been, in fact, the right thing to do and not just for the exquisite food.

I'm not especially hungry, but that isn't the point of this interchange.

"Yes, thank you, Rowena."

I sit with her at the far end of the long table, an oasis of life in the midst of this enormous, empty hall, and fill my plate with fruit and cheese. The men have not yet arrived. We two rise early and are often first to the table. Most mornings of these long winter months have been spent together, she and I buried in piles of parchment, designing and planning, letting ourselves envision our hopes made real...the castle alive with young voices teeming with magic.

But this morning, the air between us is strained. We've come to the end of the journey and, along with sealing the final enchantments into the bedrock of the castle, decisions must be made. Today we must charm the Great Book, the Grimoire that will record the births of witches and wizards from these isles from today onwards. One might not expect such a task to be as fraught as it is with conflict, but it lies at the core of differences that once, not so very long ago, we appreciated in one another, but which now threaten the foundations upon which the castle stands.

The door swings open, announcing Salazar's arrival. I wonder, sometimes, if he expects us to stand.

I watch for Godric, at his heels, somehow making it appear less like he's a few steps behind and more as if Salazar has paved the way for his entrance.

"What cheer with you, ladies?" Godric asks. He looks as tired as Rowena.

My throat is tight and I can only nod.

"I trust," says Salazar, indicating without a word that Godric should sit alongside him, "that you all passed the night restfully."

Godric's head bows and his lips curve into the hint of a smile. He leans into Salazar as if he might touch him, and I wonder how they spent last night. I catch Godric's eye and smile at his blush. They are so careful, these two, even with us. We, who have known one another so long, we who know them best, who love them.

Rowena rustles a long roll of parchment and raises her eyebrows. It's clear how she passed the long night hours. I haven't asked how her husband and small daughter, Helena, have been faring all these weeks. I see them out and about, revelling in the alterations to the castle day by day, but rarely take the time to stop and talk, to ask Magnus his thoughts about the changes occurring beneath his feet.

There is too much to say, and so I say nothing, focusing my attention instead on the fruit and cheese on my plate.

"Is everyone prepared for the Hallowing?" Rowena asks.

Today at sunset is most auspicious. We have agreed to take advantage of this moment of good fortune to complete our work.

"I have the stick," says Godric, producing what he has told us he prefers to call a wand. Made by his own hand, as all of our gifts to the castle must be, it is a thing of beauty, polished Elder wood, long and pulsing with energy. We lean forward and admire it, for its elegance and for its capacity to channel magic with focus and power never before witnessed.

"Salazar?" Rowena asks.

He places his hand on the table in front of us. He is wearing his gift as a ring, the stone, its deep, vibrant green nearly a match for Godric's eyes. 'The stone of memory,' he calls it. Of course he would keep it close for as long as he could.

"It is magnificent, Salazar," Rowena says, and his colour rises just a bit. This stone holds a piece of his heart, I think; it is so precious.

Godric leans forward as if to speak, and Salazar angles his head closer to him. He's whispering but I can hear the words, soft and desperate in Godric's ear.

"*Please, maíte,*" Salazar whispers. Both men flush at the endearment; they cannot seem to help themselves.

"Salazar."

Godric's eyes look unbearably sad, and my stomach twists at witnessing so intimate an argument, even as it is tangled in the fabric of the broader conflict among us all. Their eyes meet again; their struggle is silent, the agony of its cries nearly bursting free from beneath the surface.

Godric's hand envelops Salazar's, covering the stone, and long fingers wrap around his hand. It takes a moment, but finally, Salazar threads his fingers through Godric's and both men breathe easily again.

Rowena rushes in with her offering, as if afraid tensions will rise once more.

The tiara is dazzling. A crown worthy of the spirit of exploration and mystical receptiveness it embodies.

"Beautiful, Rowena," I murmur, and she smiles. Each of our offerings is so personal. It's no wonder we're on edge, exposing ourselves like this, hoping what we offer is sufficient. Hoping that together, the gifts will assuage the worst of Salazar's fears.

Finally, it's my turn. It took me seven months to weave it of Demiguise hair and protective magic. It feels like water in my hands, and I will miss it when it's gone.

"The cloak," I say and lay it on the table between us.

Salazar reaches for it with both hands, examining it, testing it, I think, plumbing the depth of its protective magic. I watch him, hoping that it, together with the rest, will be enough.

He holds onto the cloak for a long moment, then brings the cloth to his eyes as if it will show him the extent of its power and reassure him. After one long moment, then another, he bows his head. Regret and grief lay heavy on his shoulders.

Godric buries his face in his hands, and Rowena looks at me, her eyes wet.

My heart is pounding and I can hardly breathe.

We must finish this conversation, though we've started and stopped it a thousand times.

"Salazar," I say, though there is a knot in my throat.

Salazar scowls as he angles his body away, and Godric's face falls. Salazar's fist pounds the table, and a slice of pear slides from my plate.

"The danger to us is far greater than the loss to them," Salazar growls, and it doesn't matter that he's diving into the conversation midstream. We have discussed this issue ad infinitum.

We believe we understand Salazar's views, though none of us can fully appreciate the gravity of the threats his people endured during their years in Spain, nor the reality of the horrific losses they bore when all else failed.

He comes by his isolationist tendencies honestly, at least. "We can protect them, Salazar," Rowena is saying, and there's desperation in her voice. She's trying to soothe him, but his expression is still thunderous. "Between the stick and the cloak, we have the power to guard..."

"To guard?" Salazar's face is flushed crimson. Bright as the blood he keeps reminding us has already been spilled and will be spilled over and over again if we are not forever wary.

"More power than the people of Nava'rré who were massacred in their sleep by rageful non-magicals, jealous of what they could not have?" He pauses to look each of us in the eye. "Non-magicals who should have *understood* them and loved them, despite their *abnormality*. After all," he hisses, "they were *family*."

I wince at the venom in his voice.

I look again at Salazar. I will make one last attempt. It's all I have left, I think.

"Salazar," I say, keeping my voice soft. More steady than I feel right now. He is a Legilimens, but I make the effort to appear calm. He is my friend, and I am his, no matter how deeply we disagree nor how much I fear his position on this issue. "I understand your concern. I do. But you work with dangerous potions ingredients every day. I never would have thought you the sort to eliminate one simply because it posed a potential danger."

I meet his eyes and hide a shiver at the remoteness there. He's determined, loss and fear driving him towards what he believes to be the only solution.

There is nothing left to say.

I can see only one way out now. It's not what I want, but I have prepared for this, weeks of research and hours of practice with the spell, though I cannot fully predict the repercussions.

Still. It is the best choice. The only choice. I must act before the decision is made and the opportunity lost forever.

Salazar is shouting now, and the way his voice breaks rips into me. Even so, I know what I must do.

I lay my hands flat on the table, the four Hallows surrounding them. I take a deep breath, drawing wisps of each one's essence from the magical items that lay in a circle on the table.

Rowena is sobbing now, and Godric's face is mottled, his jaw tight with fear. I look at them, my three friends, my three comrades we who had hoped to unite and strengthen our world.

I fear there can be no *our* anymore.

"*Findere per Speciem*," I whisper. White light flows from the palms of my hands, and my body shakes.

The air shimmers with magic. The light of my spell, ethereal and blindingly white, swirls around us, faster and faster; air particles and magic collide and fill the room with sound. We are holding our breath, and then, without warning, the funnel cloud of light breaks, splitting into its component parts. Seven strands of colour, ribbons streaming as if broken by a prism on to the heavens.

Three sets of eyes look at me in shock.

"Helga?"

Rowena is the first to speak, the first to grasp it. She is looking at me with wide eyes, but Godric and Salazar are staring at the ceiling. The blue of the sky has deepened as if its very hue has chased the clouds away to make room for what is now stretching across it end to end.

A rainbow. Vivid. Enormous. White light shattered into an arc of colour across the sky.

Salazar looks at me, confusion and anger shadowing his features.

"What have you done?"

I tilt my chin and meet them head on. They can say what they will; now they can do as they please...

It is finished.



The potions laboratory, for all that it occupied the dungeons, deep below the castle, always seemed to emit its own sort of light. Fires beneath the cauldrons lining the work benches accounted for some, but Hermione was certain the iridescence of the potions fumes themselves brought about the glow she loved so much. Sometimes the deepest grey, but more often shimmering with every colour of the rainbow, each detail of colour and texture and shine marked its potion as unique in the world with a job and a function all its own.

Hermione held her hands over the cauldron simmering in the middle of her lab table. As she drew in a deep breath and exhaled, diffuse blue light flowed from her hands, bathing the bowl of the cauldron, shifting its colour from umber to shimmering sapphire.

"Finished?"

Hermione looked up at her mentor and nodded, giving the cauldron one last glance. The Potions mistress smiled and came closer to examine the potion.

"It's nearly time for the Welcoming Feast, so let's see if this is ready to test, and then we can both prepare for tonight. It won't do to keep the headmistress waiting."

Indeed, not.

"What do you think?" asked Hermione, trying not to lean over Professor Evans's shoulder as she decanted the potion into a narrow tube and brought it to the desk at the front of the room.

"You tell me," she said, perching at the edge of the desk and holding the clear glass so that the torchlight sent sparks off the surface of the potion.

"The *Nosce Ipsum* potion is a derivative of the solution used to create both the Foe Glass and, if the Grimoire we found is accurate, the Mirror of Erised. It utilises mercury and beryllium from the Foe Glass and the technique of condensing dreams into oneiric distillate from the Mirror of Erised to, we hope, create a substance that will allow the imbiber to interact with the reflective glass so as to reveal his or her... destiny."

Hermione stumbled over the last word but Professor Evans didn't comment.

"So, does this potion display the properties that would predict such an outcome?"

Hermione raised the flask to the torchlight and examined it. "It's the right colour," she said, eyeing the glistening liquid. "Thickness looks appropriate and it has the characteristic shimmer that revealing potions must." Unlike the last four they'd tested. She leaned her nose closer to the opening to smell. "It smells of Amortentia base, just as we predicted it would."

"Excellent, Hermione. The Ministry will be pleased," said Evans.

"If it works," added Hermione.

"Can't be any worse than the Astronomical methods they're using now, and they know it," muttered Evans, and Hermione snorted.

"Maybe they should just *stop* altogether," said Hermione, "and let people work it all out for themselves. My mum said that she's heard stories of times when..."

"It would be total chaos," interrupted Evans. "People competing for position, hurting each other to get what they want. People striving for jobs unsuited to them and others languishing or taking the path of least resistance despite their potential. No, no. It would be a disaster."

"Don't you ever wonder, though?" asked Hermione in a low voice.

This was touchy ground, but she and Professor Evans had spent so many hours together during the last school year and over the summer, they'd grown comfortable with one another. Starting her apprenticeship early...during the summer instead of the beginning of September when the other pupils returned...had been a stroke of genius, Hermione thought. Here it was the night of the Welcoming Feast and she already had her fifth potion to test, and, perhaps, the opportunity to have a conversation she'd been aching to have for ages.

"Wonder?" Evans's green eyes looked curious but not angry. Hermione breathed a bit more easily.

"What it would have been like to take a different path. You know, when you were still in school. To have studied something else, or maybe even to have got married and gone off and had a family. Had a partner."

Evans stood up and walked behind the desk, placing the glass tube in its holder on the wooden surface. For a moment, Hermione was afraid that she had crossed a line, that her teacher was going to reprimand her for challenging the status quo, for questioning the methods that had been used for centuries.

After all, she knew what was expected. She had done since childhood. Nobody decided *for themselves* what path to take. The Ministry decided that for you. And, really, if a potion (to take if you were magical before looking into the glass) or a looking glass alone (to gaze on if you were not) could improve the accuracy of those decisions and, as

a result, the happiness of the population, wasn't that all for the better?

The trouble was, Hermione wasn't sure any of it was for the better. She loved potions work, really, she did, but she would have given up her favourite potions book for the option to do research without also having to teach. She shuddered. All those students. All those essays to mark and exams to give. Why *couldn't* she just do the lab work?

Worst of all, though, was the bitter reality that she could have this life which was at least part of what she wanted but not with a partner; not with children of her own. Of course the Ministry would never *forbid* anyone to marry, and there were other career choices that permitted both work and a family life. But that wasn't the path Hermione had been assigned. So if she ever did want to marry, once the Ministry had agreed on the suitability of the match, she could choose to step down from her position...walking away from an academic career...and start a family.

One or the other. The path not taken, forever lurking.

"Hermione?"

"Sorry," she said. "Just thinking."

"As was I," said her professor, looking contemplative. "There have been times in my life when I have wondered, yes." She paused, glancing at Hermione and then back to the tabletop. "I have occasionally imagined how some of that sort of chaos might feel."

Hermione felt a surge of excitement and fear, imagining a world where she could *doanything*. Make any choice she wanted and then change her mind, too, if she wanted to try something else. She wrapped her arms around herself.

"I'm afraid people will feel even more trapped by the potion," said Hermione. "As if a magical reflection is even more binding than the Astrological pronouncement."

"I know," Evans said. "Still, we don't even know if the potion works. So." She smiled. "Will you do the honours?"

Hermione grinned.

"Seven drops?"

"Seven, precisely," answered Evans.

Hermione took the dropper from her instrument bag and carefully drew out the fluid. One by one, she dropped them on her tongue, letting the liquid pool before swallowing it all. It tasted slightly bitter with a sweet note underneath. She tried to trace its path as it entered her body, as if she might learn something essential about herself by feeling it work.

"No rash," said Evans, looking closely at Hermione's hands and face. "So we've eliminated that problem. Now, we wait."

Four hours. In four hours, she would return to the dungeon and look in the mirror and see whether the future the Ministry had chosen for her matched the future (the hopes the fears the dreams) bubbling up inside her.

She wasn't sure which she was more afraid to see. That the Ministry had been right, or that they had been wrong. Utterly wrong.



The office of the Headmaster of Hogwarts had lain empty for weeks, though from the look of it, one might think its former occupant had just stepped out for a walk and a cup of tea. Books and oddities still lined the walls, and the desk sat piled high with parchment to be sorted and books to be examined before being returned to their shelves. It was a place still busy with work to be done, pupils to supervise, and bigger world problems to manage.

Severus sighed and sat behind the enormous desk.

Alone.

The portraits all around the office were empty, as if their usual occupants were pronouncing judgement on his appointment to the position. Still, the door had opened to him, verifying his right, even perhaps the necessity that he occupy this seat. Surely the castle knew better than the readers of the *Daily Prophet* or the pupils (and parents) whose whispers followed him as he strode down Diagon Alley in preparation for the year to come.

Alone.

Fawkes' perch, too, stood empty. Bereft.

*Seems appropriate enough*, Severus thought. *He's no longer going to rise from the ashes, and neither will I. When I burn, it will be for once and for all. Let it at least be for good.*

He turned to look out of the windows that stretched behind him. The sun was setting and the Hogwarts Express would soon arrive. How many pupils would be missing this year? There would be no Muggle-born pupils, of course. They should already be in hiding or, if they weren't, would be on the run soon enough. Potter and Weasley and Granger would be absent, he knew. On a quest Dumbledore wouldn't reveal. Hidden away.

A pounding on the door startled him.

If he could find a way to avoid giving those idiots the password to his office, he would. The Dark Lord would, unfortunately, not approve.

He sighed and willed away the headache that was pressing at the edges of his eyes.

"Headmaster!" shouted a voice at the door followed by more pounding.

Severus flicked his wand, and the door swung open, revealing Amycus Carrow, red-faced, arm raised for yet another bash at the heavy wooden door.

"Yes, Amycus?" Severus said, his voice pitched low. "An emergency already?"

"Emergency?"

"Otherwise why would you deem it necessary to make such an exorbitant amount of noise merely to speak with me?"

Amycus fidgeted. "Well, Headmaster, I jus' wanted to be sure you'd received my proposals, didn't I?"

"Did you?" repeated Severus. "How thoughtful."

Amycus stood, perhaps waiting to be invited to sit. Severus lifted his eyebrows but said nothing.

"Erm," said Amycus.

Still, Severus said nothing.

"Erm," said Amycus again.

"Will that be all?" asked Severus, sorting through a thick pile of parchment, tossing one after the other into the bin.

Amycus's face grew even redder, but he only grunted.

"Then you may go," said Severus, still not looking up.

Only when the door slammed shut behind the retreating wizard did Severus lean back in his chair and throw the remaining parchment back onto the desk. Proposals, indeed.

He lifted a sheet out of the pile and curled his lip.

Two columns. Both excessively long.

*Suggested list of transgressions: followed closely by, Suggested punishments for transgressions:*

Severus shuddered. He knew the Carrows were cruel, but this was beyond the pale. Whipping for being out after curfew? *Crucio* for suggesting that Muggle-borns could be magical? How was he supposed to...?

He looked up at Dumbledore's portrait. The old wizard had finally returned to his frame, but his soft wheezes indicated his unavailability as surely as his absence had done.

"I need you, old man," he whispered, but there were only Dumbledore's snores to answer him.



Great Hall is silent, sunset's final moments leaving stripes across the sky, a counterpoint to the rainbow that still arches above us all. The whirlwind has stripped the day away, casting us on its wings from sunrise to sunset.

Fitting, really.

I had been braced for an assault, but, in truth, my decision to act came so quickly that I wasn't prepared. Not really.

"This is no solution."

Even so, Salazar has been unable to tear his eyes from the ceiling.

"It is the only solution," I answer. The only way to ensure that no matter what happened today, some version of our world would survive. Segregated or not. Fragmented or whole. Each ribbon of life free to unfurl into its own identity, to develop its own distinct self.

"How will you even know the impact of what you have done here, Helga?"

Trust Rowena to be concerned about the veracity of one's conclusions.

I smile. She doesn't think me simple, but she persists in underestimating me. Did she think I would ever do what I'd done today without ensuring the existence of a portal?

It's small, as magical looking glasses go and about the size of the palm of my hand. Edged in gold and polished to a sheen, its face reflects all the colours of the rainbow. I touch one...red...and I see the four of us, sitting just as we are now. And another...yellow...where the hall is empty, almost bereft. Then, another...violet...and I see the argument in full swing, louder than before by the looks of it, and I flinch. One by one, I stroke the tip of my finger along the ribbons of colour. One by one, I see us in all our permutations. Crying, shouting, clinging to one another, storming off.

The possibilities...the probabilities...unfold before us. I look to my friends, my partners. They will forgive me. They will not forgive me. We will repair our relationships. We won't. They will understand. They will not. The Hallows will follow us into our new worlds, or they won't...each world shaped by the magic contained there.

But here, right now, I open my mouth and, at first, I'm not sure I am capable of producing sound. One by one, my friends tear their eyes from the mirror I hold. One after the other, they place their arms around me. The setting sun streams in through the window, throwing yellow light onto the walls, bathing us in warmth.

Finally, safe in their embrace, I find my voice.

"It is begun."



# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 of 10

My chambers are dark, lit only by the glow of the midnight moon.

The castle creaks with rawness of stone and antiquity of magic, filled with the power welling up from beneath the mountain and the fire of intention fuelled by our four vibrant streams of magic, combined.

It is nearly impossible to recognise this expanse of land from just six months ago: pristine grasses as far as the eye could see, cresting on a tidal wave of green, the shadow of grey stone a skeleton underneath. A spider's web holding together an enterprise that, tonight, feels like folly.

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The Great Hall was humming, overflowing with animated conversation and the clatter of cutlery as pupils and staff tucked into the welcoming feast.

Hermione's eyes scanned the room, watching for signs of trouble. One hundred and eighteen new first-years, Headmistress McGonagall had reminded her, meant eruptions of uncontrolled magic, especially at the Welcoming Feast. Hermione remembered her own first night in the castle and flushed at the memory of how she'd burnt her sausages while waving her arms around.

*Whatever had caused the arm waving must have been important at the time.*

It was exhausting to learn to channel magic, and she could already hear snippets of arguments drifting up from the tables. It was inevitable. The fourth-year pupils had O.W.L. exams at the end of this year and would be asked to demonstrate their ability to control and shape the direction of their magic. It was daunting, and there would always be students who debated the restriction of wands as if the Hogwarts staff created the injunction just to thwart them.

Hermione understood their frustration. Many pupils had already read *Hogwarts: a History for History of Magic* and knew that one of the Founders had used a wand himself, made by his own hand. They also usually conveniently forgot that it had also been the Founders (and the wizarding government that had evolved not long after) who had decided soon after opening Hogwarts' doors that the urge to channel and direct magic was undeniable, but the risks of such focused power were far too high.

The fourth-years weren't yet mature enough to understand, but they would, soon enough.

In the meantime, she had her own adjusting to do.

Spending her days in the lab was Hermione's idea of heaven. No timetable to interrupt her, no lessons to prepare, pupils to teach, or papers to mark. Now that summer had ended, she would be adding teaching demands to her lab work for the first time. On top of it all, she had been assigned the daunting job of looking after the new first-years while trying not to lose any of them to the disappearing corridor just beyond the Spells classroom, or forgetting to check for them, piled in a heap, in the safety net below the fifth floor staircase.

She was exhausted just thinking about it.

Hermione smiled as the main course disappeared and pudding arrived. The elves always went out of their way to make an impression, and they were undoubtedly preening in the kitchen at the students' shouts of delight. Soon enough, the tables would be cleared and the pupils would head back to their dormitories for the night.

"Are you ready for your first class, Miss Granger?" the headmistress asked as Hermione scooped up the last of her treacle tart.

It was a rhetorical question. Professor McGonagall had already given her final approval to the lesson plans she'd brought by last week, agreeing with Professor Evans's edits of Hermione's innovative additions. It still rankled, but the headmistress insisted that she stick strictly to the curriculum.

Still, McGonagall had been down to the dungeons to examine the Potions classroom and offer moral support and last-minute advice. Hermione wished the headmistress had remembered to ask her about the *Nosce Ipsum* potion. This, far more than her lesson plans, excited her.

"As ready as I'll ever be," Hermione said with a tight smile.

She understood her role; she really did. Despite the requirement that apprentices do research, the emphasis had always been on teaching; their faculty role far more valued by the Ministry than any sort of innovation. It was one of the realisations that had quickly begun to chafe. After six long years of school, of compliance and cooperation, Hermione had imagined that, perhaps, now, her initiative would finally be rewarded. She had harboured a fantasy for years that once she'd grown up, she would receive more accolades for her individuality than so far during her formal education.

Alas, it was not to be so.

Hermione fought the knot forming in her stomach. This was her job, and it was a good one. It suited her, all in all, and she would deal with the teaching requirement. Seventh-year apprentices took the second and third-year classes, leaving the introductory and higher level years to the Potions mistress. It was a good system, Hermione thought, and one that she hoped left enough distance between Apprentice and student to ensure at least a modicum of compliance.

"Professor Evans would never let you go forward unprepared," the headmistress reassured her, breaking into Hermione's thoughts, and with a quick pat to the younger witch's arm, made her way to the podium for the opening announcements.

It took only a moment for the room to fall quiet. Hermione envied Professor McGonagall her knack for holding a group's attention without appearing to do anything at all to win it, and wondered how she would fare in the morning with thirty students and their swirling potions.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," McGonagall began. "And to those of you who are returning, welcome back. I have just a few announcements before you return to your dormitories. Tomorrow is a big day, and I expect you'll all want to get a good night's sleep." The headmistress tilted her head and waited for the inevitable titters from the older pupils.

"We are pleased to welcome Potions Apprentice Hermione Granger, who will be taking second and third-year lessons, and Neville Longbottom, who will be doing a practical Apprenticeship in Herbology with Professor Sprout. You will see him in the greenhouses and, I trust, will not interrupt him whilst he works.

Groundskeeper Hagrid has invited the fifth-years to accompany him into the Forest tonight to meet the unicorn colts born there last week. If anyone needs to ask questions prior to the visit, you may find him after dinner in his office on the third floor."

The headmistress raised her eyebrows, and Hermione hid a smile. It was more likely that students entering their sixth year would be ineligible to visit the unicorns, but it paid to be safe.

"Before you finish your pudding and head off to bed, let us remind ourselves of what the Four Founders established here, and the mission with which we are all entrusted."

Hermione leaned back in her chair and sipped her wine, a welcome perk of her elevation to the staff. She wasn't much of a wine drinker as a rule, but tonight, the cup with its shimmering deep burgundy symbolised her newfound adulthood and hopes for the future.

As she listened to the familiar tale, Hermione's eyes began to droop. The candles lighting the hall twinkled along the edge of the crystal goblet and cast a soft glow on the wine gleaming inside. The reassuring shape of the headmistress hung like a smudge of colour reflected in the glass, and Hermione looked up at her former teacher, lost to the rush of safety and affection she felt at the familiar image: her stern but encouraging expression, upright carriage, and tartan hat.

Later, she'd try to convince herself that exhaustion explained why, when she lowered her gaze to her goblet again, it was no longer the image of the headmistress suspended there, but that of an unfamiliar man. Slender, with slick dark hair, it was he...not Headmistress McGonagall...standing at the podium and addressing the hall.

She gasped.

It was too early for the revealing potion to be working...only three hours had passed. Perhaps they had been mistaken in their calculations.

Hermione blinked.

The image of the man was still there.

She couldn't hear his voice, but the tired lines around his eyes made her lean in to get a closer look, and the stiff set of his shoulders left her fingers itching to ease the tension there. How odd. She didn't know this man, and he looked anything but approachable. Still, even in this hazy reflection, she could feel his energy: he was wound taut like a spring about to be released, and she was drawn to it. To him.

Could it be? Her heart was pounding in her ears, and she could hardly hear the words of the Founders' Tale anymore. She must *mean* to see him, she thought. But what did that *mean*?

Hermione glanced up at the podium. Silly, she thought, to check that it was still Headmistress McGonagall standing there. Of course it was her.

She didn't recognise the wizard, and his presence on the dais should be impossible, if not for the evidence in the goblet. It was only when he finished speaking and returned to his seat that Hermione saw his face clearly at last.

Her heart raced.

Dark, edged with sooty lashes, his eyes were haunted not only by long shadows of candlelight, but by deeper worry, she thought. Nothing had prepared her, she realised at once, for the reality of what she might see reflected back at her once she'd taken the potion.

What had she imagined? Another career? Travel or work behind a desk at the Ministry? She shuddered. Never would she have imagined her fate might be entwined with a total stranger. But who was he, and how could he be standing where Minerva should instead?

She leaned closer, rapt, caught by the reflection in her glass.

It wasn't that he looked so severe, she thought, though he did, or intimidating, though he cut an impressive figure. It wasn't even the flash of strong hands and long fingers under the sweeping sleeve of his robes. She felt a sudden desire, like a pang in her chest, to hear his voice, and from the set of his mouth, she imagined he must be a man who spoke precisely, without a syllable going to waste.

But it wasn't any of these things that made her catch her breath or hold her glass perfectly still, lest the image melt away.

It was the look in his eyes when they hesitated for a split second (could he see her, too? The potion shouldn't allow him to see her...) before his gaze swept past her as if he had no idea he appeared, impossibly, in the red-tinged goblet, despair belying the aggressive set of his shoulders.

Why, she wondered, watching the image of the wizard fade away, did a man sitting in a room full of what must be hundreds of people, look so terribly alone?



The fire in his chambers burned hot, but his bones were cold.

Severus reached for the elf-made wine with a shaking hand and topped up his drink one last time. Personally, he'd have preferred Firewhisky, but if he had already begun to hallucinate so early in this thrice-damned school year, he'd best stay away from the hard stuff.

Two hours later, and he still felt like he was jumping out of his skin. It was bad enough to be looking over his shoulder constantly, wondering who was listening, who was watching. But this? To see *Granger* of all people, hovering in the reflection of his wine glass? Ridiculous, and yet, under the circumstances, an absolute nightmare.

It must be the strain, more intense than ever before, with the Carrows dogging his every move and the Dark Lord's ever-increasing demands. It was nearly too much. Obfuscating the truth had become so second nature he wondered what remained of the Severus Snape who had once loved a girl and longed to show her magic.

He swirled the wine remaining in the belly of the goblet and leaned in to inhale its rich scent. Despite his best efforts, he couldn't keep his eyes from straying to the burgundy stain inside the glass, half hoping and half fearing he'd find Granger's face there again.

He'd recovered quickly enough, he thought, when he'd turned from the podium and found those eyes staring at him. Had fallen into his seat and looked away before the oafs seated on either side of him noticed anything amiss.

With a groan, he levered himself off the armchair and made his way to his bedchamber. The ghosts and the portraits had been tasked to monitor the corridors for errant students, and the elves would alert him should the Carrows stray out of bounds. With his network in place, he might even doze for a few moments here and there ... if he could only shut off the persistent thoughts of Granger and the boys out there somewhere, presumably...hopefully...executing Dumbledore's plan, whatever in the name of Hades that might be.

One thing he knew for certain. *She* wasn't meant to be anywhere near Hogwarts. Certainly not in the Great Hall eating dinner, dressed in odd violet robes, and most definitely not reflected in the depths of his wine glass.

He took another sip before putting the goblet on the table for the elves to clear away. Despite the illusion, he knew she hadn't been there. Not really. He'd even done a surreptitious scan of the hall and high table just in case she'd sneaked in, disguised in those strange robes.

But, no. Even if had she had slipped past the layers of security and surveillance spells undetected, she'd concealed herself admirably well despite her unlikely appearance reflected in his goblet.

Severus laid his head on his pillow and watched the last of the fire flicker and fade to glowing ember.



He hoped to hell, wherever she was, she'd continue to stay hidden.

To stay safe.



Never had reflective surfaces held as much appeal to Hermione as they did in the weeks following the Welcoming Feast. Not one to spend much time contemplating the vagaries of wildly frizzing hair or the dark circles that inevitably showed up beneath her eyes during wild fits of studying, Hermione had always treated her image as a sometimes curious but mostly irrelevant fact of nature.

But *now*, if reflective surfaces might have the potential to show her something more than her own face, well, then, that was something else, entirely.

"It worked!" she'd said after the feast, when she had returned to the lab to meet Professor Evans.

"What do you mean, 'it worked'?" she asked. "It hasn't been four hours yet."

"But I saw him. I mean, I saw something in the goblet. A reflection. It was a man, and he was standing at the podium, addressing the students."

Professor Evans' brow was furrowed, and she wore that tight-lipped look that never boded well.

"Impossible," she said. "Even if the potion had worked and you were seeing a man who was entwined with your fate, there wouldn't be *wizard* at the podium. You must have imagined it."

Nothing Hermione said could sway her. And when she brought the oval mirror for Hermione to gaze into, all she saw there was her own reflection.

"Back to the drawing board," Evans said, though she gave Hermione a reassuring pat on the back before suggesting they both retire for the night.

Hermione had dropped the subject, going back to her notes, trying to work out what had gone wrong. *What* had gone wrong. Professor Evans had said as much. But still, she searched for him in every reflection she could find.

Oddly enough, now that she was looking for them, she discovered that Hogwarts held less than its fair share of reflective surfaces. Oh, certainly, there were cups and goblets at meals, and mirrors (magical and otherwise) in her chambers. But the large sheets of glass that adorned the modern buildings of non-magical London were completely absent in the old castle. Instead, stained glass and leaded windows provided portals only for the weak northern light that streamed into the cavernous rooms, none of which provided anything like a satisfactory mirrored surface.

As day flowed into day, she stopped noticing the way her eyes would stray to every expanse of glass or spill of liquid (and to be fair, the potions classroom gave her a fair number of those) in the hope that she might discover once and for all whether the man she had seen suspended in her wine glass had been (as she had hoped) the result of the revealing potion after all, or whether he had been a figment of her overtired imagination.

It was only the mystery of the thing that kept her looking so persistently, she told herself. An anomaly to unravel. A perfectly reasonable motive for pursuing a shadowy reflection.

She tried not to notice the lurch in her belly when she thought she might not ever see those dark eyes...shadowed but intriguing...ever again.



Snow crunched under her feet as Hermione made her way to the Greenhouses. She was grateful that when she returned to the castle, she wouldn't be beset with lesson planning and marking papers. The students had gone home for the winter holidays; only a handful remained for special projects or simply because the castle seemed a homely place to be.

Standing outside Greenhouse Four, the wide expanse of glass mirrored the castle behind it, along with the last rays of the setting sun to the west. Hermione nearly dropped her collection basket, transfixed by the flickering light against the glass.

"Hermione, what're you doing standing out there? It's freezing." Neville poked his head out the door and waved her inside.

"Sorry, Neville. Got distracted."

"Well, hurry up. The Abyssinian shrivelfigs are ready for harvest, and they can't take the cold."

She nodded and hurried inside, breathing the steamy warmth of the place into cold lungs and shrugging off her heavy coat and gloves.

"Thanks for making time for me, Neville," she said. "Professor Evans will have my head if I don't finish replenishing the stores. We're running low on everything, and the N.E.W.T. students need alihotsy leaves dried and ready for them when they get back to class."

Neville glanced up at her from a pile of fluxweed and quirked his lip.

"I don't think I've ever known you to be behind on anything, Hermione. Should I be sending you to Matron Pomfrey for a physical? Or better yet, to Professor Tonks, to be sure you've not been possessed by the evil spirit of procrastination?"

Hermione smacked his arm and tried to pretend she wasn't blushing. *Sowhat* if she wasn't working her fingers to the bone? Hadn't she done that enough over six years of schooling? She'd obtained an interesting Apprenticeship, even if it meant teaching a group of students who would never know a Runespoor from a Doxy egg. Besides, if Professor Evans were unsatisfied with her performance, she'd say so, wouldn't she?

Hermione squirmed.

She didn't manage to convince even herself.

"I've been a bit preoccupied, to be honest," she said, peering at Neville from beneath a shock of hair that had fallen into her eyes. "And this term has been exhausting."

Far more than she'd expected, in fact. Six years of tutoring Neville and haranguing Draco to do his homework was nothing compared to the day-to-day reality of teaching and marking for eight lessons a week on top of her own research.

"I understand," nodded Neville. "Those third-years, especially, are just confident enough to be cocky. You should see the mess they made of the Puffapods last week, even though Professor Sprout gave them explicit instructions. Took me four hours to clean up after they'd gone."

Hermione nodded.

"What's got you preoccupied?" asked Neville. "Man troubles? That is, if that's the path you're considering after apprenticeship."

"It might be," she said, though the thought of finding a wizard whose interests matched her own and who wouldn't drive her mad seemed nigh on impossible. "Which man would that be?" asked Hermione with a sigh. "Because if you know of someone suitable, I'd appreciate you pointing him out to me."

Neville laughed.

"I supposed you've already noticed Ron's attempts to get your attention, then."

Hermione snorted.

"I'll take that as a 'yes', and a 'no thank you'."

"Spot on," said Hermione. "You were in his Dormitory. Do you think you might steer him... elsewhere?"

"I don't expect he'd take my advice much to heart," said Neville. "Not that I see him much these days."

Hermione smiled. "Well, he knows you and I are friends, doesn't he? Maybe you can tell him that my attentions are otherwise engaged."

"Sounds like that's not far from the truth, eh?"

Hermione blinked. She wasn't preoccupied with the *man*, she thought, just the mystery. It would be foolish to let herself be consumed by the image of a wizard she was fairly certain wasn't even real.

"No problem, Hermione," Neville said. "I'll take care of Ron. But between you and me, what is going on?"

*Good question, Neville,* she thought.

Could she simply tell him the truth? That she'd been searching every reflective surface she could find for a mysterious wizard...one who (for at least three good reasons) had no business being there? That she'd been spending every free moment wondering who he was, and how he'd appeared the way he had as a sort of mirage?

*Brilliant, Hermione,* she thought. Good way to get sacked or sent to St Mungo's, or both.

"I'm fine," she answered. "Just overworked, I expect."

Neville pursed his lips. "If you don't want to tell me, just..."

Hermione's gasp interrupted him, but she didn't notice.

"Neville," she whispered. "Do you see that?"

Neville turned toward the window to the east, black from the encroaching darkness outside and fogged with steam from the heat of the greenhouse.

"See what? It's just us in the window."

But Hermione had already risen and was walking towards the glass, her hand outstretched.

Neville might not be able to see him, but he was *there*.

Her heart pounded in her ears and she approached the reflection.

It was as if the greenhouse window opened directly into the Headmistress's office, and she, as if suspended in midair, could look directly in. But instead of Headmistress McGonagall, sitting at her enormous desk, sifting through piles of paperwork or chatting with the portraits, *he* was there, the wizard she'd seen that night, pacing back and forth across the wide chamber. Arms clasped behind him, robes swishing with every movement...it had to be him, she was sure of it.

He looked simply *awful*, and Hermione's stomach fluttered in sympathy for him, this stranger who looked so tortured and alone. She stepped closer to the window and noticed that if she pressed her nose to the glass, she could see the inside of the office. Unlike the one she was accustomed to, packed with personal touches, magical knickknacks and shelves piled deep with books and papers, this one seemed almost bare, apart from the full bookshelves, as if its current occupant didn't intend to stay. Even the portraits were vacant, leaving their headmaster alone with his heavy heart.

She didn't realise she'd been holding her breath until the wizard turned to look outside his own window and stopped short, his eyes wide. Alarmed.

*Can you see me?*

Hermione let out a shaky breath, leaving another layer of fog on the glass. Without thinking, only impulse guiding her, she took a fingertip and wrote rapidly in the fading steam, her eyes never leaving the man across from her, who looked as if he'd seen a ghost.

"Who are you?"



Severus froze.

His heart pounded in his chest; panicked, his thoughts stalled.

*Not again. No.*

It was impossible.

It couldn't be her, it couldn't. She was on the run, hiding from the Dark Lord. It couldn't be Granger's blurred face in the window, looking more curious than surprised.

Besides, Granger would recognise him... Unless something had happened to her. Had she been injured? Her memory damaged? Was she incapacitated? And even if she were, what magic would allow her to appear to him like this, an apparition outside his window?

*Who are you?*

Now *that*, he thought, cradling his head in his hands, was a question for the ages.



She was gone from the glass when he lifted his head, and he wasn't sure if he was more disappointed or relieved. Seeing things that weren't there hardly inspired confidence, and Merlin knew he had enough reasons to feel uneasy already.

And yet.

The sight of her had been oddly comforting, for all that it was terrifying. It was obviously Granger, but different than he remembered her. Gone were the shadowed eyes from too much studying and the stooped posture of a student both eager to please and anxious about succeeding. Instead, she'd looked surprisingly relaxed. Curious, but not afraid. Hardly how a young woman on the run from the most dangerous wizard in the world ought to look.

He shook his head. *What folly.* To be wasting even a moment pondering what was obviously the product of too little sleep and too much stress. Neither condition was likely to abate any time soon, he thought, so he'd best just get on with it. If only he could put the image of her concerned, curious eyes out of his mind.



Neville insisted on accompanying her back to the castle, a detour to the Matron included, without comment or request. Hermione bore it well, despite her desire to protest and explain, gritting her teeth and agreeing to take the Calming Draught and go straight to bed.

"You're obviously overtired, Hermione," the mediwitch told her. "Not uncommon for apprentices after their first full term. Just take care of yourself, and you should be right as rain before you know it."

"Thank you," she murmured, tucking the bottle into a pocket of her robes.

She didn't need it. She was certain there was nothing at all wrong with her, but one didn't argue with the Matron.

"So what was it you thought you saw there in the window?" Neville asked, just as they approached her chamber door.

Hermione glanced at him, surprised, and shook her head.

"Nothing. Must have been an optical illusion," she said. "Sorry to disrupt your whole evening with nothing to show for it. I'll have to come back tomorrow to finish collecting. If that's all right with you, I mean."

Neville narrowed his eyes. "Tomorrow is fine, on the condition that you go right to sleep. Agreed?"

"Of course," Hermione said, smiling stiffly.

She waited for Neville to turn the corner before closing and bolting her door. Taking only a moment to deposit the Calming Draught in the nearest bin, Hermione headed straight for the fireplace.

"Headmistress's Office," she shouted as soon as the flames burned green, and stepped right through.



The tea was cooling on the table between them and the fire burned low.

"Are you going to tell me what really brought you here tonight, Hermione, or should we continue to perpetuate the fiction that you were simply dying for the biscuits the elves bring me before bed?" The headmistress smiled and leaned back in her chair.

Hermione shifted in her seat and put her teacup down carefully on its saucer.

"I have a question," she said. "An odd one," she added quickly at the twist of the headmistress's lips.

"It's unlike you to hesitate to ask a question, Hermione."

"Yes, well, when you hear the question and the reason behind it, you may well wish I'd kept it to myself."

"Tell me."

The simple request, the genuine concern: together, it was enough.

"Has there ever been a wizard as head of Hogwarts, Professor?" Hermione whispered, just loud enough for McGonagall to hear. "A headmaster instead of a headmistress?" Hermione felt herself flinch at her own question, trying to ignore the tittering from the portraits on the walls behind them. "Obviously, I know my history," she rushed to add. "No male Headmasters since the time of Vulpus and no male faculty since Swott." She took a deep breath. "But is it actually *true*? I thought if anyone would know..."

The headmistress leaned forward. "Miss Granger. Hermione," she said. "The legacy of witches alone teaching at Hogwarts is part of a long tradition dating from more than four hundred years ago. So far as I know, it is accurate." She paused and leaned back again. "What, may I ask, precipitated the question?"

Hermione sat for a long time, staring into the popping fire. Either something was very wrong with *her*, or something was just *wrong*.

"I'm not sure," she said, "whether I've imagined something or not."

"What is it that you believe you might have imagined?"

Hermione turned her eyes from the flames, only to find them lingering on the stained glass tucked into a curve of windows to the left of Professor McGonagall's desk. She rose from her chair and made her way to the windows. It was easier to answer this way, facing away, immersed in the intricacies of the inlaid glass.

"A wizard," Hermione answered. "In here. In your office. Except it wasn't your office. Not exactly. It was far more bare, and he looked so lonely." Hermione brought her hand to the window and ran a fingertip along the edging.

"A wizard? In *this* office?"

Hermione nodded. "Pacing."

"Pacing."

Hermione didn't reply. The colours of the window were mesmerising. She'd never seen this one up close, never been behind the headmistress's desk where all the detail of the scene could be appreciated.

It held the Four Founders, each in their own arched panel of glass. The four windows together depicted the Hallowing, the story told during every Welcoming Feast since the establishment of Hogwarts.

The surface of the window was mottled with dust, and Hermione brought the edge of her robe to rub against a spot, clearing it away.

Cleaning it.

The colours beneath were so vibrant. Even more brilliant than she had imagined.

The glass shimmered beneath the cloth of her robe, and Hermione couldn't resist clearing away more until the figure and what she held in her hands glistened.

She was vaguely aware of holding her breath as she brought the palm of her hand to rest on the image of a cloak. That must be what was shimmering, she realised, or perhaps it was the object Helga Hufflepuff was holding in her other hand. The cloak called to her, the cloak that had (according to the Founders' Tale) long ago been woven into the wind and wood and stone of Hogwarts, a magical shield over them all.

It was not as if she thought she might actually feel the texture of the fabric or the spill of cloth like water over her hands. Had she paused to think, she would have expected glass, solid and cold, beneath her palm. Never in a thousand years would she have predicted that her hand would pass right through, as if the images were made of mist instead of ground sand and pigment and iron.

Never in a million years would she have expected to meet another hand on the other side.

Warm and strong, pulsing with energy.

And never would she have expected him (it was a man's hand, a wizard's hand, teeming with magic) to fold her hand inside his larger one...

...and pull.



the headmistress's office, nestled in four of the high, arching windows that line the walls [in the Great Hall; in the entrance hall; in the library; in the dungeons; in a deserted tower; crumbled beneath layers of stone], lies an expanse of stained glass. Over the years, the House-elves have, inexplicably, neglected to polish it, leaving the residue of years of *life* coating its surface.

Beneath the grime, four figures sleep. A thousand years is a long time, and the evidence of the centuries since they last drew breath lies like a mist over them...a soporific. Tonight, one of the figures shifts beneath her heavy blanket of dust. As she draws breath for the first time in a millennium, the glass crackles with its own sort of life, its own brand of magic.



## Chapter 3

*Chapter 3 of 10*

My chambers are dark, lit only by the glow of the midnight moon.

The castle creaks with rawness of stone and antiquity of magic, filled with the power welling up from beneath the mountain and the fire of intention fuelled by our four vibrant streams of magic, combined.

It is nearly impossible to recognise this expanse of land from just six months ago: pristine grasses as far as the eye could see, cresting on a tidal wave of green, the shadow of grey stone a skeleton underneath. A spider's web holding

together an enterprise that, tonight, feels like folly.

I had expected to feel exultant.

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This story is ten chapters, and complete. I will be posting one chapter every couple of days. :)

She landed on the carpet behind the desk, a tangle of hair and violet robes.

He released her hand as if it were on fire and took three steps back.

What in the bloody *hell* was *she* doing here?

"Granger?" he barked.

It certainly looked like Granger, despite her odd dress and unlikely appearance through a stained glass window one hundred feet above the ground.

Her head shot up, her expression alarmed. Big brown eyes darted around the room, taking in the portraits (who were avidly eyeing her as well), the Sorting Hat up on its shelf, the disordered bookcases, and the path he'd already worn into the carpet in front of the desk.

"How do you know my name?"

Outstanding. A *deranged* Granger.

"I taught you Potions for five years and Defence Against the Dark Arts for one, silly girl. Why wouldn't I know your name?" He took in a sharp breath. "Unless you're ~~not~~ Hermione Granger."

He sniffed the air for the telltale scent of Polyjuice and cast a surreptitious revealing spell.

Nothing.

"Obviously I'm Hermione Granger," she said, untangling herself enough to stand unsteadily next to his desk. "Though I have no idea who you are and how you know my name."

She folded her arms across her chest and ran her eyes over him, up and down.

"You didn't teach me Potions. Professor *Evans* is the Potions mistress at Hogwarts, and we *haven't* got a class called 'Defence Against the Dark Arts'."

Having said her piece, she unwrapped her arms and attempted to run her fingers through her hair, giving up after a few moments of wrestling with the tangles, instead pulling it back with a tie.

"So, who are *you*?"

No Defence...? Professor...? Even the portraits had begun to whisper amongst themselves, clustered together now in Armando Dippet's frame.

"Professor *Evans*?" he hissed. "What sort of game are you playing, girl?"

At this, she just looked exasperated.

"You're the one who grabbed my hand and pulled..." She stopped short and turned back towards the stained glass. "What was that you pulled me through, anyway?"

Excellent question.

He followed her gaze back to the window. Just as she had when reflected in the glass, she looked curious but not especially alarmed.

If she thought he was going to reveal his ignorance of her means of transport into the most secure room in wizarding Britain, she was sadly mistaken.

"For someone who has just landed in an unfamiliar place with an...apparently...unfamiliar wizard," he said, taking another step closer, "you seem oddly unconcerned, Miss Granger."

"Why would I be concerned? I'm obviously still at Hogwarts and am perfectly capable of taking care of myself. I am a member of staff, after all."

The portraits behind him began to chatter.

He blinked.

Staff member? Definitely deluded. Oh, hell.

"You should be concerned because there's a *war* on, idiotic girl," he roared, "and the Dark Lord is after you and your..." He huffed and waved his arms. "...Weasley and Potter. You're not supposed to *be* at Hogwarts. You've abandoned your final year because you're off somewhere, doing whatever it is you are meant to do, so the Dark Lord can be vanquished. You're a seventh year non-student, Granger. Hardly a staff member."

He'd expected Granger to leap to her own defence or possibly to argue with him, perhaps presenting him with a cross-indexed list of reasons *why* *here* was precisely where she was meant to be. Instead, she just stood, arms akimbo, looking at last more confused than curious and disturbingly pale.

"You know," she said. "I think I need to sit down."

He pulled a chair to her, and she collapsed into it, head between her knees, breathing deeply.

He wanted to interrogate her, to find out why she'd come back and to compel her to reveal how she'd made her arm materialise through the window, followed abruptly by the rest of her (though, admittedly, he'd had a hand in the latter). But she was breathing deeply now, apparently trying to get hold of herself.

Something was wrong, and it wasn't the sort of wrong he had grown accustomed to over twenty years of spying.

"It's good to see you finally recognising the gravity of the situation, Miss Granger," he said. "This war is coming to a head, and you and your friends are in the eye of the storm."

He thought the strangled sound from beneath her hair was a laugh, but he wouldn't swear to it.

"I don't know about any war," she said finally, her voice muffled and a bit shaky. "Or about being in the eye of a storm." She looked up, her eyes wide. "I would have heard about this war, wouldn't I?" She took a shuddering breath. "I don't know what to do in a war."

The Hermione Granger he knew would have been defiant. Pretended to bravado, even if she didn't feel it. This witch was afraid. He sat next to her and handed her a glass of water. She sipped it and handed it back to him before she began to speak again.

"I don't know any of those wizards, either. Apart from Weasley, of course. He won't leave me alone despite having a job he should, at least theoretically, attend to. I don't know who you are and I've never heard of any *Dark Lord*. Merlin, who *calls* themselves that?" she muttered. "Or anybody named Potter."

She lifted her head gingerly, taking small sips of air as she sat up. Her eyes were bright and her skin had paled even more. It was the expression of a woman for whom war was not an every day reality. She glanced at him, at the portraits on the walls, and around the large, circular room.

He hadn't spoken, but she didn't seem to notice, lost as she was in her confusion and fear. The wheels were turning; he could almost see them spinning faster and faster, thoughts spilling out almost at random.

"Oh, Merlin," she breathed. "I don't understand. If I'm Hermione Granger, then who is the Hermione Granger who's on the run? What sort of danger is she in?" She looked terrified, as if the Dark Lord would be coming for her at any moment, as well he might. "If there's a war... are you and she, I mean, I, I mean, she, oh, Merlin's beard." She gulped. "It's just... Whose side are you on? I mean, I had the impression from what you said..."

But he cut her off with a gesture, glancing up at the portrait behind the desk. For once, Dumbledore's eyes were open. They moved from Granger back to Severus. The old man paused, and then nodded once. The girl didn't notice; she had continued talking.

"There's one more thing," she said, "you still haven't told me *your* name or how you managed to get into Headmistress McGonagall's office."

Bloody hell.



He moved her to one of the chairs by the fire and pressed a cup of tea into her hands. She muttered something that sounded like "Where are the biscuits?" but just shook her head when he asked her to speak up.

The scene felt like a dream...only more vivid than usual... until the moment he pulled out his wand.

"Where did you get that?" she shrieked, jumping to her feet.

"What?"

"That!"

Her hands were shaking, but she was clearly pointing to his wand.

The evidence that the girl was addled was growing by the minute.

"My wand?" He waved it a bit just for emphasis.

"That's *illegal*," she hissed.

He frowned. "Not the last time I checked. Unless you're Muggle-born." He paused and raised an eyebrow. *You* are Muggle-born, aren't you, Miss Granger?"

But she didn't answer. Her eyes darted between the window and the Floo as if calculating her odds for escape.

"You keep using words I don't know, and you still haven't told me your name. I don't know who you are or what this place is," she said, lifting her chin, defiant, "but I want to go home now."

For all her faults, and he could catalogue a good many, there was one thing Severus could always count on when it came to Granger.

She was a terrible liar.

Terrible. Only Minerva's death glare had saved the three first year Gryffindors from Granger's pathetic tale of woe and rescue the night Quirrell had set a troll loose in the dungeons.

He sat, lowering his wand slowly, as her eyes tracked its movement. When he slipped it back into his sleeve, she finally took a breath and looked him in the eye.

Ah.

Perhaps.

If he could get her to calm down, be less skittish. Then, maybe. Otherwise, he couldn't risk it.

Had he stopped to think, he might have wondered why he didn't simply immobilise her. It wasn't as if Phineas hadn't already shouted the suggestion amidst the cacophony emanating from the office walls. Had he given himself a moment to reflect, it might then have occurred to him that, unlike every other living soul in the castle (and a fair number of the non-living ones), this woman wasn't scared of *him*...only of the confusing circumstances she claimed to have found herself in.

The possibility of forging an alliance was remote, but so very tempting. Far too tempting, in fact. Worse, her openness in the face of her fear was a lure he couldn't resist; suddenly he was beyond logic, here, across from the young woman with the frightened eyes and the defiant glare.

"Miss Granger," he said, pitching his voice low, calming, "it's clear something odd has happened. Might I suggest *wboth* sit..." he gestured to the chair she'd so recently vacated, "and attempt to determine what it might be?"

She watched him for a long moment, then another. Her breathing slowed, but her eyes kept darting from his hands to his sleeve, where he'd tucked his wand.

"I'm going to sit," she said, at last, "and you're going to tell me *everything* about what's going on here. *Everything*."



Wherever this was, at least they had decent tea.

She held onto the teacup with both hands, wishing she could bury her face in the aromatic steam and find Professor McGonagall smiling benevolently at her when she looked up. But when she lifted her head, he was still there.

"How about starting with your name," she said between sips.

*He looks wary, she thought. Which is odd. I'm obviously the one compromised here*

"Severus Snape." His lips twisted into a sneer, and she wondered for whom he held such deep contempt: himself, for some unnamed sin, or his parents for saddling him with such a sour sounding name.

"Severus Snape," she echoed. "Thank you."

Knowing his name shouldn't have mattered, shouldn't have made her feel less anxious or unsettled. And yet it was as if a counterbalance had been set on the scale and she could nearly breathe again. Severus Snape.

All right then.

"I take it that you occupy the Headteacher's office," she continued.

"Obviously."

"Yes, well, it's less than obvious to me." She paused. *Obviously.*

He sat up straighter at that. Good. She took a deeper breath.

"I am confused about your surprise, Miss Granger," he said. "To my knowledge, you have lived six years in this castle and should know me. Quite well, in fact." His lips twisted again, and she wondered what sort of teacher he had been to her, or whatever version of her he knew.

"The Hogwarts I know employs only witches as faculty," she replied. "There are only Headmistresses, no Headmasters. It's been that way for nearly five hundred years." The look of shock on his face gave her pause, but she continued. "It's one of the reasons I was so taken aback when I first saw you. You know. In the goblet and then in the window. That's where I saw you..."

He nodded and she relaxed infinitesimally. She hadn't been the only one, then. He'd seen her, too.

"It's not as if I go around seeing strange wizards in reflections everywhere, so that was odd, of course. But seeing a wizard at the podium in the Great Hall, and then in the headmistress's office, that was... jarring, as you might imagine."

"I have no need to imagine," he said. "The Hermione Granger I know isn't currently in residence at Hogwarts," he said, appearing to choose his words carefully. "As I said earlier, she is meant to be doing some very important work. Work that is vital for my own mission, here."

So. They were meant to be allies, then. He and the Hermione he knew.

She relaxed a bit more.

"So, seeing her image where it wasn't meant to be was a bit of a shock, then."

"To say the least."

They eyed each other over their teacups. Comrades, now, both confused over a turn of events neither had engineered. She could work with this.

"I must admit, the idea of another *me* running around, trying to stay away from...who was it again, 'The Dark Lord?'...is rather unsettling."

Snape snorted and shook his head, and Hermione wondered how he felt about the Hermione *he* knew. Later, she thought. Later.

Hermione took a final sip of tea and placed the cup and saucer gently on the table. She had a thousand questions...about the Hermione Granger who was on the run, about the wizards that Hermione knew and the wizard they were running from...but now she was feeling a bit calmer. Answers could wait. Not long, but for a bit. First, there was something else she needed to know.

"Can you show me the window you pulled me through?"

His head shot up, surprised.

"Don't you want to hear about Potter and the Dark Lord?" He leaned in closer to her. "About Hermione Granger?"

Hermione shook her head, resisting the offer.

"Later, I will," she said. "First I'd like to work out how I got here and how I can get back."

*He looks almost disappointed, she thought. The memory of the expression on his face, reflected in the window, bereft and haunted, hit her like a punch in the stomach. Was he so alone here?*

"Get back," he echoed. "Of course."

"I expect you'd like me to go back. Be out of your way?" She felt inexplicably reluctant.

"Of course I would. I have a great deal to attend to here. I haven't the time to protect a Hermione Granger who is meant to be..." He waved his hand towards the window, "...out there, away from the dangers here at Hogwarts."

Hermione's stomach twisted. There hadn't been war in the wizarding world for more than a thousand years. She had no frame of reference other than her history books to guide her. But this man looked haunted, exhausted, and the realities of what it must mean to be under siege began to take on a shape far more vivid than inked words on parchment. She wondered again what the other Hermione was doing and whether she was safe.

Oh, safe.

"Are you in any danger?"

Now he looked angry. Why was he angry? She was just worried for him.

"That's not your concern, Miss Granger," he said, but she thought she heard a crack in his voice.

"Are you in the habit of telling people what their concerns should be?"

He raised his eyebrows.

"Because I'm not accustomed to being told such things. And if I were, I'd hardly listen." The first was not strictly true, but he didn't need to know that. The second was, though. Unequivocally.

"Of course you wouldn't," he muttered. "Why should *that* be any different."

She smiled, and for the first time since she'd fallen, head first, into this room, felt the weight on her chest entirely ease.

"Well, then," she said. "At least we have that in common."

His face was blank for a long moment, studying her. And then, like the clouds parting, the lines of his face softened.

"That, we do," he said softly.



The stained glass behind the desk looked, at first glance, like many of the windows peppered along the walls of Hogwarts. Some of them, like the one in her common room or the mermaid in the prefect's bathroom, had become as familiar as the back of her hand. Others, she'd stumbled upon turning a wrong corner, lost in thought. Until tonight, though, she hadn't given much thought to the windows in the headmistress's office. The portraits had always commanded far more attention, after all, and besides, Hogwarts had no end of wonders to keep one occupied.

The window in question was beautiful. All vivid reds and blacks and greens. It depicted three wizards, each holding what looked like one of the four Hallows. Here there were only three, though. She wondered where the fourth had gone. Before them all stood what might be the personification of Death.

"It's beautiful," she said. "Disturbing, of course, but quite lovely." She looked up at him. "But why are you showing me this one?"

He frowned. "You asked to see the window through which I pulled you." He gestured to the stained glass. "This is it."

Hermione turned back to the scene in the glass. "This isn't the one I was looking at when my hand slipped through," she said, running her fingertips once more over the glass.

Cold. Solid.

She sighed.

"What was the scene, then?" he asked.

Her eyes were scanning the broad wall of windows.

"I don't see it here. Perhaps it's elsewhere in the castle."

"What does it depict?"

"The Hallowing," she said.

"The *what*?" His voice was sharp and Hermione was confused.

"The *Hallowing*," she repeated slowly, as if he hadn't heard her the first time. "You *must* be familiar with..."

"Obviously not," he interrupted, voice clipped. "What, pray tell, is 'The Hallowing'?"

What was The Hallowing? Every child in the wizarding world knew the story. And if they were unclear on the details, it was told to them again at every Welcoming Feast at Hogwarts. How could this man, this wizard, not know the story that everyone in her...

*Her world.*

"This isn't my world," she whispered.

"Miss Granger, despite what the Dark Lord would like everyone to believe, you belong in the wizarding world as much as any pureblood..." But she was looking at him, aghast, and he stopped short.

"What on earth does my parentage have to do with any of this?" she asked, alarmed.

"I assumed..."

"You assumed, *what*? That the question of my birth should have any bearing on my status as a *witch*? The wizarding world eradicated that sort of bias nearly a thousand years ago, Snape. What sort of world are *you* living in?"

By the look on his face, he was contemplating just that.

She sniffed and turned back to the windows.

"What does this scene depict?" she asked.

"It is a children's fable. 'The Story of the Three Brothers.' Have you heard of it?"

She shook her head. "I haven't. My parents aren't magical, but my primary school emphasised both magical and non-magical lore, so if it had been an important tale, we would have heard it."

"We?" His voice was tight and she wondered why.

"We. My classmates and myself." She tilted her head, curious again. "What's wrong?"

"You were educated alongside Muggles?"

"There's that word again," she said. "Muggles?"



"Non-magicals."

"Oh. Why don't you just call them non-magicals, then?"

He looked flabbergasted. "I can't say that I have an answer to that."

"Hmm." She looked back to the window.

"What happens in the story?"

Snape took a step forwards, drawing a long finger to point to the first wizard depicted. "Antioch, the first of three brothers faced with Death, bargained with him for an unbeatable wand with which to vanquish him. The second brother, Cadmus, bargained for a stone with which to reach those who had already departed this plane, and the third brother, Ignotus, requested a way to hide from death, and so Death gave him his own cloak of invisibility."

He paused and looked at Hermione again. "The first two failed to escape death, but the third brother..." He shivered and Hermione resisted the urge to lay her hand on his arm. "The third brother hid from Death until he was ready to go, and then he passed peacefully into the next plane."

The room was still, and Hermione held her breath, watching as Snape lost himself in the images in the glass. Such a desperate and powerful fable, and one that clearly resonated with him. He'd said that they were at war. How long, she wondered, had he been hiding from Death?

"Such a sad story," she said at last. "So much resistance to the natural order of life." She pointed to the wizard with the wand. "They say that's why wands were outlawed not long after the establishment of Hogwarts. They provided too much focused power, too much temptation to take over instead of seeking to be in harmony."

"Outlawed," he echoed. "Wands, outlawed? I can't even imagine."

"And I can't imagine walking around with a loaded weapon at your disposal all the time," she said. "Besides, how do you cultivate your intrinsic magic if you're always tethered to that... stick?"

His lips quirked and the corners of his eyes crinkled a bit; she wondered if he ever smiled. Really smiled. Her face grew warm at the thought and from the swooping feeling in her chest.

"Will you tell me about 'The Hallowing'?" he asked, and she was grateful to see that he was still looking at the window and not at her.

"Of course," she said, grateful for the request, for the concession and the opening of a door.

Seemed only fair. She'd gone through a pretty massive door herself, today. It was his turn, after all.



decided months ago on the Great Hall for this ritual. It is the heart of the school, and where better than its heart to plant the seeds for its primary purposes and goals?

The twilight ceiling still shines with the fractured light of the rainbow arcing across it, end to end. We can hardly keep our eyes from tracing each coloured ribbon, searching for our own images shadowed there as we are undoubtedly shadows to the others...others who are also us...who might be searching their own reflected skies.

"So many possibilities," murmurs Godric, shaking his head. Awestruck. "Will we be able know them all?"

"I suppose the main rays at least should be knowable," answers Rowena with a glance at me. She is uncomfortable not to be in the role of expert, but she is also gracious and perhaps just a tiny bit afraid.

"Should we wish to view the other threads, we can do so through the mirror portal," I explain. "We cannot interfere, but we can observe."

For a moment, we all look at the indistinct figures moving within the glass and then, one by one, back up to the ceiling.

"What happens to the looking glass in future generations, Helga?" Salazar asks. "When we are all gone?"

I had been waiting for this question, in truth.

I smile.



"The Hallowing is intrinsic to the story of the establishment of Hogwarts," Hermione began, finishing a second cup of tea. "I'm surprised you didn't come across it in 'Hogwarts: A History'." She wrinkled her brow. "You do have 'Hogwarts: A History,' don't you?"

"We do," he said with a smirk. "Not to worry." And at her puzzled expression, added, "The Hermione Granger I know carried a copy with her at all times for what must have been her first four years of school. I suspect she knows it by heart."

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Your Hermione is lucky. We're not permitted our own copies. Too much emphasis on history is a barrier to moving forwards. We must know our history, of course, but not dwell on it."

It sounded like something she'd learned by rote and was trying her best to believe.

"There are, nonetheless, certain stories everyone must know. Stories that form the foundation of who we are."

"Such as 'The Hallowing.'"

She nodded.

"When the Founders established Hogwarts, they were particularly concerned with embedding protections into its foundations and walls. It is said that they disagreed about whether it was safe for children whose families had not always been magical to attend the school. We are told that Salazar Slytherin in particular worried about the safety of the students from non-wizarding homes and the risk non-magical families might pose to the wizarding world as a whole."

Severus sat forward in his chair, grateful for the teacup occupying his hands. He'd never heard Salazar Slytherin described by non-Slytherins as anything less than an elitist, a wizard who hated Muggles and anyone associated with them, magical or not.

Slytherin House had its own version of history, of course. But usually those tales involved Salazar's great power and superiority. His cunning. His ambition and magical achievements. There hadn't been much even within Slytherin House to contradict the lore about the Founder's beliefs about non-pureblood wizards. He hadn't ever given much thought as to *why* that might have been the case, nor to whether it was *true*.

"Go on," he said, breathless.

"The Founders agreed that each would bring something wrought by their own hands, imbued with their own magic, and together, they would infuse the castle with their own protections, both literally and symbolically. They called those items the 'Hallows' because they had a sacred purpose."

She caught his eye then, like she might read his own hallowed purpose there. For a moment, it seemed as if she would reach out her hand to him, and he couldn't bear to look away.

"They are meant to protect us *all*."

He looked at her hand, suspended between them as if frozen in time. How long had it been since anyone had reached out for him? How long since anyone thought *him* worthy of their protection, their support?

"They are a myth. A child's fairy tale," he said roughly.

"They are not," she insisted.

He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"I don't believe the Hallows exist, Herm..." He hesitated, stumbling over her name.

"Hermione," she whispered. "My name is Hermione."

He nodded. No matter how improbable, it was clear that this woman was not the Hermione Granger he had known for six years, had taught, had done battle with as he attempted to prepare her for war. This was someone else. From somewhere nearly out of reach. A woman who had never heard of the Dark Lord and thought the idea of wielding power for its own sake bizarre.

"Hermione," he repeated after her. "And I am Severus." She smiled broadly at him until his face grew warm.

"How was the Hallowing achieved?" he asked, flustered. "What is depicted in the stained glass on your side of the barrier?"

She focused her eyes once more on her teacup and continued.

"As the tale goes, each Founder came to the Great Hall with the item they had prepared. Gryffindor with his wand, Slytherin with his stone, Ravenclaw with her crown, and Hufflepuff with her cloak. Together, they wove the four Hallows into the shields and structure of Hogwarts, providing unimpeachable protection from harm to those who dwell here."

"There are only three Hallows, Hermione."

"No, Severus. There are four. In my world, there are four."



There. She'd said it again.

*My world.*

It was a relief to acknowledge it. Dancing around what had become blindingly obvious took more energy than she had to spare. Besides, the sooner they both admitted the unlikely but unavoidable truth...that he had pulled her through some sort of portal...the faster they could work out how to get her back again.

To her Hogwarts. Where the headmistress was undoubtedly frantic, and Professor Evans would be displeased that the third-years had no teacher for tomorrow's lessons.

"Your world," he repeated.

"So it would appear," she said.

"It would seem so," he murmured, glancing at the stained glass window behind his desk. The window that, inexplicably, connected to somewhere so completely 'other' that he could never have fathomed...

"How do you think it happened?" he wondered out loud.

"Two Hogwarts?" she asked.

"Who says there are only two?" He raised his eyebrows and her eyes widened.

"How many could there be?" She felt nauseous with a mixture of fear and excitement at the idea.

"Infinite," he whispered, and it occurred to her that this thought, above all, seemed to bring him surcease from his burdens. How heavy they must be, she thought, if it takes the prospect of infinite universes to free him.

"But Severus," she said, loath to interrupt his moment of peace, "if there are infinite universes, how am I supposed to find my way home?"



## Chapter 4

*Chapter 4 of 10*

My chambers are dark, lit only by the glow of the midnight moon.

The castle creaks with rawness of stone and antiquity of magic, filled with the power welling up from beneath the mountain and the fire of intention fuelled by our four vibrant streams of magic, combined.

It is nearly impossible to recognise this expanse of land from just six months ago: pristine grasses as far as the eye could see, cresting on a tidal wave of green, the shadow of grey stone a skeleton underneath. A spider's web holding together an enterprise that, tonight, feels like folly.

I had expected to feel exultant.

\*\*

This story is ten chapters, and complete. I will be posting one chapter every couple of days. :)

She would have fallen asleep curled up on the settee, had he not chivvied her off and towards his private office.

"Who knows what sort of magical drain the transfer from one universe to another has had on you," he said when she protested. "You need to rest."

They'd settled on the term, "universe" to describe their two, disparate, worlds. It seemed to encompass so much of what they'd already found to be different between them, their histories and their cultures.

To Severus, the thought of an entire universe filled with people who had never heard of either Potter or Voldemort sounded a real treat. He could hardly imagine how that was possible, though; how did two or more parallel worlds develop so very differently?

"I couldn't possibly sleep," she protested, even as he directed her to the sofa across from the desk in his inner office. "Where can I find a quill and some parchment?"

He sighed. This, then, would be a detail on which their two worlds coincided completely.

"There is blank parchment, quills and ink in the desk. Help yourself."

"Where will you be?" She looked uneasy, and he was surprised. Most people were all too pleased to see the back of him.

"I need to do a thorough patrol of the castle. Don't wait for me to return; I may be gone until morning."

She nodded and he detected hesitation on her face. Was she...*worried*?

"You'll be perfectly safe here, Miss... Hermione."

"It's not myself I'm worried about."

Well, then.

He cleared his throat.

"I can assure you that I am capable of taking care of myself."

*At least for now.*

"The ghosts and portraits are my eyes and ears. I am likely the most dangerous witch or wizard in the castle at the moment."

Her expression was still wary.

"Try to sleep. I would prefer you functional in the morning."

She eyed him for a moment and then smiled.

"Thank you."

He nodded and turned to leave. So much more to do before he might rest.



It had long been their custom to meet in an abandoned corner of the dungeons, wizard and ghost, to complete their late night patrols of the castle and to share reconnaissance information.

"You're late," remarked the ghost, and Severus saw the faint frown lines between the Baron's translucent eyes. That made two people tonight who were worried about him (if one considered a ghostly imprint a person... and he did).

A day for the record books.

"Detained," he said shortly as his long stride brought him side-by-side with the ghost.

"Send a message next time, Snape," said the Baron as they turned the corner to the potions classroom. "Something odd is afoot."

If he only knew.

Severus stopped short.

"Odd? What do you mean?"

The Baron turned and wafted back towards Severus.

"This will be difficult to explain to the corporeal," he said, looking uneasy.

"Give it your best effort."

The Baron drew in what passed for a deep breath in a ghost. Severus crossed his arms. Waiting.

It had taken years to build rapport with the irascible ghost. Years of conflict over which one of them should have the final word on how to handle an out of bounds Slytherin or how best to manage the Headmaster had been settled once and for all the night Severus had returned from the Riddles' graveyard, nearly shattered by what he had seen and by what lay ahead. The Baron had stayed with him that night, hovering nearby despite Severus's efforts to expel him from his chambers. He'd been grateful, honestly, though he'd never have asked, thankful the ghost knew not to leave him there, haunted by far more than old castle spirits.

But when it came to things *spectral*, the Baron couldn't help but preen a bit.

Severus closed his eyes, impatient. He'd spent the last two hours prowling the corridors. Thinking. Turning every possibility over and over and inside out, trying to make sense of the impossibility of the woman sitting in his office. If the Baron could shed some light on the matter, he wished he would do it soon. He was nearly done in.

"There's been a disturbance," the ghost said, a ripple running through his translucent image. He'd never before seen the *Baronshiver*. Severus wrapped his arms more tightly around himself and listened.

"We ghosts," the Baron continued, "are acutely attuned to the spaces *between*... to the borders separating one state and another. After all, we have each stood at the ultimate threshold and chosen not to cross over."

Severus nodded. "Go on."

"So whenever one does cross, we take note."

"Understood." His heart was racing, but he knew that the best way to get the Baron to talk was to wait.

"Deaths, births...they all create ripples, and we notice them. But they are *not unusual*."

"No, they wouldn't be, would they?"

"No, they are not. However." The ghost appeared to squirm, "there has been another sort of crossing over tonight. We all noticed it. There has never been anything like it...it was like nothing any of us have ever experienced in our time as spectrals."

"How was it different from a birth or a death?"

"It was a living being who crossed over, but there was no change of *state*, as there would be with a birth or death," he said.

"Crossed over from *where*?" Severus hissed, his patience exhausted at last.

"We don't know," answered the Baron. "I told you. We've never experienced anything like it."

Severus sighed and massaged his temples with his fingertips.

"But," said the Baron, "I just *might* know who to ask."



the Great Hall, beyond the high, arching windows that line the walls [in the head's office; in the entrance hall; in the dungeons, in the library, in the headmistress's office], four figures stir in their beds of stained glass.

One after another they shake off centuries of sleep, reaching out to feel for the telltale tingle of magic, opening their eyes to look around and see who has awoken them.

At last.



Asleep on the floor of Snape's chambers, quill and parchment spread all across the plush rug, discarded now in favour of the inexorable pull of dreams, Hermione shivered.



She was asleep when he returned to his rooms. Curled on the floor, head pillowed on her hands, her hair spilled out of a band obviously inadequate to contain it. Notes were scattered across the desk and around her on the rug, filled with Arithmantic equations, lists of questions, and on one notable sheet, a sketch of what must be the window on her side of the barrier through which she had fallen.

Or was pulled.

Whichever.

Years of spying had made Severus an expert at deception; but early on, he'd made a pact with himself that self-deception could never be part of this game.

There were already enough twists and turns to navigate without having to second-guess his own motives. So, in the aftermath of Dumbledore's brutal confrontation following Lily's murder, he'd vowed to be honest, at the very least, with himself.

Therefore he acknowledged with remarkable easiness (if only in the privacy of his own mind) the warmth blooming in his chest as he watched her sleep. Her chest rose and fell, the occasional catch in her breath the only sign of disturbance.

She felt safe enough here...in his rooms...*to fall asleep.*

Of course he'd suggested it. Encouraged it, even. But he hadn't actually expected her to be able to let down her guard, here, in what was...in spite of the familiarity...a strange place. Not here, in the chambers of a wizard who had just acknowledged to her that *he* was the most dangerous being in the castle.

His heart ached, unexpectedly, for the Hermione Granger of *his* world.

He shook his head. He couldn't do that. Couldn't go there. This woman was someone else. She was Granger, but not.

Ah, no, the girl hiding from the Dark Lord was Granger, but this woman was Hermione.

She muttered something incomprehensible in her sleep and twisted her head into what must be an incredibly uncomfortable position.

Without thinking, he stepped closer, gathering the parchment into a neat pile and putting the lid on the ink that she'd left open. It was only once they'd all been carefully set on the desktop that he hesitated.

He tried to tell himself that she was afraid of his wand, and so he would refrain from using it on her, even to levitate her to the couch. But deep inside he knew that was a lie. He felt strangely unbalanced. He tried to make himself believe that the need to touch her, to feel the weight of her body in his arms, tangible, real, was nothing more than an attempt to physically reorder his suddenly chaotic universe.

Without giving himself another moment to think better of his decision, he crouched down and slipped his arms beneath her, lifting her gently, cradling her against his chest. She sighed and curled into him, her arms wrapped around his torso as if to anchor herself there.

Oh, bloody hell.

He took a deep breath, a futile effort to slow his racing heart.

The sofa was only a few steps away. Right there.

He knelt beside it and lowered her onto the cushions. It took a few moments to untangle her hold on him, and his heart leapt at her soft moue of disappointment when he finally slid his arms out from where they had been cradling her, leaving her alone on the sofa. She settled into the soft cushions and sighed again when he pulled the blanket off the nearby chair to cover her.

He leaned his head back against the edge of the sofa alongside her and closed his eyes. Just a few moments, he told himself, and then he would get up and retire to his room. His bed. A few more moments to be sure she was sleeping peacefully, and he would go. He turned to her one last time and tucked a stray curl behind her ear. A deep sense of contentment and an unfamiliar sense of safety enveloped him. And when he woke in the morning, her hand still clutching his arm, he couldn't even remember having fallen asleep.



In the drowsy moments before she woke, when random memories of the previous day floated through her mind, she felt caught in a bizarre dream.

A parallel universe? A wizard as headmaster? The wizarding world at war? That was too absurd to contemplate, even for her; she always did have a rather active imagination.

When she opened her eyes, with no small amount of trepidation, the weak rays of sunrise bathed the unfamiliar room in a soft orange glow.

Not a dream, then.

He was sitting on the floor beside the sofa on which she slept, leaning against the cushions, his shoulders twisted, his breathing shallow and fitful, even in sleep.

Hermione shifted slightly, the better to look at him. Her hand had curled around his arm at some time in the night, and she wondered how he'd moved her to the sofa. A vague memory of steady arms and a solid body reassured her that he'd not used magic to move her, and she felt a surge of gratitude for his unspoken consideration.

Up close, he looked every bit as exhausted as he had when she'd seen him in the glass. The soft morning light was kinder than the night's flickering firelight had been, emphasising the circles beneath his eyes less and softening the lines of his face.

Still, he looked done in, barely on the edge of sleep, and she sent her magic out through the palms of her hands. Down past the gruff surface, winding along the twists and turns of his defences, she found it. Skittish, yes, but tender. Young and gentle.

She *knew* he wasn't dangerous to her, she just knew it.

Ever so slowly, she drew her magic around the tiny doe like a cloak. Soothing, calming. Lulling it to sleep, gentling his fear with the stroke of her thumb over the curve of his bicep.

*I'll watch over you. Rest.*

He drew in a deep breath and his entire body relaxed.

That was good, then. He needed to sleep. To recover from all the hardship draining him so profoundly.

And she? She would have some quiet time in which to think while he slept.



He woke from slumber as if he was rising to the surface of deep water. With a gasp, he opened his eyes.

She was asleep, but she'd shifted closer sometime in the night. Her forehead was resting nearly against his, and he could feel her soft puffs of breath against his face. He closed his eyes again, trying to isolate the hum he felt beneath his skin. It was soothing, as if he were in contact with the rush of energy below the surface of the world. Counterpoint to the hum was a steady beat, like blood pumping through veins. Steady. Reliable. Necessary.

It felt as if he'd been melded into a river of pounding hearts and flowing souls. Each one beating its own rhythm and yet, together, symphonic.

Oh, no. No no no.

*Hermione*, he thought. *What have you done?*



She could feel his energy shift.

*Awake, then.*

A tingle of awareness ran over her skin and she opened her eyes. Not only was he awake, but also alarmed.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked, bewildered by his unease. She knew the answer, had felt it, and his restful sleep had, in turn, enhanced her own.

"Surprisingly well," he answered, sitting up and attempting to straighten his rumpled robes.

"I thought so," she said, smiling.

He was staring at her as if she were a puzzle, which she supposed she was, in a manner of speaking, though no more than he was to her.

"What's the matter?" she asked, sitting up and clutching a cushion to her chest. The way his expression shifted felt wrong, not like the wizard whose spirit she had calmed just a few hours past.

"You did something." A statement of fact.

"Yes." What she had done was obvious, wasn't it? And nothing special; any fifth year could have done it with ease.

All at once, he was angry. "What did you do? What were you *thinking*?" he shouted, and Hermione clutched the pillow even more tightly against herself.

"You were exhausted," she explained, not sure why this needed explanation at all. "Too tired to sleep. How could I not help?"

"It's not just the sleep," he spat. "You did something else."

She shook her head.

"I don't know what you're talking about." She could only whisper in the face of his anger.

"I can *hear* it. Feel it. It's like a... a hum beneath a heartbeat."

"Well, yes," she said. "But hasn't that always been there? Wasn't it there before?" It had to be. It was as essential as the spinning of the earth and the rising and setting of the sun.

"No!" he shouted. "It was most certainly *not* there before you..." He waved his arm in her direction and huffed. His face was red and he looked...

She took a deep breath to centre herself and closed her eyes. When she opened them again she could see it in the stiff set of his jaw and the fine tremor in his hands.

"You're frightened."

"I most certainly am *not*," he snapped. "Have you forgotten? We are *at war* Miss Granger. *War.*"

War. Ah, right. That.

She shook her head to try to clear it, as if she were trying to clean the surface of the stained glass. The situation felt surreal. Being here, with him. At Hogwarts, but *not* at Hogwarts. A war out there...

No, she realised with a wave of nausea. The war was also *in here*. Inside Hogwarts. And he? What was his role? Distantly, she remembered the history of ancient wars, and the parts witches and wizards and non-magical folk had played in those conflicts.

So what was he? Infantryman? General? Strategist? Spy?

She shivered. Children lived inside this castle, too, and, if what Severus said was true, outside as well, snarled up in this war. Another Hermione Granger *out there*, with two of her friends, doing something essential for the cause. She could hardly imagine what it would be like to face that sort of responsibility. That sort of risk.

Her chest tightened.

"I don't know how to live through a war," she said. "I have no experience..." Her voice caught. "I'm not her," Hermione whispered. "I'm not the Hermione Granger you taught. Remember?"

But he hardly seemed to hear her. He was trembling, struggling to regain control of himself. *What had* she done to shake him, so?

"How am I supposed to Occlude..." he muttered, more to himself than to her.

"Occlude?" she echoed past the lump that had risen to her throat. Just when she began to think she'd got her head around all the things she didn't understand, along came something new.

What sort of world was this? Why use Dark magic? He wasn't a Dark wizard.

"Why would you want to do that? From whom?"

Perhaps it was the stricken look on her face, or maybe he had regained his senses enough to remember that she did not, in fact, share what was common knowledge to everyone in his world. At last he stopped shouting and muttering and just looked at her, brow furrowed. She willed him to see her spirit as fully as she had seen his, though he wasn't touching her.

"You really don't know."

She shook her head and wanted so much to reach out for him again, as she had in the night.

"I really don't. I don't understand any of this, Severus, and I don't want to do anything that would hurt you. Please. Please, help me understand."

He was pacing again, just as he had been last night when she'd reached out her hand, not knowing that he would find it. That he would take it.

"It's a long story. More than you need to know."

"But I want to know," she said. "And you must want me to, as well. You took my hand and brought me here, Severus. You could have left it alone. I would have pulled it back through the window and that would have been the end of it." She crossed her arms, discarding her cushiony shield. "Is there *anybody* in this castle who knows your story?"

Severus snorted. "One," he said reluctantly. "The former headmaster. Now deceased." He stopped, swallowing thickly.

"Portrait?" she asked. Headmistress McGonagall's office was lined with portraits of former headmistresses. It stood to reason that those witches and wizards on the wall of his outer office had been former Heads as well.

"Portrait," he confirmed. "Pretends to sleep, mostly."

*To sleep?* Hermione felt anger rise up. Who was this wizard who withdrew from Severus when his job as a portrait...his only role...was to support him?

"Was he like that in life?"

Severus's laugh was like a bark. Harsh. Angry.

Ah.

"Sleepy? Hardly. Obtuse? Incessantly."

"Why would he be obtuse? That makes no sense."

Severus laughed the ugly laugh again and Hermione shivered.

"Let's just say that he tended to secrecy, but only with the *best* intentions, of course."

She couldn't tell for certain if he was being sarcastic, but already she had grave reservations about this former Headmaster.

"The best intentions?" she echoed. "If that's so, why has he left you all alone?"



He stared at her, shocked into silence. How could this girl, this stranger, cut to the heart of his situation so quickly? Was his isolation so obvious? Did it radiate from him? The need that always gnawed, hollowing him out from the inside?

"You wouldn't understand," he choked out, but she just rolled her eyes.

"Try me."

Fear and anger tangled inside him, and he felt a knot in his throat.

"I wouldn't explain this to the real..." He cleared his throat. "I wouldn't give the Hermione Granger I know this information."

*I must be losing my mind* he thought. Sitting here as if we are sharing afternoon tea, talking to this woman...this girl...as if she could be a confidante. He knew he could have no confidante, and if he did, it certainly wouldn't, certainly shouldn't be a girl...a woman...half his age with none of his experience.

"Are you finished thinking yet?" she asked. "It's not getting you anywhere, you know."

He drew breath to speak, but whatever he might have said was interrupted by pounding at his outer office door.

"Snape!" The voice was muffled, but Severus leapt to his feet.

Amycus Carrow had made a habit of dragging students to his door at regular intervals, despite the clear guidelines Severus had set for the staff. Guidelines the Carrows refused to follow, instead either haring off on their own to punish students at will, or dragging them to him to do the same. Testing him. Pushing him to demonstrate his sadism. To prove it.

He bit back the bile that rose to his throat. The students were due to leave this morning on the Hogwarts Express, leaving the castle blessedly empty. What had the little devils managed to do in the last hours before leaving for home?

"Stay here," he murmured. "Not a sound."



Severus swept from the room and closed the door behind him, sealing it with a silencing spell. He could afford to let her listen, but he couldn't risk Carrow hearing even the smallest rustle from behind that door.

Amycus pounded once more on the door to his office.

"Snape! Open up! I have *miscreants* here needin' punishin'!"

Snape cursed under his breath as he strode towards the door and swung it open with the wave of his wand. Carrow almost fell into the room, dragging a red-haired girl and a lanky, dark-haired boy behind him.

"Amycus," he growled. "Must you make such an infernal racket every time you wish to see me?"

"It was urgent, Headmaster," Carrow said. "Students in the hallways without a chaperone." He bared his teeth and shook the students by the scruffs of their necks. "My money's on it being them that's been writing that Mudblood loving graffiti everywhere."

He pushed Longbottom and Weasley into the centre of the room with a grunt.

"Yes, Amycus," said Severus. "Thank you for sharing your well-considered opinion on the matter."

Amycus frowned, unsure whether he'd been complimented or insulted.

"You may release them now," said Snape with a scowl at the students.

Gryffindors. Inevitable, that.

"What do you have to say for yourselves? Longbottom? Weasley?" He was nearly too tired to make his voice properly menacing, but they flinched just the same.

Predictably, neither student said a word as he circled them, arms clasped behind his back. They just pressed their lips together. Obstinate. Why couldn't they just *lie low* and wait it out? Stay out of the line of fire until it was over?

This anger, he didn't have to feign.

"You *persist* in flaunting the rules," he hissed. "As if you know better than your *superiors*." He gritted his teeth against their defiant glares. "No amount of punishment or restriction has been sufficient to teach you to consider the wisdom of your elders." He paused, walking one last time around the two stubborn Gryffindors.

"Shall I take them to the dungeons, Headmaster?" asked Amycus too eagerly. "There's some Slytherins needing to practise their *Crucio*."

"No," said Snape. "I dislike the mess they leave behind, and should they inadvertently kill one, it would be highly... inconvenient, especially with their families awaiting their return from school this evening."

He strode to his desk, wrote a short note, sealed it, and handed it to Amycus.

"When you return from your holiday, you will spend every night for one week with Professor Hagrid," he said. "Detention in the Forbidden Forest."

Weasley lifted her head just a bit and for an instant, her eyes met his. He thought he saw gratitude there, but before he could be sure, it was gone.

"Excellent, Headmaster," Amycus cackled, the idiot. "That'll show the filthy blood traitors."

"Indeed, Amycus," said Severus softly. "I certainly hope they get the message at last."



She stood, her hands pressed against the door, and listened.

Hermione didn't need to know who the older wizard was to know that he was an aberration. The sort that couldn't remain part of the collective because he sought to cause others pain. What was a man like this doing at a school...and, unless appearances were deceiving...and Merlin knows, they might be...in charge of children?

Severus had obviously silenced the inner office but not the outer one, so perhaps he wouldn't mind if she made the other room visible as well as audible. And so, it was after she'd whispered a revealing spell against the thick wooden door, allowing her to see the outer office, that she gasped.

There in the centre of the room stood a very battered Neville and an obviously insolent Ginny. What was Neville doing here, and in school uniform at that? He was an apprentice, and there wasn't a magical plant alive that could do what had obviously been done to his face.

Bruised, with a cut on his cheek that held traces of dried blood, Neville stood in the centre of the room with an expression of utmost contempt on his face. Ginny's hair looked messy, but she was free from blood or other marks of abuse though her expression remained defiant.

They...these students...children...looked like they had been in battle. As if they were fighting a war. Inside Hogwarts. With Severus right in the middle of it.

She looked back and forth between Severus and Neville and Ginny.

Hadn't anyone told them they were on the same side?

When, finally, the door to the outer office closed ("Get them to the train before it leaves, Amycus. We don't want these two here over the holidays, do we?") and Severus waved that blasted wand at it and his shoulders finally relaxed again, Hermione sat back on the sofa. Thinking.

The inner door opened silently as if it, too, were too worn out to make a sound. The wizard who came through the door avoided her eyes and stood by the chair, head bowed. Silent.

She was shaking, there on the sofa. The shock of seeing Neville, beaten and in school uniform, and Ginny, dishevelled but defiant...towards Severus...had left her even more shocked and confused.

One thing, though, she knew for certain.

"Something is very wrong here," Hermione said, her voice trembling. "And I want to know exactly what it is."





He nearly laughed...the situation was so absurd.

"Nothing is wrong. Everything is precisely as it's meant to be."

"Rubbish."

The look on her face was so familiar that, for an instant, he forgot that the *other* Hermione Granger whose eyebrows habitually scrunched together when she was particularly determined wasn't standing in front of him.

This Hermione Granger had lived a life that hadn't been consumed by war.

This Hermione Granger had already achieved academic distinction and was on her way (if he wasn't mistaken) to a shining career.

This Hermione Granger wasn't a child, lost in the wilderness, but a woman who looked at him with soft eyes and apparently didn't assume that everything was so blasted *complicated*.

Again warmth spread through his chest, and he took a deep breath to dispel it. He could do nothing for the Hermione Granger out there, except to get Potter the information he needed at the right times. But this woman had no reason to get tangled in this war.

"It's no concern of yours," said Severus, bowing his head again.

"Of *course* it concerns me," she shouted. "I don't *understand* you at all!" She smacked a cushion down onto the floor.

He sank into the chair beside him, dropped his elbows to his knees, and cradled his face in his hands.

"Say something!" She looked as if she might stamp her foot, and he levelled his gaze at her.

What would it hurt, really? It wasn't as if she were going to wander around the castle or, Merlin forbid, leave. She would stay right here, under his protection but also confined until they could find a way to return her to her own world.

What could it hurt to tell her his story? For once, to tell someone the *whole* story.

He closed his eyes, imagining.

The idea was intoxicating.

She was still looking at him when he opened his eyes.

"All right," he said, finally. "But it's all or nothing." He put up his hand in anticipation of her questions. "And no interruptions until I'm finished."

She pursed her lips for only a moment before nodding. "Agreed."

"And then," he continued. "You're going to explain to me exactly what you did to me while I was asleep."



## Chapter 5

*Chapter 5 of 10*

My chambers are dark, lit only by the glow of the midnight moon.

The castle creaks with rawness of stone and antiquity of magic, filled with the power welling up from beneath the mountain and the fire of intention fuelled by our four vibrant streams of magic, combined.

It is nearly impossible to recognise this expanse of land from just six months ago: pristine grasses as far as the eye could see, cresting on a tidal wave of green, the shadow of grey stone a skeleton underneath. A spider's web holding together an enterprise that, tonight, feels like folly.

I had expected to feel exultant.

\*\*

This story is ten chapters, and complete. I will be posting one chapter every couple of days. :)

The room was silent when he stopped speaking; only the sound of her harsh breathing fractured the air.

He had spared her nothing. Spared himself nothing. No detail in the telling, no sympathetic twist in the interpretation.

"So, you see," he said, "I am responsible for the death of my best friend...my *first* friend. And I am the killer of the former headmaster, a revered wizard, and the only one the Dark Lord is said to have ever feared."

Hermione muttered something he couldn't hear under her breath, but she shook her head when he raised his eyebrows in question.

"The war is unfolding just as Dumbledore predicted. I am at Hogwarts, as I promised him I would be. The Dark Lord wants me here, which is just as well." His lips twisted in a grimace, and he didn't notice her eyes widen. "It is ever so convenient when my two masters' wishes coincide."

"It would be, wouldn't it?" she murmured.

He threw her a look, but she was still staring at her hands.

"I have two last jobs to do," he continued. "Two... items... I need to transfer into Potter's possession before this war ends, and in the meantime, I mean to leave the students as intact as possible, given the rabid idiots I've been saddled with."

"All the while making the Dark Lord believe that you are one of his men. One of those rabid idiots yourself," she said carefully.

He smirked.

"Yes."

For a long moment, she sat, eyes downcast, preternaturally still, her only movement the shallow rise and fall of her chest.

His heart began to pound, louder and louder until all he could hear was the whooshing in his ears.

He should have expected this. He had, in point of fact, anticipated it. Her disgust.

Rejection.

She had asked for his story, but never mind. Severus Snape was nothing if not patient, and he could wait for her to throw his words back at him, for her to demand he return her to her world without delay.

For her to leave, too.

It didn't take long, but though he was expecting it, the look of disgust on her face made him cringe.

"Let me get this straight," she said too slowly. "The Dark Lord and the former Headmaster have been vying over this boy wizard, staking their lives and those of countless others in this war based on a *prophecy* you overheard from some batty old witch seventeen years ago?"

"Eighteen," Severus corrected.

Her face flushed, the muscles of her face tensed, and Severus thought he heard her grinding her teeth.

"Are you all *insane*?" Hermione shouted. "Resting everything on the shoulders of a seventeen year old boy who, you say, is a mediocre wizard, at best?"

Severus pursed his lips and blinked.

"If Dumbledore was the only wizard the Dark Lord ever feared, why didn't *he* stop him when he had the chance?"

Severus opened his mouth to answer, but she wasn't finished.

"For that matter, why don't *you* kill him yourself? From what you've said, you have the best opportunity of any of his henchmen."

Severus flinched. Henchmen. He supposed he could be called that, yes. Though he did prefer 'Death Eater' if given the choice.

"Severus? Are you listening?"

Did it really sound so absurd to an outsider? That Harry Potter should be protected until the right moment, that *only he* could vanquish the Dark Lord? Had he sacrificed a lifetime in the service of an old man's delusions of grandeur and another man's crippling fear of death and megalomaniacal lust for power and immortality?

"I'm listening," he said at last. "A bit hard not to, with all the shouting you're doing."

"Sorry," she murmured. "But honestly, Severus. You're sitting here, paralysed. Waiting. Practically helpless. And completely alone."

He swallowed thickly and tried to explain.

"I set this in motion, Hermione. It's only right that I do what is necessary to make amends and to rid the world of ... him." He lifted his hand to forestall her argument. "And on the details, you must trust me. Trust Dumbledore. If he says it is so, I believe him. Harry Potter must be the one to vanquish the Dark Lord, and my role is to aid him without his knowledge."

Hermione crossed her arms and frowned as if her disapproval might change his reality.

"This is on Dumbledore's word, then?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Then he can tell me himself," she said, and before he could stop her, she was through the inner door and in his outer office.

"Hermione!"

But it was too late. The portrait wasn't hard to find, centred as it was above the headmaster's desk. All around the room, former headmasters and headmistresses peered out of their frames, the ones further from the desk crowding into the portraits of their colleagues. Every one of them awake. Except for the white-bearded wizard himself.

Severus stood at the threshold, torn between dragging her back into the inner office and letting her do whatever it was she planned to do. In all honesty, he was fascinated. By her stance, he wouldn't be surprised if there was to be more shouting.

He might even enjoy this.



"Headmaster Dumbledore, I presume."

The portrait was silent. Softly, it began to snore.

"Are you always this rude to guests?" she asked. "Pretending they're not right there in front of you?"

Severus raised his eyebrows, but the portrait coughed and stretched as if waking up from a long sleep.

"Pardon me. Just finishing a little nap. Miss Granger, is it?" the portrait asked.

"Obviously," she said, "but, it would seem, not the one you've known for the past six years. If I were the Hermione Granger of your world, I expect you would be rather unhappy to see her here in the headteacher's office. Am I right?"

"Well, yes," the portrait admitted, squirming a bit. "Which begs the question of who you are, my dear."

"Yes, I suppose it does at that." She took a step closer to the desk. "Let's just say I'm an interested party. A friend. Severus's friend."

"A friend?" The portrait chuckled. "You've hardly been here long enough to consider Headmaster Snape a *friend*."

"Is that so?" Hermione's voice was low and menacing. "Does it take terribly long to make a friend, Headmaster?" she asked. "How much time did it take you to throw your lot in with your *friend* Gellart Grindelwald?"

The portrait blinked and a sharp edge glinted in his painted eye.

"Hermione?"

She shook her head and glanced at Severus.

*Wait.*

"My association with Grindelwald is of no relevance here," said Dumbledore, softly, "and even if it were, it ended more than a century ago."

Hermione turned to Severus, who nodded his agreement.

"Where I come from, Albus Dumbledore and Gellart Grindelwald were cast out for crimes against humanity."

"Against... humanity?"

"Their attempts to subjugate non-magicals led to their trial and conviction by the Tribunal Humanitatis and their casting out of the company of all living creatures...separately, never to see one another again...by the British Consortium of Magical and Non-Magical beings. Neither ever attempted to make amends."

Dumbledore looked to Severus and then to Hermione, growing first pale and then flushed as he scrambled to make sense of what the witch in front of him had revealed.

"That was not me," he said at last. "I separated from Gellart when we were both still boys. I spent the rest of my life..." He shook his head and leaned forward. "The wizard who was cast out was not me, Miss Granger, though I suppose it might have been, under other circumstances."

"It was you under other circumstances," Hermione said crisply. "Just as I am both Hermione Granger, and not."

The portrait closed its eyes for a moment and then nodded.

"Yes. I see."

"Good. Because just as you are horrified by the actions of the Albus Dumbledore from my world, I am frankly horrified by his actions your actions here in this one. It makes me wonder how different the two wizards are, really."

She could hear Severus's sharp intake of breath clear across the otherwise silent room.

"What do you want?" the portrait asked at last.

"The truth." Hermione said. "All of it."



The elves had brought tea and biscuits, and the fire in the inner office threw splintered shadows across the room. The door was shut against Dumbledore's portrait and its truths.

She looked as shocked as he, himself, had felt that day when Dumbledore finally told him everything. The whole truth.

"Harry doesn't know?" she asked, her voice still shaky.

"He doesn't, I don't think," Severus replied. "Though I've often wondered if he suspects it."

Hermione nodded and gazed into the fire, the angry popping of the flames reflected in her eyes.

"It's insane," she said to the fire. "That you should be expected to find him. Twice. When nobody else...even supposedly the most powerful wizard the world has ever seen...can."

"Well," Severus said. "To be fair, I do have a spy."

"A spy?"

"Of a sort. You see, Phineas Nigellus Black, one of our former headmasters, had a portrait at the old headquarters. Granger apparently took it with her when they fled. I haven't received much useful information from him yet, but it's possible he'll overhear something helpful at some point."

"She's lugging around a *portrait*? On the run?"

Severus snorted. "Hermione Granger...the one I knew...is extremely resourceful. And she takes pride in performing magic beyond her training." He smirked. "Headmaster Black thinks there's an undetectable extension charm on her handbag. He said that books and food and all manner of rubbish keep banging up against him when they're in transit."

Hermione blushed as if it were *she* who had packed the bag and performed the charm.

"I imagine it comes in handy. A bottomless bag."

"I imagine so." He gifted her with the shadow of a smile.

It was so odd, he thought, sitting across from this Hermione Granger. He'd always seen her as an irritant. Disruptive in her need for more than he could give. Worst of all,

the ally of a boy whose very existence was a reminder of his worst sins...painful, but necessary.

He'd never admit it, but he held a grudging respect for the Hermione Granger he had taught. In her, he recognised his own dogged determination to understand, and his relentless pursuit of what he thought was right, however misguided.

Despite their differences, he also recognised all of that in this other Hermione Granger. Less impetuous. Not as driven to prove herself, but lit with the same familiar fire when faced with a challenge. How strange and wonderful that, this time, the challenge was the weight of his own burden, and that she would insist on sharing it with him.

As if she could read his thoughts, she interrupted the silence of his quiet contemplation.

"Why must your penance include being totally cut off from support?"

He shrugged.

"I'm hardly a gregarious man," he said. "And who would you have me tell? I cannot discuss this with the staff; the Carrows may be idiots, but they would be immediately suspicious if the staff were any less than hostile towards me. Potter can't keep the Dark Lord out of his mind, and if Weasley or... Granger knew, it would only be a matter of time before Potter did as well."

She nodded.

"Still," she said softly.

"There is nobody."

"Dumbledore," she insisted. "Who could do more than sleep."

"Oh, he wakes up periodically to boss me around a bit before wandering off for a game of gobstones or to gossip with the other portraits."

Hermione glanced towards the outer office and Severus imagined her eyes boring into Dumbledore's portrait just before her anger set it aflame. She might understand, but she was apparently not quite ready to forgive.

"What are the portraits like in your world?" he interrupted, his lips twitching just a bit.

"A lot like the ones here, as far as I can tell," she answered, distracted from her nonverbal quest. "It's just..." She hesitated, lost for words. "We just don't leave people *alone* the way you do here."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, everyone is responsible for one another, in a way. Decisions are made with the collective in mind. So nobody would ever be cut off like you've been. Not unless they'd been cast out."

"Ah, yes. I wondered what you meant when you said that Dumbledore and Grindelwald had been cast out." He shivered.

"I suppose it serves the same purpose as your prison. A way to remove someone from society and also to punish them."

"Do you have no prisons in your world?"

"The non-magicals have some, but they're often empty. Removing someone from society usually has the desired effect. They must find a way to repair the damage they did and request re-entry. Usually, they do."

"And when they don't?"

She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. "I only know rumours," she said. "Lone wanderers. Cut off from the flow... living only in silence."

Flow. Silence. Severus leaned forward in his chair.

"Is that what I'm feeling? That hum... that pulsing feeling?"

She looked up, surprised. "Yes, of course. We all feel it. It's what reminds us we aren't alone."

"Oh, but we are, Hermione," he said before he could stop himself from speaking the truth. His truth. "We are nothing if not alone."



"Severus," she said, but he'd risen and stood facing the hearth.

"Severus," she insisted. He shook his head.

Without a word, she rose and came to stand behind him. His body was bowed, bent over the mantelpiece, head buried in the cushion of his folded arms.

Standing so close to him, she could feel it. She always felt it. Humming beneath her skin, beneath his, too. He'd said he hadn't ever known it, but that was impossible. All living things did, unless they had been cast out. So long as one other was willing to link them, they would never be alone.

All at once, she felt a wave of determination fed by the residue of his loneliness and the depth of his sacrifice. She didn't understand this world, where mistakes went unforgiven and people could be discarded like rubbish. But she was not of this world, and she would act accordingly.

Hermione didn't give him the opportunity to refuse, just wrapped her arms around his torso and laid her head against the broad expanse of his back. His heartbeat accelerated beneath her hands, and she could feel the thrum of the link pass between them.

"You're not alone now," she said.

"There's nothing you can do for me," he said softly.

"Isn't there?"

He shook his head, but beneath her hands, she could feel his heartbeat slow and his breathing grow more steady. They stood just so until finally, he straightened. He brought his hands to hers and held them for a moment, finally unclasping them from around him. Only then did he turn around.

"You see?" she said.

"I see, but I don't understand," he said. "What sort of magic is this? And how am I going to keep the Dark Lord from seeing it when he looks at me?"

In a flash she understood Dumbledore's strategy but loathed him no less for it. If what Severus said was true, Dumbledore had left Harry Potter with love and attachments as shields against his enemy. But for Severus, he had left only an aching emptiness as his protection.

Allowing Severus to be (or at least seem) similar to his Dark Master might keep him safe temporarily, Hermione thought, but at what cost?

"Are you meant to survive this war?" she asked without stopping to think of the impact of her words.

But he just curled his lip and shook his head.

"I don't expect to," he said as if he were informing her of his plans for dinner. "But I must survive long enough to finish my tasks."

"That's it?" she said. "Your value? Contained in two last tasks?"

"Two crucial ones. At least I'll have that."

"You'll have that for *what*, Severus? For your tombstone?" she shouted.

"What difference does it make to you?" he asked. "Twenty-four hours ago, you'd never heard of me. And once we find the portal, you'll be headed back to your world. Your apprenticeship." He swallowed and looked away. "Your life."

Did he really think she could just turn and walk away, even knowing what she knew now...about the war, his isolation, and the danger he was in, and about the light that burned so brightly inside of him. There was nothing like this in her world, nothing for her to attack head-on. No real opportunity to make a difference, for her choices to *matter*. Did he really think she would just leave him here when she might be able to help? Had he always been this alone?

Oh, Severus. Not anymore. Not if I can help it.

"I'm not leaving until the two tasks are complete."

He barked a laugh. "Is that so?" He smirked. "We don't even know if *wecan* get you back to your world, and if so, how."

She pursed her lips and crossed her arms.

"True, which only supports my argument," she said. "So unless you already have a plan for getting the sword to Potter, let me tell you mine." She smiled. "I have an idea."

He raised his eyebrows. "How novel," he murmured.

"Sarcastic bugger," she said, lightly smacking his arm and laughing out loud at his shocked expression. "No, really, I do. I have an idea for how you can lead Potter to the sword. Once we find out where he is, obviously."

Severus sat back in his chair and took a sip of his tea.

"Since I can't stop you, go right ahead. He gestured dismissively at her. But his eyes said something else. A tiny spark flickered there behind the bleakness.

Might it be hope?



Keeping her with him was every bit as difficult as he had feared.

He hardly had a choice, really. What could he do? Throw her out of the castle? Send another Hermione Granger out into the wilds of the wizarding world to be Snatched... or worse?

Having her in the castle, on some days, felt even riskier, even though she hadn't left his chambers at all...had scarcely ventured past his inner rooms.

Room.

Inner room. He had drawn an invisible line across the threshold to his bedchamber, though the castle had (thankfully) accommodated and provided a new entry to his bathroom.

The worst part about this thrice damned situation was that he almost enjoyed it.

Sitting with her on the sofa in the evenings, talking about the day, having her listen to aspects of his life he was unwilling to analyse.

"How do you do it?" she asked him once, four days after he had pulled her through the window. It was late, and the fire was dying, sending its last gasps into the air, sparks of light and noise piercing the silence.

The question rolled around his mind, into dark and hidden places, illuminating parts of himself that hardly bore looking at.

"It never occurred to me to not do this," he said softly. "Though I admit I couldn't have imagined..." He took a deep breath. "I never considered how I get through it, day to day. I just do."

He paused and looked at her face, soft in the firelight. Her eyes were hooded with a mixture of fatigue and calm, and it occurred to him that she, too, seemed to find respite in their time together, relaxing into his presence with each passing hour.

"I'm sorry you've had to do it alone for so long," she said. Before he could respond, she took a step closer, wrapped her arms around him, and pressed her cheek to his chest where, surely, she could hear the pounding of his heart. The one he had forgotten he had.



The long days she spent alone in the large, hexagonal room with its sofas and fireplace and enormous desk piled with books were deceptively quiet.. Normally, this would be heaven. Endless hours to read and think, to write and imagine. Only a lab and supplies could improved it. That, and the ability to walk *out* of the firmly shut door.

With each passing day, the company of other people was sounding more appealing, too. Five days had passed by so far, and when she'd had enough of books and parchment (something she'd never before imagined possible), she paced the circumference of the room, fretting about the people she'd left behind and how they must be

worrying about her.

Only when Severus returned at night or when he stole an hour at midday to spend with her, did she feel at ease. She hadn't yet worked out why she felt so comfortable with this man she'd known for a handful of days, when no wizard before had held her attention for long. Maybe it was a symptom of her confinement, though she could as easily imagine wanting nothing more than to get away, had his company been less engaging.

They had settled into a sort of routine together after that first, tumultuous day. A quiet breakfast (neither one of them favoured mornings, it would seem) before Severus would don his mask of indifference and sweep out into the outer office from where his stern voice carried into the chamber in which she sat.

"Professor Carrow," he growled the fifth afternoon of her occupancy. "Do refrain from threatening me."

Hermione stiffened, listening at the thick wooden door.

"The Dark Lord may have installed you here, but do not ever forget that he appointed *me* as Headmaster of this fine institution. You will obey my commands or I will have you removed," he hissed, the threat in his words, unmistakable.

Hermione shuddered and sat back on the sofa.

She had learned more about this universe, about his life and about the people surrounding him. There had been a good many whose names she knew, but whose histories were altogether different from the ones in her world. It was hard to decide which was stranger...the ways in which they differed or the many ways in which they were the same.

Mostly, she'd been fascinated to hear about the Hermione Granger of this universe. Severus appeared amused every time he discerned a similarity between them, as if he were discovering something familiar within something new.

"Merlin, woman," he said one night, mid-debate about the relative merits of Ashwinder eggs over powdered bicorn horn, "you are as persistent as your counterpart."

She raised her eyebrows, unconsciously mimicking a typical expression of his own.

"And this is a bad thing?"

He laughed, and the shiver of pleasure at the sound nearly blindsided her. It was the first time, she realised. The first time she'd heard him laugh out loud. She'd coaxed smiles from him, though those were hard won. But a laugh? She shivered again and he reached out to her.

"Are you cold?" He pulled her closer and wrapped the soft, cashmere blanket from the back of the sofa around her shoulders.

She snuggled closer, so he couldn't remove his arm.

"A bit," she lied, her breath short.

"Hmm," he hummed, but kept her close, his heartbeat beneath her cheek and his arms around her like an anchor to them both.



"Do you spend all day lounging around, reading, in your universe?" he snarled at her as he came through the inner door six nights after he'd pulled her through the glass.

It had been a particularly miserable day, and that was really saying something. Bellatrix had spent every available moment provoking conflict among the ranks of the Death Eaters, in the absence of anything useful to do. Draco's plea for help had been impossible to ignore, though had it been anyone else, he would have done. By the end of the night, he was done in. Exhausted, irascible, and spoiling for a fight.

She was all too willing. Cooped up for days now, with only him for company, who could blame her?

"Oh, yes, Severus," she bit out. "I have nothing at all of consequence to do at home. Mostly, I lie about and demand the elves bring me treats." She threw her book on the table and got to her feet. "Do you think I *like* being trapped in here while you're *outthere*, risking I don't even know what every day?" she shouted.

She was nearly nose to nose with him, all fire and fury, blazing eyes and crackling hair. Glorious.

He didn't stop to think. If he had, he would never have done it. But she was so close, and all that furious energy was directed towards him, on behalf of him, and he couldn't help it. Not after six days of iron self-discipline and desperately resisting the pull he felt every time he was near her.

In an instant they collided, a tangle of limbs and the crush of skin against skin.

Seeking, needing, wanting.

Hands and lips and hot breath.

He kissed her and kissed her, his hands burning a path along her back, circling her waist, cradling her face as he drank in her sighs. Her lips were hot, and the sensation of her hands at the nape of his neck and the small of his back, pressing him closer, was perfect... too much... never enough.

*Oh, Merlin. Can't. Can't.*

He pulled himself away, forcing himself to ignore her cry of protest, and dashed out into the main office, breathing heavily.

"Headmaster!"

Never had Phineas Nigellus Black's voice been more welcome.

"They are camping in the Forest of Dean! The Mudblood..."

Severus flinched and looked at the portrait furiously.

"Do not use that word!"

"...the Granger girl, then, mentioned the place as she opened her bag and I

heard her!"

He hardly heard Dumbledore's chatter as he instructed Severus on the details he already knew by heart. The sword. Conditions of valour. Hermione's idea for how to get Potter the sword.

"Don't worry, Dumbledore," he said coolly. "I have a plan. . . ."

He turned to the inner door, hoping that Hermione would come along, aborted kiss notwithstanding. It was her plan, and without her, he wasn't sure he could execute it.

She was standing in the doorway.

"I heard," she said.

"Will you come?"

Slowly, she approached him and placed one hand on his chest.

"When do we leave?"



\*From Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, "The Prince's Tale"

## Chapter 6

*Chapter 6 of 10*

My chambers are dark, lit only by the glow of the midnight moon.

The castle creaks with rawness of stone and antiquity of magic, filled with the power welling up from beneath the mountain and the fire of intention fuelled by our four vibrant streams of magic, combined.

It is nearly impossible to recognise this expanse of land from just six months ago: pristine grasses as far as the eye could see, cresting on a tidal wave of green, the shadow of grey stone a skeleton underneath. A spider's web holding together an enterprise that, tonight, feels like folly.

I had expected to feel exultant.

\*\*

This story is ten chapters, and complete. I will be posting one chapter every couple of days. :)

They Apparated to the edge of the forest. She was grateful for his arm around her shoulders, a guide in this foreign world. Tree branches swung low above their heads, heavy with recent snowfall. The ground before them was untouched...a broad expanse of white as far as the eye could see.

Right up to the tent pitched in a small clearing, beyond a cluster of rocks.

"All right then," she whispered. "Do we just watch to see when one of them comes out of the tent?"

Severus followed her gaze with his own.

"What tent?"

"The one over there." She pointed.

He squinted and shook his head, looking back and forth between Hermione and the endless expanse of snow.

"I don't see a tent."

"It's right over there. There are about three layers of spells all around it, but..."

"Of course she would have set the protective enchantments," he murmured, his eyes gleaming in the moonlight. "What an unexpected perk of having one's own personal Hermione Granger close at hand."

"What do you mean, 'she'?" she asked, ignoring for a minute the twist in her stomach at his obvious pleasure at having his own personal Hermione Granger. "I would never attempt something so important alone."

What a strange world this was, she thought. Where the safety of a whole society rested on the shoulders of so few.

Severus met her eyes. "What if you had no choice?"

She shuddered. She could scarcely imagine such a scenario. So cut off from others that you had to act on your own or die trying.

"You can see them because you are *her*, and *she* set the protective enchantments."

Well, then. Thank goodness she was here. How on earth would he have found them in the forest, otherwise?

"What are they doing now?" Severus asked, his eyes darting around, no doubt looking for a likely place to conceal the sword. Dumbledore had explained that it must be found and taken under conditions of valour. Never before had she wished that magical artefacts would, for once, behave with more simplicity.

The other Hermione, as she had taken to thinking of her, sat inside the tent, next to the transparent panel...no doubt hoping for a bit of winter moonlight to illuminate their supper. She was gaunt and worn-looking and weeks distant from a good wash. Even from here, Hermione could see the droop of her alter-ego's shoulders.

Exhaustion. Weariness.

Not yet desperation, but not far from it.

Across from her sat a boy. A young man, really. Dark, rumpled hair. Round glasses. That must be Harry Potter, she thought.

*That* is Harry Potter.

He was punctuating their meal with bursts of chatter, hands gesticulating in the growing darkness. He was trying to cheer her up, Hermione realised, and felt a rush of warmth for the young man. The woman across from him...she couldn't quite think of her as Hermione, though perhaps Granger would do...periodically nodded. Once, she even smiled.

"There," Severus said from behind her. She hadn't noticed him wander off, so he must not have gone far. "Now, we wait."

The meagre meal didn't take long to complete, and once darkness fell, Hermione watched as Granger made her way to bed, her companion taking first shift.

"Can you see him yet?" Hermione asked.

Severus shook his head. "Is he taking first watch, then?"

"He is."

"Good. It's cold."

Hermione smiled and moved just a bit closer. They'd agreed to use as little magic as possible once on site. The less they risked detection, the better.

Still, it *was* cold.

She shivered.

Without a word, he wrapped his arms around her, bringing her back flush against his chest. She slid her hands into his sleeves and found warm skin there beneath her bare fingers. Her thumb traced small circles along the silk of his inner wrist and she felt his pulse thrumming beneath her fingers.

His breath huffed against her cheek, and she realised he'd curled himself around her, shielding her from the newly falling snow.

She shivered again, but, this time, not from the cold.

It was good, she thought, that his arms were holding her up because otherwise she might crumple onto the ground. Her heart was pounding, and she hoped that Potter took a long time before he came out of his protective circle.

Thus nearly an hour passed, silently, huddled together with no inclination at all to ever leave this desolate and wonderful spot.

But they had a job to do, and she could feel him begin to stir, restless, behind her as the moon began to set.

"Cast it now, Severus," Hermione whispered, when it was evident that Potter would not be moving beyond the boundary of the enchantments.

He hesitated, and she knew without him saying so that he wasn't entirely convinced of her plan. Not yet.

"He will trust you. He must." How could he not, once he saw what she had seen...had felt...deep in the night? What she could feel now, through his warm skin and in the beating of his heart?

And so, after a moment more to gather his thoughts, Severus wrapped one arm more securely around her and motioned with his other hand, the hand holding his wand, whispering the incantation.

For once, Hermione was grateful for this world's use of wands.

Never had she witnessed such a magnificent demonstration of power.

Never had she seen such a powerful and beautiful Patronus.

Wrought entirely of light, the doe was glorious, wide eyes gilded with long lashes, a lithe body and long, slender legs of silent grace. The doe paused and glanced back at Severus before turning towards the tent. Dancing silently over the snow packed ground, a moment passed before she gained Potter's attention, and even longer before the boy overcame his doubts and stepped outside the protective circle to follow her.

The doe led him past where Hermione and Severus stood, huddled in the shadow of an enormous tree, to a small frozen pool. There, after lingering by the water for only a few heartbeats, she disappeared from sight.

Harry Potter cried out for the Patronus to come back, but to Hermione the doe never truly disappeared. She only slipped through the tiny cracks of Severus's mask, tucked beneath his skin, ensconcing herself once again in her hiding place. Safe inside him where nobody...save Hermione...could see.

"Let's go," Severus whispered, as Potter failed to retrieve the sword from beneath the icy surface of the pond again and again and again.

"Don't you want to be sure he gets it?" What would happen if Potter failed to retrieve the sword?

"The Weasley boy is behind a tree over there," Severus said, gesturing to a point just beside the pond. "Potter will get himself into just enough of a jam that he'll come out and save his skin."

"Ron?" she echoed. "Really?" She couldn't imagine the Ron Weasley she knew doing any such thing, but then again, she would never have pictured any version of herself doing what the woman in the tent had done. Had been doing for years now, according to Severus.

"Yes," he said, smirking, "Ron Weasley."

"Well," she murmured, watching as Ron stepped out of the shadows and swore at the sight of Potter flailing beneath the icy water. "I suppose needs must."



It took what felt like forever to get warm again, but since they seemed to have simultaneously decided that close physical contact was the preferred way to shake off the cold, he could hardly complain.

He'd smuggled her back into the castle through a back door only known to the headmaster, Disillusioned as an extra precaution. Once inside his private rooms, he had



stripped them both of their cloaks and hats and, without a word, gathered her into his arms and sat them together on the sofa.

The fire was blazing as if the elves had known they would need a particularly warm fire tonight. Curled up together they sat, in easy silence, even as they grew warm.

A bit warmer than he'd anticipated, in fact. He shifted his position just a bit.

Hermione sighed and turned her head. Her mouth hesitated a hairsbreadth away from the edge of his jaw; her breath so sweet on his skin.

"That went well," he said, clearing his throat.

"Mm hmm," she murmured. The hum of her voice tingled against his skin, and he wondered if she could feel his pulse racing there beneath her lips.

"Are you ready for bed...for sleep?" he asked, grateful her eyes were closed and she couldn't see him blush.

"Mm hmm," she answered. She was completely relaxed, as if there was no better spot on earth than on his lap, in his embrace.

Now he knew the world had turned on its axis. Maybe she hadn't slipped into his world after all, but he into hers. A world where he could be held, where he had a partner with whom he could recuperate at the end of a difficult day. A place where he was safe, if only for these few precious moments out of time.

All of a sudden he wanted her to stay, never to go back to her world where the only way he could see her was as a distant reflection in the glass. But she couldn't stay; not now, not when the war depended on his vigilance and his isolation.

"You can't stay with me," he said. *Even though I want you to.* He couldn't say it out loud.

But he didn't need to. She lifted her head to look at him. Her eyelids were heavy, but her expression was fierce.

"Watch me."

He brought his hand to her cheek, stroking the flushed skin there. She leaned into his caress, her head heavy against the palm of his hand.

"Hermione." Begging her. Pleading. For what, he couldn't say.

She might have whispered his name, but the sound was lost to the rushing in his ears as she brought her lips to his palm. One kiss, two, three, into the curve of his hand, as if she intended for him to cup each one like drops of water and hold them close for later, when he'd surely be parched again. The next thing he knew, his fingers were threaded through her hair and he'd brought those lips to his.

She tasted of starlight and hope, and his heart surged at the joyous laughter that bubbled up from her in the midst of the kiss. It was like finding something you'd thought lost forever. Something you'd once known and hadn't remembered you missed.

Finding it felt like *everything*. Everything, all at once, together, bursting from the timbre of her voice and the sweet smell of her hair against his cheek.

He kissed her again and again. Lips and tongue and breath and skin. Every kiss, returned with interest. Her hands beneath layers of clothing, finally finding bare skin. She swallowed his moan and echoed it when his hands found the smooth expanse of her back. She wound herself around him, their legs intertwined.

With his head resting against hers, his lips touching her curls, they lay together on the sofa, until the pounding of their hearts slowed and their breathing eased. One of her curls twined around his finger, and he wanted nothing more than to spend all night mapping each and every one, defining the precise trajectory of each tendril...and to spend every night of the rest of his life doing the same with each part of her. If he could understand the pieces, perhaps he could understand the whole, how this woman had come to be and why, of all the wizards in his universe and hers, she seemed to have chosen him.

"I can't keep you here," he whispered. "Though Merlin knows I want to." He felt her arms tighten around him.

"Keeping me here? You're doing no such thing," she said. "Because I'm not leaving you here alone. Not now."

His heart lurched.

"What do you mean, not now?"

"Now that I know where you are," she murmured, her speech slurred from exhaustion. "I've been waiting for you for ages."

Waiting for him? What?

"Hermione?"

But she was fast asleep.



windows have hidden themselves [in every universe they have found their niche] and I wonder what will happen in this world to keep them from public view.

"We will be here," I show them with the sweep of my arm. "Portraits made of glass. Portals between the worlds. I will hold the looking glass in each and every window."

"Who will cross over?" asks Godric. "For what reason?"

"I don't know," I tell him. "I only know that despite the split, these worlds are still tethered to one another." All the possibilities, every potential outcome, linked. Always linked.

"So we are here," says Rowena, "and also, there." She gestures to the streams of colour that span the ceiling.

"Yes."

"And what of the Hallowing?" asks Salazar. "What does it matter if we do it now, if in other universes it never happens?"

I hear what he doesn't say. What of the witches and wizards in the other worlds who will die because they have not been protected or guided? Who will remember them?

"When the time is right," I answer, "once every century, the portal will open."

"And in the meantime?" asks Godric.

"We complete the Hallowing," says Salazar. "And we wait."



By the time the morning sun snaked its way through the high, leaded windows, the echo of dreams and the very real sensation of Hermione's body against his had blurred his memory of the night before until he was no longer sure what had been dreamt and what had been said aloud.

He wished that morning would linger just beyond the horizon for a little while longer. The Baron was bound to have obtained the information he needed soon, and once the sun was up, there would be little excuse to delay finding the portal back to Hermione's universe. The world stopped spinning for no one, not even for wizards desperate for a tiny bit of time out of time.

The chime that indicated the Baron wanted to speak with him wasn't loud enough to wake Hermione, but it roused him from his daydreams. He reached for his wand and with a flick set the chimes off again, letting the Baron know to wait for him in the outer office.

Unwinding from Hermione took a bit of finesse, as even in her sleep, she seemed determined to keep him anchored at her side. He shouldn't be surprised, he thought. Even the Granger of his world had shown a tenacity that impressed her instructors and earned decidedly mixed feelings from the rest of her class. What a singular pleasure, he thought, for such determination to be directed towards *him*.

Finally, he escaped from her grasp; for a heartbeat he let his fingertips linger against hers before he tucked her hand beneath the blanket. He paused to brush a kiss against her forehead, and to soothe her until her breathing deepened again as she fell back to sleep. Permitting himself only another brief to glance back at her, Severus entered the outer office and closed the door softly behind him.

The Baron hovered over an armchair, waiting. Severus couldn't be sure, but perhaps eagerness and not impatience led to the agitated tapping of the ghost's translucent foot against the table.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," said Severus.

"No need to apologise," replied the Baron. "I knew you were particularly keen for this information, so I thought it best to interrupt you despite the early hour."

"Greatly appreciated," said Severus. "So, tell me. What did you discover?"



They slipped through the corridors like two ghosts, past portraits feigning sleep and coats of armour standing at attention. Down, down, down, until the high ceiling of the entrance soared above them, remote as the stars.

The Great Hall was empty. Severus's footsteps echoed faintly against the stone as the Bloody Baron led him to the high table and behind, where the stained glass stood, early morning light filling the wall with deep colour.

"*Incendio*," Severus whispered, and the candle in its holder ignited, throwing long shadows along the table and walls.

"Here it is, Headmaster," said the Baron. "Helena told me that when it happened...", he paused as if for breath, "...each... world obtained its own window. Empty, of course, until each of the founders moved to the next plane."

Severus nodded and approached the expanse of stained glass. Each pane was enormous, spanning the height of a full-grown wizard. Delicately wrought, each depicted one of the four Founders. Each with, as Hermione had explained, one of the artefacts (Hallows...she'd called them Hallows) used to establish the protective enchantments of the castle.

"Why are they immobile?" he asked the Baron. For, indeed, none of the figures within their frames moved, though every other window with live figures he'd ever encountered in the castle thrummed with magical life.

"I'm not certain," he said. "But Helena did mention that these glass portraits might need something to enliven them."

But Severus wasn't listening anymore. He was standing before the glass image of Salazar Slytherin. The Founder's profile was visible, his head bowed, hands clasped in front of him. On his right index finger was the ring Severus had seen more than a year ago, its stone broken, on Dumbledore's hand.

"Salazar," he whispered, and brought his fingertips to stroke the glass, brushing away a layer of dust and grime. The ring glimmered, and Severus used the edge of his sleeve to wipe away more of the dust coating it.

The stone glowed with a deep green fire, as if lit from within. *The Stone of Memory*. A whisper inside his head. He looked back at the window and at the softly glowing stone. The Stone of Memory.

"What did you want to be sure we remember, Salazar?" Severus murmured.

He hadn't expected the portrait of iron and glass to actually answer.



Hermione woke up alone.

Every other morning of her life, in fact, she'd woken up alone, but never before had it felt as if part of her had gone missing.

"Severus?"

He wasn't there. Not in the inner office, where they had fallen asleep on the sofa. Not in the outer office, if the lack of sounds she could discern with her ear against the

door was any indication, nor was he behind the bedroom door at the far end of the room that remained resolutely closed.

"Severus," she murmured, back on the sofa where she'd woken, "where are you?"

Only the crackling of the dying fire answered her. And so, still wrapped in the twilight of half-sleep, she wandered through the small office until she once more reached the door at the far end. Without a second thought and for the first time, she touched the doorknob, hardly surprised when it swung open beneath her hand.

Beyond was his bedchamber, his most private place. He hadn't invited her in, but she had seen the texture of his soul and tasted hope on his lips, and so she just walked over the threshold with a sleepy smile.

"Oh, good," she murmured, and climbed onto the wide, four-poster bed made up with white linen that still held traces of his magic and fell right back to sleep.



That's where he found her when he returned from the Great Hall.

He was vaguely surprised to feel no panic, no moment of terror when he found her gone from the inner office. But he just knew she was still there, and that both of them were still safe.

She'd made her way to the centre of the bed and found a good many pillows, though she hadn't burrowed beneath the covers. He resisted the urge to fold the duvet around her, and to slip in beside her. Such temptation, he thought, to hide from the world here, in his innermost sanctuary, safe from the horrors of life outside, with only their basic human needs to consider. What luxury that would be.

But he was a disciplined man; no matter how deeply he longed for the peace and safety of this woman's regard, and the sanctity of the thick walls protecting them from intrusion, he understood what he must do. If Dumbledore's explanation had been frustrating, Salazar Slytherin's had been more satisfying, if no less painful.

Hermione stirred and he sat on the side chair by his bed. He didn't dare get closer; his longing had a gravitational pull from which he knew he would never, ever be free if he allowed himself into its orbit at last.

"I woke up and you were gone," she said, sleep still in her voice.

"The Bloody Baron had information for me. He found out where the portal is in this world."

She sat up unsteadily.

"He did?" Her voice was sharp and he knew there would be an argument.

"He did."

"I don't care. I'm not leaving." She rubbed her eyes and sat up straighter as if she intended to stay *right there* for the foreseeable future.

Oh, how difficult it was not to climb onto that bed and...

He folded his arms and raised his eyebrows.

"Aren't you the least bit interested to hear what I've discovered?"

No matter the universe, the response of Hermione Granger to as yet unlearned information was fantastically predictable.

She pursed her lips.

She wrinkled her brow.

She attempted to look uninterested.

She held out approximately twelve seconds before her need to know triumphed over her desire to appear unconcerned. Not bad, all in all.

Considering.

"Fine," she grumbled. "What did you find out."

Suddenly a knot in his throat made it difficult to speak.

"The stained glass. The panels you sketched the first night," he began.

She nodded. "The Hallowing."

"Yes. The Baron spoke with the Grey Lady. Helena Ravenclaw." He paused for her gasp of surprise. "She was a child when it happened."

"It?"

"When the world split."

The concept still felt like something out of an old legend, though now he thought of it, he supposed that was precisely what it was. Only nobody but the founders (or their portraits) and the few others who were there at the time (and who remained) still remembered.

*Such a delicate web of threads*, he thought. Connecting them to a history that was all but lost to the perambulations of time and fractured worlds.

"How did it happen?" She had shifted closer to him, legs bent near the edge of the bed. He could touch her if he reached out his hand.

"Helena was just a child at the time, but she told the Baron that it happened as the castle was being built. Before the students arrived. One of the founders did it, but she doesn't know which one."

Hermione nodded. "Doesn't matter, does it?"

No, it didn't, really.

"She also showed him where the windows are, here, in our world."

"Oh! Where are they?"

"In the Great Hall. Behind the high table. Hidden in an alcove."

She leaned even closer. Eager to hear.

"Did you see them?"

"I did." How could he describe the experience? Touching the glass, clearing layers of neglect from its surface. Awakening a wizard.

"And?"

"Salazar Slytherin spoke to me."

"Salazar. Slytherin." She sounded awestruck. Odd. Gryffindors didn't typically have that reaction to mentions of Slytherin.

"Seems appropriate. I was head of Slytherin House for seventeen years."

"What's Slytherin House?"

He blinked.

"Do you not have Houses at your Hogwarts?"

"Dormitory Houses, yes, of course. But the founders belong to all of us, not just to a certain House." She looked confused again.

"So many differences," he said. "I can hardly imagine..."

"Me, neither," she echoed. "So I take it to mean that, for you, talking to Salazar Slytherin was an especially meaningful experience."

"Oh, yes," he said.

"The Hermione Granger in this world, what House is she in?"

Severus grimaced. "Gryffindor."

"Oh!" A huge grin split her face.

"Why do you look so pleased?"

"You know. Gryffindor and Slytherin." She blushed.

"They fought. Their disagreement split Hogwarts."

She looked alarmed.

"What are you talking about? Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin adored each other. They built a family together at Hogwarts."

They did *what*?

"That's, erm. That's not what happened in the history I learned," Severus said.

"We need to sit down side by side with copies of 'Hogwarts: A History' one day," she muttered.

"One day," he said. "When the war is over."

If I survive, and if we can get you back through the portal again.

He didn't need to say it out loud. The mood shifted and Hermione's face fell.

"So, what did Salazar Slytherin tell you?" she asked.

"It makes a bit more sense now, actually," Severus said. "He told me to learn from his mistakes, to remember what I'm meant to do." His voice was tight, but he had to tell her the last bit, no matter how difficult. "And that the people you love never really leave you. Even when you think they have."

Tears filled her eyes and choked her once she could finally speak.

"What are you meant to do?"

He reached over and brushed the wetness from her cheeks with his fingertips.

"What he didn't do in this world." He swallowed. "Stay."



He left her there, in his bedchamber, like a talisman against the Dark, as he went about Hogwarts business that last day.

The horrors of his life (every day was like this; every single day) were muted against the contented buzz beneath this skin, reverberating even in his bones. She was still here, for a few more hours at least. Sitting on his bed or on his sofa or on the window seat of his bedroom, *Hogwarts: A History* (his world's version) in her eager hands.

He couldn't help but laugh at her bemused expression when the house-elves gave her a wide berth with each delivery of food and pot of tea.

"Was it something I did?" she finally asked, slightly hurt.

"You...she...thought it wise during her fourth year to *free* them," he'd told her, and laughed again at her wide eyed shock. Ironic, he thought, since this was not at all unlike what she'd proposed doing with *him*. For him.

"If I can't stay here, then you must come back with me," she'd said even after he'd explained what Slytherin had told him.

"Hermione, I have to *stay*, remember?"

"Yes, but for how long?"

He just shook his head and sighed.

*Until it's over..* But he didn't say it out loud. She already knew.

So he'd left her, all indignation and longing, and gone about his duties. Scowling at students and dangling illusory enticements in front of the Carrows' eyes in the hope that they would be distracted long enough to spare the unfortunate few students remaining over the holidays their sadistic attentions for a few moments.

All the while, the image of Hermione stayed at the back of his mind, anchoring him, the hum of their connection, soothing. A buffer against the sharp edges and dark corners of the world he inhabited.

He wondered if it were possible to store her up to keep for later. To hold alone in the dark after she'd gone away.



gather in front of the blank windows. The smooth stretch of glass rises before us, empty portrait frames to be inhabited later. Someday, after we're gone.

Our gifts are ready, and so are we. At last, we will complete the sanctification of the castle, investing it with the qualities we each value most.

Salazar glances again at the ceiling. "Will the others have a Hallowing?"

Godric follows his gaze and squeezes his hand. Rowena smiles at me, as relieved as I am to see them reaching for one another again.

"Some will, I think," says Godric.

"And some won't," adds Rowena.

Salazar nods, and my own heart aches at the grief I know he feels, the regret. We all pause, a moment of silence before we begin.

As Salazar lets his tears fall freely (finally) onto the stone, I understand, truly, for the first time, what imbues them with so much magic.



## Chapter 7

*Chapter 7 of 10*

My chambers are dark, lit only by the glow of the midnight moon.

The castle creaks with rawness of stone and antiquity of magic, filled with the power welling up from beneath the mountain and the fire of intention fuelled by our four vibrant streams of magic, combined.

It is nearly impossible to recognise this expanse of land from just six months ago: pristine grasses as far as the eye could see, cresting on a tidal wave of green, the shadow of grey stone a skeleton underneath. A spider's web holding together an enterprise that, tonight, feels like folly.

I had expected to feel exultant.

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This story is ten chapters, and complete. I will be posting one chapter every couple of days. :)

The moon had risen and the lamps were lit ages ago. Hermione stroked the surface of the leather-bound book, tracing the embossing on the front cover and wondering how many times Severus had read it himself. Wondering how much of his world's history he knew by heart.

"Finished it, then?" His voice teased a bit as the door closed softly behind him

"Hardly," she snorted. "You do know it grows with the reading?"

"I had noticed."

"It's like time," she said. "Infinite."

"Yes," he agreed.

She curled up more securely on the sofa. It wasn't late enough yet; there were undoubtedly people about. It couldn't be time.

"You're back early." She hadn't expected him until after the moon had set and the few souls in the castle had retired to their beds, the corridors empty of everyone except the ghosts.

"Professor McGonagall is patrolling. She will keep the Carrows under control, should they overreach."

Hermione nodded absently. "She doesn't know either, does she?"

"Nobody knows, Hermione."

She nodded, though she knew this already. He was completely alone. Reviled. Trying to overturn a tyrannical regime from within.

There were no words left. None. Nothing that would convince him to keep her here, and even if there were, how much good could she do hidden away in his inner chambers?

She had never, ever, felt so powerless.

All she could do now was this. Silently, watching his eyes as they tracked her path from the sofa to where he stood just inside the chamber door. She tucked her head beneath his chin and wrapped her arms around him, just like that. As if she might fill him with her energy; as if she could tether him to life by holding him to her, arms wrapped around him tightly.

He must have understood because he folded his arms around her, too. Fingertips sketching nonsense on her back and along the contour of her neck. Long strokes and short. Tracing fire into her skin. Leaving his mark.

She untangled her arms and reached for the line of buttons on his robes. He grabbed her hands and shook his head, but she batted him away and continued to undo the clasps one by one, and then the crisp white shirt beneath, until she finally found bare skin. She laid her cheek against him for a moment, measuring the pounding of his heart against hers and then brought her lips there instead.

His moan made her shiver and she lifted her eyes to his. She wanted to see his face, to see what he looked like undone, lost to the moment, to her. Needed to know how it felt to strip him of the worries and the sharp edges he wore like armour.

"What are you doing?" he breathed.

She smiled and traced the line of his collarbone with her tongue in answer.

"I'm not doing this and then sending you back, so if this is some..." He stopped to gasp as she sucked on his earlobe. "Trick to get me to keep you..."

Hermione hummed in satisfaction. She should have thought of this sooner. Keeping his mouth otherwise occupied was an excellent way to stop the flow of completely irrelevant *talking*.

And, oh, my. When he stopped talking, what happened instead was wondrous.

His eyes blazed, fierce, burning with a heat she had missed the previous night in the tumult of first discovery. They were *søæep*, a narrow strip of the darkest brown ringed pupils thrown wide, as if to show her the soul she'd already felt with her own magic.

"We're already linked," she whispered into the shell of his ear. "Nothing can change that. It doesn't matter where I am. Where you are."

She felt his body stiffen beneath her hands.

"I never consented to a link," he snapped.

"Oh, Severus," she said. "I haven't taken anything away from you. I've given you something." She traced her fingertips along the line of his brow. "It's up to you, what you give me in return. If anything at all."

"Hermione," he said, struggling to put some distance between them. "You don't understand. I want..." He paused for a deep breath. "This has nothing to do with what I want. The Dark Lord will *know*. If I give you... If I share with you what I want, what you want to share, he *will know*, and..."

*He will know.*

It felt as if a bucket of ice water had been poured into her veins.

Oh, god. His only protection against this wizard, this monster, had been the emptiness inside him. And now. Oh, god, what had she done?

"And that can't happen," she whispered. "He would destroy you, and the war would be lost."

"Yes," he agreed, wiping away the tears that had fallen onto her cheeks. "And many, many people would die. I told you, Hermione, I don't expect to survive this. I've already counted the loss of my life, but it would all be for *nothing* if he still won."

The heat had fled from his eyes. Instead, emptiness gaped there, a bleakness at the prospect of so much sacrifice, for naught.

"It won't be for nothing," she said. "But I won't accept that you have to die. I won't."

He brushed his lips against hers again, so gently. It felt like goodbye.

"No. No, no, no," she whispered.

"I'll never forget," he said softly. "You have no idea..."

She buried her face on his chest and let the tears fall, each one brimming with words unsaid and memories yet to be shared.

"Maybe," he whispered, as he brought his lips to hers one last time, "there is another world in which you and I are together."

The last thing she remembered from their final moments in his rooms was the sensation of his cheek against hers, warm and slick with tears.



The corridors were deserted as they made their way to the Great Hall, and Severus sent a silent thanks to the ghosts who had ensured the way was clear. It was one thing to keep Hermione alone in his quarters. Those rooms were enchanted to a level even the Dark Lord couldn't penetrate. The corridors and common rooms of Hogwarts felt dangerously vulnerable in comparison, especially with the woman he had Disillusioned at his side.

"It's uncanny," said Hermione. "It's almost exactly as it is in my world." They reached the bottom of the central staircase and stopped for a moment in the entrance hall. "Except for that. What is *that*?"

Severus smiled. "Only the most important artefacts in the castle," he said. "The hourglasses that measure House points. Do you not have them at your Hogwarts?"

"Houses compete with one another?" she asked.

"They do."

"I can't even imagine. There is no such thing in my world. There is competition, of course, but it's not something anybody would ~~do~~ster."

No wonder, thought Severus, that Muggles could live side by side with witches and wizards, as hard as that was to imagine.

"One day, you should do a study of the different worlds. How they evolved. How they differ and why," he said.

*Because I can't do it. You must do it for me.*

"We, Severus. We will study the worlds together," she said tightly. "You may have decided you're going to die, but I've decided no such thing."

He really shouldn't feel a warm flush in his chest from her declaration. Really, her insistence meant nothing for his ultimate survival. And yet...

"So you've said." He smiled, knowing she couldn't see him in the dimly lit corridor.

"Mark my words."

They were nearly at the doors to the Great Hall.

He reached for the handle and swung the enormous doors open, grateful for the house-elves who kept the hinges well-oiled.

"After you," he said softly, following the whisper of her movements in the dark.



stand in front of the windows, side by side. They have promised themselves they will not touch, but they do. His hand is interlaced with hers, and that calms them both. It pleases me to see that they do not deny themselves this. At least, this.

"Master Slytherin," says Snape. "I have brought her."

"She who has crossed over?" I confirm, though I already know. It was she who began to wake me.

"Yes," she answers. "I am the one." Her voice shakes.

"Do you seek return passage?"

She glances at Snape and he nods. She doesn't want to go back to her world; wants instead to stay with this man, this wizard whose work here is not yet done.

"This witch must return to her own world," Snape says. "For her safety and for the safety of those I am pledged to protect."

Indeed.

I reach out my hand, glass and iron, shed of the layers of grime that hid us for so long.

"Godric?"

I feel him before I hear him. He always did take his time waking up.

"I am here." His voice is rough, and I chuckle to myself. He is made of glass, as are we all. Glass and magic. Perhaps one of the elves chipped him.

"Stop thinking, Salazar," he grumbles. "I have a headache already."

The witch is looking at Snape, astonished. Perhaps they expected pomp and circumstance? Flashes of magic and bubbling cauldrons? I must ask him later how we four have been remembered in this world.

"Godric," I say. "We have company. It has been a long time since we have had company."

He rubs his eyes and lifts his head. He is still so beautiful. All red hair and blazing green eyes. I wonder if he will feel warm when I touch him, or if he will be cold and smooth as glass.

"Are the women here?" he asks.

"I have been awake for hours," says Rowena.

"Some things never change," mutters Godric.

"Welcome," says a soft voice, and we all turn to see Helga, wide awake and smiling.

"Thank you," says the young witch. "This isn't quite. I mean to say... I suppose I didn't know what to expect." She looks at Snape again.

"Nor did I," he adds. "It is an honour to meet you all," he says, bowing his head. "I had the privilege of meeting Master Slytherin yesterday. Thank you for your help in this matter."

"It has been many hundreds of years since we had visitors," says Helga. "We are pleased. We have been waiting."

The witch twitches a bit and wrinkles her brow. Snape looks at her as if he, too, has forgotten. It doesn't matter. They will remember again. They must.

"Are you ready, Hermione?" Snape looks uncomfortable; he is listening for movement behind him, and I remember again how much danger he is in. It is not hard to recall.

She looks as if she might say she isn't ready, but then she squares her shoulders and nods. He brushes his hand against her hair for only a moment, and then she steps forward.

"I am ready."

Helga reaches out her hand. She holds the mirror, the portal through which all universes can be accessed.

"It may need a bit of polishing. Miss Granger, would you do us the honour?"

"Of course."

She steps forward and with the edge of her robe, gently sweeps away the dust that covers the mirror. It glistens, and she gasps.

"It's so beautiful."

"Possibilities always are, are they not?" asks Helga.

"Yes," says the witch, breathless. "They are." Their eyes meet, and Helga smiles.

The witch turns back to Snape, but he shakes his head.

"Be safe," she whispers.

"Remember me," he answers.

She doesn't say it aloud, but we can all hear it.

*Always.*

And she is gone.



The first time Hermione travelled through the portal, she had been far too surprised to pay much attention to the experience itself. Focused instead on the hand that had grasped hers and the sensation of falling, she'd been so quickly distracted by Severus and the actuality of multiple universes that the reality of the portal faded in comparison.

The second time, through, she noticed everything, hoping to find the scrap of information that would allow her to come back, to find him again. In the meantime, she was grateful for the distraction from the agony of leaving.

This time, four voices guided her through the tunnel, its branches trailing off in every direction. It was dizzying, seeing how vast the possibilities were, all laid out in front of her. It was like looking through a kaleidoscope, infinite colours and patterns dancing like light through a mosaic of stained glass.

It was only as she approached the end of the tunnel that the light began to coalesce into more orderly colour. Leaving behind the orange tones of Severus's world, the chaos again resolved itself into strains of yellow and green with the comforting indigo and blue tones even further to her right.

"You're nearly home," said the voice. Helga Hufflepuff's, she thought.

"Will I find him again?" she asked impulsively. Did they even know? Could they say?

"Not unless you look for him," she said.

"Well, of course, I'll look..."

But that was just it, wasn't it, she thought. Even those living alongside him didn't really look; otherwise they might have known the truth, no matter how hard he worked to hide it. Occluding cut you off from others because it made it so much harder for them to find you.

"Remember him, Hermione," said a male voice. Deep and sad. Slytherin, she thought.

"How could I ever forget?" she whispered into the softly moving air.

"Focus that energy on working out what to do, Hermione," said another female voice. "Remember so that you can understand."

"And then act," interrupted another. Gryffindor, she decided.

Connection. Memory. Understanding. Action.

Oh.

Oh!

"I understand," she said. "The four Hallows. Act in accordance with each of them. Each one in their right time."



"That's right, Hermione," said Helga. "Well done."

"They're not just for protection, then, are they?" she asked. "The Hallows."

"Protection?" echoed Slytherin. "Only the cloak was meant for protection. Each of the Hallows represents one of the four qualities essential for a witch or a wizard to possess. Qualities we all must cultivate in ourselves."

Well, then, thought Hermione. She would have to propose some major revisions to *Hogwarts: A History* when she got home, not to mention changes to the Founder's Tale.

But all thoughts of revising or even communicating these shiny new insights flew right out of her head as she exited the tunnel, only to tumble directly onto the floor of Greenhouse Two, bang in the middle of a special lesson on Flowering Midnight Monkshood with Professor Sprout's N.E.W.T. class.



He'd expected silence once she'd gone. The hum that had so quickly become part of the background, reassuring him he was truly alive...like his breathing and the steady thrum of his heartbeat...he'd braced himself for it to disappear when she stepped through the portal. Gone, along with her and her open smile and fierce indignation on his behalf. Evaporated, like the memory of her lips against his skin.

He hadn't been prepared for it to surge and throb before settling down to what had become, in seven short days, its usual steady (and surprisingly reassuring) thrum.

It was more like a feeling, actually, if he'd taken the time to describe it. Somewhere between the sensation of a whisper against bare skin and the vibration a cat makes when it's especially pleased.

Which only reminded him that he didn't know if his Hermione had a cat just as Granger did here, in his world.

Oh, bloody hell.

Occlumency shields gone to pot in seven days.

Bloody fantastic.



The moments after her trip through the portal blurred together; anxious flutters sliced by the sharp edge of questions not asked.

Professor Sprout shooed the students away with the efficiency of a mother hen, but Hermione couldn't help but hear their nervous whispers as they filed out of the greenhouse and made their way back to their dormitories.

"We've been worried," said Sprout once the greenhouse was empty.

Hermione met the older witch's warm eyes and before she knew it, she was wrapped securely in her arms. Grateful (so grateful) that Professor Sprout wasn't peppering her with questions, Hermione let herself relax just for a moment, comforted. Safe.

She lifted her head and let her eyes wander to the expanse of glass lining the greenhouse walls. Was he there? Could he see her? ~~Was~~ safe?

Hermione buried her head on the professor's shoulder and squeezed back the tears that threatened to spill out.

It wasn't that she didn't want to tell her where she'd been. But where, exactly, should she begin?



She had the eerie feeling of déjà vu. Sitting on the comfortable chair by the fire, Headmistress McGonagall across from her, sipping her tea, sharp eyes watching.

Waiting.

"I'm sorry to have worried you," Hermione said, finally, placing her cup back on its saucer. Such mundane movements. Familiar and comforting. And yet, the world she knew had changed forever. What she *knew* had changed irrevocably.

"Worried." The headmistress paused. "That's one word for it. Hermione, you vanished. Vanished behind a stained glass window that is one hundred feet from a pile of jagged rock at the foot of the castle. Terrified is a bit more accurate."

Hermione rose and sat next to her former teacher on the sofa. The older woman's usually stoic expression had cracked, the fear she must have borne for the last seven days finally finding purchase in the wrinkles around her eyes and the tension in her jaw.

"I was safe," Hermione said as she put her arm around the headmistress's shoulders. "I'm afraid you won't believe me when I tell you where I've been, but you must."

The headmistress blew her nose and wiped her eyes.

"Tell me," she demanded.

Hermione took a deep breath and reached into the pocket of her robes, pulling out a large, leather-bound book.

"First," she said, "you might want to have a look at this."

The headmistress picked up the book and turned it over in her hands.

"Hogwarts: A History? Where did you get this?" There were only a handful of copies in the library.

Hermione reached over and found the strip of parchment she had slipped between two pages a million years ago. In Severus's office.

"Albus Dumbledore? Headmaster of Hogwarts?" She looked up, alarmed. "Hermione, what is this?"

"It would appear that our world is only one of many," she said. "I've just spent seven days in a parallel universe where there's a war raging amongst wizards, and where non-magicals don't even know of our existence."

"Hermione, perhaps I should call Matron Pomfrey and she can..."

"The proof is right here, Headmistress," Hermione interrupted. "It's true. It's real." She squared her shoulders and reached for the book. "And I'm going back."





headmistress's office is dark, the fire long extinguished, and the tea cleared away.

It is odd to be awake after so many years of slumber. I can feel the echoes of each world's rhythms ripple across the surface of the glass that allows this piece of my spirit to travel into each and every one.

"Did she believe her, do you think?" asks Godric, running his hands through long red hair.

"I believe she did," said Rowena. "Despite her reservations."

"What will it matter?" asks Salazar. "Will the world streams not continue, regardless?"

They always do. They always will.

And yet.

"It will matter to Severus," I say, and Salazar's eyes soften.

"Yes," he acknowledges.

I think about the loved ones he's lost and the ones he hoped to shelter. Each one a spark of light on the water. I think of something we discussed long ago, he and I. About the value of each and every one of those precious sparks.

"Remember, Salazar," I say softly, "what you told me just before we set the foundation to the castle?"

He nods, and his eyes are bright.

"When someone saves a single soul," he whispers, "it is as if she saves an entire world."



## Chapter 8

*Chapter 8 of 10*

My chambers are dark, lit only by the glow of the midnight moon.

The castle creaks with rawness of stone and antiquity of magic, filled with the power welling up from beneath the mountain and the fire of intention fuelled by our four vibrant streams of magic, combined.

It is nearly impossible to recognise this expanse of land from just six months ago: pristine grasses as far as the eye could see, cresting on a tidal wave of green, the shadow of grey stone a skeleton underneath. A spider's web holding together an enterprise that, tonight, feels like folly.

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The days and weeks following Hermione's appearance and departure had the surreal feel of a half-dream. It was almost as if the life he was living, the war he had been fighting for most of his adult life, was the aberration, and not the baffling appearance of this remarkable woman in reflective glass, and then, unexpectedly, *through* the glass, before disappearing as if she had never been at all.

But that was not the whole truth, and Severus had pledged to be honest with himself. Her arrival here had changed *everything*. Her very existence and the blinding awareness that his universe was only one of many, one of a multiplicity of possible worlds, had blown apart his conception of his role...in this universe or any other.

The idea that entire worlds existed parallel to his own, worlds in which different choices had been made, led him to rethink the implications of his own choices. It had been so long since Severus had allowed himself to contemplate what might have been had he made different decisions all those years ago. It was almost too much to bear...wondering 'what might have been.'

Worst of all was that he had no one in whom he could confide. No one in all the world...not in this one at least...who could be trusted with his most secret longing.

Seven days with Hermione, and now he knew loneliness.

Seven days with the woman who was and was not Hermione Granger, and the bedrock of the assumptions on which he had staked his mission had been shaken.

How much must he sacrifice for the greater good?

It took him weeks to go back. He supposed that the tangible reminder of her disappearance was not something he wished to revisit. Still, here was the one place where he could speak freely of what he knew, of what he felt.

"Master Slytherin?"

The Great Hall was dark, save for the flame of the candle in Severus's hand. Light reflected off the stained glass and spilled onto the floor where he stood.

The image of Salazar Slytherin opened its eyes and smiled.

"We've been waiting for you, Severus. Welcome back."



"Hermione."

Professor Evans was exasperated. Again.

"Yes, Professor?"

"Are you coming to Professor Sinistra's engagement lunch?"

"I'm sorry, Professor. I've been..."

"Yes, I see," Evans interrupted, gesturing to the table full of books. "You've been holed up in the library even more than you've been in the lab. Researching I don't know what." The Potions mistress sat down next to Hermione at the table piled with books she'd already discarded as useless.

For the first time ever, the Hogwarts library had failed her. Even more disturbingly, so had the headmistress.

Hermione closed the book in front of her on the table and rubbed her eyes.

The headmistress had been sympathetic to Hermione's story, even believed it. But she had also been adamant that Hermione put the experience behind her and move on.

"I believe you, Hermione. But even if what you say is true," Headmistress McGonagall had told her that night, putting up a hand to forestall Hermione's protests, "Even if what you say is true, you mustn't intervene. If the Founders created parallel universes, then they are meant to remain so without interference from any of us."

"But how do you know that?" Hermione had maintained. "If that were true, wouldn't it be impossible to cross from one world to another?"

But none of her arguments had swayed the headmistress. So while Hermione had finally stopped fighting, she had refused to forget. If only she had access to that window, she could talk to the Founders, herself. But McGonagall had seen Hermione eyeing the stained glass portraits and, without a word, blocked her Floo and restricted password access to her office to more senior staff. Time after time, she'd made a point of meeting Hermione outside her office, until finally, Hermione had installed herself in the library, growing less and less hopeful with each passing day that she would find the information she needed.

Each day, though, Hermione watched for Severus, searching for his reflection in every piece of glass, in every pool of water. Sometimes, she thought she saw a flash of his sharp jaw line or the sweep of his hair as he turned his head, but before she could be sure, it would fade away.

"Hermione?"

"Sorry," she muttered again, looking at her mentor.

Professor Evans sighed and picked up one of the more useless books.

*Tremores Orbis Terrarum?* Hermione, are you going to tell me what this is about?"

Hermione looked down at the open page in front of her, the words blurry. What could it hurt? She'd exhausted every other option available to her.

"Do you remember the night of the Welcoming Feast?" she asked softly.

"I do."

"We tested the *Fatum Revelio* potion, but it didn't work."

"Right."

"But I saw something. Someone reflected in my goblet that night. Remember? I told you."

Professor Evans nodded and Hermione looked at her, hoping she was making the right decision, telling her the truth.

"He's real."

"Real? But you said he was standing at the podium in the Great Hall, addressing the students."

"He was," she said. "I still don't understand why, but it wasn't the potion that allowed me to see him. There's something else going on. Something big. What I saw was real, but I don't know why I'm the one who saw it; well, he saw it, too. Saw me, I mean." She stopped.

"No, go on."

It had been hard enough explaining to the headmistress where she'd been, what she'd seen. She'd been so careful when talking about Severus, as if revealing his secrets here, even in a world where he never existed, still might put him at risk.

"You'll think I'm mad," Hermione said. "It's too hard to explain. Too incredible."

"Try me," said Evans.

But there was another reason Hermione hesitated to tell Professor Evans what she'd learned. She glanced at Severus's copy of *Hogwarts: A History*.

Because, really, how do you tell your teacher, your mentor, your friend, that in another world, just beyond the glass, she is martyred? Dead. Murdered by a megalomaniac in defence of her baby, his prophesied vanquisher: The Boy Who Lived.



Lily Evans sat, just staring at the book lying open in front of her. She hadn't spoken once since her first gasp of surprise, and her haunted expression made Hermione's heart ache.

The child, Harry Potter, didn't exist here, not in this universe. Here, he had never even been born. James Potter had been an old school friend, apparently long forgotten.

But Hermione remembered how chilling it felt to learn that there was *another* Hermione, identical to her and yet entirely different, out there...in this other world...fighting for her life in a war where wizards would happily kill her based on her parentage.

"She was very brave. I mean, I... Or... I don't know." Professor Evans paused and licked her lips.

"She," Hermione said. "She's not you."

"No."

She ran her fingertips over the words that described her alter-ego's martyrdom and her son's importance to the wizards in that world.

"It's odd. I know."

"Do you?"

"There was another Hermione Granger there, too," she said.

"At Hogwarts?"

Hermione shook her head. "Not anymore." She hesitated. "She was good friends with Harry Potter. Is good friends, I mean. She and Harry and Ron Weasley, of all people, were on the run from The Dark Lord. Voldemort."

"On the run," she echoed. "I can't even imagine."

"I know," Hermione said. "But you can feel it in the air there. The tension. Like the whole world could crumble at any moment."

They sat together, the silence almost reverent. Professor Evans imagining. Hermione, remembering.

"Where did you find the book?"

"Severus gave it to me." In a manner of speaking. *He had* given it to her. She'd just neglected to give it *back*.

"Is that the wizard who pulled you through the glass?"

"It is." Hermione paused, considering. "He was your best friend as a child. There, in his world." She took a deep breath. "And he's the one who divulged the prophecy to The Dark Lord, before he realised it referred to you...to her, to her son."

Lily Evans eyes grew wide, alarmed.

"He was *my* friend? Her friend, I mean? And then he..."

Hermione nodded.

"I think he loved her," she whispered, finally voicing the fear that had niggled at her for weeks. "The Lily Evans in his world."

Her professor looked shocked.

"Does he still?" Evans asked.

Hermione flinched. "I don't know. Maybe. He has spent most of his adult life trying to repair the damage done because of his mistakes," Hermione said softly. "I think he means to sacrifice himself in this war, and I can't let him."

Lily took a deep breath and Hermione could see her trying to piece it all together. This wizard, her friend and unintentional betrayer, trying to fix what he'd he had a hand in breaking...not here, but in another world.

"He's trying to make amends; he wants to come back."

"Yes, but he's all by himself," said Hermione. "I can't leave him there alone." She would understand this, Hermione thought, hoped.

"So that's why you've been so preoccupied."

"Yes."

"Have you found any way to find him, then, to get back?"

Hermione shook her head and closed another useless book that lay open on the table.

"Nothing other than using the same portal as the first time. But I can't get back into the headmistress's office. She doesn't want me talking to the Founder's portraits. She wants me to forget about it and move on."

Lily Evans laughed. "She's met you, hasn't she?"

Hermione snorted. "Yes, but she expects me to put the concerns of the collective first, of course. Not my own desires or even what I think best."

Wouldn't her mentor expect the same? But who decided what was for the best? How did they decide such things in Severus's universe?

"Hermione?"

"Hmm?"

"Where were you just now?" she asked, waving a hand in front of Hermione's face.

"Just thinking about the differences between here and..." she gestured towards the book she'd taken from Severus's rooms. "...his world. Such different expectations. Not just superficially."

"It's so strange that they have headmasters and wizards teaching. I wonder how that came about."

"There are lots of things that are different," Hermione said. "More than I could learn while I was there. That's why I brought this back with me." She gestured to the book. "Severus wanted me to investigate the parallel worlds, to find out more about them. How many there are. How they differ." She paused. "I think he was just trying to distract me, though."

"Distract you? From what?"

"From dwelling on the fact that I didn't want to come back here at all."



Salazar Slytherin, as it happened, was rather talkative for a wizard who had been asleep in a frame of glass for nearly a thousand years..

"He likes you," said Gryffindor one night during the Easter holidays. The castle was nearly empty, and the three wizards had indulged in a heated debate regarding the efficacy of incantations in potions brewing, culminating in Slytherin heading off to the stained glass windows in the library in search of a reference. "He's not this engaged with just anyone."

Severus fidgeted. He'd taken to visiting the glass portraits nearly every night, long past curfew, carving out a few precious minutes from days and night stretched thin and filled with horrors. A distraction spell on the doors to the Great Hall, the Bloody Baron patrolling outside as a translucent sentinel, and he'd managed to steal a moment of peace each evening where he could let down his guard. It was worth more to him than sleep and left him far less restless.

"I'm grateful," he answered at last. "I like him, too. And admire him a great deal, of course," he added.

"Telling tales out of school again, Godric," sniffed Slytherin, sliding an enormous reference book under Gryffindor's nose. "Never mind about that. I'm right. See, it's right there. I told you."

Gryffindor smiled, and Severus raised his eyebrows. Gryffindor's grin widened and he winked.

Slytherin huffed in his direction but didn't look terribly put out, really.

"Any news, Severus?" asked Helga Hufflepuff, with an indulgent smile at the men.

He turned to the witch sitting at the edge of the window pane, book closed on her lap. She must have already heard, snippets of conversation whispered at the head table drifting to her sharp ears. Still, she had waited to ask, giving him this oasis of time and space outside the unremitting stress and uncertainty that was his life. One day, he would have to show her his gratitude. Somehow. Tonight, though, at least he could answer her questions. Tell her the truth.

"Potter and his friends were caught by Snatchers and brought to Malfoy Manor last night," Severus said, and they gasped. "They escaped not long after with three other prisoners, but not before Bellatrix called the Dark Lord." He clenched his jaw and let out a shuddering breath. "Stupid cow."

He didn't need to mention the spectacular tantrum their escape had triggered. Even worse, the Dark Lord was now on his way to Hogwarts for the first time since... before, and Severus hoped the hours of practice reinforcing his Occlumency shields would keep the Dark wizard from detecting the changes Hermione had wrought in him.

"How did they find them?" Gryffindor asked, pulling him out of his thoughts. "The Snatchers."

"According to the wolf, one of them said the Dark Lord's name. The Taboo got them."

They all flinched.

"They really got away?" asked Slytherin.

"They did," confirmed Severus.

The five of them...four wrought of glass and magic, and one of flesh, blood and tears...sat. Silent. Each imagining what might have happened had the wizarding world's only hope (in this world, at least) *not* escaped the Death Eaters' clutches. He was grateful, so grateful, that his own Hermione was safe. Away from here, even though it meant being away from him.

Severus sat back in the chair he'd pulled up close to the windows. Every night as he talked with the Founders, he longed to ask, to find out if they had seen her, if they knew. Every night, he'd resisted, as if self-control in this matter might allow him to protect her, if not forget her. Every night, he wondered if she had already forgotten him in the aftermath of the return to her world.

But now, the war was escalating. Potter was getting more reckless, perhaps a sign he was getting closer to whatever job he was meant to finish.

He had to know.

"Have you seen her?" he murmured without preamble. "Is she all right?"

Hufflepuff gave him a gentle smile. "I don't believe she's been back to the window since we escorted her through the portal, Severus."

"Surprising, really," said Gryffindor. "From what you told us about her, I'd have expected her to be back with a thousand questions."

"It is odd, isn't it?" said Severus, alarmed. "Has she returned to the headmistress's office? That's where the windows are in her world."

The four Founders looked at one another and then again at Severus.

"Actually, now that you mention it, I don't believe she has," said Ravenclaw.

He hadn't known her very long, but it had been long enough to know this was not like Hermione. She was determined. She wouldn't just give up.

"Have you seen her reflection, Severus?" asked Hufflepuff. "The way you did before she came through the portal?"

Of course he had been looking. Constantly.

"Only a handful of times," he said. "And then, just flashes. I can't explain why it's been so fragmented when before..."

Before he knew her, she'd seemed close enough to touch. But now, now that he would give anything to see her face, he saw only glimpses of her smile or of her hair bouncing as she walked away. Always away.

But the Dark Lord would be at the castle any moment. Severus couldn't afford to be distracted, not now. He nodded at the Founders as he gathered his thoughts and readied himself.

*It's time, Severus.*



objects we bring to the Hallowing lie before us. They are meant to be absorbed into the fibre and structure of the castle. They are meant to become alive, like the stone and wood and air and water we weave with our magic.

I feel it happening though I can do nothing to stop it. It has happened, it will happen, it is happening now, even as we sanctify the castle with our intentions and with our power.

Our voices echo in the Great Hall [in the headteacher's office, in the library, in the entry hall, in the highest tower of the castle where one day, a witch will tell true prophecy for few to hear] and I hear Rowena cry out. The tiara is ripped from her. Not here, but in another world. And Godric, oh, Godric.

"No!" he shouts as his wand becomes the weapon he had never intended it to be. Salazar reaches for him, but he is doubled over, clutching the ring...the stone...in both hands.

"Not like that," Salazar whispers. "Please."

I can feel them, each of the possibilities. The probabilities. The ways in which our intentions are changed, subverted, supported, enhanced. I feel my cloak slip through my fingers. [It rips, it doesn't rip, it is cared for lovingly, it is put to nefarious use...] and the tears stream down my cheeks.

I understand now. We send our magic out into the world, and it is no longer ours.

"It belongs to all of them now," I say, even though I don't fully believe it yet. We have to leave it to them. Trust them to fix it when it goes awry.

We will wait a long time.



She dreamed of him.

Even though she'd had no more than a glimpse of Severus for months, she found him in her sleep. Saw the contours of his face, grown gaunt, heard his voice, words of baritone velvet skimming over her. Even, if she concentrated, could taste the sharp salt of his skin on her tongue.

Each morning, waking was painful. Her feelings for him didn't abate, and she wondered what it was about this man, this wizard, that evoked both need and joy in her like no other had done.

"Severus," she whispered as she walked along the perimeter of the lake one spring morning, "where are you?"

She had done this circuit nearly every day since the weather had begun to warm, twice a day during the Easter holidays while the castle had been nearly empty. Each time, she returned to the castle, dejected. Maybe it was the way the sun reflected on the surface of the brilliant, blue water, or perhaps today, her cries reached receptive ears. She would never know why, but this time, when she looked out on to the surface of the lake, hoping, longing to find him there, she did.

He was standing by the window in his bedroom, the same one she had sat beneath, reading. His face was pale and drawn as if he hadn't slept well in ages, and his eyes were unbearably sad. But he was *alive*, and if he was standing there looking worried, it must be that the war had not yet come to its climax.

Severus. Had he been looking for her all this time, as she had, him?

She knelt by the water and leaned over, hoping to get closer. Just a little bit closer. Right then, he looked up and his eyes widened.

*He sees me; he can see me.* She laughed out loud.

"Severus," she whispered.

He pressed his hand against the window and his lips formed the shape of her name.

"Severus. I'm coming to find you."

His lips curled into the half-smile she loved and he leaned his head forward until his forehead touched the glass.

She dipped her fingers into the water, reaching for him, but the ripples carried him away.



The school year was drawing to a close. Students were huddled together in the Great Hall and in their common rooms studying, and the staff was enjoying a brief respite before the storm of final exams.

"Miss Granger," called the headmistress, "may I speak with you in my office for a moment?"

Hermione's heart began to pound. It had been months since McGonagall had allowed her in the office.

The circular room hadn't changed in the months since she'd last been there. Even the figures in the stained glass windows still stood just as she'd left them, immobile in their frames of pigment and glass. Hermione's eyes strayed there over and over again, wondering what it would take to enliven them.

"How is your apprenticeship research progressing, Miss Granger?" the headmistress asked as she motioned to a chair by the hearth and sat down on the chair opposite.

Surprised, Hermione stumbled. "I, erm. I'm making slow progress. It's more difficult than we anticipated to draw something so meaningful through a reflective surface."

"Yes, I would imagine it would be," she said. But her sharp-eyed glance was kind, and Hermione was confused.

"I've not stopped working on it," she said. "I know that there is something important to be found there and I won't stop until I find it." Until she said the words, she didn't know they would sound so fierce.

But McGonagall looked pleased. "I am counting on that, Miss Granger."

"You are?"

The headmistress smiled. "I am." She looked towards the windows and furrowed her brow. "You see, I couldn't be sure. Not at first." She looked Hermione in the eye. "You are not the only one who takes time to do her research, you know." The headmistress smiled. "The legends describe it, but it's all so vague."

Hermione held back from saying that the headmistress was being rather vague herself and only echoed her. "Legends?"

McGonagall reached over to open a large book that sat on the table between them. An ancient copy of *Hogwarts: A History*.

"The contemporary copies do not contain the complete text of the legend. It was thought to be too... inflammatory, perhaps." She flicked through the pages until she arrived at the text she was looking for. "But all headmistresses are informed at the time that we take the position."

"Informed of what?" asked Hermione.

"Informed that we are not the only universe that exists. Informed that Helga Hufflepuff split the world into seven parts at the time of Hogwarts' founding." She leaned forward, her hands resting on the ancient parchment pages. "Informed that once in every century, there is the possibility of two across the worlds who might see, who might begin the process of linking the worlds together again."

Hermione could barely breathe. The headmistress *knew*? Yet kept her from going back? She bit back an unfamiliar surge of anger.

"I saw," she said tightly.

"You did," agreed McGonagall. "Please understand, it has always been thought that only headmistresses and, if their universe contains them, headmasters, have this capability. Perhaps scholars believed that only leaders of the school would possess characteristics similar enough to the Founders to permit such a magical ability to emerge."

"I don't understand." Why could *she* see him? Why could she pass through?

"Neither did I, Miss Granger, to my profound regret. I only suspected, and then when you returned after disappearing through the glass, I wanted only to protect you."

Of course. The mandate to protect trumps all.

"Why are you telling me this?"

The headmistress smiled. "Because I have come to realise that it is not for me to decide. If you and this wizard can see one another from across the worlds, it is not for me to prevent you from finding one another and doing...whatever it is you're meant to do."

"Why now?" It had been months. Months of agony, of waiting, of wondering where he was and if he was safe.

McGonagall flushed. "I should never have blocked your access, and for that I am sorry," she said. "Things are shifting here, Miss Granger...Hermione," she said. "Since you crossed over, the Ministry has begun to reconsider some of its policies. It has all been rather overwhelming."

"I'd noticed," Hermione said. Barely noticed, through the haze of research and worry about Severus. There had been more Ministry visits, often followed by small changes in curriculum or protocol that hadn't meant much on their own, but together felt far more momentous. And then there was the biggest change of all, right here at Hogwarts.

"I was especially surprised to hear of Professor Sinistra's engagement. I don't think I've ever heard of a staff member marrying." She paused. "I heard that she petitioned to remain with the partner she'd chosen despite the poor astrological predictions for such a marriage."

"Precisely," agreed the headmistress. "She did. The world is changing. *This* world is changing.. We are reconsidering the structures that we have always taken as given. I can only imagine what is happening elsewhere." She looked over at the stained glass windows, the figures inside still frozen. "But it would seem that you are the only one capable of finding out why, and, perhaps, helping it to unfold in the most beneficial ways."

Hermione's eyes filled with tears.

The headmistress's eyes flicked to the windows and then back to Hermione. "Do what you must. I trust your judgment."

Hermione could only nod, speechless. "Thank you," she whispered finally, when she could find her breath. "Thank you."

"I will leave you now. I have a meeting at the Ministry and mustn't be late." She stood and threw a handful of Floo powder into the flames. "Ministry!" she called out, and disappeared in a flash of green.

The office was flooded with sunlight, the stained glass windows throwing shafts of colour along the floor and against the walls. Hermione wasted no time approaching the Founders' windows behind the enormous desk.

From all appearances, nobody had touched the glass since that night months ago when she had wiped away some of the dust that obscured it and fallen into another world.

"Why has nobody cleaned these windows?" she wondered out loud.

So she set about it herself. Bit by bit, pane by pane, she cleared away the grime of centuries, the residue of decades of dust, revealing the vibrant beauty of the colours and the majesty of the witches and wizards contained there. It was meditative work, and Hermione lost herself in the flow of magic from her fingertips as she worked over the panes inch by inch. Finally, she pulled a chair close to the windowpane and sat.

The Founders stood before her in all their glory, each of them holding the Hallow they had crafted for the castle. She remembered what they'd told her in the portal, that the

Hallows were for far more than protection; that she would need aspects of all four to find Severus again, to help him.

"Can you tell me what I need to do?" she whispered to the immobile portraits. "Please."

She reached out her hand again to the cloak wrought of glass and light and shivered at the cool surface. Slytherin had said that only the cloak had been meant for protection; the other Hallows were meant for different tasks. She let her hand drop to her lap.

Were her feelings towards Severus just protectiveness? The urge to rescue wounded or mistreated creatures ran strongly in her, but that was to be expected, wasn't it? Such sentiments were encouraged, taught in school and nurtured on every level.

*We are responsible for each other.*

No, it's more than that, she said to herself. She was drawn to him in a way she'd never before experienced, not even towards someone in pain. To his power, to his intensity, his persistence, and even to his isolation. In her world, she had never met anyone as passionate or as alone...who had to fulfil so massive a task with nobody beside him, nobody to support his efforts. Bravery and quiet persistence in the face of opposition were qualities she'd never before considered, but ones she found incredibly compelling.

She looked up at the wand, Godric Gryffindor's Elder Wand, and thought about the appeal of focused power and individual initiative...qualities that were most definitely discouraged here, in her universe.

*What's best for the collective.* The motto they lived by.

*No one is greater than the sum of us all.* Another.

It feels safe here, certainly, Hermione thought. But when she thought of the other Hermione, trying to free the elves because she was horrified at their enslavement, she couldn't help but smile. When she remembered about the other Hermione and her friends running from danger, living on their wits and their skills, pushing back against an oppressor, she felt a surge of pride for the woman she wasn't, but might have been. The woman she had actually become, under other circumstances.

Did she have the capacity to overcome what she might find this time beyond the portal?

Hermione looked up to see Salazar Slytherin's deep brown eyes open and looking right at her.

"Lovely afternoon, Miss Granger," he said sharply.

"Yes, sir. I mean, hello, sir." She stood up. "It's good to see you again, sir."

"Relax, Miss Granger," said Gryffindor. "Salazar is always a bit gruff when he first wakes up."

"Speak for yourself," snapped the other portrait.

"Boys," interrupted Ravenclaw. "If you don't mind." She raised her eyebrows and smiled at Hermione. "Now then. It's good to finally see you back. Severus has been asking after you, you know."

Her heart leapt.

"He has? Is he all right? I saw him in the lake this morning...his reflection...but I can't communicate with him, and I have been so afraid..."

"He's safe for now, Miss Granger. Hermione," said Hufflepuff in her soft, reassuring voice. "But the war in his universe is coming to an end soon. Very soon, in fact. Quite possibly in a matter of hours."

"Hours?" Hermione sat down again and took a deep breath. "What should I do? I don't know how to find him. How will I know if he needs help?"

Hufflepuff looked at Ravenclaw, and Gryffindor crossed his arms and sighed.

"It's time, don't you think?" said Hufflepuff.

"I think so," said Slytherin. "Godric?"

"Yes," he said. "This one should be able to handle it, I think."

"Handle what?" asked Hermione. "What is it time for?"

Helga Hufflepuff shifted the cloak from her lap and lifted the object that it concealed. In her hand was a mirror, the one Hermione thought she'd seen on the night she passed through the portal. It glistened, edged in gold, but made of multi-colour light.

"It's time for a living witch to be the keeper of the portal," she said.

"The keeper?" Hermione whispered.

Before she could formulate a question, the image of Helga Hufflepuff rose and reached her hand through the glass. The mirror shimmered...wrought of air and light and then, all at once, solid but no less vibrant...and Hermione stood.

"Take it," said Hufflepuff. "Guard it well."

Hermione reached out and took the mirror with both hands.

She was standing in the headmistress's office...

...in the Great Hall where she could feel the echo of Severus's presence still...

...in the library, where Slytherin stands with his back to the others...

...in the entrance hall where even larger hour glasses stand...

...in a castle that echoes from its emptiness...

...in a deserted hallway, high in the castle's highest tower...

...in the dungeons where the weak light hides the windows well.

The mirror groaned with the effort of seven worlds' loosening grasp, releasing it into her possession, into her care.



Hermione held it, lost in the swirling colour and the echoes of words spoken and not; lives saved and lost; love nurtured or left to die.

"What do I do?" She could barely breathe; the weight of it squeezed all the air from her lungs.

"Respect that his world is different from yours," said Ravenclaw.

"Honour the histories that make them so, Professor Granger," added Slytherin. "They are not always what they seem at first glance."

She nodded.

"Do not be afraid," said Gryffindor. "The knowledge will only strengthen you, and your courage will be a boon to your world."

A boon. Hermione shook her head. Such headstrong behaviour was certainly *not* encouraged here.

"Hermione," said Slytherin. "He is a good man. Never, ever forget that. He has a job to do and he must finish it."

"And then," said Hufflepuff. "Bring him back."



## Chapter 9

*Chapter 9 of 10*

My chambers are dark, lit only by the glow of the midnight moon.

The castle creaks with rawness of stone and antiquity of magic, filled with the power welling up from beneath the mountain and the fire of intention fuelled by our four vibrant streams of magic, combined.

It is nearly impossible to recognise this expanse of land from just six months ago: pristine grasses as far as the eye could see, cresting on a tidal wave of green, the shadow of grey stone a skeleton underneath. A spider's web holding together an enterprise that, tonight, feels like folly.

I had expected to feel exultant.

\*\*

This story is ten chapters, and complete. I will be posting one chapter every couple of days. :)

Living hands clasped the glass. Tentative hands. Gentle.

Centuries frozen as if in ice, melted with a single touch brimming with hope and need.

*Yes. Now.*

Her body shivered as she passed through the mirror. Beyond the barrier and into the gap between space and time. The light filled her up, pristine, the colour of a Patronus, shimmering like a memory.

Here lay the conjunction of all the worlds, the place where they blended again into one another. Undulations of movement as each world unfolded and unfurled before her. She floated suspended at the nexus of the universe where there was nothing before her but possibility.

Just ahead lay the ribbons of chance and choice that began one fateful morning a thousand years before. Each one carried an element of the original, only deviating in time to gain a life of its own. Separate, and still connected at the point of origin.

She was overwhelmed. Her preconceptions dissolved in the face of so many worlds apart from her own.

No words existed here. No language. Only streams of life flowing from their source. Infinite. Immeasurable. Each tinged with their own unique hue.

She searched for him, plumbing each world, one by one. Finding her way. Tasting each one before moving on. Navigating the rivers.

She thought for a moment that she'd found his world again, but she couldn't find him there, and so she went on, looking at each strand just for a moment, just to see if she could catch a familiar glimpse that would tell her she had found the right place. Each one, an echo of the world she knew, but different. Some, so similar that she might not know it wasn't hers until she looked closely. Others, like Severus's, visibly different on the surface and, perhaps, in philosophy as well.

And two that made her heart ache.

Here, beneath the setting sun, Hogwarts stood. Deserted. Echoing with emptiness, the grounds overgrown. She knew without knowing how that he had never lived in this world, and she wondered what happened to the witches and wizards who were meant to be educated here.

*It could all end, she thought. We always feel so sure of ourselves, but we could all disappear.*

She paused for a moment between the worlds and let the white light succour her until she could move on to the one world she hadn't yet checked.

And there she was, looking through a window in a high tower in a Bulgarian castle. She saw Severus and gasped. He sat, looking calmer than she'd ever known him to be. Experimenting. Books open on the table behind him. Cauldrons simmering on the table in front of him, soft ochre smoke painting swirls in the air. So peaceful. The door opened and he looked up, face lit with joy. In walked Lily Evans, carrying ingredients, and joined him at the table. He leaned over and left a lingering kiss on her lips.

Hermione crumpled to her knees, watching them...her unspoken fears come to life. There was meant to be a world in which *they* found love with one another. She hadn't wanted to let herself consider that there might have been someone else (Lily... Lily Evans) with whom he might have found joy.

"Selfish, Hermione," she thought to herself. "You have to find him. It doesn't matter if he wants you, if he loves you.

He needs you. *Your* Severus needs you.

Go back and find him."



The Great Hall was teeming with people, but it didn't matter.

"Out!" he shouted to the cluster of pupils sitting around the Slytherin table. They leapt up and scurried out, pushing the enormous doors closed behind them. Severus cast a locking and silencing spell on the doors and ran to the head table, slipping into the nook where the portraits sat.

"Severus! What is happening?" Slytherin was standing at the edge of his frame, looking for all the world like he would leap outside it if given the chance.

"Potter and his friends broke into Gringotts early this morning," he said, "and broke *out* on a *dragon*."

Leave it to Potter to find a way to be dramatic whilst in hiding.

"A *dragon*!" said Gryffindor, a wide grin splitting his face. "Fantastic!"

Slytherin snorted, but Severus could see the affectionate glint in his eye despite the scowl.

"It's coming to a head soon, isn't it, Severus?" asked Ravenclaw softly.

"The Dark Lord is on his way to Hogwarts." He shivered. "He intends to end it tonight."

"Do you have a plan for getting the memories to Potter?" asked Gryffindor.

"I have to find him first," said Severus.

Just then, a searing pain shot through his left arm. The Carrows. They had called *him*. They had the boy.

"Severus?" Hufflepuff's voice. Concerned.

"They have Potter. Now. Somewhere in the castle. I must go."

"Severus," called Slytherin. "You make us proud."

He nodded, choked for a moment.

"Thank you," Severus whispered. "Thank you all."

He turned back to the enormous doors, flung them open, and raced in the direction of Ravenclaw Tower.



battle has begun and the glass in which we live and breathe rattles with the sounds of war.

I feel the castle shake and reach out for the others as they reach for me.

"The Hallows are not part of Hogwarts in this world," says Godric. "We cannot depend on the walls of this place to protect or guide them."

"No," says Rowena. "But if they do have control of the Hallows here, I hope they use them well."

I whisper our wish on a current of light and send it into the ether.



The portal swirled with colour and cacophonous sound; a storm was brewing at the intersection between the worlds.

Find him. She had to find him.

*Start again, Hermione. One stream at a time, slowly.*

Her fingertips brushed against the surface of the mirror again, starting with the deep blue, familiar and comforting to her as her own world. For a moment, she felt bathed in water. Another breath, and she let her fingers move into the greener hues, dry earth below... she let her eyes sweep over the cemetery in that world. Deserted. The castle on the hill was quiet.

Another breath and her fingertips moved past the yellow hues past the orange and into the red. She gasped. The air was hot, but she shivered. There was the ruined castle. Hermione huffed in frustration.

Too far, not here.

Back to the strip of orange. She dipped her fingertips into the stream of colour, and while it was hot, she could still breathe. She could see, as if through a window of the castle. Movement. Excitement. Students out of bed long past curfew.

The orange light of spells cast. Aggressive spells. With wands.

Hermione shuddered.

A shout, and without warning, a body flew out of a window. Glass exploded everywhere, and for a moment it looked as if the shards were cushioning the body as it plummeted towards the ground below.

Black clad, dark haired.

Oh, god.

"Severus!" she shouted, but she knew he couldn't hear. She could see him, but she couldn't step into his world. Her thoughts skittered wildly. In despair, she tried to burst into his world through a piece of shattered glass. But the shards fell too quickly, and she remained frozen with the horror of watching him fall.

She braced herself. Waited for his body to plunge to the ground. Crushed on the rocks.

Instead, he twisted his robes until they flowed behind him, and slashed his wand across the sky. Impossibly, his body began to rise, even as it sped across the grounds. Flying.

"You never said you could do *that*," muttered Hermione. She sank to her knees, gasping for breath, tears streaming down her face, still watching as he flew far from the castle.

She might not be able to join him, but she could follow. As if on wings of her own, she tracked his descent into the heart of the Forbidden Forest.

"Severus," she called out, and for a moment, she thought he might have heard her voice, carried through the trees on the wind. "Severus, I'm here!"

He shivered, and she wished she could touch him, wrap her arms around his thin body and warm him again. But she stayed imprisoned in the space between worlds, searching, searching for the doorway, a way into his universe where she might hear his voice again, and he, hers.

"Hermione," he whispered. His lips formed the shape of her name as he paced through the trees, restless. He hadn't forgotten then, she thought. In the dark of the night, he thought of her.

"There has to be a way in, Severus," she muttered, though she knew he couldn't hear. "I'll find it."

But an hour passed, and then two, and there was no reflective surface through which she could step. She could only hover there, watching him, listening, trying to send her warmth through the night air to wrap around him like the cloak that surely was meant for him.

Finally, another wizard, dirty and careworn, approached him beneath the shade of the trees.

The other wizard spoke, and both Hermione and Severus shivered.

She saw Severus's eyes darken, but he only bowed and made his way out of the forest. Hermione followed, as if tethered to him by a shaft of light she could not see. Finally, he entered a battered building and climbed the stairs slowly, one by one.

Abruptly, Hermione felt as if she'd been shoved beneath a pane of glass, watching the scene from below transparent floorboards. She pushed up against them but they held fast.

She still couldn't hear, but could see Severus, standing stiffly, looking as if he was trying to persuade the other man...the snakelike man...of something important. Desperately. The Dark Lord (for it must be him...who else could look so vile, so evil?) fingered his wand...Elder wood, long, and pulsing with power.

*The Elder Wand.*

It couldn't be. The Elder Wand was part of Hogwarts; it couldn't be in the hand of this wizard. What did it mean that the Darkest wizard in a thousand years held that wand in his hand?

Hermione whimpered and looked at Severus. His face was deathly white. Frozen. She had never seen such a look on his face, never dared to imagine such profound terror even after waking from nightmares of his grisly death.

Severus wasn't looking at the other wizard anymore, but at the enormous snake coiled in a cage of magic suspended in the air. He raised his wand as if suddenly aware of some danger, and she cried out, forgetting everything apart from the knowledge that something awful was happening and she had to get to him, had to help him.

"Severus!"

All at once, the Dark Lord slashed his wand through the air and the snake tumbled free. Hermione couldn't hear it, but it didn't matter. Severus's silent cry of pain rent her, cutting her until she was certain it was her blood staining the clear barrier, her blood rushing from her body, her heart torn from her chest, torn to shreds.

Through the veil of red (*his blood, it's his blood*), she could see the wizard leave, his snake gliding behind him. And before she knew it, another wizard was there. The young wizard from the forest, Harry, and his friend...the other Hermione. She could see Severus reach out to him, whispering something, the look on his face urgent, as a luminous substance poured from every pore of his body. It mixed with the blood on the floor, the tears falling from his eyes, scarlet and shimmering silver, combined on the barrier, and, unthinking, Hermione ran her fingertips over the surface and felt it ripple and give.

Blood, memory, and tears. Heart, mind, and soul. Finally, a mirror through which she might pass.

Harry and the other Hermione lingered too long, and Hermione wished she could forcibly throw them from the room.

"Severus!" she shouted when the room was finally empty apart from the lone wizard whose lifeblood was pumping from his veins.

"Severus!"

And thrust her arms through the pool of blood and tears and soulful memory to pull herself into Severus's universe, to his side.

He wasn't moving, though the blood was still pulsing from the bite on his neck.

"I'm here," she whispered, and laid her hands on the wound, her tears bathing the wound and mixing with his blood, blending with his memories. She sat with his head in her lap, whispering healing spells and his name, over and over and over again until she could no longer tell one from the other.

*Severus, please come back. Severus, stay with me. Don't go* she murmured, until she felt him shudder and take a breath at last. His pulse was weak, but it was there. No

telling how long he would last without expert help.

"Hang on, Severus," she whispered as she slipped her arms beneath his limp body and slid him into the portal. With strange ease, they both passed through.

"Help me!" she cried to the Founders, or to anyone who might hear. "Help! I have him, but I need help!"

The space between worlds spun as if in the midst of a cyclone. Noise and air...rage and pain from seven worlds, from a thousand worlds, from infinite worlds where frightened people harmed one another for power...pounded the air around them.

"He finished his job!" she shouted. "Let him go! He needs help! Let me take him with me!"

The light deepened, orange and angry.

"Enough," murmured a man's voice. Familiar. "He's done enough."

And the tumultuous light retreated, bringing in the tide of blue that Hermione knew was their only hope. She stumbled towards it, taking the trail she knew led out and back into her world.

"Please," she whispered, though this time, she couldn't say to whom.

As if in answer, another portal appeared: a thin line of blue light, then a shimmering pane of glass, and finally, a luminous doorway. She didn't stop, couldn't, just walked right through, landing in the middle of the infirmary where Matron Pomfrey stood, frozen for only an instant before bursting into motion, lending her help and her healing to them both.

Later ...

The first time he woke up, all he knew was white hot pain, shrieking through his veins, blotting out every other sensation as if a fire had indeed obliterated everything he was and had ever been, leaving only searing heat and ashes. He might have tried to cry out but no sound came from his throat.

He woke later to a more muffled pain, thoughts tumbling now with fragmented images he hadn't the will to decipher. Beneath the fog thrummed urgency and a sensation of running, though he knew he was still. Soft hands settled him and sounds which might have been words brought silence.

Other awakenings came later, like shafts of refracted light, moments when he surfaced from the depths of sleep and echoing pain into the brutal noise of voices and bustling feet. As soon as it became too much (it was always too much), he would fall again into blissful sleep. Mindless, but peaceful.

He would thank whoever sent him there, if only he could stay awake long enough.

Finally, he surfaced from a web of dreams (red-tinged spells and fangs; silver memory sliding to the wooden floor and green eyes turned brown), for the first time nearly free of pain. Thin morning light tickled his eyelids and the rhythmic sound of her breath (it must be hers) puffed against his cheek. He moved an arm gingerly and swept her hair from where it lay across his face.

He nearly laughed with the improbable joy of it.

"It's good to see you with your eyes open," said a familiar voice.

Poppy Pomfrey. Not in robes, but a long tunic, a caduceus embroidered on the front like a chest plate. Despite the unfamiliarity of her costume, he relaxed to the comforting image of a Healer at the foot of his bed.

He must have moved again because she huffed in that imperious way all Healers had, and so he lay still again.

"Stop that. And no talking for at least another twenty-four hours," she said sternly. "It's been nearly a week since Hermione fell through that window with you in her arms, and both of you covered in blood."

As if it had been his fault he'd dirtied her pristine hospital floor. His chest warmed with the familiarity of it, though this woman was a stranger.

"You must give your throat more time to heal. That was a nasty bite." The matron frowned and fiddled with the edge of his blanket, smoothing it down though it didn't look wrinkled.

*Nasty bite was certainly one way to put it* Severus thought.

He'd watched the Dark Lord dispose of his followers (and enemies) with the serpent more times than he'd care to count, but in all honesty, he'd hoped his own execution would be meted out with the altogether more dignified *Avada Kedavra*. Clean. And final.

Six months ago, he would have said he preferred that sort of death. But now? Now, the woman who had pulled him from his fate was sound asleep with her head on his pillow. If he reached out his hand, he could even stroke her cheek.

He was *alive*, and for the first time in forever, he was not alone. It was so much more than he had expected and nothing he would have ever believed he could ask for, but he'd take it. With both hands.

"I'm Matron Pomfrey," the older witch said, and he pulled himself from his thoughts to nod. "We're going to have to wait for Hermione to wake up again to get properly introduced," she continued. "Poor girl was too frantic when she got here to do anything more than hover and shout directions at me. As if I need instructions in healing from a potions apprentice. Honestly." She sniffed. "And of course you were in no condition..."

She cleared her throat and he inclined his head in agreement. He had undoubtedly been in no condition. No condition at all.

Severus brought his free hand, the one not trapped by the glorious weight of Hermione's body, to his throat. A wide bandage was wrapped around his neck and even his own fleeting touch made him flinch. In a flash, he saw Nagini, her wide mouth, those enormous teeth, coming at him. He struggled to breathe.

"Now, now. Take it easy," Poppy murmured. Skilled hands gently moved his away from the wound and, in a flash, brought a potion to his lips before he could turn away. Reflexively, he drank. She might not know him, but he knew her. She was trustworthy.

He slept.

When he opened his eyes again, the room was bathed in firelight, softened by the diffuse glow of the moon. Hermione was awake, sitting by his bed, reading.

"Hello there," she said softly, and his heart ached at the sight of her red-rimmed eyes, bruised from exhaustion and worry.

He tried to smile and grimaced. It hurt to move. Merlin, it hurt *to breathe*.

"Matron Pomfrey says you'll start feeling better by tomorrow morning, and that your healing should continue smoothly from then on."

He lowered his eyelids in acknowledgement. It was enough for now to see her. To hear her voice, and to know that he had survived. A small miracle, or a large one, perhaps.

"There are a lot of people who are going to want to meet you," she was saying, and he raised his eyebrows. "Not today, though."

Not today.

Today was for more sleep and marking the incremental retreat of the pain.

Tomorrow would be for finding his voice again, for questions, and, perhaps, for a few answers.

Later ...

"How is he?" asked the headmistress.

Hermione looked up from her book and slipped a bookmark between the pages to hold her place.

"Better," she said. "He's healing remarkably well, considering it's only been two weeks since the bite. He's been using his voice and it gets easier each time he tries. The potions seem to be making all the difference."

McGonagall pulled up a chair next to Hermione.

"He looks wretched," she said.

"Apparently war does that to a person," snapped Hermione, and the headmistress laid her hand on her forearm.

"No offense meant," she said, soothing her with a touch. "I just can't remember ever seeing someone looking so battered."

"And exhausted."

"You're giving him some stiff competition there, my dear," noted the headmistress.

Hermione looked at Severus, sleeping peacefully after a difficult afternoon of speaking and walking in loops around the hospital wing. The dark circles beneath his eyes had started to fade, but nothing could mask the sharp line of his cheekbones and the sallow cast of his skin. She hadn't been able to reach him through the portal for months; who knows how much he'd been sleeping and whether he'd even taken care to eat properly.

"It's only been a few weeks for me. He's been at it for years," she said softly. "Can you imagine?"

The headmistress shook her head. "It's like seeing the darkest chapters from our history books come to life," she said. "Battles and Dark Lords and spies."

"I don't even know how it ended," said Hermione. "I dragged him back through the portal, but the war was still raging when we left." She looked at McGonagall. "He's been thinking about it. He hasn't asked me to try to find out; I think he might be afraid it'll appear ungrateful. But I think he needs to know."

"Of course," she said. "You have the mirror?"

"With me all the time," Hermione said. "Though I had wondered whether the Founders in the stained glass might be able to find out..."

"I shall ask them and report back," said McGonagall, and Hermione felt a wave of relief. Severus had waited long enough. When he woke up this time, she wanted to have something to tell him about what he'd left behind, something to reassure him that what he had sacrificed hadn't been for naught.

"Headmistress?" Hermione said before the older woman could rise to leave. "What happens next? After he's healed, I mean."

The other woman paused. "This is unprecedented, of course. The Ministry must be consulted. As far as our universe is concerned, he doesn't exist."

McGonagall wrinkled her brow, thinking. "On a purely practical level, he is in possession of a wand, and that, of course, cannot be permitted." She raised her eyebrows and sighed. "Never mind. It will all be sorted. It simply takes time and patience."

It would, of course, thought Hermione.

The headmistress left in a swirl of long skirts, and Hermione turned back to Severus.

"If that old biddy thinks I'm going to allow her to lay a single one of those spidery fingers on my wand..." The voice from the bed was still a bit raspy, but the words were quite clear. "...she's even more delusional in this universe than in the one I just left."

Later ...

He'd made it to a chair, at least, but he hated facing her when he was still so weak. Hermione sat alongside him, a tight smile on her face.

The headmistress had visited him, of course, and once or twice he'd even been awake to greet her. But this was the first time they would meet as peers, the first time he would look her in the eye since he'd been chased out the castle window.

It wasn't really *her*; he knew that. His Minerva McGonagall was back in his universe, hale and hearty, if the report of the Founders could be believed. His world was in shambles, but at least Potter had prevailed. The Dark Lord was, at last, vanquished. And he had survived, but was more dislocated than any person, wizard or not, had ever been.

Minerva sat opposite him, or perhaps he should call her Headmistress McGonagall. He had only recently been introduced, after all. It was... bizarre, he thought, to see this witch look at him with curious eyes and not with the rage filled ones that had chased him from the castle behind hexes and jinxes.

He suppressed an overwhelming desire to *explain*, to show her the layers beneath his façade so that she would understand him at last.

But *this* Minerva had never known Severus Snape. She hadn't taught him and hadn't ever struggled with Dumbledore's decision to trust him. This Minerva had never felt betrayed by him.

"I understand you are making a fine recovery," she began, and Severus was grateful to her for breaking the ice.

"Yes," he said, "I am. And I am enormously grateful to your staff for their excellent care."

"It is our privilege and our responsibility, both, to provide aid to one in need, Mr Snape."

He nearly corrected her. But here he wasn't Headmaster Snape, or even Professor Snape. This society was, he reminded himself, different in countless ways from the one he knew. He was truly a stranger here.

"Call me Severus," he said, and she smiled.

"Thank you. You may call me Minerva. I understand that in your world, you were a professor at Hogwarts for many years. And headmaster."

"I was," he agreed.

She tilted her head and looked at him with a gaze that was all too familiar.

"I realise that you are not acquainted with our culture and customs, Severus."

"No, I am not," agreed Severus. "I look forward to learning more. Hermione has explained some elements, but your world is vast. As is mine."

"Indeed," said McGonagall, brushing an invisible piece of fluff from her skirts. "I'm sure that you will enjoy perusing the history section of our library and discussing our ways with Hermione, as well as the other staff members. However, today I do have another order of business to address. Now that you are on your way to recovery, we must discuss how to proceed," she said.

"Proceed?" echoed Severus, glancing at Hermione, who sat beside him.

"Well," said the headmistress, "I can deter them until you regain your full strength, but the Ministry must determine what is to be done with you, mustn't it?"

Alarmed, Severus attempted to stand. He hadn't escaped the clutches of not one, but two masters, only to be led into the maw of another.

"Thank you, Headmistress," he said as he struggled to his feet, shaking off Hermione's hand on his arm attempting to settle him back in his chair. "As you so astutely noted, I am unfamiliar with your culture and customs. Nonetheless, I am not about to put my fate in the hands of your Ministry."

He turned to Hermione. She, too, had risen to stand alongside him. An ally, even here, in a world where the government's steady, guiding hand had gone unchallenged for centuries. *His* ally, despite being raised in this world's culture, taught this world's mores.

"I'd rather take my chances with the Wizengamot in my world, Hermione," he said. "I'll go back and face them all before I'll let your Ministry determine what is to become of me."

Hermione looked frozen only for a moment before she nodded once as if she'd made a decision.

"Is there any possibility that an exception can be made for the obviously extraordinary circumstances, Headmistress?" she asked, but it was clear she knew the answer.

"Our world is changing, Hermione, don't doubt it. But I cannot imagine that the court would consider permitting a wizard to carry *awand*, and you know as well as I do that he would never obtain employment without a portfolio in hand from the Ministry."

Hermione turned to him, deflated.

"You wouldn't; she's right," she said. "Everything is tightly regulated. Everybody has work, but..."

"But nobody is allowed to decide for themselves," he said.

"The most rigorous methodology available is utilised in the determination of education, profession and partner selection," said McGonagall, and Severus nearly laughed aloud.

"Arithmancy or Divination?" he asked. "Or, perhaps, Astrology."

"Astrological projections have a seventy-six percent accuracy rate..."

"So nobody is allowed to make their own mistakes, then," he said, interrupting her again.

"Why on earth would we want our young people to *makemistakes*?"

Severus paused, thinking back to the teenager who wanted nothing more than to be powerful; the young man who regretted and repented errors in judgment made out of arrogance, and the man who spent a lifetime attempting to mend what he had broken.

"Why would we want to make mistakes?" he repeated, taking Hermione's hand in his. "So we can learn from them."



It took a few more weeks until the Matron deemed him fit to leave. Weeks filled with a grumpy Severus complaining about the speech therapy and the physical therapy that, while agonising at first, did rehabilitate him with astounding speed.

Between visits from the specialised Healers, the Matron left them alone. The castle was nearly empty, and the hospital wing was deserted apart from the two of them, spending most of their time reading together and talking. Daylight conversations felt sometimes like lessons, going over what they hadn't had the luxury of time to do when Hermione had been in his universe. His world's history, customs, culture, and hers.

Late at night, though, when Matron Pomfrey had retired to her rooms and the castle was completely quiet, they would lie side by side on his bed, whispering about childhood hopes and adulthood dreams. They never spoke directly about one another and who they might be to each other, but of themselves, fingers threaded together, conversations ending with the gentle rise and fall of his chest under her cheek and his hands caressing her hair even as they slept.

Finally, the Matron deemed him well enough to be out from under her watchful eyes, and McGonagall moved him to rooms down the hall from Hermione's chambers.

"Take your time," she told him. "Regain your strength. You don't need to make any hasty decisions. I am the headmistress of this school. I have the prerogative to house you at my discretion." She smiled. "The Ministry will wait."

Before he could speak, Hermione did. "Thank you," she said, grateful for the gift of time. More time.

He had nothing of his own, save the clothes on his back, and those had been ruined. Transfigured robes had done the job for a time, but now he was going to be roaming the castle, maybe even leaving it. So she went into Hogsmeade and purchased the necessities. Settling him into his rooms was a simple matter, and then there they were.

Both of them awake. Nobody at imminent risk of dying.

*Alone.*

Hermione tried not to giggle.

"What is it?" he asked, confused.

"I think it must just be relief," she said, letting a wide smile bloom on her face as she collapsed into a chair. "When I was in your world, it was in the middle of a war...both

times. And ever since you've been here, it's been all about getting you well, hoping you'll heal, and then worrying about the Ministry. This is the first time..." She paused to take in a long, deep breath.

"This is the first time we can just be. Without interruption. Yes." For a moment, he looked as lost as she about how to be, what to do, with no urgency pressing them into action or escape. And then it occurred to him that while he had no established existence in this universe, she did.

"Don't you have work to do?" he asked.

"The students have gone," she answered, "and I do have my potions project, but that's ongoing."

"Oh?"

"I'd almost forgotten that you're a Potions master," she said, smiling. "Do you mean to suggest that you'd rather discuss my Master's project than browse the library or walk the grounds?"

He reached for his new robe and swung it round his slim shoulders. "I assume that those activities are not mutually exclusive," he said. "I would dearly love to hear about your project. It's been too long since I've been in the lab. Fresh air and the library will undoubtedly come in handy as we work, wouldn't you say?"

"I would," she agreed.

And so it was that when Hermione Granger and Severus Snape swung open the door to the potions lab, hand in hand, Lily Evans looked up to greet them.



## Chapter 10

*Chapter 10 of 10*

My chambers are dark, lit only by the glow of the midnight moon.

The castle creaks with rawness of stone and antiquity of magic, filled with the power welling up from beneath the mountain and the fire of intention fuelled by our four vibrant streams of magic, combined.

It is nearly impossible to recognise this expanse of land from just six months ago: pristine grasses as far as the eye could see, cresting on a tidal wave of green, the shadow of grey stone a skeleton underneath. A spider's web holding together an enterprise that, tonight, feels like folly.

I had expected to feel exultant.

\*\*

This story is ten chapters, and complete. I will be posting one chapter every couple of days. :)

He might have gasped at the sight of her, but all he could hear was the rushing in his ears.

There she sat, Lily Evans as she had never been. Older than she had ever become in his world, hair a deeper auburn than in adolescence, when the sun had lightened it to shades of copper and gold. Laughter lines around her eyes (she's happy... I'm so glad she's happy) and the familiar purse of her lips in concentration; her face was both familiar and utterly foreign.

Hermione looked between the two of them, her eyes lingering on his face. Watching his every expression. He'd told her everything. Every heart-wrenching wish and heart-breaking error as it related to Lily. It was ancient history, and in all truth, he had never expected to see either one of these women again. But now, here he was, the two women in the world whom he had loved (oh, god, loved), standing in the same room.

"Hello." Lily stood and extended her hand. "You must be Severus."

She didn't look surprised to see him, and he remembered that Hermione had told her the story, his story with the Lily of his world. He hadn't been pleased, and they had rowed about it, but in the end, he understood.

Her voice had deepened with age, and in an instant, his Lily and this Lily converged and then diverged again into the road not taken and the one that had been cut short.

He blinked.

This was not his Lily, and yet, through her, he could imagine what might have been had he made better choices. Would they have shared a lab, had a family together? Would she be greeting him with a smile and a kiss, had he chosen differently?

And most importantly, would he want her to? He looked over at Hermione, whose grip on his hand had become vicelike. He squeezed it, reassurance and reminder alike.

He reached his other hand forward to clasp Lily's. "I am Severus, yes. And you are Lily Evans."

Of course Lily knew who he was, and yet, she didn't look disgusted. She didn't flinch away.

"You knew me," she said, and Severus wondered what she really wanted to know.

Did he know her? This woman who had grown into a Potions mistress, who had mentored Hermione? Was this the woman he had loved as a girl, the woman he had unknowingly betrayed?

He looked at Hermione and his heart ached at the worry in her eyes.

This was the woman who had stood by him, who had searched this universe (multiple universes) to find him, to save his life. This was the woman he loved.

He looked back at Lily and smiled.

"You?" he echoed. "No. Never."



They sat round the lab table, notes spread out between the three of them.

"So, you're trying to create a potion that will replace the Ministry's current Astrological methods," he said, just to be sure he had it right. It still irked him, this idea that the Ministry had so much control over the fates of the people it governed.

"Correct," said Lily. "There has been growing discontent around the results the Ministry has been obtaining. Especially over the past six months, interestingly enough."

"It was a problem before," Hermione clarified. "Wizards and non-magicals returning to the Ministry months or years later, complaining that their work was unsatisfying or their spouses unsuitable."

Severus snorted. "You do realise that even in worlds where no government decides such things that work is often unsatisfying and spouses unsuitable."

Lily laughed. "Yes, of course. However, in your world, do you need a formal court hearing to change them? To leave your job or break off a relationship and choose someone else?"

Severus shook his head. This put even Dumbledore's Machiavellian tendencies to shame.

"Does anyone know how the system evolved this way?" he asked. "I don't understand why the government would want such a degree of control. Isn't it far more work for them?"

"It is," said Hermione. "But they believe, and we have all been taught, that it is worth the cost because it, at least theoretically, reduces chaos. And chaos is frightening."

He closed his eyes to think. Magical means of determining a person's fate and future. The foreclosure of choice.

Oh.

"They are no less afraid of differences than we are in my world," said Severus softly. "They've just found another way to hide it."

"I don't understand," said Hermione.

"My world is filled with a history of prejudice and horrible, unconscionable acts of violence against those considered different...with different meaning 'less than'. Pureblood families are at an advantage because of their connections but also because society makes it so. Muggle-borns...that is, witches and wizards born into non-magical families...are educated, but there is a subtle prejudice that they carry with them. You have more to prove."

Hermione and Lily looked at one another. "We? Witches like Hermione and me?"

"Both born into non-magical families. Am I correct?"

"That doesn't matter here, Severus," Hermione reminded him.

"I realise that," he agreed. "But are you any more free to decide how to live your lives than the witch in my world born into a non-magical family but who has difficulty finding a job in her chosen field because it is dominated by pureblood families?"

"So a potion isn't the solution, is it?" asked Hermione.

Severus caught her eye and shook his head. "Not to determine each person's fate, no."

"They'll never agree," said Lily, slamming the lab notebook shut. "It's been this way for a thousand years."

A thousand years.

"I have an idea," said Severus. "Can we see the headmistress in her office?"



It was half past nine by the time they got up there, and the evening light made the room glow golden. No wonder Hermione had looked so shocked at the sight of his office. This room felt like an extension of McGonagall herself, books and artefacts that reminded him of those that Dumbledore had always kept. More than that, though, it was the tapestries on the walls and the small tokens of regard that lined the edge of her desk. Sculptures and pieces of glass and stone...found objects he imagined students had given her over the years. The sorts of things a teacher kept in memory of students and their attachment to one another.

Even if students in his world had been liable to such acts of generosity of spirit, his desk would have been bare. He knew this, and he knew that it wasn't only because of the role he had chosen (had needed) to play, but also because of his natural reserve and caustic tongue. He had grown to fit the mask he wore, and it had grown to suit him. Still, now that he had discarded it, could discard it, he found himself longing for those luminous moments, the bright light in the student's eyes when he finally understood, the proud set of her shoulders when she'd succeeded.

He could never be a teacher here; it wasn't allowed. Maybe in a hundred years, when their world had changed, too. In truth, he wasn't sure that was what he wanted, anyway. One thing he knew for certain: he wanted to have the time and the opportunity to decide for himself.

The three witches stood waiting, side by side, as he looked around the office.

"Pardon me," he said, clearing his throat carefully. "This room feels entirely different with you occupying it," he said to McGonagall.

"I can imagine," she said. "I understand that you took the post under some duress. I don't imagine you had time to settle into it and make it your own."

"I didn't," agreed Severus. "But I see that I might have enjoyed it, had I been given the opportunity."

The headmistress smiled. "I admit, it's difficult to imagine a wizard behind this desk."

"He was a marvellous headmaster," said Hermione softly.



"You were hardly there," Severus said with a half smile.

"So what? I didn't need to be there long. I have eyes."

She had seen him protect the students. Saw him worry over their safety and hers. She had seen him struggle to deliver the final, essential, piece of information to Potter, even as he lay bleeding, lay dying.

It didn't matter that Lily and Minerva were standing there. The wave of gratitude and adoration that swept through him was too powerful to resist. He stepped forward and gathered Hermione in his arms and buried his face in her hair. She snaked her arms around him and held him tight, the two of them holding fast to each other even as their worlds shifted beneath their feet.

Lily's snuffle roused them, and both he and Hermione pretended not to notice the other women wiping their eyes.

"What do you need to do?"

"I need to ask the Founders if there is a way to put things to right." He looked at the stained glass windows glowing with the evening light. "I want to know if it's possible to undo what was done a thousand years ago."



stand by the hearth, talking in low tones. He takes in the room with his eyes and his heart and my own heart breaks for him and all that he's lost.

"What do you think, Rowena?" I ask, watching her watching them. "They will ask us. What do you want to tell them?"

She pauses, considering. Rowena never was one to answer without a healthy dose of contemplation.

"I say, move forward," says Godric.

"That is what you always say," says Salazar. "So, hush. Wait for Rowena. She has actually *beerthinking* about this. You know, thinking?"

Godric just huffs and goes to fiddle with a spell he's been working on over in his glass frame. Rowena smirks and pulls her hair back into a tie. Even wrought in glass, it gets in her way.

"It has been a thousand years," she said. "I suppose it would not hurt to give them a chance, hmm?"

None of us say it, but I know we're all thinking it. Giving them a chance means believing that we've all learned what we needed to learn. That we recognise the cost of our beliefs, especially when we impose them on those around us.

Which reminds me.

It's hard for me to believe, but in a thousand years, I haven't ever said it out loud. Not in so many words.

"Salazar." He looks at me, his face blank. "I am sorry." I whisper, but the sound of my voice fills the glass with sound and feeling. "I was only trying to help."

He crosses through Godric's frame and Rowena's into mine. His face is still immobile, and for a long moment, I'm not sure what he is going to do. And then, slowly, gently, he takes my hands in his. His head is bowed and we both look down at the ring he still wears on his index finger.

"I, too, owe you an apology, Helga," he says roughly. "With the perspective of a thousand years, I can see that what you did has benefited us all in the end."

I squeeze his hands and smile. He pretends not to see my tears as he leans forward to kiss my forehead.

"Now," he says, "let us offer this witch the ingredient she has been missing."



The glass was clean, clear and bright, just as it had been when last she'd gone through the portal. The Founders sat facing the room, as if they were prepared for their request, perhaps even knew what they needed.

"Welcome," said Slytherin. "It is good to see you well."

Severus swallowed thickly and nodded. "I admit," he said, "I had not anticipated seeing any of you again. Not after..." He cleared his throat.

"The battle was long and bloody," said Hufflepuff. "Many were lost, but ultimately, evil was vanquished. At least for the time being." She smiled.

"It does rear its head again and again, doesn't it?" muttered Godric.

Slytherin laughed. "Don't pretend to complain, Godric," he said. "It gives you plenty to do, doesn't it?"

Hermione might have said the expression on Gryffindor's face was cheeky had he not been one of the Founders. She blushed and smiled at Severus, who looked dumbfounded.

"He was better behaved in your universe, Severus," said Hufflepuff.

"Marginally," muttered Slytherin.

Hufflepuff smiled. "You did have so much on your mind."

Hermione looked over at the headmistress and Lily. They were standing just beyond the desk, watching.

"Astonishing," murmured McGonagall. "Absolutely astonishing."

Godric bowed. "Pleased to see you again, Headmistress."

"Gryffindors," muttered Severus, and Sytherin laughed.

"She'll have no idea what you mean by that," Slytherin said. "But for what it's worth, you're absolutely right. Transparent, the lot of them." He laughed again.

And there they all were. Smiling and relaxed, and for a moment, it seemed as if the world, or worlds, as it were, might all line up and be all right.

Ravenclaw sat, indulgent, watching them, and Hermione saw her catch Hufflepuff's eye.

The light-haired witch cleared her throat and the room grew still.

"Lovely as it is to see you all, and delighted as I am to see Severus here, alive and well," she said, "there is something you need from us. Am I right?"

Hermione nodded. "You are."

"Tell us," said Ravenclaw.

"You are aware, of course, of how this world governs," Hermione began.

"We are," said Ravenclaw.

"It poses a problem for us," Hermione continued, gesturing between herself and Severus, "but in truth, it has been a problem for our world for a long time."

"We are aware of that," said Hufflepuff.

"Each of the universes possess some, hmm, imbalance," said Slytherin. "Reflecting a part of the whole but not encompassing all of its potential nor all of its possibilities."

That would explain a lot, thought Hermione. Her own world's overbearing protectiveness at all costs; Severus's world's negligence and focus on power.

"Can it be repaired?" she asked.

"I told you she was a Gryffindor," murmured Gryffindor, none too subtly.

"She's ambitious; she should be in Slytherin," said Slytherin.

"Brilliant," murmured Ravenclaw in a singsong voice.

"And ever so loyal," said Hufflepuff with a smile.

Severus huffed and Hermione looked over at him with a grin.

"You enjoy having them fight over you?" he asked, but his lips were twitching in that way he had when he was trying not to smile.

"No," she said. "I love having proof that your House sorting system keeps people from embracing different parts of themselves. By your system, you belong in Gryffindor for your bravery, Slytherin for your cunning, Ravenclaw for your obvious brilliance and Hufflepuff for your persistence... spying for decades, Severus?"

"It would seem," interrupted the headmistress, "that we have lived for many centuries with access to only a fraction of the potential of the universe as a whole. Am I correct?"

Helga nodded. "You are. And I am afraid that is my responsibility." She held her head high. "I acted with the best intentions, and I do believe that ultimately, splitting the world saved it from destruction. However..." She paused.

"Until very recently, the universes have become increasingly distorted," continued Ravenclaw. "As the tendency gains momentum, I fear what might happen."

Hermione felt a knot in her stomach.

"But I thought that over the last six months or so, the rigid rules of this universe had been loosening," said Severus. "And certainly the last six months or more in my universe were extreme."

The headmistress came closer to the windows, as if to address the portraits and people together.

"Yes," she said. "Over the last few months, we have noticed changes in the population. In their requests for more autonomy. In their dissatisfaction with the status quo."

"Ever since I passed through the portal and returned?" asked Hermione.

McGonagall paused. "Possibly."

"Would you lot know anything about this?" asked Severus.

Slytherin smiled. "We would, indeed," he said. "It took you long enough to ask."



"My potion?" Hermione repeated, confused. "Why do you need my potion?"

"If you want to know how to mitigate the damage of what has been broken," said Hufflepuff, "we can show you. But we need your potion."

"It has not worked thus far, has it?" asked Ravenclaw.

"No," said Hermione. "It hasn't." She looked to Lily, who smiled encouragingly.

"We're getting close, though," Lily said.

"You are missing an ingredient," announced Slytherin. "That is why it hasn't worked. But hurry, your opportunity for today will soon pass."

It was clear that the portraits weren't going to say another word until they had the potion in front of them. And so Lily moved quickly through the Floo...saying, "I'll get it,

Hermione; you stay here," ...and brought back a stoppered flask of liquid, its colours shifting with the light. Now violet, then blue, and with a tilt of the flask, vibrant greens and yellows, until with a twist, the oranges and reds pulsed within it.

"Magnificent," murmured Slytherin. "Well done."

Hermione blushed and took the potion from her mentor and brought it closer.

"Open it," said Slytherin, "and hold it in front of the windows."

With a glance to Severus, who nodded once, though he looked just as baffled as she felt, Hermione unstoppered the flask and held it up to the fading light flowing through the windows. It was nearly sunset, and the colours of the descending sun pierced the glass.

*Retreating light... red and orange, tinged with blue... flows through the portraits. Green and orange-red, blue and yellow glass, absorbing the light, twisting it. Transforming it... until it touches the potion...*

"Oh!" gasped Hermione.

The light had converged, a swirl of colour as if a rainbow had been twisted together over and over again. Like water, it flowed from the window into the open flask... which turned from a kaleidoscope of colours to a brilliant white.

The potion seemed to pulse in Hermione's hand as she held it there while the sun finished setting. Nobody could look away. It reminded her of the light in the portal, like memory, thought Hermione, or perhaps the silvery white of Severus's Patronus when it brought Harry what he needed most.

"What is it?" Hermione asked, her voice hushed.

"That," said Salazar Slytherin, "is what the essence of the universe looks like."

"When it's whole," added Hufflepuff.

"What do I do with it?" asked Hermione.

"One drop," said Slytherin. "If you take one drop, the influence you have already had on the universes by travelling to them will increase exponentially."

"There is no way to bring the worlds back together. It is their fate now," said Hufflepuff. "But you can seed them with pieces of the others. Let the seeds grow."

"Our hope is that this will ultimately bring balance and health to each of them."

"There was one where it looked like all the witches and wizards had gone," Hermione said. "When I was looking for Severus, I saw it."

The Founders looked at one another and Hermione thought she might have seen some moisture in Slytherin's eye. But he was made of glass, so that couldn't be right.

"We don't know how change will happen, or if it always will," said Ravenclaw. "And it is not your job to make it so. Just travel to each world. Be who you are. Ask your questions and listen to the answers. Bring bits of what you learn with you as you travel." She smiled. "You will join the worlds together with your touch."

"Travel across the worlds," Hermione echoed. "Well, we can't stay here, because of Severus." She stopped short, her heart pounding. "Well... well, we can't stay here."

The room was silent and it took her a minute to realise what she had said.

*We.*

She didn't even know if Severus wanted to be with her. Had no idea what he wanted and whether she was welcome.

"Can we have some time to discuss this?" asked Severus into the silence.

"Of course you can," said Hufflepuff. "You have the potion. Just one drop, remember. You only need one drop."

"Also," added Ravenclaw, "you may dose anyone you meet in your travels who you believe is suited to the task."

"What task?" asked Lily.

"Adaptation," said Hufflepuff.

"Revolution," said Gryffindor.

"Transformation," said Slytherin.

"Revision," said Ravenclaw.

"Across the worlds," said Hufflepuff. "They can repair themselves if given the chance."

Severus let out a long breath and Hermione looked at his face.

His eyes were shining.



Her rooms were dark when they returned, but neither rushed to light the lamps. The potion glowed with its own luminescence; and it was enough. Without a word, they sat side by side, watching the potion...looking like no less than memory and soul, heart and mind, made tangible. All of it held in the palm of her hand.

Just like she held his heart, he realised. Had done so ever since her eyes had blazed, indignant at Dumbledore's treatment of him, determined to right the wrongs. Determined not to leave him alone ever again. Even when she'd gone back to her world...had been sent back by him...he'd felt her presence through the hum beneath his skin. The day he'd seen her again in the glass, really seen her, and she'd seen him, too, the day before the night his world ended, he had felt peace for the first time in months.

"Will you stay with me?" he asked softly, though his heart was racing. "It's a lot to ask. It means leaving here."

Hermione reached over and placed the potion on the table in front of them and took his hands in hers.

"I don't want to stay here if it means being without you," she told him, and it felt as if the universe was inside him, lighting him up more brilliantly than any Patronus.

By the light of the potion, which glowed with the brilliance of seven reflected moons, he kissed her. She leaned into him and her lips were so soft. He lifted his mouth from hers and dropped kisses along the line of her cheekbones, her scent filling him with sunlight and the smell of rain.

She broke away reluctantly and lifted the potion flask again, looking at it as if through a prism.

The Universe. Whole, right here in her hand.

*Should we?*

They had already traversed worlds together, braved the chasms between them to find one another. The universe inside them? Simple, by comparison.

He smiled.

Hermione placed her fingertips around the rim of the glass and then brought one to the centre. A single, shimmering drop of potion hung in the air between the flask and her finger, and she brought it to his lips. He opened his mouth and she released the drop onto his tongue. It tasted of air and earth, fire and water woven together, warming him as he swallowed. In an instant, she had another drop at her lips and he watched as she placed it on her tongue.

"Severus," she whispered, capturing his mouth again with hers.

"I'm here," he answered her, and it felt as though by saying so, he was remembering that she was there, too. For him. All for him.

He wrapped her in his arms, for the first time ever, with no fear pushing against his skin. No worries about the world outside, and no fears that letting himself love her could destroy them both. This time, he could give himself to her whole. Like the universe cradled in a crystal flask, his heart was complete.

They fell asleep beneath her covers, bare skin against bare skin. She had her arm around him as if he might slip away while she slept, and he wondered if she, like he, had lain awake night after night in the dark, wishing he could reach out and touch her.

There would be no more waiting. No more longing. No more loneliness. They held the universe inside of them.



sun rises, sending brilliant yellow light streaming through us, through the windows and into the Hogwarts of seven worlds.

Here, the light touches the headmistress's desk as she considers a request for a male faculty member to join her staff. There, a young man...the saviour of his world...memorialises a wizard he believes dead, a wizard he finally recognises as a hero. In another world, witches and wizards who never knew themselves to have magic awoken, bit by bit, recognising the magic that lives in their blood.

One by one, seeds of change are planted and we witness their blossoming from within our home of pigment and glass.

Centuries will pass and we will watch each one of our gardens bloom. We will watch over them all.



Original Prompt: (Placed at the end of the story.) Mirror universe - parallel universes. In one, HP canon runs as we know it - Snape is Potions Master and spy. In the other, the wizarding world is at peace, and at Hogwarts, Potions is being taught by one Professor Hermione Granger. The two professors begin to be aware of one another when shadowy images appear, very faintly perceptible, in reflective surfaces such as mirrors, windows, water, wine in a glass, etc. Each becomes fascinated by the phenomenon, and curious. Gradually, they come to see that they are aware of each other. How are their worlds parallel, and in what ways different? How do Hermione and Severus begin to communicate? How does Professor Granger come to believe that she a) should and b) can help Professor Snape? What happens after the end of DH?

~~\*\*~~

a/n:

I am incredibly fortunate to have a veritable Quidditch team (if you include reserve players... ahem) of alpha readers, beta readers and cheerleaders. I simply could not have written something of this scope without them, and they deserve so much credit for making this story work. Each one brought a unique point of view or expertise to the process and helped me immensely as I groped my way through the world-building and character development and searched for plot. (I'm always searching for the plot. Just ask them.)

So, here goes. :)

First of all, thanks to Dicky for writing such an intriguing, brilliant prompt and for being awesome in general... I was highly motivated to write something that would be deserving of her as a recipient. \*squishes her

Massive hugs to subvers, lady\_rhian, and bluestocking79 for alpha reading/cheerleading and general "yes, this works" all the way through. You were my rudders.

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Thanks to the mods and especially to scatteredlogic for making sure the complex coding worked on this monster of a story. \*hugs

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Finally, juno\_magic wrought her incredible magic in two massive ways for this story. First, she did the coding (which took days) that created the gradient color background that gave the story (as originally posted on the SSHG Exchange on LJ) its visual punch. She also did the most in-depth editorial read that I've ever experienced. It was massive, detailed and absolutely invaluable not only for the story, but also in pushing me as a writer. I don't think there are enough words to express my gratitude to her. Juno, you humble me.

Ladies, you all humble me.

\*standing ovation to the alpha/beta/cheerleading team