

Felix Infelicis

by juniperus

It is said that angels are bright still, though the brightest fell, but we know what the road to Hell is paved with...

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 2

It is said that angels are bright still, though the brightest fell, but we know what the road to Hell is paved with...

"Help! Someone!"

Hermione, most of the other clinic staff, and at least a dozen patients rushed down the corridor towards the sound of screaming and hysterical cries for help.

"Margot! Stop screaming!" Hermione's supervisor quickly pushed a slight woman, gawking from the doorway, into the arms of another clinician before elbowing her way into the women's lav and demanding answers from the middle-aged woman still calling for help, transfixed by the scene before her.

"I needed t'use the loo before the group session," she mumbled, eyes still trained on the first stall, where a health care assistant was crouched, holding a motionless arm and frantically searching for a pulse. "I'd just got m'jeans buttoned when I heard a thunk." The supervisor stepped between the woman and the stall as another assistant tripped the lock and the toilet stall spilled out the body of a young, brown-haired woman.

"Jackie," Hermione breathed. She turned away, blinking back tears. She'd only met with the shy runaway yesterday—she was a week from completing the program, getting her certificate, meeting the requirements of her probation, and qualifying for job seeker's allowance. "I get to start a new life," she'd told Hermione, enthusiastically, "Dr. Brownlow said I'm like wisteria."

Wisteria. Hermione had heard her supervisor's description of the teenagers who ended up with them, after running away from bad situations, back alleys, and predators. "Children just need a chance—wisteria is dead easy to grow, give it some love and it'll practically run amok... but plant it in the coldest, shadiest part of a garden, and it'll wither, too. We're good soil and sunshine, Hermione—we're here to give them the chance to thrive."

"That's the thing with wisteria, Petal," Hermione recalled her father saying, when she watched him gardening. "Without enough support they topple right over." *Without enough support...*

That was years ago. A lifetime...

Hermione was still on guard, back to the wall, when the ambulance arrived to take Jackie away. She needed to get out of there, needed to get through the crush of the curious at the door, necks craned to catch a glimpse of the wilted flower on the tile floor.

With Brownlow speaking to a policeman, Hermione saw her chance and slipped out. Her eyes passed over the group loitering in the corridor and spilling into every adjoining space, all visibly affected by the discovery of Jackie, dead from an overdose. She stopped and looked again across the lobby. *I'm seeing things*, she thought, as she recalled another body strewn across a floor, years ago, unseeing eyes wide open.

She shook her head and moved to retreat into the relative safety of her makeshift office when she spotted him again. This time she focused in on the tall man hunched into

his leather jacket, hands in his pockets. Even dressed in Muggle clothing and attempting to remain unnoticed in the throng of addicts (*recovering addicts*, she automatically reminded herself), his profile, the lanky hair hanging in his face, was unmistakable.

She took off like a shot.

"I believe you're my next appointment," she lied, as she gently took his elbow. "My office is much quieter, Mr. ... uh..."

His eyes widened and his gaze darted from side to side looking for an escape route. And found none—the front entry was full of police and paramedics and a stretcher full of dead girl that they were having difficulty fitting through. Visibly damping his evident panic, he mumbled, "Prince. My name... is Prince," before allowing Hermione to lead him through the lobby.

Her mind raced as they briskly moved down the corridor towards the offices and group therapy rooms. *He's alive? He's here? But how? And... why?* She took a sidelong glance at his emaciated frame and a face far more worn than even the last time she had seen him—and *then* she would have sworn he's aged years since the night of Dumbledore's death—that explains the *why*... but...

The end of the corridor. Her office.

"Why are you here?" he rasped, as he leaned against the closed office door.

She fumbled with the lock, then motioned him inside. "I'd like to ask you the same, but I'll start." She sat at the makeshift desk and turned towards the only other chair in the tiny office. "After the war, after... everything, I couldn't bear to return to Hogwarts, to enter the Aurory with Harry, so I hid in the Muggle world, hid from... everything..." She trailed off, realizing he'd relaxed into the chair, his head tipped and resting against the wall as he regarded her.

She closed her eyes against the sight of her former professor and again found her voice. "I stayed with a cousin who worked in a clinic like this in London... Lambeth... volunteered a bit, you know... learned how to relax again. Nine months in I decided to sit my NEWTs cold, just to get them over with." She paused.

"And?"

"I received Outstanding marks in Potions, Charms, and Defense Against the Dark Arts, but only earned an Exceeds Expectations in Ancient Runes and Transfiguration." She shrugged. "I became a Healer—it seemed like the only sane option after, uh..." She gestured at nothing.

"Everything?" He raised an eyebrow.

Hermione snorted. "Yes, *everything*. I would have preferred to remain in the Muggle world, to be honest, but when faced with the records nightmare of having left Muggle education at age eleven, I decided St. Mungo's would suffice. I completed my training, and helped my ward mentor establish a Muggle-style psychiatric program. The wizarding world was a right mess, rampant with PTSD, but I hadn't recognized the patterns until I returned. I'd met a few Iraq vets at Lambeth, you see..."

At the look of confusion following her last comment, Hermione clarified, "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. *Shell Shock*. A very large number of Healers and researchers at St. Mungo's are half-bloods or Muggle-borns, and many of those come from families with a background in medicine—it was surprisingly easy to find Muggle doctors with magical siblings willing to take on 'interns' for six to eight weeks at a time. Dr. Brownslow has a magical fraternal twin."

Severus sat up sharply. "Hufflepuff, two years my senior. *I knew* she looked familiar."

Hermione nodded. "Hufflepuff is correct... the age sounds about right. She works in the spell damage ward, currently over-full with victims of potions damage... none of the damage is accidental, however... not quite. Before the Harry J. Potter Postwar Wellness Clinic had got off the ground..."

Severus barked out a laugh.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "It is a ridiculous name, but he donated the seed-Galleons and St. Mungo's insisted his name would attract more interest. They were right, I'm sure, but Harry hates it." She suddenly found her hands very interesting as she quietly added, "He tried to name it after you, actually—he's been keen to name *something* after you since he got your acquittals through the Wizengamot."

When she raised her eyes warily, she was amused to see his mouth hanging open, aghast. "The Potter Clinic sounds much better to me, now."

"I thought it might." She grinned. "Eventually it'll be fully-staffed and fully-operational once it expands to include the Felix Felicis addicted, Cheering Charm addled, and alcoholics. Once I finish here, I'll arrange for other Healers to intern in my stead, in addition to their specialized St. Mungo's training."

Sitting back in her chair, Hermione crossed her legs comfortably before concluding, "There, I've told you my bit—what's *your* story?"

Severus paled. "Broom cupboard?" he asked, looking around the office, uncomfortably.

"Yes, it was. Don't change the subject," she replied, her eyes fixed on his face.

He closed his eyes and leaned his head back. He remained in that position long enough that Hermione grew concerned—but then he quietly began to speak. "I'm not happy that you know I survived, or that I'm about to share this with *you*... but obviously, as you discovered me in a Muggle clinic for drug addicts, I'm existing at a level of desperation that allows me neither privacy nor dignity."

So quietly did he speak that Hermione had to lean forward in her seat to hear him. This was not the Severus Snape she remembered from Hogwarts. *It was* him, yet... *that* man had been dynamic, formidable, a force to be reckoned with. The man sitting in front of her was depressed, broken... even the memories Harry had taken from him showed a whole man—hurting, but whole.

Merlin, what *happened*?

"The summer after the Tri-Wizard Tournament I was... compelled... to devise a potion. The need for me to return to the life of a double agent was paramount... and so I quickly researched an ancient formula—long-banned—and attempted to remove the most illegal of ingredients while retaining efficacy. I was not successful. A brilliant, more experienced Potions master had been supervising my progress..."

"Who was..." Hermione asked, eyes wide.

Severus held his hand up and opened his eyes. "Stop. Allow me to continue, please." He watched her, waiting for her nod of assent before he continued. "My mentor knew what was at stake—namely, your friend and the whole of the wizarding world—and suggested substituting Felix Felicis for the excised components."

Hermione gasped. "Surely you knew..."

"Of *course* I knew it is highly addictive—do you think me a moron?" he snapped, then glared at her until she sat back and gestured at him to continue. "... As did he. But he didn't think there was time to find another way."

Severus laid his head back against the wall and sighed, again closing his eyes. "The goal of the potion was to boost my Occlumency abilities, to ensure that The Dark Lo...

Vol... *Tom Riddle's* considerable Legilimency could gain no purchase in my mind; most important was to protect my secrets and Potter's and the Order's. I understood the danger of long-term Felicis use; I had planned to mitigate that for as long as possible... What I didn't understand, however, was the interaction of one of those long-unused, ancient potions components with the Felicis. One of those—*Lactuca virosa*—was, I eventually discovered, a distant, magical, relation of the opium poppy. That salient detail was in no Muggle reference, nor any magical text younger than the second century Before Merlin."

Hermione again gasped but covered her mouth with both hands. Her mind—her potions-trained mind—raced. Since the Tri-Wizard Tournament—ten years *Oh dear God.*

Severus looked at her. "I'm not a heroin addict. Nor am I a Felicis addict, not precisely. No, it's the combination... the withdrawal is as if I'm attempting to break the bonds of both, at once... which, I suppose, I am. I have. Tried, I mean. Many times." He sighed and opened his hands. "Obviously, I have failed."

Hermione scooted forward in her chair, not unlike the way she had as a child when preparing to put her hand in the air. But she wasn't a child, and twenty-six-year-old women do *not* wave their hands in the air. Instead, she held her breath until he sighed and gestured grandiosely that she might speak.

"You've tried to detox on your own? *After ten years on that potion?* She was aware her voice had taken on a higher pitch, but not that she'd nearly yelled the questions until he sat straight up and looked worriedly at the door. "Sorry..." she near-whispered. "I'm amazed you didn't kill yourself!"

"I quite nearly did. Three months ago, a year before that, and every year since I woke up on the floor of that bloody shack with no strength, almost no blood, and bloody Fawkes sitting on my bloody chest pleased as bloody punch." He snorted, and shrugged as her mouth opened to ask how he called the bird. "No idea—I'd planned to die in this thrice-damned escapade, hoped I would actually—would've taken care of the addiction, eh?—I blame the Felicis... not enough luck to keep that monstrous snake from ripping out half my throat, but enough to call a bloody Phoenix to save my miserable hide. Figures."

His eyes slipped closed again. "Bloody well *figures*."

"Why did you come to this clinic?" Hermione asked. "If all of the magical remedies for Felicis poisoning failed you..."

"Methadone, or another Muggle-synthesized substitute. I've come to the conclusion that my only chance is to fight the Felicis and opium at the same time... and if I die trying, then... then that's it. I'm tired."

"You won't die trying," she said, still at a near-whisper. "Not if I can help it."

"Is that why my case was reassigned to you, then? I talked to a tall, Indian man on Tuesday last." He looked confused, tired.

Addicted, addled.

"Y-yes. That's it." Hermione bit her lip before catching herself and schooling her features. *Damn that 'tell', anyway... not that he would have noticed with his eyes closed.*

"Do I need to go to the 'Potter Clinic'? I don't much care to stay here, if it's all the same to you."

Oh, *Circe*. "No! I mean, I'd imagined you'd prefer to remain in familiar surroundings. I assume you didn't include your correct address in your records..."

His smile only went as far as the crinkles at the corners of his eyes, but it was as genuinely animated as he'd been the entire meeting. "You assume correctly."

She pushed a pencil and pad of paper toward him. "Address, in full. And the name of the ancient potion and list of ingredients, if you please..." She held up her hands when he glared. "I just want to know what I'm dealing with—I'm not doubting your abilities. When do you want to start?"

"As soon as possible... yesterday. Ten years ago."

If Hermione still had that time-turner, she'd have considered the latter. "Tomorrow night?"

Severus nodded, then stood up with a wobble.

She looked down the corridor before leading him towards the lobby. Chaos still reigned in the women's lav.

Hermione offered a bright smile and gestured toward the doors, waited for him to turn the corner, and ducked into the main office. His file—Nullius Prince—was second from the top in the stack of today's cases, just under Jackie's. Jackie's doses of methadone were still near-ceiling... they were to start tapering her today. Thank Merlin—Hermione quietly pocketed the tablets that had been pulled for her and left unattended when the screaming started. It should be enough. She hoped.

She glanced at the clock... it had been a little less than an hour since she arrived that morning. Enough time for a woman to die, a dead man to be found, and his life put in her hands.

She glanced at the schedule diary as she tucked the hair already escaping its hair band back into place. No one for another forty minutes. Right. She ducked back into her office to glamour the pills and hide them in the bottomless pocket of her Muggle purse, grab a tenner, and lock up.

Hermione needed to clear her head... and a cuppa. *And I'm quite certain Dr. Brownslow would appreciate one, too* she thought, as she slipped through the propped-open lobby doors and headed in the direction of Caffè Nero.

It's likely to be the least questionable thing I've done all morning.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 2

It is said that angels are bright still, though the brightest fell, but we know what the road to Hell is paved with...

Hermione passed the obviously abandoned factory for the third time. She dug in her pocket and pulled out the note Snape had scrawled. "Spinner's End, behind the old Lloydfield Mill on the corners of Lostock and Mellor Streets, Miles Platting." She was on Mellor, facing the mill building, which was surrounded by a fence and overgrown vegetation. She walked down Lostock and looked at boarded-up cul de sacs, none of which were Spinner's End. She walked through a dilapidated park to the canal,

stopped to stare at the looming smokestack of the huge, former Victoria Mill, and turned to walk back to Mellor.

Had he put her on?

As she neared the rear of the old factory she craned her head to look at its broken windows, tripped on the crumbling pavement, and... fell into the fence. Into the fence, through the fence, and—as she felt the very strong and very prickly Muggle Notice-Me-Not charm—into a shrubbery. She righted herself with a huff, irritated with herself for not thinking to cast a simple detect magic charm. As if a wizard like Snape would have been hiding somewhere straightforward all these years... she really should have known.

Still... behind an abandoned factory? She made her way through what appeared to have been a deliveries and parking lot before the weeds had taken over near the scraggly line of trees. As she ducked under the low-hanging branches, she felt the tell-tale prickle a second time before finally facing what appeared to be the remnant of a cobbled lane of terraced houses that had to have been built before World War I, all boarded-up... except one.

Casually leaning in the doorway of Number 13, Spinner's End, was Severus Snape, who took one last draw on his cigarette before putting it out with the toe of his boot and vanishing the butt. He looked really good for someone who has been an addict for a decade—looked good for any reason, but especially because he didn't look like her former teacher.

That was good. It would be difficult to see him as her teacher—and one upon whom she had a long and distracting crush—when he was her client... but it was difficult to consider him strictly a client, given the professionally reprehensible way she was handling his situation.

Oh, Hermione, what have you got yourself into?

"You're late," he said, then grinned at the look of indignation on her face.

"You could have mentioned the fence."

"What fun would that have been?" He turned around and started walking away, motioning her to follow.

"Wait, don't you live here?" Hermione called after him, as she trotted to keep up with his long strides.

He grunted in reply and waved her forward.

"Wait, wha..."

"Chippy."

She stopped. "I have a car."

"S not far," he called over his shoulder as he turned behind the last house.

Hermione blinked in confusion, then bolted after him. *Blasted man.*

He was nearly to the roadway over the canal before she caught up with him. He must have taken this route often, if the worn path to the broken fence at the rear of the property was any indication. "Hey, slow up—you're taller."

"And you're shorter—how is that my problem, precisely?" he snarked, even as he slowed his stride. As she trotted to his side, out of breath, he turned and cocked a brow at her. "Really, Miss Granger, you should take better care of yourself."

She opened her mouth to retort, then caught herself when she noticed him grinning, again. Had he always had a sense of humor?

He pointed as they rounded the corner. "Shop is just over there... stay back a bit, it's Sheila's night at the till. I love this part." He walked faster to get ahead of her, then paused to take a pair of glasses from his pocket and wink at Hermione before putting them on and opening the door.

At a woman's scream, Hermione rushed into the store just in time to see a woman older than her mother jump up and down and scream, again, before disappearing into the back. She stared at him, dumbfounded, as he accepted a greasy paper bag from... Sheila, Hermione supposed, and gallantly kissed the back of her hand, before turning and leaving the shop.

"Ta-ra, Mr. Lennon—always a pleasure," Sheila gushed.

Merlin.

Hermione paid for two bottles of Coca-Cola and left, finding Severus Snape outside, leaning against the wall and laughing. If she weren't feeling so indignant, she might have enjoyed the sight of his mirth.

"That wasn't very nice. That poor woman thinks you're really *him*," Hermione chided.

He glared at her. "Did you ruin Potter and Weasley's fun, too?" He rolled his eyes and started back down the pavement. "I tried telling her years ago, and she wouldn't have it."

"The glasses?"

"My own special touch." He grinned again. "No harm has come to her from the owner...I've made sure of it...and she loves the attention *And* the way prices have gone up, it's spot on."

She rolled her eyes at him, but didn't comment further as they returned over the canal. He paused to allow her through the warded and disguised fence opening first, and then fished in his pocket.

"Smoke?" he asked, as he thrust a packet of Woodbines at her.

"No, thank you," she said as she screwed up her face.

"Too posh for such a dirty habit?" he sneered, as he stuffed the packet back into his pocket. "Or is it that you smoke a better class of fag?"

Hermione stopped. "*What?* Just what are you trying to say?"

He shrugged. "Nothing."

Hermione was surprised by his sudden turn of mood. *Was he nervous about trying to detox, again? Did he need a fix?* Despite his ability to make a joke, he was obviously still as prickly as ever.

Severus sped up as if pursued, then stood hunched on his doorstep, frowning, as she continued to walk at the same pace. *He can snipe all he wants, but I'll be damned before I break into a sprint just to cater to his strop-py whims.*

As she reached Number 13, he hunched even more and opened the door before mumbling, "I don't entertain, so don't expect much. Apart from the period before the war when I was burdened with Wormtail, there hasn't been a single visitor since Mum died."

As she stepped inside in front of him, she quickly took stock of the worn furniture and area rug, the bookcase-lined walls, and the patches of aged and faded wallpaper she could spy over them. "You haven't changed a thing since she died, have you?"

He shuffled in and closed the door. "No. No need to. Nothing has changed since she spelled the block—it's not as if I could get a delivery of a new lounge suite, even if I wanted one."

Hermine blinked, and then stared at him in confusion. "Spelled?"

"When the mill closed, Da tried to get other work...and sometimes he managed it, for a few weeks or months at a time, before the drink'd get the best of him...but the other men found positions and families moved, especially once the city started tearing down the workers' neighborhoods near waterways in the name of progress. *These* houses were progress, once—built after the dodgy Victorian stews were knocked down. When we were near all that was left, and Mum cast a notice-me-not spell on this whole area, Obliviated a few workmen, and planted memories of having wrecked the place... every year she added layers of spells. The last set I helped with before I went back to school my fifth year."

He pointed to a ratty chair in front of the fireplace, then retrieved an old metal chair from what had to be the kitchen. After Hermine sat, he put a piece of fish and some chips on a plate and handed it to her, then made up a plate for himself. He looked surprised when she pulled fizzy drinks out of her pockets and set them on the small book-table between them but then nodded and tucked in.

I should have expected mood swings, Hermine thought, as she recalled his upbeat mood anticipating the chip-shop, his sour demeanor on the way home, and now this almost-relaxed and almost-convivial meal together. *But there seems more to it than just the effect of the potion.*

She ate appreciatively—she needed to remember the location of the chippy; the fish was better than the one near her small flat—but quietly, until the question she'd been dying to ask just couldn't be contained any longer. "So... when did the Evans family move? Surely before the spell was cast..."

Severus popped the last chip into his mouth and sat back, making the rickety chair squeak in protest. "They left while we were in our third year—climbers they were, like the sister. Wanted a comfortable house and a proper neighborhood like the one you grew up in." He eyed her warily before popping up with the chip bag, loudly crumpling it as he escaped to the kitchen.

Ah. Hermine recalled some of Ron's least impressive moments, including being over-sensitive to the point of starting a fight after the one time she'd invited him home for dinner. The rest of that summer, at Grimmauld Place, had consisted of her avoiding him. Felicitas-abuse paranoia poured salt on every old wound—at least Severus hadn't begun ending every sentence with '... *not that you would know what that's like.*'

Even though she was full, she finished the last—soggy, cold—chips on her plate (best not to leave open an excuse to accuse her of finding the food not to her standards) and carried their plates to the kitchen, where she found him sitting, head in his hands, on the other kitchen chair.

"Leave them in the sink."

"I appreciate the meal and the company—I can do my part," she started before he held his hand up to stop her. She glared at him until he looked up. "My parents fought with spotty teenagers over brushing their braces and pulled rotted teeth for a living—it's not as if they could afford to send me to Clifton Lodge, for Merlin's sake! I do my dishes the Muggle way every day in my flat, just as I did when I was still living with my parents—and I'm going to do them here, too." Hermine stood with her hands on her hips, staring at Severus until he rolled his eyes and shrugged.

Victorious, she turned and began filling the sink. "So... tell me more about the potion. I want to know what it did for you, what difficulties you had with ~~it~~ everything." When her request was met with silence, she stopped the faucet and said, firmly, "*Now.*"

After a long-suffering sigh he muttered, "You don't get owt for nowt, Severus."

Hermine made quick work of the plates and neatly hung the dish flannel before Summoning the chair from the other room and joining him at the table.

He cleared his throat and shifted into the formal speech and cadence she recalled from Hogwarts. "The *Silentium Exulceratum* potion was, as I said, designed to boost my ability to Occlude. It did so by addressing several areas at once... anxiety..."

"The valerian?" she interrupted. He glared, then nodded.

"Also the *Lactuca virosa*, which in some antiquated texts was called 'opium lettuce,' masked the detrimental effects on magic from extended periods of high anxiety."

Her eyebrows raised.

"Anxiety wears on the mind, on the body, and on magic. There is fraying, and an experienced and powerful Legilimens can detect it as easily as looking at that old rug," he explained, gesturing to the other room. "The fraying can't be entirely prevented, because the anxiety cannot be—not should be—fully suppressed, but the magical signature of the wear can be camouflaged."

"And the physical effects?" Hermine asked, recalling how his physical appearance changed at the beginning of her fifth year, growing increasingly unkempt and gaunt over time. "You weren't sleeping or eating properly, were you?"

"No, but the Dark Lord hardly noticed such trivialities, particularly since I'd carefully cultivated a reputation for greasiness. Many of the same side effects opium addicts experience were, to my chagrin, also present due to the shared origins of the two plants. That hardly contributed positively to my appearance."

"Or reputation," she added. His hair-trigger temper that alternated with an even colder detachment than usual had been a frequent topic of discussion in the Gryffindor common room—she could think of more than a few keen students who suddenly changed potential career paths to avoid NEWT-level Potions.

He inclined his head towards her. "Or reputation... not that I considered that a negative effect, except when dealing with my colleagues during my time as Headmaster—I behaved more horribly than was strictly necessary to Minerva on more than a few occasions."

Hermine examined his face as he closed his eyes against those memories and looked pained just to have mentioned it. She waited for the furrow between his brows to smooth before continuing.

"Cut ginger root is used in Wit-Sharpening Potion—and although highly illegal, the eggs of the runespoor would have gone even farther to enhance your mental ability, correct?"

"Yes...my abilities as a Legilimens were heightened considerably. After beginning the *Exulcero*, the only minds that could Occlude against me were those of Dumbledore and Riddle. It proved... useful on more than one occasion."

"So bitter wormwood was the potion's namesake component, then?"

"Yes—if used in a bare fraction of the amount used in the Draught of Living Death, the heart rate remains slowed to a resting heart rate. This also means that reflexes are slowed, and in high-stress situations my skin looked more pallid than usual because there wasn't enough oxygenated blood flowing."

Hermione cringed. She doubted the certain damage to his internal organs could be completely healed, at this point. Mitigated, possibly, but even *that* might be considered too hopeful.

Snape shrugged. "Neither of those side-effects have given me trouble since I left the wizarding world—I have fervently avoided undue stress and situations that require quick reflexes."

She frowned as she pondered his last statement. "What happened when you tried to detox on your own? That was more stressful than one of your average days at Hogwarts."

"I wouldn't be too sure of *that*," he said, dryly, then sighed. " ... Excruciatingly painful numbness in my limbs before I passed out, cold. Very unpleasant."

"Very," she agreed. "Out of curiosity... what component did you replace with the Felicis?"

"Harpy claws."

Merlin. "They were actually used in potions? And the fools trading them, transporting them, and using them *lived*? They're even more dangerous than Gorgon spittle or distilled Erumpent Horn fluid!"

"Hence the substitution."

"Bloody hell!"

"Indeed." He closed his eyes as he had in her office, sitting still as the dead. As she waited she noticed him clutching the table.

Tremors. So it begins. "Where do you want to do this?" she asked, quietly. "Your bedroom?"

He nodded, eyed still closed.

Hermione clutched her hands behind her back and waited for Severus to stand—controlling her urge to help him was difficult, but she knew it wouldn't be appreciated.

Not yet, but soon.

She slowly followed him out of the kitchen, pausing to gather her things before peering through the bookcase-camouflaged door he'd passed through. *Stairs... an old two-up-two-down. I've read about these early-century rookeries.* She gingerly ran her hand along the same wallpaper she'd spied earlier—but not as faded, the stairs were barely lit by the single sconce at the top. *It's like stepping back in time*, she marveled. *No, it is stepping back in time... it was already very old when Severus was a baby. I wonder if he has indoor plumbing...*

She shook her head and proceeded up the stairs. She couldn't imagine what it must have been like to grow up here... in poverty, surrounded by derelict houses and—after his mother cast the spell—in complete isolation.

She'd never had a clue, when she'd been his student, that he was anything but a pure-blood of some means. Ron wore his family's material shortcomings on his sleeve, not appreciative of the wealth they possessed that couldn't be bought. The arrogant, disdainful dungeon bat the boys had joked about was suddenly cast in a new light. Lonely and secretive—an aberration in his own House. Hard, spare, and cunning—because that was how to survive, here. Harry had disclosed to her the contents of the memories he'd collected from Severus... they'd made no sense to her whatsoever, until this moment.

Although not as bull-headed as she used to be, she was still largely unused to being wrong—and she'd been wrong about Severus Snape all along. This new information was nearly as shocking to her as his description of his addiction.

She paused at the top of the stairs and looked at the three doors crowding the tiny landing. She peeked into a dark room with the door ajar and sighed with relief. *Indoor plumbing, thank Merlin.* She knocked on the door adjacent.

She heard a muffled "Come in," and moved toward the sound. In three steps she crossed the landing, then placed her hand on the knob.

"Have you changed into something comfortable? You know th..."

The door opened, suddenly. "I know very well," Severus snapped. He stood before her in the same t-shirt now paired with threadbare flannel trousers so large they fairly fell off his hips. She stared at his long, bare toes long enough that he walked away with a deadpanned, "Looking for cloven hooves?"

"I... no... I never..." she blurted, before hearing his laughter. *I suppose I deserved that.*

As she closed the door behind her she rolled her eyes then set her satchel next to the door. He was sitting in the mate of the threadbare chair downstairs, still grinning.

She fought the urge to grin back at him... unsuccessfully.

"Based on my research, I think managing the Felix Felicis withdrawal first is the best plan of action—is that what your experience has indicated?"

He nodded. "Yes it was the severest period of Felicis-madness coinciding with the rise of opiate withdrawal symptoms that resulted in my needing to stop the process, no matter what other modifications I made with each attempt."

"When was your last dose of the potion? What are you experiencing now, besides tremors?"

"The last dose was this morning—I'm an hour past due and started experiencing Felicis dry mouth nearly a half hour ago."

That sounds about right. "I'll give you a short dose of the Methadone now, and I'll gauge from there based on your discomfort—if you start experiencing pain, I need to know before it becomes unbearable."

He nodded again and stood.

Hermione looked around, then crossed the room to retrieve the chair from the corner and dragged it closer to the bed before retrieving her satchel from next to the door. As she fumbled around the spelled-larger interior of the case, she heard his silent *Aguamenti* fill the glass on his bedside table. After handing him the tablet, she sank down into the worn cushions. It was going to be a long night.

Hell, it was likely to be a long *week*.

"When you've tried in the past, did you get to the point of flooding memories before you passed out?"

Severus sat on the side of the bed and sighed. "For a bit the last time. I don't think I had hallucinations... but I can't be certain, obviously."

"Obviously. Although my clinical experience has been that the hallucinations are both extreme and implausible, so you may be right. It's my hope that you will avoid hexing me if you see something bizarre, but given your skill with wandless magic, I am more than a little concerned," Hermione said, attempting to sound confident (and failing).

His response was to hand over his wand. "Put this away until this is all over. You're correct—I'm enough of a danger to you without it."

She stared for a moment before taking it.

She continued staring after he lay on the bed, one hand behind his head, then shook her head and busied herself in her satchel. *Stop it, Hermione, she thought. You're a professional—act like it.*

She reached forward to take his pulse the Muggle way, and at her touch he pulled back, as if burned.

"I-I'm sorry. I should have used magic, I..."

"No, it wasn't you," he replied, quickly. "You just surprised me... it's just that..."

Hermione was mortified. "You experience the physical hyper-sensitivity? I'm an idiot, I should have assumed..."

He shook his head. "Really, it wasn't your fault. You took my arm at the clinic, and it was fine, remember? For the most part I don't struggle with it as most do. It's only certain parts of my body." He colored.

As his unspoken words dawned on her, she colored, in turn. "Like, uh, your wrists?"

He released the breath she didn't realize he'd been holding. "Yes... my wrists. If you must take my pulse the Muggle way, I suggest you do so on my neck—the scar-tissue seems to inhibit the sensitivity."

She silently berated herself for succumbing to the urge to touch him when unnecessary, even as she hurriedly replied, "I should use magic—being used to working in Muggle clinics is no excuse."

He looked as though he was going to say something else, but suddenly his eyes appeared unfocused and before his next breath, his eyes closed.

Hermione sagged into the chair. *Thank Merlin for good timing. Sudden-onset sleep, more abrupt than narcolepsy—check.*

She rested her head against the back of the chair and again considered the series of poor decisions that had led her to being in Severus Snape's bedroom, with him trusting her as a clinician. She could lose her licensing. She could sully her name. Thought if she were to be honest, all of that only worried her in the context of no longer being able to do the work she knew the wizarding world desperately needed and, more importantly, leaving the reputations of those who had trained her—and those whom she had trained—spotty by association.

She sighed. She'd like to cite latent Gryffindor tendencies to rush in and attempt to help without thinking, but she had only herself to blame—curiosity at his survival and the potion, and the resurgence of her... teenage fascination.... with her former professor had obliterated her usual adherence to medical protocol.

She glanced at her watch, then performed a complete diagnostic—magically. She scribbled notes in a Muggle steno she always kept tucked in her satchel, then stretched.

She ran through a mental checklist: *Thirst, tremors, sleep. The flood of suppressed memories could start at any time. Hopefully the hallucinations won't begin for another few hours.*

Hermione had grown to *despise* Felix Felicis—the ease in becoming addicted... the paranoia, rage, recklessness, and eventual emotional numbing that eventually led to an irreversible state akin to that of a badly-botched Obliviate. And withdrawal was emotionally and magically debilitating.

She sometimes wondered how—if—Ron managed it, but hadn't spoken with him since their fight over his chronic Felicis use. In fact, apart from Harry and the Healers at St. Mungo's, she had no contact with the wizarding world that couldn't be accomplished through Owl Post. Not since the subsequent blow-up with Molly after her row with Ron.

If she preferred to lose another son rather than see what was right in front of her, that was her choice.

What's past is past, Hermione, she reminded herself. Over six years past... at least there's Harry. And Neville and Luna, not that I see them much. The rest of the lot can go fuck themselves.

Hermione's revisiting her memories—the memories she wished would stay as dead as the relationship between her and Ron, a relationship nearly as dead before the breakup as it had been after—was interrupted by quiet moans from the bed. She sat up. *Pain?*

He moaned again, as his face contorted in anguish.

No. Not pain. Not physical pain, at least.

"Da, no!"

Hermione reached out to hold his hand. Harry had told her about all of the Pensieve memories he'd seen, and her heart broke for the little boy Severus had been. Bad enough to live through the first time, much less having to remember it all like it just happened.

"G'away from 'er, boy! Shoulda thrown yeh unnat'ral creatures out m'house *years* ago!"

She pulled back and stared at the man thrashing on the bed. He wasn't ~~remembering~~—he was *reliving*. She'd never seen this before. She didn't know what could happen, what she'd have to react to.

She'd hadn't considered the ways the potion would differentiate from the—obviously—more simple and straightforward addictions to Felicis and heroin. She hadn't considered that the withdrawal may be more intense—more dangerous—than she had experienced in training.

The promise she'd made the day before replayed itself in her mind. *Circe, Nimue, and Medea—help me keep this wizard alive.*

"Da! Stop!"

"Don' call me that, *freak*. Yer no son o'mine!"

"Don't you hurt him, Tobias!"

"Sh'up, woman, or I'll..." Severus' head whipped back before he curled into a ball, shaking.

"Mum? Mum, I'll get help, I'll get you up and carry you out... Mum? Mum, please answer me..."

His face contorted into something she'd never seen before, not even on the battlefield, and his eyes opened, unseeing.

"Y—you killed her, you lazy, drunken Ted! You bastard! You filthy Muggle, I'll—"

His head whipped back, again, and he was silent. Asleep.

No one knows I'm here. There's no one I can ask for help.

Hermione fought back tears. *Merlin knows what horrible things he hasn't yet relived.*

The light from the small window waned as night approached, but she was too overwhelmed and afraid to notice.

Over the next many hours Hermione watched Severus relive every Hogwarts memory Harry had described to her.

And several attacks by Harry's father and Sirius Black.

And the murder of an isolated Muggle family in Cornwall that had been ordered by Voldemort as Severus' proof of dedication. And taking the Dark Mark. And the meeting at which the mangled remains of young Regulus Black, who—Hermione discovered—had been his *other* best friend in school, were displayed openly.

Close to dawn, exhausted and sobbing, she watched as he knelt on the bed and begged Albus Dumbledore to protect Lily Potter. And after he fell asleep for another forty minutes, she listened to him keen as he discovered her body.

There was a reason why staff monitoring Felicis withdrawals were scheduled in short shifts.

But there were no other staff. There was only one shift—one days-long shift.

She fumbled for her wand and cast the diagnostic spell, again, then fell into fitful sleep as she tried to record the data.

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By the end of the second day Hermione had devised a system of napping between flashbacks. She'd allowed herself two bathroom breaks and eaten one-and-a-half sandwiches from her satchel. She'd drank a great deal of tea from her Wicker's Ever-Full flask. She'd both successfully—and unsuccessfully—used the charm St. Mungo's had devised to void bladders into a designated location. She'd cast as gentle a Scourgify as possible and dried the bed linens. He hadn't appeared to notice.

Nor had he noticed when she had to cast it, again, as he relived Remus Lupin turning into a werewolf and closing in on them, her third year.

She hoped to the moon and the stars and all that was holy in the world that his Felicis withdrawal would only last the usual three days.

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Hermione awoke with a start. He was gone. *He was gone!* She tried to tamp down her panic as she grabbed her wand and leapt up.

She heard a flush and the whistle of old pipes, then a bleary-eyed Severus stumble through the door.

"Come in, Albus. You've never visited my home, before... is—is there something happening at Hogwarts?"

He sat on the bed and handed Hermione his empty glass. "Firewhisky?"

She quickly refilled it with water and handed it back to him. He held it up to firelight that wasn't there and took a sip.

"No, no trouble at the castle, Severus. I—I need to discuss something with you. Something... important." Severus reached out and took something that had been offered him, years ago. "This is a tome from my personal collection, I've marked a page. I believe I have the solution to the problem we'd discussed after the Tournament."

This is it! The potion! Hermione listened raptly, poised on the edge of her seat. If she thought the changes in his voice had been shocking before, she was absolutely chilled, now. It was if Albus Dumbledore were really in the room—and not the dotty, mostly-benevolent Headmaster he'd appeared to be.

He looked at his open hands and frowned. "Albus, this potion is poison. Even if it does what it purports, I cannot acquire many of these components... and surely would not survive them, if I could."

"Now, now, Severus. You're a skilled Potions master. I'm sure you can manage..."

He raised his head, staring at a point just over Hermione's shoulder. "And if I refuse?"

"You cannot refuse, my boy."

"You didn't keep her *safe*, Albus. I did what you'd asked, I stayed at Hogwarts, and I agreed to spy for you and lie for you, once more... but—but this ~~is~~ suicide. And I'd not even mind that, if you had only *kept her safe!*"

Severus screwed his face into something ugly, scarcely looking himself. "I *will not* have this conversation with you again—must *lagain* remind you of your responsibility for her death?"

Why that manipulative old...

Severus' face became his own, again, and he closed his eyes. She wondered if he'd slipped back into sleep and moved to help him lay down, when he took a shuddering breath. "No, you don't have to remind me."

Then he *did* fall asleep.

Hermione stared at him, aghast. *Compelled... yes, you were, weren't you?* Sympathy surged within her. *No wonder you were obsessed with Lily all those years... he made sure she rarely left your mind, didn't he? If he weren't already dead, I'd...*

He stirred in his sleep, and she shifted his legs into a more comfortable position. She sighed and gently smoothed his hair from his face. "You always deserved better, didn't you?" she whispered.

She returned to her chair and cast another diagnostic spell before pulling out another sandwich. She wasn't hungry—nauseated, actually—but she had to keep her strength. He had three more years of horror to relive before she could hope to see an end to the Felicis portion of the withdrawal process, and after that... well, she hoped

that the opiate didn't have its tendrils wound as deeply in his psyche.

After two half-cups of tea—she was shaking too much to risk filling to the rim—she slipped out to use the loo. After splashing cold water on her face and attempting to stare herself down in the mirror, she returned to Severus' bedside while he was mid-flashback.

"I showed you the results of each version I brewed and tested...it can't be done! Your suggestion is ludicrous! You could train me, I could *work harder*, I can do this without turning into a pathetic, drooling addict!" he snarled, one fist repeatedly hitting the mattress, for emphasis. "I am more than a Legilimens, I..."

Suddenly Severus' anger dissolved into honey. "But how, Severus, will you protect The Boy if you can't even protect your own mind?" Hermione gasped—she could see Dumbledore, fingers steeped in front of his mouth and eyes narrowed. "He's the key to destroying Tom for good, this time... without him, we are lost... without him, there will be *nothing* left of Lily..."

Hermione's hands clenched into fists—her knuckles turning white—as she fought the urge to scream. *Dumbledore* was the mentor? He *knew* what would become of Severus if he started taking the *Silentium Exulceratum*! It was all *his* idea, *his* ancient and secret text, *his* dangerous changes to the formulation...

She recalled Severus' comment that he hadn't intended to survive the war.

Neither had Dumbledore—she realized, starkly—intended him to live.

The thought chilled her to the bone. How did this wizard go on, day after day, knowing his lot was to be sacrificed? What was it like to be not merely a pawn, but a sort of tortured *agnus dei* in Dumbledore's grand, twisted chess match?

Hermione sobbed as she watched Severus sleep, tugging at her hair and biting her lip while replaying her memories of school through a new lens.

Belatedly she realized that not only was this not the man she'd had a crush on as a teenager, nor was this the man whose life she had told herself she would save because she was a caring professional—not a foolish young woman consumed by guilt for having left him bleeding—no, *this* was a man for whom she'd willingly give up her licensing and with is her professional life.

Even worse: She'd been as wrong about herself and her own motives as she'd been about *him*.

Her fitful sleep was filled with dreams that, upon waking, made her face heat and her heart ache with shame.

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By the end of the third day Hermione was more exhausted than she recalled being in the Forest of Dean.

She had listened to Severus fight with Sirius Black (who, she decided, as an adult was both as emotionally stunted—every bit as malicious as when he was at Hogwarts—and as insane as his dear Cousin Bella), Dumbledore (who *knew* Occlumency lessons from *Severus* wouldn't help Harry, that was clear), Dolores Umbridge, and Peter Pettigrew. The more she understood, the more angry she became. She had left the wizarding world because she considered it an ethically decrepit pit of despair—and nothing she had witnessed over the last three days suggested that her conclusions were incorrect.

She had taken and recorded vitals. She had poured and drunk three hot cups of tea (and another three that had sat, cooling, while she cast charms against Severus' rising blood pressure—without the calming effect of the Felicis on his system, the stress of each day's flashbacks wreaked increasing havoc on his body, especially now that they were coming so closely together that even his falling into narcoleptic slumber afforded him no rest).

She had paced. And paced. *I don't dare nap, anymore... with each episode he's drawing closer to either a heart attack or a stroke, unless I cast the charms quickly. How this thrice-damned potion didn't kill him well before this, I can't imagine.*

He whimpered in his sleep. Hermione whipped around, wand at the ready.

"How could you have been so careless? You knew very well that the ring carried a curse!"

"I am perfectly capable, Severus..."

As Severus' face turned bright red with rage, Hermione began casting diagnostics and charms in close succession. *Obviously not!* Had you waited five more minutes before you could be bloody-*arsed* to summon me—*me!*—you would be dead now! And what would have become of the boy? You have intentionally kept information from me—how would I have protected him if the result of your foolish, Gryffindor stunt had worked as intended?!"

Hermione craned to hear Albus' exhausted, embarrassed mumble in response, "I yet live. You have contained the curse..."

"For now..."

"For now... and I thank you, Severus. I have never doubted your skills..."

Severus' voice lowered, filled with fear. "Albus—you must give me the recipe. Y-your hand is damaged, I will need to brew it now... I can't fulfill your instructions without it. If you had died..."

Her hand stilled. *Recipe for what? He was already brewing the Silentium Exulceratum potion...*

"No. I will continue to supply you with the potion, Severus." Albus' voice was no longer thin, exhausted... it was so cold Hermione shivered. "What would I do, after all, if my spy were compromised, *hm?*"

Severus snorted. "What would you do if I no longer had to beg you for a dose of the elixir, don't you mean? If I wasn't forced to be your lapdog just to function in the face of the Felicis side-effects?" His voice grew even more bitter. "I'm exactly where you want me, aren't I?"

"Indeed."

Severus turned his face away and buried it in the pillow.

Ohgodohgodohgod. Hermione shook with anger. *No wonder he managed to keep functioning so much better than Ron had... there was another potion. And that bastard controlled it, he probably planned it all along before suggesting the Felicis substitution... and we trusted him. I trusted him.*

Hermione hadn't thought it possible to control the long-term effects of the Felicis, nothing in the research she'd done when Ron... nothing in her research had indicated that anything existed that could help mitigate the damage to extremities from decreased blood flow... *A Potions master who could no longer brew because his hands stopped working properly is a liability. And control over the rages, the emotional numbness, paranoia, and madness-generating brain buzz... how could he have functioned in the classroom, much less as a spy, if he...*

She remembered... no, she needed to stop dwelling on that. She and Ron weren't meant to be from the beginning, she knew that now. She knew ~~that~~^{then}. Her failures after she realized he'd been using, after he'd got hold of a nearly-toxic batch, after... she shook her head, as if that could shake her mind and throat from the stranglehold she felt whenever she *remembered*.

No.

"NO!" Severus roared. His open eyes saw something she could not. "I will*not*! I have done all that you demanded, and*more*. For sixteen years you've used me with my knowledge and permission, but you won't use me to end your life. That's too much to ask." He blanched, as he appeared to be craning to hear something... then looked up to the right, then to the left.

Hermione suddenly realized who was speaking. *The portraits! Even they disagreed with Dumbledore's plan... good.*

"That's immaterial, Armando. I cannot allow the boy to shatter his soul..." He paused. Hermione tried to recall which portrait was where, to guess who was speaking. "Ooessa, Vindictus, you fail to understand... Severus must... STOP!" he shouted, Severus face mimicking Albus' rage. "Phyllida, Phineas, *enough!* He will do this," Severus looked down at himself. "You *will* do this."

As his face changed back to his own, Severus' jaw set at the same time his eyes misted over. "Of course I will," he replied, quietly. "What good is a tool if you don't use it, eh?"

Hermione stifled a sob and straightened her back before performing another diagnostic. *Temperature, heart rate, blood press... 210/120! Merlin!* Her wand swished through the air quickly as she attempted to bring his blood pressure down to a safer level.

As it dropped he followed, falling over onto the mattress, eyes closed.

Hermione rushed to his side, smoothing the hair from his brow and mumbling reassuring words even as tears rolled down her face. She had barely regained her composure before she noticed him grimacing.

Another? Already?

Severus' back arched off the bed and he clutched his head.

"I have spied for you and lied for you, put myself in mortal danger for you. Everything was supposed to be to keep Lily Potter's son safe. Now you tell me you have been raising him like a pig for slaughter—"

He gasped. She worked feverishly to control his heartbeat and blood pressure.

"No!"

As he shouted instructions at her, again, to see to Flitwick, she checked and rechecked his vitals.

As he would have been running up the stairs of the Astronomy Tower, knowing what he was about to do, his heart raced and his blood pressure rose.

"Severus... please..."

And rose.

"Avada Kedavra!"**

She scarcely took a breath as he called out orders, spells, as his heart beat a military tattoo in his chest that she struggled to control.

Sweat beaded on her forehead as she concentrated, as her wand swished, as she cast spell after spell in an attempt to keep him alive. Her words from days—that felt like years—before rang in her ears, condemning her. *You won't die... not if I can help it... not if I can help it... not if I...*

"Don't," he screamed, his face a mask of pain, "*call me coward!*"

And nothing more. He'd passed out, finally reaching the limits of his psyche, even as she was attempting to keep him from surpassing his physical limitations.

After confirming that his vital signs were returning to normal ranges, she slumped.

She sat on the bed and rubbed her aching eyes, wishing she had tears left to cool the burning behind them, then wearily laid her head on his chest. *Heartbeat?*

It was there that she woke up, his body curled around her. As he stirred in his sleep she raised her head and realized where she was.

Oh, Hermione. Oh, no.

Before she could extricate herself from his arms, he moaned piteously. She reached around and rubbed his back in what she hoped was a soothing manner. She wasn't sure where her wand had got to, and she needed to keep him as calm as possible.

She kept a stream of calming words flowing at a whisper as, in his memories, he returned to Hogwarts as Headmaster and attempted to protect the students from the vicious Carrows. She heard sharp words of remonstrance from her former Head of House, watched his face fall as he received information from the portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black, listened to him in heated discussion with the portrait of Dumbledore. Shortly after he delivered the Sword of Gryffindor to the Forest of Dean—it was him! *I never knew, Harry never told me... of course, of course it was him*—he finally slept for more than a handful of minutes, and she took the chance to untangle her limbs.

He scrambled after her, weakly, and she gently *shhhh'd* him back to repose as she looked for her wand to take a diagnostic.

Amazing. It worked, she thought, as she rolled slowly off the bed and moved toward the door.

After using the loo, she splashed water on her face once again and studied herself in the age-darkened mirror. "You are a fool, Hermione Granger. You are a reckless, unprofessional sham. Severus Snape nearly lost his life due to your guilt-fueled heroine complex, and this isn't over yet. If you're lucky, you'll only lose your license to your irresponsible folly, to your romantic notions... if you're lucky, all he'll do is *hate* you."

Her eyes grew wide as the words left her lips, then filled with tears.

She was right, after all. *What have I been thinking? That this intelligent, proud wizard will fall into my arms when I save him from himself? That he could tolerate owing yet another person?*

She looked away from her reflection. She disgusted herself.

As Hermione let herself back into Severus' bedroom, her stomach rumbled, so she went in search of her satchel*One sandwich left, and no sign of the end...*She forced herself to eat half of it, and drank more tea to fill the gap, even though she was growing concerned that she'd end up with the shakes if she had much more.

He stirred. She returned to his side and quickly checked his vitals as she heard him pleading with Voldemort—she knew what was next. She began casting the spells that would control his body's reaction to reliving his near-death—*I can't believe I left him there I can't believe I didn't check for a pulse I can't forgive myself I can't*—he pleaded with Harry, his hands moving to his throat to attempt to staunch the flow of blood—*ohgodohgod so much blood there was so much blood*—just as she remembered.

"Look at... me." She sobbed and waited for him to, again, fall asleep*Mercy, please.*

Except he didn't.

He looked directly at her and reached out to run his fingers down her wet cheek. "You're an angel, aren't you?"

She let out the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.*A hallucination, then.*

Did he see Lily before him? Her heart clenched.*You're a fool, a fool.* Would Harry's mother have come back for him? Would she have forgiven him, at last, and offer to lead him to the afterlife? Hermione didn't think so, but surely he'd want... her voice was unsteady as she quietly replied, "Yes, Severus. I'm here for you."

"I know you are, Hermione. I know you are." And finally, he slept.

She backed away from the bed, panicked—*he knows? he knows! CirceHecateMedea*—until the back of her legs hit her chair, and she sat.*Breathe, Hermione, breathe. Heart rate, temperature, blood pressure...*

She methodically, obsessively, cast diagnostic spell after diagnostic spell until she could no longer hold up her hand. She let her head fall back, let her calm professionalism crumble and—with a tight hollowness in the pit of her stomach—her wakefulness slip away.

~/~

He was due for another dose of methadone—a tablet she didn't have. He hadn't had a flashback for nearly two hours... but dare she risk it?

Did she have a choice?

She hesitated before sitting back on the side of his bed. She should be in the chair*Circe*, she shouldn't have held him like a lover in the first place, let herself imagine he wanted her to hold him... she was damned.

As she watched Severus' tremors begin anew, she imagined herself standing before the clinicians at the Potter Clinic, the St. Mungo's doctors she'd trained under, the Wizangamot, and Harry himself. She imagined trying to explain herself... and just stopping. No.

When his legs started moving, as if he were running a race in his sleep, Hermione started to pay attention. A magical relation to opium should have many of the same properties... but which unique traits it would have she couldn't guess. Tremors, restless legs, sweats... he exhibited what she expected.

So far.

"N-need water..." he rasped, bringing her to attention.

She filled his glass and helped him sit up. After he sipped, and sipped again, he shook his head.

Once she laid him back down he met her eyes and smiled slightly. "Thank you."

She returned his smile. "How are you feeling?"

"Like the Knight Bus hit me, backed up, and hit me a second time at greater speed."

She chuckled and nodded. "I'm not surprised... it's been a difficult nearlyfour days," she replied, noting the slant of the light coming in the dirty window.

"I wondered why I felt rather like devouring an entire Hippogriff in one sitting," he said, grinning slightly.

"I can make you something..."

He shook his head and frowned. "Not much good here to speak of."

She quickly answered, the forced, chirpy cheer in her voice making her cringe, "I can Apparate to my flat, make some sandwiches... or go to the chippy?"

He tipped his head to the side and studied her through narrowed eyes. "I would appreciate either. Very much. Which... whichever you prefer."

"Right. Back in a flash," she replied, before standing and pulling the wallet form her satchel.

Destination, determination, deliberation, Hermione thought, hysterically, before she appeared behind the chippy, barely catching herself as she stumbled. She took a deep breath before slipping around the corner and heading to the door.

She stared blankly at the menu until Sheila cleared her throat. "I, er... " How much food would he eat in his condition? "I'd like fish and chips for, um, five. And four each of the barley water and Purdey's, please."

Sheila eyed Hermione as she bagged the drinks. "Mr. Lennon is fond of the shandy, you know."

Hermione blinked and sucked in a lungful of air. "Right. I'll take one of those, too, then." She only let her breath out in a whoosh after Sheila went to the back to bag the fish.

After paying and gathering the bags in her arms, she hurried out the door and around to the back of the row of businesses.

The look on Severus' face indicated her choice of chippy over cold cuts was very much appreciated. Almost cheerful, he ate like a man starved and chatted with her about what she knew of his former students.

As the opiate withdrawal progressed, however, she doubted her decision to bring home the greasy fare was still held in as high esteem—his look of embarrassment after she Banished his sick was nothing compared to his barely contained horror when the flu-like attack of his G.I. tract reached his bowels.

Nothing she said about her experience in Lambeth resulted in him looking her in the face, so Hermione concluded silence was the better part of valor.

She was running out of blankly encouraging things to say, anyway.

As he fell to sweat-soaked chills, he finally broke the silence by asking her about what more to expect. He considered the list she recited, then changed the subject.

"Tell me again how you came to be at that clinic... you stayed with a cousin, was it? Why not your parents?"

Hermione stiffened. "They... they moved. Away. Before... before Harry, Ron, and I went into hiding."

"Away?" He looked at her intently.

She swallowed hard before answering, "Australia. It was safer for them, you understand..."

He nodded, his eyes never leaving her face. "A bit of a job to convince them to leave without you, I'd imagine."

She stared at the wall behind him, willing the tears pricking the back of her eyes to go away. "Yes." Once she shifted back to looking at his face and realized he was frowning, waiting for the rest of her answer, she sighed. "It's not hard to leave a child behind if your memories have been modified so you never knew you had her."

Hermione looked away again. "As I said... it was safer for them."

"That was... I can't say I would have had the courage to do that, in your shoes. Didn't you go back for them, after it was all over?"

"Of course!" she shouted, somewhat hysterically, then gripped the fabric of her jeans and continued, softly, "Of course I did... but the Memory Charm I used was irreversible. They think they are who their documents say they are. They seemed happy, at least."

He reached out and covered her hands with his own. Through the tremors he squeezed, grimacing at the increasing pain in his joints she knew he must be experiencing, then pulled them away.

She met his eyes once more, her throat thick with unshed tears for her parents and appreciation for his simple gesture.

Then he opened his mouth, as if to speak, and gasped. His eyes rolled back into his head as he arched back into a seizure, his head hitting the headboard as he fell over.

Hermione grabbed for her wand, eyes wide. She'd never seen this before... Nimue help her, she didn't know what to do. She'd read about it, of course, but couldn't remember...

She started to hyperventilate as she cast charm after charm. Nothing was helping, and he was still seizing—this was so, so dangerous. What was she supposed to do? This could kill him, damage his brain—*ohgodohgodohgod*—she dug as deeply into her St. Mungo's training as she ever had and cast a spell she'd seen used only once... if she did it right the seizure would stop. If she did it wrong... the damage from the seizure would be considered an improvement over the result.

He stopped seizing. *Please let him live, please, please, I can't lose one more person I love, I can't, please...*

She checked his vitals. He was alive, his heart rate slowing back to normal, his blood pressure stabilizing.

She stifled a sob and, forgetting herself (forgetting her training, her role as a clinician, forgetting everything she'd sworn to uphold when they'd pinned the Healer emblem on her robes), took him in her arms and thanked every name she'd ever heard invoked for his life.

She held him like that until her heart slowed and until her tears stopped.

She held him until he shifted, and only then she loosed her hold. She realized his eyes were open and scooted backward, forcing herself to sit with her hands clasped in her lap.

"What happened?" he rasped.

"Y-you seized. It's... it's a rare thing, but... you're okay, now. I-I think that was the worst of it..."

Severus nodded as his eyes drooped. "Tired..."

She stood and watched him sleep. Once the din in her head became too much, she paced—the thoughts in her head ran fast and furious, and none of them the least bit congratulatory.

Eventually she tired, and sat. He slept for another four hours, peacefully. She cast the diagnostic spell over and over until she was satisfied.

It was over.

When he awoke it was not yet time for the sun to rise, although—given the eerie silence of the city beyond the window—Hermione guessed it wasn't far off.

"It's over, Severus. You're alive," she said quietly as she helped him sit up.

He turned to look at her. "Hermione... tell me what you said... before I slept."

She froze. "I thanked Merlin, Nimue, Morgana, Hecate, and-and I don't know who else. I was relieved, you understand..."

He shook his head. "Before that."

Before, before... oh. Oh, no.

I—I didn't say it out loud... did I? Hermione felt light-headed.

"Did I hear you say you love me?"

Her silence was her answer. The look on his face grew thunderous.

"This wasn't a normal procedure, *was it?*" His voice gained strength. "What was this, Hermione? What am I to you? A curiosity? An experiment? Another cause to champion? *What did you mean when you said that??*"

Hermione stared, and stuttered, "I-I didn't... you weren't... I didn't mean to... it wasn't like that... I'm-I'm *sorry!* I'm so, so *sorry!* I shouldn't be here, I shouldn't..." She leapt up and grabbed her satchel, looked at him once more beseechingly, then bolted for the door.

~/~

She ran from Spinner's End, sobbing. She stopped under an old, dim, street lamp and took one last look. She felt as empty as the row of boarded-up houses—crumbling, but still standing—the long-defunct mill chimney looming over them all as twilight turned to dawn.

The enormity of what she'd done washed over her, again, and she shivered.

"Hermione! Stop!"

She gasped and backed up a step as Severus ran into the anemic circle of lamplight.

"Stop. You don't have to..." He caught his breath, "... you don't have to go."

She shook her head. "I *do*, I told you—I should never..."

"I heard you."

"Then why..."

"I don't know," he whispered, as he stepped closer and tentatively touched her face, stroking a finger along her jawline before stopping to run his thumb across her chin. "You made a bad decision...a decision so recklessly, *stupidly* Gryffindor I didn't think *you* capable of it—and I'm furious with you, but..." He looked into her eyes as if he were searching for an answer.

Hermione felt certain any answer he'd find would infuriate him further, and tried to turn away.

His hand held her chin firmly, and it wasn't until she raised her eyes to his once more that he continued. "But how could I deny you the one thing I never allowed myself?"

She took a shuddering breath and fought back more tears. *I don't deserve your forgiveness, I don't, I don't, I don't...*

"But you have it," he answered.

Her eyes widened at the realization that he'd carelessly gleaned her thoughts.

Careless...

Severus bent and slowly brought his face closer to hers. She found herself as transfixed by his lips as she had been by his eyes.

"I remember calling you an angel..." he said, quietly. "And I haven't changed my mind."

She held her breath. *Please kiss me, please make it all right, please, please...*

His mouth hovered over hers, then he pulled back slightly. "No. Not yet," he whispered. "Your gift wasn't my life—that wasn't your gift to give—it was the ability to start again. If you meant what you said, if you think you care for me... I must know it's *me* you care for, not..." He waved his hand toward the dark row of houses. "... not who I've had to be. I can't do this, otherwise. I *can't*."

Tears filled her eyes. "So this is goodbye?"

"This is *hello*, Hermione," Severus whispered, then kissed her cheek. "Make peace with your conscience." He stroked her chin once more, then he stood and stepped back.

Somehow—even thin, barefoot, and wearing faded pyjama pants—he was as physically commanding as she remembered. He was right, she didn't know him.

Nor did he know *her*. But it seemed—even after she admitted how unprofessional and irresponsible she'd been, after she gave him every reason to hate her—~~he~~*wanted* to know her.

Hermione nodded and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "I'll be back," she whispered.

"When?" She could see uncertainty in his eyes.

When? When can I make peace with myself? Her voice was thick with emotion as she choked out, "As soon as possible. Yesterday. Ten years ago..."

Recognition dawned on his face. He grinned before turning and disappearing into the darkness outside the reach of the street lamp.

She stood a minute longer, staring in the direction he'd gone—then slowly walked to where she'd parked her car, a lifetime earlier.

Could she make peace with herself? She unlocked her car and slipped into the seat. Exhausted, she rested her head against the seat and felt the war within her stir again.

"Tomorrow night," she whispered, as she gave the fence she'd just passed through one more long look. Then she turned her key in the ignition and drove away.

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* Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows (33.580)

**Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince (27.758)