

The World Before Columbus

by corianderpie

Years after the final battle against Voldemort, Hermione Granger and Severus Snape meet again—under circumstances neither of them could have imagined—to face the resurgence of an ancient evil that threatens to destroy their world. Sequel to "Caramel." Light crossover with Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials.

Prologue: Archipelago

Chapter 1 of 6

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Abstract of primary document *Where Angels Tread: Being the Statement of a New Theory of Transdimensionality*, W. P. H. Witheril, 1867: Furness Publishers, London.

Department of Mysteries Archive number 45-ESS-TO-1893:12

Abstract prepared 18 June 1893 by Josefa A. Plimsoll, Assistant Under-Clerk to Deputy Domestic Warlock for Transdimensional Orthodoxy, Department of Mysteries

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Abstract:

Author argues that, in the universes, there are thin places between worlds. There are many of them, and they are holy places, or places of fear, for humans; we come close to them in our dreams and when we are near death.

Once, they were the redoubts of immortals...of minor gods; gods of rivers and groves, of mountains and meadows...and in some worlds, they still are. In our world as in many others, they have become portals through which the immortals pass on their messengering.

When the gods of places accepted the call to serve the great gods (arch note: author suggests they were cozened into service) they became angels...messengers without desire, but with consciousness and immortality. Their desires were caught in between the worlds, in a place that is no place, where they stay as hungry ghosts until they are released into one or another world, when a thin place is punctured.

This happens rarely, the author states, and usually at the hands of overreaching mortals, like the mages of Cittagazze, or the architects of Babel. Such mortals, in their

restlessness and greed, use these rips to pass between worlds, garnering great profits and incurring even greater costs.

When a thin place is riven, the hungry ghosts flow out into the worlds, and they keep flowing out until the tear is mended. Once there, they batten on the living, draining them of consciousness and desire.

Author claims there is a Torn Place in the Department of Mysteries of the Ministry of Magic in London. It was ripped open in the time of the Hogwarts Founders and only annealed by their combined magics. The oldest part of what is now the Ministry building was built on top of and around it, to entomb and protect it. The Place cannot be destroyed; it can only be contained.

In the short period it was open, it released a stream of hungry ghosts, and it was another task of the witches and wizards of that day to capture and tame these beings...who they called gæstgeniþlan (arch note: OE: persecutor or foe of souls), turning them into our servants by making them the guardians of Azkaban.

There are other Portals in our world, other Torn Places. One is beneath a pyramid in Egypt. One is in the sky above a ruined temple in the jungles of southern Mexico. One is in Lhasa; another is hidden by polar ice. These are the Places that are known (arch. note: see page 413 of primary document for a complete list). They are guarded and warded.

Reports (arch note: nb unsubstantiated either by author or in existing literature) exist of Portals in thr

Archivist's note: The last 22 inches of a 38-inch document are missing. The parchment has been torn and only the first part is still in its canister. Incident Ticket No. 183-03 to Internal Investigations dated and dispatched 2 September 2003. Signed Medea Gammon-Phipps, Archive Technician Grade 4

* * *

The rock field was a dazzle of light, and the lizard had come out to lie on the warm stone.

The man sat cross-legged, near enough to the lizard to watch the slow blinking of her flat golden eye, the swelling of her belly as she breathed, the occasional shifting of the spines in her neck frill.

He blinked with her, breathed with her. Tried, with some success, to ignore the ticklish flow of sweat down his back and the throbbing pain in his neck.

Teach me, old woman, he said silently. *Remind me.*

It was the still middle of the day...the long lull before the onshore breeze would sweep in. The rock field was the floor of a broad old volcanic caldera. It was the place on the island where one could see the ocean in three directions, and the rest of the archipelago stretching away to the southeast.

He looked out to sea. Brown islands. Blue sea and sky. White, shimmering heat.

Paradise, he thought.

Paradise. Somewhere unspoilt by human despair, human machinations. A place out of time, not of the earth. The place you go to when you die.

He hadn't been dead the first time he came here, six years ago. But he hadn't been entirely alive, either.

Miranda had Portkeyed in with him, stayed a few hours, and left before nightfall. She'd marooned him here with three biggish tents, collecting equipment (bags, boxes, jars, parchment, knives large and small, a sort of coracle to get him between islands), and food enough for six months.

This had somehow been just what he needed, though he certainly hadn't thought so at first.

After two days of hurling stones into the sea and cursing Miranda's blackhearted manipulative soul, he'd begun to explore the island.

Within two weeks, he had mapped the place: western cliffs plunging sheer into the sea to windward, lousy with birds and reeking to heaven; in the centre, a gently sloping plain of stones and tough plants and scaly, furry, scurrying things; to the east, a lagoon formed of a partially submerged caldera lined with fine reddish sand. Sea lions came here in their season, but it was empty when he arrived. And hot. And silent. This was where his tents were pitched at first.

He had begun bathing in the lagoon every day, swimming through the warm clear water to the reef beyond which breakers crashed. Stiff and easily tired at first, he felt his limbs strengthen and loosen as the weeks passed.

He established a routine. Each morning, he would scour the shoreline on foot, or he would use a Bubble Head Charm to explore the lagoon and reef below the surface, collecting specimens he then spent the afternoon examining, cataloguing, and preserving.

After about two months his agonising dreams began loosening their grip on him.

Hungry sharks swarmed the lagoon when the sea lions returned, and the noise and stench of the big belligerent creatures drove him up to the central plateau. He moved his tents into the shelter of a clump of spiny, bent little trees and spent his days cataloguing the land animals and plants.

The huge purplish-brown lizards were his favourites. He spent hours and days watching them. They were at once social and solitary, sharing territory but spending most of their time out of one another's sight. When they met, they seemed to bow, lowering and raising their massive heads, and to click their tongues in greeting.

He imitated them, and flattered himself that they understood. They tolerated him, anyway, and sometimes they bowed and clicked back at him when he addressed them.

Within four months he was still having the dreams, but he was sleeping through the night.

The rains came, and they were magnificent and destructive, sweeping in from the west with the power of the whole ocean behind them.

He used magic more and more sparingly. He found he was losing his taste for the British way of softening his environment with trivial magics. Drying spells and warming charms muffled his senses, and in the absence of other people, his senses were what reminded him that he was, in fact, alive.

The feeling of heavy rain soaking him to the skin; the gradual warming he got from a blanket trapping his own body heat; the bone-melting heat of immersion in the hot springs...he *really liked* these things. He went days without drawing his wand once.

By the time Miranda returned, he was strong, fit, and nearly pain-free. Half a year's sun and wind and water had leached the last of the snake's poison out of him...the remnants that St Mungo's best minds had told him he must carry with him for the rest of his life.

The pain, they'd said, was something he could learn to manage. There were potions they could recommend. Therapies. Rehabilitative practices.

A diminished, pain-tinged life would have been acceptable, if he could have had the other thing. He'd have bargained for far greater physical pain. Actually, he would have given anything he had left, after having already given almost everything, if the dream that had both tormented him and kept him afloat could have been realised.

But the dream was a chimera, and his losses were total after all.

Miranda, appearing just in time and perceiving much, had spirited him from the scenes of his sacrifice and defeat to these sea-struck, parched islands and left him here to choose life. Or not.

Life surrounded him, and persuaded him. The sea and land were teeming with life in a thousand forms, from fine flat lichens to huge bony fish, that could be found nowhere else...and nowhere else either.

This was, he was convinced, the Galapagos of this world, though yet undiscovered by men in boats, and so still unnamed by them.

Which, all sentimentality aside, was the real reason Miranda had brought him here in the first place. His meticulously collected specimens would flow to the alchemical supply house of Artemis & Hidisyan, back in the world he'd left.

In six years in Miranda Hidisyan's employ, he'd scouted the richest and rarest materials in three separate worlds and five different times. And he wasn't the only one...Miranda shared few details of her network, but he knew that there were at least two other Scholar-Gatherers posted in this particular here and now. It followed that there must be more in other worlds.

He was the first, though, who had been sent to work with Dinsha' Bhahba, the great Lhasan monk-alchemist, whose abbey was an ark of alchemical knowledge. Placing one of her agents with Sri Bhahba had been a coup for Miranda...a sure sign of her strengthening reach in this world.

But one year into his two-year contract with the abbot, it was clear that Severus could not handle the working conditions.

The cold, dry climate of the high Asyan mountains had brought the old pains back with a vengeance. His hands had curled into useless claws. The scars on his neck and jaw burned and stung him to near madness. His breath was chronically short, his damaged lungs refusing to acclimatise to the altitude. He had dreams of all the bones in his spine shattering at once.

The mountains were killing him; the islands had saved him once before.

So Miranda had consented to bring him back here...via Portkey from a back room in a Qabul apothecary's shop to the familiar stone-walled room in Tblisi; through the Anomaly Frame; a Portkey from Tblisi to this island.

A brace of Miranda's flunkys had appeared hours later with supplies, and by nightfall he was alone again, and encamped: sleeping tent, working tent, cooking-and-supplies tent. A self-contained, one-man scientific compound.

The lizard blinked again and flattened her neck frill. Slow as honey, she flowed down the side of the rock and out of sight.

He rose to his feet and bowed to the space she'd left. 'Goodbye, madam,' he clacked after her in her own language. 'May the stones of your house never grow cold.'

He stood for a moment, looking out to sea. His stomach rumbled, reminding him it was time for lunch. Picking up his field bag, he turned around.

Standing not ten paces away was a woman immaculately dressed in a brilliant white shirt and khaki trousers. A pith helmet set carefully on glossy black hair gave her safari outfit the air of a film costume; her flimsy sandals made the costume absurd.

He smirked. Of course she would not wear boots and conceal her beautiful feet. She was a slave to her own vanity, and almost touchingly unaware of the fact. He had occasionally found this quality in her rather useful.

Severus stepped forward and reached for her hand, which he bowed over and brushed with his lips.

'Mrs Hidisyan. You are loveliness itself.' His own voice sounded harsh in his ears. He'd hardly spoken in months.

Miranda smirked back at him even as she retained his hand. 'Mr Snape,' she said. 'You are so very kind.' Then she said, 'Severus, my love, I could swear you were just being civil to that creature. Can it be you have found a friend, or a long-lost relation, here in the desert?'

He glanced in the direction she was looking, after the disappeared lizard, then turned back and shrugged. 'She is a great old matriarch of the island. Aren't you pleased with me? You have been trying to teach me how to speak to a lady since we were children.'

She covered his hand with her other one and smiled at him. 'So I have. ~~am~~ gratified.' She inclined her head. 'Shall we? I'm starving, and I'm sure you are too, you look perfectly spectral. I propose that you feed us both immediately.'

He noted the fine points of her performance. The lift of her chin. The sidelong smiling glance that lasted just exactly long enough. The lips parted slightly, as if she couldn't quite contain her appetite.

It was her usual display, but it was all a little off today. Underneath, she seemed nervy. Distracted. *Why?*

But all he said as he tucked her arm in his was, 'Right. Well, you know what to expect at my table, so you've only yourself to blame for turning up hungry.'

* * *

Afterward, she went off to the hot springs, leaving him to parcel up the specimens she'd take with her when she left.

Severus spread out one last sheet of brown paper and stacked half a dozen small specimen boxes on it. He folded, wrapped, knotted twine, and shot binding, masking, and protective spells through the packaging. *Magister E. Teimourian*, he wrote on the top. *The Greenery, Ankara*.

He ran his thumb over the address, smearing the ink a little.

He looked up to see Miranda standing just inside the entrance to the tent. Her face was a little pink from her hot soak, but her hair was sleek and dry, and she was fully dressed. She walked over to his table and picked up her pith helmet and outer robes.

Good. She wouldn't be staying for dinner.

'Leaving, then?' he said.

'Mmmmmm, afraid so.' She smiled at him, sweetly rueful. 'This has been heavenly, but I must fly. I'm feeling quite proud I managed to pop in and see you at all, actually. Stolen moments are very precious, yes?' Her touch on his chin was brief and light. 'Darling, I'm so glad you still shave, here at the edge of the world. I like to see your face.'

'Likewise, I'm sure.'

She clapped in delight and cooed, 'Well done, Severus! Well done. I am very pleased with you.' She beamed up at him.

Yes. She was pouring on the sweetness with a heavy hand. Something was afoot. Perhaps Ackerley could shed light on the matter.

Miranda moved to his worktable and drew the parcels towards her. 'Thank you for getting all this together so quickly,' she said. 'I know you weren't expecting me, so I'm

doubly grateful.' She ran her eye down the inventory list. 'Lovely. We need more of that. And those, yes. And white albatross quills, always in demand. Marvellous, marvellous.'

She took a brocade bag from her trousers pocket and began to place the packages inside it. 'One for the Professor, I see.' She smiled. 'It's sweet how you always remember him. I'll be sure he gets this along with his next order.'

'Well, darling.' She pocketed the bag and shrugged into her robes. 'I'm off. I'll do my best to come in April; if I can't get away, I'll send Ackerley. Try not to miss me too much.' She set her helmet on her head, winked, blew a kiss, and turned to go.

'I'll muddle through,' he muttered as she pushed aside the tent flaps. He gave her a minute or two, so that when he stepped outside he would be alone again.

* * *

Sunset was a bore on this side of the island...the westward ridge of the caldera crowded the horizon, blocking his view of the fiery clouds and sea.

He had a good moonrise tonight, though, and he lingered outside to watch it after he'd dispatched a tern to Ackerley.

The moon was just past the full, and it rose huge and yellow. As its bottom edge left the horizon, a small shadow flitted across the disk. Not a bird...it was too oddly shaped, both angular and lumpy.

There it was again, closer and clearer by the second: a broomstick of sorts...more of a tree branch, really...with a witch astride it as ragged as a beggar and as elegant as a cat. Keeping pace above the witch was a bird completely alien to these parts...a kestrel.

Within minutes, the woman landed before him, and dismounted with fluid grace. The kestrel lit on her leather-clad shoulder, and she leaned her ruddy cheek in towards the bird, closing her eyes in what was clearly a private moment of union.

Severus blinked. He'd seen this sort of thing before. The kestrel was acting like a daemon...the animal-form alter egos possessed by humans in some worlds.

But not this world.

What was a witch with a daemon doing in this world? Had Miranda brought her through? Or was there another doorway between worlds...another Anomaly? Did Miranda know of it? Was *this* what was unsettling her?

She opened her eyes, stepped forward, and said in English, 'Are you the wizard Severus Snape?'

'Yes, madam. I am,' he said.

She bowed. 'It is good. My name is Aino Jaakima.'

He bowed in reply.

'I bring you tidings from another place and time, Severus Snape' said the witch. 'And I bear a token from that world.'

She opened a pouch at her waist and pulled out a golden coin, which she held out to him.

He took it. Merlin's portrait scowled from the obverse. He had not seen a Galleon in years. He turned it over and, as he did so, the coin grew very warm and the runes encircling the hippogriff on the reverse disappeared and in their place a message flashed.

Severus where are you?

In an instant, the witch was at the point of his wand.

'Who,' he hissed, 'gave you this?'

* * *

A/N: This story is the sequel to my SS/HG story, *Caramel*, also archived here. It also has crossover elements with Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials universe. *The World Before Columbus* is still set in the *Caramel* version of the Harry Potter universe (only much more AU, and EWE; *Caramel* stuck to canon as much as I could manage), but Pullman's creation is going to crash the party a little. You won't need to read the HDM trilogy to understand this story, though if by any odd chance you haven't yet, you should go do that right now, just because it's brilliant.

This story will get smutty, but not for a while. So the rating is for the overall story.

Big thanks to juniperus for the inspired old English word *gæstgeniplan*, foe of souls, for Dementors. It is perfect.

Biggest thanks to my marvellous hehicera and lifeasanamazon.

Aftermath

Chapter 2 of 6

In the twenty-four hours after Dumbledore's death, Severus and Hermione begin readying themselves for the battles to come.

Disclaimer: The Potterverse belongs to JKR, and this is a work of fanfiction.

* * *

When Severus got outside the gates to the Apparition point, the others had gone. In the instant before Disapparating, he turned to glimpse the Mark floating over the castle.

The next moment he was leaning against the inside of his door at Spinner's End, heart thumping, staring up at the darkened stairs, the glow of Morsmordre still fading from his sight.

He allowed himself one breath before pulling the Marauders' Map from his pocket.

'I solemnly swear that I am up to no good,' he said.

Potter was on the ground where Severus had left him; as he watched, the boy began moving back towards the castle. In the shadow of the Astronomy Tower, people were gathering, already forming a dense, illegible mass of ink in a semicircle around a small patch of empty space. Severus flicked his eyes around the castle. Yes. Everyone was still moving towards the dead man. Not yet outwards in pursuit. He would have a few minutes.

'Mischief managed.'

He pocketed the map and strode to the kitchen. He yanked open a cupboard door and transferred a phial from his pocket to the jumbled shelf, then took out two phials, a jar, and two paper bags and jammed them into a string bag. He cast a spell over the cupboard, the magic seeping into the wood like oil into earth.

In the sitting room, he undid the Disillusion charms on the volumes of history and geography into the Dark works they really were. Working quickly, he grabbed two, four, six, seven volumes not entirely at random, shrank them, and slipped them into the bag.

If he hadn't paused for a moment to take a last look around the dingy little room he'd known since infancy, he wouldn't have heard the crack of Apparition at the door. As the front of his house exploded inwards, he turned on the spot.

He reappeared in the LeStranges' Apparition chamber.

'What took you so long?' growled Yaxley, stepping forward. 'The others got here three minutes ago.'

'Mmmm.' He didn't owe Yaxley an explanation. 'Is he here?'

'Of course. He's waiting in the library.' Together, they walked up the stairs and down the hall. Severus drew ahead to push open the door and, without hesitation, he strode towards the Dark Lord, who was standing before the hearth.

'Severus. What news?'

'It is done, my lord.'

'So I have heard.' Voldemort was almost vibrating with impatience. 'I want to see.' He reached down to tip Severus's chin up and dived into his mind.

'Oh, how priceless!' he hissed. 'The great Albus Dumbledore *begging*.' Voldemort put on a pleading tone. "'Please, Severus. *Pleeeaaasse*.'" And *pfffttt*. Dead just the same. Why did you delay bringing me this, Severus? A sentimental visit home?'

'No sentiment, my lord. There were a few things I wanted, and I believed I had a minute or two before I'd be pursued. They arrived just as I left. It's unlikely I'll be able to go back there for some time.'

'Not so very long, Severus. Soon you will be able to go anywhere you choose. Or, rather, anywhere I choose.'

Severus bowed in acknowledgment. 'Where is Draco?'

'Oh, he's here,' said Voldemort. 'He's with his Mummy. And Daddy is winging his way here as we speak. All is forgiven. It's a jubilee.' He skimmed his thin hand along the mantelpiece, finishing with a flick of the fingers. 'I'll be moving to Malfoy Manor presently. We need somewhere... more... spacious.'

The Malfoys were all alive, then...for the moment at least. And Draco was no longer in his charge. Severus found he felt no desire at all to see Draco, or his grateful mother, just yet.

The news about Lucius was not surprising. Voldemort would need free access to Lucius's money, now that things were really moving. Captive with his family in his own house, cheek by jowl with his master, Lucius would be less able to protect or conceal his assets. And coming home to a house where his guest was his master...that would be more humiliating in its way than staying in Azkaban. Lucius would find himself on a very short, very galling lead indeed.

Keep your friends close...

'Indeed, my lord,' said Severus.

'Well,' said Voldemort, taking a seat before the fire and indicating an empty chair. 'Onwards. I have an errand for you in Brussels. You and Petain leave in the morning. Sit down and I will tell you about it.'

'Yes, my lord.' He sat.

...and your enemies closest

* * *

He pounded the door until it shook in its frame.

'Mum! Mum, open up. I'm sorry, I didn't mean it. Mum! Let me in!' The horror behind him had his heart racing... he had to get inside where he could be safe and warm and not alone, where he could explain...

'No! Go away! You are none of mine, you, you...' She was sobbing, and her next words disintegrated into howling.

He stopped pounding and turned around in the freezing dark. A great heap of clothing lay on the ground a few feet away

Dead. Terror and despair surged in him. Dream, this is my dream, I can control it...*He stared at the dead man, his pulse slowing* Did it to himself. Deserved it. Idiot. Glad he's dead.

Terror and despair leached away as he stared. He grew harder, sharper, until at last he stood revelling in his cold bright edges.

The door opened a crack, warm light spilling out. 'Murderer,' she whispered. 'Never come back.'

He turned to face the woman in the doorway. Terror and despair flooded back.

'Hermione!'

The door slammed shut.

Severus wrenched himself out of the dream and awoke panting. He turned his head on the pillow. Moonlight was faint on an unfamiliar carpet and it took him several seconds to get his bearings. He was in the LeStranges' house.

Dumbledore. He closed his eyes again and put his hand over them, and the hand was trembling. An urge to move overtook him, and he flung aside the covers and stumbled into the adjoining bathroom. He stood on the cold floor for some minutes. He did not turn on the light, or look in the mirror.

Back in bed, he laid his hands across his chest and stared up at the ceiling.

Murderer. He weighed the word. Yes, he was that. Stare at it *murderer*. Grab hold and claim it: *murderer*. Fit it into the old, well-worn grooves: *I am a murderer*.

When he could look at the word without sickening, he began working backwards from the word to the deed *I killed him. He needed to die, and I did it*

He twitched, impatient. *Self-justifying bollocks.* He tried again...lingering on the tower, seeing again the black shadows and silver moonlight of the scene, hearing the sound of Albus's begging words, feeling the anguish and rage peaking and pulling the killing spell out of him. *I hated him, and I killed him.*

There. No excuses. He stayed with it as long as he could, hardening his heart.

Then he sat up and pulled from his pocket a small tin labelled Thanatos Potts's Liquorice Allsorts. He opened it and stuck the tip of his wand right in among the contents. 'Pov'yazuyut' nas,' he murmured, and amber light shone briefly in the darkness.

One after another, he plucked the little shards of caramel from the tin and crunched them between his teeth, working his way through them without pause. When they were gone, so was that particular temptation. There would be no desperate sneaking 'visit' to her some night when he'd contrived to convince himself he could no longer bear the separation.

He lay back. The burnt sugar melted into him and flowed through his blood to every last dark and secret place.

After a time, he closed his eyes and rolled over on his side, curling up into himself a little. The shadows in the room were softening to grey when he finally let himself sleep.

* * *

The grey light of dawn came long after Hermione had given up on the notion of sleep, and she welcomed it. Now at least she could get up and leave the dormitory. She pulled on her running clothes.

There were aurors posted at the main door, which shouldn't have surprised her, but did. And she was surprised again when they let her go out of the castle. 'Stay on the paths and within the grounds,' said the shorter one. 'You'll be quite safe.'

She damped down a bubble of hysterical laughter. *What a perfectly brainless thing to say,* she thought, though she guessed he meant well. No one was safe anymore, not at Hogwarts or anywhere else.

Hermione turned and looked back towards the castle, at the sky over the Astronomy Tower now innocently pale and clear of any trace of the Dark Mark, and at the grass at the tower's base, now empty of the Headmaster's body.

She chose a path that skirted the Quidditch pitch and then along the edge of the forest before bending back down towards the lake. It was so early no one was in the sky above the pitch...or maybe the aurors were not yet allowing flight within the grounds.

She ran hard, determined to purge the feelings of helpless terror and anxiety that had kept her up all night. She had a set of facts and reasonable inferences about the state of her world at the moment, and she could use them either to feed her worry or to make her plans. The night had been for worry. Today was for thought and action.

By the time she reached the lake, she had made a short list of priorities. Top of the list was safety for her parents. She could risk anything if only they were safe. But how to make them so?

The answer bubbled up in her mind, and it was so shocking that she gasped and stopped dead in her tracks. 'No,' she whispered. 'No, please. Please, no.' And her tears started to flow, because she knew. This was the only way.

She ran on, crying. As she reached the middle of the loop that sent the path back towards the castle, she slowed and stopped again. Something... what was it? Something about a liquid Obliviate that was fully reversible... where had she read about it? She could not remember. If Snape were here...but of course he was not... *Lupin?* Somehow she associated this idea with him. Had he mentioned it in DADA in her third year?

Running again, slowly, she thought feverishly. She must send them away. And she must Obliviate them, for their own safety and hers. But if there ~~was~~ such a thing as this dimly remembered potion, and she could protect her parents without losing them forever, that would be... god, that would be almost bearable.

Even so, she'd get no help from them. Surely they would never consent to leaving her behind in the centre of all the danger *Well.* She narrowed her eyes. *I'll have to convince them, somehow.*

If Lupin could help her with the potion, she could do the rest. It would be huge...making new lives for two people in another part of the world, with jobs and a house and immigration paperwork and money and enough false memories to make them feel comfortable and sane...

She pelted the last hundred or so yards to the castle door, past the aurors, and up, up to the Owlery. She watched the owl out of sight, then headed back to her dormitory to shower and start making her lists.

* * *

Lupin got to Hogwarts before her owl ever reached him...of course he had come as quickly as possible, even though he had no official reason to be there. The owl, after doubling back without rest, was exhausted and irritable when Lupin finally untied the message from its neck, and it pecked his hand. And it was another hour before he found Hermione in the Great Hall and pulled her aside into a cloakroom.

'I do know it,' said Lupin in answer to her question. 'Or at least I know of it. I've never seen it before, though, never made it. Why d'you want to know?'

She told him.

He was silent for a moment, leaning slump-shouldered against a table, his eyes on the floor. When he raised them to hers, they were full of sadness. 'Are you sure?' he asked. 'This is... I hardly know what to say.'

'Say you'll help me, Professor,' she said. 'Harry needs my help, and I need to help him, but I can't if my parents are vulnerable. This is the best way I can think of to keep them safe. You know... you know the Ministry won't be any good for this. I want them... I want them out of Britain. Invisible. And if this potion exists, and I can use it, then I can also hope that I'll' she gulped 'that I'll see them again. When it's all over. And if I don't make it, or we lose, then, then they will still have a happy life. It's... help me, Professor Lupin. Please.'

He straightened. 'Well. If he were here, and also not a murdering traitor, I'd ask for Snape's help. Instead, we'll look at his books and stores, see what we can find. I'll ask Minerva for permission to go down there....meet me in half an hour outside his door, yes?'

She flung herself at him and hugged him hard. 'Oh, thank you, Professor Lupin!'

'Oh, now, Hermione, that's...' He patted her awkwardly on the back and turned his head away to avoid getting her hair up his nose. 'That's all right.' He stepped back and smiled at her. 'And really, you can start calling me Remus, you know. We're more colleagues now than student and teacher, yes?'

'Yes. Um, Remus.' She smiled back at him. 'Feels odd, but I'm sure I'll get used to it. See you in half an hour. And thank you, again, so much.'

'Well, we'll see how helpful I'll be. It's a bit of a long shot. But we'll try.'

* * *

The fact that they found the very book they needed on Professor Snape's shelves before they'd searched an hour almost made Hermione soften towards the man. And when investigation of his stores showed that the ingredients they needed were there and in sufficient quantities... well, she could have hugged him. She hugged herself instead.

Lupin had the book open on one of Snape's stained work tables, studying the relevant page intently. 'This involves quite a feat of Legilimency, to begin with. I think... I think I can do it. But Hermione.' He looked at her gravely. 'The altered memories...the new life we need to give them...that's rather another matter. Usually you'd want to go through the Ministry for that sort of thing. It's that or the black market. Hard to know which would be less dangerous in this case, but... let me work a Ministry angle. My contact is in the Order and also a delegate to the International Congress of Magical Witness Protection Programmes. You'd want to place them in, maybe, North America, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa...anywhere else? Ireland?'

Hermione shook her head. 'Too close. Maybe it wouldn't matter, but I want them far away. On Jupiter if I could manage it. But Australia would do nicely.'

'We'll try for Australia, then. I'll get in touch with Stygia tonight. Now let's talk about how we'll capture the memories. Are you *certain* you can't do this with their freely given cooperation?'

'I am. If I tell them what danger they're in because of me...what danger *it*'m in...they'll never leave me here. Dad especially.'

'Are you prepared to cast Imperio on your own parents, then? Because that's what it will take...to get them to tie up the ends of their lives here and prepare to go abroad, and to submit to some very extensive Legilimency.'

She hadn't actually *thought* of that part. The tears she'd been suppressing very successfully came quite close to the surface. He was right, she knew he was. What a nightmare.

She set her jaw. 'I'll do whatever it takes. Anything. Even that.'

* * *

A/N: *Pov'yazuyut' nas*: "bind us" (Ukrainian)

Portrait of a Headmaster

Chapter 3 of 6

While some people go camping, Headmaster Snape plays a long, tricky waiting game.

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* * *

SEVERUS SNAPE EXONERATED, NAMED HOGWARTS HEAD

Dumbledore Death Called a 'Regrettable Accident'

by Titus Mortimer, special to the *Daily Prophet*

A special panel of the Wizengamot, called by Minister for Magic Pius Thicknesse the day after he took office, has found Hogwarts Professor Severus Snape not guilty of murder in the 11 June death of Hogwarts Headmaster Albus Dumbledore. The verdict was reached three hours after the start of the hearing.

'We found not a shred of evidence to support the charge of murder,' said Dolores Umbridge, the Senior Undersecretary in charge at the tribunal. 'The unsubstantiated allegations of a fugitive minor who is, at best, emotionally unstable...well, goodness! This is hardly the basis for a trial, much less a conviction, but the Minister very rightly wanted to establish the truth about the regrettable accident that claimed Professor Dumbledore's life. We are delighted to have done just that.'

The tribunal was closed to the public, and the names of the Wizengamot members on the panel...and the witnesses they called...have not been released. But a source close to the process has told the Prophet that everyone present on the Tower that evening...including respected members of important Wizarding families...took the stand. All witnesses confirmed that Professor Dumbledore seemed weak and disorientated, even incoherent, and that he tripped on his own robes and fell over the parapet.

'We were all so shocked, we could none of us move until it was too late,' one witness testified. 'Professor Snape was the quickest, but his Wingardium Leviosa misfired, and Dumbledore hit the ground. It was terribly sad.'

According to the Prophet's source, witnesses were also unanimous in stating that Harry Potter, whose sensational accusations have been given credence by witches and wizards who should know better, was not even present on the tower when Professor Dumbledore died.

'Mr Potter was invited to take the stand and give his version of events,' said Dolores Umbridge, 'but he did not even have the courtesy to reply to the Ministry's overtures. It would seem that his style of mischief becomes less enjoyable when it is answered by the rule of law.'

Ms Umbridge went on to announce that Professor Snape has been named Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, effective immediately. 'Professor Snape is a brilliant teacher with a long and exemplary record of service. Minister Thickesse feels strongly that he is the best candidate for the post, and is pleased that the Hogwarts Board of Governors has agreed to offer Professor Snape this promotion. It is hoped that this will be some recompense for his having been wrongly accused.'

When asked about Mr Snape's alleged links to Death Eaters and to He Who Must Not Be Named, Ms Umbridge stated that that was 'all in the past,' and that such ties are 'hardly a concern of forward-looking public servants such as Minister Thickesse.' Asked about the alleged appearance of the Dark Mark over Hogwarts the night of Dumbledore's death, Umbridge asserted that this claim has been investigated and found to be unsubstantiated.

'We believe some students were experimenting with a new product from Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes that produces a greenish, shape-shifting vapour,' she said. 'This would also explain the scattering of reports we've had in recent weeks of Morsmordre in the skies over Britain. The company is under Ministry investigation, and if we find any such products, we will take appropriate action, your readers may be sure of that.'

Ms Umbridge would not confirm whether Minerva McGonagall, Acting Headmistress of Hogwarts, who has been one of the chief exponents of Harry Potter's accusations against Severus Snape, was one of the witnesses called at the tribunal. The Prophet's source indicates she was not, and she could not be reached for comment by the time this story went to press.

* * *

'All of it, sir?' squeaked the elf on the left.

Severus didn't bother to repeat himself. He simply stared at the elf for as long as it took...about two and a half seconds...for heads to start bobbing and hands to start wringing and chattering apologies to start pouring out.

'Shut. Up,' he said. They did. Then they all fell to their knees and started knocking their heads against the floor. 'Stop that!' he growled. They stopped.

'Send three more down to my old quarters in the dungeons. I'll meet them there in twenty minutes to tell them what to move. I'll give you until after dinner to shift everything except the pieces I just showed you, and move my things up here. I will arrange them myself.'

At ten past seven, he laid his hand on the gargoyle's stony head and murmured 'Turkish delight'...the new password. He had decided to keep using the names of sweets. It amused him, a little, and comforted him too, a little.

It was July, and the sun was still hours from setting. It filled the room with light, making the fire the elves had laid look pale and weak, even though the flames danced high. Dumbledore's personal things were mostly gone...the hundreds of clocks and other whirring, clanging objects, Fawkes's perch, the dragonbone chess set, astrolabes, inkstands, sweet dishes, piles of parchment, lone slippers, rickety little tables, and so on and on...and his own things were lined up in neat piles along two walls.

He sat down at the empty desk and placed his hands flat, spreading his fingers wide and staring at the web of skin between his right thumb and forefinger. How it cast its own barely perceptible little shadow. How pale it looked in contrast with the dark and gleaming wood.

He breathed slowly in and out, dropping everything that was beyond each instant or outside the borders of his breath. His mind calmed; his magic filled him like a glowing lake, still and deep.

He gazed at his hand, and attended to his breath.

'Severus.'

He froze, then flinched as he recognised the voice.

Already it begins. He let out his breath, and the world rushed back in.

'Albus.' He rose and turned round.

The portrait of Dumbledore looked a touch woozy, but the blue eyes were finally open, and gazing at him with a sleepy warmth. 'Severus. Merlin be praised, you are here. You brilliant, marvellous man, you did it.' Dumbledore closed his eyes and took a deep sighing breath.

'Evidently.'

There was a rustling of whispers. Severus glanced up to see the portrait frames crowded with visitors from all over the castle. All the paintings wanted to witness this. *Brilliant.* His calm of a few moments ago was quite gone.

The portrait's eyes opened, and now they held a glint of their old keenness. 'Severus. I am very grateful for what you did. Thank you.'

What reply could there be to that? Severus just bowed his head a little, so he wouldn't have to look at Dumbledore, but he was already simmering with relief, and reawakened guilt, and raw anger, and, most hateful of all, a craven gratification. Dead though he was, the old man could reach right in and *twist*.

Perhaps to give him time to recover, Dumbledore addressed the crowded canvases. 'You can all know it now, my friends,' he said.

'I apologise most sincerely for the Binding and Befuddling spells you had to endure last year. But until Severus could succeed in his mission to kill me and become Headmaster of Hogwarts, I couldn't risk anyone knowing that was his true aim, and that he was acting on my orders. I honour him profoundly, and hope you will forgive my secretiveness and work with us now to keep Hogwarts safe and free.'

There was instant uproar among the portraits. 'Atrocious overreach!' 'Madness!' 'Humph!' 'Whaaaaaat did he say?' 'Silence! SILENCE!' Painted babies wailed, knights clashed arms, public housegoers bawled out curses, dogs barked, young ladies swooned and old ones squawked.

Then Dexter Fortescue began applauding, and soon all assembled had joined in, and the calls changed to 'Bravo!' 'Well played!' 'I knew it all along!' and a ragged chorus of 'For he's a jolly good fellow.'

Hogwarts' portraits and paintings were magically bound to obey the rightful Headmaster of Hogwarts. Now Severus held up a hand, and the silence was immediate.

'Thank you,' he said dryly. 'But this must go no further. House-elves, ghosts, students, and staff all must continue to think as before *Celato!* And now, if you please, all but Headmasters and Headmistresses will return to your own canvases.'

There was a bit of muttering ('Didn't need to do that!' 'Secrecy charms indeed!' 'Where's the trust gone, I ask you?') but Severus ignored it. He felt back in command of himself, his emotions on their leashes...except for the private burn of rekindled guilt and resentment...and, perhaps, a tiny flare of satisfaction that he was no longer so utterly without help.

When the crowds had dissipated, Albus said, 'Now, Severus. Tell me everything.'

* * *

Severus stood staring down at the lake, the surface of which was pock-marked by the late summer rain. The first years would have a soggy journey. Grimacing, he stepped away from the window and lay on his back on one of his leather sofas, one arm thrown over his forehead, eking out his last few minutes alone.

Embers flared in the fireplace and Amycus Carrow's face bulged and rippled over the grate. Severus swung his legs off the sofa and sat upright.

'The train is in, Severus.'

He twitched his coat sleeves down over his cuffs. 'Professor Snape or Headmaster, if you please, Professor Carrow. Let us preserve the forms.' Bored, cold. 'I'll be down presently.'

Carrow's lip twitched. 'Right. Headmaster.'

Severus stepped before a mirror and settled on his head a plain black conical hat with a single silver crescent moon at the front, and he straightened his black otter-lined hood. He'd worn these badges of office once so far, to the staff meeting the previous Monday.

Umbridge, temporarily in residence and insufferably ubiquitous, had said a few words about his Ministry exoneration. Then she sat at his right hand, smirking and making little mewling noises in her nose while he addressed the staff. It was the sort of thing that would have irritated him, back when he had the luxury of feeling irritation.

'I'll keep this brief,' he'd said, and paused. 'I will not pretend we're all friends at this table. We are, however, adults and colleagues. And I am the duly appointed Headmaster of Hogwarts. Our duties are what they have always been; to educate and protect the children in our charge in accordance with the policies and traditions of the school and the laws of the land.'

'I expect each of you'...he looked around the table into faces that were mutinous, frightened, mulish, guarded, smug...'without exception'...lingering on Alecko Carrow's face, then flicking to Minerva's, who bristled visibly...'to do your duty. As shall I. Now. Let's review the first month's duty rota. Professor Flitwick, if you would start please.'

And so it had gone...an uneventful, dry-as-dust meeting with people who loathed and feared him.

The way to play it was this: stern words, and few; cold voice. Flat gaze. Strategic brief bursts of rage. Aloofness and personal indifference universally applied. Duty and formality the watchwords.

Other people's voices would flow into the vacuum his silences left; other people's assumptions about him would be his best concealment. He simply needed to give their beliefs about him space to roam in, and a bit of food now and then.

In some ways not so very different from before...except that then he had walked a broad plank over the abyss. Now he trod a knife edge, and he carried the whole of the pestilential, puling school on his shoulders. And he couldn't protect them all, all the time. Some of the time, he knew, he couldn't even seem to try to protect them, or to want to.

When he swept onto the dais that evening, the second to seventh years were seated at their tables, their ranks thinned by nearly half overall. Twenty-three new first-years came through the great doors, led, as usual, by Minerva. Five of them were Muggle-born, he knew; eleven pureblood. What in hell the seven half-blood families meant sending their children here, now, was beyond him.

Gods. It was not a good sign that on the first night of the year he was already so tired.

Here came the Hat; it was time. He stood, scowled, and intoned: 'Welcome to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.'

* * *

'That is suggestive, Professor Carrow, but circumstantial. Let me know when you and Mr Filch have some evidence I can work with.'

'Aw, Sev Headmaster! I *told* you! They was trying to get into their common rooms after hours, the same night the writing went up in them toilets, and with no excuse.'

'Untrue,' snapped Minerva. 'Both students have stated they were in the library the whole evening. Four witnesses confirm it.'

'Witnesses!' Amycus's tallowy face was splotted with red. 'The same crew of blood traitors every time summat like this happensOw!'

'Oh, I beg your pardon,' murmured Minerva. 'So clumsy.'

'Professor Carrow,' said Severus. 'I am, as you know quite well, perfectly prepared to match punishment to offence. Miss Weasley and Miss Lovegood are serving detentions for being in the corridors after hours. Bring me proof they vandalised the toilets and I will act on it. As I have now said twice.' He rose. 'Now excuse me. I have reports to write, and it's past midnight.'

'Oh, and Professor Carrow, come see me in the morning before breakfast. Bring Professor Carrow.'

Alone, he activated the Map. The corridors were empty of students, the dormitories dense with quiescent dots. Minerva and Amycus walked side by side towards the main stairs. He'd noticed that most of the staff did this with the Carrows...stuck to them whenever possible. *Keep your enemies closest*

The arrangement had worked well...he could never monitor or hinder the Carrows as effectively as the other teachers did, and for weeks now Hogwarts had still functioned more or less like a school.

That would shift in the morning when he gave the Carrows their new disciplinary responsibilities. The change in status should appease them for a while. Perhaps Potter would bring matters to a head before he had to give more ground.

Where is Potter? Is she with him? He had no way of knowing. He was blind to so much outside the castle. But he could see a great deal inside these walls, thanks to her.

On the map, he saw Filch, roaming. Septima, on patrol. The ghosts...Nearly Headless Nick drifting about up in the seventh-floor corridor..*Shit.* Midnight, and bloody Longbottom and his cronies were in the Room of Requirement, their House ghost serving as their lookout again. They were being far too reckless.

He watched until a little stream of dots appeared in the corridor...Longbottom, Lovegood, and Weasley...and here was Filch approaching the stairs from the sixth floor.

Oh FUCK this for a lark.

There was a tapestry at the top of the stairs. Severus pointed his wand down and at an angle and, through hundreds of feet of space and stone, Transfigured the tapestry into three fat rats, which scattered at the approach of Mrs Norris. And... the dots stopped... Nick's dot went to investigate... the dots doubled back to take the longer routes back to their towers.

Pain flowered in the centre of his forehead. 'Mischief managed.' Their escape was bloody well up to them now, the little shits. At least they wouldn't be found near the Room. Not that the Carrows knew about it yet, but plenty of students did, including those who curried the Carrows' favour.

Grim-faced, he sat down to his reports.

* * *

The Great Hall fell silent under his gaze.

'I have three announcements this morning, the first two to do with new rules in the wake of the recent spate of vandalisms and pranks at Hogwarts and in Hogsmeade. First, students visiting Hogsmeade may no longer take their wands. Vandals from Hogwarts will not be allowed to jeopardise the safety of their fellow students or the wellbeing of our neighbours in town.

'Second...silence! Second, it has become clear to me that discipline at Hogwarts needs to be restructured. The Heads of House and other staff are increasingly preoccupied with disciplinary tasks, and it impinges on their teaching duties.

'For this reason, and until further notice, I am appointing two Deputy Headmasters for Discipline and Order. These Deputy Headmasters will be the primary arbiters of punishments for the infraction of school rules, relieving the Heads of Houses of their customary duties in this regard. All detentions will be served with one or the other of the Deputies.'

He turned towards the staff table. 'Professors Carrow and Carrow, will you please come forward? Siiiiiiiilence. Both Deputy Headmasters share equally in the duties I have described; however, Professor Amycus Carrow will have general oversight of Gryffindor and Slytherin Houses and Professor Alecto Carrow will oversee Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw Houses. I believe Professor Amycus Carrow has a few words. Professor Carrow, the podium is yours.'

As Amycus droned, Severus surveyed the room.

'Professor Snape!' Minerva was beside him, vibrating with fury. 'Why were we not informed...'

'Not here, Professor McGonagall, and not now. Come to me in my office later.'

'You may be *sure* I will.'

'Quite.'

* * *

'Where are they?'

'D-d-dunno,' sobbed the boy.

'Wrong answer,' whispered Alecto Carrow in his ear as her brother tightened the thumbscrew another two millimetres.

'Aaaaugggh!' screamed Morse, his body gone rigid. The thing would be just starting to bite into bone.

'And again, Mr Morse,' Alecto said, walking behind his chair. 'Your two Mudblood friends are missing. They did not leave the grounds. Where. Did. They. GO?' She stopped in front of him, so that she and Amycus were side by side, standing over him.

'I don't *know*!' Morse wailed. 'I told you, I...' He stopped. His streaming eyes opened wide, staring at something just over Amycus's shoulder. 'Tree?' He squinted. 'They said something about a, a tree, a mag-, a magic tree, er. Rumping pill...oh! Whomping Willow, there's a, there's a *hole*. In the, in the Whomping Willow. They went, uh, there?'

'Riiight,' said Alecto, with a look of satisfaction. *That* rat-hole's plugged at the other end. They won't get far.' She leaned forward again, getting right up into Morse's terrified face. 'Things will not go well with you, you little half breed, if we find out you've been lying.' She smiled and turned to her brother. 'Professor Carrow, if you would?'

Amycus slowly unscrewed the thumbscrew from the boy's fingers. Morse gazed at them in horror.

'*Episkey*,' said Alecto brightly, and waved her wand over his wounds. He screamed as the healing spell did its work.

'You can go now, Morse. Thank you for your help. However, you *do* know that if it turns out to be the sort of help that's not at all helpful, we'll see you back here before dinnertime.'

Choking on sobs, Morse stumbled towards the door, not daring to glance at the painting on the wall...a group of brown-robed monks poring intently over a scroll in a dingy scriptorium.

'Well, Amycus? Now, or after lunch?'

'After lunch,' grunted Amycus. 'I'm starvin'. They can't go nowhere, any road. The Shack'll hold em.'

'Mmmmm,' hummed his sister happily. 'Let's leave the equipment here, yes? We'll need it one way or another. I do love the sound of little half-blood fingers *cracking* like wet sticks.' She laughed a tinkling laugh.

Amycus rolled his eyes behind her back. *Mad bint*. He had to agree about the bones though. It was a good sound.

When the door slammed behind the Carrows, the monks in the picture scattered.

Fifteen minutes later, Ginny Weasley slid into place next to Neville Longbottom at the Gryffindor table. Reaching past him for a sandwich, she murmured, 'The Fat Lady says we have to get Morse out now.'

'How much time?' Neville let his gaze wander over to the Ravenclaw table. Peter Morse, a third-year, sat there looking grey.

'An hour maybe.'

'Right. Luna takes him; Terry goes for his stuff.'

'Not Luna. She did the last two. Cho?'

'Yes.'

Neville slumped his shoulders and tried to look tired and dull. He pulled out his Galleon under cover of the table and sent three messages. Then he reached for an orange and started peeling it.

His heart was beating hard. He didn't know how many more times they could get away with this, but what could they do? The portraits didn't give warnings lightly; Morse must be in real danger, and it was probably due to the fact that his two Muggle-born roommates had disappeared in the last week...which was partly Neville's fault, but nothing to do with Morse.

From under his forelock he looked up at the staff table. The Carrows were both still there, and so was ~~he~~. Neville had always been terrified of Snape. The man still scared Neville, but mostly now he just hated him. *Evil, lying, murdering git*. He would get his, though, when Harry came back. They just needed to hold out until then, somehow.

* * *

There was the Ministry break-in, and then there was nothing. *Nothing*, for weeks and weeks. Where the hell were they? What was Potter playing at? Severus couldn't hold on forever like this.

One raw day in late December, Phineas Nigellus came sliding into his Hogwarts portrait and looked sharply around the room before announcing, 'Forest of Dean! They're in the Forest of Dean.'

At last, something to do.

At the top of the stairs, Severus shrank the sword to pin-size; he stuck it carefully into the fabric lining his waistcoat.

Starlight lit his path across the grounds, and desiccated leaf mould crackled faintly under his feet as he entered the tunnel of trees just before the Hogwarts Gate.

Out of nowhere came the image of a girl by a shining pool in a dreamed forest, and it made him shut his eyes for a moment.

I might see her tonight.

You can't see her.

I might.

No.

She needn't see me.

Liar.

It would help me... make me stronger.

Sure about that?

Yes.

Liar.

A glimpse, to see she's alive.

You know she's alive.

I may never see her alive again.

True. But you can't see her tonight.

He stepped through the gates and drew his wand. Only the small night creatures at the wood's edge saw him vanish.

* * *

A/N: Celato: conceal it

I have the trio of Neville, Ginny, and Luna using the Room of Requirement earlier than they do in canon, though here it's not yet the bunker and refuge it is when Harry, Ron, and Hermione show up at Hogwarts for the final battle. They use it for meetings, and, as here, to occasionally take a student out through the Vanishing Cabinet, which is still in Borgin and Burkes and so is very dangerous to use, but they chance it in the middle of the night, with Fred and George as conductors and intermediaries on the Diagon Alley / Knockturn Alley side. They have no idea that Snape is actually helping them manage this, using his Map to keep them undetected while they use the Room.

How's that for an author's note full of extraneous detail that didn't fit into the chapter?

Into the Woods

Chapter 4 of 6

Severus goes to the Forest of Dean, and to Malfoy Manor.

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* * *

*Music. A cello, playing alone. Oh, she thought. I love that piece. What is it? It stopped. A door down the corridor slammed*Don't leave, she cried, and ran, but the corridor never got shorter.

Shrieks echoed around her, Mudblood filth get out of my house, *and the walls were lined with closed doors. Which was the right one?*

My heart, she thought. She put her hand on her breast. It came away sticky with dark blood. Mud blood. Needed to button up her jacket to cover the hole. No one must

know about the hole, and the blood. How could she hide it though?

The floor sucked at her feet. It had become a mudhole, freezing cold, and she knew it would swallow her. Come back! she screamed. Don't leave me!

'Hermione!' Hands were shaking her awake. 'I'm here! I'm here. I didn't leave, I'm here.'

Someone's face was right in hers when she opened her eyes, the lamplight shining on black hair *Haystack hair. Not right.*

She jerked backward and banged her head against the bed frame. 'Ouch!' Now she was fully awake, though still awash in that muddy, helpless, heartbroken nightmare feeling.

'I'm fine,' she said sharply, and shrugged away from Harry's hand, which was still on her arm. 'I was just...'

'Dreaming,' he said, sitting back on his heels. 'Are you okay?'

'Fine,' she said again, but without heat. The dream-fuelled tumult was ebbing. 'I'm fine. Do you want me to take over?'

'No, I'm...it's, I'm not going to be able to sleep. Not after...' He ran his fingers through his hair.

'Of course. Just...I'll be here if you change your mind.'

He nodded, and ducked out.

I'll be here, NOT sleeping.

She never got back to sleep, not after that dream. It had a dozen variations, all of which made her feel deeply wretched and somehow almost nauseated, if your heart, or some part like that, could feel nauseated.

Sighing, she got up and sat at the table, reached for *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* and a battered Middle German to English dictionary, and unfolded a long piece of parchment on which she was making a sort of concordance of about three hundred words from the modern English edition Dumbledore had left her. Digging for clues in mistranslated words. Probably useless. Anyway, it was nit-picky, absorbing work, and a tonic for an irritable mood or a nauseated *whatever*.

* * *

The night was moonless and here in the wood it was starless, and velvety dark, and very, very cold. The cold struck right through Severus's clothes. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the greater darkness. When they did he saw snow covering the ground under gaps in the trees' canopy.

He was in a beech grove beside a car park...he'd been there before, long ago. Potter and Hermione were probably to the west of here.

He drew his wand and began the motions and incantation of the locating spell.

His wand twitched slightly, then more sharply. *There*. He started walking. The wand was like a dowsing rod, leading him to the west and south, across the road and into a clump of old oaks and then deeper into the pathless parts of the wood.

A small clearing opened before him, and above it there was a break in the clouds. Starlight flooded the clearing, bright on the snow, especially to one who had just stepped out of the deep dark.

Standing right in the middle of the clearing, a front foot raised on hoof-tip, was a small doe, coal black in the cold light. He froze at the trees' edge, his heart pounding. The deer looked right at him, just for a moment, and then she put her foot down and began to walk away from him, not quickly at all.

Mesmerised, he followed her. She walked under the trees. He was just a few paces behind, but still she didn't run. These trees were beeches too, with white peeling bark, and for a tantalising moment he could still see her outlined against their trunks before she melted away.

'Lumos!' he hissed. It was unwise to risk a light, but at that moment he could not bear to let her go.

It was no use though; she was gone. *But there*. His wandlight shone dully on something several yards to his left. It was a frozen pool, about ten feet across, covered with thick, dirty-grey ice.

He forgot about the doe. *Perfect...* He'd thought to use the river, finding a shallow bit near the bank out of the main current. This was much better...safer, more contained, fewer variables.

'*Evanesco*,' he whispered. The ice began to steam, and in seconds it was gone. Severus withdrew the tiny sword from his waistcoat lining and brought it back to size, then Suspended it horizontally above the water and slowly lowered it until it rested on the bottom of the pond, three feet down. He refroze the surface of the pond, taking care that the ice should be clear enough to show the sword.

Satisfied, he renewed his locating spell. Fifteen minutes' walk, and he came up against the edges of her wards and stopped, then slipped through them and behind the shelter of a huge oak.

There was the tent, glowing faintly from within, not a stone's throw away. Severus pointed his wand at it, and silently laid upon the tent's fabric the tracing spell he'd prepared. He had no wish to lose Potter again now he'd found him.

Someone was sitting slump-shouldered in the doorway of the tent. From the shape of the head, he could tell it was Potter *Thank god*. He needed it to be Potter.

But... *oh gods*... here it was: that profound shifting of his magic, the upwelling of calm, strength, and wholeness he felt when she was near. He'd deliberately forgotten this. A man could become quite useless, remembering this.

Just then, a scream came from inside the tent: 'Come back! Don't leave me!' It was Hermione.

Adrenaline shot through him and he took an involuntary step forward, crushing a twig underfoot. He froze *Bugger*. But Potter didn't hear...he'd leapt up and scrambled through the doorway of the tent.

Severus seized the tree trunk with both hands; the rough bark dug into his palms...he barely felt it...and he bent his head.

He thought he'd vomit. The moment passed; the cold clutching his insides didn't. Appalled, he retreated soundlessly until he was standing in deep shadow a dozen yards past the edge of the wards.

And he'd thought he could come anywhere near her...see her, even! *Cretin*. A man on hunger strike doesn't linger at the feasting table. He doesn't wait for a crumb to fall unnoticed so he can sneak a tiny, utterly insufficient taste of cake.

He *knew* this.

He turned his back on the campsite and began to move back towards the pond; he'd send his Patronus from there, and there he'd bloody well stay.

He hadn't gone five paces when he heard other footsteps...loud, crunching ones...off to his right. Again he whipped into the darkest shadow he could find and stood utterly still and alert.

'Harry? Hermione! Are you there? It's me, Ron. I'm here...please, please let me in! I've come back.'

Ron Weasley came into view, a black and pale grey figure stumbling alongside the perimeter of the wards, clearly sensing them and just as clearly unable to breach them.

'Hermione! Harry!'

Severus cast a wordless Disillusionment spell on the interloper. Now at least no one would hear the stupid~~stupid~~ oaf. After a moment, Severus cast a tracing spell on Weasley too. His plan had a new wrinkle. He moved off towards the pond.

* * *

Alecto Carrow...*Professor* Alecto Carrow, thank you very much...had never imagined how fascinating it would be to teach Muggle Studies. The things the Mudbloods got up to! Wars, atrocities, genocidal sprees, murder, rape, cruelty, torture, purposeless destruction...it was all *everywhere, all the time*, some of it quite cleverly managed. And the scale of it!

She was curled up with some tea and a rather nice book about a modern African genocide when a familiar pain seared her left forearm.

'Oh, my Lord,' she gasped and dropped her book. The fire flared green and Professor Snape's face appeared in the hearth.

'It's a general summons, Professor Carrow. Collect Professor Carrow and meet me at the front door in three minutes.'

'But surely we can't all leave...'

'You're down to two minutes fifty seconds,' he said, and disappeared.

Whomever he'd left in charge, and whatever he knew or guessed about the meaning of the general summons (it had been months since there'd been one), Snape wasn't talking. Alecto found she wasn't feeling very chatty either. The three of them walked down to the Apparition point in silence.

Outside the Malfoys' gates the air was peppered with the *crack!* of Apparition and the crunch of feet on snow as Death Eaters materialised in their dozens and hurried up the drive.

No one spoke until they got to the wide-open door. Snape swept in, but Amycus broke stride and murmured, 'What's that?' It looked like a pile of dirt-streaked snow had been left at either side of the door.

Alecto looked, and her pulse sped up.

It wasn't snow; it was a pair of white peacocks...Lucius's prized fowl...muddy, bloody, and dead on the stones.

So. Not a good sign.

* * *

The entrance hall of Malfoy Manor was a wreck. The walls and ceiling were scorched. The carpet on the great staircase was smouldering, and piles of rubble and broken glass littered the floor. The air stank of burning and blood.

Five people were dangling eight feet up in the centre of the hall. The three Malfoys. Bellatrix. Fenrir Greyback. All of them were Petrified, utterly still but for a trickle of tears off the tip of Draco's chin and the occasional drop of blood falling from Bella's right hand.

Below them in haphazard heaps lay ten or so little grey forms dressed in rags...all house elves, all dead. Off to one side lay another corpse, its face mottled purple and distended in death. Severus could see its right hand was made of silvery metal, and was clutching its owner's throat. Pettigrew.

As the Death Eaters flowed into the room, they stopped, and spread out into a semicircle around the tableau. No one said a word or exchanged a glance. They looked at the prisoners or at the corpses or at the floor, not at each other; they were waiting to be told what to think.

Voldemort made them wait nearly ten minutes after they'd all assembled. The foot-shuffling and whispering that had started abruptly stopped when the high, cold voice began to speak.

'My Death Eaters, look at your fellows. Today they have disappointed me very, very badly indeed. I have called you together to help me... correct... their incompetence and error.'

The five prisoners began to spin slowly in midair, and then four of them disappeared with soft pops. Pettigrew's body disappeared as well, silver hand and all. Draco crashed to the floor on top of some of the dead elves, gave a choked scream, and scrambled away to cower at the foot of the stairs.

'Severus,' said Voldemort, still nowhere in sight. 'Take this boy back to school. His parents have made a bargain for his release.' There was a loud bang and all of the little elf corpses suddenly billowed with black smoke. In half a minute they were gone, heaps of grey ash in their places. As if he'd been shoved, Draco jolted upright and stumbled towards Severus.

The voice continued. 'Everyone else, go now to the dungeons. The miscreants await. Remember, they have disappointed me today. They have made me... quite angry. You understand me.'

They all began moving towards the back of the hall, where corridors would lead them to the dungeon stairs. Severus seized Draco's arm and propelled him in the opposite direction, out the door and down the drive.

Severus let himself feel, for a moment, intense relief that he was exempted from torture duty. Then he reflected: Voldemort could have given Draco to one of the Carrows. It might mean something that he chose Severus instead, but it might not. He'd know more when he questioned Draco.

But first, they needed to get out of here.

* * *

The Apparition alarms began shrieking the moment their feet touched the pavement of Hogsmeade High Street. Severus and Draco stood where they were until the guards arrived to check their identities. Once they were cleared, Severus made directly for the Shrieking Shack, towing a hiccupping Draco behind him.

'What happened?' he asked the moment he'd determined they were alone in the shack.

'It was Potter,' said the boy bitterly. 'Some Snatchers found Potter, and Weasley, and Granger, and Thomas and some goblin, and brought them to Malfoy Manor. P-Potter was jinxed so you couldn't recognise his face, but with those others with him...who else could it be? Father was just about to call the Dark Lord to tell him he had Potter when Aunt Bella noticed they had a sword, and she got frightened, I don't know why. They wouldn't say where they got it, so she sent Potter and Weasel to the dungeon and tried to torture an answer out of Granger...'

Severus interrupted. 'Did she die?' His voice was a croak.

Draco looked confused for a moment. 'Oh. Granger? No. She didn't. But she might have if she'd been Crucioed much longer. She was unconscious, and Aunt Bella was about to give her to Greyback when Potter and Weasley managed to escape from the dungeon, and they all Apparated away, with the goblin and a house elf.' He paused. 'But the Dark Lord was already on his way. He arrived a minute later and...' Draco trailed off, his eyes on the tip of Severus's wand, which had blasted a smoking hole in the wall of the shack.

Severus had stopped hearing. The cold terror that had gripped him at first had rapidly given way to nausea and rage. Waves of red crashed behind his eyes and his skin crawled. He wanted nothing so much as to Apparate back to Malfoy Manor and grind Bellatrix and Greyback into blood-soaked dust. Then he'd find Hermione and take her away, to the other side of the world, and hide her and make her better...

...and Potter would lose, and Voldemort would hunt them down and destroy them, or, most likely, they would never get away in the first place. He put his hand over his chest where the Transfigured ampoule of her memories lay close to his skin. *She's away. She's as safe now as she's ever been.* He could kill Potter for getting her caught; he was sure it was down to him. Or Weasley, that idiot...

Draco was staring at him, he noticed. He assumed his coldest expression and growled, 'Yes, go on.' And Draco told him about the Dark Lord's destructive, terrifying rage, and of how he'd Crucioed all of them and, when he'd heard that a house elf had been involved in the escape, massacred the Malfoy house elves.

'What was the bargain your parents struck for your release?' Severus asked.

'I don't know,' Draco moaned, and started crying again.

Severus sat and watched Draco, letting him cry himself out. They both knew what was happening to Draco's parents at that very moment. But for all Draco had seen these past months, Severus had seen much more, and could imagine the scene better. He cringed inside at the thought of Lucius and Narcissa caught in that, but the idea of Greyback and...especially...Bellatrix enduring whatever a pack of frightened Death Eaters could conjure was both intensely pleasurable and deeply unsatisfying.

He wanted to destroy Bellatrix. Not just kill her...Avada Kedavra was too good for her. But make her really suffer. Break her spirit and her mind. All his helplessness and his peril, all the terrible vulnerability of his heart...as Draco wept, he poured it into an elaborate, dark, and bloody scenario of revenge.

He revelled in this for a little while, but soon enough he arrived at the truth he already knew. The only way to really hurt Bellatrix was to destroy the one thing she cared about: her precious Lord. And that was going to happen through Potter's agency, not his. Bloody fantasies aside, he was now just where he'd been before in regard to Voldemort and his own fate: his hands tied, dangling over the abyss. And he had to come to terms with what had happened to Hermione, and...all over again, because he thought he had done...with what might yet happen.

* * *

Two days later Severus made the mistake of looking into a mirror in one of the tower storerooms. He'd gone there in search of the case of narwhal oil he'd been missing since his move from the dungeons.

The large mirror, off in a corner, had always been covered with a cloth; now the cloth had fallen off it somehow, perhaps disturbed when the house elves had cleaned. He strode over to put the cloth back in place...and stopped short.

In the mirror, Hermione stood beside him, her arm around his waist, her body tucked up against his side. Nothing else was in the reflection...not any of the other junk in the room, or any other scene or object, just the two of them. She was smiling her radiant smile and looking into his eyes from the mirror, and when he put his hand up to touch the surface, it was Hermione, not the image of himself, who raised a hand to lay her palm against his. Her eyes were dancing.

Struck stupid, he dropped the cloth and stepped forward. He rapped against the surface of the mirror, and then, heart racing, he darted around behind it and felt along its wooden back. As if she'd fall out of some hidden panel. By the time he'd rounded to the front again, and looked up to see the words 'Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi' carved into the top of the frame, he knew what this was.

He stood still in front of the mirror and stared at her happy face for he didn't know how long. Then he dragged his eyes over to the image of himself, looking... also... happy.

The vision of his own smug face...closed lips curved up, forehead nearly smooth, eyes glinting...and of his arm around her shoulder... He swallowed hard, and a wave of pure rage swept through him. He wanted nothing more than to blast the image to smithereens. So he did.

For an instant, the mirror showed an image of itself exploding in a flash of green light, and then it collapsed in a pile of silvery dust and splinters. He threw the cloth over it and, completely forgetting the reason he had come into the room, stalked out of it.

* * *

'Why did you destroy the mirror, Severus?' asked Dumbledore, his painted brow furrowed.

'Because I wanted to.'

'That was a rare and precious object. Why would you ruin it?'

'I just told you,' said Severus coolly.

'I wish you would tell me what's troubling you.'

Severus snorted. 'I'm sure you would. However, most troublesome to me right now are my Ministry reports, due tomorrow. I apologise for destroying your mirror, and would like to get on with my work now. If I may.'

The portrait said nothing more, though Severus was sure Dumbledore was regarding him with concern behind his back...and that he probably had his own ideas about why Severus had destroyed the mirror.

He'd apologised for form's sake, but he wasn't sorry. The mirror's existence would have been one more temptation than he needed. Furthermore, wasn't that a malignant sort of object, taunting its victims with what they might never have? As if he didn't know what he wanted...as if he needed to be reminded.

In the days since he'd returned from Malfoy Manor, he'd seriously considered Obliviating himself. His anger and fear had peaked and receded, leaving him filled with a new kind of despairing hopelessness. Before, when he had been without hope for himself and his own happiness, he hadn't much cared about it. He'd lived without hope for so long.

Then she came, and woke him up, and for a few weeks he had felt alive and whole and ~~happy~~, happier than he could have imagined being in such circumstances...or, really, in any circumstances. He'd tasted what it might feel like to really live, rather than just survive. And now not only was he intensely aware that he would probably never have that, but he was raw with his own helplessness to protect her from death or worse.

It had often felt, these last few days, as though Obliviation were the only way to make it through. It had always been an option of last resort. And deadening those thoughts and memories was certainly the safest and most rational course. They were a torment, not a comfort any more. Before his encounter with the mirror, he'd begun to gather the ingredients for the self-Obliviating potion.

After the mirror, though, he knew. It hurt, and it was dangerous and probably hopeless, but he'd rather die knowing he'd been loved than buy a measure of peace by deadening that part of his mind. He would keep his memories, cost what it might.

* * *

A/N: Okay, I slipped in that conversation between Harry and Hermione. In canon, he stays alone on watch until the doe appears. Maybe we are officially AU now? *g *

The black doe: the Forest of Dean is home to a number of fallow deer, some of which are melanistic, or possessed of a dark...even black...coat.

And, in case you were wondering by now if I actually enjoy torturing him, the answer is no. That was one of the most depressing chapters I've had to write in this story.

The Shrieking Shack

Chapter 5 of 6

The Battle of Hogwarts happens...

Chapter 4

The Shrieking Shack

Disclaimer: Whose? Hers.

* * *

What do you do when the world comes crashing down on your head, suddenly, finally, in one of the ways you knew it might?

If you're Severus Snape, you hold out just a little longer and then a little longer, fighting back the shock of poison and blood loss so you can finish your work.

She's there in the room, but you only have seconds before you're gone beyond helping. And here is Potter, still missing a crucial piece of the puzzle...a piece only you can give him now.

You have your usual choice...that is, no choice. You don't have the time or the strength to even look at her.

Instead you dig into the wells of memory for images that will build the boy's trust, and you spin from them a tale to help him understand what he needs to do, and what the stakes have always been...for him and for you. He has to end it now. He has to.

You pass out from the effort and when you see anything again, it's Ronald Weasley's backside disappearing into the tunnel.

Wait! you want to say, but nothing's working in your mouth or throat, and you can't make a sound.

They are off to save the world, and you are... forgotten. Done. Yes, of course. Your eyes close. It's very cold.

Funny. In the end you are dying like him...Toby Snape, the pile of Muggle rubbish who fathered you. He died cold and alone. Helpless, pathetic, worthless... good riddance. Poetic justice.

No! The embers of old rage flare up in you. NOT like him, never EVER like him. You have power he couldn't even imagine, and you will not die like him.

Accio wand!

The silent spell takes almost everything you have left, but it works. There's a wand under your fingers, and it's slippery, like your own ebbing intention, but you put both together for an instant and think Congresco and then you don't think anything more

* * *

Ginny dropped Hermione's hand and stepped forward to kneel opposite her mother at Fred's side. Ron and Percy had their arms wrapped around each other, and Percy was shaking with sobs, as was Fleur, in Bill's arms.

Hermione twisted her hands, feeling suddenly alone on the margins of the Weasleys' grief. Eyes blurred with tears, she looked away...right at the bright pink splash of Tonks's hair on the stone floor. Tonks's hand was almost touching Lupin's as he lay beside her.

A sob escaped Hermione's throat. Dead, dead. Teddy an orphan, just like that. She moved away from the knot of Weasleys and crouched beside Tonks. She looked so small and cold. Could she and Lupin not have a blanket to lie on, at least? Hermione reached into her pocket for her wand.

It was not there.

She leapt to her feet and began patting her clothes and digging into her other pockets. Not there, or there, or there, or *anywhere!*

When had she last had it out? In the shack, when she'd conjured the flask for Harry. Then... Voldemort's voice had sounded across the grounds, taunting Harry to come out, and they'd all scurried towards the tunnel, and surely she had pocketed her wand...

She closed her eyes and tried to concentrate.*Accio wand!* She opened her eyes and waited... waited...

Nothing. *ACCIO WAND!* And... wait... Still nothing.

Damn it. She must be too far from the wand, or too upset to do wandless magic. She would have to retrace her steps.

She looked at the Weasleys. Every single one of them was crying, either quietly or loudly. Ron, with one arm still around Percy, was now clinging to Fleur as well, and weeping openly. Hermione's heart pounded painfully. She couldn't interrupt. And... well, she'd be gone and back before she was even missed.

Looking around, she saw Luna hurrying up to the dais with infirmary supplies. 'Luna!' she called, waving her over. 'Luna. I need to go and... find something. If Ron's looking for me, tell him I'll be back here in, in about twenty minutes or so, okay?'

'Yes, of course. Shall I come with you?'

'No, no, please,' she waved Luna on towards the dais. 'You keep... doing what you're doing. I'll be right back.'

She ran. Out of the hall and past the signs of battle strewn across the floor of the entrance, and into the black, black night.

The Whomping Willow was still frozen, and she wriggled into the passage for the second time that night and began crawling forwards in the dark. *Accio wand!* she shouted into the tunnel.

Nothing. She was beginning to panic a little. Was her wand not coming because she was anxious and couldn't focus her intention without it? Or was she wrong about where she'd dropped it?

She swept her hand before her in the darkness as she crawled, berating herself all the while. *Should have let Luna come with me, or Summon it for me. Should have borrowed a wand. Should have told someone where I was going. Ill-conceived in every way...*

The tunnel was beginning to slope upwards. She stopped, and breathed in and out to calm her mind. Then she tried again, reaching out her hand. *Accio wand!*

And oh! The feeling when her wand flew into her hand and she wrapped her fingers around it!

Actually, rather a *sticky* feeling...

'*Lumos!*' she said, and in the light she examined the wand. It was half-covered in something... blood.

Snape's blood.

She closed her eyes and swallowed hard. *Tergeo,* she muttered, and his blood was gone.

Except it wasn't. It was all over the floor of the Shrieking Shack. Her thoughts flashed to the dead in the Great Hall. Shouldn't she...? But she didn't have the ~~time~~ to Levitate his body all the way back, and, anyway, *should* she? He was an enemy. A bad man. But the thought of him lying alone in a shambles of dust and blood was just... unbearable somehow.

Up ahead of her, a lighter patch in the darkness showed where the tunnel emerged into the shack.

She had to do *something*. Clean up a bit. Fold his hands, that kind of thing. Thirty seconds' work. She could spare thirty seconds to be decent.

She scrambled forwards and pushed into the room where he lay, half on his side. Her wandlight swept over his pale face with its mercifully closed eyes. The light glinted off the dark pool under his head. She pointed her wand. '*Tergeo,*' she whispered, and the pool disappeared. She knelt beside him and pointed her wand at his blood-soaked hair and clothing. '*Scourgify.*'

The horrible wounds in his throat were clean for a moment, but blood started trickling out again almost immediately. *God, how could he have any left to lose?*

Wait. Why is blood flowing out of there? That's on the top of his body, shouldn't gravity be pulling it down under.

She flicked her eyes back to his face. *Why...?* Had Harry closed Snape's eyes before he left? Because they'd been open as he died, she was sure of it.

Reflexively, she reached for his hand. *Warm. Oh god.* She laid her fingers over his wrist... was it...? *A pulse?* She put her face right down in his and felt on her cheek the merest thready wisp of breath leaving his nostrils.

'Oh god!' she said out loud. 'Ohgodohgod. Professor Snape, it's me, Hermione Granger. We thought you were dead. You're not dead!'

He didn't move. The blood was running down his neck, forming another little puddle on the floor. She must have ripped the clot out with her cleaning spell *Episkey!* she said, and the mangled flesh tried to close itself but couldn't. She needed a clotting spell... oh, what was it... oh, right. '*Congresco!*' she said, and the blood thickened and slowed, then stopped.

Now he was in only slightly worse condition than she'd found him in. She looked at her watch, screeched, and scrambled to her feet. Nearly half of the hour of Voldemort's truce had gone.

She stared down at her teacher, feeling impossibly pulled in two directions, and utterly out of time.

How will I get him out of here? How can I save him? If she took him back to the castle...well, would he survive the trip? And would he be safe there, among so many people who hated him? She couldn't stay with him, there was no time, she needed to get back to Harry and Ron. Soon they would be fighting again. *Think! Think!*

Then she had it, the outline of a plan slamming together in her mind.

It might work; it was certainly the best she could do until... well, until whatever was going to happen tonight played itself out! *I'll deal with tomorrow when tomorrow comes, she thought, if I live that long.*

'Winky!' she said firmly to the air. 'Come here.' There was a crack and the little squash-nosed elf stood before her.

Hermione got back down on her knees so her face was level with Winky's. 'Winky,' she began. 'Winky!' She grabbed the elf's shoulder and shook her slightly. 'Look at me, not at him. Good.' She drew a deep breath to calm herself. 'Winky. The Headmaster needs your help. Listen carefully.'

* * *

What do you do when you have felt your world teetering on a knife's edge for as long as you've been in it?

You save it. You run and hide and struggle and plan and fight, and you save the world.

If you're Harry Potter, you die doing it, then come back to life to finish the job.

If you're Hermione Granger, you help Harry every way you can think of, and you watch him die, then watch him return from the dead, and you fight some more, and somehow, you stay alive.

When you see the enemy fall, and he's really dead, and the battle is won and the world is saved...what then?

For a little while, you keep going. Because who could stop, after running for so long?

* * *

Harry was alive. Voldemort was dead. Bottomless relief, ferocious joy, and a flood of tears hit Hermione all at once. She and Ron got to Harry first, and the three of them stood there hugging and crying and unable to form any words at all for a long, long while.

When she could bear to relinquish Harry to the others who crowded around him, she and Ron turned to each other and hugged like they'd never let go, and he kissed her long and sweetly and held her face in his hands and looked at her with such raw devotion that she had to burrow her head into his chest. She knew that same look was on her face, too, and it was hard to bear so much happiness, and so much of everything all at once. So they just stood, wrapped around each other, for another while.

Then...and she could feel it happen in his body...he remembered Fred.

They walked over to his family...only a few steps, and another round of smiles and embraces and wordless teary-eyed looks, but time had started again. She looked around. There was work to do.

She squeezed Ron's hand and let it go. 'I have something I need to check on. I'll be back in twenty or thirty minutes.'

'Shall I come with you?' he asked.

Oh, yes, please, I'm afraid of what I'll find 'No, you stay with...' she gestured around to his family '...stay here. They'll need you, and I won't be long.'

'Can't it wait, Mione? There's Death Eaters still about; wait until the Aurors get here and secure the place.'

'It can't wait, and don't worry...I won't be roaming around outside at all. Go...Ron, your mother wants you, look.' Hermione pointed. Molly Weasley was beckoning to her youngest son. Hermione kissed him quickly, then ran out of the Great Hall, wand drawn.

There was a little cloakroom outside the Great Hall, and when Hermione ducked in there, it was empty. She walked around the room peering under tables and twitching aside tapestries until she was sure she was alone.

For a few seconds, she stood before the window. The vault of the sky was luminous grey and pinkish at the edge with the beginnings of dawn. Closer to the earth it was smoky. Things were burning. She would think about that *next*, maybe. Not yet. She closed her eyes and said, 'Kreacher!'

Nothing.

'Kreacher!'

She stamped her foot. *Stupid, BIGOTED elf!* 'Kreacher! Come here now! It's for the Headmaster!'

Kreacher cracked in and stood glaring up at her from under his warty brows. 'Miss... is wanting Kreacher?'

'Yes. Kreacher. I need you to Apparate me to the Shrieking Shack. Do you know how to get there?'

'Oh, Kreacher knows, Kreacher knows, Miss. But can't Miss... *walk*? It is near.' He smiled with some condescension. It was ghastly...it made him look more than ever like something out of a child's nightmare. 'Kreacher is needed in the...'

'*Kreacher* is needed in the Shrieking Shack, and so is Miss, because that is where the Headmaster is, and he is hurt and he needs our help.' She grabbed his hand, ignoring his flinch. 'The Shack. Now.'

Grey light leaked into the room from one unshuttered window. The patch of floor where she'd left Snape was empty. Where was he? Then she saw that Winky had managed to move him to the bed. This was either a good sign or a very bad one. Winky was in a chair beside the bed.

'Oh, Miss Hermione, I is so glad to see you. Come!'

Hermione moved to the bedside. 'How is he? When did you move him? Is he...'

She stopped speaking and grabbed at the back of Winky's chair. For a moment, there was a roaring in her ears and her scalp prickled and her flesh seemed to go cold from the inside, and she just swayed there.

The fit...or whatever it might be called...passed, like they always did, leaving her clammy and panting, and feeling like she wanted to cry her broken heart out. She realised that she was staring at Snape's face, drawn and thin on a brocade pillow, and that Winky was talking.

'...like you said, Miss Hermione. Madam Pomfrey didn't mind at all, she gave Winky all the supplies you told Winky to get...the blood replenisher and the tincture of bezoar and the dittany and wound cleanser and, you can see, Winky put some bandages on, too, to keep all clean. The Shack,' she looked around worriedly and dropped her voice as if to avoid offending the building, 'the Shack is being *very* dirty, Miss. Winky is spelling twelve pounds of dust out of the bedclothes before moving the Headmaster!' She pointed to a little heap in the corner of the room.

'But how is he?' Hermione asked, staring. Snape's face was waxen. A bulky white bandage enveloped his neck and left shoulder; his shirt was gone, a sheet pulled up over his chest. *So pale and thin*, she thought. *That little knob on his collarbone*.. Her hand was halfway to touching it when she realised what she was doing and snatched it back.

Winky wrung her hands. 'Alive, Miss. No more bleeding. Just... sleeping, so very deep. And fever, but Winky thinks it is less now.'

Hermione reached out and touched his cheek. It was very warm but not burning hot. It must be the snake's venom heating him up. Or an infection. She felt the pulse at his wrist. Not strong and not slow, but steady.

'Hmmm,' she said absently. Now that Voldemort was dead, this man was one of the most loathed people in Wizarding England. She ran through the possibilities *What if I take him back to the castle, which is full of hundreds of adrenaline-mad, grief-stricken people who hate him. Not safe. What if I leave him here until I can find an adult to help...Madam Pomfrey. But Order members could find him here with Winky.* They might just kill him. Death Eaters? Probably would. Students? Possibly. Aurors? They might take him to St Mungo's, or they might transport him right to prison, killing him in the process.

She walked around the room, weaving the wards she had used every day all winter long to hide herself and Harry and Ron. It was, again, the best she could do for now.

Kreacher had sidled up to the other side of the bed and was looking everywhere but at Winky while he whined, 'Deserting its post during the battle, ooooh, it's a bad elf. Doing whatever the Mudblood says...'

'Kreacher,' snapped Hermione. 'Stop being horrible to Winky. You have to do what I say, too.' She felt like a bully the minute she said it, but honestly. Kreacher was incorrigible. 'Winky,' she said more kindly. 'You've done wonderfully. I will send help soon. Keep taking care of him, and don't panic if anyone comes into the Shack. They won't be able to see you unless I've told them you're here.'

She looked down at Snape. 'I have to go now, Professor. Good-bye.'*I'll try to keep you out of Azkaban until you're better, at least.*

'Okay, Kreacher. Back to the castle, please, and no Splinching.'

* * *

The crash hit them all at once, hard.

Harry took off his glasses and rubbed at his eyes, then closed them and left his hand tented over them. His face looked dirty and pinched in the sunlight that washed in through the windows of the Headmaster's office.

Hermione looked up at Ron. His face was grey and exhausted and, now that they weren't talking anymore, he looked, well... He looked like he was maybe ready to start crying again. Her heart lurched. *Ron.* She reached her hand out and grasped his; his gaze met hers. She tried to let all the love she felt shine through to him.

He smiled at her a little, and caught her other hand too, but his eyes were swimming. He glanced over at Harry and looked away. He was going to try to keep it together in front of Harry.

Oh, Ron. She sighed and let her eyes close for just a minute. Her boys were about to fall apart. They needed rest. Nothing more could or should be expected of them...for a long time, really...but certainly not until they had slept.

She, however, had one more job to do before she herself could rest.

Right. She opened her eyes.

'Harry,' she said. 'Ron. It's time to sleep. Come on. Everything else can come after sleep.' Harry stood up and walked over to her and Ron, stumbling a little, he was so tired.

Hermione turned to Dumbledore's portrait. 'Sir,' she said. 'May we use the Floo? It's a long way to Gryffindor Tower.'

'Of course,' said Dumbledore. 'Of course you may. Please go, and rest now, my dear, dear children.'

Ron still had hold of both of her hands, and he started moving them both, awkwardly, towards the fireplace.

'No, Ron, I'm... I actually have to stay for a few minutes and talk to Professor Dumbledore about something. You two go on ahead; I'll follow.' She pulled her hands out of his, then, feeling shy but bold, she threw her arms around his neck and stretched up to kiss him on the lips.

He held her tight and kissed her soundly, then leaned his forehead against hers and closed his eyes. 'Mione,' he whispered.

'I know,' she murmured, and now *she* was about to cry, just burst with tears of happiness and grief and exhaustion. 'I'll see you after you wake up.'

She hugged Harry fiercely. 'I'll be there in five minutes, and I expect you both to be upstairs in bed.'

When the green sparkles died down in the grate, she turned back to the portrait.

'What do you want to talk to me about, my dear?' asked Dumbledore, looking down at her.

'It...it's Professor Snape, sir.'

Dumbledore grew very still. 'Yes?'

'Professor Dumbledore, he's alive! I didn't want to say anything in front of Harry, because he'd want to go to him right away, and Harry...Harry needs ~~to~~*rest*, sir. And Professor Snape...he's all right for the moment, but he's badly hurt, of course, and he needs real help...and if everyone knew what Harry just told us, he'd be safe. But it's complicated, isn't it? It's *delicate*.'

She was pacing in front of the portrait, and wringing her hands. She'd gone to see Madam Pomfrey as soon as Kreacher Apparated her back to the castle, and the Healer, hearing that Snape was safe and stable, advised keeping him where he was for the time being.

'I'll tell Professor McGonagall, and we'll take care of it,' she'd said. 'Don't worry, dear.'

But now everything was different.

'Everybody still thinks he's a traitor and they hate him. And I...'

'Miss Granger,' Dumbledore broke in. 'It's all right. Professor McGonagall has already spoken to me about it, and is in possession of the facts. She has been to see him and is arranging transport to St Mungo's as soon as it can be managed.'

'You have done splendidly, and I am more grateful than I can say that you were the one who found him, and that you found him in time. And I hope that soon... well, never mind that.' Dumbledore shook his head a little.

'You must go and rest now,' he said. 'We'll take care of Professor Snape.' He smiled at her.

Almost too tired to feel relieved, she stumbled to the fireplace and in four minutes was asleep in someone's bed in the girls' dormitory.

* * *

A/N: And that, my friends, concludes the canon-compliant part of our story. The last scene in this chapter takes place at the very end of Deathly Hallows...before the Epilogue. Harry has told Ron and Hermione about what he saw in the Pensieve and what happened in the Forest, and he has spoken with Dumbledore's portrait about the Hallows...and abjured the wand and the stone.

The Burrow

Chapter 6 of 6

Two years after the final battle, Hermione remembers some things. Some other things remain hidden from her.

Disclaimer: I am happy to report that JKR created and owns the Potterverse.

* * *

'Oh, Mrs Weasley, let me take that. You'll have your hands full with the cake.' Hermione hurried forward to relieve Molly of the tea tray.

'Thank you, my dear. That would probably be best, now that I think of it.' Molly beamed. 'I suppose I may be a little too attached to doing everything myself. At least that's what Arthur says, though in my experience, more hands don't necessarily mean more help. You, however, I can trust.' She winked.

Hermione smiled, though inwardly she thought Mr Weasley had a point. It was only a tea tray, not a box of explosives. Mrs Weasley was an absolute dictator in her house, and Hermione often had trouble seeing the point of all her fuss.

She certainly didn't think Mrs Weasley had done her sons any favours by not teaching them to cook and clean. God knew it would have been nice if, during the war, Ron had shown a tenth as much interest in cooking as he had in eating.

And Fleur adored Bill, but three years into their marriage, she was fed up with his domestic incompetence. Last night, after everyone else had gone in, Fleur, Penelope, and Hermione had lingered in the garden in the soft darkness, drinking wine.

'Eet's like 'e ees surprised every day to learn eet ees *ëes* 'ouse too, and zat food needs to be cooked. 'E is like a, how do you say, like *un petit oiseau*, waiting for *maman* to feed 'eem.' Fleur snorted. 'Do I look like 'ees *maman*? *Non*, and I never shall. I am ees wife and ees equal.'

'Exactly,' said Penelope, huddling forward in her chair and slurring her words the tiniest bit. 'Equal partners. I work even longer hours than Percy does, but whose flat is a tip? His. I've stopped going over there, and he knows why. I don't know if it's sinking in, or if he's holding on to a fantasy of how it will be once we're living together.' She gulped her wine and frowned at her lap. Her wedding was in four months.

Hermione, of course, was thinking of the flat Ron and Dean shared. It was profoundly filthy. She'd stopped going there, too, even though her living at home with her parents didn't afford her and Ron much privacy.

'Good luck weezy Percy,' Fleur said, shaking her head. 'Beel ees trying, but eet's like part of 'ees brain just...never grew.'

'He's been Mollycoddled,' Penelope said darkly. 'Our men are deeply Mollycoddled.'

Hermione giggled.

'What ees Mollycoddled?' asked Fleur.

'It means they've been babied and spoiled,' said Hermione. 'It's a real word, it just happens to coincide with the *source* of the mollycoddling in this case.'

'MMs...Mollycoddled men,' said Penelope, pouring out the last of the wine. 'It's lucky for them they have so many good points.' She raised her glass. 'To our MMs. May they Mature Markedly.'

The other two women had raised their glasses. 'Ear, ear,' said Fleur.

Maneuvering the tea tray through the kitchen door into the sunny garden, thinking of last night's conversation, Hermione sighed. *Ron*, she thought. *Mollycoddled Ron*.

Penelope and Percy were on a blanket on the grass, Penny propped up on her elbows and reading from a fat folder of parchment, Percy asleep with a book over his face. As Hermione passed them on her way to the table, she glanced down at Penny's file and stopped abruptly, jolting the tea tray and sloshing the very hot tea out onto the tray and over her hand.

'Ouch!' she yelped, and stumbled over to the table with the tray. She crammed the burnt part of her hand in her mouth and started sucking on it. 'Owowowww,' she moaned around the hand.

Penny jumped up, scattering parchment, and drew her wand. 'Let me see.' She held her hand out and Hermione let her look at the burn.

"*Lenio*," said Penny with just the tiniest movement of her wand. 'There. Good as new. Yes?'

'Yes,' Hermione murmured. 'Thank you.' She grimaced. 'I do know *Lenio*, of course. I've used it a dozen times.'

'It's hard to remember things when you're in pain,' said Penelope sympathetically. 'Your intention gets so scattered.' She turned to the tea tray and siphoned the tea back into the pot. 'Shhhh.' She grinned. 'Molly never needs to know.' She went back to the blanket and began gathering up the scattered pages.

'That file,' said Hermione hesitantly. 'Is that...Professor Snape's medical record?'

'It is, yes.' Penelope looked as though she was about to say more, but she didn't.

'Is there...is he...did something happen?' Hermione swallowed hard. What if there had been some change? Not death, though...Penny wouldn't be reading the file if he had died. Would she?

Penny hesitated still, perhaps considering how much she should say. Healers needed to be discreet at all times and, with all the publicity surrounding Snape's trial and exoneration just beginning to die down, everyone connected with his case was especially circumspect.

Hermione felt very awkward. 'It's just that I... you know that I... I was, um...'

'I know,' said Penny quietly. 'I know you found him. I know...you visit him.'

'Yes.' Though it had been more than a month since she'd gone to St Mungo's.

Ever since the day after the final battle, when he'd been transferred to St Mungo's, Snape had been in a coma. At first, it was medically induced...the damage was so

grave, so complex, and the healers put him under.

And then...he didn't come out of it. Not after a month, not after a year and more. He breathed and his heart was beating but that was all the sign of life he gave. The healers said there was no apparent damage to the brain, and no reason they could name that he should still be comatose. But he was.

Week after week she'd visited him, often accompanied by Harry, sometimes by Ron, too, in the beginning. Harry went by himself sometimes. And others visited, too, in the first months...Order members, Hogwarts staff, some former students, mostly from Slytherin. Half the time she visited, it seemed, someone or other sat at his bedside.

Then, as the rumours about the nature of the memories he'd left gained currency, more and more people started sending him flowers and gifts (and sometimes time-release Dung Bombs and rotten vegetation) and even trying to get in to visit him.

He would have hated it all, of course. Though in a tiny corner of her own mind she nursed the belief that he would not mind ~~her~~ visits. She and Harry were among the few still allowed in to his room; with Professor McGonagall, they were his most faithful visitors.

Ron didn't visit anymore. He thought it was 'pointless and morbid.' He actually used the words 'greasy git' once in an argument that had started about something else altogether and had somehow got on to her Tuesday evening visits to Snape.

And a month ago, on the second anniversary of the final battle and just three weeks after the vindicating verdict, she'd been preparing to leave for the hospital. Ron, angry she wasn't coming down to the Burrow, shouted, 'He's never waking up, and even if he did, he wouldn't want to see *you*! What the bloody hell are you trying to prove?'

'Nothing!' she'd yelled back. And it was true, and that was a daft question. Daft. Still, she'd decided to prove she had nothing to prove. And she'd stayed away since that day.

A month. She'd refrained for a month from sitting by the bedside of someone who lay like a stone and who, if he'd known she was there and had the power to speak, would have insulted, wounded, and dismissed her...just as he'd done when he'd been her teacher, when he'd sacked her as his assistant.

Why did she miss those visits so much? It made no sense. But she did miss them, she really did. She didn't have anything to prove...she simply wanted to sit beside Professor Snape, reading her book in peaceful silence. She would start visiting him again, and Ron could like it or not.

Penny spoke. 'I'm his new primary healer, that's all. Hortense Grex-Dinkle has been his healer the past two years, but she's just retired...and moved to Tahiti, of all things; I think an aunt died and left her a pile of Galleons. Anyway, I'm familiarising myself with his case.'

'Oh! Well, I suppose I'll probably see you there. Because, yes, I do visit him. I've read that regular visits can be beneficial for coma patients. What is your opinion on that?'

'There's certainly some research to support it.' Penelope nodded. Then she looked down at the pile of parchment and riffled it. 'One thing reading this file is demonstrating to me is that I need to do more reading on the subject of the care of comatose patients. There's one protocol Hortense established that doesn't make any sense to me. I'm sure it's based on good practice, just no practice I'm familiar with. I've owled her with some questions. I wonder how long an owl to Tahiti and back will take...'

'Mmmmm Penny,' Percy murmured. He slid the book from his sleep-flushed face and squinted up at his girlfriend. 'What time is it?'

'Nearly four, Dozy. There's tea.' Penny smiled and bent down to kiss him. 'Want some?'

'Mmmmm-hmmm.' Percy blinked and reached for his glasses. 'Wait. I'll get it.' He pushed himself up to sitting, stretched, and stood. 'Want some, Hermione?' he asked, moving towards the table.

When he turned his back, Penelope clasped her hands over her head and shook them like a victorious fighter. She grinned at Hermione. 'Progress,' she mouthed.

Hermione gave her a thumbs-up. 'No, thank you, Percy. I'll go and tell the others. Where are they?'

'Let's see,' said Penny. 'Ron and your dad went with Arthur to the garage to look at some... I want to say bicycle parts? Harry and Ginny went for a walk to the tree house. Bill and Fleur and your mum went into the village. I think they all know to be back by four...oh, look, here come Ron and Arthur and your father. And Molly with the cake!'

Mrs Weasley was indeed in sight, walking down from the house bearing an improbably tall chocolate cake.

Magnetised to the cake and groaning about his thirst, Ron declined to come with Hermione to fetch Harry and Ginny. So David Granger tucked his daughter's arm through his own and they set off towards the great oak that held the Weasleys' ramshackle old tree house.

Hermione smiled up at him. 'How were the bicycle parts?' she asked.

Her father shook his head. 'Well, there were a lot of them. Also motorbike parts, prams, and a small mountain of roller skates and skateboards and miscellaneous wheels and gears. That garage is amazing. It looks like a little shed on the outside, but inside it could be a warehouse.'

'I know. Harry gave Mr Weasley that expansion spell as a present last Christmas...they're very expensive. At least the permanent ones are. The piles were starting to creep out into the garden, and Mrs Weasley was *not* happy about it.'

'Cheers for Harry, then,' said Dr Granger. 'Making both his future in-laws happy in one stroke, eh?'

'Oh, yes, that's Harry. Though they'd be happy with him if he gave them each a second-hand deck of cards. They love him to pieces.'

'And what did you give them for Christmas, sweetheart?'

'A second-hand deck of cards, of course. To share. Some of the cards might have been missing.' She grinned, and ducked her head under a hawthorn bough that overhung the path. It was delicious to her, bantering with her father on a beautiful summer's day.

Things were getting better. Things were getting *good*. They had been so hard for so long.

Her parents' anger and hurt when she had restored their memories had nearly broken her heart. She quailed whenever she remembered the hope and dread of those first few hours, when she and Bill and Cressida Lamb from St Mungo's sat in the Grangers' lounge in Melbourne, helping her parents through the transition, Cressida monitoring their brain function as the neural pathways blocked by the Obliviate re-formed. And they had re-formed, thank all the gods ever named.

Other things were not so quick to mend.

Her very serious and proper mother had come back to herself quite soon...before they even left Australia, she had assured Hermione that she understood, that she was proud of her, that she forgave her.

But her kind, funny, patient father had remained withdrawn and irritable. For the first two months, he was plagued with migraines, and he slept twelve hours at a stretch. Over the next few months, he improved, but slowly. He returned to work. He went back into his garden, a place he loved. He and his wife began to socialise again, and he reported to Cressida that he was now able to talk to friends and neighbours about their sojourn in Australia without wanting to run from the room or smash something.

And above all, he began to warm up to Hermione. His expression lost its distance, and smiles lit his eyes again when he looked at her. Finally, in one of their family sessions with Cressida he had embraced his daughter and wept, rocking her in his arms and whispering that she was his brave, good girl and that he loved her so much.

Her father was himself again at last, and today he was walking with her on the path through the meadow beyond the Burrow's garden. It was heaven.

'They love you to pieces, too,' he said. 'Arthur and Molly.'

Hermione blushed. She wondered what Mr Weasley had said to him. 'They do, I think. They did even before Ron and I... Well. They've always been very fond of me. I know they'd be happy if I m-married Ron'...her cheeks and neck were on fire...'but they also realise that we're very young. I mean, um. *They* got married very young, and Harry and Ginny are even younger than I am, and they're engaged, but I don't feel any pressure from Mr and Mrs Weasley to, um, to do that.'

Yet, she added in her head. After Percy and Penny's wedding this year, and Harry and Ginny's next, Hermione had a fair idea where Molly Weasley's laser-like attention would turn.

Dr Granger gave a little grunt. 'That's good. You know I like Ron, but you have the rest of your education to think about, and the start of your career. There's plenty of time for settling down later, when you're closer to thirty than twenty.'

Translation: you can do better than Ron thought Hermione. She was sure her father hadn't lied...he did like Ron. And he wanted her to finish at university and settle into a career. But Hermione knew (because her mother had told her so, in the gentlest terms) that her father thought it was no match, and that she (her mother) agreed.

But there were things her parents just couldn't be expected to understand. Her history with Ron. The things they had been through together. How could she ever contemplate being with someone else? Who could ever know her so well?

And she loved him, Ron. He was dear, nearly all of the time. And he loved her. They were good together, in a way that made perfect sense to Hermione even if her parents couldn't quite see it.

Thankfully, they had arrived at the tree. She dropped her hand from her father's arm and walked forward under the canopy. 'Harry!' she called. 'Ginny! It's teatime!'

In a moment or so, Harry's tousled head showed over the railing. 'Okay! We'll be right down! Ow! I mean, we'll be down in a few minutes.'

Hermione looked down so he couldn't see her grin or her blush. She had little doubt what Harry and Ginny were doing up there.

Still, she called, 'D'you want us to wait for you?'

'No!' Harry said. 'Go on, we'll follow.'

She turned around. Her father had wandered back along the path. As she went to join him, a memory overtook her, of a time when she had come upon Harry and Ginny unaware. And had stood mesmerised, unobserved and on fire. The two of them, together... any words she'd since tried to find had failed. It was like the best of the books she'd used to read, times ten thousand. It was *everything*. She'd felt pierced and undone. She'd felt ravenous.

She'd tried, that night, with Ron, to find something that met the hunger. But she hadn't known how to ask for the something, because she couldn't even *name* it, and Ron had been eager if puzzled, and she'd ended up feeling rather desolate and vowing she would keep her expectations in check from now on.

It was just that... now she knew that *that* didn't only happen in books. Real people really had that. Sometimes they had it in a tree house on a summer afternoon.

Hermione sighed. She was a few paces behind her father now, and she called out. 'Dad! They're going to follow us.' She caught up to him and matched his stride. 'Let's go and see if Mum and Bill and Fleur are back.' She hooked her arm in his.

He whirled around and yanked his arm away. His face was pale and damp, and his eyes were wild. 'Don't!' he yelled. 'Don't touch me!'

'Dad!'

'Don't you...I don't...You! Who are you? Why are you following me? Why can't you leave me alone?' He was staggering back from her, and then he was down on the ground, jerking in the tall grass and making a horrible keening sound.

'Daddy! Dad! Oh god, Dad!' Hermione fell on her knees, and as she reached out her hands to him, he went rigid, and his eyes rolled up. She grabbed his hand, then fumbled to find the pulse in his throat. It was high but strong.

Penny! She needed Penny!

She leapt to her feet and ran back towards the tree house, screaming for Harry.

* * *

A/U: Lenio = soothe.

Gentle readers. I'm so sorry it's been an age since I posted. Life's not giving me much time for writing these days. Love and thanks to hechicera and lifeasanamazon, always.