

# In Aster Stars

by Meladara

Emotionally lost in the post-war world, Hermione finds that she must puzzle out a confusing world of dreams, nightmares, and strange events.

## Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 2

Emotionally lost in the post-war world, Hermione finds that she must puzzle out a confusing world of dreams, nightmares, and strange events.

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The characters and canon situations in the following story belong solely to J.K. Rowling, Scholastic, and WB.

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Hermione sat at the table, a cup of tea before her. Her elbows rested lightly on the table while she slowly brought the steaming cup to her lips and sipped, her eyes staring fixedly out into the Muggle neighbourhood. She was alone in the quiet house and had been so for two weeks now.

Peering through the sheer curtains, she could see the shapes of her neighbours going about their morning business, silhouettes of the lives that surrounded but never touched her. As they undertook the daily tasks of life that she simply could no longer grasp, she watched. She recognised Mrs Siegfried, waddling out to the curb with the rubbish bin; then Mr Hayes also exited his house, carting his rubbish behind him. For a moment Hermione was amused, watching her two oldest neighbours greet one another. They had, for countless years, been meeting in such a manner, and it soothed her to see that there were still constants in the world. Then she remembered and the amusement faded abruptly. Sighing, she watched her neighbours turn and retreat into their houses, oblivious to the presence of the mourning war heroine.

War heroine. That was what they called her in the *Daily Prophet*, not that she read that tripe. Since the end of the war nearly six weeks ago, she, Harry, and Ron had been thrust completely into the spotlight. It was only due to her ability to fall back on her Muggle heritage that she had any privacy available to her right now.

Setting down the cup, her hands moved to her head and rubbed against her eyes. She was tired and drained from weeks of crying. The pressure of her warm palms against the tender, red flesh was soothing, and for a moment she took in deep breaths, allowing the stress and grief of loss to flow out of her with each exhale.

Part of her felt completely foolish that she had fallen into such a state. For truly, when the end of the war had come, no one particularly close to her had been lost. When the dust of the battle had cleared, she'd found herself and her best friends alive and safe, much to her relief. Sure, there had been many lives lost and she had mourned with the rest of their world, but no one had had a close enough relationship with her to account for the acute depression she now found herself facing. It was almost as if something inside her had broken somewhere along the way, and now that she was no longer fighting a war, she couldn't figure out how to put herself back together again.

It was this house. She could find no strength here in this lonely silence. It was filled with ghosts and memories of her past and the lives of the people who meant the most to her. Deep down she knew that until she found them and restored their lost memories, she would be stuck, floundering in a sea of depression and grief.

Once again, memories of the past flooded her. A distant echo of her mother's voice calling her inside to lunch played through her mind; the memory of her father sitting across the table doing the Sunday crossword puzzle flashed before her eyes. A deep shuddering breath escaped her; she felt her palms and cheeks start to dampen, and by the time the tears were streaming down her cheeks, she had descended back into crushing grief.

She was so alone, and if she didn't do something about it soon, she was afraid that she would never be able to make it back to the person she'd once been.

Her hands moved to dash away the tears with harsh swipes as she struggled to hold back the sobs which were threatening to escape her. Breathing in a slow, steady breath, she closed her eyes to the world around her.

Another memory flooded her.

\*~\*~\*

"Hermione, are you sure this is what you want?" Harry asked her for what seemed like the twentieth time.

She sighed and looked up from the book she'd been pretending to read. They were the only ones sitting in the Gryffindor common room so late in the evening.

"Yes, Harry," she said with slight irritation. "As I told you last time, I just need to get away for a while. I simply can't think here; there are too many people and too many memories haunting me. I need to take a step back from the war and allow myself some time to heal. Everywhere I go here I see..." Her voice cracked before she fell silent; she couldn't or wouldn't voice what terrors haunted her here.

Silence stretched between them for a moment before she heard Harry speak. "Are you sure you'll be okay alone? I could come with you, or you could come to The Burrow, or even Grimmauld Place, if you'd like?" he offered earnestly.

"Thank you for the offer, but I think that it will be best for me to go at it alone for a while. Besides, Ginny isn't going to let you out of her sight for quite some time; she needs you, too, Harry. And I don't think I could face Ron right now, so The Burrow is just out. He expects something from me that I cannot give him, and after that display last night, he is the last person I want to see," Hermione told him.

"I'll talk to Ron for you if you want. He was out of line last night and shouldn't have done that, especially in front of everyone else," he offered.

"That he was. Do you realize that Ron and I haven't even gone on a single date? He's never even done something as simple as asking me to walk around the lake with him, or... I don't know... go to Hogsmeade! He was way over the top doing that. You can talk to him, if you think it will help. Although I'm not sure it will do much good."

"You're probably right, there," Harry agreed.

"I really think he's lost in grief over the loss of Fred and latched on to the idea of an "us". He's thinking himself in love, when he is not. I can't do it this time, Harry. I can't be his or your strength any more. I need what strength I have left for myself."

She knew he wasn't happy with her plan to leave the post-war sanctuary of Hogwarts, but there was really no other place that she particularly wanted to go, and staying certainly wasn't an option. The Battle of Hogwarts, and the violence she had witnessed there, were still too close to the surface. She knew it wouldn't fade until she left Hogwarts altogether. Faced with the fact that there were simply too many people at The Burrow, Ron included, and the Order Headquarters had too much residual Dark Magic to make it a desirable home, she found herself left with only option: her parents' house.

"Harry, please. I have healing I need to do, and I need to make arrangements to retrieve my parents. Not to mention the war has only been over for three weeks and the media is already driving me nuts. They've turned us into a bloody circus act, and I don't know how much more I can take. That drivel they have written about Ron and me is just plain wrong. I know we kissed, but that was in the middle of a battle, and I am smart enough to know that now is not the time to get involved with someone. Especially Ronald!" The words flew from her mouth quickly and full of irritation. When she finally fell silent, she was slightly breathless.

Hermione took a calming breath and waited a moment before continuing. "Please, I've just got to go for a while. I'm not running away, and I promise you I will come back." A desperation that she rarely displayed crackled through her voice.

Harry had, over the years, learned enough of Hermione's body language to understand that she was reaching her breaking point. He'd watched her over the past week as she struggled daily. He saw how she hesitated to walk the halls and would purposely take circuitous routes through the castle, avoiding the locations which had seen the more gruesome parts of the battle. At meal times it became apparent that she was eating only sparsely, and the circles under her eyes, which were growing more pronounced with each passing day, suggested that her sleep was kept to a minimum.

Then had come the disastrous display the previous evening, where Ron had expressed his undying love in the middle of the Great Hall. Harry was sure that those who had heard her shrieks were in no doubt of Hermione's feelings toward Ron. Everyone but Ron, that was; he simply wouldn't take Hermione's words at face value, believing that she would come around eventually. Though Harry had been rather amused at how thoroughly she had laid into their clueless friend, it was clear that she needed a break.

Knowing that Hermione would share her struggles with him when she felt ready, he reached out and placed his hand over hers. Giving it a comforting squeeze, he nodded his acquiescence. "If you ever need me, any time, I'm just a Patronus away. You are my best friend, and I love you like the sister I never had...don't ever forget that. Please, just... call me if you need me. Promise me?"

She gave him a weak smile as tears filled her eyes. Nodding to him, she spoke. "Thank you, Harry. I promise that if I need you, I'll call."

"Alright then. You promised, don't forget that."

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That had been the last time she'd seen or spoken to anyone. She had watched as Harry left the common room that night, and by the time he had awoken in the morning, she had fled.

Her plan had worked partially. Settling into her parents' home had allowed her to escape the horrors that were brought on by the halls of Hogwarts; the violent memories faded into the background almost immediately. Everything was still bubbling just under the surface, ready to erupt at any reminder, but living in her parents' home allowed her to, mostly, escape the daily reminders of the horrors she'd seen. Save one.

It had been an unexpected development for Hermione when she realised that it was *his* eyes that she was seeing each night. Just days after the battle, she'd had the nightmare for the first time, although she had been so mentally drained that it hadn't been immediately apparent just who was featured in this new horror. Then, one night later, as she was slowly robbed of sleep and sanity, it became clear exactly whose eyes were staring and pleading with her, whose blood was draining from a gaping wound. It was this knowledge that had finally broken her.

They frightened her, these vivid recollections of the horror she had witnessed that night in the Shrieking Shack. It had been a ghastly scene, and if she had taken a moment to examine her motives more closely, she would have known that the nightmares had truly been the catalyst in her decision to flee the school. A wild, desperate hope that should she be able to escape Hogwarts, the nightmarish dreams would leave her as well.

She couldn't understand why she was dreaming about him of all people. Why him? He was no one to her, truly, and although she had witnessed his final breath and gone so far as to wish him peace in his final moments, she didn't feel anything special for him. He was simply another pawn in a war of nasty people, another victim with a tragic story. There was no denying, though, after five weeks of the repeating nightmares, that it was his eyes that haunted her each night. His pleading eyes of midnight. She only dreamed of him and never the other deaths she'd witnessed. How could the death of her surly professor fill her with such grief?

Each night, as she retired, there would be a moment where she would allow herself a sliver of hope. Hope that tonight would be a good one, free of the horrors of war. That she would be spared watching him bleed out at her feet. Alas, most nights she was not so lucky and would awaken drenched in sweat and tears, the scent of his phantom blood lingering about her.

Hermione looked down at the cup before her and noted the cold tea. She sighed. Yet again, another morning had passed her by, and not a single thing had been accomplished; yet again, she had retreated into her thoughts and despair, causing her to waste yet another perfectly good cup of tea. Her life felt like a dangerous balancing act that was liable to teeter too far at any moment. She'd repressed the memories of the others, only to be haunted by Snape and her parents. Her grief was palpable; she felt immobilized and lost, her brain dull, her heart and will broken. Absently, she picked up and swirled the cool tea, watching the few tea leaves at the bottom of the cup whirl around.

Again the phantom image of her stalwart father flickered before her, her tired mind once again reminding her of what she'd lost. She remembered all the times they had sat at this table together. He would work quietly at his puzzles and read the paper while Hermione read her lofty texts. It was one of her favourite things to do when home, sharing the peaceful communion between the equally studious father and daughter. Her mother would bustle around the house, sometimes admonishing the bookish pair to trek outdoors for some fresh air, sometimes simply smiling fondly at their camaraderie and providing them fortification in the form of afternoon tea.

Her eyes drifted unseeing around the room until they fixed on the window once again. Dazed and lost to recollection, her hands began to loosen their hold on the tea cup. As the cup began to tilt, the final dregs of tea began to spill onto the table. The tan liquid was tinted gold by the light of the late afternoon sun, now shining through the window. Suddenly, the cup clattered down to the surface before her, jarring her from her thoughts.

Hermione jumped and quickly righted the cup, then sopped up the spilled tea, shaking her head at her head-in-the-clouds behaviour.

She really missed her parents and was afraid that she was running out of time to fetch them. It was already nearing the middle of June. If she wanted to have them settled back in England before she returned for her final year of schooling at Hogwarts, she would need to get moving soon. There was no doubt in her mind that it would be a difficult task because when they realized what she had done, they would be less than co-operative. She would need to be able to take as much time as possible explaining and coaxing them back into her life and country.

It had been her only choice at the time, in the midst of war; Hermione knew that her parents were Death Eater targets and, as Muggles, terribly vulnerable. They never would have agreed to let her perform any magic on them, she knew, but with time being of the essence, she'd taken matters into her own hands.

Mr and Mrs Granger, although loving and attentive parents, had never embraced their daughter's magical nature. It seemed there was something that they were fundamentally incapable of understanding when it came to her magic. It was like trying to explain to a blind person what colours were made of; it was something their brain simply couldn't compute.

In her early years at Hogwarts, Hermione had enthusiastically shared stories of her magical education with her parents, only to find that they responded with frowns and quick changes of subject. As Hermione grew older, she often thought her parents treated her magic as if it were a boyfriend of whom they disapproved: showing it a distant, slightly wary respect while clearly not understanding how it held her so enthralled. They never questioned her about the incongruous family secret; it was spoken of only in the abstract and never directly referred to. Still, never did they question her decision to immerse herself within the magical world, understanding that even if they couldn't comprehend her magical gifts, it was important to her future in the magical society.

It was because of this that Hermione never doubted her parents' love for her, no matter how much they misunderstood, and perhaps even feared, her magic. Until she had been forced by circumstances to use her magic against them, she believed wholeheartedly that her parents would never exile her completely from their lives, as so many other Muggleborns' parents did. They were, after all, good people in an extraordinary situation. But now, knowing what she'd done to them, she feared they wouldn't take kindly to her presence in their lives and that regaining their trust would be nearly impossible.

Hermione pushed her chair back from the table and stood. Taking up the tea cup and now-wet tea towel, she walked into the kitchen, where she quickly washed the cup by hand and placed it on the rack to dry. Then, looking around, she realized her wand was nowhere to be found. She must have left it on her bedside table. Silently Summoning her wand from her bedroom, she snatched it out of the air as it floated through the door. Turning to peer out the window at the back garden, she watched the setting sun colour the sky.

It was becoming clear to her that if she stayed here, she would never be able to pull herself from this depression and certainly never get herself to Australia. Now that her theory that the nightmares would lessen if she left Hogwarts had been proved faulty, she knew it was time to move on. Whatever healing was going to be found here was small and ineffectual, especially without her parents' support. The horrors of battle were still just below the surface of her mind, ready to show themselves at any moment, and the dreams were growing stronger and more disturbing. She knew that she could no longer do this alone.

For a moment she twirled her wand through her fingers in an idle movement. Then, as it landed deftly in her palm, she weighed it in her hands gently.

One of the first things she and Harry had done after the war had been to contact Mr Ollivander in order to obtain her new wand. Bellatrix's wand made her feel physically nauseous, a sentiment Harry completely understood from his time using a borrowed wand. Hermione had been surprised that her new wand was so different from her original. The springy willow wand was light in her hand, ready to fly into action. The core had been a surprise as she'd never heard of a wand with a core of dragon scales. She had immediately begun pondering what magic must have been involved to get a dragon sized scale into the core of a wand. Some things about this world still amazed her...and who was she to argue? After all, it was magic.

Hermione took a breath and closed her eyes, focussing on the moment when she'd found her new wand and the feeling of completeness that had momentarily surrounded her in a rush of magical energy. Then, when she felt ready, she chanted her spell and swished her wand.

*Expecto Patronum!*

A small burst of light flickered out of her wand before sputtering out.

Hermione frowned and shook her head. She should have known it wouldn't be that easy. Searching her mind for a stronger memory, she once again chanted the spell.

Again the same light burst forth, only to fade before it could form into the familiar otter that was her Corporeal Patronus.

"Damn it!" Hermione growled, throwing her wand on to the counter.

Tears flooded her eyes. Feeling defeated, she slowly walked out of the kitchen. Climbing the stairs to her bedroom, she decided to try again in the morning. In the meantime, though, she would try and get some much-needed sleep.

\*~\*~\*

Hermione's heart raced as she tossed on her bed. The bed covers long since discarded, she was twisted in a tangle of damp sheets.

"No... no..." she groaned.

The sound of a door closing echoed through the house as Hermione shot up in her bed.

Frantically, a hand went to her damp face, wiping the tears and sweat from her eyes.

"Do you think she is here?" she heard a deep voice say quietly as she froze her movements.

"It looks that way. See, here is a wand. Although, it looks different from her old one," a female voice replied.

*Shite!*

She'd left her wand downstairs.

*Stupid, Hermione! Stupid! Stupid!*

Hermione crept quietly out of bed and padded lightly to the door. Opening it gently, she listened.

"She's probably asleep upstairs, dear. I told you we should have waited until a little later in the morning."

There was no reply, except for the sound of feet on the stairs.

Still caught in the strange world between wakefulness and sleep, Hermione straightened and went into fighter mindset. She didn't know who those people were; no one other than Harry, Ron, and Professor McGonagall knew this place; therefore, they had to be a threat. Backing away from the door, she ducked into a dark corner, awaiting her intruders. Her eyes were wild, resembling a cornered feral cat waiting to spring on its captors.

The footsteps fell silent just outside her door. Wild panic flashed through Hermione. How had these people known exactly which room belonged to her?

Before she could wonder further the door slowly began to swing open. Just before she sprang from her hidden corner to attack, a voice rang out.

"Hermione? Are you in here?" the woman called.

Hermione froze. Though she could not see who was standing at the door, there was no doubt that she knew the voice. How had she not recognised it before?

"Hermione?" The woman called again.

Tears began to prick at her eyes and sobs began to wrack her body. Suddenly, Hermione crumbled to the floor as a muffled, "Mum," fell from her lips. Before she could utter another word she found herself wrapped by four arms and pulled into a family hug.

Hermione continued to sob into the shoulder before her. She wasn't sure which parent she was clinging to, but that didn't matter...they were here. Listening to the comforting words of nonsense her parents used to soothe her, Hermione suddenly felt that perhaps everything would be okay. Her Mum and Dad were home, and in that fact alone she could find hope.

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*This fic was first posted in the 2012 SSHG Exchange on Livejournal. It was a gift for the lovely HBAR and would not be here today if it hadn't been for the support I received from Sixpence Jones. The banner is by talesofsnape. The original prompt will be posted at the end of the final chapter. I hope you enjoy!*

## Chapter Two

*Chapter 2 of 2*

Emotionally lost in the post-war world, Hermione finds that she must puzzle out a confusing world of dreams, nightmares, and strange events.

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Sitting at the table with a cup of tea before her, she did not gaze catatonically out the window at the neighbourhood today. No. Today, Hermione could see and feel. Today, she could find strength in this house.

It seemed to Hermione, who was surviving at this point on pure emotion, that the depression she'd experienced only twenty-four hours before had been a lifetime ago. She sipped her tea as her parents went about preparing a morning meal, watching with an outward expression of serenity. Her eyes followed them closely, logging each moment, step, breath, and look.

During the war she had stood helpless as so many of her friends lost their loved ones, and though she was beyond happy to have her parents home, she was wary of their surprise return.

Hermione had cautiously confirmed the identities of her parents just moments after their reunion. The war had irrevocably changed her, and she understood it would be foolish to abandon all she had learned simply because the war appeared to be over. So, when she realised the potential for danger in their mysterious return, she had quickly questioned her parents to establish that they truly were who they were claiming to be.

These two people were definitely her parents. It helped to soothe her suspicion that they looked just the same. Though, if she were being honest with herself, they really looked better than before she sent them away. Their eyes were vibrant and full of energy. Their all-around aura seemed healthy and happy. Hermione guessed that their lifestyle in Australia had suited them well. But still, a nagging deep inside her told that there was much here she did not yet understand. Something in them had fundamentally changed; she simply had yet to identify what it was.

They moved about the kitchen while Hermione watched, her mind full of hazy wonder. It was unexplainable. They shouldn't have their memories back. Had her spell work been faulty?

No, she thought vehemently, her head shaking.

Feeling the anxiety attached to that line of thought, she pushed back the question. Now was not the time for that. Now was the time to bask in the glow of being with her family and enjoying the comfort that they brought her. Holding up the still steaming cup up to her face, she closed her eyes and took in a deep breath. She allowed herself to enjoy the scent for a moment before exhaling. Taking a sip of tea, she let the rich flavour roll over her tongue, and the familiar hints of the anise, clove, vanilla, and cinnamon in her mother's special blend of chai tea relaxed and reassured her. As her shoulders relaxed, the emotional turmoil that resided deep within her finally began to uncoil.

Whatever it was that had changed in them, they were not currently a danger to her. Thankful for the blessings in her life, even if she didn't understand them, she left the

questions for later.

Hermione chuckled lightly into her cup as a feeling of giddiness settle over her, and a single tear slipped down her cheek. It was such a different type of feeling, one that she'd not known for months, maybe even years. It was a relief to allow herself a bit of happiness. Hermione's heart swelled as she assured herself, once again, that her parents really were home.

Jean Granger looked up from the eggs and sausages she was cooking and smiled at her beaming daughter. Hermione had changed so much since she had last laid eyes on her. Nearly ten months had passed since Hermione had sent them away, and during that time her baby had grown into a woman. However, there was something about the manic joy and confusion their daughter was displaying that unnerved her. In the past, Hermione had always been what Jean considered a bit emotionally repressed. Their daughter had always found it difficult to connect with others, and even at home, it was rare for her to display emotion. Now, however, she practically beamed them, so clearly written were they across her face. For what certainly would not be the last time, Jean wondered what horrors her daughter had been forced to face during their time away.

Breakfast passed quietly as they enjoyed each other's company. When the meal was finished, Hermione rose and mutely cleared the table as she'd done in her days as a child. Then, after the food was cleared away and the dishes cleaned, the family moved to the sitting room. Jean and Richard sat together on the sofa while Hermione perched on the tufted ottoman in the middle of the room.

"I think, my dear, that it is time we have a little talk," her father said.

Hermione knew this confrontation needed to happen. They needed to address how they came to be at this point. So many things remained unknown to both parties. She did not looking forward to explaining her own actions, but she hoped that, if their emotional reunion was anything to go by, she really didn't have any true reason to fear her parents' reaction. She hoped that they would never exile her from their lives or love. With a nod, Hermione fixed her eyes on the carpeting at her parents' feet. She suspected that this would work best if she spoke first. After all, she held the beginning of the story, whereas they held the end. However, no matter how much she wanted to speak, the words wouldn't come out.

The trio sat silently for a moment before Jean sighed and spoke. "My dear, we need you to know that no matter what, we love you. We always will. You did what you thought best. We understand your motives. You acted in good faith and out of love. If there was anything to be forgiven in your actions, we willingly give you that forgiveness." Jean paused as her daughter once again began to weep, though with more dignity than she had displayed the previous night.

Jean realised that her fears were right. Hermione's conscience had got the better of her. From the moment Jean had understood the situation that Hermione had been forced into, her thoughts had centred around the great burden her daughter carried. It was too much for one so young.

Neither parent moved to comfort her as she wiped away her tears; they simply sat and observed with silent approval as their daughter grieved and healed.

Raised to believe in and rely on her own strength from a young age, Hermione intuitively understood that self-reliance was the Granger way. This understanding of this internal strength and self-trust had kept her sane throughout these past years. Only in the last few weeks, after the conclusion of the war, had she felt her strength faltering and slipping. Now, however, with her parents here to accept and validate her grief and remorse once more, she felt that strength start to rebuild.

Into the quiet she spoke, her voice still shaking with emotion. "Thank you. You have no idea how much I have wanted to hear those words. How much I needed to hear them." A watery smile spread across her face. Carefully, taking measured, calming breaths through her nose, she slowly re-established her composure.

When she felt her emotions more fully stabilised, she continued, "I knew... What I did, I knew it needed to be done. There was no other way to protect you. Also, I knew you wouldn't have understood the urgency. I should have explained the war before I took action, but I couldn't figure out how. I searched for weeks to find a better way, and then, before I knew it, the war was coming fast and the chaos escalating. Things were out of control. In the end, I simply broke down and Obliviated you. It was safer for me to know that you were out in the world, somewhere safe and alive. Even if it was without the knowledge of your daughter."

Hermione's words came, quiet and quick, from her mouth, full of earnest emotion. When she finished, the room fell into an unnatural silence while everyone waited for someone else to speak. This time Hermione broke the silence, voicing the questions that were plaguing her mind.

"I don't understand, though. How are you here? How do you know what I did? About the war, me, Harry?" she asked.

"It is an odd story, really," Jean said with a laugh. "It is one of many stories I am sure we will share at a later date, but for now the short version will suffice. We were found by a silver-robed wizard, Tilinus. He reversed the Memory Charm and helped us arrange things for our return home. During the days that it took to make the arrangements, he helped us piece together a picture of what you went through. He explained the climate for Muggle-born witches, the danger that placed us in, and your involvement in the war itself. As soon as everything was arranged, we took the first Portkey home."

Hermione, who at first felt surprised at her mum's nonchalant use of the words 'Memory Charm', was now stunned. "A Portkey?" she blurted aloud.

Richard smiled at his daughter's uncharacteristic loss of decorum. "Yes," he chuckled. "We happily took a Portkey, Hermione. We were loath to allow another day to pass without getting home to you, love. You've been through so much, and we wanted to return as quickly as possible. It isn't a bad way to travel, even if it leaves you a bit green around the gills."

This was too surreal. Surreal that only twenty-four hours ago she'd sat here in this house alone and lost. Surreal that, somehow, her parents had returned with their memories intact and were set on embracing her wholeheartedly in a way they'd never done. However, the most surreal part of it all was the way her parents were treating the magic they'd experienced. It was as inexplicable as the surprise return itself.

The small, newly reunited family passed the rest of their first day together with a peaceful quiet about them. Often, Hermione found herself paired off with one of her parents while the other performed the necessary tasks of the day. It was a day of reflection for Hermione, the first time in ages she felt as if a normal life was within her grasp. Yes, there was still a lot of healing for her to do, but for today, her internal demons were at rest. In that fact Hermione found comfort.

When the light of the evening sun faded from the room, Hermione bade her parents good-night and headed upstairs, the fatigue that had plagued her for weeks driving her to the bed. She hoped that, for the first time in many nights, true and peaceful sleep would find her.

\*~\*~\*

*Hermione walked through the room, the sound of a slow wheezing breath all she could hear.*

*The space around her glowed in a strange half-light, and the air moved around her as if a breeze were blowing through an open window.*

*She watched the space before her where the light moved and shifted in odd flutters. Quirking her head to the side, she studied it closely, startled to find that a door was beginning to take shape, forming out of nothing before her very eyes.*

*It beckoned to her, called for her to open it and enter. Somehow she knew that through the door lay her destiny. There was no other way to go, no other thing to do. She must open that door before doing anything else.*

*Without a thought for her safety or well being, she took a step towards it.*

*The door was tall, black, and made of a rich, dark wood. In the centre, a tiny silver dragon winked at her with violet eyes.*

*Smiling at the dragon, she reached out her hand and wrapped it around the knob. With a quick, silent turn, she pushing the door open and stepped confidently through.*

Immediately, the room spun around her, and the door disappeared. Again, she heard the wheezing breaths sound in her ears.

"Hello?" she called. "Who's there?"

A part of her told her that she should be afraid, that her dreams were no longer a place of happiness and comfort, but she found herself only able to generate curiosity.

"Hm..." she said as she began to take measured steps forward.

Closing her eyes, she let her ears and feet guide her to the person in the room. She listened intently to the sounds coming from the other person.

"Please," she whispered as she walked, "I won't hurt you. I'm a friend."

She paused momentarily; the wheezing had morphed into a muffled and breathless chuckle.

Hermione turned her head to the left and let her eyes peer through the darkness. Whoever it was, they were somewhere over to the left. About ten steps away, she estimated.

Closing her eyes and quieting her breathing, she began to step toward her companion. Each foot touching the floor, first at the toes and then rolling silently down to the balls of her feet. Step after silent step, she moved. When she was approximately one step away, she spoke again.

"Please, don't worry. I am here now." Her voice came soft, clear, and calm as she spoke, though the words seemed foreign. Why had she spoken those words in particular? She shook her head. No matter how foreign they seemed, they were her own.

Kneeling down, she reached out a hand as her heart began to pound in her chest. Even with her eyes open, she could only make out the faint outline of the person lying before her in the dim, glowing light. As she gently extended the tips of her fingers, she felt the lightest brush of something silky against her skin.

A hitched breath escaped the prone form before it morphed back into the wheezing, and Hermione tentatively ran the tip of her fingers along the silkiness at the tips of her fingers. Pressing them forward, she realised it was hair: long, silky hair.

"You hair is very soft," she whispered.

Suddenly, a hand wrapped tightly around her wrist, and her fingers were pulled up and away.

Hermione jumped, panic flooding her. Ripping her wrist from the hand's bruising grasp, she backed away, frightened confusion coursing through her.

Again, the room spun around her, her vision swimming and then settling into a somewhat wobbly version of clarity. Moonlight now flooded the room, and at her feet, a form began take shape. As she bent her body to better see, a quiet horror began to fill her. She recognised this shape. It had appeared before her countless times.

"N-No," she stammered, her voice shallow and stressed.

Not again!

Her ears strained for the wheezing breaths that just moments before had filled the room, and she found herself horrified when she could hear none. Had he not just chuckled at her? That meant something ... counted for something ... didn't it? This couldn't happen again. Not again. Not after that.

"No!" she cried, her voice keening with distress.

Frantically, she fell to the floor, the knees of her jeans immediately soaking up the dark liquid that was spilling from the now-silent person.

"No. No. Not again," she pleaded as her hands frantically moved over his person.

Tearing off her outer shirt, Hermione balled it up and placed it into the crook of the dying man's neck, desperate to staunch the bleeding. As tears began to streak down her cheeks, she continued to plead with him.

"Please live. Please don't die."

Mindless of the blood surrounding her and the growing terror in her chest, she brought her ear to his mouth and listened for any signs of life. Relieved when she felt the faint breath leave his lips and move against her cheek, she took a deep breath and momentarily closed her eyes.

He lived. For now.

She remained this way for some time, hovering over him with eyes closed. Then, as if filled with a sudden madness, she began to feel around for a wand, all the while knowing her searching to be useless. No matter how often she experienced this situation, there were never any wands in this place.

"No wands... I need a fucking wand," she growled. Hermione's hand flew to her hair, pushing it from her face before returning to press against the bunched and bloodied shirt that was sealing the gaping neck wound. It was futile, but she needed to try. Even if that meant doing something that would not work. How she wished that magic existed here.

With her other hand, she reached around to the far side of his head and angled it so his eyes peered into hers. She needed to see them, to be sure that he saw her. She needed to know that he understood was not alone in this moment.

Severus Snape stared back at her with dark eyes that glinted from black to brown to purple as they pleaded with her, begged her to do something. Anything. But she didn't know what to do. She could not save him.

Tears falling, silent cries shaking her, she grieved for the man who died time and time again right before her eyes.

He wouldn't last much longer now; he'd lost too much blood.

With grim determination, she looked directly into his eyes and shook her head, frowning sadly.

'No. I can't save you,' she thought with sorrow, unable to speak and confess her short failings to this man who was utterly reliant upon her these last moments of his life.

As the light in his eyes faded, she saw his understanding. She could not do it this time. She could not save him. Resigned, he nodded, and with a small quirk of his lips, he closed his eyes and let out his final breath.

*Hermione broke into deep sobs as her body collapsed atop him.*

*"I'm so sorry. I don't know how to save you. I don't know..." she sobbed.*

*For many minutes she held him close to her, mindless of the sticky dampness of blood soaking both of them. Tears fell down her cheeks only to drop and continue their journey on his, as if anointing him with her grief and remorse.*

*After she spent her tears and the shaking in her chest calmed, Hermione reached up and gently closed his unseeing eyes.*

*With eyes never leaving him, she slowly rocked back onto her knees. Running a hand down his cheek, she quietly chanted out a prayer:*

*Etsi damnant quod non intelligunt,*

*Omnia oblivioni sunt et omnia veniam sunt.*

*Requiescat In Pace, Severus*

With a wet face and swollen eyes, Hermione shot up in her bed. It had happened again. She had watched him die, helpless to do anything about it. Growling in frustration, she dashed away the her tears with an angry swipe. That was it. Her parents were back, and for the first time in months, she could feel the touch of happiness nearby. Apparently, not even that could break the pattern of tormenting nightmares.

It was time. She needed to tell Harry and find out what the hell was going on.

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