

# Traveling With Her Soul In His Pocket

by *TeddyRadiator*

Ever since her second year, Hermione's relationship with Professor Snape has been complicated. How can she explain to him how the touch of his wool robes makes her feel, when she's not even sure how to explain it to herself? Written for the LiveJournal 2015 Winter HP\_Kinkfest.

## Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 1

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*Many great thanks to the mods of HP\_kinkfest for running such an amazing comm. When I asked for my own prompt, I thought, "This will be a piece of cake!" Unfortunately, Hermione and Severus had other plans. Thank goodness Stgulik was there to act as referee. Thank you, Jules, for making this fic work. It would not but for you. You are the best beta/editor on this earth, and the greatest friend in the universe. Any mistakes you see here are purely mine, because I couldn't resist piddling with it after she worked so hard to return it to me in tip top condition.*

*The title comes from Stephen King's Dark Tower Series, Book One: The Gunslinger. Song lyrics are from Pink Floyd's The Wall - Comfortably Numb. All usual disclaimers apply.*

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Hermione dropped her bag on the hall table, and briskly headed for the tiny galley kitchen in their shared flat. "Where've you been?" asked Ron, his voice deceptively casual.

"Hospital."

"Again? This is the third time this week, innit?" Hermione could feel his resentment, but, to his credit, he tried to keep it out of his voice. "I mean," he added, "what are you hoping this will accomplish? He's in a comma, for Merlin' sake. He doesn't even know you're there."

"It's a coma, Ron."

"Call it what you like, but he still doesn't know you're there."

Hermione put the kettle on and reached for the box of tea bags. "Muggle physicians believe that on some level coma patients are aware of their surroundings." She was tempted to remind him of those awful days during Second Year, when she lay petrified and neglected in the Infirmary, but she didn't want him to read that much into the situation. "It's said they respond more quickly to treatment when they're not alone. That's why friends and loved ones are encouraged to visit often."

Ron stopped her busy hands. In a baffled but pitying tone, he replied, "But you're neither one, 'Mione. You're a student he treated like dirt the entire time we were in school. Old Snape's not exactly anyone's idea of a best mate, is he? I mean, I know Harry's singing his praises to anyone who will listen, but you were *there*. Why do you bother?"

She tidily disengaged herself and resumed making tea. He was right, of course. Professor Snape, of all her professors, had never enjoyed her as a student. He had humiliated her and made her cry. He had called her archaic, insulting names like *chit* and the ever-handly Know-it-all. He had been rude and occasionally quite cruel. On those counts, Hermione knew Ron's assessment of their former professor was justified.

But how would Ron react if she told him the secret she had never revealed to anyone? How could she explain what she and Professor Snape shared? How could she explain how much he had come to mean to her?

"Well, I'm home now," she said, trying to keep the irritation from her voice. "Can we talk about something else?"

He was silent for a moment, then tugged on a belt loop of her jeans with a rakish grin. "Thought you'd never ask. I have the perfect distraction in mind."

Hermione cringed inwardly, shutting her eyes so she wouldn't have to look at the eager, calculating expression on his face, the one he apparently considered seductive and irresistible. The thought of him grunting and sweating on top of her again made Hermione's skin crawl. But he begged her, then nagged, until she gave up and allowed him to lead her upstairs.

During the war, during the long numbing days running down Horcruxes, she had stopped hoping for a future and had stopped dreaming of the past. She measured her time in heartbeats, and was thankful at the end of the day that hers still clocked her existence. When Harry went to sleep, she and Ron would stay up, silently kissing to the tune of Harry's snores. A few nights after he had returned from his truculent desertion, she was stroking his hair when he shyly took her hand and placed it over his cock. He looked at her with such beseeching fear she closed her eyes and told herself it was the right thing to do.

Beneath Ron, she felt nothing, save a strange, disturbing desire to pet him like a child. He broke her hymen and spent himself in her the first time, and she held him and smiled up at him. She felt nothing more than the sharp pinch of the loss of her maidenhead. Tiredly, she decided that, in all likelihood, she was simply too frightened to properly enjoy sex. Ron seemed to have no qualms in that area, nor was she surprised about that, either.

From then on, until the day they were captured and taken to Malfoy Manor, Ron pounced on her every time it was Harry's watch. Hermione endured it, mainly because she hoped that they would survive, and her terror-saturated brain would revert back to normal. Perhaps then she would be able to take the same pleasure in the act of sex as Ron. She had wanted at least to pretend there was still some joy and safety to be had in their world.

Now that the war was over, and their lives were safe, she was still waiting. Lying beneath Ron as he panted in her ear, Hermione recalled the feeling of wool between her fingers, the warm, solid strength of a hand touching hers.

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*Hello is there anybody in there/Just nod if you can hear me/Is there anyone at home/You are only coming through in waves/Your lips move but I can't hear what you're saying*

The fear of being forever trapped in this hell was child's play to the isolation. Madam Pomfrey touched her; she could not feel it. Harry came and held her hand; it might as well have been a stick of cordwood. Deprived of all sensation, her existence was sinking deeper with every passing day. In time it would surely drive her insane to be unloved, untouched, *unfelt*.

*When I was a child I had a fever/My hands felt just like two balloons/Now I've got that feeling once again/I can't explain you would not understand/This is not how I am*

Words to a Muggle song her dad liked, and they ran a tired groove in her head until she was convinced she actually had gone mad. Hunger gnawed her, sleep eluded her. People eventually stopped coming to visit her. They probably thought she was somewhere else, and she had left this rigid, hollow carapace like a marker should she ever find her way back. She watched the world float by her gauzy, fading eyes, and thought, *I must be dead. I am already a ghost.*

The day's light had just fled the darkening corners of the Infirmary when *he* finally came to her.

He sat down beside her on the bed with a flourish of billowing robes and graceful hands. Even though her eyes were nearly blind from being opened for so long, Hermione could clearly make out the severe features of Professor Severus Snape. He was looking down at her without any of his usual intractable disdain. There was a blandness in his expression that was startlingly naked.

He looked both open and real, and Hermione frantically reached out with her mind, blindly groping for any handhold, any message she could send. He stared penetratingly into her eyes, and far away in her prison of bone and stone and petrified blood, she wailed, *I'm in here! I'm in here*, because he had seen her. He knew she was in there.

He slipped his arm beneath her shoulders, and carefully lifted her upright. He brought a vial to her frozen lips, and from far away, down the rabbit hole of reality, warm liquid trickled down her throat. Deep inside, she felt it, peppery and masculine, seeping into the cracks of her organs, warming them and restoring their rich malleability.

A ripple of clear, colour-drenched light danced over her vision, and she blinked furiously as bright, sharp feeling burst into her frozen limbs. Heat flared within her, like thousands of pins and needles. She took the first breath and screamed every scream that had been caught in her throat since she'd rounded the corner, mirror in hand, and fallen to the floor a second later. Hermione shattered the air around her, the sharp, glassine sounds piercing her ears.

Professor Snape withstood her assault, wincing slightly. *"Breathe*, Miss Granger. The panic you're feeling is common. It merely indicates the potion is doing its work properly."

His voice was low and musical, and to Hermione it sounded like the first melody that had ever been heard over the primordial wastelands of history. Her limbs twitched uncontrollably; shudders of sensation rippled through her, vibrating through her body like the roar of a monstrous beast. Wildly, she threw her arms around his neck, clinging to him as her body juddered back to life.

She buried her nose against his heavy, black robe, inhaling deeply. He smelled warm and male, and the odours of camphor and mandrake spendings still clung to the fibres of his clothing. It was as if her senses were processing things for the very first time, and they were crossing over, so that smell became a taste in her mouth, and the texture of his robe was a sound in her roaring ears. She rubbed against his chest, scraping her cheek roughly against the sober cloth as if to clean herself with it.

His body tensed, and he tried to move away, but she could not let him go. "Real," she gasped, her words thick and syrupy because she was drooling and had forgotten to swallow. She stroked the cloth between her thumb and forefinger; she had an almost irresistible urge to lap at it like a dog. "You're real." Just the *feel* of the wool, warm and solid and alive, was as hedonistically delightful as if it were made of the finest silk or velvet. She felt him shift uncomfortably, and she begged silently, *Please don't let me go. Please, just a little while longer—*

But he was already pulling away, untangling himself from her clutching hands. "Apparently so, Miss Granger," he said, looking clearly nonplussed. "Now, if you will kindly stop assaulting me, I will inform Madam Pomfrey her remaining patients can now be un-petrified."

He took her face in his hands to gently push her away, and the touch of his hand was like receiving a jolt of electricity. She was aware of him then, not just the entity that filled out the divine black cloth, but as a *man* and a powerful wizard who had brought her back to life. All of her nerve endings lit up, and every inch of her flushed and shivered. It produced a strange fluttering in her empty belly. She pressed her face to his warm, surprisingly smooth hand, unaware of anything but the wonderful feeling of touching and being *touched*, until he huffed, "That's enough, Miss Granger. I said that's enough!"

Hermione's head cleared, and she dimly realised she was rolling her face over his hand, lost in the feeling *o*f feeling. She hastily released him, her chest tight with mortification. "I'm sorry, sir," she whispered, gulping back her foolish tears. Her hands grasped the sheets of the bed, and she convulsively kneaded the fabric. She rocked back and forth, whimpering, her nose clogged and her eyes streaming. From over her head, she heard his sigh.

"Lie down, Miss Granger. You are not robust enough for this level of outburst." Obediently, she did as she was told, but her hands still clutched her bed sheets, stroking them. She looked up at him, standing by the privacy curtain, and his lips pressed together in a flat, grim line. He sighed heavily, with a snort of something that might have been impatience, and returned to her bed. With astonishing largesse, he grasped the edge of his over-robe, and held it out to her.

"Do not get snot on my robe, Miss Granger," he demanded imperiously. Before he could change his mind, Hermione tentatively stroked the heavy robe, then pulled the fabric through her fists, hand over hand, like a rope. She nearly swooned at the wonderful feel of the heavy cloth as it rolled between her fingers. Over and over, end over end, slipping through her palms until they tingled from the friction.

He stayed beside her, allowing her to worry at his robe, until the watch spring in her chest unwound to a level of exhaustion she didn't know she was capable of. She fell asleep with the cloth running through her hands like warm, black water.

When she awoke the next morning, starving and desperate for a wee, he was gone.

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Professor Snape didn't recognise her when he first awoke. Nagini's fangs had left him voiceless; her poison had left him delirious. He looked up at her with mutely pleading eyes. *Make the pain go away. I don't want to live anymore* She stroked his burning brow, and when he blindly reached out, she wound her fingers around his, trying to soothe him as she would a child—as he had once albeit reluctantly soothed her.

Gradually, the fever cooled to something that merely left him weak and tired and more like his old self. Hermione chose to ignore his resentful looks and his garbled curses. The hospital staff began to think of her as part of the furniture, and even taught her how to change his bandages and check his vitals. They were happy to let her; in those first mad weeks after the war, St. Mungo's was horrifically short-staffed, and Professor Snape was neither a popular nor particularly cooperative patient.

"Back again, Granger? Tenacity, thy name is Gryffindor," he said sourly, as she walked into his room on a crisp, September evening. "I fail to understand why you have this impulse to harass me on a daily basis."

She helped him to sit up, then plumped his pillows. "Good evening to you as well, Professor. Now, how am I harassing you today?"

Sometimes she was actually able to jolly him out of his grumpy discomfort, but it appeared today would not be one of those days. He glowered at her from his bed with large, jaded eyes. His voice was still hoarse, the bandage on his neck thick and soaked with powerful healing potions. Finally, he slumped tiredly, as if keeping up his resentful glare was too much effort. It troubled her to see so little fight left in him, even on these bad days.

She sat beside him, and produced a newspaper. "I came as soon as the afternoon edition of the *Prophet* was distributed. It has the entire transcription of today's session, I think you're going to be very—"

"Why are you here, Granger?" he demanded. "If you're looking for another cause to champion, go somewhere else. I'm not interested in being anyone's pet project. I just want to be left alone."

She stopped, disturbed at the amount of vitriol in his voice. Lightly, she replied, "Heaven forbid that anyone would think of you as a pet, Professor." She grew solemn. "I know I don't. I respect you too much. That's why I wanted—"

"Don't. Start," he warned, eyes narrow with simmering bitterness. "I don't want to be anyone's hero, either."

"Well, I'm afraid you're too late. That's what I've been trying to tell you!" She brandished the paper, rattling it like castanets. "The Ministry cleared you of all charges today. Harry presented evidence proving your innocence, and you were given a full pardon *and* awarded the Order of Merlin, First Class!" She grinned. "I'm a little jealous, you know. I was only awarded a Second Class, but there you go. Once the sidekick, always a sidekick."

He gave her a look that was part suspicion and part uncertain, painful hope. Hermione placed the paper in his hands. The front page letters magically rose two inches from the page, declaring, "**SEVERUS SNAPE AND HARRY POTTER: WAR HEROES**:"

Gently, Hermione added, "When you're well enough to leave here, you are free as a bird. And like it or not, you are Wizarding Britain's hero."

The newspaper fell from his hands, and he stared at it numbly. "Well, that's that, then," he said, but there was no real happiness or vindication in his words. He sounded too stunned to take it all in. "As if that really changes anything."

Hermione picked up the forgotten paper and folded it carefully. Almost as if she was reading from the page, she said quietly, "It doesn't change how I've come to feel, in any case. I didn't come here to put you on a pedestal. And I don't keep showing up because I want something you may not wish to give." She studied the page again, and hoped she would be forgiven for *that* little white lie. "I just want to be your friend, Severus."

For some reason Hermione didn't quite understand, he flinched at the sound of his name. They looked at one another for a long time. "Go home, Miss Granger." He turned away from her in such a final, dismissive gesture Hermione's throat tightened. "Whatever you are looking for, you won't find it here."

"But if you'd just let me—"

"I said go home!" he shouted hoarsely. "Gods, girl, are you *that* incapable of following the simplest instruction?" He slammed his fist down on his bed in impotent frustration, breathing hard. Somewhere an alarm must have sounded, because a Healer swiftly entered the room, a worried look on her face. With patronising sympathy, she told Hermione it might be best for her to just leave for now. It would not do, after all, to jeopardise the recovery of Wizarding Britain's hero of the hour, would it?

The next day Hermione was told Professor Snape had been inundated with witches and wizards, all trying to ingratiate themselves in his favour in one way or another. He had refused all visitors.

Two weeks later, when she told Ron she was going to try and speak to Severus again, their disagreement over the issue escalated into a blazing row, which in turn resulted in Ron moving out, and Hermione was alone again. When people asked her later on why she and Ron split, she would shrug evasively and say, "Oh, you know, the war..." Most of the time it was enough explanation, and she would be asked nothing more.

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*There is no pain you are receding/A distant ship smoke on the horizon/You are only coming through in waves/Your lips move but I can't hear what you're saying*

She was dying. No one told her she was, and they all denied it later, but Dolohov's curse was rotting her from the inside faster than they could staunch it. Lying in an Infirmary bed, with a team of Mediwitches rushing around her, Hermione was so frightened, she could not speak or give voice to the pain that was raping her body.

Hearing the calm but increasingly terse running commentary surrounding her (*this artery is still bleeding...give me a number eight Blood Replenishment vial STAT...someone get this suture sealed...vitals are crashing*), she thought, *I'm going to die, and no one has the guts to admit it.*

Just beyond the frantic activity buzzing around her, Hermione saw Professor Dumbledore standing in the Infirmary doorway, but he barely acknowledged her presence. It was Harry whom he sought. She was all but invisible. After all, what was another death, as long as the Boy Who Lived survived to fulfil his destiny?

Beyond the Headmaster, Professor Snape appeared. Like an angel of death, he had come. In her dying moments, she wanted to tell him that despite everything, she had come to love the sight of him, moving through their world with grace and tension and purpose. But more than even that, she wished she could touch him again.

She tried to rise from the bed, and his eyes met hers. "I don't want to..." she gasped, and coughed, tasting blood in her mouth. Spots swam in her vision. "I'm dying." She reached for his velvet-silken-rough hand. Blood sprayed upward from a new source, flying into the air like a satin ribbon, and—

"Godsdammit, stop that bleeder! Somebody get her under control!" An angry female voice cried, and Hermione heard as much fear in that harsh voice as she felt in her failing heart.

And suddenly Professor Snape was there, manning the potions counter, freeing a pair of hands while he expertly wielded the tools of his trade. Blood Replenishment, Calming Draught, Strengthening Elixir. He held her head in one large, warm hand, his face pale and grim. Hermione managed to reach his lapel, and felt its smoothness rasp against her trembling, blood-crusted thumb. A vast feeling of peace descended upon her. She would not die alone, surrounded by strangers. She would die with something familiar in her hands, something she knew, something that knew *her*...

The voices around her receded, the pain receded, the world receded, until it was only the two of them. He loomed over her, grim and determined and *real*. There were drops of blood in his hair. "No," he said, as if she'd asked a question. "You will not." His eyes, large and dark, were locked with hers, and inside her head she heard his voice. "You will not die, Hermione Granger. You *cannot*." The world narrowed down to two things: the fabric beneath her fingers, and the words in her head. "You will not... you *can* not... you will not... you *can* not... you will not... you *can* not..."

He swiped a stray drop of the final potion from her lips and gently lay her back down on the bed. Witches and wizards swarmed around them, stabilising and saturating her with the counter-curse. He gently pried her fingers from his grimy, blood-soaked lapel. When she braided her fingers with his, he did not pull away, and he did not take his eyes from hers, though he looked as if he wanted to be anywhere else but there.

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After Ron left her, Hermione waited until she was a bit more composed, then requested visitation again. This time, for reasons unknown, Severus granted permission.

She walked into his room, and he looked at her with tired, defeated eyes. "Whatever is the matter with you, girl?" he asked softly.

Hermione glanced at the newspaper in his lap; the front page showed a photograph of her leaving the hospital, looking around furtively, as the large letters screamed: *GOLDEN TRIO'S FEMME FATALE LEAVES LOYAL CHILDHOOD SWEETHEART TO RUSH TO WAR HERO'S SIDE*.

It was on the tip of Hermione's tongue to turn the room blue with profanity, but when she looked into Severus' face, he was wearing the expression of a man who has no intention of laughing, but very much wants to. Hilarity rolled up in Hermione's throat like bright water bubbling from a forgotten spring, and she laughed until she cried.

When she was finally under control, she took the paper from him and read it aloud in *dreadfully naive* Received English stylee, trilling over the lurid phrases 'heartless tart' and 'questionable taste.' It was truly too ridiculous to be angry over.

Severus shook his head, and even chuckled once or twice, but there was a tinge of reproach in his face. "Really, Granger. I thought I made it very clear that you shouldn't come here."

She sobered. "Don't ask me to leave again."

He shook his head. In an angry undertone he spat, "Don't you understand, witch? I could walk down Diagon Alley encrusted with a hundred Order of Merlins, and I will still remain a pariah. And you will become one as well, if you continue to associate yourself with me. Look at that rag, for gods' sake! It's already happening." He rubbed his stubbled face with a sigh of resignation. "Why do you insist on wrecking your reputation by coming here?"

Hermione swallowed. "You know why."

For the first time since she had returned, he seemed unsure, perhaps even contrite. He sat up straighter. "I want you to tell me. Tell me, out loud, so you will see just how ridiculous this childish thing is in the cold light of day."

That gave her pause. It had never occurred to her what had happened between them wasn't just as important to him as it was to her. Stubbornly she insisted, "Just because I was younger, it doesn't mean my feelings are any less valid. Don't cheapen them because you're afraid of them."

For a long moment, they stared at one another. "If these feelings are so valid, say them," he insisted, and in his tone was both accusing and challenging.

"You're the only person who's ever made me feel real," she began. He gave her a look that was both alarmed and perplexed, and she hurried on. "I'm not here because I want to worship you. I'm here because..." She hesitated, reaching out, trying to grasp the right combination of words and feelings that would be the most truthful. "I think I make you feel the same way. Like we don't have to play any parts or wear any masks. I've seen you when you thought I didn't. I know you and you know me, and it's the only time I feel like I'm not transparent or...or a second-rate character in someone else's story. Does that make sense?"

He looked at her with pity then. "Don't do this, Granger. You don't know me at all. And I'm living proof that you can't make someone love you."

Merlin, that hurt. She made herself smile, even though it nearly killed her to do it. "I think you're afraid. But I'm not. And I can be brave enough for both of us." Before he could protest, she planted a kiss on his forehead. He was still carrying a low-grade fever; she could taste the tang of his sweat on her lips. "I won't bother you, but if you want a friend, that's the only agenda I've got. You know me, and I know you. I can't make it any simpler than that."

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They were standing side by side on a small bridge. They did that a lot, she noticed. It was far easier to stand shoulder to shoulder, looking outward in the same direction, than to look at one another and confront the truth he couldn't quite face. As they studied the bright, crystalline morning, before the ice and snow was finally corrupted by the glittering sun, he turned to her.

"I'm quitting England," he said suddenly. "I want to leave and never come back." His voice was strong and melodious again, and the shock of those words nearly brought Hermione to her knees.

"Why?" she managed, even though her chest was caving in.

"There's nothing for me here," he said quietly. "I told you what would happen, and you didn't believe me." The confidence in his voice was enough to convince her that he had set his course. She would not be able to talk him out of this.

Hermione surreptitiously ran her fingers across the side of his coat. It was warm, and full of promises he would never keep. Her heart was breaking, but she just didn't know how to tell him. And so they stood side by side, avoiding the inevitable, and Hermione felt that same, hideous, disjointed feeling she had suffered as a teenager, waiting for someone to discover she was still alive, trapped inside her frozen carcass.

The weather was freezing, and from the corner of her eye she could see the soft cloud of his breath. She was seized with an irrational desire to capture it, and put it away in a magical vial, so she could breathe him in on those days when she could feel nothing but the ugly scar that spelled "MUDBLOOD" on her inner arm.

*When I was a child I caught a fleeting glimpse/Out of the corner of my eye/I turned to look but it was gone/I cannot put my finger on it now/The child is grown, the dream is gone*

It was quiet and peaceful, the wintry sun shone on the iced-over pond, and the world around them was quiet. A goose glided in for a landing, and they watched in growing alarm as he misjudged the ice and skidded across the frozen surface. He landed ungracefully on his arse, comically backpedalling with his webbed feet, then crashed indignantly into the far wall.

Severus burst out laughing, and the sound of his intoxicating voice lifted into the air in unfettered laughter was so beautiful, Hermione nearly wept. How was she supposed to live without it, now that she'd heard it?

Without a word, he placed his hand over hers. His fingers were cold, but he refused gloves. Hermione closed her eyes. Why now? Why show her these crumbs of affection at the very end, and make her even more aware of what she was losing?

"Where will you go?" she said, and cursed silently that her voice shook.

"Why, that all depends," he said, and there was a tone of surprise in his voice.

"On what?"

"On you. Where would you like to go?"

She turned her face up to his, and her tears spilled cold from her eyes. "Anywhere you are."

He looked deeply into her eyes, unsmiling, and brought his cold mouth to hers. She was lost to him, as lost within him as the first time he touched her and brought her back to life. His lips were soft, and mobile, and she inhaled him, taking this precious gift so that she would be able to remember this moment forever.

Then he was turning her, moving them both, and Hermione's head spun as he Apparated them away. She opened her eyes and met his gaze, and the emotion in them shook her. "This is my home," he said, and stepped away from her, but she grasped his coat, unwilling to part from him.

"I am a stubborn man," he began, "but I can't deny this anymore. I don't want to deny you anything. Tell me what you want. If it's within my power..." he entreated, his words all breath and consonants. Hermione licked her lips, and tried to speak but no words would come. He awarded her a wry, tender smile. "Don't be afraid. You of all people have nothing to fear from me anymore."

She swallowed and nodded. Her fingers stroked his wool coat, and he looked down at the place where she touched his clothing, then brought her fingers to his lips and kissed them. Her heart was pounding so loudly she was sure he could hear it. "I love you. I have for a long time," she blurted, her voice raw and on the edge of tears. "You make me feel safe." She moved closer, unable to bear the separation any longer. "You make me feel strong, and whole."

Suddenly he was on her, around her, kissing her with frantic, hungry lips that felt impossibly hot. She moaned helplessly as he fell on her like a predator. His tongue invaded her mouth, fierce and possessive, rendering her boneless, and she grasped his shoulders so that she would not fall.

His kisses were demanding and so breathtaking she was soon gasping. She tangled her fingers in his hair in an effort to get closer; their teeth clashed together. He devoured her with a ragged moan, a primal sound that spoke to her body like a call in the blood, and Hermione heard all the things he could not say. This was passion; this was desire, and even though she had never felt this with Ron, she recognised it in the memory of her younger self, and she rejoiced in the understanding of it.

He made a harsh, growling sound in her mouth, and wrapped his long arms around her, dragging her into a suffocating embrace until she was pushing and pulling at him, afraid she would die if he didn't let her breathe, even more afraid of dying if he let her go.

And then he *did* release her. He stepped away, staring down at her with his liquid black eyes, burning hot as coal. He was breathing hard, as if he'd just run from the other end of the street, and there were bright, hectic spots of colour high on his cheeks. For a moment, they stared at one another, and Hermione thought he was silently daring her to look away.

"I want you."

"Yes."

"Undress for me." The words came out like a harsh whisper, rustling leaves. "If this is what you want, I won't force it from you. I have to know you want to give it." He closed his eyes for a moment. "I won't take anything for granted ever again."

Hermione's hands were shaking as she unbuttoned her blouse. Severus backed away, never taking his eyes off her, and sat down on the battered sofa. His eyes widened when he saw the scars, first the one he had helped to heal, then the hideous souvenir from a ghastly afternoon at Malfoy Manor.

His expression was solemn, but without his stern anger to fuel it, his frown looked pensive, even anxious. He merely sat, his hands loosely locked together in his lap. She slowly revealed her legs, in need of a shave, and her breasts, clad in her simplest bra. She unhooked it and let it slip down her arms. Her nipples felt hard and solid, and when he saw them, his desire was a tangible, tactile thing that wrapped around her.

When she shakily stepped out of her knickers, he looked over her body with lingering, contemplative desire. When his eyes finally rose back to hers, he gestured with one hand. "Come here," he said softly, and Hermione all but ran to him.

He gathered her into his lap until she was straddling him, then he put his arms around her and pulled her in tight, until she was engulfed in his warmth and the warm smell of wool and male. Her entire body ignited as the fabric of his coat dragged over her aching nipples, snagging against them in a way that made her feel lightheaded with arousal. He kissed her again and again, until she was hot and moaning and straining against him.

It felt glorious, and caught in the amber of his intense, focused concentration. Hermione understood he was not taking from her. He was giving her the chance to emerge from that dark chrysalis into something she was supposed to be, if only she could see it for what it was. His warm mouth slid down the column of her throat, and she melted against him. "I understand," he said gravely, and she felt his warm lips brush her forehead.

She drew back from him, surprised. "But, I never said—"

"You never had to." Then he was pushing her onto one wool-clad thigh and moving her, using his strong hands to propel her hips in a slow, grating rhythm. Her aching, swollen clit scraped over the fabric as he moved her against his thigh. She ground against him artlessly, ensnared by the delicious friction building between them. The crippling, addictive heat seemed to come from within and around her all at once.

She was rocking on his leg, and he was growling, "Yesss...that's it...*Oh fuck*, you're so beautiful..." He rolled her tight nipples between his dexterous fingers, pinching and plucking them until she hissed and arched her back. He leaned forward, taking her taut nipple in his mouth, sucking it hard enough to draw milk from her with his will alone. Hermione felt an incredible, unfamiliar ache bloom deep in her core, then spread over her body, filling in all the answers to her questions. Severus lapped greedily at her tight flesh and moaned, "Let go, Hermione. Just breathe, love—"

Her first ever orgasm boiled over her like a melting cauldron, incinerating her thoughts until she was nothing but the honest rasp of his clothing and the slick, sweet pleasure pulsing from her cunt. Unspeakable ecstasy washed over her in drowning sheets of sensation until she felt conscious thought leave her.

She came back to herself, still trembling, still calling his name. He rocked her in his arms, slowly easing her back into herself, allowing her to spiral back down from the great height of her climax. He whispered a spell she didn't recognise, then lifted her onto a cock that felt hard as bone and soothing as velvet. He uttered a choked sound of sheer rapture as her still-pulsing sheath clutched and milked him.

She was awkward at first, unused to the position. He pulled her flush against his chest, letting his clothing burnish her bare skin, sloughing away the old skin of numb, deadened feelings she had worn since the night she had been petrified by the basilisk's reflection, leaving her pinkly new and perfect for him.

He took her face in his hands, and she leaned into his touch. "Look at me," he commanded. He whispered another spell, and the abrasive clothing melted away, revealing the man beneath. He was pale and lean, and had his own scars. So vulnerable, so beautiful, like portraits of saints and martyrs are beautiful. Hermione looked down at him, and realised what a disservice she had done him, how selfish and stingy she had been.

"Severus," she whimpered, and he was in her mind, seeing her, seeing *her*, and she felt his stunned, unasked-for joy. "You've not had enough," she whispered, and covered his face with kisses of gratitude and love. "I want to show you what you've been missing."

He looked up at her with his huge, hopeful eyes, and she recognised the man she had seen bending over her petrified body in the Hogwarts Infirmary, letting her hold onto him because she needed to feel alive again. It was both thrilling and humbling that he knew her thoughts, her desires, her understanding of how he had molded and shaped her own burgeoning sexual awareness of herself and her body. That it had once shamed and stirred him was immaterial now.

His body was warm and alive, and she knew with blinding clarity that *this* is what she had longed for, not the rasp and drag of the cloth, but the man behind it, the man who filled it, and who now filled her with the same surety and meaning. She would become *his* clothing, covering him, protecting him, keeping him safe.

His features softened, because he understood that, too. "It's all I ever wanted," she said. He laid his head back on the sofa, and gazed up at her with something akin to reverence.

They made love tenderly, almost shyly, and he held her like the most precious of treasures. He was gentle and patient, at times her teacher as well as her lover. Their bodies spoke the messages their clumsy words could not. And when they at last collapsed against one another, spent and slick with sweat and the juices they made to smooth the way, Hermione promised him her love, and her loyalty and regard. She told him he was beautiful.

He held her, and she could feel his swift, steady heart booming against his chest like waves in the surf. He was disheveled and sweating, his hair tangled and oily, his face flushed. He closed his eyes. "I'm no one's idea of beautiful, Hermione. I'm no one's idea of noble, or heroic. I'm a foolish, frightened, insecure man. I stopped hoping the night I betrayed Lily Evans, because there seemed nothing left to hope for. All I had left were my dreams. I dreamt of peace. I dreamt of feeling clean."

He opened his lovely eyes and stroked her cheek. "You make me feel clean again," he said simply. "If you want me, truly want me, I'll belong to you forever." He grew very still, and his hands traced slow, caressing circles on her skin. "I don't think you're getting the better end of this bargain, but—"

She stopped his words with her kiss.

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Hermione stares at herself in the mirror, and peace descends. With that peace is a soft feeling of contentment. She sees a woman smiling back at her. The woman isn't the world's definition of classically beautiful. Her wild hair is a legendarily untamable mass of curls, kinks and corkscrews. She is a little rounder and less firm than she would like to be. She has scars from old battles, she has stretch marks and moles and the unmistakable dimples of cellulite here and there, and still she smiles, because that woman is happy.

She smiles because the air that kisses her bare flesh is thick and abrasive with magic; it sizzles over her skin, sometimes hot like a shining wire, sometimes cool as the point of an ice cube. It is a zephyr that flashes over her like a desert sandstorm, carving exquisite little runnels of pleasure and pain over her body.

Hermione glances past her reflection to that of the wizard standing behind her. He too is no one's ideal of classic handsomeness, but he is compelling and fascinating to her, in the same way that the scars and the magic that grace her flesh are compelling.

His voice is glorious; a finely tuned instrument, one he has cultivated and uses to its fullest impact. His intellect is a beautiful thing as well; shrewd, complex, deep like fine wine. He has both mellowed and grown more potent with age. His self-discipline, his grace, his flawed and bashful pride; all components of a whole that is more far-reaching, more vast than any portion that she can single out as the most captivating, desirable piece of the puzzle that is Severus Tobias Snape.

She has written poetry about his eyes, but she is too shy to share it. Suffice to say he has set a thousand worlds spinning in his dark, fathomless eyes, and Hermione sees herself in all of them.

He is wearing a black robe over his Edwardian-tailored suit, and as he whispers his dark, erotic commands, his black, black eyes leave burning trails over her skin, and these score more deeply than the magic that he carefully paints on her body.

A flick of his wrist, and brighter skeins of magic fly from his wand. They slash across her back like a whip, and the pleasure is enough to make her knees buckle. She moans in ecstasy, and he smiles, but he doesn't stop. Instead, he uses his magic to draw her pleasure up to the surface, readying her for his touch.

He sits in their favourite chair, fully clothed. He has unbuttoned his trousers, and is stroking his cock as he holds her in his thrall. Even after all this time, she has been known to climax the moment he pulls her down into his lap, and the warm cloth kisses the merest tip of her primed, engorged clitoris.

They make love with abandon, and joy, and when the intensity of their passion tips over into something more cathartic, they hold and soothe and comfort one another in the aftercare. As much as they burn for one another, they trust one another more.

They live in a place that has never heard of Hermione Granger or Severus Snape. To their acquaintances they are Roland and Dana Dove. They like the fact that they are perceived as a rather staid, uninteresting couple, the kind that waves and smiles at the supermarket, but never seem to have anything interesting to divulge. They are the kind one invites to large parties, but never small intimate affairs, because they will be too boring to make good company.

It pleases her to think how shocked their friends would be to know that every night, Dana Dove slowly undresses for Roland, and they make love while he holds her in arms that are warm with devotion, and the rough, healing texture of fine black wool.