

Left Alive

by Ladymage Samiko

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Chapter 1 of 1

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"I can't forget. I never want to forget. It...they...are a part of me."

She's bolted the door, curtained the windows. The still, unmagicked faces on the walls flicker in the candlelight, while her skin bathes in it, catching and holding the gold shadows. She slips from the sleeves of her robes, stretches sinuously, a goddess, a siren, a lamia... a lorelei emerging from the dark pool that gathers about her hips, from the rioting froth that tumbles about her head and down in glinting honey-brown. He watches, single-focus, her arms drifting down again, riveted to the sight of the flames that engulf her arm, the phoenix there and the India-black chains of an indecipherable script.

"From letter to word, from word to line. From line to page, from page to eye. From eye to mind, from mind to heart. From heart to soul, from soul to life."

The words swirl, serpentine, from the base of her finger, back of her hand, around her wrist, up her arm. They twine, surround, caress the phoenix that rises triumphant, that embraces, that flames even in the darkness so that he almost believes that it casts its own shadow of mystic words.

She is still. She watches him. She waits for him, with her temptress's whisper of what she offers. But if he would dare, *he* must go to *her*.

"I made my choice. I chose beauty from darkness, from ugliness. I chose acceptance and transformation instead of obliteration."

She offers him the same, if he will accept it.

She offers him the alternative, if he chooses.

Has he ever been given choice before? He cannot remember. His paths have turned, skewed, been littered with brambles, hedges, walls, pits that gave him onto the road he's walked. They have never offered alternatives.

She kneels on the floor, hands in her lap, deceptively passive. Young, supple hands, embodying all that is possible in this life. He looks at his own. The dim light is kind to them, but they are knobbed, scarred, heavy-marked by the paths of nerves and veins. Signs of his acts. Of his sins. He lets them fall, futile, impotent. He looks to her again. A brilliantly green spiral of a fern curls from under the sooty cup of cloth that holds her breast. Her first. *Her* choice. Her symbol of determination, of what she would craft of herself, of her wounds. It seeks upwards, to the light. To her eyes. To her mind. It grows, unfurls, unfolds.

He has collapsed, detached, curled in upon himself, an involuted Mbius of black emptiness. He remains only because there has been nowhere else to go; even death has been denied him. He exists on and on in nothingness.

She waits. She is silent. What words can be said have already been spoken.

"Come when you make your choice. Only you know when. Only you know if. But now, a year from now, an eternity from now. My door is open. I will be there."

The buttons, mundane creatures of another world, open one and one and one, neck and torso and leg. They release his arm; he grimaces at the ghost of evil burnt there. He lets the robes drop, and their heaviness echoes upon the floor. His wand slices the shirt beneath to shards; those, too, whisper into place below. As does his wand.

Her eyes change, but he is too deep within himself to see. His bared foot steps, and he welcomes the chill of the wood boards. Another foot. Again. His toes find the soft edge of the pallet she laid out for him. He kneels, holds to himself the stiffness of his knees, the ache as his shins adopt his weight. He looks to her, sees the change, but he cannot understand what he sees.

"Please, Severus." Her voice escapes her, unbidden, undesirable. She must allow him his choice, his time. She remembers the importance of her own. But only his eyes narrow, searching, puzzled, uncomprehending.

She keeps time by the quick, heavy, silent beat of his pulse and breath.

His hand reaches out, plants itself upon the thin fabric over the hard boards. He shifts, settles, sighs.

He lies there, passive, still. Locked. Hands outflung. Eyes darting behind tight lids. He fights still. Struggles to surrender, to give up, even for these hours alone, the autonomy he needs. He fights the deeply carved knowledge that impels him to trust no one in anything...not even her.

Perhaps especially not her. She seeks to alter him, bring him into the unknown. *Can* she be trusted? Hermione herself doesn't know.

It's dull, now. Dead. Quiescent. But still a malignant force that feeds upon him. The pale shimmer of his arm is swallowed by the lead grey skull and drab olive serpent. Her hand hovers, aching to draw the vile ink from his flesh and flame it to harmless ash.

She cannot. A disservice to him, a betrayal of them both. And he is not ready for her *here*. Perhaps will never be.

Her fingers brush back heavy strands of jet black. He flinches, his whole body shivers, battles to leap away even as he endeavours to lie still. Her palm flattens along his cheek, seeking to calm, reassure, communicate... something... she dare not put into words.

He wins, for now. She gathers the hair back, away. Himself allows her to cradle his head in her hand as she gathers the strands beneath. Always long. A protection. A mask. She gently tucks it away.

Her touch glances over his neck, and she jolts; echoes of pain lance through her, a shadow of the snake and its venom radiate from her neck, from under her tattoo and her own small, soul-deep scar.

"Granger?" His eyes have shot open; they search her face, her body.

"Hush." She soothes him back down, prepares him again. Her magic anticipates her before she has prepared herself, building the connection before she's ready to feel. But she knows the pain now, the memory. She is ready. She tilts his head, bares to the dim light the mottled purples and reds and yellows...vile shades of puce and barn red and bile...of the holes where Nagini sunk her fangs and pumped in her venom, the singed-black slashes of where her other teeth gouged, ripped, tore.

She cannot allow herself to weep. Her tools are ready to hand and useless if she clouds her sight with tears.

She arranges her skirts. Her knees are snug against his sides; his heat bakes into her skin, his breathing is a pulse against her thighs. His eyes open once more, bleak, expecting nothing. She makes the choice to draw her fingers along his cheek, gentle, slow, a promise that all will be well, that she knows him, that she knows her abilities. Hermione picks up the long, slim metal wand with its needle-embedded tip. She dips into the black...mandrake ash, iron, witch hazel...and presses the needles to the rough and smooth skin of his scars.

Pain. Subtle pain. Discrete points blending into lines. Whatever gods that may be watching him know that he's endured far worse. Can't complain-for once he has truly asked for this.

Pain. Fire pain. A swath burning across his neck. If he opens his eyes, will he see Nagini again, flooding his veins with her poison? Or will he see Hermione with that same serpentine grin?

His hands search, desperate. He cannot open his eyes; he dare not open them. Blind, his hands seek some obscure confirmation; they find the warm pillow-flesh of her thighs. His fingers dig deep, burrowing, struggling to ensure her realness, her presence, her truth. Buried deep in his own sensations, he does not hear her strangled gasp. He feels the contraction of her shins against his ribs, the bones of her knees pressing hard against his bones and the scars that cross over them.

They are real. He knows them to be real. His hands convulse against a fresh stab of pain. Her muscles shift. This is *her* pain. Pain she offered honestly, starkly. Pain he has accepted, pain he embraces.

Pain he needs.

The hours pass. Magic and ink swirl, combine, separate, draw out, fill in.

Become.

Soft, heavy, deep.

Her voice thrums through him, through his torso where her legs lock him in place, through his throat where her hands brush along, through his ears where the monotonous, incomprehensible chant pours in to fill him. No longer a man of flesh; his skin is filling with words and sounds, settling at the lowest points like a dead man's blood, rising in a pool of which he is bottom and the banks. Dead, then? Does she sing a death chant over him, a pagan priestess calling him to an eternity?

But the chant goes on, vibrations in all of him, in the bones of his wrist, the nerves of his spine, the callus of his feet. Into the particles of the atoms of the molecules of the body of Severus Snape; they shiver in unison.

Her voice quiets until just the thrum is left in him, in his bones. And then he no longer feels it, only *knows* it continues on in the most basic part of himself, shaking him out of his stupor and into the waking world.

He blinks. The pain is gone. Not all pain; there are some scars that always ache, a burn on his hand from a day...two?...back. But the fire of Hermione's work is gone. The

dull throb that has been a part of his neck for... so long... is gone. He discovers that his hands are curled loosely on the floor. Experimentally, he lifts one, lays the length along his throat.

A mirror is pressed into his hand. He stares at Hermione; he hadn't noticed her remove herself from him, hadn't felt the loss of heat or of *presence*. "Look," she urges. His brows furrow. Her voice is her own again. No longer the priestess. No longer the temptress, or the goddess, or the lamia. Just... Hermione.

Have the past several hours been a hallucination?

"Look," she says again.

He lifts himself up, sitting cross-legged. Now he must look slightly down to see her face. He raises the mirror, angles it cautiously, experimentally, testing its reflection, testing his fingers; they're not quite a part of him right now. He pulls the other hand from his neck.

Green. All sorts of green. Jumbled together, mish-mashed, intermixed...

No. Separate, distinct. Interwoven. Rosemary...*rosmarinus officinalis*. Witchwood...*pythouissam lignum*. Feverfew...*tanacetum parthenium*. Passionflower...*passiflora incarnata*. Sage...*salvia officinalis*. The longer he looks, the deeper they go, plant after plant, herb after herb in a gloriously tangled forest that curls from some mysterious place behind his ear, around, down the notch of his collarbone. Growing. Changing. Thriving. Nestled within, the tiniest of ravens perches upon a spring of *camellia sinensis*.

He touches, strokes, prods, examines.

Incredible. Impossible.

"It's- it's beautiful." Mesmerizing. He could lose himself in this forest. "I've never..."

"There's never been anything beautiful about me."

To argue with him would be futile. "There is now." She smiles, watching her hands, the movement of the words there, as she cleans her tools.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." Simple. "But not all of it's mine, you know. The magic doesn't work like that."

"Some of it's you."

"Yes. Some of it's me. Most of it's you." A little bit of her. To be carried with him. Always.

She's about to banish the leftover ink, bits of carmine, daffodil, lilac. His hand grips her wrist; she feels the heat and pressure surge up her arm, up her ribbon of words. She turns; his face is there, intense, possessed. Not...precisely...frightening.

"Do it. Now."

Dazed. "Wha..."

"This!" He flips his arm over, thrusts it before him. "Do this. Now. Before..."

"It's late."

"I don't care!"

"I do."

"Too tired?" He sneers. Tears away.

A flick of her hand, and the ink is gone. "If you like." Another flick and pots and palettes and needles fly to a basin unseen in the dying light. "You are, too."

He snorts.

She sighs. "Oh, Severus..." That impossible profile, ivory jutting out into the candle-dark. "It's just not *time*. I'll do it; you know I'll do it. But 'night's candles are burnt out,' dear man. So am I, if you'd bother to look."

He looks...a slanted gaze that admits nothing. A slight tremor to her hands. A taming of her hair. A bare shade of over-pallor to her skin. A witch with no magic. She's used it all this night. She's... a woman.

He turns, scrapes himself across the pallet to be beside her. He looks, tries to look all of the things he cannot say.

She touches him. "You can be such a ridiculous man." He traces the line of her curling fern, from her breast to her neck to her ear. "Feel beautiful, Severus. Take this one night to just feel beautiful. I'm here."

"I'm here," he echoes.

Beautiful.

Author's Notes:

There are a number of influences and inspirations to be acknowledged and thanked for this fic, foremost of which is [dragon811](#), who provided the prompt: *Fic: Post-war AU: Hermione takes up tattoo artistry in Diagon Alley, while Snape owns the apothecary next door. Befriending the prickly man, she finally convinces him to let her ink over his Mark...and now together they are turning him into art (SS/HG or SS & HG, your choice)*. My primary influence for the experimental style & mood (and the guilty party behind abandoning a more conventional version of this fic) is watching Jim Jarmusch's *Only Lovers Left Alive* for the first time. If I may, I suggest listening to the [soundtrack](#) as an aural wine for this literary morsel. For my part, it was essential in maintaining the proper mindspace to complete this.

For the role that tattoos play in this fic, I have to acknowledge the stories I have read/seen of breast cancer survivors who have used tattoos to beautify, normalize, and/or feminize their mastectomies. The most recent of these is from the BBC, about [Vinnie Myers, who creates nipples for women with reconstructive surgery](#). Also from the Beeb is [this article on students of Thai tattoo](#) which informed Hermione's ink and 'missing years' between canon and fic. A minor note of influence was *Shisei*, a manga short by Yokobaba Ryo.

And now that the notes are lengthier than the actual fic, I'll close by thanking you for reading and humbly requesting any feedback you wish to provide. Cheers, Lm. Samiko