

Night of the Nargles (complete)

by PlaidPooka

Decades after the war, a special Auror taskforce is ready to take down the last five Death Eaters as they meet in a old forest in the middle of nowhere. Before the mission, Hermione learns of a danger no one had anticipated. If she doesn't warn Harry in time, everyone in the forest will die, including a tall, black-robed figure no one has seen since the end of the war.

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Chapter 1 of 5

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1.

The meeting of the Special Protective Order of Ongoing Neutrality was not going well. That was putting it mildly, Hermione thought. If it went any worse, the meeting would soon become a brawl. According to Harry, these meetings normally ranged from boring rehashing of past missions to low-key planning sessions for future operations. When he asked her to do some research for their upcoming mission, she'd been happy to oblige. Her house had become too big and too empty to be born. A little research to keep her mind off of her silent house was exactly what she needed.

The last of her children had graduated Hogwarts and fled the coop. It was hardly a surprise that she had born two children who knew exactly what they wanted to do from an early age and rushed off to do it the moment they left school. The closely knit family stayed in touch and visited together often, but it wasn't the same as having children underfoot.

Her marriage had not survived both children being in school. It was hard. She and Ron remained best friends and that was as it should be. The truth was that they'd always been better friends than lovers; she sometimes thought they had gotten married out of pure stubbornness. It wasn't as if she wanted to go back to being married to Ron. They had little in common other than the children, and they bickered constantly. While content with going back to her maiden name and being on her own, it was the slow, quiet passing of time that was getting to her. Her life had been full of children and bickering once upon a time. Now it seemed a trial to try to find things to do to fill up the hours of her solitary day. She was almost fifty years old and she was living alone for the first time in her life.

What did people do after they got a divorce? She knew that you went on and, hopefully, found someone else that suited one better. But what exactly did one do to fill up the hours between work and bedtime once the responsibility and general din of having a family suddenly fell out of it? Her work with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement helped, but once she went home of an evening, she felt a little lost.

She needed more life in her life. Her independent studies and research were not enough to drown out the silence of her house.

When Harry had called her in as a consultant, she'd jumped at the opportunity with her old enthusiasm. With scarcely a moment's thought, the house was shut up and sleeping under protective and preservative spells. Thirty minutes and one apparition later, and Hermione had rented a small flat in a large building in Diagon Alley. It was inexpensive and clean, but the walls were a little thin. Her flat was small and noisy, and she loved it.

"Who the hell named us SPOON, anyway?"

The shouting young man dragged Hermione back to the present. It was one of the younger Aurors, newly recruited to the taskforce. His angry retort made her blush slightly and she had to hide a smile behind a hand. When tasked with finding an official and inconclusive sounding name for the new Auror division that was put together specifically to hunt down missing Death Eaters, Hermione had come up with Special Protective Order of Ongoing Neutrality. It was accepted and put in place long before any of the members noticed it spelled the word spoon. When Harry and Ron had cornered her about it, she'd sworn that she hadn't noticed that when she named the division.

She'd lied through her teeth.

Now, every time someone found fault with the name, it made her want to snicker. A small thing, but it made her enormously happy.

"This isn't the time, Jude." Harry ran a hand through his messy hair and closed his eyes for a moment. "Our present order of business is whether or not to use George Weasley's new magic dampeners when we raid the meeting of the last five Death Eaters known to exist. The owl we intercepted told us the time and place, now we need a plan as to how we conduct the raid. The next person who disrupts this meeting with a wild tangent will be petrified for the remainder of the meeting. Have I made myself very clear?"

"Yes, Harry." The young Auror looked crestfallen, but held his peace.

Hermione idly wondered whether Harry would petrify her if she referred to the task force as "Spoon" for the rest of the meeting. It was tempting, but one look at her friend's tense and exhausted expression made her decide not to chance it.

"Before we continue with the pros and cons of using the dampeners," Harry paused to give Hermione a questioning look and she nodded in reply, "let's hear from Hermione Granger. She's been researching the area and her information might aid us with our decision."

Standing up and walking to the front of the room to stand near Harry, Hermione made a sharp and silent gesture with her wand and created a map of the area which hovered in the air. Turning to face her audience, she began to speak.

"I have spent the last week researching the woods surrounding Frogspawn Creek. The forest itself is ancient, with many trees that are well over a century old, and some so old I couldn't get an exact date. I also made a short visit to the forest itself."

"Was it wise to visit the area in person when it's where the Death Eater's are going to meet?" An older Auror with short grey hair, Dawlish maybe, interrupted her. "If they get spooked and change their plans, we'll never catch up to them."

"I went early last week and took proper precautions not to be seen. It seemed a low enough risk, seeing how the meeting in question remains two weeks away."

'Proper precautions' had been a loan of Harry's cloak, but she wasn't about to mention the artifact publicly. The cloak was most useful the less people knew of it's existence. Taking a fortifying breath, Hermione continued her report.

"The forest itself seems unremarkable aside from its age. It is smallish at only forty square kilometers, but very dense. The underbrush in many areas makes travel on foot fairly impossible. There are four clearings of any size in the woods, a pond, and several derelict wood cabins. A maze of deer trails cross through the area, which make it easier to navigate through the brush, but I was not there long enough to map these trails."

"It sounds as if our greatest problem with this raid will be searching the area effectively if it's that difficult to walk through it." Ron Weasley pursed his lips in thought. "Can we use brooms?"

"I don't think so." Hermione wished they could. Surprising the last Death Eaters by air would be easier and safer. "The old growth of the trees make it fairly impenetrable from the air. It is extraordinarily dark under the canopy, which will also cause difficulty. Our one piece of luck is that the meeting is to begin before the sun sets. However, if the dampeners are used, it is important that the Spo...er...the taskforce each have a device of muggle means to light their way if the search lasts long enough for darkness to fall."

"But does the forest itself have magic?" Kingsley Shacklebolt, Minister of Magic, was not a member of the taskforce, but was present to add the benefit of his experience and intelligence. "I have nothing against using these dampeners of young Weasley's, but I would not want such an old forest to be harmed."

"I was concerned about that as well." Hermione smiled at the Minister. He was getting older, but the man was as energetic and tough as he'd always been. "In fact, that was the main reason for my visit. I used four different types of magic detectors while I was there. I was suspicious of magical intervention. It's rare for trees that old to be untouched, and I could find no mundane reason for the cabins to be abandoned."

"You suspected magical intervention?"

"I did. I thought there must at least been a notice-me-not spell on the area. I found nothing of the sort. I am left to guess that the area has been let alone because it is far from any town or city. The small forest is unremarkable and off the beaten path. Honestly, I think it's been forgotten by muggles and wizards alike."

"What about magical beasts?" Young Jude's voice was very soft. Perhaps he was afraid he'd be petrified.

"There are certainly magical beasts in the old woods." Hermione drew her cell phone out of her pocket to check her notes. It was useless for calls when surrounded by the magic of the Ministry, but it worked fine for note taking. "My fauna detector indicated at least one magical animal of a size to be a unicorn or perhaps a thestral. There was a great deal of activity in the canopy itself. Most likely insect life. Or possibly Bowtruckles. It's their mating season. I was hoping to study the wood further when this mission is concluded to see if any of the trees there are suitable for wands."

"An excellent idea," the Minister agreed. "But what of the dampeners? Will they harm the magical wildlife?"

"No, they will not. After I discovered that the forest is inhabited by magical creatures, I spoke to George Weasley at length and we did some experiments. The dampeners only effect wizard magic. If the woods had been protected by old enchantments, that would have caused an issue. The magical creatures are inherently magical, and the field has no effect on them whatsoever."

George and Hermione had tested one of the dampening devices by creating a dampening field around a small salamander. The salamander had sniffed it for a moment and then gleefully burned it to ashes with magical fire.

"If there is no danger to the forest and its inhabitants," Kinsley began, "then I see no reason not to use the dampeners."

"We have other potential problems to discuss." Harry put his hand through his hair again. "Hermione, did your research send up any more red flags?"

"What do red flags have to do with it?" Jude muttered.

"Quiet, please." All Harry had to do was glance at the young Auror and he fell silent.

"None yet, but I am not finished with all of it. A colleague recommended a book on Scottish forests that he believed spoke about Frogspawn. It's got an entire chapter devoted to the little wood."

"And what was your conclusion?"

"I'm afraid I don't have one yet. The book is written in Gobbledygook, and is resistant to translation spells. I appealed to the Goblins at Gringotts, but they were not interested in assisting me. I am translating it myself, but it is slow going. It's a very long chapter."

That was an understatement. The chapter was several hundred pages long, and so far, Hermione had translated the section which described where the forest was, which she already knew. It was frustrating work.

"In that case," Harry said, "we'll leave that part of the discussion for now. Do tell us immediately if you discover anything you wish to add to what you've told us."

Hermione vanished her map and returned to her seat. Her part in this meeting was over, but Harry wanted her involved so that he could take advantage of her knowledge. Not everything had changed since they were in school. He'd gone so far as to get her temporarily loaned to his department until this situation was concluded. She was happy of the change. Her work to find and change the laws of their society that benefitted purebloods over muggleborns was very important, and she would return to it. In the meantime, it was nice to have a change of pace.

"As I see it, the greatest effect of the dampening field is that the Death Eaters who come to the meeting will not be able to apparate away once we confront them." Harry spoke with confidence and authority. "These are the last five, people. I don't have to tell you how important it is that we end this here and don't end up waiting for years to get another opportunity."

"What about Blevins?" The speaker was a middle aged witch that Hermione wasn't familiar with. "You say we have five left, but what happened to Blevins? Last I heard he was hiding in Australia or some such."

"Blevins was gifted to the Ministry."

Harry didn't explain that statement. There was no need. Even Hermione was aware that through the years some Death Eaters had been mysteriously found next to the fountain in the entranceway of the building. At least, their bodies had been found. The bodies always appeared with no explanation or any trace of who had left them there. It remained a mystery that no one in the Ministry was terribly worried about solving. The Death Eaters in question were not people who could be rehabilitated to rejoin society. The fact that they seemingly dropped dead in the middle of the Ministry was a not considered a problem.

"As I was saying, they won't be able to easily escape, but we won't be able to use magic either. No spells to find them, light the way, bind them, or defend ourselves. We can leave a squad of Aurors outside the field to deal with any of the Death Eaters who manage to leave the wood on foot, but those of us in the woods will have to fight without magic."

"I don't see that as a problem." Scorpius Malfoy was an unexpected, but not unwelcome, addition to the Aurors. "We're talking about old-school purebred wizards. They won't be trained in hand to hand combat, but we are. My only suggestion is that we take some muggle device to bind them with. Rope, or those muggle handcuffs."

"Handcuffs is the term," Harry gently corrected, "and that sounds like an excellent idea. There are shackles for ankles as well. If we can take them alive and we can't use magic to bind them, then some mundane means will be needed."

"I'll look into acquiring them." Hermione knew it would be easier for a muggleborn to go shopping in London, and she had time to fill. She could only work on the Gobbledygook translation a few hours at a time, or it gave her a terrible headache.

"Thank you, Hermione. I'll get you a Ministry credit card." Harry looked around the room at every member of the task force. "Are we in agreement, then? Shall we use the dampeners?"

Every member of the group gave their consent. Hermione supposed the dampeners made the task seem easy, but she'd been to the forest. It was going to be far from easy.

Shortly after that, the meeting broke up and Hermione returned to her flat to have a solitary dinner before returning to her work on the headache inducing Goblin volume. The sounds of life that crept through the flat's thin walls were calming, but she was lonely all the same. Perhaps she should get a cat? She hadn't really considered another cat since Crooks had passed away. He'd been such a character and so smart. It seemed like a new cat wouldn't be able to live up to its predecessor's legendary status. Perhaps a dog then. There was a shop that sold familiars nearby that had an adorable litter of crups in the front window. No, that would never do. Cute as they were, crups couldn't stand muggles and she had regular visits with her muggle relatives.

What she needed was a date. Almost fifty, and out of the dating world for a several decades, she wasn't certain she even knew how to go about getting a date. Had the dating scene changed since she was a teenager? Would anyone be interested in a middle-aged witch? Surely there were some middle-aged wizards around who were single and lonely like she was.

That was a puzzle for another time. For now, there were handcuffs to buy and this thrice damned book to translate.

She truly did need more life in her life.

A/N: While I still read fanfiction, I have not written any of my own in a very long time. Years ago, I turned my keyboard away from the Potterverse and wrote original work. This November was a busy one. I wrote 50k words on a new novel for NaNoWriMO, and started a Kindle Scout campaign for one of my romance novels, Descending. (My Kindle Scout campaign for my romance novel, Descending, has finished. Descending is available through Amazon and Kindle. You can find it by searching Julianne Q Johnson.)

Last night, I wanted to write something just for fun. I'd been thinking about a little HG/SS story for years, and I decided to write it down. I ended up staying up until four in the morning and writing 8k words. It's been ages since I had that much fun writing and also since the words flowed that fast. I had a blast, and finished the tale today when I woke up. Five chapters, over 10k words and my tale is complete. I'll post a chapter every few days until it's all posted.

I don't know if I'll write another story after this one. I'll think about it. It was the biggest writing fun I've had in ages. I suppose further fanfic will depend on if I get another idea. I have no beta reader, so any mistakes are my own damn fault.

I hope you have as much fun reading it as I did writing it.

All my love,

JQJ

Decades after the war, a special Auror taskforce is ready to take down the last five Death Eaters as they meet in a old forest in the middle of nowhere. Before the mission, Hermione learns of a danger no one had anticipated. If she doesn't warn Harry in time, everyone in the forest will die, including a tall, black-robed figure no one has seen since the end of the war.

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"Harry," Hermione said, her tone of voice getting a bit demanding, "I haven't gotten through the entire passage yet, but it's clear that there's a stern warning about magical creatures in Frogspawn Wood. It's tied to the lunar cycle in conjunction with the aligning of several planets. That exact alignment is happening tonight. You have to call off the mission."

"Call it off? After decades of wild goose chases and misinformation, we are finally given a chance to round up the last of the Death Eaters and you want me to call it off? I'm sorry, Hermione, but this mission is going to happen. We're going into the wood in four hours, and I'm not calling it off when you don't even know what the threat is."

"I'm working on it. The warnings are dire, Harry. They speak about Goblins being eaten alive."

"I understand. Even so, that book is older than the hills, you said so yourself. For all we know, the threat was some creature that died off long ago. Maybe it was a dragon that got taken to the reserve. You said that the only creature there in any numbers was probably Bowtruckles, and they don't eat people."

"What happens if the warning isn't wrong? You're going into that wood, into a dampening field, and you won't even be able to use magic if this threat manifests. Is it worth losing your entire team? Why can't you turn the dampening field on and wait for the Death Eaters to leave the wood? You can catch them without even stepping foot inside."

"No. I won't risk those bastards getting away. We'll leave a team of Aurors outside the field, but we're going in tonight. Unless you can give me some concrete evidence before the mission starts, I'm not changing the plan."

"You're so stubborn!"

"Look who's talking!"

The discussion went downhill from there, and Hermione soon fled Harry's office to return to her research. She had to find out more from the dusty old tome and she was running out of time.

Three hours and one headache later, Hermione wasn't any closer to understanding what the book was talking about. It was clear that the tome spoke of a rare creature that lived in clusters of extended family. Normally shy and harmless, the creatures lived to be over three hundred years old, and rarely procreated. However, certain astrological events encouraged in them a sort of mating frenzy. It was after this frenzy that the new generations of the creature were born. The book also warned that during the mating frenzy the creatures became ravenous, and would swarm over any living creature they found and strip it to the bones if not fought off. The description was much like that of a school of hungry piranhas, or a swarm of locusts that ate meat instead of plants.

If these creatures existed, the time for the mating frenzy was tonight. Under the light of a blue moon, while Jupiter, Venus, and Mars were visible in the sky in the shape of a triangle, the creatures would lose their little minds and go all crazy for protein.

Her main problem was that, for the life of her, Hermione could find no translation for the Goblin word "Sulmas-Dhaub." There was a literal translation of the phrase, "aggressive agony," which seemed apt under the circumstances, but it was clear that this was their name for the creature itself. Hermione had no clue what the name of the creature was in English. If it even existed. Perhaps Harry was right. She could be worried over a magical animal that went extinct decades ago.

The only other clue was yet another untranslatable phrase about what the creatures normally ate when they weren't attacking things in a mating frenzy. "Lavozagh Nagransham." The closest she could get to the meaning of that phrase was "tree-eater," and that didn't make any sense. One might call a giraffe a tree eater, but the book was clearly talking about a plant. What kind of plant could eat giant old trees?

Wait a minute. She'd seen it. When she visited the wood to look for signs of magic. She'd peered up into the tree canopy, trying to get a glimpse of what the magical creature detector had spotted. Standing at the foot of a massive old oak, Hermione had peered through its branches and seen the gigantic clumps of mistletoe hanging in the tree. While they would never consume the entire tree, they were parasitic. They bored into the branches and sucked water and nutrients from the host plant. Tree eaters.

In all her life, she'd only heard of one creature that ate mistletoe.

Her cozy flat had no fireplace. Hermione spun on the spot and apparated.

Stumbling only briefly on the pink and purple welcome mat she landed on, Hermione turned to the front door of the charming yellow and blue house and knocked loudly. In a moment, it opened.

"Hermione!" Luna Lovegood Scamander smiled at her warmly and waved her inside the cheerfully painted house. "Was I expecting you? Did we have an appointment? I swear, I can't remember anything these days."

Luna hadn't changed much over the years. She remained thin and ethereal, her voice retained its dreamy sing-song quality, and she still wrote articles for The Quibbler. Luna was the editor of the paper, now her father had retired. Over the years, Hermione had grown very fond of the odd woman, and she reminded herself that she should visit Luna more often. Her friend had seemed so shocked to find Hermione on her doorstep.

"No, we didn't have an appointment." Hermione gave her friend a tight hug. "I was working on some Ministry business and I need your help."

"How lovely! Come in, sit down, and I'll get us a cuppa."

"Is Rolf home?"

"Oh, no, not at the moment. He's gone over to Tullaroan to help with an infestation. Chizpurples."

"What a shame. I hope he does a fumigation on himself before he comes home."

"I won't let him in until he does!"

Once the tea was poured, Hermione got down to business.

"Luna, what can you tell me about Nargles?"

"Oh, they are sweet little shy things. They live in mistletoe bunches, and they move from clump to clump so that they don't eat all of the leaves from any one plant."

"Have you ever seen one?"

"I did actually. Back when we were in school, I used to sneak out to go walking in the Forbidden Forest."

"Really?" Hermione was shocked the gentle Ravenclaw had broken the rules to go to the forest. "Wasn't it dangerous?"

"No, not really. I never went into the forest very far. Around the edges it's quite pretty. The more dangerous denizens stayed deeper in the wood. I think they were afraid of Hagrid."

"Probably afraid he'd want to keep them for a pet."

They had a good laugh before Luna continued. It felt wonderful. Since her divorce, Hermione had spent too much time with books and not enough with her friends.

"And you saw a Nargle if the Forbidden Forest," Hermione prompted when their laughter had died down.

"I did. I climbed this big oak tree to look for one. I wanted to make a realistic sketch for my dad to put in the paper. I had to search a few mistletoe clumps before I found one. It was a funny little thing. Rather like a Bowtruckle, with long limbs and fingers, only they're green and Bowtruckles look like brown bark."

"Did you touch it?"

"Oh, Merlin, no. They're shy, and they aren't aggressive, but they have very sharp teeth. Nargles have been known to nip people if they are messed with. I didn't want to get bitten. I'd have had a hard time explaining that to Madam Pomfrey!"

"I suppose so. Luna, have you ever read or heard anything of Nargles attacking people?"

"No. I can't say that I have. They are very shy and very rare. Most wizards don't even believe they exist. There's nothing in the lore that suggests they would hurt anyone."

Hermione stayed for a short chat, and then excused herself to return to her work. Time was running out, and she had one more task to complete before she decided if Nargles were a threat to the mission. It seemed too fantastical to possibly be true.

An astronomy book and several Arithmancy spells later, and Hermione had the last piece of the puzzle. The configuration of moon and planets happening that night had not occurred in recent memory. The last time had been over three hundred years ago. Back then, there were very few written accounts of natural happenings in the wizarding world. It was quite possible that Nargles had swarmed over three hundred years ago, and no written account of the event had survived. The information may have been spread by word-of-mouth and fallen by the wayside when the event didn't repeat itself.

The written history of the Goblins went back much further than human records. She had no choice but to accept the tome's warning at face value. Looking at the clock, she realized the mission was starting. She was out of time. Throwing a dark cloak over her muggle t-shirt and jeans, she rushed into the flat's tiny kitchen and grabbed a butcher knife. A quick transfiguration of a kitchen towel, and she had a sheathe for the impromptu weapon. Her wand was in its pocket, but if the dampeners had already been set, it would be useless. She wasn't certain how useful the knife would be against a swarm of Nargles, but it was better than nothing. Sliding the sheathe through her belt, she turned on her heel and apparated.

On the edge of Frogspawn Wood, Hermione saw an Auror nearby with one of the spheres that created the dampening field. There were ten spheres in all, circling the forest, every one aimed in toward the wood. The plan had been simple. Wait until after the secret Death Eater meeting was scheduled to begin, so that the Death Eaters could apparate to their meeting point, and then turn on the field so they couldn't apparate away.

"Excuse me, Spanton is it?"

"Yes, Ms. Granger, how can I help you?"

"Has the dampening field been engaged?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"You have to turn it off."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Ms. Granger. Order's from Mr. Potter himself. No matter what happens, we are not to turn off the dampening field."

"But there's a problem Harry doesn't know about. I have to find the taskforce and get them out of the woods before moonrise. I can't do that without magic."

"I'm sorry, Ma'am, but orders are orders."

Turning from the stubborn Auror, Hermione checked the sky. The sun was already fading behind the hills to the west. Her calculations earlier had pinpointed moonrise at less than an hour after sunset. There wasn't much time to warn the others. If they were to get any warning at all, she would have to do it herself. She must find Harry. Only he could give the order to drop the dampening field.

Double checking her wand and her knife, Hermione strode into the forest.

A/N

A big, ginormous thank you to everyone reading so far, and also thank you for the kind comments. It's nice to be a part of the fandom again. I'd said last time that I would post a chapter every few days, but I seem to be too impatient. I think I'd rather do one a day.

I will add a short pitch for my novel, *Descending*. It's nearing the end of its Kindle Scout campaign. My campaign ends 12/15/2016. If you enjoy my writing, and want a chance at a free e-book of *Descending*, stop by Kindle Scout check it out, and nominate it if you like what you see. You can find it in the romance section. If it's chosen for publication, everyone who nominates it gets a free advance copy. Free books! Nothing wrong with that.

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The woods was every bit as dense as she remembered. Hermione had a rough time of it until she stumbled onto one of the many deer trails that crossed the forest. Without magic to clear the way, the members of the taskforce would be sticking to the trails as well. Hopefully Hermione would find Harry on one. Either that or she would be eaten by Nargles.

The fading twilight did little to help Hermione along her way. The thick canopy of the trees let very little light in. She had excellent night vision, but it was going to get very dark before the moon rose.

Stumbling over a tree root, Hermione fell to her hands and knees. While her jeans protected her knees well enough, her palms were scraped painfully. Picking herself up and shaking off the pain in her hands, she continued along the deer trail. In around twenty minutes, she emerged on the far side of the woods, skirted the forest until she found another trail, and headed back into the dark.

Luckier on this pass, she practically ran into one of the Aurors crouched on the trail in front of her. The Auror spun towards her and automatically drew a wand.

"What are you going to do, poke me in the eye?" Hermione whispered.

"Hermione?" the answering voice whispered back.

"Ron?"

"Yeah, what are you doing here? It's dangerous and, while you have a mean right hook, you aren't trained in hand to hand."

"I have to find Harry. It's important. Why are you couched here?"

"There's a clearing ahead on the trail. I was waiting for the moon to rise so I could see if the Death Eaters were using it."

Brushing past her ex-husband, Hermione strode out into the clearing and peered around herself.

"All clear," she said over her shoulder in a slightly louder tone of voice.

"You fool woman," Ron hissed. "What were you thinking? What if you'd walked straight into those Death Eaters?"

"I didn't. Look, I don't have time to waste. I have to find Harry before moonrise. We've got a bigger problem than the remaining Death Eaters."

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"At some point after moonrise, we're going to be attacked by Nargles."

"You've got to be taking the piss." Ron threw his hands up and then chuckled. "Nargles? They don't even exist."

"They do exist, they're just rare."

"You're as loony as Luna, you are. Even if they existed, what harm could a little thing like that be to a human?"

"Look, Ron, I don't have time for this. You know me...you lived with me for years. Do you think I'm insane?"

"No, of course not."

"Do you think I'm intelligent?"

"You're smarter than Harry and me put together."

"Then listen to me. That Goblin book I was translating has an account of a rare event, one that hasn't happened in hundreds of years. Those readings I took of magical creatures in the trees? They weren't Bowtruckles, they were Nargles. Sometime tonight after the moon rises, those Nargles are going to go into a frenzy and eat every animal--that includes us--that they can find. They have very sharp teeth and there are hundreds of them. The book said they could strip a Goblin to the bone in thirty minutes. Now, they can eat the Death Eaters, and I say good riddance. But we have twenty Aurors wandering in this wood with no magic. If we can't get Harry to drop the dampening field, they're all going to die."

"All right. Yeah. All right. I'll help look for Harry. Anyone I run into, I'll tell them to do the same."

Peering around the clearing in the dim light, Hermione found another deer trail and headed toward it. Pausing halfway there, she turned back to her ex-husband."

"Ron?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for listening to me."

"Hey, if Hermione Granger says there's wizard-eating Nargles, then there's wizard-eating Nargles. Stay safe, all right?"

"I'll try. You too."

That said, she turned back towards the trail and made her way into the darkness. She could make out the trail, but she found herself walking awkwardly. With every step, she raised her foot farther off the ground than she was used to in order not to trip on the uneven terrain. After another fifteen minutes walk, she found the young Auror, Jude, and told him the same story as she told Ron. When she got his promise to look for Harry, Hermione struck out in a new direction and kept walking.

Soon, even the dubious assistance of the twilight was gone and she found herself creeping along using only the sensation in her feet of the bare dirt of the trail to keep herself on the path.

Stopping in confusion, she felt around with her foot but couldn't tell where she was. The trail had vanished. It was unclear whether the spongy stuff she stood on was dead leaves or grass. Hermione crouched down to feel it with her hands. Grass. She must be in another clearing. Not knowing which way to go, she sat on the ground in defeat. It had seemed practical to grab a knife before she'd rushed out of her apartment. Why hadn't she thought to bring a torch? The darkness was getting to her. Anything could be in this clearing, Death Eaters or Nargles or God knew what.

As she sat contemplating her next move, the clearing around her burst into a diffuse, cool light. As much as she was relieved to be able to see, she turned her face to the sky and silently cursed the moon. If she was right, and the Nargles were getting ready to swarm, it would start any moment now.

The clearing she sat in was empty. Rising to her feet, she found a new deer trail and went back under the trees. It was still too dark for her to feel confident, but at least the moonlight through the trees let her follow the faint line of the trail as it wound through the wood.

Her present trail led to no new Aurors, or to Harry. It seemed forever since she had spoken to Jude, though she guessed it had been less than an hour. A strange sound began to rise in the trees above her head. A creaking sound, like trees groaning in a strong wind, but there was only the lightest of breezes blowing. Five minutes later and the creaking was joined by sharp squeaks and trilling wails.

It was the Nargles, it had to be. No matter how much she'd wished her research was wrong, the small beasts were beginning their mating frenzy. Anyone who stayed in this wood without the benefit of magic was bound to be hurt or killed.

Hermione had tried her best, but she'd run out of time.

It wouldn't do any good to stand here in the middle of the trail like a frightened rabbit, she had to keep moving. Her only chance now was to find her way out of the wood as quickly as possible and convince the Aurors to listen to her. If that failed, she swore she'd petrify them one at a time and turn the damn stones off herself. True, they were highly trained Aurors, but they'd never suspect such treachery from her. She'd have a fair chance of disabling the dampening field if she could find her way out of the forest.

Her plan in place, Hermione continued down the trail as fast as she could in the dim moonlight. Twice she fell in her hurry, but she got back up and kept going. The main problem was that the deer trails wound around through the wood. There was no way of telling which way would bring her to the outer edge of the trees the fastest. All she could do was keep her feet moving and hope for the best.

Hermione splashed into the water before she realized it was there, so focused she had been on the ground in front of her feet. She'd found the pond. It looked eerie in the moonlight, a flat mirror of the sky above with tendrils of mist lifting from it here and there. The trail she'd been hurrying along ended at the water's edge. The deer must use it to come to drink. She needed a new trail.

Looking around, she spotted one of the abandoned cabins near the edge of the water. Surely there was an old trail that led to the cabin she could use to find her way out of the wood. The creaking above her in the trees had reached the level of all-out screeching. If she wanted to live, she had to get out from under the trees.

Halfway to the cabin, something fell from the trees above, landing on her shoulder. The small shape screamed in her ear and sunk sharp teeth into her neck. Screaming herself, Hermione tore the Nargle from her neck with one hand and threw it away from her as hard as she could. It rolled across the forest floor, bouncing over tree roots, before it fetched up against a tree trunk. Springing to its feet, the odd little creature ran towards her on two legs, shrieking and waving its long arms over its head.

Hermione's hand was on her wand before she remembered it would be useless. As the tiny savage ran towards her, she raised a foot and brought it down on the insane thing with all the force she could muster. Lifting her foot, she examined the Nargle's broken body on the forest floor. It was dead.

Before she had any time to be relieved, a dozen more Nargles fell to the ground around her. No choice but to flee. The cabin should offer some shelter from these crazed beasts. Leaping over the nearest Nargle, she sprinted towards the dubious safety of the old cabin. Ten feet from the cabin's front door, she tripped over an unseen stone and hit the ground hard enough to knock the wind out of her.

The screaming of the Nargles grew closer as she struggled to take a breath. Just as she sucked in a wheezing stream of air, strong hands grabbed her. In a purely reflexive action born of fear, she batted the hands away.

"Get up, you stupid woman. Do you want to die here?"

The gravelly voice was familiar, but Hermione couldn't place it. She allowed the hands to pull her to her feet, and then she was being dragged by the hand to the door of the cabin by a man in a dark cloak with the hood pulled up. All she could tell about him was that he was much taller than she was and he was trying to save her life.

He didn't release his tight grip on her hand until he had slammed the cabin door shut behind them. Three of the bright green Nargles had followed them inside, and the tall wizard stomped them under his black boots before flinging them into a fire burning in the hearth of the one room cabin.

"Give me your cloak." His voice was demanding. The tall man held out his hand as if expecting to be obeyed.

His face was hidden in the shadows under his hood. The sound of his voice was distracting her. It was at once familiar and unfamiliar. Though her initial reaction was to argue with the gruff man, he had just saved her life. With a sigh, she unclipped her cloak and handed it to him.

Striding to the door, the man knelt to stuff the fabric of her cloak into the crack under the door where several of the slender Nargles were trying to gain access.

"There. That should help, at least for a little while." Throwing back the hood of his cloak, the man strode to the only window of the small cabin and peered outside. "Now, would you mind telling me, Madam, why you were wandering alone in the forest on the first Nargle mating period we've had in several centuries?"

The voice made more sense now. A familiar voice made more rough by a throat injury. She knew this man. He looked much the same as he had the last time she had seen him, except that his face was a little more lined and he had a large steak of silver in his jet black hair. And, of course, he wasn't lying on the floor bleeding to death.

Her mouth fell open in shock. The man who had saved her life was none other than Severus Snape.

A/N

I am having so much fun! It's been far too long since I played with Hermione and Severus. I hope you enjoyed this 3rd chapter, and there's 2 more to go.

My campaign on Kindle Scout was flagging. I've never exactly been a social butterfly. Thanks to you and my friends in the costuming world, it's perked up quite a bit. I thank you. My campaign ends 12/15/2016. If you enjoy my writing, and want a chance at a free e-book of *Descending*, stop by Kindle Scout check it out, and nominate it if you like what you see. You can find it in the romance section. If it's chosen for publication, everyone who nominates it gets a free advance copy. Free books! Nothing wrong with that.

You can also share the link to the campaign page if you wish to help further. If it's chosen, everyone who nominates it gets a free e-book, it doesn't matter how many there are.

Decades after the war, a special Auror taskforce is ready to take down the last five Death Eaters as they meet in a old forest in the middle of nowhere. Before the mission, Hermione learns of a danger no one had anticipated. If she doesn't warn Harry in time, everyone in the forest will die, including a tall, black-robed figure no one has seen since the end of the war.

4.

"Well?" Severus turned from the window to face her. "Why in the nine circles of hell were you wandering around in the dark?"

He must not recognize her. The years had changed her. She wore her hair longer now, which pulled some of the curl out of it. She was also slightly plumper after having two children, though she had not reached a Molly Weasley level of plumpness by any means. The last time this man had seen her, she's been a gangly teen. It was little wonder that he didn't recognize her.

"Severus." She'd tried to say Mr. Snape, but it simply hadn't wanted to come out of her mouth. Hermione and her friends had taken to referring to their surly former potions master by his first name shortly after Harry's son, Albus, had been born.

His head snapped up and he regarded her more closely, his expression carefully blank as he studied her from head to toe. "Muggle clothes, but obviously a witch to know who I am. Most likely one of my students. Hermione Granger I believe, or more likely Hermione Weasley."

He said the last word with such distaste that it made Hermione smile. "It was Weasley, but it's Granger now."

"Is it? Can I dare hope that the youngest Weasley has perished in some dreadful accident?"

His gravelly voice held so much glee at the thought of Ron's untimely demise that it made Hermione laugh out loud, which seemed to disconcert him. She couldn't help it. Here was a man she had long thought dead, acting his normal snarky self, and she could not have been happier to see him. She managed to stop laughing and was surprised to feel tears in her eyes. She didn't know if she should laugh or weep, she was so glad to see Severus alive.

"Afraid not," she managed. "We're divorced."

That said, she rushed over to the tall man and hugged him with all her might. She felt him stiffen under the assault, and suspected he reached for his wand before remembering that it was useless. Perhaps she was lucky the dampening field still held. Severus was never one to enjoy being fussed over.

"Miss Granger, please unhand me."

"No." She squeezed a little tighter.

"What do you mean, no?"

"No, I won't unhand you." Loosening her grip slightly, she looked up at him. "I've very happy to see you, Sir, and I don't feel like letting go of you just yet."

The expression on his face was more astonished than angry, so Hermione decided she could get away with hugging him just a little longer. She put her cheek against his chest and tightened her grip again.

"Since you have already made rather free use of my given name, Hermione, I see no reason to return to formality."

"Thank you, Severus."

Hermione was the one who was astonished when she felt one arm creep loosely around her back. Though it wasn't quite a hug exactly, it was far more forward than she had ever expected the reserved man to act.

"Now then, do you think you could release me? I really would like to know why you were wandering around this wood, and why my carefully crafted anti-Nargle wards have dropped. Not to mention the fact that I can't get so much as a spark from my wand."

Reluctantly, Hermione ended the hug and stepped back from her formal professor. Though his tone of voice had been close to his old disdain, the expression on his face as he looked at her was something closer to fond.

"Are we safe here?" she asked.

"For the moment. The cabin is old, but intact. I was examining it for holes and cracks when I heard you scream."

"I'm glad you did. Thank you for helping me."

"I didn't much fancy watching a woman get eaten."

She laughed again at that remark. It was odd. The same droll tone and sarcasm that had so affronted her as a schoolgirl now seemed amusing. Had he been this funny when she'd been his student? Had she been so affronted by the way he spoke to people that she hadn't noticed his deadpan sense of humor? Or had he changed in the years since she'd last seen him, bleeding on the floor of the shrieking shack? Perhaps it was a little of both.

"I'll explain what's going on, but I really need to sit down, I think. It's been a trying evening."

"Suit yourself."

There was no furniture in the old cabin. Hermione walked to the nearest wall and sat cross-legged in front of it so she could lean against the smooth boards. To her surprise, Severus joined her and sat close enough that their knees were almost touching. She regarded him quietly for a moment. He was an interesting looking man. Not handsome by any means, but not ugly, as she had considered him when she was young. Chiseled features and black eyes that regarded her with patient curiosity. The silver streak in his dark hair looked almost dashing.

Perhaps she's been living alone too long. Severus was over twenty years her senior, but she found him strangely compelling. With a sigh, she tried to calm her thoughts so that she could explain the situation to him.

It took little time to tell him of the mission and the dampening field. The further she explained, the more angry he became.

"So, you mean to tell me that the plan I put into motion, the plan that took years to come to fruition, is now being ruined by the clumsy hands of the Ministry of Magic? How the hell did they even find out about this meeting?"

"Luck. An owl was intercepted. They read the message and sent it on its way."

"Chance? Pure thrice-damned luck brought the Aurors here to muck everything up?"

"What plan, Severus? Did you lure the last Death Eaters here?"

"Of course I did. You couldn't possibly think they just happened to pick a time and place to meet where they would be eaten by Nargles. It took ten years to find where each of them was hiding. I sent messages to all of them, pretending to be one of their number, warning them of some mysterious threat. Suggesting a supposedly safe place to meet that was far from prying eyes. Letting them feel safe enough to meet in person. It was going perfectly."

"Do you think they will escape?"

"They will not." Severus' tone of voice had become grim and determined. "I chose the clearing carefully. It is surrounded by the oldest oaks in this forest and they have a multitude of mistletoe hanging from their branches. The remaining death eaters are already dead. What concerns me is that if this ridiculous field lasts much longer, we may end up joining them."

That was a sobering thought. Hermione could only hope that Harry got her message before all of them were eaten by ravenous Nargles.

The two sat in silence for a long moment, each lost in their own worries. Hermione decided that it would be better to continue their conversation and try to take their minds off of the screeching creatures outside.

"Severus, how is it that you are alive?"

"I once told you, on your first day of potions class, a good potions maker can put a stopper in death. Not all death, of course...no wizard, regardless of talent, has that power. However, venom from a snake I had long studied and a little blood loss was certainly within my power."

"But we found your body."

"Don't be stupid. You found a body. Obviously it wasn't mine, as I'm still using it."

The gentle insult only made Hermione smile at him, which he seemed to find disconcerting.

"Why didn't you let us know you were alive? We missed you. We grieved for you."

"I very much doubt that."

"Doubt it all you want, it's still true."

Severus rolled his eyes at that statement, which made Hermione chuckle.

"I had work to do. The remaining Death Eaters had to be found and eliminated. I knew them, knew their habits, knew how they thought. I had the best chance of finding them, and I couldn't do that from a cell in Azkaban. Now that the last ones are dead, my work is finally finished. I can present myself to the Aurors with a clear conscience and let them do with me what they will."

His words shocked Hermione. Here was this man who had worked tirelessly for the good of the wizarding world for...well..his entire life practically, and he thought that his only reward would be a prison cell. Yet he'd continued, with no thought of reward, fighting for the side of the light. It occurred to her that she had never really understood this man at all.

"But Severus, your name was cleared ages ago. Kingsley is the present Minister and Harry is the head of the Aurors. They cleared your name and awarded you an Order of Merlin almost as soon as the war was over. Didn't you see the announcements in the paper?"

"I have not seen a wizarding paper since that night in the Shrieking Shack. I was in hiding. I kept away from wizarding cities and distrusted the post owls. But, Hermione, how can I be pardoned? Shacklebolt thought I was a traitor and Potter hates me."

"Harry did hate you, back when he was a kid. He didn't understand, Severus, none of us did. You gave him your memories and he learned the truth. He hasn't hated you since that moment. In fact, he named his youngest son Albus Severus."

"He did not!"

"He did."

"What a ridiculous name to saddle a child with."

He grew quiet after that. Sitting next to Hermione, staring at his hands where they lay clasped in his lap, he seemed to need time to mull over what Hermione had told him. She gave him as much time as she could stand, and then reached over to cover his hands with one of her own.

"Are you all right?" she asked gently. "I know it's a great deal for you to get used to."

"Me? You saw a man rise from the dead. I--"

Whatever he was going to say next was lost when he got a good look at her hand. Holding it in both of his own, he turned it palm up to examine it.

"You're hurt. You didn't tell me you were hurt."

"It's nothing. I fell down, oh, several dozen times it feels like."

The palms of her hands were raw and bleeding in a few places from catching herself when she fell. Severus bent his head closer and plucked a couple of splinters from her palm with his fingernails, making her wince. Reaching into his cloak, he retrieved a small vial with liquid of a greenish hue. With a gentleness that Hermione had never suspected the gruff man possessed, he rubbed a few drops of the healing potion onto her skin. The shallow wounds healed before her eyes, leaving the pink of new skin in their wake.

"Other hand, please."

The same process was repeated with her left hand, and Hermione stretched her fingers in relief. She hadn't been aware of how badly her hands were hurting until they weren't anymore.

"Are you injured anywhere else?"

Remembering the Nargle that landed on her shoulder, Hermione pulled the neck of her t-shirt down to reveal the bite mark. A few more drops of potion, and the intriguing feeling of his gentle fingers on the base of her neck, and that wound was also healed.

His hand remained on her neck as they stared into each other's eyes. Hermione wasn't certain what her own expression revealed, but Severus' was a mixture of puzzlement and astonishment.

The moment was broken when they heard a high pitched scream from outside the cabin.

A/N

One more chapter after this. I've had such a good time revisiting the Potterverse. I might do it again. Thank you so much for reading, and for the kind comments.

For those who have nominated my romance novel, *Descending*, I thank you. My campaign has really picked up, and it has to be because of you guys. My campaign ends 12/15/2016. If you enjoy my writing, and want a chance at a free e-book of *Descending*, stop by Kindle Scout check it out, and nominate it if you like what you see. You can find it in the romance section. If it's chosen for publication, everyone who nominates it gets a free advance copy. Free books! Nothing wrong with that.

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5

Chapter 5 of 5

Decades after the war, a special Auror taskforce is ready to take down the last five Death Eaters as they meet in a old forest in the middle of nowhere. Before the mission, Hermione learns of a danger no one had anticipated. If she doesn't warn Harry in time, everyone in the forest will die, including a tall, black-robed figure no one has seen since the end of the war.

5.

Scrambling to their feet, they rushed to the window to peer into the moonlight. Outside near the cabin, a unicorn fought against a wave of ravenous Nargles. They watched in horror as the poor beast stomped Nargles underfoot and impaled ones falling from the trees with its horn. Despite its best efforts, it would soon be overrun. The unicorn fought well, but it was already bleeding from a dozen wounds.

Without thinking about it, Hermione ran to the door of the cabin, her mind on the beautiful creature being hurt outside. Strong hands grabbed her by the biceps and pulled her back against a firm form.

"Let me go! I have to help it!"

"There are too many Nargles out there. If we go, we'll be killed."

"But they'll kill it, Severus. They'll kill it." Hermione burst into tears. She was a strong woman, but it had been a long night that only promised to get longer.

The hands on her biceps loosened their iron grip, and Hermione could feel the man against her back sigh.

"Dry your tears, woman, and pull yourself together. I'm going to open the door and you must be ready to kill any of the vermin that come into the cabin."

The words sounded harsh and the schoolgirl she had once been would have been affronted. Her grown self saw beneath the words. Severus did not think it was safe to try to help the unicorn, but he was going to do it anyway. He was going to do it for her.

Rubbing her eyes on the hem of her t-shirt and shaking her head to clear it, Hermione drew the butcher knife from its sheathe.

"Ready."

Severus put on a thick pair of dragon hide gloves and strode to the door. Removing her cloak from the crack near the floor, he threw the door open. He placed the finger and thumb of one hand in his mouth and produced an ear-ringing whistle.

The unicorn raised its head and looked at the cabin. It's nostrils were flared and its eyes wild.

"Get your horse's arse in here, you great twat!" Severus shouted.

The unicorn shook itself and then raced across the small clearing and into the cabin, it's hooves thundering on the wooden floor. Severus slammed the door shut and immediately went to the creatures aid, pulling Nargles off the frightened beast and breaking them in his gloved hands before throwing them into the fire. The unicorn stood still, shaking and snorting in fear.

Nearly two dozen of the Nargles had run into the cabin while the door was open. Hermione stomped them beneath her feet and stabbed the ones climbing the walls with her knife. By the time she threw the last dead Nargle on the fire and replaced her cloak under the door, her ankles were bitten to pieces and she had a large scratch on one cheek.

Severus had finished pulling the Nargles off of the unicorn and was now using drops of the green potion to heal its many wounds. The beast stood quietly, sides heaving and head down. The poor thing was exhausted.

When Hermione stepped forward to help, the unicorn pranced in place and tossed its head, snorting.

"Please keep your distance, Hermione. I must finish healing it."

"But why won't it--" Hermione nearly bit her tongue when she realized why the unicorn allowed Severus to stand near it but not her.

The glance Severus shot her was fierce enough to remind Hermione of her old potions master. "Not another word. Not one word, do you understand?"

Hermione went back to the cabin wall, a little farther away from the corner where a man with a fierce scowl and gentle hands healed a unicorn, and sat down.

Thinking about the subject she could not speak aloud, she decided it made sense. Severus was over seventy, but looked younger than her parents. He's spent his youth and early adulthood in love with a woman who married another. Spent decades as a spy for the Order, and then spent decades on the run as he hunted stray Death Eaters. When exactly was he supposed to have lost his virginity? He held a torch for Harry's mum for ages. Certainly assignments happened, even in the most busy of lives, but

she doubted Severus could do casual.

When he had finished healing the unicorn, he came to sit next to her and take care of her fresh wounds. Though no longer scowling, the taciturn man avoided looking directly at her except for the moment it took to heal the scratch on her face.

After he was finished, he leaned against the wall and sighed. "Go ahead."

The voice was more a growl than an invitation.

"Go ahead and what?" Hermione asked.

"Go ahead and ask your fool questions. I know you. Always with your hand in the air. Always curious and full of questions."

The poor man sounded defeated and unhappy. He'd had a hard life. Why shouldn't he think she would question him? He probably thought she'd tease him about what she'd accidentally found out.

Reaching out, she grabbed one of his big hands in her own and squeezed it. "I don't have any questions. I'm tired."

As she leaned her head back against the wall, she could see that he was studying her out of the corner of his eye. She half expected him to take his hand away, but he didn't. She really was tired. Closing her eyes, she dozed.

A hand shaking her shoulder woke her with a jolt.

"I'm sorry to wake you, Hermione, but the Nargles are eating a hole in the roof."

Wide awake at once, she heard the chewing sounds coming from above. "I'm awake."

Severus stood, and then offered her a hand to help her up. She gratefully accepted it. Her legs were stiff from sitting on the hard floor so long.

The gnawing sounds were getting louder. Dust and bits of wood were falling from the ceiling above their heads.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I'm sorry you are here. I thought I had this plan so carefully thought out. I didn't expect the Aurors to learn of the meeting and I didn't expect you to be here."

"You don't think we'll make it."

"There's nowhere else to run. This cabin is our only safety...if it is overrun, we've nowhere to go. Without magic...well...our chances are not good."

The unicorn in the corner of the room was also staring at the ceiling. Severus crossed the room to pat it on the neck with one hand.

"I'm sorry my friend. I'm afraid I've only put off the inevitable."

The beautiful creature tossed its head, and then rested the side of its face briefly against Severus' chest.

When the Nargles began falling into the room, they were ready. The first dozen were dispatched with ease but as the hole widened, a swarm of the ravenous beasts gained access to the cabin. Before Hermione knew what was happening, she was on her back on the floor with Severus on top of her, his cloak covering them and as much of the now prone unicorn as was possible.

"Severus?" Despite her proximity, Hermione practically had to shout to be heard over the shrieking of the Nargles.

"We're overrun." Severus shouted back. "My cloak, it's been dipped in Nargle repellent. I don't know how long it will last."

That was why he demanded her own cloak to block the crack under the door. Even then, he was thinking ahead.

Reaching up under the darkness of the cloak, Hermione found his face with her hands and raised her head to give him a brief kiss. The man's entire body stiffened, but he did not pull away.

"Just my luck," she said. "I finally find a man I want to date and we're both about to be eaten by Nargles."

A tremor went through the body on top of hers, and for a moment she wondered if he was laughing at her. The next moment Severus sprang to his feet with his wand drawn. A silent flick, and a protective shield went up around them.

"Hermione, help the unicorn. Kill the ones inside the shield."

"Scrambling to her feet, Hermione drew her own wand and began picking off the Nargles one by one. When the interior of the shield was cleared, she used a controlled fire to wipe out the ones in the rest of the cabin while Severus repaired the hole in the roof. Once that was done, he tapped the nearest wall with his wand and the entire cabin became impenetrable.

Standing side by side in the middle of the room, sides heaving as they fought to catch their breath, Severus and Hermione both broke into joyous laughter. Severus literally picked Hermione up and spun her around before he came to his senses and set her awkwardly on her feet.

"The field has dropped. We can leave!" Hermione had never been so relieved in her life.

Severus' smile faded away.

She placed a hand on his arm and asked quietly, "What's wrong?"

"I have spent years on the run, chasing down the last of a bad lot. Now it's over. I'm free of it. We can leave the cabin, but..."

"Tell me."

"Hermione, I have nowhere to go. My drab old house was destroyed by Death Eaters shortly after the final battle."

"Severus, I rented a flat in Diagon Alley because my large house had become too empty and too lonely. You know, it wouldn't seem so bad if I had a friend to share it with. There's lots of room."

He smiled then. A crooked smirk that made her smile back.

"Hermione Granger, are you asking me to move in with you?"

"I believe I am."

Turning from her, Severus walked to the door of the cabin, hit it gently with his wand, and whispered a complex spell. He then walked over to the unicorn.

"You will be safe here. The Nargles will return to normal when the sun rises. I've spelled the door so that it will open for you after dawn. Do you understand?"

The unicorn gave on swift nod of its head, and then rested the side of its face briefly against Severus' chest again.

"You are most welcome," he said softly. Turning back to Hermione, he offered her his hand. "I'm ready to leave when you are."

Hermione gave his hand a squeeze. "Severus, you've known me since I was a child. We've been through a great deal together tonight. Do you trust me?"

"I do."

Hermione spun them in a graceful turn and did a side-along apparition.

They landed just outside of the forest, on the spot where Hermione had first spoken to the stubborn Auror who wouldn't drop the field. All of the Aurors were gathered in a clump nearby. Hermione felt Severus stiffen beside her, and squeezed his hand.

"Trust me," she said softly.

Harry was shouting at the Aurors. "We scour this forest until we find her. I don't care if we have to kill every Nargle in the damn woods, if she gets killed because I was too stubborn to listen--"

"Harry!" Hermione shouted. "I'm here! And look who I have with me."

Many heads turned towards them as one. Harry's expression changed from happy relief to mouth hanging open shock as he caught sight of the man standing next to her. Pushing past the members of the taskforce, he walked towards Hermione and Severus. When he was a few feet away, he lunged forward, making Severus flinch.

"Why does everyone keep hugging me?" Severus grumbled as he returned Harry's hug awkwardly with one arm.

"Because we missed you." Hermione replied.

"I highly doubt that."

"It's true."

When Harry released him, Severus was next accosted by Ron. Severus put up with the hug, but did not return it.

"Now I know who has been leaving us gifts by the Ministry fountain." Harry grinned at Severus.

"I have absolutely no idea what you are nattering on about." Severus sounded sincere, but not one person believed him.

"It is so good to see you, Sir."

"It is not completely unpleasant to see you, Mr. Potter."

They spoke to the other Aurors before they left. Severus met Scorpius and promised the young man that he would stop in to see his father soon. None of the Aurors had been seriously injured. Hermione's warning had spread through the taskforce and they had all made it to the outskirts of the forest before anything more dire than stray bite wounds happened.

Soon, Hermione was too tired to continue any longer.

"Severus, are you ready to go home."

"Yes, Hermione. More than ready."

A graceful turn, and they vanished from Frogspawn Wood.

Last chapter! I hope you have enjoyed my return to the Potterverse as much as I've enjoyed writing this story. As I mentioned before, I'm not working with a beta reader, so any mistakes are all my own fault. It's been lovely to see some familiar faces in the comment section, as well as some new ones. I may write another story by and by. I do have a bit of a plot bunny nipping at my heels.

My Kindle Scout campaign for my romance novel, *Descending*, has finished. *Descending* is available through Amazon and Kindle. You can find it by searching Julianne Q Johnson.