

The Centre of the World

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The final battle and what happened afterwards. One-shot.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Disclaimer: I don't own the characters. I just borrowed them for a while.

A/N: My humble contribution to the ship. Nothing great, just a few scenes that came to my mind during an extraordinarily dull lecture.

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The Centre of the World

The ground was hard and cold. Her neck hurt from the odd angle in which she was lying against the wall. But she was too weak to move.

Over. It was over.

This thought alone kept echoing in her tired mind.

Over. It was all over. Voldemort was gone. He was thoroughly dead, and if the Unspeakables didn't come up with a weird way of bringing people back through the veil, the wizard known as the Dark Lord would stay dead.

It was finally over. The wizarding world was free. What did it matter that she lay here like a broken doll on the hard, cold floor? What did it matter that the blood trickled out of her body, warm on her cold skin, the only warmth that was left to her? They had conquered the Dark Lord.

It was silent in the stone chamber except for Harry's sobs. The sound came from further down the stone steps. He was alive. She heard him sob. Ron? She tried to think. When had she last seen Ron? She hoped he was okay. The others ... Where were all the others ...

Voices interrupted her feeble thoughts. They became louder, drew closer. She heard the thumps of running feet and agitated, familiar voices. Their cries echoed through the stone chamber, coming from somewhere near the bottom of the steps. They centred around Harry, asking, exclaiming, admiring. *Of course, Harry*, she thought without anger. Harry was the Hero, the Chosen One, the Boy Who Had Finally Defeated Voldemort for Good.

More voices, crying, shouting. Harry's heaving sobs. It was so loud. Why were they all so loud? Why couldn't they stop shouting? Gradually, the voices became softer and then died away. She was left alone in the stone chamber. The only sounds were now her shallow breathing and the soft whispering of the veil.

They had left her, had not come to look for her. *Of course*, she thought tiredly. All that counted was Harry. They had not looked for his friend; they had not seen her lying on the top step, sagged down bonelessly where Voldemort's last curse had blasted her.

Might as well have used Avada Kedavra, she thought sourly.

The sound of approaching footsteps echoed through the chamber and interrupted her sluggish train of thought. Steps and the soft whispering of clothes. The steps came closer. Then, she breathed in a tangy, spicy scent. The ghost of a smile formed on her lips. She knew who was there even before he spoke.

'Miss Granger?' His silky voice was now hoarse. His robes rustled as he knelt down in front of her. 'Miss Granger? Can you hear me?'

With an effort, she opened her eyes and met red-rimmed, dark ones, sunk deep in a haggard face. Her tiny smile deepened as the feeling of a déjà-vu hit her.

Not surprising, she thought. *He's always been there. When the adventure was over, when I opened my eyes, he was there. Always at the heart of events, right at the centre. At the centre of the world.*

Her lashes fluttered as her lids became too heavy to keep them open. From far away she heard him call her again, felt a warm hand on her shoulder. Struggling against the blackness that clouded her vision, she managed to whisper, 'It's always been you.'

Then the world faded.

* ~ *

She was dreaming. She knew she was.

She watched through the eyes of her younger self as Harry tried to stay on his bucking broom, felt herself rushing through the crowded Quidditch stands, bumping into several people. A surprisingly small hand lifted her wand and whispered an incantation. Small blue flames settled on black robes. She felt herself grin, felt the triumph as she heard the outraged scream ...

... and burst into tears of joy as Dumbledore awarded House points "for the use of cool logic in the face of fire". She raised her head and peered at the High Table, and then looked quickly away as her eyes met angry black ones.

The scene blurred and changed. She was in the library and with a triumphant, but quiet exclamation closed the book in front of her. She had been right! It was a Basilisk! She chuckled at her younger self's attempts to convince an older student of the danger, and then watched Penelope Clearwater's sceptical face turn into sheer panic as they heard a slithering sound. A mirror was procured, and they peered round a corner ... gold and hot, so hot ... fierce, piercing pain ... nothingness ... and then the sound of softly treading feet, hushed voices, and a tangy, spicy scent.

She opened her eyes and met cold black ones. He held an empty vial in his hands and straightened. She watched her younger self sit up excitedly, firing off questions about the potion, the Basilisk, her fellow students, and how long she had been petrified and how long until the exams and how ...

His lips twitched as he turned to the approaching Madam Pomfrey. 'This one is fine,' he said softly. 'She is already asking questions.'

She watched his back as he stepped to the next bed and remembered her surprise, remembered her wish to see the twitch of his lips again ...

The scene blurred and changed. It was cold and dark. The place was scary. She suppressed a sneeze as a cloud of dust rose at the slamming of the door. His black eyes glittered. She felt the cold shiver run down her spine he was so angry ... bellowing at her, at them all. Why wouldn't he listen? She raised her wand ...

... and then she was lying in a bed in the darkened hospital wing, shivering from a Dementor-induced coldness. A warm hand touched her forehead. Her eyes shot open and met troubled black ones. She blinked, and he pulled his hand back and turned away. She watched as he left the hospital wing. And then he was there again, later, almost incoherent with rage, and with surprise she remembered that she hadn't been afraid she had been sad ...

The scene changed once more; another day, another adventure, but still the hospital wing. But it wasn't her in a bed this time, Harry was, and she was sitting close to him, worried and scared. There was Fudge, grinning like an idiot as Dumbledore tried to tell him that Voldemort was back. Why wouldn't the dolt listen? A black-clad figure moved and revealed a pale forearm. There was a mark there, slightly blurred like a bad tattoo, a skull and a snake. His black eyes flashed angrily.

She held her breath, knowing that this was serious, that this moment was important, but it passed, and with it, Fudge. What had Dumbledore done? And what was he making her professor do? What was it he must ask from him? For a moment, glittering black eyes met hers, and then he was gone and she bit her lip in worry and ...

The scene blurred and changed, and she wondered why she was seeing these events in chronological order. Weren't you supposed to see your life backwards when you were dying?

Sickly cute kittens with large blue eyes gambolled through a painting. A huge body smelling of stale sweat pressed her against the wall. Harry was shouting; what was he trying to say? For a moment, her eyes met blank black ones over the shoulder of her captor, and then he was gone. She remembered that she had to play for time ...

... and she was running through a dark hallway and then hiding in a room, but the door burst open, and the masked man shouted. Then he was silent, his comrade was Stunned and then there was pain ...

... and a soft bed, hushed voices, and faint steps. She ached everywhere and a vague memory of danger troubled her, but there was a tangy, spicy scent that soothed her nerves, and something cool was being rubbed on her temples that eased the pain. She smiled a little and wasn't surprised that, when she opened her eyes, they met stormy black ones. He turned away and put the vial down. She blinked at the number of vials and bottles on the table next to her bed and then the shock of red hair on the white pillow of the bed to her right reminded her of what had happened at the Ministry.

She winced together with her younger self as she sat up, but he pushed her back down, and she began asking worriedly about Ron and Harry, the others, the Ministry, the prophecy and what happened ... and why would she need that potion? What had the masked man done to her so that she needed this one, and oh, she didn't know that one ...

His lips twitched and she was silenced, gazing speechlessly at him as he gently told her to rest. And when he was gone, she did rest, and she saw the twitch of his lips again in her dreams ...

She was standing in front of a door, his office, and someone Luna was with her. Her insides squirmed and she couldn't stand still. There was a dull thud, and the door banged open. For a moment, he just stood there on the threshold, and her eyes met his, black, desperate, and determined before he told them to take care of Flitwick and to stay away from the danger ...

... and then there was the scarred face of Bill Weasley on the white pillow of the hospital wing bed, and the ice-cold rush inside of her at Harry's flat declaration, 'Snake killed Dumbledore.' ...

Scenes blurred and changed rapidly ... a tall, black-clad figure, wand raised, shouting an incantation ... warm hands, a spicy scent, and a rough voice asking whether she was hurt ... a deadly quick movement, a flash of red, and the masked man fell down at her feet ... tired black eyes in a too-pale face, a wry twitch of thin lips and a silky voice; 'I'm not a hero.' ... a small room in a run-down house, two black-haired men shouting at each other, fists raised ... and one of them was kneeling in front of her as she inspected the bleeding wound on his temple, thin lips curling into a small smile at her reproving words. 'You certainly do your best to anger him' ...

And then there were long, dark hallways and masked figures that moved in one line; the line broke as two figures pulled back; masked figures fought each other; a hand roughly pushed her down ... a large, dark stone chamber, an arch with a fluttering veil, her friend crumbling to the ground ... a flash of light, and she was smashed against the wall ... a high-pitched scream and then Harry's sobs, and the blood trickled down her neck, warming her ...

* ~ *

The darkness receded, and she became aware of a throbbing headache. Her neck hurt. She was lying on something soft, and for a moment was disorientated. When had the hard ground changed into a soft bed? Wait ... a bed?

Her thoughts paused. Soft bed, check. Darkened room, check. Hushed voices ... no. No soft steps, either, only stale air and the scent of long-unused rooms. Grimmauld Place then, not the hospital wing.

Her mind slowly began to work. The memories returned, memories of the last fight, of Voldemort, and of Harry's sobs. She became further aware of her body and a strange tickling in her soothingly leaden limbs. *Painkiller Potion*, her mind supplied. The coppery taste in her mouth had to be from a Blood Replenishing Potion. Her heart beat steadily; she could hear its regular thumping over a soft whispering of clothes.

So, she was not alone.

Curious, she tried to open her eyes, but her lids seemed to be glued together. A tiny, angry frown wrinkled her brow, and she sighed.

A tangy, spicy scent filled her nose, and she relaxed immediately. *When the adventure was over* ... Something cool and soft brushed over her face, leaving it slightly wet. Then, there was the sound of water splashing before the darkened room became silent once more.

... *He's always been there*. More memories of her friends crossed her mind; how they had sat together before they set out for the Ministry and the last fight; how they had fought their way through the lines of Death Eaters. They had lost Ginny, Luna, and Neville at some point, but there had been no time to look for them. They had to go on. Ron had been hit by a spell, and in the end, it had only been Harry and her, and then she too had been hit, leaving Harry to his destiny. He had survived, she knew it, she remembered. The fates of the others were unknown to her, but for some reason, she was not worried. He was here, with her. He was not in Azkaban, not Kissed. Somehow, this meant that her friends were all right as well.

She fought once more with her heavy lids and this time, she succeeded in opening them. He was a dark shadow in the dark room. The single candle on the bedside table only emphasised the darkness. But she was not afraid of Darkness anymore. It was gone forever.

She strained her muscles and managed to turn her head on the pillow. Immediately, he got up from his chair and bent over her, looking at her with a searching expression in his shadowed eyes. She tried to smile, but she was not strong enough for another mammoth task such as that. Her lashes fluttered.

A whisper of robes, a soft clinking, and then something hard was pressed against her lips. A foul-tasting liquid was ruthlessly poured into her mouth. She choked, gulped, and coughed, then gave him a very weak angry stare.

His thin lips curled into a tiny smile that broadened as her eyes followed the empty vial and lit on the various numbers of potions on the bedside table. She frowned slightly, and then looked up at him. He raised one eyebrow.

'No questions, Miss Granger?'

And, strangely, this time, she had no questions.

Yet, before this thought had time to manifest, the door opened and someone peered into the room. 'Is she awake?' the person asked in a stage-whisper.

He nodded and set the vial down. The door opened further and a small figure came in. The light of the lone candle revealed a thin woman with lank hair, pale skin, and dark shadows around her eyes. It took the young witch on the bed a moment to realise that this was Mrs Weasley.

The older woman smiled tiredly at her. 'My dear girl! How do you feel? It's so good to see you awake. We've all been so worried.' The smile quivered. 'For a while, we thought ... it looked ... but thanks to Severus, you will live! Harry and Ron will be so happy to hear you are better.' She dabbed her eyes with her sleeve, then resumed some of her old motherly activity. 'Now, what you need, my dear, is a good sleep. And don't trouble your head about the other young people. They're all alive and will recover just fine.'

She patted the younger witch's hand and smiled, but the shadows in her eyes spoke louder than her words, and they spoke of sadness, despair, and loss.

'So, you just lie there and try to sleep, Hermione,' Mrs Weasley continued. 'I'll come and sit with you, but first I have to put this young man in bed.'

'That is not necessary, Molly, I can...' he began, but Mrs Weasley interrupted him.

'Don't argue, Severus! You've been sitting here for the last three days and nights, and I dare say that you haven't slept at all. Now that she's awake, there is no need for you to watch her any longer. No, no, I don't want to hear it! You said yourself that once she wakes up she's out of danger.' Her voice softened as she added, 'Go to bed, Severus. You'll help no one if you exhaust yourself to death.'

'I am fine, Molly, I...'

Mrs Weasley snorted. 'Yes, yes, I can see that. You're nothing but skin and bones! And you haven't had the time to recover from your own injuries. No, Severus. You go to bed. Now.'

Hands on her hips, the small woman glared at the much taller man, but even in her weakened, grief-stricken state, her glare still had power. He sighed and nodded.

'Very well. I will give Miss Granger the last potion and -'

'You will do nothing but go to bed! I'll do it. Just tell me which one and I...'

A bell rang from somewhere in the house, interrupting her words. She started and seemed to grow even paler.

'That's Ron's,' she whispered. For a moment, she wrung her hands, then she straightened her shoulders and jabbed a finger at the man beside her. 'You give her that potion and then go straight to bed! I'll come back as soon as I can, and if I find you here still, I'll Stun you and levitate you to bed!' She cast the sleepy witch in the bed a last, faint smile. 'I'll be right back, Hermione. And remember, one potion, and then he goes to bed!'

She vanished from the light, and then the door shut quietly behind her. After a moment, he sighed softly and picked up another vial from the bedside table. He turned to the bed and hesitated, then sat down and helped her to sit up. Her head lolled against his shoulder and he had to hold the vial to her lips since her hands were too weak to hold it.

Obediently, she drank another foul-tasting potion and then lay back down. She was tired, but she did not want to sleep as long as he was here. Her eyes followed his every move as he put the vial back down on the bedside table.

He looked up and their eyes met. He seemed to wait for something, maybe for her to say something, question him, but she was too tired to speak and only gave him a faint smile. He looked down at the assortment of full and empty vials and then back up into her eyes.

'Still no questions, Miss Granger?' He waited. 'No? You begin to worry me. You drank two potions that you don't know, and you still have no questions?'

At that, she managed a grin. He smiled in return, a genuine smile, and she wondered whether she was in delirium.

He hesitated again, and then bent down and laid his hand on hers. He looked straight into her eyes; his own were brighter than she had ever seen them, and they seemed to glow from within.

'If you have no questions, Miss Granger,' he said slowly, 'I will leave you now. But, as soon as you are better, I have a question for you.'

Her eyes widened and her lips parted, but the opening door interrupted. He straightened and turned away from the bed.

'You are still here, Severus,' Mrs Weasley said reprovingly.

'Yes, but I am leaving,' he answered and without a backwards glance he walked to the door.

She watched him melt into the shadows, a soft smile on her lips. A question. Yes.

He let Mrs Weasley enter, and though she couldn't see him from the bed, she was sure he looked back at her for a moment. The door closed softly behind him.

Mrs Weasley came into the room and sat down in the vacated chair next to the bed. 'Sleep, Hermione,' she ordered gently.

The young witch closed her eyes. She felt sleep pull at her, and as she sank into its welcoming arms, a tender warmth filled her. A question. The smile lingered on her lips.

It's always been him. He's always been there, at the centre of the world. When it was over, he was there. Right at the centre of my world.