Animated Night

by Anastasia

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within, Hermione, torn between death and darkness, is forced to consider a third,
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Chapter 1 of 1

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and darkness, is forced to consider a third, unthinkable option.

Disclaimer: JKR owns it all. I'm only paying homage.

AN: I have to admit that this one has taken the most out of me to complete. Thank you to Ariadne, who read this in very small pieces over these past few months in random order on IM and spent forever and a day offering encouragement and the usual beta goodness along the way. An additional thanks to Ariadne for the cover art.

A flaming tapestry whipped in the rising wind from a shattered window, twisting and beating itself rhythmically against the side of the castle, a tragic beacon calling all those with a soul to take up arms in the name of righteousness. In tales so often told, it is then, at such moments, that reinforcements arrive, the forces of good turn the tide, and the dawn breaks to reveal that the day is saved and all is well.

Cruel reality, however, knows no such laws.

As the tapestry tore free to fly out into the blood-red dusk, the flames dying on the dark surface of the lake, it served as a final plea for help that would never come.

It wasn't supposed to end like this.

The castle had become a stronghold, a refuge for those too terrified to venture from their homes, as each day grew heavier with reports of more abductions and attacks. Bridges collapsed under suspicious circumstances, houses burned inexplicably, and explosions and unholy screams were heard in the night. Whenever the battle had been discussed, optimism had been strong. "They don't have the means or the ability to break through the defenses," they had said or hoped. In the face of it all, they had kept their faith that the elusive last Horcrux would be found and destroyed, that Voldemort would fall.

It just had to be.

They knew that Voldemort was amassing scores of allies and argued in detail over strategy, anticipating that the battle was imminent.

But no one had anticipated the cataclysmic onslaught, arriving not only at the gates, but descending from above.

Hermione felt it first.

A wavering, oppressive weight to the air, driving downward, followed by an irrepressible feeling of darkness. She turned her eyes to the enchanted ceiling, which displayed a peaceful sky, the stars brightening against a pitch-black night. A single stray cloud stretched across the arch of the ceiling, thinning as it traveled. When the cloud's progress roughly stuttered and then halted, Hermione's heart sank. When the scene began to run backwards, her blood ran cold, a gasp of disbelief on her lips.

The air grew cold as the ceiling's image warped. A twisting arc forced the peaceful scene aside for one terrifying moment, revealing a hellish display of wrath descending at great speed. The two images battled while the Great Hall's occupants stared in abject horror, their wands at the ready, with no idea of what to do. The cloud swiftly spiraled over onto itself, forming a wild cyclonic void. Static images of a starry sky were viciously torn to pieces, their tattered edges rapidly consumed by darkness. A chaotic flood of pure terror washed over those below as the vision of thousands of Dementors twisting around a red moon filled the ceiling, the ornate arches shimmering at the edges for a fraction of an instant before the entire ceiling exploded inward in a blinding assault of flaming shards of wood, stone and glass.

School owls fled, diving low across courtyards and through corridors, angling sharply, seeking escape and the safety of the skies. Silhouetted against fierce beams of blackened sunlight, they rose above the Forbidden Forest, beating their wings swiftly to gain altitude, fleeing the sudden disintegration of their former home. Joined by other birds, they created a living trail across the sky, heeding the one unspoken command uniting them all:

Fly.

The battle had rapidly degenerated from paired dueling to a brutality that knew no such niceties. The moon rose higher, sending light into the deepest shadows, but it made no difference. A wild matrix of red and green slashed its way across the grounds, illuminating the carnage well enough for some, and too well for others. Furious chaos spawned savage fury, confusion, a momentary lapse of concentration, a ravenous roar, the moonlight blurring, fading, and then soft grass as yet another body fell. In the end, it was brutally clear that numbers were insignificant; rather, it was the willingness to fight on a level unknown to civilized wizardry that proved the true advantage. The Light readied themselves for battle, only to discover that their opponent not only disregarded all rules but also valued the art of the kill above all else, replacing the instantaneous and, in fact, merciful Killing Curse with the most foul and deranged magic ever seen. Death Eaters descended into the very bloodstream of the castle, taking voracious pleasure in wanton destruction, and whenever survivors were found, exacting revenge with a level of violence turned, by their laughter, into a whimsical art form. Deserted corridors held gasping voices, echoes of normalcy shattered by the sounds of ruthless murder.

The Great Hall was fully engulfed, the upper windows shattering one after another in a strangely beautiful synchrony of airborne glass. Flames hungrily lapped the exterior walls, streaking long black trails along the masonry. Woven in with the sounds of the monstrous blaze were ferocious voices screaming spells known only to the most vile, inflicting horrific wounds, announcing the existence of a world that made the Unforgivables appear compassionate. Shouts of raving madness and rage, bravery and desperation; valiant displays of courage and absolute merciless obliteration in response. The overwhelming wave of darkness crushing the light, dragging it backwards to drown in despair and, ultimately, surrender.

Torches continued to burn in an absurd display of normalcy as fire raced through the castle. Staircases were consumed, the flames flickering calmly on ornate railings, creating a bizarre scene disturbed only when the degradation reached a fatal level and the structure failed. One staircase began to thrash, sweeping itself to crash into one wall, then another, demonstrating pure agony in wordless despair. Finally, it forcefully twisted itself from its mooring and, in an act of inanimate suicide, threw itself to the Entrance Hall below.

Her steps were random, awkward, with no destination other than into the familiar, somewhere away from the obscenity of the battle. It methodically stalked her from every veiled corner, whispered in a vaguely menacing voice the names of the dead and reminded her that, if not for the distraction of Harry's arrival, she, too, would have fallen.

Hermione pressed onward, one hand gripping her wand and the other pressing over her mouth to keep from screaming aloud. Portraits hung at severe angles, some with large gashes, reminiscent of mortal wounds, others torn completely from their frames, a stark announcement that anarchy now ruled. Parchment and books were strewn everywhere, some blackened and smoldering, the tinge of magic still hanging in the air. She paused, staring at a tapestry at the end of the hall. Flames hungrily devoured the bottom of it, weaving their way through the fabric. The lion still stood proudly, its head raised high, jaws open in an endless roar, staunchly ignoring the destruction below.

Another corner, the sounds of the battle becoming more and more disconnected, foreign. Her hand pressed to her chest, glass and brittle shards of wood shifting under her feet as she stopped. Something dark was approaching, inspiring an overwhelming sense of dread. Waiting and listening, Hermione could hear nothing but the sound of her own pounding heart.

Darkness lorded over deep shadows where torchlight failed to reach, leaving precious pools of flickering warmth. She focused on that piece of the mundane, a tragic triumph in the face of chaos. How strange that the simple proper lighting of a corridor could simultaneously inspire comfort and terror.

Someone was watching her. She knew it.

Slowly, each torch began to lower in perfectly timed order, a silent rebellion against logic. The flame struggled, climbing higher and burning brightly before a dark force dragged it down, drawing it inward, suffocating it. If it was possible for a simple flame to suffer an agonizing death, it was happening in total silence before Hermione's startled eyes. She watched, drawn to the struggle, how the force held a casual power over its victim, allowing it fleeting hope for survival before delivering a crushing blow.

Pressing onward, flinching slightly as she passed each torch, halting when one suddenly snuffed out next to her, Hermione kept her wand trained on the sconce, refusing to believe searching for a reason. In response, it flared to life, twin columns of fire entwining and rushing upward toward the ceiling. One by one, each torch followed suit, bursting from cold death to blinding light. Liquid fire spilled over, flowing like wine tipped from a goblet, sending flaming streams branching out across the floor.

She threw her hand out to feel along the wall and backed quickly.

Another corner.

She gasped. Portraits had been torn off the walls, thrown into the center of the floor, and set on fire. The flames completely consumed the corridor, reaching the ceiling and curling back over themselves, billowing downward to join the center once more. Looking back, she found that the torch-lined corridor, filled with fire not more than a few seconds ago, was now pitch-black, cold, and silent, the gaping absurdity mocking her sanity.

Hermione watched in horror as a large tawny owl hit the wall with a sickening thud, awkwardly flailed its wings and fell to the floor. It had barely righted itself when she looked up to see the source of its terror.

The corridor was black, not from the lack of light, but from hundreds of ravens. A sea of animated night bore down on her, parted, and set upon the fallen owl, ruthlessly tearing at it, taking its wing first, then mercilessly going for the throat, spreading their wings, declaring possession. Others took flight again, swerving from side to side, some hitting the walls as they traveled. More filled the corridor, their wings brushing against Hermione from all directions, their speed increasing, becoming a hurtling rush of slick black feathers and bright eyes. They reached the end of the corridor and, instead of turning once more, ran into a large stained-glass window. Over and over they beat against the glass with their wings and beaks, tearing at the frame, then turning on each other in rage.

Hermione could do nothing but stand still in the middle of the torrent, her hands clamped over her mouth as more ravens crashed into the window, some with enough force to send them falling limply to the floor to lie in a growing heap of twitching bodies. Another rush of wings, their ferocity at an even higher degree, sped past her and, as one, finally succeeded in shattering the window, surging, driven into the gaping night beyond. More and more ravens poured into the darkness and, after what seemed like an eternity, dwindled to a trickle, then ceased.

An ominous silence fell, as if evil required time to catch its breath before the next wave of terror would begin.

Hermione twisted the neck of her robes closed, her hand pressed over her heart as she approached the window frame. Glass crunched under her shoes as she nervously shifted her weight. The wind swept higher, rattling one last shard left in the window's frame, its jagged edge catching the pale moonlight.

A soft gasp escaped her when she saw that one raven was standing on the rest of the fallen, staring up at her defiantly. It threw its wings out and opened its beak, a silent warning cut off by some unseen command. Tilting its head, it looked past her, offered what appeared to be a bow, then took flight.

She gripped her wand, rolling the vine wood in her palm and shifted her eyes to the side. The wind lifted her hair off of her shoulders, the air laden with the scent of terror, dark magic and death.

"Beautiful evening, isn't it?" a deep voice asked casually from behind her.

"No," she moaned, a simple word encompassing everything: denial, failure, desperation and fear. Anger stood in the shadows, raging against the unthinkable prospect of acceptance.

His breath traveled along the back of her neck, warm with dark laughter when an explosion rocked a lower floor. Someone was screaming, begging, their voice a hollow, wavering echo. Something in the back of her mind asked if she could die without ever reaching a point where her voice sounded like that.

How much she wanted to simply lean back.

He placed one hand on either side of her against the window's frame, forcing her to watch the destruction below. The night air alternated from a cool autumn breeze to a heat like none other. Flames rose from a classroom below, hot cinders and arid smoke billowing upwards. Fire had become commonplace: an acceptable, albeit ravenous, resident.

Somewhere out on the grounds, someone screamed her name. She recoiled in response, backing against him and squeezing her eyes shut.

"Why?" Her voice was part plea and part cry; she didn't care either way.

"Hermione, you could not possibly comprehend the world as it truly is. Did you actually believe that this is as simple as good versus evil?"

She remained silent, watching as a lone figure broke from the forest and ran, only to be pursued by werewolves. Lunging and snapping at each other, leaping over the grassy knolls, they chased their prey at a terrifying speed, their distorted moonlit shadows undulating over the ground ahead of them, a tangle of grey and black merging into one. The figure stumbled and fell, its frantic curse spiraling uselessly into the air when the first werewolf closed and immediately tore at the throat.

Hermione turned away sharply, met by Severus' cold eyes and a faintly amused grin.

He looked past her with an expression of mock pity as his hair blew gently in the breeze. "It seems our dear friend Lupin knows no loyalty in the moonlight."

Hermione grimaced and tilted her head down, telling herself that she could not possibly want to embrace the man before her. Not now. When a disturbingly human-like howl rose, joined by the laughter of the damned, she held a hand to her face in despair.

"You seek the darkness," he stated, leaning towards her.

Hermione's fingers trailed down her cheek, lost in the shock of his words. "No..."

"I can see it in your eyes," he said quietly, watching her closely. "Part of you wants to be out there. Free to revel in pure chaos, justified murder and the timeless art of war."

"No!" she raged as she raised her wand and roughly shoved it against his chest.

A slow grin born of victory spread on his face.

Burning parchment rained down in a starlight shower behind her, slowly falling, then swirling upwards, at the complete mercy of the rising wind. Her hair, wild on even the most normal of days, whipped around her face.

To Severus, she had never looked more beautifully fearsome.

Ignoring her wand, he gripped the window frame higher, his robes forming a barrier. A harsh gust rippled the fabric in rough waves behind him.

"Denial to such an ardent degree is, all too often, an admission of truth," he said flatly, his eyes fixed on hers.

Hermione froze, her grip on her wand so tight that it was shaking against one of the buttons on his coat.

"I have seen you in the library," he continued, lowering his voice as he spoke, "reading books that haven't been sought out in years."

Her eyes widened a fraction, her hand shifting her grip on her wand. He tilted his head slightly and raised an eyebrow in response, a challenge.

"It is a little-known, scarcely admitted fact that Hogwarts, the bastion of righteousness, would possess such knowledge. Available only to a select few, of course. The staff, charged with protecting the students, must understand the enemy, research the methods, the usage, the subtle craft. They should experience first-hand the attraction, the fascination, how one's mind could waver, dangerously close to the abyss of obsession."

With barely a breath, she gasped, "Never."

His lips twisted into a wry smile as he continued, "Perhaps, an experiment or two to fully comprehend the nature of the source and the proper execution. For research purposes, of course."

She shook her head in wordless horror, a single tear streaming into her hair.

"A dismal attempt at denial," Severus murmured, lowering his head next to hers and breathing each word directly into her ear. She closed her eyes, feeling the soft brush of their hair mingling in the wind, the hot air from the fires below and the shifting chill of the night.

A desperate whisper, Hermione repeated more to herself than anyone, "Never..."

"You and I both know how close the boundary lies, how it beckons, how it issues a silent call with the promise of a power that instills a cold terror at the faintest breath of its name. It is a drive to study that strictly follows several winding trails of objective experimentation, never straying out past the ragged edges to the disgrace of execution.

"Oh, but you do know. You know, because it is, as they say, too dangerous. Something that must be treacherous by its very sin of existence and nature of its rage, something that should not be spoken of, only defended against. That the souls of those who venture too close are forever tainted, torn and devoured by a voracious magic that holds no allegiance, knows no morals and will kill those who dare to wield it in a fraction of a startled heartbeat.

"I believe that without the depths of destruction, there is no rebirth, without darkness there is no light, and that even the most terrifying magic has a place in this world that cannot be denied."

Severus paused. He could sense her apprehension, denial, conflict, all there, all in the hesitation of a single roughly drawn breath. It was the absence of words that drew his attention the most: a turning point.

"I have reason to believe that you agree with my position," he suggested quietly.

"That's a lie!" she shouted, holding her wand higher.

Severus stood his ground, crossed his arms over his chest, and asked, "Is it?"

Her jaw worked, mind searching for words. Her arm weakened, her wand suddenly feeling as heavy as her heart.

Severus' eyes darkened as he ordered, "Lower your wand."

Hermione remained frozen for a moment, then complied, dropping her arm to her side. Her eyes flickered slightly, then closed as she turned away from him, preferring to face the horror without than that within.

"I never meant to" she said ruefully, trailing off when he stood next to her.

Something born of cold fury was approaching.

She felt it again, a growing presence soaring on the magical lifeblood of the castle. It was rolling, spreading, flowing upwards through the floor, the walls, crossing the ceiling, reaching out, pulling downwards and then drawing back with a force that felt like the air itself would be altered forever. Tentatively placing a hand against the stone wall, Hermione felt the intoxicating energy rush forward, fleeting and timeless, wild and tenacious, offering countless possibilities and promises of absolute power. Fierce possession thrummed under her fingers, claiming every inch of the stone. Her mind tore at her conscience to abandon everything, to join neither side, to run. Thoughts of her Muggle life flickered through her mind, then sank, thrust into the gray mist to fall and waver across the surface, rocking on the waves, dragged under more with each roll until nothing more remained than a torn, faded memory.

Severus raised his eyes to the darkened corridor. Watching. A low wind shifted, pulling his hair in thin strands across his face.

"It is here," he said in a distant voice and slowly shifted his gaze towards her.

Hermione stared in disbelief. Past Severus, the torches were fighting for their lives once again, rising and falling in increasingly frantic waves, blackening the walls with each violent flare. An indescribable sense of rage was building, throwing fractured shadows across every surface and blurring the flames into one combined entity. A droning sound entered her mind, synchronous with the fire's ebb and flow, the cycle at once rhythmic and pure pandemonium.

Severus kept his eyes on hers as he swiftly cast a Shield Charm, took her arm and pulled her tightly against him.

The air swiftly descended to deep crimson, reversing to near black as a deep, leaden weight pulled at the atmosphere, swallowing any light that dared show itself. A blizzard of parchment flooded the corridor, forcefully flushed through the air, tumbling, turning over and dragging along the walls, catching, then tearing free to twist and sweep higher. Hermione clung to Severus as a violent wind rose, escalating in ferocity and fueling a deafening roar that reverberated off of every surface. The torches fiercely battled again, fueling flames that could do nothing but lie flat in the face of such insurmountable power. Sconces were torn apart, sending flames to cart-wheel along the floor, lighting the tangle of portrait frames, feathers, glowing parchment and dead ravens. Finally, a chaotic force tore through the corridor, obliterating any hope of resistance, wrenching the sconces from the walls and sending them clattering to the floor.

Slowly, Hermione and Severus looked around, their attention drawn to a pale green light from the nearby window. As it faded on the floor, a sickening laughter echoed in the darkness, threatening to overwhelm the sound of someone crying Harry's name. A moment later, that too was silenced. One torch suffered where it lay, its twilight of a flame dwindling, then it died.

Hermione realized that what she had witnessed was no ordinary spell gone wrong, but a battle of colossal importance played out with the death of a single flame.

She pulled herself from his arms, backing away and almost falling over the twisted debris.

"No..." she gasped, holding her hands to her face. Just as grief and disbelief threatened to take hold, Hermione looked gravely at Severus and said in a distant voice, "Leave me..."

Severus watched her calmly, a fluid curtain of dark resolution falling over his face.

"If you are fortunate, they will only kill you," he stated grimly.

"Leave," Hermione repeated in a hoarse whisper, her breath ending in a strangled sob. She tilted her face to the ceiling, closed her eyes tightly and swallowed hard.

Silence stretched out as the castle quietly faced its death sentence. Thick banners of smoke wafted through the corridor. The fire had found new fuel, and the faint sound of groaning wood could be heard, a prelude to failure.

"Come with me," Severus said, his hand held out to her. He waited, a myriad of academic reasons and counter-arguments prepared in his mind.

Hermione stood motionless, barely flinching when the sounds of the battle, carried on the turbulent night air, rose to a desperate level. His tone of voice struck her as different, heavy with something foreign, a request amongst orders, something strangely close to a plea. She called herself mad for even considering it. It was never an option, but the world had changed in a silenced heartbeat, and nothing would bring it back now. Logic meant nothing and everything in that singular moment, balanced between destruction and possibility.

She met his gaze, searching his eyes in a wordless conversation of wills, intentions and understanding as he held his hand steady. Reaching for her. Waiting.

Suddenly, they caught sight of a shadow moving at the end of the corridor, its outline creeping higher on the wall, taking form.

Severus dropped his hand and turned, his cloak flaring to sweep across her legs, and swiftly stepped in front of her. An act of possession or protection; she couldn't tell.

As if on cue, the bells erupted into a tumultuous clanging, accompanied by a triumphant roar, a deafening cavalcade of cheers, screams and, worst of all, bloodthirsty howls. It all then came to an abrupt halt, followed by a haunted silence, rolling over the castle, settling like a thick blanket of heavy, still fog.

Severus stood, his shoulders squared and head held high as the shadow approached, its footfalls grinding broken torches, feathers and glass into the floor with each step. A heavy dragging sound drew closer, angling through the wreckage, following the wall and heading directly towards them.

Hermione's eyes were fixed on the sparse moonlit shadows, her mind racing and her heart filling with dread.

"Good evening, Severus."

Severus crossed his arms over his chest and nodded. "Lucius..."

"Now, Severus... you wouldn't be keeping this one to yourself, would you?" Lucius asked tauntingly, pointing at Hermione contemptuously with his wand.

Lucius stepped from the shadows, projecting an aristocratic air even with torn sleeves and blood on his hands. A crumbling streak of dried blood stretched across his Mark where his forearm bore deep, jagged scratches and bruises just starting to bloom bright purple. He approached, a tattered cloak trailing behind him.

"Of course not. However, you must allow me *some* spoils. It's not as though you would want such filth for yourself," Severus argued, using one hand angled behind him to roughly shove Hermione backwards.

A drawn-out silence followed while Lucius considered, paced further around them and then stopped.

"The Dark Lord is awaiting us in the Entrance Hall. A Muggle-born to dispose of would be a suitable house-warming gift," Lucius sneered, his cold gaze falling upon Hermione. "Wouldn't you agree?"

Severus shifted his weight in front of her each time Lucius took a step, his robes swaying over broken glass. A raven's feather lay, curled at each end, turning as the hem of his robes slid to the side.

Lucius waited, a lurid smile playing about his lips as he stared at Hermione.

"Hand over the Mudblood, Snape," Lucius ordered, taking a step closer.

A subtle shifting from below rocked Hermione on her heels. She noticed a faint look of concern cross Lucius' face, then transform into outrage as Severus slowly raised his wand and declared, "No."

Lucius lunged forward, raising his wand, and snarling, "I always knew you were a traitor!"

Cracks suddenly streaked across every surface, shattering the floor into thousands of pieces, exposing ancient wooden beams glowing white-hot from the inferno below. The entire floor racked itself to the side, twisting and tearing free, shredding the boards into twisted strips with a sound resembling searing pain. Portraits and other debris slid across the floor, struck the wall and then fell through the gap into the flames that were rapidly climbing upwards, anxious to gain another level.

Hermione's fingertips brushed Severus' arm as he spun, shoved her backwards, took hold of her and dragged her along with him. The world went black with stifling heat. Robes, she was tangled up in them and another layer was thrown over her shoulders. A wool-covered hand covered her mouth, holding tighter as she stumbled along with twisted boards shifting under her feet. Behind her, she heard a catastrophic collapse and Lucius' voice screaming Severus' name, sending curse after curse and promising revenge.

Falling away, the sounds became more and more distant and hollow, then silent.

A cool rush of air swept her hair from her face as the twist of fabric slipped away. Hermione widened her eyes, but could see nothing but a few arched shapes in the dark. She felt Severus leave her and heard his harsh footsteps move away.

Suddenly, the shades jerked open, and silver moonlight poured into the room.

Severus turned and stood in front of the tall windows, the night behind him alive with spiraling shadows. They swept upwards, twisting and turning over on each other, reaching and striking out. Several departed and dove out of sight, giving the others pause before they returned to their never-ending pattern.

Hermione watched them in silence. She knew what they were, knew what they meant. Leaning back against a table, her hand brushed the feather of a quill, standing ready for the next hurried note.

Severus brushed stray cinders from his cuffs and crossed his arms across his chest.

"I shall ask you once more to come with me..." he said, his voice a solemn plea to her sense of self-preservation, regardless of propriety, "... or perish."

"Hermione?" a hollow voice called.

Before she could register the movement, dark fabric swept past, whipping over her shoulder.

She turned just as Severus crossed the room and slammed someone against the wall with enough force to send them sliding to the floor, their wand uselessly clutched in one hand, a parchment in the other. Something wooden clattered to the floor.

"Poor timing, Mr. Weasley," Severus growled, twisting his wand deep into the base of Ron's throat.

Ron's eyes flew from Hermione to Severus repeatedly, his hand turning his wand over in an offering of surrender.

Ron raised his head and declared with dread, "It's over. They're all gone now..."

"Pity," Severus taunted.

Ron stared at Hermione through his ruined hair, questioning her with his glare. Blood was starting a fractured path out of his hairline, following along his jaw and down into his collar.

Hermione reached out to touch Severus, but held back. A palpable tension was in the air, rising, gathering.

"No," she whispered and placed her hand on Severus' wand arm. Heat pulsed through the thick wool, and when Hermione glanced up at Severus' face, she knew.

"Closer?" she asked in a hesitant voice, and as if in response, the heat beneath her hand flared, burning her palm through the fabric. Distant voices and laughter echoed against abandoned walls.

Approaching.

Ron had grown pale, his hands twisted in Severus' robes and his head driven back from the force of Severus' wand.

Severus snarled, "Once again, you are incorrect, Mr. Weasley. They are not all gone."

Ron's eyes widened as Severus drew his wand back, the lines on his face deepening into one of a predator preparing to tear its prey apart.

"I'll go! Just don't!" Hermione cried.

Severus paused, his grip on Ron's throat still tight enough to cause him to claw helplessly at Severus' fist.

Hermione repeated, "I'll go. Please."

A shout and a furious response filtered through muted stone; someone was tauntingly calling Severus' name.

Through gritted teeth, Severus growled, "Leave one."

Ron managed a strangled reply of agreement before being unceremoniously dropped to the floor. He quickly struggled to his feet, grabbed what Hermione could now see was one of two brooms, and left, heading towards one of the open corridors.

Hermione picked up the broom and approached Severus.

"They'll kill you now, too," she said quietly, holding the handle out to him.

Severus closed his hand over hers, watching her expression, the fear of both options plainly seen in her eyes.

"They'd have to," he said fiercely, roughly tearing the clasp from around his neck and tossing his robes aside.

Before she could respond, he took the broom and mounted, pulling her towards him.

"You will want to hold on. We are desired by many tonight," he said as she mounted and wrapped her arms around his waist.

"How" she started, then felt them leave the ground and Severus draw his wand. Fractured red light ricocheted in all directions before a waterfall of liquid glass fell before them in a glittering shower, exposing the raving obscenity of ragged robes twisting outside. A glaring white light burst forth, forcing Hermione to press her face against the rough wool of Severus' coat. Intense heat burned her lungs as they arced to the side and upwards, the strained screams of the Dementors fading on the jagged air.

Flat grey ribbons of smoke sped past them, and the first thing that struck her was that Severus knew how to fly.

Fast.

Hermione dug her nails into his coat, twisting the fabric in a desperate attempt to stay steady as Severus flung the broom from side to side and then drove higher. She dared to open her eyes and was blinded by a green jet of light before the world swung to the left; stars were inserted into her view and then everything went black. To her amazement, they had reentered the castle and were flying through an open corridor, weaving in and out of the columns as red and green beams blasted stone into a fine powdery spray around them. Shouts from below grew faint, then renewed from above, causing them to jerk downward, then sweep low. The floor bowed upwards as they approached at a terrifying speed, snapping boards straight up in the air as an astounding array of spells exploded from the level below. Severus instantly shifted his weight backwards and threw a leg out, taking the brunt of the hit as they spun around and slammed into the wall, throwing several portraits to the floor. Hermione screamed and could do nothing but hold tight as their weight twisted back to center and they accelerated once more. Daring to look, tears and Severus' hair whipping back in her face, she saw gaping caverns where classrooms had once stood, then the corridor's fire blazed brighter at the same time that Severus shifted, raised his wand and sent an unknown curse to spiral into a blur of platinum and robes. The broom lurched faster, twitching to one side to avoid another pile of flaming debris before the world behind them exploded in a hail of broken wood and stone.

Confusion passed over her frantic thoughts, and a part of her mind told her that the vibration against her chest was Severus laughing, but she simply couldn't believe it to be true. Recognition of parts of the castle that flew past in a blur, shadows, intense heat as they sped through raging flames followed by deep, hollow cold. They tipped forward and then fell straight down. Through one watering eye, Hermione saw staircases engulfed in flames fly upwards, some twisting in a jerking motion above them, too slow to react to their passing.

Voices carried, and for one frightening moment Hermione heard one above all the rest.

Even at such a fierce speed and with Death Eaters sending curses to explode all around them, Hermione focused on that voice. The flat laughter, reveling in dark victory, simmering upwards on the fluid wind and, finally, blazing into pure, unadulterated rage as Severus and Hermione careened through the Entrance Hall doors and out into the starry night.

Hermione stood outside the musty greenhouses, long since overrun with school experiments left to their own devices. A charcoal sky hung low overhead, darkening and promising nothing but a dismal rain. Among the mottled clouds were hundreds of owls, lowering softly on currents of silent air, waiting.

Reaching into her robes, she pulled out a tattered parchment and unfolded it carefully.

Turning to the deep shadow behind her, she said quietly, "A few are still alive."

They exchanged a glance when he joined her side, saying more than any words could ever attempt. While the others gathered behind them, Hermione touched his hand lightly, her breath catching when he returned the gesture.

Placing a hand on the hidden passage door, Hermione closed her eyes.

She felt it first, and it welcomed her.