

The Beauty of Grace

by *misstee*

Help and hope arrive from an unexpected source.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 2

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Disclaimer: Not mine. Not making money. In fact, have endured moments of sheer panic from merely taking them out to play for a while. So don't sue me, please.

Beta: Ginny_Weasley31 and Scattered Logic

He wrapped the blackness of his cloak around himself, just a little tighter. No billowing here. He folded his body down behind the tree and silently cast a Disillusionment Spell. The trickling of the spell flowed over his body, tingling as it worked.

He was unnecessary now. He knew that. He had served his part as a footnote in the grand story, and now he was an amusement for his Lord.

He rubbed his hand across the stubble that had formed on his chin and frowned.

He felt the cool air on his face and debated on the merits of casting a warming spell before deciding against it. Cool air against his face seemed a fair price to pay for the remaining time that he lived.

For now, he lived. Voldemort, one of the greatest skilled Legilimens who had ever lived, had decided that his amusement last evening would be sifting through his Potions master's memories for anything of use. He had done this in the past, often finding some buried memory of Snape humiliating Potter in class. He would regale his listeners with Potters' shame.

But this time, Severus Snape, one of the greatest skilled Occlumens who had ever lived, had cracked. The wall was still intact. But for the first time ever, in his long history of risking his life by allowing the Dark Lord access to his memories, Voldemort had realized that there was a wall. He had realized that he hadn't reached THE end; he had reached a dead end.

"Severus, you hide something from me," the low voice said. There was no madness now, just the frightening determination that had transfixed so many.

"No, my Lord," he said smoothly, feeling his heart rate increase slightly. He willed it back to normal. "I would never do that." He bowed his head. "You have sensed something amiss, but I assure you that it is merely fatigue that causes my mind not to be as orderly as you would prefer this evening."

"Of course. I am sure that it is as you say, Severus." The evil one inclined his head in response before turning away from him. "For you have seen the punishment I have inflicted on those who lie to me, and I am sure you would never do that to me."

Casually, as if it were a mere afterthought, he turned back to the man. "Join me for dinner tomorrow evening, won't you? After you complete your trip back to the school to see which Order members have ensconced themselves in the castle. I believe that we will have much to discuss."

And, with that short conversation, he knew that his days were limited. He needed to find a move to make that could end this. He could not have spent all these years in vain. He must find something... or someone... to bring this to an end.

He settled in as his mind raced.

Hermione stuffed her wand back up the sleeve of her crimson jumper as she headed down the steps of the Great Hall into the cool air of the fall morning. Her trainers crunched through the leaves that blew across the footpath that led towards the greenhouses.

Taking a deep breath, and feeling the crispness suffuse her lungs, she reflected that she was glad that Madam Pomfrey had asked her to help find some more chestnuts for a healing draught and willow bark for headache potions, as it gave her something else to do this morning. She would most likely keep Hermione busy brewing if the boys were still gone tomorrow.

The mediwitch was now spending much of her time fussing in the Potions laboratory, brewing and stockpiling enough healing and restorative draughts to fill the infirmary cabinets to overflowing; although she had been known to mutter on more than one occasion that she wished someone was still around to take care of the potions work.

Severus Snape. The name was akin to a curse word these days. He had been erased from conversation as if he had never existed. When someone was foolish enough to mention the name, it was usually followed by an awkward silence as they fumbled to recover.

By helping in what had been his laboratory, Hermione supposed she was thumbing her nose at her former professor. She had spent years trying to get just one "well done" from him, trying to brew the perfect potions and write the perfect essays. And after all that work on her part, what had been her reward? He had gone and turned her world upside down, siding with those who had labeled her a Mudblood.

She pushed aside the anger that had swelled within her. These days, she tended to find that thoughts not resulting in action were useless. Someday, when all this... mess... was behind her, she hoped that she would be able to return to the luxury of useless thought. The constant vigilance, as Moody so often continued to remind them, took its toll on them all.

If only things were different. But they weren't, so there was no use starting to grizzle. She had a task to do, and she may as well do it. As she made her way to the greenhouse to get a basket, she pulled her mass of hair back and tied a ribbon around it, just to get the blasted mess out of her face.

She called for Professor Sprout, but getting no answer, she grabbed a basket and headed towards the copse of trees where she knew that the chestnut and willow trees grew. The thicket was on the grounds, near the edge of the Forbidden Forest. She took care, as always, to avoid the Whomping Willow, as she didn't think the tree would take too kindly to having a few pieces of bark stripped from its trunk to help cure headaches.

As she approached the trees, she felt a vague chill run down her spine. She unsheathed her wand and looked around, seeing nothing out of sorts. Even with Dumbledore gone, nothing dared venture out of the Forest to bother any of the Hogwarts residents. Hermione thought idly to herself that she should probably research that thought on her next library visit. *It would be useful to be able to contain creatures in that way.*

Crunching through the gold, red, and brown leaves, she entered the shadowy grove. She spotted the first tree she was looking for and set her basket down as she looked for a way to reach the lower branches of the ancient chestnut tree. Silently noting with gratitude how much easier some things were with magic, she used her wand to Levitate a decaying tree trunk and transformed it into a sturdy wooden ladder before placing it under the tree so that it would stay balanced. As she climbed, she noted the rustle of the leaves and the twittering of songbirds in their nest.

As she grasped the sides of the ladder, she sized up the situation as logically as possible. How would Professor Snape have done this? He must have come to gather this at least once a year. She only had two hands, and using magic to sever the chestnuts from the tree would lessen the effects when it was used in a healing draught. Steeling herself, she rubbed her hands on her jeans and started climbing. *Merlin, I hate being off the ground.* She made it to the top step and placed her wand in her teeth just for a moment as she reached for the branch. If she could just grasp the branch with her left hand, she could reach what she needed with her right hand.

Just a little further.

As she reached for the branch, she caught a flash of black out of the periphery of her vision. In slow motion, she found herself gasping a small noise of surprise, which caused her wand to fall. In what seemed like a slow motion scene from a Muggle movie, she scrabbled for it with her right hand and overbalanced. She toppled over the ladder and fell towards the ground.

Grateful for the relative cushion of the leaves, Hermione landed hard on her back with an "Oooomph!" as the breath left her lungs. Feeling a sharp pain in the back of her head, she tentatively reached back through her hair, only to feel something warm and sticky on her fingers.

She vaguely thought that the little bits of sunlight coming through the remaining orange and yellow leaves above her were quite lovely as her world went dark.

Dark eyes looked around quickly. No one seemed to be coming to help the girl. He stayed where he was for a few minutes longer, waiting to see if her companions would show themselves. No one came. Cursing softly, he drew an ebony wand and came out from behind the brush he had been hiding behind. There was a pool of blood that he could see spreading around the base of her skull through that wild mane of hair she would never be able to control.

He dropped to his knees and silently cast a spell to stop the bleeding. A few diagnostic spells later, he had also healed a broken left ankle. One wasn't a double agent for years without learning how to correctly heal some simple wounds.

Reaching into his robes, he found what he was looking for and tipped the phial of Blood Replenishing Potion down her throat. The girls' eyelids fluttered for a moment, but stayed closed, and she managed to swallow without choking.

Wake up, but don't wake up yet, he grimly thought. Another spell and the blood was cleaned off of his clothing, her hair, and the leaves below her head. Still, she didn't wake. He took a finger and thumb and opened both of her eyes, one at a time. Both of them constricted quickly when the sunlight hit the pupils. *No head injury.*

Sitting back on his heels, he tapped his wand on his thighs and thought. *What to do now?* He could bring her back to the Dark Lord as a trophy. He didn't really want to, but truly, the girl had put herself in this position. It would help elevate him yet again in the Inner Circle and perhaps get him closer to the end.

No, Potter will crumble without her to do his thinking. He stared at her face, watching as the color started to come back slowly. She had dark circles under her eyes and looked older than her age. *Then again, we all do these days.* Taking his wand, he pushed a few stray curls and the neck of her jumper aside. Ah, just as he had thought. His gut twisted. He had seen Nott take aim at her during their skirmish several weeks ago and had deliberately turned and barked an order, trying to distract his attention from the target. It had worked, as Nott had glanced his direction as he cast. But then she had lost her balance and turned into the hex, instead of away from it.

He pushed her neckline back into place, forcing himself to look away from the vulnerable tilt of her neck and the soft swell of her curves. She really did look much more attractive with her mouth closed and her hand not shooting up in the air. Cursing again, he pushed himself up, listening to his knees creak. He needed this whole... situation... to end soon, as he was going soft. He shouldn't be noticing those things about his annoying ex-student.

Damn it, did she not tell anyone she was coming out here today? As he stalked around her, he picked up her wand and a red ribbon that fluttered around a small branch. As his mind raced, wondering how to make use of this situation he found himself in, he found himself mindlessly picking up the basket and gathering potions ingredients. He continued to shoot glares towards the castle, wondering when she would be missed.

The girl was moaning now. He dropped the basket quickly, placed her wand inside, and looking around, he took quick strides back to the Forbidden Forest. Potter was moving too slowly, and his next step needed to come soon, but what would it be? How could he turn this situation to his advantage? Looking down, he realized he still had the crimson ribbon threaded in his fingers. Scowling at his own inattention, he quickly stuffed it into a pocket. He never looked back.

Somewhere, someone was moaning. *They need to be quiet and stop their whining.* It was beginning to make her head hurt. Suddenly, it dawned on her that she was the one who had made that noise. Opening her eyes again, she looked up at the leaves above her. That was odd. There didn't seem to be as much sunlight as there had been earlier.

Taking a breath, she lifted her right hand to look at her wrist. She needed to see how long she had been lying here. As she looked toward her wrist, the breath caught in her throat. *Blood. On my hand. Oh, right. My head.* She tentatively reached for the back of her head, and where it had been warm and sticky before, she now felt only hair and firm flesh.

She blinked hard, and sat up on her elbows. Her head hurt, and she wasn't sure how long she had been there, but she was sure that she had hit her head on a small rock as she had fallen. Or had she? She knew that hitting one's head hard could cause funny things to the memory. But there had been blood. She had the dried stuff on her hands as proof. *So, not totally losing my mind, perhaps.*

As she pushed herself up to a sitting position, her head began to argue that a quick lie down might not be a bad idea. That thought fled, however, as she noticed the basket to her side. Neatly sitting inside the basket were her wand and a fair amount of chestnuts. She looked around frantically, trying to see who or what had been beside her. Grabbing her wand, she quickly cast a silvery Patronus towards the castle. There was a time for Gryffindor bravery, but this simply was not that time.

She needed some help and quickly. And then she needed some answers. What did one say in this situation? *Please come quickly, as I was just attacked by someone who collected potions ingredients, found my wand, and stopped me from bleeding to death?*

She heard the Headmistress calling her name in the distance, and quickly making a decision, she cleansed the blood from her hands. She didn't seem to be in any immediate danger, and while she wanted answers, she didn't want to worry anyone else. It could always turn out to be an overactive imagination, coupled with a bump on the head.

"Miss Granger? Hermione? Child, where are you?" The voice was almost upon her now.

"Over here," she called weakly, still looking around carefully. "Over in the trees, Professor."

"What happened here?" There was the soothing, sharp voice that had been an integral part of Hermione's world since she was a first-year pupil. "I got your message for help, and came as quickly as I could."

"Nothing much," she said weakly as she smiled and motioned towards the ladder. "I fell off the ladder and hit fairly hard. I suppose that I panicked a little bit that I might have broken something." Good thing that her ability to fudge the truth had improved more than Ron's over the past few years. She seemed to be calling on that ability more and more these days.

McGonagall looked her over briskly, tutting and tsking, and for a moment, Hermione felt like a Transfiguration attempt gone awry. She half expected to hear the words, "Hmm, Mr. Longbottom, you'll need to practice this further. Rats which are transfigured into goblets should not continue to have tails." Stifling an inappropriate grin, she let the Headmistress continue her poking and prodding.

"Well, you appear to be in one piece," she heard Professor McGonagall say as she received one final poke in the arm. "Let's get you up to the castle and let Madam Pomfrey have a look at you."

Hermione stood stiffly, ankle aching, and picked up her basket before walking slowly behind the Headmistress out of the brush.

She was dragged away from her confused thoughts by the voice of the older woman slowing to walk next to her. "Where are Mr. Weasley and Mr. Potter today? Why aren't they here helping you?" Hermione chewed on her lip and thought carefully before answering. She didn't want to give the impression that there was any sort of rift between the three of them.

"They said they wanted to visit the Burrow for a few days since I was busy researching something in the library that they couldn't help with." There. That was the truth, even if it wasn't the whole truth. Ron and Harry had indeed said those words to her, even if she had known they were lying as the words left their mouths.

The real truth; the unspoken one that she had known bubbled beneath the surface was the fact that she was a girl. And in their battle-addled minds, girls weren't supposed to be beside them during the fighting. She had slugged Malfoy in their third year, hexed Death Eaters in their fifth year, and been the brains of their operation for years.

But that wasn't enough because she had also grown breasts and had occasionally worn a dress. Apparently those facts were almost enough to disqualify her from whatever secret mission they had decided upon. But the straw that put her over the edge was a fortnight ago when she had been hit with a slicing hex to the collarbone by a masked Death Eater. There had been blood, and lots of it, but Madam Pomfrey had patched her up quickly, as was her wont these days.

Bless. She wanted to hug and hit the boys at the same time for their misguided sense of chivalry. She hadn't been hit that badly, but it had been the thing that made both boys decide that she didn't belong on the front lines.

Once she realised that they were lying, she had confronted them. "You're going to look for that Ravenclaw Horcrux without me, aren't you?" she had asked, planting her feet and placing hands on her hips. Ron had turned red and looked away while Harry had tried futilely to look innocent. Gits, the both of them, and she had told them so in no uncertain terms.

The boys, and she was fairly sure that even at age twenty-two they could be called boys, blustered and had left abruptly in the wee hours of the night. The short note left behind simply said that they had gone to visit the Burrow and would return shortly. Oh, and to definitely not try to follow them, as they would be busy seeing the Weasley brood. The fact that the note had been crossed out and re-written four times with a different explanation each time had not escaped Hermione's notice.

So here she was, as always, covering for their stubbornness and foolish behavior, just like she always did.

The Headmistress looked at her knowingly for a moment, and Hermione was tempted to confess the truth, but then, the moment was over.

Over the steady pounding in her head, Hermione searched for a way to change the subject. "I should have told you before I went out onto the grounds." The Headmistress nodded in agreement.

"And, I probably should have made sure it was all right to wear Muggle-style clothing around the castle today. You know, what with our Ministry guests and all..." She trailed off. This time, the Headmistress just furrowed her brow and glanced at Hermione as they climbed the steps into the castle.

"Miss Granger, this school endured the Dark Lord living under a turban for an entire year without notice and a Polyjuiced Death Eater masquerading as our Defense Against the Dark Arts professor for a year. Again, nary a person noticed. I scarcely think that your walking the grounds in Muggle-style clothing raised an eyebrow with the masses, such as they are."

With those words, Professor McGonagall gestured to the Great Hall as they passed it, empty but for a small contingent of Aurors sitting at a table. She pursed her lips together tightly and glared at the group as she and Hermione walked through the Hall. Finally, they took notice and hurried to look alert. "Look at them," she said sharply, "acting like bored children."

Hermione followed her gaze to the young Aurors, two of whom were playing Exploding Snap while the other two huddled over a parchment, quietly laughing. She idly noted that one of them looked a little like Harry, but for the fact that Harry didn't laugh much these days.

She sighed and turned toward her former Head of House. "Time has a way of blunting the horrors, unless you face them on a regular basis, I suppose," she said, "and I would argue that none of that lot sent by Scrimgeour has seen a true Death Eater in their life. They're young, and they know that their purpose is public relations. It has been four years since anything has happened here, after all."

The two women kept going on their slow journey to the infirmary. It was eerily quiet throughout the school, especially when one realized that school should be in session on this crisp, fall day. The stairwells should be filled with tiny first-year pupils, learning their way around the castle, and carrying a load of books that seemed at times to dwarf them in size.

While the school officially remained neutral and closed until the defeat of Voldemort, Rufus Scrimgeour had decided to send Aurors to guard the staff. Of course, he always sent the youngest, the slowest, and the most dim-witted; a fact that escaped no one they were supposed to be guarding. Even Trelawney had taken to predicting the demise of all Aurors with a relish everyone had been able to rally behind.

Those who had remained as residents of the castle were content to let Peeves keep busy tormenting the Aurors so that they left the staff alone. After all, just because Hogwarts was officially neutral, unofficially it had become the haven for all Order members and a few others who hoped to contribute to the cause.

They made their way into the infirmary and found Madam Pomfrey, who immediately led Hermione to the nearest bed and began fussing over her. She was, by now, an old hand at this, as the entire Order had found that there were fewer questions from the matron than from the healers at St. Mungo's, and she was a dab hand at healing narrow escapes from most of the commonly used hexes.

After diagnostic spells were cast and potions were ingested, Hermione was instructed in no uncertain terms that she would be spending the night in the infirmary. There was a moment that stretched the limits of Hermione's ability to obfuscate the truth. Madam Pomfrey had cast a spell that Hermione wasn't familiar with, and as she moved her wand from head to toe, the tip began to glow a pale green in colour. "What is that?" Hermione furrowed her brows curiously. "I've never seen it do that before."

"Hmmm, it must be an error." The mediwitch took a clean towel and wiped the wand off before clearing her throat and trying again, only to get the same results. "I don't know how this could be correct. This should only happen if a healing spell has been cast very recently."

Surprised, and heart hammering in her throat, she concentrated on looking properly chagrined. "It was... erm... I guess... what I mean is... it was me," she said contritely. "I thought I could fix my own ankle." Madam Pomfrey had gone from a sympathetic tut to a full-fledged glare, so she decided to continue digging the hole she found herself in. "I mean... I didn't think it would be that difficult," she added belatedly. "But it was."

After some number of apologies and promises not to try such nonsense again, she was ordered to bed. And she found it curiously comforting at times to be ordered about, as if she were still an innocent child.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she pulled her clothes off and reached back to pull the ribbon out of her hair before remembering how she had lost the ribbon somewhere in her tumble this afternoon. Pulling on a medicinal smelling dressing gown, she pushed the white curtains aside and padded wearily toward the window in front of her bed.

Looking into the darkness, towards the edge of the Forbidden Forest, she saw nothing. Nothing at all except for darkness. As she lay down in the bed and closed her eyes, she wondered how much of today was real, how much was imagined, and how much had been blurred by a sharp rock to the head.

And then, at last, she slept.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 2

Help and hope arrive from an unexpected source.

The next morning as Hermione again made her way outdoors down the front steps, she felt much better than the last time she had crossed that threshold. After a quick examination by Madam Pomfrey, Hermione had been able to snatch some phials of a mild painkiller and stuff them in her pockets before heading off to get a much needed shower and change of clothes.

Although her sleep had been fitful, she was fairly certain that the flash of black and the blood she thought she remembered must have been due to an overactive imagination in the wake of hitting her head a little too hard.

In fact, the more she thought of it, the more it made sense. She must have climbed up the ladder, gathered the chestnuts in the basket, and climbed back down to place the basket on the ground with her wand before climbing back up to get a few more. And she must have healed herself. She had seen Madam Pomfrey cast healing charms time and time again over the past years, and Hermione had done it herself. *I just can't quite remember it all because I hit my head.*

She ignored the niggling doubt at the back of her mind, screaming that she would have never put her wand down away from herself.

No one could have been there that would have helped her, or they would have stayed to make sure she had awakened. And no one could have been there that wanted to hurt her, or she was certain that she would not have awakened again. Ever.

But just in case... She turned and hurried back into the castle, ignoring the residual ache in her ankle. She headed back towards the group of rooms that she, Ron, and Harry had claimed for their own upon returning to the castle. Glancing around, she saw no signs of anyone in this part of the castle.

She walked past her own door, and towards the room Harry usually stayed in. She pointed her wand at the door and quietly took down the wards she had recently lectured him about putting up. Click. The door opened and she slipped inside. *Please be here.* Ah. There was his trunk, and inside was just what she was looking for. She grabbed the item, closed the trunk, and carefully slipped back into the hall.

Hermione quickly walked towards her room as she heard a voice round the corner. She barely ducked into her room and closed the door without being spotted by Professor Binns and The Baron as they glided past.

Even Professor Binns was trying to do his part to help these days. Of course, it had taken him two years to note the fact that no students were attending his class. But once he had taken notice and discovered the reason, he began his daily commentaries on each of the 457 battles of the Goblin Rebellion, giving specific, in-depth analysis for

why each side had won or lost to whoever would listen. They had all learned quickly to duck into the nearest alcove when Binns approached.

She grabbed her frayed book bag, paused to pluck up some of her notes, and shoved both the scrolls and the borrowed item into it as she headed back out into the hall. Thankfully, the two ghosts were deep in conversation and merely nodded politely in her direction as she walked to the stairs.

Stopping by the kitchen, she asked the house-elves for a sandwich and an apple. They glared at her as they shoved several of each in her direction. Hermione rolled her eyes at the odd creatures, knowing from experience that they only gave her more than she asked for in hopes that she would return to bother them fewer times.

Taking care this time to mention her mission to the headmistress, she found herself walking the same path she had traversed the day before. This time, she held her wand firmly in her hand as she glanced around with every whisper of the trees.

It was only my imagination. Nothing more. Everyone who hits their head gets feels a little wonky.

Entering the brush, she located the willow bark. Shrugging off her bag, she placed it next to her and started carefully peeling thin strips. Just as she was gathering the last of it, a loud *crack* resounded through the quiet trees.

Whirling around, she fell naturally into the dueling stance she had made use of so many times before. Her eyes darted to and fro, unable to find the source of the noise. Hermione backed towards the tree, thinking only of how daft she had been to come out here alone yet again.

Suddenly, a small branch let go of its final hold on the tree it had spent so many years attached to and fell to the ground in front of her feet, scattering its rotted pieces into dust. She heard the scampering of some sort of small rodents and dropped to her knees, swallowing hard. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry with gratitude as the wisp of gray fur stopped to look at her.

It's only my imagination running away with me. The squirrels above are not plotting against me.

Hermione settled back against the tree and pulled her bag close. Opening it carefully, she took out a sandwich and pinched the end off, tossing it to her audience. She leaned her head back and felt the sunlight on her eyelids as the thump of her heart settled back into a more reasonable rate.

Constant vigilance, my arse. I'm going to have words with that old paranoid coot the next time

"My, my. What have we here?" A distinct voice interrupted her thoughts. A voice she had heard before.

Jumping to her feet, she pointed her wand in the direction of the voice. The voice that was currently attached to a man. A man who was wearing black. A black robe much like the one she thought she had imagined seeing yesterday.

"You!" Black eyes met brown. Wands were drawn. "It was you yesterday." It wasn't a question, but a statement of fact.

"*Expelliarmus!*"

"*Protego!*"

Her attempt to disarm him was deflected easily; her hex bouncing up to the trees over his head and sending leaves fluttering violently to the ground.

Snape said nothing for a moment, as if he were trying to decide how to answer her earlier statement. His curtain of dark hair obstructed her view of his face, making it nearly impossible for her to read his expression. Not for the first time, she mentally cursed herself for being out alone, making herself into such an easy target. Whatever he chose to do to her, she was unlikely to be found for hours.

Finally, he placed his wand on the ground and said, "Yes, it was I. Your insight continues to amaze, Miss Granger. No wonder you're known for your brilliance." He held up his palms in an exaggerated show of being unarmed.

"What are you doing here?" It was hard to keep her voice from becoming shrill, but she hoped to at least give the outward appearance of calm. "How did you get past the wards and onto the grounds?"

"I had hoped that you, of all your compatriots, would think before speaking," he said with a raised eyebrow. "You do realize that the more competent amongst the teachers assisted in placing the wards around the grounds, do you not?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "I see no need for sarcasm, sir," she said, ignoring the churning feeling in her stomach. "That tone has had no effect on me in years. I simply wish to know why you have returned to Hogwarts. And then, since it appears that I have the wand on you, I believe I shall turn you in to our group of Aurors."

He took a step towards her, sighing in annoyance while reaching towards the pocket of his robe.

"Stop. Now. And not another step, please." Her voice could have cut glass. He stopped his advance. However, the man showed no signs of lowering his hand.

"Miss Granger, did I not just show you that I am unarmed? I simply have some information that I would like to give you," he said smoothly. "It is quite important, and would be useful to Mr. Potter."

If she hadn't spent six years as his student, she would have said that Severus Snape was merely conversing. But she had spent six years as his student, and she knew better than to think that he would want to make polite conversation. He was placating a wild animal that he thought he had cornered.

"You've shown me only that, for the moment, you've no wand in your hand." Hermione swallowed hard, but her hand remained steady on the wand. "That really doesn't mean that you're not reaching for one. Lower your hand. Now, if you please."

"I will if you will," he said, clearly becoming frustrated. "I saved your bloody life yesterday. You would have bled to death if not for my intervention. I just told you. I have something for you. Use that so-called intellect and listen to me."

"I'm so very sorry you aren't pleased, sir," Hermione said firmly. "But hearing those words from a Death Eater whose last visit to these grounds resulted in murder gives me little confidence."

He continued to stare at her while a muscle twitched in his jaw. "Granger, I came to Hogwarts yesterday to see if anyone was left who I could get a message to. I won't explain myself to you. I don't have the time, and I don't have the inclination. I'll likely be dead before morning. I don't wish to have my last memory be a protracted conversation with you."

Neither of the two moved. He continued through gritted teeth, "I saw you fall yesterday during your outing, and I thought that, although you appeared to hit your head quite hard, you might still retain a modicum of sense. I need for this to be over, and my Slytherin tactics have failed me. I decided that when I approached you, I needed to go for the blunt, Gryffindor approach, much as I despise the traits of your erstwhile House."

"Why did you save me?" she asked. "What do you want me to do? And why should I trust you?"

He looked upward, again pausing before he glared at her and spoke. "I couldn't possibly expect you to understand without a million questions, could I? I saved you simply because I could. I haven't carried a secret tendre for you for these many years. And I don't want anything from you, except for you to read some information I have gathered. You don't have to trust me; you just need to give me your attention. You can manage that, can you not?"

"Put your hand down," she was whispering now. She didn't believe him. If she believed him, it would change everything.

Against her will, she felt her resistance wavering.

"Granger, how long are we going to do this?" He was back to that smooth, soothing tone. "I have information. You need information. If the Dark Lord finds out that we spoke, it will risk more than my position." He paused and looked straight at her. "Believe me, I've spent years trying to find a way to end this. Damn it, if there were any way to avoid dealing with either you or Potter, I would find it."

"Tell me what's in your pocket, and I'll Summon it," she said. She was faltering, but she wasn't giving in easily.

He rolled his eyes, but lowered his hand finally. Now they were getting someplace. "A folded Muggle envelope."

"*Accio envelope!*" she called. A piece of white peeked over the pocket of his robe and fluttered in the air between them. Hermione stretched out her fingers to grasp the flying piece of paper when she suddenly heard a loud groan.

Both of the onlookers glanced towards the source of the noise, and that same slow motion feeling came over Hermione. *Is this how accidents always feel?* Powerless to stop anything, she realized that her earlier deflected hex had instead caught one of the main branches of an old oak tree above them. She watched in horror as her former Professor tried to jump out of the way of the falling branch. It wasn't that he was too slow. It was that the branch was gnarled and twisted, and whichever direction he went there was broken tree in his way.

Hermione saw the branch catch his arm as he raised his hand, and it clipped him on the side of his head. "Miss Granger, could you please..." he stopped. Looking stunned, he took a clumsy step forward and folded like a puppet to the ground.

"Oh, Merlin," she said as she ran towards him and knelt at his side. There was more than a trickle of blood coming from his nose, and it was frightfully red against the white of his cheek. His eyes were closed, and his arm was resting at a funny angle. His black hair fanned out around his face, giving her a clear view of the greenish-blue of his jugular vein and the rise of his Adam's apple in his throat.

She bent over his face and watched his chest rise shallowly. *Good. Airway is clear. He's breathing. He's got a pulse.* Even if he was a murderer, he was bloody well not going to die until he answered her questions. She would save him and then turn him in.

Hermione jumped up and ran back to her book bag. Pulling out notes, sandwiches, and apples, she found nothing that was useful at the moment besides two phials of a pain reducing potion. *Blast it!* This just couldn't be the one time that she left something in the bottom of the bag. A small voice perked up inside her head. *He must carry some potions, else he wouldn't have been able to help me yesterday.*

Dropping everything, she returned to his side. Taking another quick look at him and ascertaining that he still breathed, she Transfigured a leaf into a pillow and placed his head gently on it. Hermione felt his head and was relieved to find no blood. She parted his robes and delicately felt inside when she heard a clinking noise. Taking out a phial, she took a tentative whiff. Ew. It smelled horrible, but was recognizable. *Who carries their own supply of Blood Replenishing Potion with them?*

All right. First things first. Hermione hadn't been running with Ron and Harry all these years without learning some basic Muggle and wizarding first aid skills. She pointed her wand to his nose and staunched the flow of blood there. Next, she rolled up his sleeve, taking care to ignore the dark tattoo she saw. She chanted softly over his arm, watching with fascination the ripple underneath the pale skin, as the bones re-knit themselves. If she lived to be one hundred fifty, she would never tire of seeing magic work.

A few seconds later, a yellow leaf was Transfigured to become a flannel. She dabbed at the blood on his cheek and above his lip, taking a moment to check his head. When he didn't wake, she took the opportunity to stare at him.

When he wasn't glaring at her, or pointing a wand, or threatening to take House points, he was just a man. A powerful and scary man, but a man nonetheless. His nose was too large, but she couldn't imagine him without it. His permanent scowl was relaxed for the moment, and she suddenly realized that he was not that old. *Maybe mid-forties? Merlin, that means he was in his early thirties when we started at Hogwarts* How much had he lived through in those forty years that had made him so hard?

He let out a small moan, but still didn't wake. She tentatively reached out to feel the insides of his pockets. If he had another wand hidden somewhere, now was her chance to disarm him. Nothing in the left pocket. Now, for the right one. There was something in that one. Hermione pulled it out, not sure of what to expect. Staring, she found herself looking at the hair ribbon she had lost yesterday. As it gently swayed in the fall breeze, she looked from the ribbon, to his face, and back again. Feeling guilty, and not at all sure why, she stuffed it back into his pocket.

She took the Blood Replenishing Potion and tipped his head up to pour it down his throat.

He coughed violently, and Hermione found herself sitting back on her heels, dabbing with the flannel at his potion-covered cheeks. Her posture unknowingly mirroring his from the previous day, she tapped her wand on her thigh as she wondered what to do next.

Jumping up, she went in search of his ebony wand. He had placed it on the ground... ah, there it was. She held it for a moment, studying it, before placing it back on the ground and stepping back. Biting the inside of her cheek, she thought for a minute before brandishing her wand. "*Servo tantum mihi,*" she said quietly with a swish and flick. She finished with a prick to her finger and watched a tiny droplet of blood touch the tip of ebony. *Gods, that better work.* She picked the wand up and laid it beside the still man.

Seeing as he still was not awake, but finding nothing else to do to him, her next task was clear. "*Accio envelope!*" A whoosh, and the envelope pulled free of a small branch and leapt into her hand. She sat down on a log, close enough to observe her former Professor, yet far enough away that she could react if he woke.

Opening the envelope carefully, she pulled out several sheets of Muggle paper, covered with the spidery writing she remembered so well. She looked back at him in disbelief; uncertainty and hope wrestling for control across her face. Hope finally won out, as she stood.

Of all the people in this world Hermione had ever expected to help her, Severus Snape had to be at the bottom of the list. He had just supplied her with the information needed to defeat Voldemort. Oh, the information wasn't complete by any means, but what he had written, combined with what she had learned recently would make all the difference. She felt the absurd urge to burst into tears. Everything was going to change now.

She stood over him for a few minutes, trying to wake him with sheer will. She had so many things to say, and only he could hear them.

And he had just told her that he would probably be dead after tonight.

She finally dropped to her knees next to him and made a decision that would change her life. She decided to quit thinking and just... feel. She could trust him. She didn't know exactly how to explain it. In the coming years, when they lay in their bed at night as she drifted off to sleep, she would hear him whisper softly in her ear that one word. *Why?* And she would curl up against him and whisper two words. *Why not?*

She reached into his pocket and pulled the hair ribbon out. As it dangled in front of her, she concentrated, trying to remember just exactly how to replicate Professor Flitwick's work. She bit her lip, hoping that she had remembered correctly as the ribbon grew warm in her hand, before placing the bit of material back into his pocket.

She was re-reading his papers for the third time when she realized that he was staring at her.

Not a word was exchanged, not a bit of Legilimancy was used; but he knew. He hadn't explained anything, and she had granted him clemency anyway.

Hermione opened her mouth to say something; no doubt she had questions for him. "I need to know. Where did you find this information about..." She cocked her head, listening, and placed a finger over her mouth shushing them both. She ran over to her bag, grabbing it up and dropping it next to his feet. He watched her as she fumbled through it, before finally taking out what looked like an Invisibility Cloak.

She pulled it over her back, and with eyes darting side to side, she stepped over him and went down to her knees. Severus lay weakly on the ground, unsure of what was going on. His ears were still ringing from the blow to his head, when he felt her stretch her legs down the outside length of his and lay her torso on top of his.

"Sorry," she whispered. "It's not big enough to cover both of us otherwise."

Just as he wondered what she was doing, he heard the voices approach.

"See, I told you there was nothing here, Shaun," a decidedly male voice said. "Made us trek out here for nothing, didn't you?"

He most definitely had a broken rib. The girl was sticking her elbow in it right now.

"I heard a crash, and the birds flew up from the trees," another voice answered in reply. "You know the old lady would have our heads if anything happened on our watch."

He decided that the girl needed to do something with her hair, and soon. A wild curl was poking him in the nose, and he fought the urge to sneeze.

"Tell me about it. Nothing ever happens here, but you'd think this is the center of the universe from the likes of her," the first voice grumbled in reply.

Severus felt light headed from the pain, but tried to focus on the fact that something smelled exquisite. Like vanilla and jasmine. He could feel her breathing against him.

"Did you catch the replay of the Cannons and Wasps on the Wizarding Wireless this morning?" The voices were still close, but they were headed away from them.

She fit on top of him nicely, all softness in the right places. He could reach up and run his hands over her hips if he dared move. Which he didn't dare do right now.

"Yeah, my cousin has season tickets. Can you believe that? We're stuck here, in the middle of nowhere, doing nothing, and he's going to games every week." A discussion followed about the general unfairness of life, but grew fainter.

Drawing his hands up her arms, Severus could have sworn he felt a shiver before he pushed a corner of the cloak up to look in the direction the voices had come from. Had that been him or her?

"What are you...?"

He shushed her with a finger to her lips. "They may come back," he said. "If they follow Auror training, they will make a second pass."

With the corner of the cloak up, and his eyes adjusting to the dim light, he could barely see her under the cloak.

The Aurors weren't coming back. Severus knew it, but hesitated telling her that she could move. For a long minute, they stared at each other in stillness. Her breath moistened his finger, but he was reluctant to remove it from her lips. Finally, he could hear nothing further, and he nodded at her.

She nodded back, and he could see her pupils dilated with some foreign emotion fear, perhaps. In a quick move, she rolled off of him and was on her heels. He felt strange and alone without her closeness.

"That was close," she said in a shaky voice. "They almost found us."

"Half an hour ago, you were ready for them to find me," he answered slowly. "Does this mean you'll use the information I gave you?" He held his ribs as he tried to raise himself up and with a grunt fell back.

She nodded her acceptance and thrust a phial of the pain relieving potion toward him. "Here."

"What is this?" he said as he sniffed delicately and pulled a face. "Poppy's work?"

She handed him a second phial. "I didn't see that you had any of this. Take more for later."

"I can't. If I were to be found with it, the consequences would be... swift." His head jerked up. "You went through my pockets?" he asked, narrowing his eyes as he spoke.

"I'm open to second chances, but I'm not an idiot, you know," she said with a raised eyebrow. "I needed to check to see if you had anything that could help me heal you, and see if you had any other wands."

"Why?" he asked.

"Why? That's an awfully broad question," she said tentatively. "Would you care to be more specific?" She pulled her bag closer and handed him a sandwich before taking one for herself. "Eat." she ordered. "I have plenty."

"Why did you heal me instead of turning me in? What are you doing with Potter's Invisibility Cloak? Why are you staring at me? Pick one." Severus was quite disconcerted by her actions. And even though the Dark Lord was waiting, he took a bite of the sandwich as the girl just stared pointedly at him while he eyed her closely.

"To quote a pompous bastard I heard previously, I healed you simply because I could." She shrugged and continued. "I didn't know what I was going to do with you at the time. I still thought I might turn you in once you woke."

"Very well. Continue, please."

"Why am I staring? I'm staring because for years I've thought that you were using all your knowledge against the Order, and you've just handed me years of research that makes me grateful to you. I'm grateful that whatever your past behavior, you're on the right side after all. And to answer your question, it isn't Potter's Invisibility Cloak. He keeps his with him at all times. Fred and George gave us the Galleons needed to buy another one, as it was a trifle difficult hiding three people under a single Cloak."

"Stop. Your chatter is making my head throb." He pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers. "I didn't purposely choose you. You do realize that bit of pertinent information, don't you?" he said slowly. "You just happened to be the person I crossed paths with. It could have been Sprout or Flitwick, and I still would have tried to pass on this information."

She shrugged her shoulders. "But it wasn't. You know, Ron and Harry haven't wanted me to be involved in war these days." She gestured towards her collarbone and shrugged. "I caught the tail end of a hex a couple of weeks ago, and it scared them. Now, apparently girls shouldn't be involved in this mess. So this involves me in the process again. Without them."

He just stared at her with narrowed eyes for a moment. "I have absolutely no interest in Potter and Weasley. This could be a trap, you know? You're not so smart that someone couldn't trick you. You shouldn't trust me so easily, just because you crave a bit of the glory for yourself."

"And you shouldn't assume that because I'm younger and more naïve than you that I haven't thought about that," she said tartly. Hermione stood up, brushed the crumbs from her lap and started shoving items back in her bag. "I led Umbridge into the forest to the centaurs. Admittedly, it wasn't one of my shining moments, but I do understand deception. And I never actually said I trusted you. Don't place words in my mouth, please." Her hands were on her hips, and she looked ready to start lecturing him like an

errant schoolboy.

Severus nodded and pushed himself up to a sitting position with a grunt. "So, you've decided to keep this between us," he said, still not clear on where she was going with this. He reached down to pick up his wand.

She nodded and pursed her lips, thinking. It was a look he was familiar with from all the years she had been his student. Bloody hell, she was going to put her hand up in the air, wasn't she? "Do you know the meaning of the word grace?"

"Yes, of course," he countered. "When did you become a deity, Miss Granger? Have you decided to wipe my slate clean and let me start afresh? Perhaps this time I'll be sorted into Gryffindor and we can become best mates." He looked like he had tasted roasted Blast-Ended Skrewts and found them wanting. His arms were folded over his chest, and he faced her with a glare.

"That's not what I mean, and I think you know that," she glared back and finished packing her bag.

"Pray tell, Miss Granger," he said brusquely, "I would like to end this conversation, as I have an appointment with the Dark Lord pressing upon me." His wand twitched in his hand, and he stifled the impulse to hex her.

She dropped down to her knees next to him and sat there quietly for a few seconds. "Look, I know I won't say this right. And I know that you'll make fun of me. I just mean that something has changed today."

He waved his hands impatiently and started to talk, but she interrupted him. "I don't suddenly think of you as a nice man. You've done things that I don't think I could ever understand or forget."

Severus nodded. He had temporarily lost the ability to speak.

She moved toward him, closer than before. "But, you're going to make sure that Harry is able to kill Voldemort." An almost imperceptible wince came from him at both of those names. "And that is something that you never had to do, regardless of which side you joined.

"May I?"

He just stared at her, waiting for a retort to form in his brain, but none came out. She reached up toward his cheek softly with the flannel in hand again.

"Sorry, but your nose is bleeding still a little." He tilted his head to the side, transfixed. She continued as she touched his face. "And the beauty of grace is that you don't get to choose whether I believe you. You don't get to choose whether I trust you.

"I don't need your permission. You get what I choose to give you, not what you deserve." Hermione leaned back and surveyed her work. "There. All done."

Severus reached up to his nose, wiping away the last drop of blood, and then fingered his wand as he mulled over her words. "I see." He stood up, thinking. Reaching out a hand, he helped her to her feet. His world had rocked on its axis, and he needed to leave now.

But instead, he watched her stand and fussily extract a leaf from her wild mane of hair. "You obviously hit your head harder than I realized yesterday," he said. "You're daft."

She laughed, a full laugh this time, and stood up on her tiptoes. "Of course. And now, I feel compelled to warn you with my typical Gryffindor bluntness that I would like to kiss you." And with that, she pressed her warm lips to his rough cheek, just at the corner of his lips.

It was, in a way, more intimate than any kiss he had ever received. Wrapped up in that kiss, he felt safe in a way he hadn't been since childhood, a vulnerability he hadn't had since his first broken heart, mixed with a longing he had never known possible. The softness of her hand against his cheek was almost overwhelming.

She fit so perfectly in his arms. His arms, which had remained at his side, found themselves wrapping around her back and through her hair, memorizing the feel of her against him. Broken rib be damned. If he was going to be killed, he was going to take this one last memory to the grave. A few long moments later, they both drew back.

Hermione pulled away. "I have to go. The Headmistress will be looking for me soon if I don't check in with her." Turning away from him, she picked up her bag. Glancing back over her shoulder, she said almost casually, "I hope you aren't thinking about Obliviating or Stunning me before you leave."

The unreadable look was back in his eyes, and he knew without a doubt that she was hoping that none of today had been in vain. Severus had fooled people before. He had killed people before. "Why on earth would you think such a thing, Miss Granger?"

"You don't think that Professor Flitwick has been up here grading papers for the past four years, do you?" She arched her eyebrow at him. "Your wand is charmed not to cast harmful spells at me. It will turn them back on the caster. You can thank him for developing that charm the next time you see him, I'm sure."

She turned to face him full on and continued. "And please listen to me carefully now. Whenever you have trouble, whenever it occurs, whether it is tonight, tomorrow, or next week, take that ribbon out of your pocket and think of me. Do you hear me? Think of me, and say my name out loud." Every word was carefully enunciated, as if he were backwards. "Do you understand me? Do you understand what I am saying?"

Narrowing his eyes, he bristled at her comment and the suggestion that his intelligence was lacking. "You think there will be a next time, then? I will not be returning. In fact, I shall probably be dead by tea time tomorrow. I don't believe the Dark Lord believes in your concept of grace. Make wise use of this information as this will be the last time we meet."

"There will be a next time. I have no doubt about that." She stopped at the edge of the trees and turned back to him. She looked up at him with a fierceness he had never seen.

"What gives you this feeling? Have you taken tea with Trelawney once too often?" he asked with an urgent push to his voice.

"That, my dear Professor, is a word called faith." A quick swipe of the back of her hand through the tears that now streamed across her face, and she was gone. He heard her final words drift back to him through the trees. "And I will do my best to explain that word to you the next time we meet."

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A/N: Servo tantum mihi = poor Latin version of "protect only me"

Thanks again to my wonderful beta, GinnyW, to Scattered Logic, who was also kind enough to help me out, and to everyone who takes the time to read my little story!