

# Walk Through the Fire

by *WonderfulChild*

Severus Snape has proved his loyalty beyond a doubt, and Voldemort has found a most perfect reward -- but Bellatrix Lestrange has other plans. These things just never go as planned.

## Prologue: Even Bearing Gifts

*Chapter 1 of 3*

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**General Warning:** This is a story about the trauma of war. Within you will find dubious consent, non-con, disaffection, violence, torture and a great deal of general unpleasantness. What you won't find is romance between Our Heroes, though there will be friendship. Consider yourself warned. Enjoy!

Also: Not mine. JKR's.

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Prologue: Even Bearing Gifts

"Whatever it is, I fear the Greeks, even bearing gifts." Vergil, *The Aeneid*

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Bellatrix Lestrange was smiling.

Standing there in the sitting room doorway, her dark hair and wizard's robes clashing with this quaint Muggle home, its nauseating pink walls and crocheted doilies, and she was smiling. It was the sort of smile Severus had seen her wear often, on raids, during torture; it was the smile of a predator with trapped prey, the hungry look of a sharp clawed animal.

Severus did not like that it was directed at him.

"Bellatrix," Severus said as he drew to a stop. His hand twitched for his wand, and although every instinct was screaming that she was a threat, he resisted the desire to draw on her.

"Severus," she said. She tilted her head a little and studied him. "Leaving the festivities already?"

Severus fixed her with a poisonous look. He hadn't slept in nearly two days, and his exhaustion was threatening to become delirium. His stomach was churning unpleasantly at the scent of strawberries and sulfur that permeated the whole floor. He only wished to collect whatever trinket the Dark Lord felt he had earned, take a stomach-calming potion, and sleep.

"Our Lord," he snarled, "said that you have something for me."

"Yes, of course." She turned and drifted back into the sitting room, changing her stride long enough to step over a huddled mass lying on the fading area rug. Severus managed a few steps into the room before his eyes dropped involuntarily to the girl, unconscious and trembling from overexposure to the Cruciatus Curse. There were long, finger-shaped bruises blossoming on her jaw. He suddenly remembered her as an exuberant first year, practically jumping from her seat with her raised hand, and his disgust at her unabashed eagerness to answer his questions.

Idly, he wondered how many of Potter's secrets she had revealed.

Severus suddenly needed to know how badly she had been damaged. He slid the toe of his boot under the girl's shoulder and pushed her onto her back; she whimpered and her eyelids fluttered, but she did not regain consciousness.

"Your reputation as a Potions master is not idle talk," Bella was saying. She had settled into a winged back chair of the most hideous orange as if it were Queen Mab's throne and reclined as if holding court. "That is a truly fantastic potion you brewed. The girl keened as if a Dementor was sucking out her soul. Will it truly last as long as she lives?"

Severus ignored Bellatrix. There was something wrong with the girl beyond the aftereffects of the Cruciatus Curse. An unnatural flush colored her cheeks and spread downward and underneath her jumper. Severus frowned. Whatever the curse was, he didn't recognize it. "Which curse did you use?" he asked.

"I didn't use a curse." His eyes flickered back to Bella questioningly, and her smile, impossibly, sharpened. "It's the Incendium. The little Mudblood is your reward."

*I don't want her*, was Severus' first panicked thought. She was a student, and he was her teacher, and he wanted this fussy little harpy like he wanted a hole in his head. His heart fluttered wildly, and he was on the verge of panic ... what the bloody hell was he supposed to do with her? ... but he remembered his place at the Dark Lord's side and Potter's filthy accusations that last night at Hogwarts and his long held determination to triumph in any situation at any cost, and he dropped his eyes to the girl again and said, "That explains the smell of sulfur and strawberries. How did you get the blood?"

Bellatrix laughed. "I can't believe you need to ask."

"Ah. Of course," Severus murmured. Wormtail. He should have known. The wretched, thieving rat. Always lingering behind closed doors, watching him with those watery eyes, twitching and simpering and waiting....

"It was a surprise, you see," Bellatrix explained, once it became apparent that Severus had worked the problem out. "Our Lord only wanted a fitting reward for you."

A fitting reward? Dear Merlin. They had fed her the Incendium, brewed with his blood and layered over the Vacuum. It was so creatively cruel that he almost wished he'd thought of it first, but he could hardly think of how the Dark Lord could possibly consider it a fitting reward, unless, of course, it wasn't.

"Our Lord is magnanimous," Severus said at last.

"Indeed." Bellatrix's voice all but dripped with sarcasm and accusation, called him a traitor in all but words. "Between Dumbledore and the Vacuum Draught, you can do no wrong."

"Are you casting aspersions upon my loyalty to our master, Bella?" Severus asked, studying the girl again and letting his question hang in the air. He made note of the finger-shaped bruises and four little half moon crescents of blood on the girl's wrist, then cast a sideways glance at Bellatrix. "Or, perhaps, on his judgement? Because, if I recall, we've been through that once already."

"Oh, Severus," she purred. "You should forgive me. I've been beastly. I'm merely jealous of your recent success. You obviously deserve such a reward." She nudged the girl with her toe. "In fact, it was I who suggested he make a gift out of her, rather than sending her back to Potter piece by piece. I thought you might like a replacement for that other Mudblood, even if this one is rather pl..."

Bellatrix's last word was strangled in her throat as Severus whirled on her and pressed his wand into the hollow under her chin. Rage had erupted within him, suddenly, powerfully, forcing his blood to pound in his ears and drawing his lips back from his teeth into a rabid grimace. That she would even dare to bring *her* up, or speak her name or think of her, even obliquely....

Bella stared up him, daring him, that irritating smile on her lips again even with his wand digging into her flesh. "Did I say something wrong, Severus?"

"Don't ever speak of her, Bella," he hissed, his wand hand shaking with barely contained rage. "Or I'll..."

The thud of the basement door against a far wall and heavy footsteps in the hall interrupted his threat. A measure of self preservation set in, and by the time Yaxley's huge form insinuated itself into the room, Severus' wand was again hidden in his robes.

Yaxley's eyes drifted nervously between them before he cleared his throat. "Bella, our Lord wants you to come down. Says you'll like to see what the Desiccation Curse does."

Bella did not move her eyes from Severus. "Be right there, Yaxley," she said.

Yaxley ducked out again.

"I know what you are, Severus," Bellatrix said. She stood and pushed into his personal space, leaning in close enough that Severus might have kissed her, if he desired to lose his tongue to her teeth. "You may have fooled our Lord, but you have not fooled me."

Severus' rage had retreated somewhat, and although he held it only by a thin thread, he managed a coolly contemptuous look. "Speaking of our Lord, Bella, should you really keep him waiting?"

Bellatrix moved away but did not break eye contact. She was no longer smiling. "Time will out, Severus. I swear he will know what you are before this is over."

"It's good to have goals, Bella."

They stared at each other, both occluding, neither breaking eye contact, like cats fighting over the same territory. At last, Severus sighed. "Bella, just go. He's waiting for you."

And then it was over, and Bella was walking out of the room, but she stopped in the doorway and looked over her shoulder. "Your new toy fights, Severus, but she screams nicely when she breaks." Bella smiled at him with her predator smile. "Enjoy her while you can. I know I did." And then she disappeared around the corner in a swirl of robes.

A moment later, he heard the rise of a distant scream as the basement door opened, then muffled quiet as it closed again.

Alone at last.

On the floor, the girl whimpered.

Severus crouched next to her and watched her for a moment. Here was another responsibility, another albatross around his neck, this skinny, needy, frizzy-haired harpy. He couldn't stand her, not from the moment she walked into his classroom, and his contempt for her had only grown when she became friends with Potter. But now she was his, and he would have to find some way to tolerate her, whether he wanted to or not.

After all, Mudbloods gifted from the Dark Lord did not come with return policies.

Severus carefully gathered the girl into his arms, despite the sharp protest of his fatigued body, and marveled: eighteen months of brewing perhaps the most deadly potion ever created, countless meetings with each of his masters, at least half a dozen Cruciatu s Curses for not getting on with it, a full teaching load, a paper on the properties of pomegranate seeds, several months of following the younger Malfoy around in vain, nine deaths both directly or indirectly at his hands, and a Killing Curse that severed Albus Dumbledore from his life and Severus from his connection to the wizarding world, and his reward was Hermione Granger.

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#### Author's Notes:

1. The theme and title of this story comes from a quote from Charles Bukowski's poem *How is Your Heart?*: "What matters most is how well you walk through the fire."
2. The quote at the beginning of the prologue is from Book 2 of the *Aeneid* by Vergil, when the Trojan high priest Laocoon lays eyes on the Trojan Horse.
3. Incendium= Latin for "fire," pronounced "inkendium."
4. Vacuum= Latin for "empty" or "void." In Latin, the u's are pronounced separately: "vac-u-um."

## Chapter 1: Persephone

*Chapter 2 of 3*

Hermione encounters her captor.

Disclaimer: Not mine.

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What matters most is how well you walk through the fire. Charles Bukowski

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### Chapter 1: Persephone

Hermione woke up scuttling away from a Cruciatu s Curse.

She clenched her teeth, came up against something hard, and threw up her hands. The pain would be teeth rattling, deep in her bones, in her flesh; it would feel as if she were being flayed alive, as if her organs were being pulled out with rusty hooks, as if being held down into a vat of acid. She would scream and beg and writhe until she gave up every last bit of her dignity, and still, the pain would not

There was no pain.

Slowly, Hermione lowered her hands, noticing at last that it was quiet and that she was alone. She must have been having a bad dream. The nightmare images of a howling monster and something slithering through the darkness were already slipping away, but she was still shaking from the terrors of her dreamscape as she huddled against a head board in a graceless jumble of limbs.

Hermione unfolded herself and crawled to the edge of the bed where she sat trembling, confused as to where she was and how she had gotten there. The room was small and unfamiliar, big enough for the bed, a wardrobe and a dresser covered with bits of parchment and an empty ink well. Dust motes danced in a thin shaft of afternoon sunlight that fell through a gap in the tatty curtains, spilled across the faded duvet and climbed up the yellowed, peeling wallpaper of the opposite wall.

In the distance, she could hear cars on a motorway.

She stood and wiped her sweaty palms on her jeans, which were, she noticed with some concern, dirty and torn at the knee. She felt the most distant twinges of panic as she dug desperately through her memories, trying to recall some event that would reasonably explain her whereabouts, but all she came up with was being in the Quality Quidditch Supplies and leaning past Ginny to look out the big front window

Nothing else came. Hermione pushed back the panic that wanted to surface and decided it would do her no good to get worked up. It was entirely possible that something bad had happened, but that it was over now, and this was an Order safe house and that Mad-Eye Moody or Professor Lupin or Molly Weasley were down stairs waiting for her to wake up.

Yes. Good. That would do.

The next issue at hand was thirst. She was thirsty. Very, very thirsty.

A door to her left was cracked open. Since no one had come barging in to hex her or to offer her a glass of water, for that matter she sidled towards the door and pushed it open with the tips of her fingers, hoping that it was a bathroom with a working faucet. The dim sunlight outlined a sink and large bathtub. She tried the wall just inside the door for a light switch a Muggle habit that she had never been able to break and when she found none, whispered a tentative, "Lumos."

Candles ignited along the back of the sink.

She took a cautious moment to decide that the bathroom was wizard space; although it was small, the white tiles were clean and bright, and the claw footed tub had a multi-headed bronze faucet like those at Hogwarts, all of which was at complete odds with the dilapidated bedroom in which she had just woken. One last glance told her that there was a bottle of Muggle shampoo on the floor near the tub and a towel tossed over the edge to dry, and then she went right for the sink.

She dipped her face under the water. It tasted wonderful. She wasn't quite sure she had ever been this thirsty before and stayed under the faucet until her back began to ache from the awkward position. She drew away and wiped her mouth with the cuff of her jumper, feeling somewhat ridiculous that she couldn't at least have used her cupped hand. She looked up, smiling at herself and feeling a little silly, but when she saw herself in the mirror, the smile fell from her face.

Her hair was a tangled, frizzy mess, her eyes shadowed as if she had been violently ill, but it was the long bruises along her jaw that caught her attention four on the left, one on the right where someone had held her very, very roughly.

She touched them gently with trembling fingers, and with sudden clarity, she remembered: she was leaning past Ginny to see Death Eaters in the street, wizards and witches running ahead of them in a screaming, mindless mass; Ginny tugging on her arm, urging her towards the back of the shop where there was a fireplace; watching Ginny disappear into the flames shouting out for the twins' joke shop, but being unable to follow because someone had grabbed a fist-full of her hair; a Side-Along Apparition and then falling to her knees and looking up and up and up and seeing him, his red eyes boring down into her and the huge snake slithering around the perimeter of the room, eyeing her hungrily...

Hermione cut off the water immediately and stood stock still, waiting for some sound to tell her that she had been heard. Her heart was pounding so hard she could feel it in her finger tips. The last thing she remembered with any clarity was being hit with one of many Cruciatus Curses by Bellatrix Lestrange. She had no idea if that mad harpy was still around to curse her, or worse, Voldemort himself, or and here she had to stop that line of thinking, or she would never get out of there for panicking.

She waited another moment, and when there was only the sound of motorway in the distance and the thick afternoon silence, she took a deep breath and crept back out into the bedroom.

She needed her shoes. She wasn't sure where they were, if they were here, wherever here was, at all. She peeked under the bed, then in the wardrobe in which hung several white shirts and heavy black robes. Her trainers were placed neatly on the bottom of the wardrobe, and as she sat on the bed, slipping them on, her eyes fell on the robes again.

Her stomach twisted.

No.

Just no.

She took another deep breath to calm herself before her imagination had her sliced into tiny bits for a dark potion and decided the best way to go about things was to just get out of there as soon as possible. She looked around for her wand but didn't see it. She pulled the sheets and the duvet off the bed, hoping that it had gotten lost in the folds, but nothing fell out of them but a few pound coins she had had in her pockets.

This complicated things. She might have had a chance with her wand, but without, things looked much more desperate. She didn't remember the Death Eaters taking it from her, but she didn't have it when she was dropped in front of Voldemort; she knew this because he had laughed at her and called her a foolish Mudblood when she tried to pull it out in self-defense. Maybe it was lost or broken or even sitting on a shelf somewhere as a Death Eater souvenir, but wand or no wand, Hermione wasn't just going to wait around to be tortured by another Death Eater, and she certainly wasn't going to just sit there and wait to be rescued. The logical part of her mind told her that was more likely to get her killed than not, but she was at her limit and there was no way no way that she was going to be a captive of that murderous traitor, Snape.

Hermione squared her shoulders and opened the bedroom door into a dim corridor. The stairs lay between her and a second door further down the hall, probably another bedroom, and she waited yet again for sounds that never came. She tiptoed towards the stairs, cringing as every little creak of the floorboards seemed to echo through the house. With every step she expected Snape to appear out of thin air as he always had at Hogwarts, this time bearing a curse rather than detention, but a snarling Potions master never materialized, and the only sound was Hermione's hiss of frustration when she saw that a closed door awaited her at the bottom of the stairs.

Hermione dithered on the top step, clenching her hands and biting her lip. She had no idea what awaited her down there, whether it was Snape, Bellatrix Lestrange, or a giant, ravenous snake, but she couldn't just stay here and wait to be tortured or killed or worse, whatever worse might be. She had to tell Harry that Voldemort knew about their mission to find the other Horcruxes, and Harry wouldn't know, not if Hermione didn't get out of this house and away from Snape, and she had to do it *right now*.

Hermione sucked up her courage and just went; she barged down the stairs and gave the door a firm shove when she couldn't find a doorknob. The door swung open ponderously as if weighted down and hit the wall behind it with a dull thump.

Hermione found herself in a claustrophobic sitting room lined with overburdened bookshelves. The lighting there was dim as well; slivers of sunlight snuck in around the shoddy curtains and dappled the bald rug with bright splotches of light. A battered sofa and arm chair huddled together around a rickety table, and there, amongst it all was the front door, like a beacon of salvation and freedom, the way out and away from the perfidious murderer who could be lurking somewhere in this house.

Two more strides and she gripped the doorknob with the same joy a starving man feels when he sees a magnificent feast before him.

And was knocked hard onto her bottom by a Shocking Hex.

"Don't hurt yourself, Miss Granger."

Hermione's head whipped around at the sound of the voice. It was Snape, too thin and strangely human in his shirtsleeves and trousers, on the far side of the room with his wand at his side.

The panic that she had been holding at bay by sheer determination and willpower surged within her. She scrambled to her feet and backed away until she hit the door and still pressed backwards as if she could fall through the wood like a phantom. "Stay stay away from me," she stuttered. The rational part of her mind told her that it was a stupid thing to say, but her panic had reduced her to bad Muggle movie lines, and besides, this man was a murderer. If he could kill Professor Dumbledore, nothing would stop him from killing her.

She was going to die, and Harry wouldn't know that she had told Voldemort about the Horcruxes until it was too late, and then Harry would be dead and the whole wizarding world with him, and it would all be because she couldn't keep Voldemort out of her head, and she had told him everything

"Calm down, Miss Granger," Snape snapped at her, taking a few steps forward. "I'm not going to hurt you."

Hermione cringed away from him, lost her footing and went down so hard that she felt a jarring shiver of pain all through her back.

"For Merlin's sake," she heard Snape hiss, then the sound of rustling cloth. "There. I've put away my wand."

When she looked up, Snape was a few steps away from her, lines of loathing and irritation etched into his face. Hermione peered up at him, waiting for something painful to happen.

"Panicking," he snarled, "will not do you any good, Miss Granger. Now get up and come sit on the sofa."

Hermione didn't move.

Snape rolled his eyes. "Do I need to cast an Imperius Curse on you?"

Hermione shook her head, remembering the awful pleasure of the Imperius from fourth year, just floating in mindless bliss, waiting for the next command.

She pushed herself to her feet, ignoring the unpleasant ache in her back. When she didn't move any further, Snape pointed at the sofa. "Now sit."

Trembling, she kept her eyes on him as she circled around the armchair and sat on the edge of the threadbare sofa. It creaked under her weight, and an ancient spring poked her bottom, but she was too terrified to find a more comfortable position. He eyed her irritably for a moment. "Don't you dare move," he said, disappearing through a second hidden door.

Hermione could hear him banging around in what must be the kitchen. She had long enough to catch her breath and find some sort of self-control before he swooped in again, a glass of amber liquid in hand.

"Drink this," he said, offering the glass. Hermione looked between Snape and the glass, thinking that he was mad if he thought she would ever drink anything he handed her.

Snape scowled. "It's *whiskey*. A Muggle brand. It is the only sedative I can give you that won't make you sleep for another twenty four hours or react badly with the Incendium."

"The what?" Hermione said. The name raised a hazy memory, something she had read somewhere she was sure, but it wasn't strong enough to grasp. Whatever it was, it didn't sound pleasant.

Snape's eyes narrowed, and he all but slammed the glass down on the table beside her. Whiskey splashed over the rim, sloshed across the table and dripped onto the carpet. Hermione shied away from his sudden burst of fury.

"Pay close attention, Miss Granger," he snarled as if she had asked him if werewolves were dangerous on nights of the full moon, "because I will only explain this once. The Dark Lord has seen fit to reward me for my actions last spring, and Bellatrix Lestrange convinced him that you would be an appropriate reward, no doubt as an insidious and multifaceted form of revenge for usurping her place with the Dark Lord. She also convinced him that giving you the Incendium Draught would be adequate insurance that you would not escape, or if you did, that you would not live long enough to benefit from it."

Hermione stared at him. A reward? How could she possibly be a reward? Unless...

Her horror must have shown on her face, because Snape sneered at her. "Yes, I see you've come to the correct conclusion and that we are of the same opinion on the matter."

"What...what does it do?"

"Oh," Snape smirked. The cruel smile he gave her was little more than a snarl full of crooked teeth. "Something you haven't filed away in your overactive brain? Then look it up. Here." He pulled a book from a shelf and practically threw it in her lap. Hermione saw that it was *Moste Potente Potions*. "I'm sure you are familiar with that title. Read up on the Vacuum Draught while you are at it. You were doused with that, too. I would make you write an essay, except you would turn in twice what I ask, and I refuse to grade another of your longwinded essays ever again. So, let's say an oral report, with specific reference to how the Incendium and Vacuum will interact, due by tomorrow afternoon."

Hermione was incredulous. "You're giving me an assignment?" she asked.

His eyes narrowed again in that dangerous way. "Did I stutter?"

Hermione was quick to shake her head, lest he explode at her again. "No, sir," she murmured, staring at the cover of the book in her lap. She wondered which way his mood would swing next and was vaguely surprised to hear him say, "Are you hungry?"

Hermione nodded more eagerly than she intended. She was hungry. Ravenous, in fact. The last meal she had eaten had been a breakfast at the Burrow the day she had gone to Diagon Alley with Harry and the Weasleys. And that was yesterday? Two days ago? Last week?

"Come." When she stood, still holding the book, he gave her a withering look that clearly told her that the swiftest way to lose her life was to go anywhere near the kitchen with his book. Hermione cautiously set it on the rickety table, too frightened of him to be offended that he had impugned on her meticulous care with books.

Snape led her down a short passage into a Muggle kitchen with toothpaste green Formica counters that were probably in style in 1955 and faded linoleum that was curling up along the walls. There was a small window over the sink, also with drawn curtains, and a door that must have lead out to the back garden.

"Sit," Snape said, pointing at a tiny kitchen table with only three chairs. Hermione obeyed, choosing the only chair that wouldn't leave her back to him. She nibbled her bottom lip and clenched her hands in her lap. She watched Snape anxiously as he moved back and forth, setting the tea to boil and slathering mustard on bread. She had never expected to see Snape doing such mundane things, especially for her and under these increasingly bizarre circumstances.

Of course, she would have never expected him to kill the headmaster either.

"What?" he snarled at her when he caught her staring at him.

Hermione dropped her eyes to her lap and mumbled an apology, noticing that there was a circlet of bruises around her wrist and four little half moon nail marks where her jumper had ridden up her arm. Right. That's where Bellatrix Lestrange had held her when she tried to feed her the other potion, the one that smelled like strawberries and rotten eggs, but Hermione had fought because the last potion seemed to have ripped out her soul...

"Miss Granger!" Hermione blinked at Snape's sharp bark. He was looking down his nose at her. "Tea?"

"Please."

A moment later Snape placed a cup of tea and a ham and mustard sandwich in front of her and sat down across from her with his own tea. Hermione was famished and wished he'd go away so she could stuff half the sandwich into her mouth like Ron after a Quidditch match; instead, she forced herself to remain in control and take one bite, even if it was slightly larger than what was entirely polite.

Hermione hated mustard, and its sour flavor permeated that first bite, followed closely by the unpleasant texture of stale bread. The combination was repulsive, but she kept chewing, eagerly taking another bite. She was so hungry that ham sandwiched between mustard and stale bread was like ambrosia from heaven. Within two minutes she had all but inhaled one half of the sandwich and was ready to devour the second half when she remembered that Snape was sitting across the table from her.

Hermione glanced at him quickly. He wasn't watching her at all, but frowning into his tea cup. He seemed perplexed and distracted and completely uninterested in Hermione's table manners.

Even so, she took a slower, more cautious bite of the sandwich. She stared at the perfect semi-circle her teeth had made in the bread as she chewed, and it suddenly occurred to her that he might have laced it with some potion, a poison or... or... it could be anything. She shouldn't have accepted anything from him. Bellatrix Lestrange had already fed her mysterious and dreadful potions, and here she was, accepting food from a traitorous, Death Eater Potions master within five minutes of deciding that she wouldn't take anything from him ever.

She felt sick and hopeless. And maybe this was what Persephone had felt like in the Underworld when she was handed the pomegranate: terrified and desperate, all but starving and lacking the willpower to refuse a small kindness like a ham and mustard sandwich, only realizing too late what it meant.

Snape's voice cut through her terrified fantasizing. "If I had poisoned it, Miss Granger, you would already be dead."

Hermione nodded slowly and forced herself to swallow.

And decided that, unlike Persephone, there was no way that she would take this lying down.

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## A/N:

1. Incendium = Latin for "fire," pronounced "inkendium."

2. Vacuum = Latin for "empty" or "void." In Latin, the u's are pronounced separately: "vac-u-um".

3. Hermione's flashbacks are a common symptom of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. So are nightmares, jumpiness, anger, anxiety, depression, and trouble sleeping. I've gotten most of my information on PTSD from the National Center for PTSD webpage.

4. In Greek Mythology, Persephone is the daughter of Demeter, the goddess of grain, who is seized by Hades, the god of the underworld, and taken to be his queen. She refuses to eat while she is in the underworld, until she is one day offered a pomegranate. She eats 6 seeds and forever after is forced to spend 6 months a year in the underworld. We call those 6 months winter.

5. Thanks to Sophi for her amazing beta work!

## Chapter 2: Down the Rabbit Hole

*Chapter 3 of 3*

Things get better, then they get worse.

**Warning:** Depending on where you are, there is some limited under-aged drinking in this chapter.

**Disclaimer:** Still not mine.

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What matters most is how you walk through the fire. Charles Bukowski

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Chapter 2: Down the Rabbit Hole

"There are rules, Miss Granger," Snape said as he led her back upstairs into the dark hallway.

"Yes, sir," Hermione agreed, shifting the weight of *Moste Potente Potions* off of her injured wrist.

"First and foremost, don't snoop. If you find a warded door, don't try to get past it. If I tell you not to touch something, don't touch it. If you think you can escape while I am not paying attention, I would highly advise you not to make the attempt. The house is heavily warded, and an attempt to leave it without me might kill you. And even if you do survive, you won't survive the Incendium. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"The parlor and kitchen are acceptable places for you to be. You may read almost any of the books, except those on the top shelves. Some others may shock you when you try to pick them up. Should that happen, take the hint and leave it be."

"Yes, sir."

"You may have the second bedroom," Snape said, opening the door. Daylight only slightly brighter than the hallway gloom cast Snape into a sharp contrast of shadows. "I warn you, however, until a few days ago, Peter Pettigrew was living in this room."

Hermione grimaced. Pettigrew was responsible for the deaths of Harry's parents and for Voldemort's resurrection, and that would have made him a respectable villain in her eyes, someone of whom she should truly be frightened, if she didn't remember the craven way in which he had begged her to save him that night in the Shrieking Shack, wringing his hands and sniveling at her, calling her a 'sweet girl' and a 'clever girl' and simpering. He had made her skin crawl. There was something fundamentally slimy and repulsive about him, and the last thing she wanted was to sleep in the same bed as Wormtail. It would almost be better to sleep with Snape.

"Don't worry," Snape continued, revulsion tingeing his voice. Hermione had the momentary sense that he was on exactly the same page as she was where Wormtail was concerned. "I've cleaned it thoroughly. However, if you find something that you expect may have belonged to him, bring it to me so that I may burn it posthaste."

"Yes, sir."

"There is only one bathroom in the house. I will put a door on the hallway for you. Until then, you may go through the master bedroom."

"Thank you, sir."

Snape moved past her, letting more light into the hallway. "We have a couple of hours until the shops close. Use the bruise-healing paste I've left for you on the bathroom counter and clean up a bit. I expect you down stairs in half an hour."

"Yes, sir," Hermione answered to his retreating back. Suddenly remembering that she still didn't know what happened to her wand, she said, "Er, sir?"

Snape stopped and turned, raising an eyebrow at her.

"Where's my wand?"

"I don't know," said Snape, as if the question wasn't as interesting as he had expected it to be. He turned away again and disappeared into the stairwell. "And even if I had it," he called, "you wouldn't be using it, anyway."

Hermione's heart fluttered. Her earlier panic resurfaced as she stood in the hallway and listened to his retreating foot steps. Without a wand, her chances for escape had narrowed severely, down to nearly impossible. She knew she wouldn't be able to get past Snape's warding without a wand, and she certainly wouldn't be able to protect herself against him even if she could get out. She felt hopeless and defeated. Tears threatened to come.

A sharp pain in her injured wrist reminded her of the heavy book in her arms.

Hermione took a steadying breath and stepped into the bedroom. It was half the size of the master bedroom and just as gloomy and dilapidated. A narrow twin bed covered by a tatty quilt, a battered bedside table, and a wardrobe with a missing door barely fit in the room. The curtains were drawn here as well, though some daylight leaked in

around the edges. Hermione wondered if maybe Snape really was a vampire. He certainly seemed to be adverse to sunlight.

She set the book on the bedside table and, cradling her arm to her chest, plopped down on the bed. She was exhausted, and between the torture of the night before and the emotional rollercoaster she had been on all afternoon, she thought she might collapse.

And really, she reasoned, it could be worse. True, Voldemort had given her as a gift to a loyal Death Eater, and if she had interpreted Snape's brief, furious lecture on her intended role as his captive correctly, she was meant to be some kind of sex toy. The mere thought of it turned her stomach, but, she remembered, he hadn't seemed any more pleased than she was. He also hadn't made any indication as to whether or not she would be filling the role, which she hoped was a good sign.

It didn't seem that she was in any immediate danger. Snape had fed her and given her her own space, allowed her free range of some of the downstairs living areas, and though he had shouted at her, which really was nothing new, he hadn't really threatened her, except with an Imperius Curse, and she wasn't really sure if he was serious about that or not....

Hermione shivered and gave the curtains a halfhearted tug and wasn't all that surprised to find that they had been spelled shut.

*Moste Potente Potions* beckoned her, and she really did want to read about the potions Snape had mentioned, but he was expecting her downstairs soon, and she didn't want to make him angry. She wanted to keep him placated long enough to think of a plan and make her escape, and being late had never endeared anyone to Snape. Hermione resigned herself to waiting just a little longer to contend the complications that the potions would undoubtedly bring and went off to the bathroom to do something with her battered appearance instead.

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Half an hour later, Hermione descended the stairs into the living room, clean and bruise free. Her hair had been rinsed and somewhat tamed, although she still looked ill around the eyes, and her clothes were rumpled and dirty. The bruise-healing paste had taken care of the bruising, not only on her face and wrist, but on a dozen other places she found when she undressed.

But she looked respectable at least, and less like a captive of war or battered housewife than she had an hour ago.

She also had nearly sixty five pounds and her debit card, which she had found in her jeans pocket. The sixty pounds and change were from her parents to exchange at Gringotts for a new set of scales, and her debit card was intended to be drawn upon to buy school books, although Hermione had intended to use the money for Horcrux hunting. It seemed a small miracle that they were still there, that the Death Eaters hadn't taken them from her, although they might not have known what the cash and the plastic rectangle could do for her in the Muggle world.

Now she intended to put the money to other uses, namely making a well-timed escape if she had the opportunity.

Snape looked up as she entered, giving her his usual spiteful look. "It's about time," he snarled at her, putting a book back on one of the top shelves.

His mere presence reduced her bravery by half. "Sorry, sir," she mumbled.

Snape made an impatient noise and stalked to the door where he paused to mutter an incomprehensible password before opening it.

Hermione blinked in the brightness of the afternoon sunlight as she followed Snape out onto a cobbled street in a run down, and as far as she could tell, deserted neighborhood. Windows and doors were boarded up, trash filled the gutters, and the hulks of abandoned cars crouched by the curb, rusting away in the elements. A single monolithic smoke stack loomed over the row of houses across the street, and she realized that if she had been able to open the drapes in her room, she would have been able to see it from her window.

Snape was already halfway down the block. She hurried after him, trying to memorize street names and form a mental map while keeping up with his long-legged stride. She was skittish at first, worried by the sinister atmosphere of the empty neighborhood, before she remembered that she was hurrying after a Death Eater, and anything that might attack them in this neighborhood wouldn't stand a chance. At that point, she decided that this was what going mad felt like: feeling safe in the presence of the same Death Eater who had killed the Headmaster and betrayed them all.

After a few blocks, they emerged onto a high street with several shops: an off license, a chemist, and a Marks and Spencer among others. Snape stopped at the head of the high street. He turned to her and, to her surprise, shoved 80 quid into her hand. "Is that enough?"

She stared down at the Muggle money. The Queen smiled up at her blithely. "Er, for what, sir?"

"Clothing and any other necessities you might need at the moment."

"It should be."

"I will be back for you in half an hour. See that you are waiting here when I return."

Hermione looked up at him sharply. She seemed to be living from one surreal moment to the next. "You're letting me shop alone?"

"The Incendium will kill you in just under " Here he pulled out a gold pocket watch and flipped it open. " thirty six hours. I highly suggest that you wait long enough to read up on it before you make any inadvisable escape attempts."

Snape tucked the watch back into his pocket and looked at her thoughtfully. She dropped her eyes a second too late, realizing that he had used Legilimency on her in the few seconds it took her to remember he was a Legilimens. "The train station is outside of my wards, and although the Muggle money and credit card in your pocket would certainly buy you a train ticket to London, I promise that I will get to you before you can hand it across the counter."

It wasn't a threat as such, she realized, just a statement of fact. And besides, she should have known better. Snape wasn't stupid. He wouldn't have let her set foot out of the house if he thought she had any possibility of escape. Her chest tightened with panic again. Even the likelihood of a Muggle escape had narrowed dangerously.

"Yes, sir," she managed.

Snape smirked. "Half an hour, Miss Granger," he said and turned away.

Hermione watched him disappear around the corner at the end of the block. The feeling of looming madness increased; Snape had left her alone with enough money in her pocket to buy a train ticket, and she wasn't even going to try to escape.

Hermione pushed her growing sense of hopelessness back again and walked down to the Marks and Spencer.

This store was much smaller and more cramped than the one she and her parents had often frequented; the lighting flickered and the selection was smaller. No one paid her much mind as she moved through the racks of clothing. She picked up two t-shirts and a pair of jeans and had just enough left to buy a dressing gown, knickers and socks.

She emerged with five minutes to spare and a little under 20 quid in change. She popped into the chemist across the street for toiletries: shampoo and conditioner, toothpaste, dental floss and a toothbrush, the whole while grimly amused at the fact that her parents had so ingrained dental care that she worried about even while held captive by a turncoat Death Eater.

Snape was coming around the corner again as she was leaving the chemist. He scowled at her as she crossed the empty street but said nothing as she fell in step with

him. She noticed that he was carrying a plastic bag and decided that she was wrong. This was what going mad felt like, walking along calmly in broad daylight with Snape, who was wearing more or less Muggle clothing and carrying a plastic bag with a Tesco logo on it. She knew he was a half-blood now at least but years and years of watching him swoop about with his robes whirling behind him had ill-prepared her for Snape in a Muggle environment.

She was Alice falling down the rabbit hole with no end in sight, and the sensation only deepened when he stopped suddenly.

"Are you allergic to fish?"

She blinked in surprise. "No, sir."

He handed her another twenty quid. "Then pick up enough for both of us. I will be back in a moment."

Hermione turned and saw that they had stopped in front of a fish and chip shop. As Snape disappeared around another corner, Hermione did as she was told. When she came out a bit later with their dinner, Snape was waiting for her. He relieved her of the food without a word and stalked away.

The walk back to the house was conducted with the same silence as before, but Snape had slowed his stride somewhat, and Hermione was able to pay more attention to the streets they took. She still felt uneasy walking through the empty streets. The sun was descending towards the horizon now, the shadows growing deep and long, and the abandoned houses looked like crouching trolls ready to devour them.

She was absurdly relieved when Snape warded the door behind them and wondered whether she should redefine the feeling of going mad again.

They ate their fish and chips at the kitchen table in silence, and although Hermione was neither here nor there on fish and chips, or fried foods in general for that matter, she was still hungry and devoured every bit of the meal.

As soon as the last chip passed her lips, Snape was looking down his nose at her. "Don't you have an assignment to complete?" he said.

Hermione could take a hint. She rinsed her dishes in the sink without having to be told as she doubted his hospitality extended to washing up after her, then went up stairs to take proper shower with shampoo and conditioner. She also brushed her teeth with toothpaste and an actual toothbrush and put on a clean shirt and knickers and jeans. Then she made herself comfortable in bed with *Moste Potente Potions* across her lap, at least as comfortable as she could be on a lumpy mattress with a murderer downstairs and a mysterious potion hanging over her head.

It wasn't so bad, so far. She had always imagined that life among the Death Eaters would be full of wild revels and Muggle-torturing at every turn, although that was a rather impractical way to conduct a war, but it was just Snape snapping and snarling at her and mustard on her sandwiches.

Or so she thought until she opened to the chapter on Forbidden Draughts and read the first paragraph.

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"Are you out of your mind?" Hermione screeched. Snape looked up at her, startled, as she barreled into the kitchen where he was reading a dusty potions tome and drinking tea.

Hermione had read through the chapter on the Forbidden Draughts with a growing, sickening horror. There were seven potions, all horrible and cruel in their intent. One was the Inversus Draught, which turned the drinker inside out, something she had briefly glanced over when she was a second year trying to brew Polyjuice Potion. There were others that were equally horrifying, but she paid little attention to those as she was more interested in the two which that mad Lestrangle woman had poured down her throat. Those two, though, those two made her stomach twist into painful knots, and her vision skew, and her sense of self-preservation dwindle in the force of her outraged anger.

"It will burn me alive if I don't... if we don't " Hermione made a vague gesture that encompassed everything loathsome and terrifying about the Incendium. "There's no bloody way that is going to happen!"

"No? I beg to differ," Snape said, setting down his cup with infuriating calm. "You will do exactly what you have to do to stay alive, whether you like it or not."

"You're disgusting," she snarled at him and regretted it immediately, because Snape's eyes narrowed and his lips thinned. He stood, leaning towards her, supporting himself on the tips of his fingers. Hermione backed away from him in terror, her indignant anger long forgotten. What had happened to placating him? She was an idiot and, now he was going to hurt her or curse her or What had she been thinking?

"You idiot girl," Snape snarled between clenched teeth. "You are a bargaining chip. You are strategically useful in many different ways to many different people. Believe me, the last thing I wanted as a reward was you or any of you vile creatures I've had to put up for the last sixteen years, which is exactly why Bellatrix Lestrangle chose that potion as a means of revenge!"

She stared up at him with wide, terrified eyes, expecting something horrific to happen, but his anger suddenly went out like a candle flame, and he straightened up with a sigh. "Sit down," he said, gesturing at the table. "I need a drink."

Hermione obeyed, hoping she hadn't ruined her chances for escape, although now, after reading up on the potions, escape was essentially a death sentence. It seemed that not only was she was tumbling down Alice's rabbit hole, she was also bouncing off every painful, outlandish obstacle along the way.

Tears threatened to spill. Hermione buried her face in her hands and willed herself not to cry. She wouldn't cry in front of him, and not about this.

"Drink that," Snape said and something heavy thumped on the table in front of her. Hermione looked up after she was fairly certain that she had regained her equilibrium. There was a tumbler of amber liquid in front of her, whiskey probably, as that was what he had tried to give her earlier. Snape had reseated himself, setting his own tumbler on the table and filling it.

She pushed it away. "I don't want it."

"Merlin's beard," Snape said wearily, lifting the glass to his lips. "Drink it, Granger. I won't have you wailing at me like a banshee all night."

"Fine." Hermione grabbed the glass and threw it back. The whiskey was vile and burned its way down her throat, killing her taste buds and scorching her sinuses along the way. She doubled over and coughed violently; when she was able to breathe again, she found Snape watching her with an impassive expression.

"What did you learn from you reading?"

"That I'll burn to death," she said sullenly, fiddling with the glass. A warm feeling was spreading through her, like a milder version of the potion she had been forced to drink the night before.

"Taking a page out of Potter's book of people skills, I see," Snape said. "I want a proper report."

Hermione took a deep breath and began. "The Incendium is a timed potion. Whole Ashwinder eggs, dragon's blood, sulfur, aloe, pomegranate seeds, strawberries and the blood of the binder are brewed together, stirred every seven minutes, thirteen times counter clockwise, for forty nine minutes by a married person of either sex. Within forty eight hours the drinker develops a fever. By the end of seven hours, if the requirements to deactivate the potion are not met, the drinker literally bursts into flame."

"I see your knack for memorizing entire paragraphs word for word has not depreciated in the last three months," Snape commented. "Do enlighten me as to the requirements."



"You know what the requirements are," she muttered.

"I do. But I would like to hear it from you."

Prickly heat ignited in Hermione's cheeks and spread down her body. "The binder and the victim have to... they have to..."

She couldn't say it. She could barely even think it, and he wanted her to give him a report on it?

"Yes?" Snape prompted in a tone of voice that implied it would be best to obey.

Hermione took another deep breath and looked anywhere but at him. The words tumbled out of her mouth as quickly as she could speak them. "The victim has to have intercourse with the binder during the seven hours that the Incendium is active, otherwise, the dragon's blood, Ashwinder eggs, and sulfur ignite and burn the victim to death from the inside out. If the requirements are met, the aloe activates and suppresses the other elements."

"A passable summation," Snape said. "What about the Vacuum?"

Hermione eagerly switched topics, even though she couldn't decide whether the Incendium or the Vacuum was the worse potion. "There wasn't much about it, sir. There was no formula, just a description. It somehow dampens the magical core for three minutes so that any spell or potion applied during that time will bind to a witch or wizard's magic. Whatever that spell or potion is, it lasts for the rest of their lives." Synapses fired and Hermione looked up at Snape. "Does the spell or potion draw its power from the wizard's magic?"

"Yes. Indefinitely."

"So if someone were cursed with a Cruciatius Curse, it would last until it killed them?"

Snape nodded as he poured himself, and her, another drink. "Now that you have worked out the intricacies of the Vacuum, how does it interact with the Incendium?"

Hermione frowned. "Well, meeting the requirements wouldn't work, would it?"

"Not necessarily. Where many spells have no time limit and will not end unless stopped by an outside force, timed potions like the Incendium are designed with a termination point."

"So, it would end, but..." And here she had to pause to put her sudden understanding into words. "But would the cycle restart?"

"Precisely."

Hermione found herself reaching for the tumbler of alcohol, if only to distract herself from deepening horror with physical pain. She endured another coughing fit while the whiskey burned through her. "It's a ridiculous potion," she said, once she could breathe again.

"Oh?" said Snape, and she'd never heard him speak to her like that, as if he were interested. "I would have used the modifiers cruel and terrifying."

"But it is also absurd and excessive. Why not use the Imperius Curse or a love potion?"

"It is a love potion."

"In the way that a Killing Curse is a gentle incentive," Hermione huffed. She pushed her tumbler toward him for a refill. "It's... it's...humiliating."

"And there you are, Miss Granger," Snape said as he refilled her glass. "It was invented by a wizard who wanted revenge on a wife who wouldn't let him touch her, but went through other wizards as if they were disposable tissue."

"Did it work?"

"Yes and no. She died, screaming in agony, and he received a one way-ticket to Azkaban."

Hermione drank the whiskey down, and although she winced as it burned its way through her sinuses and down her throat, she did not have another coughing fit. Afterwards she felt warm and kind of wobbly, definitely more relaxed than she had been all day. It was almost nice.

Hermione pushed the glass towards him for another refill.

"I don't think so," Snape said, capping the bottle. "I don't care to deal with a hung-over teenager tomorrow morning."

"I won't do it," Hermione insisted suddenly. She was much calmer now, but much less brave than she had been when she charged into the kitchen to shout and rage at him. But, she needed to make it clear that it wasn't happening, ever, not if she could help it.

"When the Incendium activates, I suspect you will change your mind," Snape said and pulled the book he had been reading when she had entered closer. "Now go away. I was in the middle of something."

And then he was reading again, his hair hanging limply around his face, and had totally dismissed her. Hermione pushed away from the table, feeling rejected and terrified and deeply confused, and left him to his reading.

Upstairs, she slipped out of her jeans and slid into bed. The springs poked at her, but she didn't notice, because she was crying finally, with great heaving sobs, and when she finally exhausted her tears, she slept.

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#### A/N:

1. Incendium = Latin for "fire," pronounced "inkendium."
2. Vacuum = Latin for "empty" or "void." In Latin, the u's are pronounced separately (vac-u-um).
3. Inversus = Latin for "altered." This seemed like an acceptable name for the potion Hermione read about in CoS, since JKR didn't provide one for it.