The Endlessness That You Fear

by JackieJLH

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Prologue - She Knows

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Prologue

There are very few certainties in Hermione Granger's life these days, very few things that she can say, without hesitation, that she *knows*. The things she learned in school, the information gleaned from thousands of books, none of it matters anymore—none of it is real to her. Nothing she's ever read could have prepared her for what her life has become. All that exists in her world now is this dark building below the Muggle streets, her makeshift bed, and the few truths cycling through her mind.

She *knows* she won't hear the rain, no matter how hard she tries. She *knows* it's because the rain isn't real, that she's nearly ninety feet below ground and the windows are charmed. She *knows* she's seen nothing but raindrops dripping down the glass for nearly seven weeks now and supposes it's the building's way of protesting the way it's been mistreated. Knowing this doesn't stop her from being bothered by it. Silence is deafening when it's constant.

She *knows* that she will fall asleep faster if she sings to herself. She first started this when she was very small, on the nights when her parents would go out and leave her with the girl who lived next door, who would spend the entire night sitting on the back porch with her boyfriend and leave Hermione alone in the empty house. Now she closes her eyes and pretends Julie is still just outside, sees herself wearing the white nightie with pink ribbon on the hem her mum bought for her last summer, and she tries not to remember that she's been alone for nearly a month.

She *knows* her side has lost the war—they must have, it seems—but also *knows* that it really doesn't matter anymore which side won. She *knows* Harry is probably dead, and Ron too. She worries that one day she'll forget to worry about whether all of the people she loves are dead or alive.

She *knows* her life was saved by a traitor. What she doesn't know is whether allowing such a person to save her makes her a traitor too. Sometimes, she's sure it does, and sitting here in the dark, it's easy to believe it. If she really thinks on it, she decides this isn't true, and that her guilt is just her mind making chaos out of her swirling emotions, but she finds it easier to blame herself because she tries not to think too much about anything these days.

There are a few other things Hermione knows now, things she would rather not admit to anyone, even herself.

She *knows* how to cast the Killing Curse, and she *knows* what it's like to have said curse fly from her wand; she remembers the way her hand tingled and burned as if in shock. She *knows* what death smells like and *knows* what a body that's been dead for weeks feels like beneath her fingertips. She *knows* how much her stomach can hurt

after days upon days without food, and knows that rats and cockroaches can be considered an acceptable meal to a starving person. She *knows* she should have died six weeks ago, and she sometimes wishes she had.

She *knows* she's probably gone a bit mad down here, all alone, and that if she were to go back in time and meet the Hermione she'd been two months ago, she would scare herself.

She *knows* that somewhere out there, the man who saved her life is probably looking for her because he's the only one who realises she's not dead. And she *knows* that even though Snape is a traitor, if she's honest with herself, she hopes that he finds her. She's barely survived this long, and he may be her only chance.

Chapter One - The Traitor

Even though Snape is a traitor, Hermione hopes he finds her. She's barely survived this long, and he may be her only
chance.

The first time they met the Death Eaters in a full scale fight, they were sure it was *The Battle*, the one that they'd all been anticipating and dreading from the very start of the second war. They fought bravely and with determination, everyone willing to give their lives for their beliefs.

By the time it was over, everyone was exhausted despite the energy-giving potions they'd been taking at every opportunity, dozens were dead, and both sides had pulled back to regroup. No one had been victorious, not really. Over the following months, they fought four more such battles, some lasting hours and others lasting days. Neither side seemed to be gaining an advantage over the other.

When Harry, Ron and Hermione made yet another trip to Hogwarts to spend what little time they had to themselves poring over books in search of long-sought information, as they'd done many times before, they were on edge. They expected an attack...they always did. It seemed safer to be cautious and fearful than to be overly confident. For once, that fear was warranted; as they opened the school gates with the password the headmistress had given them, dementors descended from the skies. While they were distracted with trying to hold off the dozens of soul-sucking monsters, the Death Eaters Apparated onto the grounds around them, quickly making their way inside the opened gates.

Clearly outnumbered but unwilling to risk Apparition in the midst of such chaos...leaving a body part behind in the middle of a battle would surely result in them never seeing said body part again, and anyway, they were Gryffindors, and Gryffindors didn't run, right?...they fought for their lives.

A flood of students and professors poured from the castle in the distance, racing towards the oncoming Death Eaters and dementors with their wands raised and looks of grim determination on their faces. Harry sent a Patronus racing towards London, alerting the Aurors. Another flew from McGonagall's wand, summoning the Order, and more than one person thought to notify St. Mungo's of the ongoing battle. Not a single Auror, Order member, or Healer appeared, and after sending her own Patronus to the Ministry a few moments later, hoping against hope that perhaps Harry's just hadn't gotten through, an overwhelming sense of dread and panic settled in Hermione's stomach. For whatever reason...one she realized she may never learn...there didn't seem to be any help coming. They, a small group of a dozen or so capable wizards and witches and a slew of barely trained, terrified students, were on their own.

The children shouted hexes and jinxes, the only spells they knew well enough to use effectively. Spells such as these were no match for silently-cast Unforgivables. The older witches and wizards, including Harry and his friends, had practically spent more time fighting than not over the past year, and they didn't waste their time with anything they'd been taught in school. Every one of them took aim at the Death Eaters without hesitation; every spell that found its victim was fatal. And yet it wasn't enough. Their side was dwindling fast, and more Death Eaters were arriving even still.

Dodging a curse that crackled through the air and just barely missed her head, Hermione began casting spells. If she'd been asked a year ago if she could ever cast an Unforgivable, she would have answered with a resolute no, but now she cast them without hesitation, having seen too many people die at the hands of injured, but still able, Death Eaters.

Hermione was separated from Harry and Ron as the fight escalated into an all-out battle, and she found herself between Neville Longbottom and a surprisingly capable second-year Hufflepuff. In the frenzy of the battle she didn't see the Hufflepuff disappear from her left, and only noticed the girl was gone when she nearly stepped on her where she lay on the ground. Not daring to even take a moment to see if the student was still alive, Hermione only let her rage fuel the spells she cast.

When Neville collapsed beside her in a flash of red, she nearly faltered, but instead turned to face her friend's attacker, and then nearly jumped back in surprise when she found herself face to face with Severus Snape, unmasked but still wearing Death Eater robes, his wand pointed directly at her chest. Before she could say a word or even *think* a spell, a flash of green erupted from his wand, and she fell to the ground so quickly that she didn't even have time to register what had happened until he stepped over her body and disappeared from her line of sight.

She was certain she should be dead, and yet she seemed to still be conscious and aware. The notion that she may have become a ghost skirted around the edge of her thoughts, but she brushed the idea away when she realized that she couldn't move. Her mind flashed back to her second year, to being Petrified, and decided it was similar to that, though she hadn't been aware of her surroundings at all after the Basilisk's attack. Struggling to take hold of her wand, which was lying only inches from her hand and nearly right in front of her face, she fast discovered that she wasn't able to move even her eyes. The only thing she seemed to be capable of was breathing, and even that was limited to short, shallow breaths that were barely enough to keep her lungs from burning.

Wondering if this was what death was really like and terrified that may be the case, she tried desperately to figure out what was going on around her. She could see her right hand and her wand, and she could see her left hand where it lay draped over Neville's arm. She saw that Neville was bleeding quite a bit, but he was still breathing shallowly, and she prayed he'd survive long enough for help to arrive. Wishing she could close her eyes against the sight of so much blood, she tried to drown out the screams and the hissing sounds of spells flying through the air.

A student ran past, looking back over his shoulder and screaming, *"Petrificus Totalus!"* Hermione saw the flash of light, heard a deep, rumbling laugh behind her, and felt the force of heavy footsteps running towards her as they reverberated through the ground. Then she felt a sharp pain in her side, and barely registered that a Death Eater had tripped over her before realizing that she suddenly couldn't breathe. All of the air had been knocked out of her by the Death Eater's kick, and now, being unable to take a full breath and with pain radiating from her side and intensifying with every second, she struggled to get enough air and found that she couldn't. She fought desperately to

breathe, knowing it was hopeless as darkness came over her.

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When she next became aware of her surroundings, it was well past nightfall. Neville lay beside her, barely breathing, and she still couldn't move. A man was kneeling above her muttering spells under his breath, his wand pointed at Neville's chest. She desperately tried to identify the voice, but he was speaking too softly. Then she felt someone's hand close over hers, locking her fingers tightly around Neville's wrist, and Snape's face came into view once more.

"Wait for me," he hissed at her, and she had only a second to wonder what he was talking about...where, exactly, did he think she was going to *go*?...before she felt something being pressed into her wand hand. Just as an all-too-familiar tugging feeling began behind her navel, she heard him whisper, "*Finite Incantatem,*" and only had enough time to tighten her grip on Neville's arm before the Portkey pulled her away.

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When the world stopped spinning, Hermione jumped to her feet, glancing around nervously. She was in a house, that much was apparent, but *whose* house, she had no idea. She could only see two doors...through the open one she caught a glimpse of a bathroom, and the moonlight pouring through the window beside the other door suggested that it led outside. There was a bed in one corner of the small house and Muggle kitchen appliances on the opposite side of the room. A small table and a few chairs took up the center of the floor.

Taking everything in apprehensively, Hermione decided that the most important thing at the moment was to make sure Neville was all right. She had no idea what had happened to her other friends, but the battle had been over by the time Snape had come to send her away, and she couldn't imagine them *leaving her*, even if they thought she was dead, so....

She pushed those thoughts away, refusing to allow herself to think that anything could have happened to them. *Surely*, she told herself, *they thought I was dead and just didn't have the time or the ability to take me with them.* Refusing to entertain the thought that she could be wrong, or wonder why they wouldn't have taken Neville, if the situation she'd imagined were true, she focused her attention on Neville. He was breathing easier now, and his wounds, while still there, had stopped bleeding. Hermione wondered if Snape had been casting healing charms on him when she'd regained consciousness, and decided that he must have been...from what she'd observed on the battlefield, Neville shouldn't have even survived being transported, and yet he seemed to be holding his own now.

She reached into her sleeve for her wand and then realized, belatedly, that it had been left behind. That was the thing to nearly break her control, and she fought back tears as she gently took Neville's wand from his hand. Focusing the last of her energy on levitating him carefully, she gently settled him onto the only bed. Once he was settled, she began exploring.

'Should I just wait here?' she wondered, peering out the windows apprehensively. The tiny cottage seemed to be in the middle of nowhere...she could see nothing but trees. But it was dark, she reasoned, and maybe there would be more to see come morning.

Snape had told her to wait, but could she trust him? He was a traitor! He'd killed Dumbledore... and then *saved her life?* It didn't make any sense. She cast another worried glance back at Neville, wishing he'd wake up and help her decide.

Finally, too exhausted to go anywhere at the moment, and acknowledging that Neville was too injured to be moved yet again, she settled into one of the chairs in the center or the room, grimacing as a twinge of pain raced down her side. The thought that the Death Eater who had kicked her had bruised or broken some of her ribs flitted across her mind, but she was too tired to really care.

She tried to set up some wards over the door and windows, but Neville's wand didn't seem to like the sudden change of ownership, and in the end she only succeeded in a simple locking charm. Frustrated and exhausted, Hermione turned so that she was facing the door, leant her head against the back of the chair, and let her eyes drift shut.

Chapter Two - Waiting

Chapter 3 of 8

Even though Snape is a traitor, Hermione hopes he finds her. She's barely survived this long, and he may be her only
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The sound of someone talking woke Hermione up hours later, and she nearly fell out of her chair. She quickly stood and surveyed the room nervously, wanting to kick herself for having slept so long. The sun was shining brightly through the windows, and she must have been asleep for *hours*, she realised with a fleeting feeling of panic. She darted to the bathroom, glanced inside to make sure no one was hiding there, and then ran to the window.

Outside, as she'd observed the night before, there was nothing but a forest so thick that she couldn't see more than ten feet past the tree line from where she stood. Frowning at the wand in her hand and wondering how long it would take for it to work correctly for her...*and would it ever, if it wasn't suited to her?*...she considered venturing outside to see if she could determine where Snape had sent them. But then she heard the same voice that had woken her, and this time realized that it was Neville; he was talking in his sleep. He didn't seem to be forming actual words, though, just mumbling.

Pulling her chair across the room to sit beside his bed, she saw that he was sweating profusely, and wiped his face gently with the edge of the blanket. He felt disconcertingly warm, and she eyed his injuries nervously, wondering if they weren't healed all that well after all. Not sure what else she could do, and not having enough experience with healing spells to risk attempting anything herself...especially with Neville's wand...she dug around in the bathroom cabinet until she found an old rag, cast a quick cleansing charm on it, and then wet it, placing the cool cloth on Neville's feverish head.

'What am I going to do?!' she asked herself, feeling only seconds away from sobbing. *'Things weren't supposed to go this way!'* Sniffling and doing her best to hold back her tears, she considered her options.

For all she knew, they'd lost the battle. Maybe they'd even lost the war. She had no owl, and for a moment she decided that the best thing to do would be to send a message using her Patronus to let her friends know she was all right. But then the thought occurred to her that even if Harry and Ron were alive, they might not be alone. They may very well have been captured, and sending confirmation that she was still alive could endanger their lives...or Snape's, for that matter.

Did she *care* if they found out Snape had helped her? She wasn't really all that sure she did. But a little voice in the back of her mind kept telling her that he'd saved her, and so maybe he really *wasn't* trying to kill them all. Maybe there was more to the story than she'd thought....

She briefly entertained the idea of Apparating back to Hogwarts, or to the Burrow, or St. Mungo's, anywhere to get help, but hesitated. Who knew if someone would find the cottage? She could hardly leave Neville alone and defenseless.... And Snape had told her to wait, and if he *was* to be trusted, then perhaps there was a reason he'd sent them *here*, of all places.

A cold chill crept up Hermione's spine at that thought, and she quickly pushed it aside, resolving to wait for now, at least until Neville was strong enough to work his own wand. She didn't much like the idea of trying to do anything as risky as Apparating with it to a strange, not when she could barely cast a simple locking charm without a significant amount of difficulty. While Apparition didn't necessarily require a wand, she didn't much like the idea of being practically defenceless when they arrived at their destination.

Sighing inwardly, her eyes fell on the refrigerator, and she realized that she hadn't eaten since the morning before. As if reminded that she *should* be hungry by now, her stomach growled loudly.

Unfortunately, the refrigerator, she soon found, held nothing but rotten food. It was still cold, and seemed to be running on magic instead of electricity, but everything was months old at best. Most of it had even started to take on a greenish hue. Finally, after quite a bit of searching, she found some canned soup in a cupboard. After cooking it the Muggle way (because really, the last thing she needed to do, she reasoned, was burn down the cottage by trying to heat something with Neville's wand), she ate half, putting the rest in the refrigerator in hopes of giving it to Neville if...*'When,'* she corrected herself quickly...he woke up.

Bored and feeling more than a little anxious, she made up her mind to go outside and look around before it got dark again. She's slept longer than she'd realized, and the sun was already starting to get a bit low in the sky. It took her a few minutes to get the nerve to open the door, and even longer to take the first few steps outside, but it all was rather anticlimactic. After walking twice around the cottage, she realized that there really wasn't anything to see. There were trees and grass... and more trees. The occasional bird flitted around the yard, but for the most part, there were just *trees*.

Pressing her hand to her side gently and finding that it didn't hurt quite as much as it had the night before, she carefully climbed up into the branches of a tree on the side of the house and found that the forest extended as far as she could see in all directions. In the distance, she saw something that she suspected was the ocean, but it looked like nothing but a thin line of color on the horizon, and she worried that it could just be her mind playing tricks on her.

Hermione had never had the best sense of direction, and she realized that if she was going to leave, she'd have to do it by magical means or risk wandering in the expansive forest forever. She wished, more than anything, that Harry and Ron were there. For some reason, even when they panicked, she was usually able to keep her calm when with them and decide on a course of action. By herself, with no one to reassure her that she knew what she was doing and look to her for answers, she couldn't make up her mind.

Still feeling tired, hungry, and overwhelmingly afraid, she went back inside and returned to her seat beside Neville's bed, clutching his clammy hand in hers as she fell asleep.

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She spent three days in the small cottage before the decision to wait or leave was taken out of her hands. Now she *had* to do *something,* whether she wanted to or not. Neville was getting worse...much, much worse. His fever hadn't gone down; if anything, it had risen. He was muttering and mumbling to himself deliriously almost constantly, and his wounds were obviously infected now. She hadn't heard a thing from Snape, or from anyone else, for that matter. Hermione had given in to temptation and sent a message to Ron the night before using her Patronus, but it had come back to her almost immediately. Her attempts to contact Harry, Professor McGonagall, and Arthur Weasley had similar results. She hoped that it was just a matter of strong wards surrounding the cottage, and not... well, she didn't want to think about what else it could mean.

She was out of food, and despite practicing daily, she was not having much luck using Neville's wand. Hermione knew that the wand was supposed to choose the witch or wizard, and that they were rarely were suited to just *anyone,* but Ron had used his brother's old wand, hadn't he? And Neville had used his father's for years.... It didn't seem fair that now, when lives depended on her ability to be able to conjure things like food and clean water, the odds were not in her favor.

Whatever reasons she had for remaining in the cottage as long as she already had, none of them seemed to matter anymore. If they stayed, they'd probably starve, and she wasn't sure Neville could survive much longer without the attention of a Healer.

The rest of that day she practiced Apparating while holding things, since she'd never had much reason to use Side-Along Apparition until now, trying to be as careful as possible. She'd seen the spell used to reattach body parts after a splinching and knew the incantation, but she'd never preformed it herself, and the thought that she'd accidentally leave something important behind, like her head, terrified her. After a few successful Apparitions from one end of the cottage to the other and then onto the roof and back again, she decided she would leave in the morning if nothing had changed.

Perhaps, she thought, the reason that she was so reluctant was that she had no idea where she was. Long-distance Apparition was significantly harder than going somewhere nearby, and if she couldn't find help, she had no idea how to get back to the cottage again. One had to have a very good idea of *exactly* where they were going to Apparate there without issue, and now was not the time to be testing that rule.

She finally decided on St. Mungo's as her destination. The battle had been fought in Scotland, after all, and even if the good side *had* lost, she doubted that the affects of the defeat had been felt as far away as London yet. The Healers could help Neville, and she'd be able to find a way to contact her friends.

When the next morning came, she rose before the sun, wanting to get to London early and avoid as many Muggles as she could. Focusing all of her concentration on her spells, she cast cleansing charms on herself and her clothes in an effort to look less conspicuous, and a Disillusionment Charm on Neville. Then she removed his robe, leaving him in rather plain looking clothes. She hoped that she'd be able to get inside the hospital without any Muggles seeing him floating beside her, unconscious and barely alive, but if for some reason someone did see him, the bloody robes would have made it all that much harder to explain.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she pulled her friend up until he was leaning heavily against her shoulder, wrapped her arms around him tightly, gritted her teeth, squeezed her eyes shut, and Apparated to a small alley she knew was located just down the street from the wizarding hospital.

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They landed with a thud in a dark, narrow alley, and Hermione quickly checked them both over to ensure that they were completely 'there'. Satisfying that the Apparition had gone well, she carefully propped Neville up against the wall, hid him behind some dustbins, and removed the Disillusionment Charm. If she was going to leave him without a wand, it wouldn't do to have him recognized as a wizard immediately if someone...like a Death Eater...happened to find him.

Glancing around nervously in the dim light of the early morning, Hermione stepped nervously out of the alley and headed towards the hospital, and then stopped dead in her tracks.

When she'd made the decision to Apparate to St. Mungo's, she'd considered all the things she might find there. The scenario she was hoping for, of course, was to find that everything was fine, that she'd been thought dead and would be reunited with her friends. At worst, she suspected that Death Eaters might have taken control of the facility, and that she wouldn't be able to go there for help after all. But nothing she'd imagined could have prepared her for what she saw.

Where St. Mungo's had once stood, there was now only a ruined, burnt building. She could see what looked suspiciously like dead bodies lying on the street. Looking around, she realized that she didn't see anyone else. No Muggle buses that usually drove past the hospital every few minutes; no children darting through a crowded

street. No Muggles at *all*. And even though it was still early in the morning, she couldn't remember ever seeing this street empty before, even in the middle of the night.

The street looked completely abandoned, and when she strained her ears to listen, she didn't hear the sounds of a busy city. She heard *nothing*, and she fought the urge to turn around and run back to where Neville was waiting, to just get them both as far away from London as possible.

Squaring her shoulders and holding Neville's wand in front of her body protectively, she stayed close to the wall and crept towards the entrance to the hospital, desperately hoping that the horrific scene before her was some sort of Muggle deterrent and that she'd find Healers inside. But once she stepped through the broken, misshapen doorway, she realized that her surroundings hadn't change. St. Mungo's really *had* been destroyed...destroyed so completely, in fact, that it seemed the Death Eaters hadn't even bothered to leave someone behind to guard it.

The only people she could see were already dead. One looked like he was wearing Healer robes, and the other two were Aurors she recognized from meeting them during dealings with the Ministry over the years. Looking them over at a distance and wondering what spell had been cast that had left the pavement tinged red with blood, she was nearly sick with panic when she realized that they had small, round wounds over various parts of their bodies. She wasn't *certain*, but they looked like bullet holes. And she *knew* wizards didn't use guns.

Turning on her heels and running towards where Neville was still lying in the alley, she heard the distinct sound of voices behind her.

"It's one of *them!*" Hermione heard a woman shout shrilly over the other voices, and as if on command, Muggles seemed to pour from the surrounding buildings. At least a dozen of them were running after her, and she fought back the urge to cry, knowing that it would only make her run out of breath faster. She had a head start, and so she ran as fast as she could, desperately trying to reach the alley before they did.

The sound of a gunshot echoed behind her, and a bullet hit the pavement only inches from her feet. Another flew past her head a second later. Letting out a frightened, startled scream, Hermione careened into the alley, threw herself down on top of Neville, clung to him tightly, and Apparated away.

Many thanks to ladyinthecloak for her support, encouragement, and the wonderful rec on LJ and Potter_Place! :)

Chapter Three - Shelter

Chapter 4 of 8

Even though Snape is a traitor, Hermione hopes he finds her. She's barely survived this long, and he may be her only
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When she'd Apparated away, dragging Neville along with her, she hadn't been focused on any one particular destination. The only clear thought in her head was, *'Need to get somewhere safe, somewhere that's not **here***!' She was more than a little surprised to find herself in another alley seconds later, not that far from the first, and even more shocked when she realised that both of them had arrived completely intact.

Leaning over Neville and checking to make sure he was still breathing...he was, but barely...she didn't hear the footsteps behind her, and had no idea that they weren't alone until a voice nearly made her jump out of her skin.

"Is he dead?"

It sounded like a child, Hermione thought, but she couldn't be sure. Still, she wasn't about to turn her wand on a kid if she could help it, and the thought occurred to her that maybe this child was with a larger group of Muggles. Muggles, in her mind, were defenceless against magic, and though they had weapons, it would only take one spell to take them all down. *'Yes, but there will be more, and you can't do proper magic with that wand. Do you really want to risk dying in this alley?'* a little voice whispered in the back of her mind. Frowning, Hermione kept her back to the entrance of the alley, afraid to move one way or the other.

"Hey, is he dead?" the little girl asked again. Then she shouted, "Mum, Dad, there's someone hurt over here!" as she ran away. Seconds later, Hermione heard the sounds of a woman scolding the child for having wandered off, and then multiple sets of heavy footsteps were coming towards her.

Hermione knew that she could Apparate away again, but had no idea where to go. Each attempt seemed more dangerous than the next, and with Neville being so sick, she wasn't sure she should risk it again. Not knowing what to do, and realising that she was no match for armed adults...Muggle or not...with only Neville's wand for her defence, she made what she thought was possibly the hardest decision she'd ever had to make. Praying that she wasn't going to get them both killed, she tossed the wand behind the nearest dustbin, wincing as it clattered to the ground just as four men and a woman ran into the dim alley. Without a word, they surrounded her, guns raised.

"What are you doing here?" one demanded, staring her in the eyes, and she nearly froze. He seemed to be the leader of the small group, judging by the way the others were present all flicked their eyes to meet his whenever they dared to look away from Hermione at all.

"I... I don't know," she finally said, trying to buy herself time. "I.... Um, there was an attack. My friend is hurt...."

The man who had spoken to her looked Neville over from where he stood, narrowing his eyes at the blood that seemed to be seeping through his clothes once more. "What happened to him?"

"I'm not sure. I can't remember anything after the attack. I just woke up... in my flat. He was like this when I found him." Hermione did her best to look confused and terrified...not an altogether hard thing to do, considering the situation. None of this made any sense!

"Search them," the leader finally said after a moment, his eyes never leaving hers, and a second later Hermione felt coarse hands running roughly over her body, feeling for things hidden in her clothes or hair. She did her best not to flinch, hoping that in not fighting them, they would decide she wasn't a threat. Finally they finished and left her alone, turning to search Neville. When they came up empty-handed, the leader nodded slowly, and Hermione decided that they may make it through the day after all.

"Your friend needs medicine. Those cuts look infected," another man said. He had knelt over Neville and pulled back his shirt to reveal the oozing wounds on his chest.

"Can you help me get him to a doctor?" Hermione asked hopefully. The people around her only laughed.

"There are no doctors anymore, dear," the woman in the group finally said, her eyes softening a bit. "Not around here anyway. David here will do what he can, though. Took some medical courses at the Uni. He's the closest we get to a doctor these days."

Trying to figure out if she was being lied to, and realising that they were probably telling the truth, judging from the silence that seemed to overshadow what little noise they made, Hermione felt tears well up in her eyes.

"We'll take them back to the safe house," the leader finally said, peering out onto the street cautiously. "There could be another attack soon, and I don't want to be sitting in the open when it comes."

Agreeing quietly, two of the men lifted Neville from the ground and carried him between them, sticking to the shadows and hurrying towards a small building the next street over. The others followed, nudging Hermione along, and she did her best to remember the route they were taking, knowing that she'd need to get back there later if she ever hoped to get her hands on a wand again.

When they entered the building, they hurried up a flight of rickety, dangerous looking stairs and into a flat...the only one that didn't seem to be damaged in some way, from the looks of things. Inside, the little girl she'd seen in the alley and a few adults waited, eyeing Hermione and Neville warily.

"Is he okay, Daddy?" the child asked the leader of the group, pointing at Neville.

"I'm sure he'll be fine," he told her, lifting her into his arms. Turning back to the others, he simply said, "Bring him into the back bedroom and let David take a look at him."

"You," he called after them, looking at Hermione, "stay here. I'd like to talk to you."

"Can I go watch?" the little girl asked excitedly, already scrambling to stand on her own feet again, and after a moment of considering it, her father nodded, setting her down and watching her scurry away. Waiting until the door swung shut behind his daughter, the leader of the group finally turned to Hermione again and motioned for her to sit at the table that took up most of what Hermione thought must have once been the living room. Chairs were scattered around haphazardly, and against some of the walls there were blankets and pillows, as though people had been sleeping there.

Feeling grateful for the chance to sit down for a moment, Hermione sunk into the nearest chair, leaning heavily on the table.

"What's your name?" one of the men asked.

"Hermione," she answered. There was no reason to lie, she reasoned. They were Muggles. They probably had no idea how well known the two people before them had been only a week ago. "My friend's name is Neville."

"You're from London?" another one asked, and without hesitation, she nodded. "Any family?"

"Neville's parents... died when he was a baby. Mine live in Windsor. Is there any way I can get word to them?"

A few of the others exchanged glances, and someone told her, "That part of the country was evacuated days ago, from what we've heard. If they're alive, they're not in England anymore."

Hermione wasn't sure whether to be upset that she couldn't get word that she was all right to her parents or delighted that there was a good chance they'd managed to get away to safety. Nodding slowly, she looked around again, trying to take everything in. There were so many people in the tiny flat, and they all looked tired and dirty.

"You'll stay here," the leader of the group said after a moment. "We'd all better get some rest. We'll need to go out again at dark." He stood and walked out of the room without another word or a backwards glance, and the others all scattered quickly, some of them following the first man and others crawling under the blankets lining the walls. The only one who stayed with Hermione was the woman who had talked to her in the alley; she cocked her head to the side, motioning for Hermione to follow her, and then went into the back bedroom where Neville had been put to bed.

"I've given him some antibiotics...we have somewhat of a stockpile," David told them when they entered. "Michael, one of the men who lived here until... well, he's gone. Anyway, he worked at a chemist's," he explained at Hermione's raised eyebrow. "With any luck, they'll help his body fight the infection and bring his fever down. It's quite a bit higher than is strictly *safe*.... I'll be back to check on him in a little while." And without another word, he left.

Hermione settled herself onto the edge of Neville's bed, still trying to understand everything that had occurred. "What *happened?*" she finally asked the woman who had led her to the bedroom. The woman sighed and lowered herself into a chair on the other side of the room.

"You don't remember anything?"

"No," Hermione lied, shaking her head. "I was sitting in my flat one day and there was a big flash of light.... I didn't wake up until this morning."

The woman looked sceptical, but settled back into her chair and began talking. "We were attacked," she said, pausing for a second, and then finished, "by people who can use magic." She mistook Hermione's look of shock for one of disbelief, it seemed, because she continued. "At first, no one knew what to think. There was some sort of explosion in a building...a kind of hospital for their kind or something. The thing is, none of us could remember that building ever having been there. I've walked by there every day for most of my life and have never seen it before.... Then there was another explosion a few streets away...it was really odd. It seemed like the explosion happened underground. The weirdest part, though, wasn't the explosion, it's what was left behind. It's like looking into *nothing*. Not even darkness... just *nothing*. That was... five days ago, I think."

Hermione realised she was talking about St. Mungo's and the Ministry of Magic, and if five days had passed, that meant that the two buildings had been destroyed on the same day that she and her friends had been attacked at Hogwarts. Suddenly, she understood why no one had answered their messages begging for help, and she fought back the urge to cry as she considered the implications of what this could all mean.

"After that, things just got worse. We thought that it was a terrorist group at first. There was talk that it had been suicide bombers. Everyone was scared, but... we never really imagined...." The woman's voice faltered as she spoke, and Hermione could see that she was blinking back tears. And yet, she kept going. "Then this horrible looking man...he looked like a snake turned into a human being, if you can imagine such a thing...he showed up with hundreds of these people in black robes, all of them wearing masks except for the snake-man, and started declaring that all of us were his slaves. He called us 'Muggles', whatever that means.

"At first, everyone laughed it off, I guess, because he got angry, and killed someone. Just pointed this wand at him...at least, I'm guessing they're wands, they all seem to have them...and killed him. It was on the telly. I suppose reporters went there when they heard that there was a group of strangely dressed people gathering in London, claiming to be responsible for the explosions. The police had been called, but only a few had arrived at that point. Kind of crazy, that reporters got there before the police, you know?

"Anyway, the snake-man said that we had to either submit to him or die, and, well, would you let yourself be forced into slavery? No one knew what sort of weapons these people had, but there were only a couple hundred of them, so when the police arrived, they surrounded the group and tried to arrest them. All of the police and reporters, and most of the people watching, were killed. They just... died. They weren't even given a chance to fight back.

"After that, things just became chaos. They started killing every normal person they saw, and in retaliation, the military started sending in troops to areas where the wizards were thought to be hiding...those people, they called themselves wizards," she explained, "and I think they were telling the truth. They seem to be able to do magic with those wands they carry...I know it sounds crazy, but it's true. And the only way to kill them, it seems, is to do it before they know you're there. Once they see you, if they're able to hit you with one of their spells, you're dead. The thing is, the wizards seem able to disappear in an instant and reappear somewhere else.... If you can get their wand away from them, though, they're practically helpless. But that's almost impossible to do without killing them, so the easiest thing to do is kill them as soon as you find them.

"Most of the country has been evacuated, from what we've heard, but in the big cities where the wizards are still hiding and attacking, the people are on their own, and

London is no exception. We've heard that there is a safe zone just a ten or eleven miles outside the city, near the edge of the Thames, but we have to get there ourselves, and most people that have tried to get there have ended up dead. Eventually we'll have to head that way. We don't have enough food to stay here forever. That's what we were out looking for when we found you," she explained, running a hand through her hair and rubbing at her tired eyes. "These people, these *wizards*, they're inhuman. Evil. They'll kill us if they find us. And while we've managed to kill lots of them, there are still some hiding around the city...."

Hermione stared at the wall, trying to make sense of everything, and just kept shaking her head, not wanting to believe anything the woman had said.

"I know it's a lot to hear all at once," she said a minute later, reaching over and covering Hermione's hand with hers, "and I'm sorry, but you need to know what we're up against. When we attempt to get to the safe zone, you're welcome to come with us, and in the meantime, feel free to stay here. You'll be expected to help search for food, of course, once you've had a chance to rest... but it's better than being out there alone, right?"

Patting Hermione's hand one last time, the woman stood up and moved towards the door. "I'm Laura, by the way. If you need anything, just yell."

"Okay," Hermione said softly, giving her a weak smile. "Thanks."

Laura left, closing the door behind her, and Hermione heard the clinking sound of it being locked from the outside. She stretched out on the bed beside Neville, touching his forehead gently and finding him still warm with fever. Feeling lost and completely alone, Hermione wrapped her arm protectively over Neville's chest and settled her head beside his on the pillow. She felt as if she were guarding her only link to the life she'd known just days before, and tried to focus her mind on understanding everything she'd just learned and come up with a plan. Judging from what Laura had said, there wasn't much of a wizarding world to go back to, and Hermione supposed there were worse places to be...especially if magical people were being hunted down and killed. Wondering what had become of her friends and praying that they'd somehow escaped, she tried to put them out of her head, resolving to focus on getting herself and Neville out of the country safely.

I know, I know, Snape is conspicuously absent. But he'll be back shortly, I promise.

Many, many thanks to the lovely Vaughn for the beta work, and to ladyinthecloak for so graciously being my sounding board and ongoing source of encouragement for this fic.

Chapter Four - Grand Mistakes

Chapter 5 of 8

Even though Snape is a traitor, Hermione hopes he finds her. She's barely survived this long, and he may be her only
chance.

Author's Notes: This story is, obviously, not DH-compliant. Um, oops.

Mark...Hermione was pretty sure his name was Mark, anyway...stopped in the doorway long enough to jerk his head towards the main room of the flat and then gave her an expectant look before disappearing from sight. Feeling more than a little apprehensive, Hermione squeezed Neville's hand in her own before getting up and leaving the room. She stepped carefully through the dark, still trying to get accustomed to the layout of the corridor. At some point before she'd come to London, the electricity in the city had been shut off...no one knew if the Muggles had done it or the wizards...and their supply of other light sources was running dangerously low, so they spent most nights in complete darkness.

Things had gone surprisingly well so far, at least, and she was thankful for that. It had been two days now, and no one was at all suspicious, but Hermione worried that could change if Neville were to wake up. The others had insisted that she begin helping to search for food, now that she'd had a chance to rest, and though she'd protested quite a bit at first, she was afraid to argue too much. The last thing she wanted was for them to think that she had something to hide.

Not that they'd been overly open and honest with her. With the exception of Laura and Emily, the little girl who had found them in the alley, no one had bothered to tell Hermione their names. She'd learned most of them by listening to them talk to each other and argue, as they often did, about who would go out searching for food and who would stay behind to watch Emily (and, Hermione thought, probably to keep an eye on her and Neville as well, just in case). It wasn't the ideal place to be stuck without a wand, but Hermione could think of worse situations she could have just as easily found herself in, and so she resigned herself to remaining with the small group of Muggles until she could either find an opportunity to get Neville's wand back or find a way out of the country. The idea of Apparating away stayed in the back of her mind, an ever-constant option, but with everything being as chaotic as it was, she didn't see how Apparating into a completely unknown situation without the protection of a wand would be any better than staying right where they were. At least here they had nearly a dozen heavily armed Muggles protecting them at all times.

When she joined the Muggles in the main area of the flat, they were preparing to go on another food search, loading guns and trying to hide their nervousness. But today, instead of barely acknowledging her presence, the leader of the group, Ben, looked right at her and asked, "Ever used a gun before?"

"No," she answered quickly, hoping that he'd decide he didn't have time to teach her. Instead, he shrugged and offered one to her anyway, along with a large cloth bag with a strap, which she shouldered reluctantly. "Where did you get all of these?"

"Gun shops. Dead policemen. Anywhere we could find them, really," he told her. "It's loaded, so be careful." She cautiously took the gun from him and held it with a trembling hand, as far from her body as she could manage.

"If you see one of them, point and shoot. Preferably at their head. If you miss, they won't give you a second chance, so I suggest you aim carefully and stay out of sight."

"I...." She paused, glancing at the weapon in her hand and trying not to picture herself using it to shoot anyone, Death Eater or not. "I'm not sure I can do this. Maybe I should stay here with Neville... in case he wakes up."

Ned only shook his head and opened the door of the flat, allowing the others to file past him as he looked expectantly at Hermione, waiting for her to follow. Trying to quell the nauseous feeling that had settled in her stomach, she hurried out the door.

As they moved through the streets, Laura alternated between casting worried glances at Ned, constantly concerned for her husband's safety even though she was in just as much danger as he was, and keeping Hermione from making any mistakes. Hermione, on the other hand, had all of her attention focused on following the others...who all seemed to have a good idea where they were going...and on not accidentally shooting herself or someone else. Just the very idea of having a gun in her hand, knowing that she had no idea how to use it, terrified her.

Creeping carefully through the shadows took quite a bit longer than walking nonchalantly down the street, Hermione quickly realised, and it took them nearly an hour to get only a few streets away. They paused to rest in an alley, and Laura motioned for Hermione to follow her, pointing in the direction of what seemed to be an ordinary intersection of two streets. But when she looked closer, shapes began to become clearer in the darkness. She could see dead bodies scattered around the ground and, just past them, what appeared to be some sort of large crater, so wide that it took up the entire intersection. Hermione couldn't help but wonder if those people had been trying to get out or in when they'd been killed.

"That's the nothing place I told you about," Laura explained. "We don't ever go near there.... No telling what those people might be hiding down there."

Hermione nodded solemnly, careful to memorize exactly where they were. She'd only been to the Ministry a handful of times, and always via Floo or Apparition. This was the first time she'd seen the Muggle street that ran above the underground facility.

Not long after they began walking again, Ned led them into a dark block of flats and to the door on the first floor. They broke in as quietly as possible, and Brian, another one of the men in the group, stayed behind to guard the door while the others made their way inside, searching the rooms for anyone who may be hiding there. When they didn't find anyone alive, they went into the kitchen and took as much food from the cupboards as they could fit in the bags they carried. They took anything and everything that wouldn't require cooking or refrigeration, packing it carefully so that it wouldn't rustle or shift too much as they made their way back through the streets.

Once they'd made it back to their own flat, and Hermione had ensured that Neville hadn't woken up while she was away, she relaxed quite a bit. They'd be going out again in a few days, though, and that worried her. His fever was practically gone, and he should have woken up by now... he was bound to do so any day, she hoped. She could only hope that Neville regained consciousness before she was forced to leave again.

Fortunately, Neville woke up the following morning, confused and in pain. Hermione had been resting beside him on the bed...the only place she had to sleep besides a hard, uncomfortable chair...when he'd suddenly tried to sit up and then groaned loudly, flopping back onto his pillow.

Jumping up, startled, Hermione instantly ran to close the door, hoping that no one had heard him. As quickly as she could, despite the fact that he was barely awake, she explained everything to him, comforting him as she told him what had happened to St. Mungo's...and what fate had probably befallen his parents. By the time David came to check on him, Neville understood enough of what was going on to keep from letting anything dangerous slip, and the Muggles assumed that the tears in his eyes were due to pain or the shock of learning that they were in the middle of a war.

~*~

Though awake, Neville's strength refused to return quickly. Even with the Muggle medicine and sterile bandages, the wounds on his chest were showing no signs of healing...but, thankfully, the infection seemed to be gone. Hermione continued scavenging for food with the Muggles nightly, and Neville stayed in the flat, sleeping more often than not. Little by little, he gained the strength to walk around on his own, but wasn't nearly well enough to go out with the others at night.

The days crept by slowly, and the sounds of planes overhead were often the only things to break the silence. Hermione would lie awake and listen as they passed, wondering where they were going, hoping that it wasn't London they were headed for. The only planes to be seen these days were sent by the military. The only other sound they ever heard outside their flat was much rarer...the sound of gunshots ringing through the empty streets.

Things went on in much the same way until the night Neville glanced out the window and said, "Looks like it will be a full moon tomorrow," eyeing the street below them nervously. "You think there are any werewolves still working with Voldemort?"

The thought hadn't occurred to Hermione before, but now it overwhelmed her thoughts. But what could she do? They were supposed to go searching for food the night of the full moon...with so many people staying in the tiny flat, the food ran out quickly, and it was easier to make their way around London if the moon was creating at least a bit of light to see by. But how could they go outside, knowing that werewolves may be wandering the streets? And how could she warn the others without them realising that she knew far more about the wizarding world than any Muggle should?

She spent most of the following day considering her options, going over a dozen different scenarios in her head. The idea of pretending to be sick and staying behind crossed her mind, but her conscience wouldn't allow her to just let the others walk into harm's way without at least *trying* to warn them, and so as the sun began to set, she went into the kitchen, where most of the others were gathered around the table, and sat down, hoping that she'd have some sort of sudden inspiration and find the right words to convince them to stay home without giving *too much* information.

"I... I think maybe we shouldn't go out tonight," she said softly, looking at Ned, and he frowned, his face barely visible in the dwindling light.

"We have to. We're almost completely out of food," he pointed out, giving her a curious look. "Why, what's going on?"

"It's just that, well, it's the full moon," Hermione answered, trying to keep herself from looking too nervous. "I know that usually doesn't mean anything, but with things as they are now, who knows? The stories have always said that magic is stronger or more dangerous on the night of the full moon, you know, and... well, a lot of other stuff that we thought was made up turned out to be true. Maybe there really *is* a reason to be afraid of the full moon. I just don't think it's worth the risk."

"That's *stupid*," Mark said simply. "There's nothing to be afraid of except those wizard people, and they're already more powerful than we are, so it's not like that would be anything new. We're all hungry and we're out of food. We have to go tonight."

"I just really don't think it's a good idea," Hermione insisted again, and maybe the very real fear that she knew was reflected in her eyes stirred something inside the others, because Laura glanced nervously towards the window and folded her arms protectively across her chest.

"Maybe she's right... We really don't know what we're up against here, right? Why risk it?" she asked, frowning. "We've all gone longer than a day without food before; we can do it again."

"This is ridiculous. Come on, it's getting dark and we're wasting time," Mark said, standing up, but only a few others joined him. "You can't be *serious*?" he bit out, giving them incredulous looks, and then shook his head. "Ned, tell me you're coming, at least."

"Yeah, I'm coming," Ned said with a sigh, looking slightly reluctant, and in the end a small group of five tiptoed out the door, heavily armed, and slipped away into the shadows.

Feeling as though she'd just let them walk into certain death, but too afraid of what would happen to her and Neville if she were to let on that she knew far more things to fear during the full moon than she really *should*, Hermione curled up in a chair near the window overlooking the street. Neville joined her a moment later, standing behind her with one hand on her shoulder.

The others who had been left behind exchanged worried glances and tried to make small talk, and as an hour passed and then another, and their quiet chatter filled the room, only to be suddenly silenced by the echo of howls ringing through the empty streets. Hermione grabbed Neville's hand where it rested beside her, and the two of them turned and glanced out the window, half-expecting to see the source of the noise right outside the building.

"Must be wild dogs," one of the other men muttered, looking completely unconvinced by his own words, and everyone seemed to huddle a bit closer to each other.

"Oh my God, is that them?" a woman...Nancy, Hermione's mind told her, and she brushed the thought aside...asked, and they all leaned towards the window and peered cautiously outside to see three men come racing down the street towards the building.

"Where are John and Bri-" Laura began to ask, her voice sounding panicked, and then promptly forgot the rest of her sentence as what appeared to be two massive wolves turned a corner and bounded after the men, barely visible in the moonlight. One of the men...it looked like Ned, but it was hard to tell, it was so dark...stopped long enough

to turn and fire a shot at the wolves, but either he missed or the single bullet wasn't enough to do any real damage...the creature overtook him a second later and dove on top of him.

One of the women in the flat began to scream, and Neville reached over and clapped a hand roughly across her mouth, hoping that no one outside had heard her over the yells of the men in the street.

The second wolf pounced atop one of the other men just before they fell out of view, and everyone rushed to the door of the flat, listening intently for the hurried footsteps of the third man. Hermione and Neville stayed at the window, watching in horror as the wolves turned to look at each other before one tossed its head towards the building and then looked directly at them. They jumped back, exchanging worried glances, and then carefully peeked outside again only to see the wolves heading for the block of flats, leaving the men they'd attacked unconscious or dead on the pavement.

"They're using Wolfsbane, aren't they?" Neville asked softly, and without waiting for an answer, turned to face the others in the flat and shouted, "Don't open the door!"

It was too late, though...the door flew open to let Mark get inside, and the werewolves were already bounding down the hallway.

"Damn thing bit me!" Mark was shouting, cradling his arm against his chest, and the others quickly slammed the door shut.

"How quick do they turn? Will he turn tonight?!" Hermione asked Neville, ignoring the odd looks as she pointed at Mark openly.

"I don't think so," Neville answered, already moving behind the sofa. "Help me get this against the door."

"What's going o-" Laura began to ask, but was interrupted by a loud bang as something was thrown up against the door. The werewolves were trying to break through.

"Get over here!" Hermione shouted, already helping Neville, jumping as the wolf lunged at the door again and a large crack appeared in the wood. Somewhere in the back of the flat, Emily started screaming in terror, and that seemed to put everyone into action; without further argument, they began barricading the door with anything they could find and finally leaning against it all themselves. After nearly an hour, the wolves seemed to give up, and the inhabitants of the tiny flat watched from the window to make sure they'd left the building.

"They'll be back as soon as they're human again, and that door isn't going to keep them out for a second," Neville said, watching them go, and Hermione nodded. "We need to get out of here, all of us. As soon as the sun comes up."

"If we can get to your wand, we can protect everyone. We'll need another building, but if we could ward it heavily enough, they'd never find us." She turned and eyed Mark's bite warily, realizing that there was no way that he could go with them. They had no way of getting him Wolfsbane potion, and without that, he would be a danger to them all. But as she glanced around at the others in the dim light, she found that they were taking wary steps away from her and Neville.

An instant later, Mark raised his gun with his good arm, pointed it at Neville's chest, and hissed, "I knew there was something wrong with you two. You're wizards, aren't you?! You probably led those things here!"

Filling with dread, Hermione realised that the real trouble had only just begun.

Author's Notes: Ok, so I lied. No Snape yet. See, originally this chapter was so very different, and I ended up rewriting and reworking the whole thing. It ended up much longer than I'd originally intended, and so instead of Snape appearing at the end of *this* chapter, his entrance has been pushed back to the first page of chapter six. But then won't leave again for the rest of the story (which should be another seven or eight chapters at least), so it's not all bad. :D

Chapter Five - Explanations and Escapes

Even though Snape is a traitor, Hermione hopes he finds her. She's barely survived this long, and he may be her only
chance.

A/N: Hello! So, this story is not abandoned, just... taking a really, really long time. Life has been hectic, but has finally calmed down, and with any luck, I can actually do some writing on a semi-regular basis again for a while. :)

Not daring to even exchange a glance with Neville, Hermione held her hands up slowly in front of her body and tried not to look as angry and terrified as she felt.

"Mark, put the gun down," David said forcefully, looking exasperated when instead of Mark doing what he asked, Aaron, the man standing beside Brian, lifted his own gun.

"Of course we didn't lead them here," Hermione said softly, attempting to sound calm and reassuring. "If we'd done that, why would we have helped keep them out?"

"Were those things wizards?" Laura asked, ignoring the guns raised beside her. Tears were streaming down her face, and she held her daughter crushed against her side. "Those things that killed Ned, were they wizards?"

There was no sense lying, Hermione realised. They'd already given themselves away in a moment of panic, and the only way out of this now was to tell the truth and hope that everyone would remain reasonable—which didn't seem overly likely, all things considered. "Yes," she said after a moment's hesitation. "But not just wizards. They're werewolves."

"Werewolves don't exist," Aaron said.

"Just like wizards don't exist?" Neville asked, a hint of anger in his voice, and Hermione bit her lip and silently begged Neville to shut up, or at least calm down.

"Can we please put the guns away before someone else gets hurt?" David asked again, reaching for Mark's arm and examining the bite wounds carefully.

"They *do* exist," Hermione interjected. "They're real, and they know where we are now." Pausing and dropping Mark's gaze, she added quietly. "You were infected when they bit you. You'll become one of them during the next full moon."

David hesitated, and then loosened his grip on Mark's arm, looking nervously at the blood that was gathering in small pools in the indentations in the skin made by his own

fingertips. Mark gave him an incredulous look.

"You don't actually *believe* her?!" he growled angrily, jerking his arm away and sending droplets of blood spraying across the floor. "She's trying to turn you against me!"

"Why would I do that?" Hermione asked, trying to make him see reason, but it was obvious that he wasn't listening to her.

Mark continued, "They're trying to scare us so we don't kill them! Don't you see?" He turned to face the others in the group, taking in their nervous expressions, now focused on him instead of Hermione and Neville. "They're *lying,* you idiots!" He backed against the wall, aiming his gun first at one person, then another, then back again, looking crazed with fear and shock.

"Mark, come on, calm down. No one is saying that," David tried to reassure him, but the way that he was holding his bloody hands, as if he were afraid of them, said more than his words ever could. "Just put down the gun, okay? This is crazy. You're losing a lot of blood. You need to sit down and let me bandage up your arm.... Please, Mark."

"I know what you're all thinking," Mark said as if he hadn't heard a word. "You're thinking you should kill me. You think I'm one of them now, but you're wrong. *They're* the ones you should be after." He motioned towards Hermione and Neville, sending another spray of blood into the air.

"What happens if he becomes one of those things, those werewolves?" Nancy asked, her voice shaky.

"He'll want to kill. The wizards are only able to control their actions when they're like that because they have a special potion. I don't know how to make it.... Without it, a werewolf only wants to bite everyone it can find. He'd kill or infect all of us," Hermione said warily.

"I wouldn't do that!" Mark shouted, aiming his gun at Hermione once more. "How *dare* you say that? I would never—"

"You won't be able to stop yourself," Neville interrupted, taking a step forward but stopping when the gun suddenly pointed his way. "You won't know what you're doing, and you won't remember it the next morning."

"Will you all just all sit down and talk about this *without weapons*?" David asked again.

"We should kill both of them!" Mark shouted.

"We can protect you!" Hermione pointed out. "We can help get everyone somewhere safe, maybe even find a place for you to stay when you transform so that you can't hurt anyone. We can help y—"

"No," Laura said flatly. "No, we don't need your help."

"Yes you d—"

"No! Just get out. You knew this was going to happen and now my husband is dead! You acted like you were my friend, and you let him die! Now get out!" Shoving her way past the others, Laura began dragging things away from the door. "Get out before I let Mark shoot both of you."

"You can't just let them go!" Mark said, hurrying toward Laura and grabbing her shoulder, forcing her to turn and face him. "They'll bring them back here! They know where we are!"

"We can't stay here anyway," Brian pointed out.

Mark shook his head, his voice slightly calmer now that he felt the others were on his side once more. "They know too much. They shouldn't be allowed to—"

"We can't just kill them either," Nancy bit out. "If we start murdering people for no reason, we're no better than they are."

"They're *wizards!* What other reason do you need?" Aaron asked incredulously.

"Look, they don't have wands, right? Can we just lock them in the bedroom and talk about this?" David tried again. "Mark, Aaron, please. Gunshots would only lead other wizards here. We need to think about this rationally."

His words seemed to have some affect on the others, and finally it was decided that they would do exactly that. Not wanting to push their luck any further, Hermione and Neville allowed themselves to be led at gunpoint to the back bedroom and locked inside. The second the door shut behind them, they ran to the window and threw it open, looking down at the alleyway below.

"We're four stories up," Neville said, echoing Hermione's thoughts. "We'd probably kill ourselves jumping out of here, or at least be hurt badly enough that we wouldn't be able to get away."

"We're dead anyway," Hermione pointed out, glaring around the room anxiously. "Is there anything we can hang out the window so we can at least get closer to the ground?"

"Nothing but the bed sheet, and that won't get us very far. Maybe six feet at best, if we can find something to attach it to." Despite his words, Neville began pulling the quilt off the bed. "Maybe if we tear it into long pieces and tie them together?"

"Maybe," Hermione said. "But if they come apart...." Examining the alleyway, she suddenly turned away and grabbed the end of the mattress and pulled it away from the bed frame. "Help me," she said insistently, climbing onto the frame and bracing her feet on one side and pushing on the other, pausing when it began to give way with a loud cracking noise. When everything remained quiet in the hallway, she began pushing on it once again. Neville knelt on the other side and pulled, wincing as the pain in his chest grew steadily with the effort.

Finally the board came free with a resounding crack of splintering wood, and Hermione began moving it towards the window. "Maybe we can get over there," she said, throwing a quick glance at the closed window on the other side of the narrow alley, barely five feet away.

The board reached across the distance, but barely, and they both eyed it warily. Even if they made it across, the force of them trying to open the other window or break through would probably knock the board to the ground far below, along with whoever was still standing on it.

Casting his glance around the room, Neville grabbed something from a shelf in the room—it looked like an alarm clock, but Hermione didn't get a good look—leaned out the window and threw it across the alleyway, shattering the glass.

"Go, now!" Neville said, pushing Hermione towards the window as they heard voices coming down the hall.

She was about to protest that Neville should go first, but they didn't have time to argue. Climbing through the window, she balanced her weight carefully on the board, careful to avoid the screws that were sticking out of the ends at odd angels, and crept across it on her hands and knees as quickly as she dared. Neville held on to the end tightly, trying to steady it. The board rocked back and forth ominously, but stayed in place, and when Hermione reached the other side, she put one hand on the wall to steady herself while she pushed the rest of the broken window onto the floor of the flat and climbed inside, gasping in pain as bits of glass cut into her hands and arms. Turning back quickly, she held onto the board while Neville began climbing out of the window.

When he was only halfway across the alley, the door back in the small bedroom was thrown open, and Mark, his arm newly bandaged but still bleeding, stormed through,

followed by the other inhabitants of the flat. Hermione tugged the empty window frame up so that the jagged edge of glass was out of the way and leaned through, and Neville grabbed her hand, launching himself through the window and knocking them both over. The board clattered loudly into the alleyway seconds later, and without sparing a second for feeling relief, Hermione and Neville began crawling towards the door of the room, afraid to stand up and make themselves targets.

Once out of the room, they stood and hurried out of the abandoned and ransacked flat, racing down the stairs of the building and hurrying out into the street, where they were quickly faced with another problem. It was dark, yes, but there were still werewolves about, as well as the angry, fearful, and probably murderous Muggles they'd just escaped. They flattened themselves against the side of a building, hiding in the shadow, and paused to catch their breath and formulate a plan.

"You're bleeding!" Hermione whispered anxiously, reaching towards Neville's chest, and he distractedly pushed her hand away.

"So are you," he said, glancing at her hands, and then turned his gaze back to the street. "We have to get out of here. Do you know your way around London?"

"Not at all," Hermione admitted. "The only places I've ever been were the train station, St. Mungo's, and..." Her words trailed off as her eyes lit up. "Come on, I know where we can go!"

Moving as quickly as they could while staying mostly out of sight, they hurried through the darkness, Hermione stopping occasionally to glance around and make sure she was headed in the right direction, before finally she came to a sudden halt and pointed. She motioned toward what seemed to be a large crater in the middle of a dark intersection.

"Is it safe?" Neville asked, eyeing the dead bodies in the road.

"Can't be any more dangerous than it is up here," Hermione reasoned, surprised to find that she sounded more sure of herself than she actually felt.

Without another word, Neville hunched his shoulders and bent low, running for the dark void, Hermione only a few steps behind. They reached the edge, amazed that they had done so without being attacked by anything or anyone, and then stared at each other for a minute, unsure of what to do next. Then, sitting down on the edge of the hole, Neville dropped down into the darkness and completely out of sight.

Hermione waited for a tense moment, listening intently, and nearly jumped out of her skin when Neville called up to her, "Come on!" Bracing herself, she followed Neville's example and sat down, lowering her feet over the edge. Bits of the street crumbled underneath her, and the darkness consumed her legs so that they seemed to completely disappear into what felt like a very dense, very dark cloud of pure heat. Feeling sweat instantly begin to form all over her body, Hermione held her breath and slipped down into the Ministry of Magic.

Cool air hit Hermione's skin as she fell to the floor of the Minister's office, and she glanced up at the web of heat she'd just fallen through, amazed that she could see outlines of buildings in the moonlight. Glad that they'd at least be able to see anyone coming after them before they themselves would be seen, she glanced around the room, squinting to make out anything in the darkness. A dim light glowed through a doorway up ahead of them, and they made their way toward it. In the hallway a single candle, the magical sort that never burnt down and melted away, glowed from its place on the wall. Stretching and standing on his toes, Neville wiggled it out of place and held it in front of him, careful not to let the tiny flame go out.

Normally hundreds of these candles lit the hallways of the Ministry so brightly that it was sometimes easy to forget that electricity didn't exist in the wizarding world. Now the light given by this single candle created little more than shadows; the darkness was so complete that they could still barely make out much more than what was right in front of their faces.

Edging along silently, they stepped over ruined and broken furniture, finally coming across a dead body. Almost holding their breath with anticipation, they searched for what seemed like forever, checking the surrounding area as well as the body itself, but were unable to find the man's wand. As they crept through the rest of the first level, they came across more bodies, also wandless. Feeling despair wash over them, they continued through more dark and abandoned hallways. The only sound to be heard was the occasional rat skittering away as they approached.

~*~

Hermione woke up to complete silence. She waited for a moment for her eyes to adjust to the darkness and then looked around, startled to see Neville gone from his makeshift bed against the opposite wall.

They'd spent the rest of the night sleeping in Arthur Weasley's office, tucked into the back corner of the second floor. It had seemed like the best place to stay—they felt almost safe there. The floor above them was all but gone, and everything around them practically in ruins, but further down there was more destruction, more dead bodies, and more rats.

Standing and making her way carefully into the adjoining office where the small cache of candles they'd collected were sitting on a desk, giving the room a haunting glow, she felt panic flood through her when she realized that her friend wasn't on the second floor at all. Carefully lifting one of the candles and shielding it with one hand to keep the flame from blowing out, she moved as quickly and quietly as possible, climbing up the stairs to the first floor, which had once held the Minister of Magic's office. The Minister himself still lay on the ground, his wand broken in two but still clutched in his hand, and Hermione stepped gingerly over his body, glancing up at the dark night sky. She knew that no Muggles could actually see past the edge of the crater made by the Death Eater's attack—or had it been a Muggle bomb? She wasn't even sure anymore—but it still made her nervous.

The smell in the air was just as horrible and made Hermione sick to her stomach. In every room and corridor, the only thing to be seen was dead, rotting bodies, and the stench was overpowering. Everything was always dark, and the view from the charmed windows showed only steady, dreary rain.

When she didn't find Neville in the Minister's office, Hermione debated between continuing up to Muggle London and going down into the lower levels of the Ministry. Deciding that it was safer for her in the Ministry, despite whatever dangers may be waiting, she crept back down the stairs, ignoring the leaning door on the second floor and continuing on to the third.

The third floor looked very similar to the second, as did the fourth. From there, each was a bit darker, a bit scarier, and a bit more depressing. The smell almost overwhelmed her, and she fought to keep from being sick. Still, further down she went. In the Atrium, a place she had stood just a few years ago with her friends, she passed the statue that had once topped the magnificent fountain. Instead of being displayed proudly in its usual place, it had been completely shattered and was lying in scattered pieces on the ground.

She eyed the stairs to the next floor down, and found that she almost couldn't resist. When she reached the ninth floor, the door to the Department of Mysteries stood open. With each turn down a new corridor she found more open doors, and the spinning room no longer spun. The Brain Room, as she'd taken to calling it, had been nearly taken over with brains that grew like ivy, wrapping themselves around the dead and creeping up the walls. Hermione hurried past, hoping she hadn't been noticed.

A moment later she came upon a room that still haunted her nightmares on occasion. The Veil, the one that had taken Sirius' life just a few years earlier, stood in the centre of the room as if nothing had ever happened to the building around it. And there was Neville, lugging a dead body towards the innocuous-looking archway.

"What are you doing?" she asked softly, her words echoing in the cavernous room. Neville jumped, startled, and then relaxed when he saw her.

"I hate the smell," he said, shrugging, and continued toward the Veil, grunting with effort as he moved. Without hesitation, he shoved the body through the archway, and Hermione watched as, instead of falling through the other side, it disappeared completely. "I counted; there are thirty-two of them. No wands so far. Well, no whole ones. Found a few broken ones, but it looks like the Death Eaters took all the usable wands with them."

Without another word, he nudged his way past her and walked up to the Atrium again, grabbing another dead body beneath the arms and dragging it towards the stairs. Not knowing what else to do, Hermione picked up the woman's feet and helped, resolutely not looking at the person's face. She didn't want to know, she decided. It was

easier if they were faceless, nameless Ministry employees, and not old friends and acquaintances.

They were both hungry and feeling weak from having not eaten, and so they didn't get too far. After only moving two more bodies, they decided to rest a bit. Later that day they moved two more, and then stopped again. Finally, they discussed going aboveground to find something to eat. They decided to wait until the sun had set again, knowing that would be safest.

~*~

Searching for food, they quickly discovered, was not exactly a viable option. After an entire night of scavenging, they had come up empty-handed. This was due to bad luck more than anything else, Hermione knew, but still, she was reluctant to try again. They had come upon a building of Muggle flats not long after leaving the Ministry, and had thought themselves fortunate. They were disappointed to find that all of the flats had already been broken into and all of the cupboards and refrigerators had been emptied of anything that wasn't spoiled.

As they continued towards the top floor, hoping against hope that they would find something,*anything,* to eat—it had taken them a half hour to get only four buildings away from the entrance to the Ministry, thanks to the need to stay completely out of sight as much as possible, and they weren't anxious to try finding yet another building to search—they found one door that was still locked. Hopeful, they broke the lock as quietly as possible and let themselves in, only to have a bullet lodge itself in the door mere inches from Neville's head.

They turned and ran, and whoever was inside the flat followed them, screaming at them the entire way. They didn't stop until they made it to the Ministry and both of them, shaken and trembling, tumbled onto the floor of Arthur Weasley's office. Feeling a bit too sick to their stomachs to eat anything anyway, they decided not to venture into Muggle territory again that night.

The next morning, feeling as though she were starving, Hermione set Neville to looking for something that could be used as a knife of sorts while she coaxed a fire to life inside one of the Atrium's fireplaces. It took them the better part of the day to catch a rat, and doing their best not to think about exactly what they were doing, they killed it and cooked it over the fire. Neville remarked that it wasn't really all that awful—they both knew he was lying, but neither really cared.

Over the following week they had many other such meals, and drank what rainwater they managed to collect. Whenever possible, they avoided going aboveground; it seemed safer to stay in a place where the Muggles couldn't come after them. They finished disposing of the dead bodies, and on one occasion where her discomfort overcame her desire to stay hidden forever, Hermione snuck up to the 'surface', as they'd taken to calling it, and returned four hours later with an armful of blankets and a few pillows. All in all, she was miserable but safe, and she decided that was the most she could ask for, all things considered.

Neville, however, seemed to be weakening by the day. His pain had turned into a near constant thing, and he shivered and trembled most of the time, even though he'd taken to sleeping by the fire that they kept burning in the Atrium. Much of the day he lay under his blankets, his mind far away, and only spoke when he was spoken to first, and so Hermione never stopped talking. Hermione had never felt so alone in her life, and though she'd always valued silence, now she despised it. If she kept talking, and he kept answering her, then she knew she wasn't alone after all. It didn't matter what they were talking about—and after a week, they'd covered every shared-interest topic Hermione could think of and had moved on to things Neville knew nothing about, since he rarely paid any real attention to the conversation anyway—as long as there was something for her to focus on besides the dark office space, the smell of death that still lingered in the air, and the rats and cockroaches that crawled down the very walls they slept against.

Everything continued in much the same manner for what seemed like forever, but had only been, in reality, a few days, until one day Hermione woke up to find Neville gone. She found him in the room with the Veil, sitting before the archway, staring at the curtain that dipped in and out as if being blown by a breeze that no one else could feel.

"Neville? Are you all right?" she asked softly, walking up behind him and placing a hand on his shoulder. He jumped, as if he hadn't heard her speaking and hadn't realized she was there until she'd touched him.

"What do you think it feels like to die?" he asked, turning his gaze back to the Veil.

"I don't know," she answered, gripping his hand in hers. "But you're not going to die, so it doesn't matter. Come upstairs. I'm going to make something to eat."

"Tired of rats," he mumbled, pulling his hand away, but he allowed her to help him up to the Atrium nonetheless.

The trip downstairs had weakened him even further, and by the next day, Neville couldn't gather the energy to do so much as eat. Hermione gave him water when he woke, and sat by his bedside, talking constantly as always, hoping that he'd hang on just a little longer—but what he was supposed to be waiting for, she didn't know, and that terrified her. A few days later Neville wouldn't wake at all, and Hermione held his hand, stroking the skin softly with her thumb until the slow rise and fall of his chest stopped completely.

Refusing to let herself get upset—*You knew this was coming, you shouldn't be this upset!*she scolded herself—she brought him down the stairs as gently as she could and then pushed him through the Veil.

She stood there for a long moment, staring, contemplating following him.*What else do I have to live for at this point?*she wondered. Some time later, deciding that the Veil would still be there later if she should have need of it, she made her way back upstairs and lay down on her bed, trying not to pay attention to the blankets piled against the opposite wall, trying not to think about the fact that Neville was supposed to be sleeping there.

It wasn't until the next morning, when she found herself talking as she prepared breakfast and it occurred her that no one was there to answer her, that she cried.

Chapter Six: Old Acquaintance, New... Friend?

Even though Snape is a traitor, Hermione hopes he finds her. She's barely survived this long, and he may be her only
chance.

Most days, Hermione crept through the Ministry going about her usual routinesee if any of her traps had rewarded her with breakfast; throw another desk leg or piece of a chair onto the fire that she was afraid to let die; watch fake rain drip down fake windows; try not to remember what her life was like before this all started; refuse to think about the people she loved.

Today the fire was out and she and kept to the shadows, barely daring to breath. There was someone else in the Ministry.

She'd heard noises in the Minister's office the night before, while checking her makeshift traps on that floor. The sound of someone hitting the ground as they dropped down from the street was unmistakable. Without taking a moment to see who it was, she'd darted down the stairs as quietly as possible and covered the fire with ashes, smothering the flames. She knew that she wouldn't be able to hide the fact that someone had been there, but she hoped to at least hide *herself*. And then she grabbed a chair leg, the closest thing she could find to a weapon on short notice, and went to Arthur Weasley's office, hiding under the desk in the dark.

All night she had sat up, listening. She'd heard someone moving through the offices, and then nothing. After hours of waiting, she crept to the stairs and found light shining up from the Atrium. Not firelight, which would have caused shadows to dance and jump along the walls, but wand light.

After a few hours spent wavering between the decision to leave the Ministry while she could and the option of approaching the armed wizard or witch, she finally reasoned that first she had to find out who was downstairs. If it was an ally, then she didn't have to run away, and if it was an enemy, she may have the chance to get the better of them and steal their wand. After all, she had the element of surprise on her sidethey didn't know she was there.

Stepping as lightly as was possible in the very dim light, finding herself thankful that she'd cleaned most of the debris off of the stairs in her boredom in the weeks since Neville's death because it left less to trip over now, she almost made it to the Atrium before she felt a strange tingling feeling on her ankle. She froze, and in the same instant, everything went completely dark. She wanted to scream in frustration; she'd activated a ward, she just knew it. But she didn't have time for berating herself for her lack of planning just at the moment; whoever was in the Atrium probably not only knew she was there, but exactly where she was, and her only option left was to try to get out of this alive.

She turned to dash up the stairs, but before she'd gone a single step, she was grabbed by the hair, and suddenly she was falling backwards. She swung out with the chair leg she still held, but couldn't hit the person behind her without being able to turn around, so she dropped her weapon and reached back, clawing with her nails at the hand wrapped in her hair. There was a hiss of pain, and then a wand was being pressed against the base of her neck, and the world seemed to stand still.

"Stop struggling or I'll kill you," her attacker barked harshly into her ear, and her heart nearly leapt from her chest. She*knew* that voice.

"Professor Snape?!"

Instantly she was released, but spun around and pushed backwards in one fluid motion, so that she landed painfully on the stairs.*Lumos,*" Snape said, and once more the room was flooded with light. Hermione winced and blinked a few times, her eyes struggling to adjust to the sudden brightness that had been impossible to achieve with just firelight all these weeks, but she refused to look away from the man in front of her.

She wanted to laugh, to grab him and hug him, to hold on to him and never let go as long as it meant that she wouldn't be left alone again. But then all of those thoughts were pushed aside by overwhelming anger, and so instead she said, "You left us to die!"

Snape stared at her with an incredulous expression on his face for a moment, which then turned into a look of rage. "What the hell are you doing in London, Granger?"

"Neville was hurt, I came here to find help!"

"And you couldn't possibly have found help somewhere that wasn't in the middle of a bloody war zone?!"

"Well I didn't know it was a war zone, did I? And we were starving, I didn't have my wand, and Neville"

"Snape interrupted, "Yes, where is Mr Longbottom? I would think even*he* wouldn't leave an unarmed woman to"

"He's dead," Hermione said angrily.

"Well why did you bring him here?" Snape shouted back at her. "I got you off the fucking continent! Why did you bring him"

"What?" Hermione whispered, her eyes going wide, and Snape paused, his face still contorted with rage. "I didn't know where you'd sent us.... I thought we were still in Scotland somewhere." She hesitated for a moment, feeling ashamed and lost and guilty and hurt, but then another thought brought her anger back, and she jumped to her feet, advancing on Snape and ignoring the wand still pointed at her chest. "You never came! You told me to wait for you, and then you never showed up! We were starving, and Neville was dying, and you never so much as sent an owl!"

"I couldn't get out," he said, his voice sounding calmer this time, but she could see the anger burning in his eyes. "I came to London after the battle at Hogwarts, and by the time the world started trying to end around us, I couldn't get out. Apparition wards. Not the Dark Lord's, either. Have you not tried to Apparate recently?"

"Someone is helping the Muggles? Why would a wizard be helping them?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Granger," he said with a defeated shrug, and it looked like all of the will to fight melted from him in an instant. "How long have you been here?"

"A little over a month, I guess. We got to London and were taken in by some people who thought we were Muggles, but they found out what we were, and... well, eventually we ended up here."

Snape looked around and finally lowered his wand. "What did you do with the bodies? There were dozens the last time I was here. Tell me you didn't eat"

"No!" Hermione exclaimed. "Though, all things considered, we probably should have. But no, we pushed them through the Veil." After a moment of silence, she added quietly, "Neville, too. There wasn't anywhere to bury him."

Now that she wasn't afraid for her life any more than was usual, Hermione took a moment to look around. Snape had set up what appeared to be a small mattress on one side of the room. The fire was out, but the air was warm, and something that appeared to be real food was sitting in a bowl on the floor. She must have stared at the food for a bit longer than she meant to, because Snape asked her when she'd last eaten.

"The day before yesterday," she said, dragging her eyes away from the bowl. "But it was just... well. There aren't many options for food down here," she finished embarrassedly.

Snape looked away and motioned towards the bowl. "Eat that."

Normally she would have protestedit was*his* breakfast, after allbut she wasn't feeling a whole lot of compassion for him at just that moment, and she thought she might pass out from the pure ecstasy of just the smell of real food. Without a moment's hesitation, she darted across the room and sat down on the mattress, sipping at what she found to be bean soup. She was fairly certain it was the best thing she'd ever tasted.

While Hermione ate, Snape paced back and forth, inspecting the deep scratches she'd carved into his hand with her nails, and told her about what he'd seen since the battle at Hogwarts.

"The Dark Lord"

"I wish you wouldn't call him that," Hermione said, wrinkling her nose in disgust.

"*Voldemort,* then," Snape went on, and Hermione felt a shiver go up her spine. "He had planned to gain control of the whole of the United Kingdom. But he underestimated the Muggles. They all did."

"You didn't try to stop them? I mean, you had to have known that the Muggles wouldn't just stand back and be forced into slavery or murdered, magical enemy or not."

Snape rolled his eyes. "You don't tell Voldemort that he's being an imbecile, Granger. Not unless you're suicidal."

"Your silence cost us the country. Cost *everyone* the country."

"My silence kept me alive."

Hermione glared at him. "That's the most selfish thing I've ever"

"Honestly, Granger, do you think my death would have helped anything? I had to be alive if I was to be of any use in defeating him."

Hermione just looked away, feeling sick to her stomach. She wasn't sure if it was because of the conversation, or the large bowl of soup she'd consumed in less than two minutes, of the dull ache that was spreading through her head from Snape pulling her down the stairs by her hair.

Snape seemed to take her lack of response to mean that she didn't have any further comments to make, and continued, "Everything just went wrong. The Muggles were attacking the wizards, the wizards were too busy fighting amongst themselves to stay out of sight, the damage to St. Mungo's was so extreme that the wards fell and everyone was exposed. The Muggles brought in reinforcements, and they didn't seem to care which side the wizards were on; they wanted us all dead. We might have still come out on top, though, if the wards hadn't gone up. We were trapped, then. No one in, no one out. There are checkpoints, patrols... and there aren't enough wizards left in any one place to try to take them all on, not when we can't even see half of them. They're hiding everywhere, and they're not exactly trying to take prisoners."

Hermione's head, now throbbing, reeled from the information. She couldn't believe everything had fallen apart so quickly. Just thinking about it made her feel exhausted, and staying up all night finally caught up with her.

"For Merlin's sake, Granger, you look like hell," Snape said, frowning. "Please, spare me any dramatic fainting."

"I'm just tired.... Didn't sleep last night."

"So sleep." At her suspicious look, he shook his head and walked away. "Or don't. But you're of no use to me if you can barely function."

"Snape!" she called after him, and he turned around. "Don't leave. Just... be here when I wake up, okay?"

He snorted. "Where else would I go?"

She shrugged and offered him a weak smile, trying not to think about how often she'd dreamed about him finding her, saving her. Now he was here, and maybe that meant that she'd make it through this alive after all. Settling down on his mattress, she started to drift off, but forced her eyes open one more time, taking in the sight of him leaning against the wall opposite her, as if he were standing guard.

"So now what?" she asked sleepily. "What do we do now?"

Snape sighed. "We wait."

~*~

The next few days seemed to pass by in a whirlwind of reminders of all the things Hermione had learned to live without. Snape had enough food with him, all in cans and shrunk down to fit inside a rucksack, to feed them for months. All of it seemed heavenly compared to the meals Hermione had been having lately. He'd mended and cleaned the clothes she wore, and conjured her a bath, and transfigured her pile of dirty blankets into a fairly comfortable mattress and a warm quilt like his own, all with the magic that she yearned to be able to use again.

At Hermione's insistence, both of their small beds were moved into Arthur Weasley's old office. She couldn't sleep in the Atrium, surrounded by so much open space, even with Snape's assurances that the wards he'd set would alert them long before anyone got that far into the Ministry, and she refused to let Snape out of sight when she could help it. As much as she wanted to trust him, she couldn't help but worry that he'd disappear one day, and she couldn't bear the thought of being alone again, defenceless and starving and terrified. Snape, to his credit, only made a handful of comments about how his life would have been easier if he'd remained on his own. Hermione thought maybe he'd been lonely, too. It was one thing to live a fairly solitary lifestyle in the midst of a world where you had a place, where you fit. It was entirely different to know that everyone you'd cared about was probably dead, to know that the world you'd found a place in was gone.

She gave him a detailed account of her life since she'd last seen him, and he shared more with her, too. He'd seen so many die after she'd lost consciousness back at Hogwarts, and he told her every one he could remember. She did her best not to cry, but failed. He'd seen Harry, Ginny, and Luna fall, and Minerva McGonagall, and what seemed like almost all of the students. Death Eaters had taken most of the bodies away. Ron had disappeared, and no one knew if he'd escaped or not. There hadn't been any sign of him since that day. Professor Flitwick had gotten away and was part of a small contingent of wizards and witches currently trying to hold Hogwarts against a group of remaining Death Eatersit was one of the few places that whoever was helping the Muggles hadn't been able to disenchant. Everywhere people were running out of food, and the remaining Muggles no longer had electricity, clean water, or any way to fuel their cars.

The war hadn't spread, though. What information Snape had gotten before the borders had been closed seemed to indicate that while the entire world was now searching for evidence of a wizarding world in their own countries, none had been found. While the Muggles had still been trying to figure out what had hit them, wizarding populations worldwide had known in an instant and gone so far underground that no one would ever find them even if they knew where to look.

That didn't mean that the rest of the world was unaffected there had been reports of witch hunts, of innocent Muggles being executed all over the world on accusations of wizardry. Voldemort's folly had thrown the world back to the mentality of the seventeenth century, it seemed.

The worst part, he told her, was the checkpoints. They were on an island; you couldn't just leave. Apparition wards not only enclosed London, but the entire coastline. There were checkpoints, places you could go to be airlifted outif you were a Muggle. Most of the wizards didn't have a Muggle identity, and that proved to be a problem; a wizard could transfigure something into passable identification, but you couldn't fake the computer databases, and there were so many armed Muggles around that no one dared to try to use spells to get through. Snape had heard of more than a few accounts of wizards or witches entering the "safe zones" only to be executed within a day or so. And as if that weren't bad enough, London and many other large cities were surrounded by Muggle troops. Anyone trying to leave was usually caught, and while one Muggle was hardly a match for someone with a wand, dozens hidden out of sight were another story.

Of course, quite a bit of this was just rumors and gossip. No one ever left the safe zones on foot, only by plane or through death, and no one that left the country ever came back.

~*~

If Snape thought it odd that Hermione never left his side, and insisted on sleeping within a few feet of him, and became visibly distressed if he mentioned leaving the Ministry for any reason, he didn't mention it. What he did mention, however, was her nightmares.

"Granger!" she heard shouted at her, and she nearly jumped out of her skin as she instantly became awake and alert.

"What?! What's wrong?" she asked, sitting up and starting to climb to her feet. She paused when she saw that Snape was still lying down, leaning up on one elbow, glaring

at her.

"What's wrong is that I can't sleep with all of your tossing and turning and whimpering over there. Shut up," he ordered nastily, dropping back onto his pillow and pulling the blanket over his head.

"Sorry," she grumbled, blushing. She had known that she was having nightmares every time she managed to doze off, but she hadn't realised that it had been keeping Snape awake. She leaned back against the wall, forcing her eyes to stay open.

After a moment, Snape heaved an exaggerated sigh and pushed his blanket away from his face, saying in an exasperated tone, "You can't be serious?"

"What?"

"I can't sleep if you're going to sit there staring at me, either."

She shrugged. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize, just stop," he complained. Hermione slid down onto her mattress again, her eyes focused on the wall beside her, and did her best to stay awake at least for a little while, but before she knew it Snape was leaning over her, shaking her.

"You're doing it again," he told her when she opened her eyes and glared at him.

"I can't control my dreams, Snape," she snapped back, swatting his hand away from her arm. "Every time I close my eyes I see myself getting attacked in my sleep."

He seemed to contemplate this for a moment, then said, "I have some potions ingredients; not many, but I think I'd have enough of the right things to make you something to stop the nightmares."

"And have me be drugged and useless if we're attacked? Not a chance," Hermione answered, getting to her feet. "I'll just go do sit outside for a while. You sleep. When you wake up, I'll try to rest and you can go somewhere else so I don't *bother you*." And she pushed past him and left the room, slamming the door shut behind her. Once outside, though, she grew fearful. She was unarmed, and from where she stood, anyone coming down the stairs would see her. What if Snape's wards didn't wake him up? What if someone managed to take down the wards without him noticing?

Hugging her arms across her chest, she couldn't stop herself from crying silently as she backed herself into a shadowed corner, her eyes never leaving the doorway to the stairwell, only partially hidden by a door that hung lopsided from just one remaining hinge. She wasn't sure she could handle going to another floor, not without Snape and, more importantly, his wand. It occurred to her that just days ago she'd moved through the Ministry alone day in and day out, afraid but managing to control her fear, but she couldn't bring herself to move now.

After a few minutes that had seemed to last an eternity, the door to the office suddenly flew open. Snape stood in the doorway looking annoyed, and Hermione opened her mouth to make a comment, but he cut her off with a sharp glare.

"Get in here, Granger," he growled, and feeling too relieved to argue, Hermione hurried back into the room, wiping tears from her face with shaking hand. "Lie down," he said, pointing at her small bed. She complied, and when he continued to stare at her angrily, she rolled over to face the wall. A moment later, without warning, she felt him sink down onto the tiny mattress beside her, his arm wrapping around her.

"What are you doing?" she hissed, beginning to scramble away, but his arm held her in place.

"Protecting you. Now go to sleep," he said, loosening his grip when she stopped struggling, and he moved his arm so that his hand rested on her hip, wand pointing toward the door.

Hermione wanted to be angry, to tell him to go away, to feel as uncomfortable as she thought she ought to feel about this entire thing, but she couldn't bring herself to feel anything but safe. For the first time in a very long time she felt *safe*, and it was the most wonderful feeling in the world. Shifting so that she could lean back against Snape's chest, she fell asleep to the feeling of his warm breath on the top of her head and the steady drum of his heartbeat against her back.

When they woke some hours later, Snape lying on his back with one arm holding Hermione against him, and her using his chest as a pillow, neither of them spoke of it. They just got up and went about what was fast becoming their daily routine—eat, argue, stare off into space, argue some more, talk about the war and speculate on what may be happening outside, and argue yet again. And when night came again and Hermione automatically slid all the way to the edge of her mattress to make room for Snape beside her, he lay down without comment, as if it were the most normal and natural thing in the world. Perhaps, considering how chaotic and unreal life had seemed lately for both of them, it was.

Chapter Seven: Wants and Needs

Even though Snape is a traitor, Hermione hopes he finds her. She's barely survived this long, and he may be her only
chance.

Hermione climbed the stairs to the Minister's office, settling on the floor near the doorway, hidden by the shadows, and watched the sunlight fade. She missed the warmth of the sun, the feeling of wind on her face, the smell of fresh air. But tonight, she hadn't come for any of these things—she'd come for the moon.

Hours went by, and the room echoed with the sound of dozens of howling wolves roaming the empty streets. She listened to it in silence, leaning her head against the wall, and nearly screamed when Snape's voice, low and dangerous and so quiet that she had to strain to hear him, came through the open doorway. "Get downstairs, Granger!"

She frowned. "Why?"

"Because our food is getting cold. And if you get bitten by a werewolf, it'll completely ruin my appetite."

Hermione grinned in spite of herself and answered quietly, "I didn't know you cared, Snape."

"I *don't*."

She rolled her eyes. "There's more of them this month. We only heard maybe a handful of them the night Neville and I came here, and only a few more last month. Now they seem to be everywhere, and I was just thinking about... well." She paused, biting her lip, and then continued, "The Muggles that took us in, one of them was bitten. I can't help but wonder if they stayed with him. If they're alive or dead now."

"In case you've forgotten, they tried to kill you," Snape said in his *'you're being an idiot'* voice, and then he stepped inside the room and settled down on the floor beside her. Hermione pulled her legs up close to her body and wrapped her arms around them, leaning her head on her knee and watching Snape stare at the gaping hole in the ceiling.

"They were scared," she said after contemplating his words for a moment. "I don't think any of them would have acted that way under normal circumstances. And what about Emily? She was just a child...."

"Many children have died in this war, Granger. If she's dead, she wasn't the first, nor will she be the last."

Hermione laughed humourlessly. "You're so comforting sometimes," she said, her voice laced with sarcasm, turning her gazed back to the moonlit sky.

Snape was silent for a moment, then added quietly, "Werewolves rarely bit to kill. Their instinct is to infect. If they didn't force him out, then *Emily* is probably better off than any of us tonight. There aren't any dark creature registries, no wizard or Muggle authorities to restrain or control her. During the full moon, she's the predator."

The thought sent shivers down Hermione's spine, and it took a moment for her to realise what had just happened. While his amended response hadn't made her feel better, he'd actually *tried* to be comforting. Turning back to look at him, she caught him watching her before he averted his eyes, and she smiled.

"Our food is probably a solid mass of congealed stew by now," he complained abruptly, pushing himself to his feet. "Let's go, Granger."

She didn't move for a moment, lost in her thoughts, her gaze drifting back to the sky.

"Granger."

No response.

"Hermione," he said softly, and she finally turned to look at him. Nodding more to herself than to him, she got to her feet and followed him down the stairs.

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Despite their nights spent at each other's sides, their days were often filled with fighting, and more often than not, one of them would storm off in a huff, only to return a few hours later, sullen and quiet. It was an unspoken rule that they never went looking for each other, even though Hermione was often sorely tempted to do just that. But it was also understood that no matter how angry they were, they wouldn't leave the Ministry—to do that without telling the other person would not only be horribly heartless, but incredibly stupid (as Snape had pointed out, causing Hermione to tell him that he was an idiot if he thought she hadn't realised that).

So when Snape stalked off one night, Hermione knew she shouldn't follow. But she felt guilty. Normally they fought over stupid things, or nasty but not entirely hurtful comments, or simple differences of opinion. This time it had been personal, and hadn't even really been a fight. They'd been talking, as they often did these days, about life before the war. Well, about Hermione's life. Snape was rarely forthcoming with such information, but seemed content enough to listen to Hermione chatter on about her parents, her friends, her Hogwarts days. It hurt to talk about it sometimes, to remember everyone that was gone, but it also made her feel like all of those people were right there with her. Just hearing herself say their names made them feel alive, if only in her mind.

And then she'd made a mistake. She'd been talking about Sirius Black and Remus Lupin (which really, she decided later, was her first error), and when Snape made some awful comment about not understanding why anyone would bother to mourn either of those men, Hermione had snapped.

"Would you *grow up*?" she said nastily. "Honestly, with everything that's happened in the last few months, was whatever they did to you really so terrible?"

Snape's face had paled considerably, and his expression hardened. Without a word, he got up and pushed past her, probably a bit rougher than he had intended, and stormed down the stairs. Watching him walk away, Hermione felt her heart sink. She'd actually upset him this time, not just annoyed him, she was almost positive. And considering everything he'd done for her, and how he'd been almost... not quite friendly, but *almost* pleasant....

Bracing herself for what she was sure would be an extremely unpleasant conversation, she followed him.

It took her a few minutes to find him. He was in the Department of Mysteries, in the middle of the Brain Room, casting one nonverbal spell after another on the brains that were trying to reach him. She stood and watched in horror as the brains bobbed up and down in the room, their tentacles reaching out toward Snape before snapping back like rubber bands as his spells sent them reeling. They didn't seem to be harmed by the onslaught, and just continued wending their way through the air until he forced them back again.

She took a step backward, and the movement caught Snape's eyes. He turned to look at her, then frowned and moved toward the door, still casting spells. When he was standing directly in front of the doorway, between her and the ever-approaching brains, he ignored her entirely.

"What are you doing?!" she finally exclaimed. "You're going to get yourself killed!"

"They don't kill you, Granger, they just cause you to go mad."

"Oh, well, never mind then. I won't *worry*."

Snape sighed and stepped outside the door, pulling it shut and sealing it with a wave of his wand. Turning around, he folded his arms across her chest and stared at her expectantly. When she didn't say anything for a moment, he growled, "You're wasting my time. What do you want?"

"I...." Hermione frowned at him, his impatient attitude getting on her nerves. "I wanted to apologise to you for what I said. *Not that you deserve an apology, if you're going to be such a nasty git,* she thought privately, but kept the sentiment to herself.

"Fine. Are we done?" he bit out, but his tone was slightly less scathing this time.

"What are you doing?" she asked again. Snape shot an irritated glare her way.

"Practicing," he said simply. "You can't be naïve enough to think that we'll be the only ones to try to take shelter here? There are at least a thousand people still hiding in London, Granger, and many of them are wizards. It might not look like it from the street, but there are plenty of people out there, and most of them would rather attack first and ask questions later. And if I sit here letting my skills rot away, we'll both end up dead."

"But if it's a Muggle, they couldn't possibly sneak up on us, and the wizards shouldn't be an issue—Voldemort still thinks you're on his side, right? And anyone on the good side," she went on, and Snape rolled his eyes at the term, "wouldn't hurt us."

"Do you honestly think a Death Eater isn't going to try to kill me for treason, if they see me with you?" he asked. "And if they don't, do you believe they'd just let you walk out of here, or leave you alone because I tell them to?" He stepped closer, and Hermione instinctively backed up against the wall. "If Death Eaters come here, they must be dealt with. They won't just kill you, Granger. Not unless they have to. You're a young and presumably fertile witch. In a world were wizards are being hunted and most of our population has been murdered or sent into hiding, you're valuable to them. A means to an end."

Hermione bristled at the words, hurt at what he seemed to be implying. "Is that why you're helping me? Why you've stayed? Because I'm *valuable?* Is that why you want me here?"

"If you have so little trust in me, perhaps you shouldn't be depending on me to protect you," he snapped, "which is precisely what I'm doing. *Protecting you.*"

"Why?"

Snape glared at her, and she asked again. "I mean it. Why? Why did you try to help me escape."

"Potter was the first priority because the prophecy said only he could defeat Voldemort. You were the second priority because it was unlikely that Potter could put on his robe correctly without you, much less survive the war. I was to get both of you out, but I never got to Potter before he was hit."

"And now? Harry's dead; you don't need me anymore."

"No, I don't."

She dropped her gaze to the floor, tears welling up in her eyes as he turned to walk away. Then he paused and finished, "It was never about *needing* you, Granger. I've stayed here with you because I want to."

Hermione could only stare at him in surprise. Without another word, he disappeared around the corner.