

The Wild Hunt

by WonderfulChild

Glastonbury Tor has been said to be many things: a pre-Roman settlement, an entrance to the underworld, the mystic isle of Avalon, the spiral castle of the Gwyn ap Nudd, the Fairy King of the Tor. Hermione Granger and Severus Snape are about to learn the truth.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 6

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Warnings: Shameless mixing and matching of Celtic mythology, legends from Glastonbury, and HP canon, chosen solely at the author's discretion (the myths and legends, not HP canon). And the present tense, for those who cannot abide it.

Thanks to miraba for the beta and to madjh for reading early drafts of a few chapters way back when.

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Chapter One

Hermione can't say what exactly prompts her to take the flat in Glastonbury.

Oh, there are plenty of reasons for selling the house and moving elsewhere, and they all begin and end with Ron. But the specific choice of Glastonbury? It certainly isn't the flat, which is far too small for her needs, just this side of dilapidated, and smelling a bit like eucalyptus. It isn't the town, which although quaint and cozy, doesn't draw Hermione's interest. It isn't the low population of witches and wizards, which somewhat does. It isn't the legends of fairies, which are all codswallop for the most part, or its ties to King Arthur, or the ridiculous Muggle sightings of UFOs.

But if she has to give a reason, it would be the Tor itself, rising out of the fields of Somerset like the hump of some great grass-green serpent, its single medieval tower standing like a sentinel at its summit, its terraces hinting at the labyrinth that once coiled around its slopes. The first time she sees it, it is through the grimy bedroom window of the flat and it is beautiful and breath-taking and bewitching for reasons she does not entirely understand, but which scare her immensely, so she is careful to tuck them away safely in the back of her mind.

Hermione is a rational witch, and though there is a fine line between what is a Muggle legend and what is not in Glastonbury, she knows for a fact that the legends about the Tor are merely fiction.

Fairies of that sort don't exist. And even if they do, no force on earth can bring back the dead.

The first night in the flat, she dreams of Ron, Ron in his old school robes speaking to her urgently outside of the Potions classroom, insisting that there is danger all around,

but Hermione is late for Arithmancy and he for Divination, so she brushes him off impatiently and pushes him away, insisting that neither of them should be tardy to class.

Later, she will wish she had listened.

There is a dog crouched at the front door of her building.

Hermione slows to a stop and stares at it through the rain dripping from the rim of her umbrella. It is a tall, slender thing, with a sharp muzzle and long, powerful legs that look like they were built for racing across moors and savannahs and wide, open spaces. It is huddled against the door, its ears turned down, looking miserable and cold and wet. There is a collar with no tag around its neck, but there is a lead, so she assumes that it isn't feral and cautiously approaches him.

Hermione extends her hand. "Hello there."

It whimpers and thumps its tail half-heartedly on the pavement.

She steps closer. "Lost?"

The dog creeps forward and sniffs at her fingers. It whimpers again and looks up at her with dark eyes.

"Poor thing." She pats it consolingly on the head. Part of her really doesn't want to deal with this, not after the long day she's had arguing with Percy Weasley about her proposal for the next Quidditch World Cup, but her inner champion of lost causes can't leave the poor thing to the elements.

She stoops to pick up the leash. The dog climbs to its feet and waits patiently for her to open the door. Now that the dog has stood, she can see that it's male. His nails click on the linoleum as he trots confidently into the foyer and shakes himself dry with the jingle of his collar and leash, splattering rainwater everywhere. She closes her umbrella and absentmindedly casts a quick cleaning spell before she leads him up the stairs, wondering who he belongs to and how, exactly, she is going to go about finding his owner, never mind what she is going to do with him until she does.

In answer to her silent question, the dog whimpers and strains towards the door of the first floor flat as they pass it on the landing.

Ah, there's her answer. She's lived in her flat for almost two weeks now and has never seen her neighbor or the dog. Then again, she leaves the flat only for work and her walk to the Tor in the evenings, so it doesn't surprise her that this odd looking dog lives in the building.

Hermione knocks, but there is no answer, not even the sound of movement inside. When she tries to lead the dog away, the lead goes taut in her hand. She turns to see that the dog has planted himself in front of the door.

Hermione pulls and tugs, but the dog won't move.

"He isn't there. We'll check back later," she tells him. The dog cocks his head as if he doesn't quite believe her. "I promise," she adds. The dog thumps his tail on the floor once, whimpers pathetically, and finally rises to follow her upstairs.

Crookshanks is unhappy with their guest, of course, and expresses his displeasure by arching his back and hissing at the dog as Hermione lets him into the flat. The dog isn't impressed. He trots over to greet Crooks with a good sniff, but Crookshanks, who is having none of it, slaps the dog on the nose and bolts into the bedroom.

Sighing, Hermione tosses her keys onto the hall table and sets her briefcase by the door. "He's crotchety. You might not want to bother him."

But the dog seems to have already forgotten the cat and is occupied by sniffing along the floor. Hermione leaves the dog to nose between the boxes she has yet to unpack, his wet leash leaving damp streaks on the hardwood floor, and goes into the bedroom to change.

As she is unbuttoning her blouse, she glances up and out the window. She frowns and looks again, taking a few steps closer to the window to peer through her reflection in the glass. She stands there for a long time, hands still poised to unbutton her blouse, staring out at the dark silhouette of Glastonbury Tor as the last of the daylight seeps from the heavy clouds.

It must have been a trick of the light or simply her own imagination, but for a split second, she thought the Tor was glowing.

The dog repays her kindness by waking her up in the middle of the night, howling.

Hermione leaps out of bed before she is even awake, heart racing, wand aimed, blinking away the last clinging remnants of sleep and trying to determine the source of that atrocious wailing. It takes her a moment to understand that the black, triangular thing sitting at the end of the hallway in front of the door is the dog she brought home, head thrown back, its howl a long, piercing ululation of misery.

"What are you howling about?" she shouts, turning on the hall light.

The howling stops. Hermione stumbles down the hall, squinting in pain as her eyes adjust. The dog is looking at her expectantly, as if he is waiting for her to rush immediately to the door and let him out. Crookshanks is sitting on the back of the sofa, his ears turned back, giving her a look that insinuates she is a far lower life form than he had originally thought, since she not only brought a *dog* home, but a loud, howling, emotionally disturbed dog that doesn't have the decency to let cats and their people sleep through the night.

Hermione sighs. "Is he home?"

In response, the dog whimpers and paws impatiently at the door.

"Right," she says, and returns to the bedroom to make herself as presentable as possible for banging on her neighbor's door in the middle of the night. She throws on a pair of jeans, slips on a pair of her work flats, and grabs the lead.

The dog bolts into the stairwell as soon as she opens the door. There's a sharp pain in her shoulder as she finds herself being dragged along behind him, and she dimly recalls the old joke about the dog walking the human. The dog scrambles down the stairs and slides as he hits the landing, nails scratching at the floor. Hermione grabs the banister and only barely keeps herself from flying down the stairs head first.

By the time she's recovered her balance, the dog is already whimpering and pawing at the crack between the door and the jamb. Hermione wraps the leash around her hand for a better grip and raises the other hand to knock, but before her knuckles even touch wood, the door flies open. The dog leaps to its feet, wagging its tail gleefully, but Hermione blinks at the man in the doorway in startled shock.

She glances at the door itself, to her left, to her right, and finally over her shoulder, as if maybe she's picked the wrong flat, the wrong building, or perhaps even the wrong universe, then says in the most idiotic way possible, "What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here?" snarls Severus Snape, his eyes flickering over Hermione with pure loathing to the dog straining towards him eagerly and back to Hermione again. The years have been kinder to him than she would have expected; he no longer has the pasty, sallow complexion from too many years hiding in damp, lightless places, and he looks as if he may have gained a stone. But his features still twist in disgust and loathing as well as they did when she was a child, and he is clearly unhappy to see

her. "I live here. What are you doing here?"

Oh, no, it was impossible, wasn't it? Hermione can't decide whether to laugh or cry.

The dog is straining towards Snape, and Hermione grips the leash in both hands to hold him back. "I live here, too."

"What do you mean you live here?" Snape's voice has a dangerous edge she last heard in the maze of caves where Voldemort and his Death Eaters had retreated, with Lucius Malfoy at wand point and Harry hidden somewhere in the endless labyrinth of caverns.

"I mean, I live here. In the upstairs flat."

Surprise flashes briefly across his face, before his eyes narrow and his mouth flattens. He fixes her with a look of the deepest loathing. "Please tell me this is an elaborate joke."

Snape's intimidating expressions have long ceased to impress Hermione; he isn't nearly as terrifying at twenty-eight as he was when she was twelve. "Believe me, I sincerely wish it was."

Snape's eyes slide to the dog again, which is straining so hard at the end of its leash that Hermione feels the burn in her arms and shoulders from holding him back. "Get that beast away from me."

"This beast seems to think it belongs to you."

"I would hope that my treatment of Black and Lupin would clearly indicate that I am not, in fact, a dog lover."

"So he's not yours?"

Snape gives her a look that questions whether she should be walking upright. "No," he says, and slams the door in her face.

The dog whimpers inconsolably, barks once and begins scratching frantically at the door. Hermione, with the very last of her strength, hauls him back, nearly choking the poor thing and thinking all the while that this might not be the best way to handle such a big dog.

"Stop," she tells it. "He doesn't want you and why in the world do you want him? He'll only use you for potions ingredients."

The dog stops fighting her and slumps miserably in front of the door, giving her a look of such despondent rejection that he seems almost human.

Hermione sighs. She feels bad for the poor thing, she really does, though his attraction to Snape is utterly beyond her. How she came to be neighbors with Snape is also utterly beyond her, but she is tired and annoyed and she only wants to go back to bed. She'll contemplate this surreal experience in the morning.

"Come on," she says, tugging at the dog's leash. "Let's go back upstairs. I'll work on finding your owner tomorrow when I get home from work."

This must be acceptable to the dog, because he comes obediently, his head hanging and tail drooping, and Hermione decides in a moment of uncharitable irritation that the next time she finds someone's lost pet in the rain, she's going to keep on walking.

Hermione meets Harry for lunch the next day at the Leaky Cauldron with the intention of telling him about Snape, but as soon as she sees him, she decides it's a conversation that can wait. Harry looks pale and drawn because he has spent most of the night chasing down and arresting Marcus Flint and a few other minor but still active Death Eaters. There are dark circles under his eyes, and his scar is an angry red, standing out brightly against the pallor of his face.

The scar looks like that more and more often; she desperately wishes she could smooth her thumb across the scar and take that last vestige of Voldemort from him forever.

Unfortunately, deciding against bringing up Snape allows Harry to turn the conversation towards something she actually considers a bit more unpleasant than Snape, if such a thing is possible.

"So, are you coming next Saturday?" Harry asks, picking the crunchiest chips off Hermione's plate.

Hermione slaps his hand away. "Saturday? What's on Saturday again?"

"Molly's birthday party?"

Hermione's stomach flutters nervously and she frowns. "Oh, Harry, I don't know...."

"You should come. They miss you. They're always asking about you."

Hermione is aware of that. At least once a week she has to perform the most amazing athletic feats to avoid Arthur in the corridors at the Ministry, and even then she can't escape him when he comes knocking on her office door to check up on her.

"I'm not sure I'm ready to handle the full force of the Weasleys yet, Harry. They remind me too much of..."

And Hermione stops there because a knot of pressure is building in her chest and her eyes are beginning to burn with the threat of tears. She clenches her hands, stares intently at the whorls in the almost-patterns of the table's wood grain, and wills herself not to cry in public, not with Colin Creevy and a reporter from the Daily Prophet across the room, talking shop. Her picture would be in the paper inside thirty seconds with some wildly scandalous and completely untrue headline above it.

Harry reaches across the table and covers her hand with his. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I didn't mean to--."

Hermione nods and entwines her fingers in his. "I know, Harry." Her voice is shaky, unshed tears lurking just behind her words. "It's okay."

"No, it's not." Harry's voice is thick with tears now, too. Sometimes Hermione wonders if he doesn't miss Ron more than she does. "I should have been..."

"Herm-own-ninny?"

They both look up, startled by the interloper in their moment of grief. Hermione is surprised to see Viktor Krum standing beside their table in dark red robes edged with grey fur, as tall and broad shouldered as she remembered, but older and thicker and strangely different.

"Er, Viktor?" This has certainly been the day for meeting ghosts from the past. "What are you doing here?"

"I live in London now." Viktor glances from Hermione to Harry to their entwined fingers and back again, "Am I interrupting something?"

Harry quickly untangles his fingers from hers. "No, er, of course not. We were just discussing..." Harry's voice trails off at Hermione's sharp shake of the head. The thought of including Viktor in their grief makes Hermione feel a bit sick, like she is cheating on Ron. "Would you like to join us?" he says instead.

Hermione isn't sure if she likes that idea any better, but can't bring herself to contradict Harry's offer.

Viktor's eyes flicker between them, his brow furrowed in uncertainty. "Only if you are sure I am not interrupting."

"You aren't," Harry assures him. Both men look at her for confirmation. In answer, Hermione slides over. "You aren't," she says, patting the bench and giving him a watery smile.

Viktor gives her a radiant smile full of teeth. She's never seen him smile so openly before. It's... disconcerting, and for a brief moment she considers retracting her offer, but then he is sliding in next to her, and the opportunity to withdraw it has passed.

There is a moment of deep awkwardness. She hasn't spoken to Viktor for the better part of a decade, since she stopped writing him when she was eighteen, and her life narrowed down to Harry and Ron, to the Horcruxes, to surviving the war. Afterwards, there were trials and the wedding and in the end, when she thought she might start writing him again, Ron had asked her not to. It annoyed her that Ron got so upset when she was writing Viktor back in school, but having come out alive and whole on the other side of a war, she realized that Ron was threatened by a man whom he seemed to think could offer her more. Not that Hermione would have ever left Ron for Viktor, but Ron needed some kind of reassurance of that. He did tend to put up with a lot more from her than other husbands might have, so it wasn't such an awful thing to give him that little bit of reassurance.

"So I heard you retired from Quidditch," Harry says, breaking the heavy silence, perhaps realizing that Hermione would not.

"Yes. Too many Bludgers to the head." Viktor smiles self-effacingly and touches his temple. "My healer said too many more might cripple my magic."

"Ah," says Harry, glancing briefly at Hermione before he proceeds to ask Viktor how he thinks the Quidditch World Cup will be affected without him. They discuss it for a bit, and Hermione lets the conversation drift in one ear and out the other, just as she used to when Harry and Ron turned the conversation to Quidditch, but then Viktor suddenly turns to her and says, "I heard about your husband. I am very sorry for your loss."

"Oh," Hermione says, dropping her eyes to the table. The knot of pressure in her chest is building again. "Thank you."

Viktor must have realized he has tread over some kind of invisible line, because he says quickly, "Oh, I am sorry, Herm-own-ninny. I did not mean to hurt you."

"It's okay, Viktor," she says and gives him a weakly reassuring smile. "It's been almost a year but it's still hard."

"Still, I am very sorry," Viktor says and then there is another moment of awkward silence.

Harry breaks it again by clearing his throat. "I need to be going. I have to get back to the office."

Hermione gives him a thankful look. "So do I. I have to argue with Percy Weasley about my proposal again at two."

They all climb out of the booth. There is a flurry of nervous robe readjustment and hand shaking and awkward but pleasant goodbyes, and then Harry is stepping into the fireplace and shouting for the Ministry and Hermione is still standing there with Viktor, who is watching her with an intense concern that makes her look anywhere but at him.

"May I owl you, Herm-own-ninny?" His voice is terribly intimate. Hermione shifts uncomfortably. "I once enjoyed your letters."

She doesn't really want to correspond with him. Just because Ron is dead doesn't mean that her promises don't count anymore. Still, she isn't sure that Viktor will understand that and she can't find it in herself to be rude, so she nods reluctantly and says, "Okay. Owl me."

Viktor gives her that open smile again. She doesn't know why it bothers her so. "I will. Have a good day, Herm-own-ninny."

"Thank you," she says, and grabbing a handful of Floo powder, steps into the fireplace, unable to ignore the feeling that she has just betrayed Ron.

That night, Hermione dreams of the day Ron died.

She is running from room to room in St. Mungo's, looking for Ron, looking for Harry, looking for anyone who can tell her what is going on. She runs and runs and runs, and no one knows anything and no one is helping her and no one even looks at her, and then she finally finds Harry alone in one of the private rooms, sitting beside a bed with mysterious hills and peaks and hollows beneath the sheet. His head is bowed, his hands are dangling between his knees, and he does not look up as she steps into the room.

"Harry?" She is panicked by his defeated posture and the emptiness of the room. She can't see the far wall and she can't see Ron and she has no idea what is happening. "I got your Owl. Where's Ron? What's going on?"

"I don't know what happened, Hermione." Harry's voice is as raw and thick as it was the night after he defeated Voldemort, stumbling back into their camp, bleeding and pale and half-dead. "We had Antonin Dolohov cornered in a Muggle warehouse, but Ron and I got separated, and when I found him again, he was having a coughing fit. It was only a Pneumatic Hex -- you know, the one that makes you cough incessantly? -- but I didn't know the counter-hex, so I brought him here. The Healers fixed him, and I went to Floo you, but there wasn't a fire, and so I had to owl and when I got back he was coughing up blood, and there were healers running around, shouting at one another, but the blood just kept coming ..."

Hermione feels like the walls are pressing in on her, crushing her, stopping her from breathing. "Harry, you're scaring me."

Harry shakes his head. "I was away only twenty minutes, maybe half an hour. They said it was complications from the hex. That it's rare, but it happens."

Hermione steps toward him, shaking uncontrollably, sick to her stomach and terrified. "Where is Ron, Harry?"

Harry looks up, finally. His eyes are swollen, his face is mottled and red, and his scar, just visible through his fringe, is glowing like fire. "I'm so sorry, Hermione." He grabs a fist full of the sheet and pulls it off the hills and peaks and hollows on the bed to reveal the pale, dead body of her husband....

Hermione sits up, trembling and nauseous and panting in fear. Crookshanks is sitting at the end of her bed protectively, ears forward, watching the dog, and the dog is sitting in the doorway, watching Hermione.

And in the weak street light that falls through her window, his eyes look like caverns.

Chapter Two

Hermione keeps running into people she'd rather not see. Snape behaves exactly like himself.

Thanks to miraba for the beta.

Disclaimer: Not mine. Never was. Never will be. Not making any money, etc.

Chapter Two

Severus Snape keeps dreaming of hounds.

Unsettling and exhilarating dreams, dreams of racing across wide open plains with the scent of earth and blood and prey in his nose, so fast, so fleet that his paws barely touch the ground. Dreams of running. Of hunting. Of killing.

For six months, he has been having these dreams. He always wakes up shaking, his heart racing, disturbed and frightened and energized. He does not go back to sleep afterwards, and sometimes he reads or works on his experimental potions until dawn, but most often he dresses and walks up to the Tor to contemplate the stars and watch the sunrise.

And sometimes the Tor glows.

Severus is considering moving out.

He chose his flat five years ago for three simple reasons: it is cheap, owned by an elderly Squib who doesn't care who he is as long as he pays the rent, and Glastonbury is nearly empty of wizards.

And Hermione Granger has just ruined it for him.

She's more of a nuisance now than she ever was as his student. In less than 48 hours of discovering her presence in his building, he has already amassed a list of grievances against her: she stomps back and forth in her flat at all hours of the day and night, that monster of a dog keeps scratching and whining at his door every time it passes, and her offensive perfume lingers in the stairwell for hours after she has been there.

Of course, the most intolerable grievance of all is her friendship with Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Wouldn't-Bleeding-Die, and the thought of having to face Potter after he'd washed his hands of him almost ten years ago is infuriating and almost too much to bear. He has a vision of Granger with a tea setting spread out in front of her, that disgusting mongrel curled obediently at her feet and Potter across from her, separated from Severus by only a mere meter or so of floor and ceiling; involuntarily, he grinds his teeth and clenches his hands into fists, incensed with the mere thought of Potter even daring to glance in the direction of Somerset, let alone stepping one foot inside this building.

The last tenant may have smelled strongly of eucalyptus and menthol, but at least he had been quiet and friendless and decidedly *not* Hermione Bloody Granger.

Severus stands at the door of his flat, listening to her weary tread on the stairwell. He decided earlier this morning as he listened to her clomp back and forth above him that it is time to make it clear that she is entirely unwanted in his building, especially if she insists upon keeping that long-legged monster. If Severus has to listen to him whimper and scratch at his door one more time...

Besides, he was here first. It's much easier for her to find a new flat as a war hero than for him as a convicted murderer, even if he is convicted only in the eyes of the public. But if she won't leave, he will move out because he wants nothing to do with Harry Potter and his sycophants ever again, and he certainly doesn't want one for a neighbor.

Out on the stairs, there is a sudden thunk. Granger's footfalls cease, and she mutters an oath he is amused to hear come out of that prim, pedantic mouth.

Never one to pass up an opportunity for drama, Severus throws open his front door. She is crouching on his landing, gathering up spilled papers and attempting to wrestle them into her briefcase. She is older and thinner, but her hair is just as unkempt and frizzy, even swept up into a knot at the base of her neck. The make-up she wears doesn't do as much to hide the dark bags under her eyes as she probably thinks it does. She is dressed in Muggle business attire skirt, blouse, heels, and a long winter coat and his eyes stray to the slim, curved line of her calf beneath the shimmer of her Muggle hose.

"What do you want?" she snaps at him, and he jerks his eyes away from her leg.

Well, she's asked. "I want you to move out."

She sighs irritably and shoves a handful of paperwork into her briefcase. "No."

"I was here first." It comes out more petulant than he would have entirely preferred.

She pivots towards him on the balls of her feet and stares at him in astonishment. Snape pointedly does not look at the line of her thigh disappearing underneath her skirt. "Oh, honestly. What are you? Five? I'm not going anywhere." She grabs a few errant papers, stuffs them into her briefcase, and stands. "So get used to it."

And then she starts down the stairs again, as if she isn't imposing an inconvenience on his life, as if she hasn't shattered the peace he's made for himself here. All he's ever wanted was some peace, and everything he's done up to this point has been worth it, or had been, until she showed up.

For once, just once, he'd like to have what he wants.

Snape clenches his hands again, grits his teeth. What can he do to drive her away? There must be something.... Ah, yes. Of course. The dead Weasley she married.

"I can see why you want to stay." He is pleased to hear how smooth his voice is, even if a tremor of anger can be heard in its undertones. "This tiny, decrepit flat must be an improvement over that huge, empty house." Granger slows to a stop and turns her head, watches him out of the corner of her eye. "Tell me, how long did his scent last on your sheets before it faded completely?"

She flinches as if he has struck her; Severus feels the warm glow of triumph in his chest.

He doesn't wait to see what she does next. Satisfied with his strike, he goes back into his flat and slams the door behind him.

The warm glow lasts the whole morning.

Hermione is having a very bad morning.

Encountering Snape and his nasty temper tantrum first thing was not how she wanted to start the day, not after a restless night full of strange dreams that she is only able to recall in brief flashes: Ron speaking in whispers, dogs barking in the distance, getting lost in a maze that she couldn't escape.

She is nearly shaking from exhaustion as she hurries through Diagon Alley in her Muggle heels and uncomfortable Muggle clothes, rushing to the apothecary and hoping she won't be late for her nine o'clock meeting with Percy Weasley and a representative from the Prime Minister's office. Her eyes are dry and red from little sleep, her face puffy, her patience nil. She is in need of Pepper-Up to make it through the day as caffeine isn't cutting it anymore and her tolerance of Percy Weasley is sailing towards zero as it is.

And now she has to spend the day with Snape's vicious, petulant comment rattling around inside her head, as if every moment without Ron isn't miserable enough as is. Bloody Snape, twisting the knife of her grief deeper into her heart with his nasty comment. She should have hexed him, the bastard. Here she was willing to keep her distance from him, to live and let live, and then he has to go and make that comment.

She isn't going to let the bastard get away with it. He wants her to leave that flat? Like that would ever happen now. She'll stay just to spite him, right up to the day he dies, if she has to. Oh! Or better yet, she'll just tell Harry...

Her thoughts are cut short as she collides bodily with some kind of huge, fleshy wall. She finds herself sprawled on the cobblestones, looking up at Viktor Krum.

Her morning has just become worse.

"Herm-own-ninny!" Viktor says, hurrying to help her to her feet. "I am so sorry. I was not paying attention to where I was going." He brushes at her coat, trying to be helpful, but he only succeeds in annoying her.

Hermione steps away delicately and inspects her suit, mends a run in her stockings with a quick flick of her wand. "No, it's all right. No damage done."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Viktor flashes that open smile. His teeth are very white and even. Hermione very much wishes he would close his mouth.

"I am glad. Tell me, would you care to go to lunch later today?"

Hermione manages a weak apologetic smile. "I'm afraid I can't," she says, lying unabashedly through her teeth. "I'm busy all day long. In fact, I need to run. I'm a bit behind this morning."

His smile fades a little, as if he didn't expect to be brushed off so quickly. "Oh, of course. I won't keep you. Perhaps I will Owl you tonight?"

"That would be nice," she says, and hurries past him, glad to have escaped his eager attention.

Of course, halfway through her meeting with Percy at his most arrogant and the equally pompous Muggle official, she almost wishes she'd stayed with Viktor.

Just to make her day that much better, on her way out to walk the dog that evening, she runs into Snape again.

The landlady, Mrs. Prenderghast, has waylaid her in the foyer to ask her about the dog.

"I agreed to let you keep a cat, Mrs. Granger," she scolds, reminding Hermione a bit of McGonagall at her most pinched. "But a huge dog like that "

"I know, Mrs. Prenderghast. I'm sorry. I'm only keeping him until I find his owner."

Mrs. Prenderghast frowns severely. "Are you sure he even has an owner? What if he's just a stray?"

"And how do you know that thing isn't feral or infected with rabies?" adds someone behind her.

Hermione jumps at the voice, whirling in surprise and only barely restraining her instinct to draw her wand. Snape is standing at the foot of the stairs wearing a Slytherin green and silver striped scarf and a long black Muggle coat that hints at the teaching robes he once wore. He is scowling of course, and the dog, as ineffably drawn to him as ever, whines and strains towards him at the end of his leash.

Snape's lips curl in disgust as he steps back from the dog.

"Why do you ask?" Hermione replies pleasantly. He thinks he's going to get under her skin, but she isn't going to make that mistake again. She let his unpleasant remark affect her more than it should have this morning and she isn't going to let his sharp tongue cut her again. "Did you bite him?"

Snape bares his crooked, yellowed teeth in a snarl and stalks past them, out the front door, leaving Hermione the clear victor in the confrontation.

The dog, however, slumps dejectedly.

"Nasty piece of work, that man," Mrs. Prenderghast says as the door slams behind him. "If he weren't such a good tenant, I'd have thrown him out years ago." She sighs and peers over the rims of her glasses. "About the dog, Mrs. Granger..."

"Give me two weeks, and he'll be gone. I promise, whether I find his owner or not."

"I'll give you one week or I'll throw you out just like Mr. Snape asked," she says and disappears into her flat, leaving Hermione gaping indignantly at her words.

Oh, that unmitigated bastard! Not only is she going to tell Harry about Snape, she is going to invite the twins to tea as well.

And she's going to tell them to bring their experiments.

Severus is getting thoroughly and unrelentingly drunk.

He is sitting in a smoky, dreary pub he sometimes frequents, drinking shot after shot of whiskey, accosted by awful Muggle music and the inane conversations of the evening crowd, pondering the cruelty of fate. Just when he thought life was getting better for him, he now has to live only one floor away from Hermione Granger, has to endure her sarcastic little comments and tolerate that drooling canine nosing after him with his needy, watery eyes.

Severus pours another shot from the bottle the bartender left with him. The nerve of her. *Did you bite him?* Oh, so funny, the wretched woman. He should have hexed her just as he always wanted to years ago, whenever he saw her hand fly into the air in class. If Mrs. Prenderghast wasn't standing there, if she hadn't promised him just that morning that Granger would go if the dog didn't, he would have.

He really, really would have, their exploits in Voldemort's caverns be damned.

"Evening, Rex!" the bartender says from just down the bar, his booming voice ripping Severus out of his self-righteous brood. "You seem to be a dog or two short tonight!"

Severus jerks his head up irritably to see the bartender and a familiar old man with great wispy eyebrows and a shock of pure white hair standing just down the bar near the window, looking out at something in the street. The old man is wearing a tweed coat and an orange sweater vest, reminding him a great deal of what Dumbledore would wear when he took it into his head to dress like a Muggle. No matter the culture, it was always atrocious colors with the Headmaster.

"I've lost Rupert, the poor old soul," replies the old man. "He ran off after a cat the other night and I haven't seen him since. Mind if I put up one of these fliers?"

Severus's ears prick up. A lost dog?

Severus studies the old man with interest as he and the bartender chat, trying to force his inebriated brain to recall why he recognizes him. There is something here, something important, a connection between Granger's dog and the old man's and if he can just remember...

Oh, of course. It was all coming together nicely.

Severus feels the corners of his mouth curl into the sort of smile that used to terrify first year Hufflepuffs when he caught them in the corridors after curfew. He wants Granger out of his building. Granger can't stay if she doesn't get rid of the dog. As long as he can keep the old man and Granger from crossing paths...

It's probably a ridiculous plan, but he's fairly drunk and who bloody cares if it is, especially if it inconveniences Granger for even a day or two?

Severus slips out of the pub, skirting around the two hounds tied up outside as they strain to greet him, whimpering pathetically just like the monster Granger has in her flat. Then he spends the rest of the evening in better spirits, walking through Glastonbury and ripping down all the lost dog fliers he can find.

Revenge never stops being fun.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 6

Things progress in ways Hermione doesn't care for.

Thanks to miraba for the beta.

Disclaimer: Not mine to the nth degree.

Warning: The naughtier elements start in this chapter.

Chapter Three

To Hermione's great dismay, she keeps running into Viktor Krum.

She had received an Owl from him the same day she literally ran into him in Diagon Alley. The note was brief and polite and merely asked how her day went, but Hermione decided not to reply to it in hopes that he would take the hint. She feels awful about it - her mother would tell her she was raised better than that - but she can't find the inner strength to deal honestly with his odd interest in renewing their friendship. There are so many other over-taxed relationships she has to deal with without adding a new one to her roster.

Two days later, she learns that Viktor did not take the hint. On Friday morning, she is picking up a few files from the Department of Games and Sports when she meets him again. He is with Oliver Wood, who has become assistant to the department head since his early retirement from Quidditch due to an untreatable spinal injury, and Harry, who looks unhappy as he always does when he gets caught up in inner office socialization.

"Herm-own-ninny!" Viktor assaults her with that open smile again. "We were just going to lunch. Would you like to join us?"

"Oh, I don't know." The last thing she wants to do is have lunch with them, and it has nothing to do with the fact that they will probably talk about Quidditch the entire time. "I'm rather busy today. I have a proposal due to Fenwick on Monday."

Oliver smiles brightly at her. "Oh, sod Fenwick. I'll deal with him. You should come to lunch. You can fill us in on how preparations for the World Cup are going."

Harry gives her a wide-eyed, pleading look. "Yes, please, Hermione."

The three men watch her expectantly. Hermione sighs. "Okay. Let me get my coat...."

Lunch is a bizarre and uncomfortable affair. The discussion is as Quidditch-related as she expected. She makes an occasional contribution to the conversation about the Muggle-relations aspects arrangements for next World Cup, but she is mostly distracted by fact that Krum's attention is excessively focused on her, that Harry's attention is excessively focused on Krum, and that Oliver keeps glancing between the three of them as if trying to make sense of the undercurrents.

Eventually, Viktor excuses himself from the table and disappears in the direction of the restroom.

"Seems a bit off, doesn't he?" Oliver asks when he is gone.

"Does he?" Harry murmurs. He is looking in the direction that Viktor has gone with the same focused, suspicious look he used to direct towards Snape.

"You don't see it?"

"He is a bit off," Hermione agrees. Very off. Much different than the awkward, shy Viktor she knew as a teenager.

Oliver shrugs philosophically. "I guess that's what too many Bludgers to the head can do to you."

No one replies to that, as Viktor is making his way back to the table. Mercifully, lunch seems to end then, and they all scoot out of the booth. There is hand shaking and polite good-byes, but this time Hermione isn't left alone with Viktor. Harry hovers nearby as Viktor takes her hand in both of his and speaks to her in a low, intimate voice.

"Perhaps we can have lunch alone sometime, Herm-own-ninny."

"Perhaps." She glances over her shoulder at Harry. He is watching Viktor with a dark look. "But I have to get back to the office."

Viktor gives her that open smile again, but this time it is more intimate and too familiar. "I will Owl you then, yes?"

"If you would like." Hermione extracts her hand from his, hoping that he will take the hint this time, but not entirely sure he does. She hurries over to Harry, and they both Floo back to the Ministry.

"He trying to get into your knickers," Harry says when they emerge from one of the fireplaces in the Ministry atrium, covered in soot and Floo powder.

Hermione nods and brushes some soot off of Harry's shoulder. "I know, but don't worry about it. My honor isn't in any danger."

"It's not that I don't want you to be happy, Hermione, but..."

"But it's awfully forward of him?"

Harry nods.

"I know." Forward and somehow unnerving. She would have never imagined that the unimposing boy she knew before would have turned into such an aggressive adult. And that smile.... "But I am a big girl, Harry. I'll take care of it."

"If you need me to do anything...."

Hermione smiles at his ridiculous over-protectiveness. "I'll be sure to let you know."

That night there is another Owl from Viktor. She sets it aside and does not reply, ignoring the twist of guilt at her own cowardice, telling herself that it had everything to do with what Ron would have wanted and nothing at all to do with Viktor's smile.

The next day is Saturday, and Hermione wakes from a nightmare just before dawn. It's an old nightmare, a remnant of the war, a clinging, oppressive dream of running through the twisting bowels of a network of caves, following the swirling cloak of the wizard in front of her, desperate and terrified, worried that Harry and Ron are dead. It clings to her and won't let her to go back to sleep, so finally, just as the sun is rising over the horizon in a flare of reds and oranges and golds, she gets out of bed.

She takes a shower, has tea and a bit of breakfast, and then makes a batch of lost dog fliers. She spends the rest of the morning walking the town with the dog, putting them up on community bulletin boards, in shops and restaurants, and on the few kiosks around the town. Then deciding that it was too beautiful a day to stay inside, even if the mild fall chill did take what feels like a huge arctic drop the night before, she and the dog walk up to the Tor.

She hasn't been up to the Tor since she found the dog and she feels nearly happy as she follows the footpath up the steep slope, despite the burn in her lungs and legs. From the summit, she feels like she can see the whole of Somerset when she gazes out across the mottled patchwork of fields. Even with the cold wind lashing her face and the tourists getting in her way, there's a sense of peace here, like she's somehow close to Ron. She likes to pretend she isn't taken in by the stories that the Tor is an entrance to the underworld and the kingdom of the Fae, and logically she knows they are merely myths, but sometimes she can't help but wonder if there's any truth to them, if maybe she couldn't find an entrance if she looked hard enough.

But it's only a passing fancy, a fantasy born of mourning and sadness, and she usually feels ridiculous to have even considered it once she returns to the town. But up here in the wind, with the wide blue sky over head and the Tor under her feet, with that feeling of peace enveloping her, she's willing to give up a bit of her rationality, if only for a little while.

And then the dog, who had been sitting quietly at her heel, leaps to his feet with an excited whimper and strains at the end of his leash. Hermione suddenly realizes that her peace is about to be shattered.

"Do you plan to infect every aspect of my life here?"

Irritated at the sarcastic bite of his voice, Hermione turns to find Snape standing behind her in his Slytherin scarf, scowling at her as if she is something he has to scrape off of the bottom of his shoe. The cold has raised the color on his cheeks, and sunlight gleams in a halo on the crown of his greasy head, and he looks nearly human.

Nearly.

"I might ask the same of you," she says, returning her attention to the sprawling country side. She has come up to the Tor because it makes her feel at peace and she refuses to let him ruin that, but with him here, the Tor has suddenly lost its magic. Now it's just a bloody big hill in the middle of an ancient marsh with just enough history and myth to make it a decently large tourist attraction.

"Leave, Granger."

Hermione sighs. Snape's acidic presence has curdled her peace like old milk.

"No." Hermione turns back to him, pulling on the dog's leash to keep him from leaping on Snape. "It's a public park."

"I'm not talking about the park." A gust of wind rushes across the Tor, tearing at Snape's long coat, whipping Hermione's hair in her face. "I'm talking about Glastonbury. Leave."

"No," she snaps. "I have as much right to be here as you."

She gets a good grip on the leash and marches right past Snape, all but dragging the dog behind her. Thankfully, the dog follows obediently, even though he whimpers as if she's broken his heart, and she charges down the hill. All the way back to her flat, she curses Snape and fate's sick sense of humor and anything else she can think of that might be blamed for this ironic little twist in her life.

Hermione has no nightmares that night. Instead she dreams that she can see the crown of Snape's head between her knees, and he is using his sharp tongue in more productive ways than for lashing out with mere insults. When she grabs a fistful of his greasy hair to better direct him, she wakes, panting and shivering, and decides that between the nightmares and the erotic dreams, she'd rather have the nightmares.

Saturday evening, Severus discovers that Granger has put up lost dog fliers of her own.

He notices the first one in the grocer's, tacked to the bulletin board near the door as he is walking out and ends up standing in the doorway, glowering at it until a mother with a small boy in tow tries to leave.

"Excuse me, sir," the woman says politely, but Severus fixes her with his best glare, rips down the flier, and storms through the door, leaving the mother gaping behind him.

He spends the next quarter of an hour wandering in and out of the shops along the street, taking the fliers down as he goes, only to turn a corner to find them on lamp posts

and kiosks and tacked to the occasional wall.

The wretched woman. He was never going to get rid of her.

Walking the town tearing down fliers is considerably less enjoyable this time, probably because he isn't completely pissed. It takes an hour just to remove them from the High Street alone, and then, when he is down near Glastonbury Abbey, pulling down the last of her fliers the ones he can find, anyway he is nearly bowled over by two hounds.

They come at him, yipping excitedly, eager to greet him, pulling at the ends of their long leashes, their owner jogging behind them in a cheerful trot. Severus jumps back against the kiosk, a flier clenched in his hand, suddenly overcome by the images of his dreams: running across a field, the moon high above him, the smell of earth in his nose, and the prey, running in terror, reeking of blood and life and...

"Get these mongrels away from me!" Severus snarls, trying to escape the overwhelming joy, the intense freedom of those dream-memories, even though he is suffering the indignity of being backed against a kiosk by two huge, drooling hounds.

"William, Liam!" their owner calls, tugging on their leashes. It is the old man from the pub, garish orange sweater and all. "Down, lads. Heel. Not everyone likes to be licked to death."

The beasts relent, sitting on their haunches obediently, but gaze up at Severus with avid wonder, as if he's a deity in need of worship, their tails thumping the pavement. The idiot dogs. Don't they know that he'd all but laughed himself to the point of asphyxiation when that mongrel Black fell through the Veil?

"Sorry about that, mate," the old man says. There is a cigarette hanging precariously out of the corner of his mouth. "They like you! They always recognize a dog lover."

Severus, in attempt to retain his dignity, straightens and pulls away from the kiosk. As an afterthought he balls up Granger's flier and shoves into his coat pocket. "I am emphatically *not* a dog lover."

"No?" The old man shrugs. "Well, no one is perfect, I suppose. Mind if you let me at the kiosk? Someone's been taking down my lost dog posters."

Severus sidesteps the hounds and gestures at the kiosk with a sneer.

"Cheers," he says and tacks up yet another lost dog poster.

Severus has to restrain himself from groaning.

"Have a good night, yeah?" the old man says with a jolly smile and a wave of his hand, and leads the hounds off along the street. They glance mournfully at Severus as they go, and he has a sudden urge to take out his wand and curse them within an inch of their lives.

Severus turns back to the kiosk and the new lost dog poster and sighs in exasperation.

"Like bloody Sisyphus up the bloody hill," he mutters and checking to ensure that the old man has disappeared around a corner, he rips the poster down and throws it in the nearest rubbish bin.

A dog lover indeed.

Monday evening, when Hermione stops off at the grocer's after work to pick up something for dinner, she notices that her flier, and only her flier, has been removed from the bulletin board.

"None of us took it down," says the teenaged girl who is working the till when Hermione asks about it. "That wanker with the greasy hair and the black coat, he did it. Saturday night, I think."

Greasy hair. Black coat. Right. Snape.

"Thank you," Hermione says through a clenched jaw and stalks out of the shop. By the time she has walked the block and a half back to her flat, she has discovered that the other fliers have been taken down as well. She is in a fine state, shaking with anger, silently running through a list of hexes she could cast on the miserable bastard. She storms up the stairs and pounds on his door, but he doesn't answer. She continues up to her flat, throws the entire bag of groceries into the refrigerator without unpacking them, and storms into her bedroom to change.

In a pair of jeans and a fuzzy fleece jacket, she grabs the dog to take him for a walk, hoping that she meets Snape along the way so she can give him a piece of her mind.

She doesn't hope in vain.

There he is, coming up the street just as she steps outside, head down and hands in his pockets, the Slytherin scarf tossed casually around his neck. Narrowing her eyes, she marches towards him, pulling the dog along.

The dog barks happily and hurries forward. Snape draws to a stop and looks up, a moue of distaste curving his mouth into a frown, his eyes narrowing in disgust as they flicker between Hermione and the dog.

"You miserable, wretched excuse of a wizard!" she shouts as soon as he is in earshot. She is vaguely aware of other people on the street, returning home from work, walking their pets, doing their shopping. She is also vaguely aware that eyes are already beginning to turn towards her, that people are stopping to watch. One fellow even seems to be following her, strolling along not far behind, his dogs trotting at his side, probably already setting his mobile to camera mode in order to film the show.

She hopes he enjoys it because she is about to throw a fit of epic proportions, an irrational, hysterical, satisfying fit. It's been one of those days. One of those long, tedious Percy Weasley-filled days, with meeting after meeting after meeting, no lunch, and acrobatics in the corridors trying to escape one of Arthur Weasley's good natured visits. She's probably radiating fury at this point she certainly feels like her anger is going to burn her up from the inside out and Snape's childish antics are the fine, nearly insubstantial straw that has just this very moment broken the camel's back.

Snape raises an eyebrow and takes a step back as the dog lunges eagerly towards him. "I'm sorry, Granger, is something bothering you?"

"You know exactly what is bothering me. You took down my lost dog fliers!"

Behind her, someone clears their throat as if trying to get her attention, but she ignores them, could care less what they want. She's busy right now, and they can bloody well wait for her to finish.

"Why would I do something like that?" he says, his voice full of mock innocence. "I want nothing more than to see that needy mongrel go."

"Don't play dumb, Snape! The shop girl at the grocer's said you'd been by and took it down."

That annoying someone clears their throat again.

Snape smirks. "She must have been mistaken."

"Oh, you're insufferable! You know I only have a couple more days to find his owner, and I know in your petty, sadistic little mind, taking down my posters is probably some kind of malicious, convoluted plot to get me thrown out of my..."

That someone clears their throat yet again. "Excuse me, young lady."

On impulse, Hermione whirls around. "What?" she shouts.

There is an elderly gentleman standing behind her in a tweed coat and a sweater vest so horrific a shade of orange that Dumbledore would have worn it over his robes every day. He has great wispy eyebrows and a mass of white hair and he looks like a character out of a children's book. He is completely unaffected by the fact that Hermione has just whirled on him in a paroxysm of anger that should have been spent on Snape, and the shock of seeing his sanguine demeanor in the face of her temper tantrum shames her back into reason.

When he sees has her attention, he smiles at her brightly. "Yes. Hello, there. I believe you have my dog."

Hermione blinks and looks down at the dog, noticing for the first time that he has forgotten Snape and is happily reacquainting himself with two other nearly identical hounds on the end of the elderly man's leads, his tail wagging madly. "Oh," she says. "Sorry."

"That's all right. Lover's tiffs can be like that."

Hermione blinks again. "But we're not..."

"I'm just glad you found my Rupert," the elderly man continues blithely. "The lads and I have been missing him something awful."

All three dogs swiveled their ears at the sound of their name.

"Oh, yes. Glad to be of help." Hermione takes a deep breath and gives the old man a friendly smile in hopes of making up for all of the shouting. "I found him outside my flat last week in the rain. He looked so pathetic, I couldn't help but to take him in."

"You're very lucky this lovely young woman came along, aren't you, Rupert, you wicked boy?" the old man chides, but the dog only looks up at him adoringly and wags his tail. The old man turns to Hermione again, beaming, and takes the lead from her slack hand. "I am quiet grateful, Ms....?"

"Er, Granger."

"I'm quite grateful, Ms. Granger," he says, reaching beneath the lapel of his coat as if to pull out a wallet. "If there is anything I can do for you, don't hesitate to ask."

She holds out her hands to stop him before he can pull anything out. "No. It was nothing," she says, thinking the whole affair was nothing but a headache. "I'm just glad I found his owner."

"Then my deepest thanks," he says, withdrawing his hand from his jacket. "And I mean what I said. Anything I can do to help. I'm always around, so all you have to do is ask."

"Thank you, but I don't think that will be necessary."

"If you say so," he says, then nods towards the place where Snape was standing earlier. "I believe your young man has left."

Hermione glances over her shoulder to see that Snape has, in fact, disappeared, the bastard.

"He's not my young man," Hermione says, turning back to the elderly gentleman, but he, along with his three hounds, is disappearing around the next corner.

A gust of wind blows down the corridor of the street, tossing up leaves and bits of rubbish in its path. Hermione shivers, but she isn't entirely sure that it's because of the wind.

Hermione dreams about Snape again.

She dreams that her legs are wrapped around his hips, and his arms are braced on either side of her shoulders, and they're fucking, swift and hard and rough. He's panting and she's keening, and they're both sweaty and hot and pleasure drunk. She's teetering on the edge, so close, and she urges him on, gasping out encouragement between thrusts: harder, faster, deeper. Surprisingly, he obeys; his hips jerk forward, pushing harder and faster and deeper, and then the orgasm takes her, flows over her, through her, and it's everywhere, flooding through her limbs, vibrating into the very tips of her fingers. She calls out his name-

She sits up, her heart pounding so hard she is sure the sound is echoing through the silence of her apartment. She runs her hands through her hair, pretends her whole body isn't tingling with the intense realism of the dream, of the way Snape's bony hips fit so nicely between her legs.

Hermione squeezes her eyes shut and pushes the images and dream-sensations out of her mind, refuses to acknowledge that she has had another erotic dream about Snape.

When she thinks she's won the battle with her body's mutinous arousal, she throws the blankets back and slides out of bed. Crookshanks raises his head and gives her a filthy look for waking him before he rolls onto his back, feet sticking up in the air, and throws one paw over his eyes.

Just as Hermione is about to give him a good scratching behind the ear for being so adorably manipulative, she sees something out of the corner of her eye, flashing outside in the darkness. Hermione moves to the window where she stands for a long while despite the cold pouring through the glass over her sweat-drenched body, and stares in awe at the Tor rising up over the town.

It is glowing, burning bright like the sun, and this time, she is certain that what she sees is no trick of light.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 6

Hermione has uncomfortable conversations, and Snape has interesting dreams.

Thanks to miraba for the beta.

Disclaimer: Not mine to the nth degree.

Chapter 4

The image of the Tor burning white hot will not leave Hermione alone.

She spends the next morning sequestered in her office, absentmindedly sorting through the inter-departmental memos piled on her desk. Occasionally she catches herself staring off into space, remembering the glow snaking along the terraces of the Tor, blazing so brightly that it could have easily lit the entire town.

She'd be lying to herself to say it hadn't and bothered her deeply. The Tor isn't supposed to do that. The lore about Glastonbury is full of half truths and second and third hand accounts of mysterious encounters with everything from ghosts to King Arthur to UFOs, and the glowing Tor was one such bit of lore, except... well, except, she'd seen it for herself.

The Tor *glowed*.

Hermione frowns, pondering what she'd seen while tracing a rough approximation of the Tor's shape on a memo from Human Resources reminding employees not forget that Friday was Dress Like a Muggle Day.

She had read up on Glastonbury when she first took the flat. The sources all agreed that Glastonbury is full of mystic energy, as it sits on a ley line, that those graves in Glastonbury Abbey do contain the remains of King Arthur and Guinevere, and that there's a good possibility that the Tor is the mythical Avalon. But the stories of a fairy king and his court inside the Tor? Utter rubbish. Likewise for a Muggle psychopomp god and the underworld. Pixies and fairies and doxies might exist right along with trolls, goblins and elves, but the Fae the baby stealing, trick playing, time altering Midsummer's Eve fairies do not exist. Neither do their fairy kingdoms or their fairy kings.

But the Tor *glowed*.

Hermione throws down her quill with a sigh and rubs her burning eyes. Why does she have to obsess about this now? It was probably her imagination; the Tor couldn't have possibly been glowing. It couldn't have, because if the Tor really did glow, would that might mean that all the rest might be true. Fairies, fairy kingdoms, fairy kings....

...An entrance to the underworld.

"Get a hold of yourself, Hermione," she mutters, irritated by her overactive imagination. Those half realized fantasies are doing nothing but making the thought of the years without Ron that lay ahead of her more painful to endure. "There's no such bloody thing. Stop thinking about..."

The door of her office suddenly opens with a sharp creak; Hermione starts, looks up, war-honed instincts prompting her to aim her wand and poise a defensive hex on the tip of her tongue.

But when she sees no one there, she relaxes and puts away her wand; there's only one reason why the door of her office would be acting of its own will.

"Hi, Harry," she says, settling back into her chair. "Who are we hiding from today?"

Harry begins to materialize from the feet up as he pulls off his Invisibility Cloak. "Percy this time, the tosser." He throws the cloak over one of the guest chairs and plops down in the other. "He's harassing me about security for the World Cup again." He rubs his scar absentmindedly, looking tired and drawn and over-worked. But then, Harry always looks that way lately, and that atrocious scar always seems to be glowing. "Mind if I hide out for a bit?"

It isn't unusual for him to hide in her office two or three times a week to escape the wide array of Ministry officials who are always harassing him to use his fame for their own ends. He and Ron used to disappear for hours on "important Auror business," which, loosely translated, meant they hid out in a Muggle pub somewhere, getting sloshed and watching the telly. But without Ron, Harry has lost that idiotic enthusiasm for skipping out on work completely and spends all of his time hiding out with her, even though she usually bullies him into working.

It is like fourth year all over again, except this time, Ron wouldn't come to his senses and return to them.

Ron won't be returning at all.

"If you'd like. You did bring something to work on, right?"

Harry scowls at her. "Are we in school again or something?"

"I'll take that as a no." Hermione grabs a handful of memos and shoves them at Harry. "Here, you can help me sort through this mess."

"You really know how to show me a good time," he grouses, but takes the memos anyway.

They sit in silence for a while, sorting through the memos she's been ignoring for about a week now. Harry balls up them up and tosses them in a pile at his feet while Hermione drops hers in the rubbish bin next to her desk.

She's about half way through her pile when Harry says, "You haven't even opened this yet?"

Hermione looks up, taken aback with the anger in his voice. Harry is holding up a green envelope with gold lettering. It's the invitation to Molly's birthday party.

"Well, I knew what it was," she mutters and returns her attention to the dwindling stack of memos. "Didn't need to open it."

"So you're coming, then?"

She tosses a memo about diligently reading inter-departmental memos in the rubbish bin. "Maybe. When is it again?"

"Hermione..." Harry sounds disappointed in her, and Hermione is irritated that his disappointment makes her feel so guilty.

Hermione scowls and pulls over her desk calendar, hoping a very important meeting is scribbled in on Saturday and circled in red, or even a bit of dangerous and invasive Muggle surgery. Unfortunately, she finds Saturday disappointingly free.

She nods miserably. "I'll be there."

"Good. Molly and Arthur will be really happy to see you."

Hermione sighs in defeat. "I know."

Harry nods approvingly and returns to sorting through the memos in his lap. Hermione stares blankly at her own memos, a coil of anxiety tightening in the pit of her stomach. They'll be talking about Ron at that party, Molly's birthday or not, and worse, they'll want to talk about Ron with her.

She's already looking forward to Saturday with dread.

As she is walking from the Ministry approved Apparition point that evening, she finds her gaze drawn to the Tor. In the late afternoon light, it appears to be a normal, earthly National Trust site, with tourists and footpaths a single medieval tower at its summit. It has no otherworldly glow; UFOs aren't hovering in the sky, and fairies aren't pouring out of hidden tunnels.

Hermione sighs in exasperation, suddenly feeling ridiculous and idiotic for spending all day obsessing over something that hadn't happened and couldn't have happened. It had been a dream. Just a dream.

Still, she watches it suspiciously through her bedroom window as she is stripping out of her work clothes. If it was a dream, it had seemed very real, with the hard, cold floor beneath her feet and the icy air pouring through the windowpane and the glow snaking up the terraces, gleaming like the sun.

But her dreams had been vivid lately, she tells herself as she pulls on a pair of jeans and a heavy sweater. The nightmares, the dreams about Snape all vivid, disturbing and seemingly real, but just dreams. The glowing Tor is no different, just a dream.

Only a dream.

She keeps telling herself that as she walks up the Tor. It still appears as normal as it had earlier, all big and green and hill-like. As she climbs to the summit, her lingering unease fades, and the peace of the place settles over her, dispersing her anxiety over her dreams and Molly's party on Saturday and the drudgery of the World Cup project.

The sun is setting when she finally reaches the top, and she watches the last of the sunlight bleed from the sky, leaving behind strata of oranges and blues and purples in its wake. She stands there for a long time, gazing at the rising crescent moon and the stars as they slowly begin to prick the sky. The cold settles into her limbs and from a distance, she hears the chattering and laughter of the few intrepid sightseers, still wandering on the Tor, braving the sharp cold. Below her, the lights of the town come on one by one.

She feels peaceful, still, comforted; she feels like Ron is nearby; she feels like life is actually bearable.

Then something cold and wet touches her hand.

She shrieks in surprise and jumps away, her heart pounding wildly, the urge to draw her wand in self-defense only tempered by her awareness of the few nearby Muggles. She whirls around and finds the dog she rescued behind her, straining at the end of his leash and staring at her with big, eager eyes. His two pack mates are sitting on either side of him, watching her with doggyish interest. Behind them with their leads in his hand is their owner, the strange old man with that orange eyesore of a sweater.

"Rupert!" the old man scolds. "Watch that nose! Not everybody likes cold noses on their skin." He grins apologetically at Hermione. "Sorry about that. When we saw you, Rupert wanted to come say hello. We didn't expect to frighten you like that."

Hermione puts her hand to her chest, feeling her heart racing beneath her palm, and takes a deep breath. "It's okay. He just startled me."

"Cold, wet noses tend to do that." The old man pats the dog to Rupert's left, and it twists back his head to lick at his owner's hand. "It's how Liam here wakes me up every morning, isn't it Liam?"

Hermione nods in understanding. "My alarm clock is a fat, twenty year old cat. Sometimes he uses the cold nose method, but usually he just nips at my hands and purrs until I get up."

The old man grins and nods as he fishes a cigarette out of his jacket pocket. "Just as effective, I'd say. Mind if I smoke? I'll be sure to stand downwind."

Normally, Hermione would mind, but there's something strangely companionable about the old man, something familiar and easy that makes the smoking a minor inconvenience.

Hermione shrugs. "Go ahead. But they'll kill you, you know."

The old man chuckles. "So I hear." He lights the cigarette with a silver lighter and drops it back into the same pocket from which the cigarette came. "Now, Ms. Granger, what are you doing all the way up here on a cold evening like this?"

Hermione shrugs. "I like it up here. It's very peaceful."

The old man nods sagely. "It is, isn't it?"

They stand in silence for a bit, watching the stars. The old man smokes, flicking ash away from his cigarette occasionally. Hermione shivers and shoves her hands in her pockets, wondering why she didn't bring a pair of gloves along and if she could cast a warming charm without anyone noticing. The dogs settle and curl up at their master's feet, content to wait until he's ready to move again.

At last, the old man drops his cigarette and grinds it into the ground with his toe. He tilts his head to the side and studies her for a moment. "You feel closer to them up here, do you?"

Hermione blinks at the old man in confusion. "Do I feel closer to who?"

"Whoever it is you lost."

Hermione gapes at him in surprise, then suddenly looks away, out into the darkness, towards the lights of the town. Her chest tightens at the thought of Ron and she's afraid to speak lest she break down in tears. She nods, pursing her lips together, blinking against the burn of unshed tears.

"I'm not surprised," the old man says. "Most people do, perhaps because the gates to Underworld are beneath our very feet."

Hermione scoffs, the threat of tears rolled back by her indignation. "I really don't need that, you know."

"Need what?"

"The false assurances that he's in a better place now and all that rubbish." Her voice is bitter and sharp, even to her own ears, and she forces herself to keep her eyes on the town, so she doesn't have to see that look of pity so many people wear whenever Ron's death comes up.

"You don't believe that he's in a better place?"

She clenches her hand in her pockets. Her nails press sharply into the palm of her hand, distracting her from the knot of confusion the question raises. She doesn't know what she thinks, and not knowing always bothers her. "I don't know. There is an afterlife, I know that, but I don't know what it's like or if it's any better than here. But I'm fairly certain that I'm not standing on top of it at this very moment."

"Are you now?" The old man chuckles in amusement. "Oh, you wizards know everything, don't you?"

Hermione looks up at him sharply. "How did you know I was ..."

"A witch?" The old man gives her a gleeful grin. "Oh, you can't be around as long as I have and not know a thing or two about wizards. And I happen to know more about this Tor than those rubbish wizard scholars who've been wringing the joy from magic since time began."

Hermione frowns. "So you're not a wizard?"

"No."

"A Squib?"

The old man shakes his head. "Not that either. I'm just an old man who loves Glastonbury and all of its lore. Did you know that there was a labyrinth that once snaked up the side of the Tor?"

"I did." Suddenly they're on familiar ground. Absolute knowledge, the kind that can be cross referenced and double checked, and verified. The kind with evidence. "The wizard sources say the labyrinth was actually several levels of terraces used for farming, and some Muggle sources agree, but others say it was used as a part of some sort of induction ritual for a goddess cult."

"Ah, well, both are right. The Muggle settlers did use it for religious purposes. Muggles may be non-magical, but they can still sense magic. Usually they muck it up and get it confused with religion, so you'll find that many pagan religious sites are built in places where magic is the strongest."

"Like the Tor?" Hermione says, deciding to just go along with the conversation to see where it ends up.

He nods. "Like the Tor. Originally, a group of Celtic witches settled here in pre-Roman times to guard the doorway to the Underworld on the earthly side for the Tor King ... your sort of witches, by the way and they terraced the hill for farming. Of course, when the Roman wizards came, they wanted to harness the power for themselves." He shook his head sadly. "Those poor witches never had a chance."

"I see." Hermione knows she sounds skeptical, but she can't help it. None of her sources, Wizard or Muggle, discussed a group of Celtic witches, and she suspects what she is hearing is actually local oral lore. And oral lore in Glastonbury really can't be trusted as the stories about UFOs and ghosts clearly demonstrate.

"You don't believe me? Where do you think that doorway in your Department of Mysteries comes from?"

Hermione stares at him in shock. "How do you know about..."

"The Veil?" The old man gives her an enigmatic smile. "I told you, can't be around as long as I have and not know a thing or two about wizards. Or their mad schemes. And the Veil is a particularly mad one. The Roman wizards killed those witches and built a doorway into the spiral castle of the Tor King to steal his power, but the only thing they managed to achieve was to enter the other realm years before they were meant to, the idiots. It isn't possible to cheat death or control it. Muggles and wizards alike have a problem understanding that."

Hermione nods, thinking of Voldemort and the Horcruxes and the people who died to make them.

"Not that it matters," the old man continues. "The Wild Hunt catches everyone in the end, no matter how fast they run."

Hermione frowns. "The Wild Hunt?"

"Yes, you know? When Gwyn ap Nudd rides out with his Gabriel hounds to collect the dead. If you see the Tor glow, that's the King, off to hunt down the dead and the dying."

Hermione stares at him, her heart racing madly, and the image of the glowing Tor rises again in her mind's eye, gleaming in the darkness. "The Tor glows?"

The old man cocks his head to the side and studies her for a moment. "It does. I've seen it myself a dozen times at least. When the Tor King rides out, the gates to the underworld open, and the earthly Tor is lit by its otherworldly twin for the brief time they are open." He gives her a knowing smile. "You've seen it, haven't you?"

Hermione looks away, out over the town, up at the stars, anywhere but at him. "I don't think so."

The old man chuckles. "Oh, you have. And you, a witch, refuse to believe the place where we're standing is the Tor King's realm? That's irony, that is."

Hermione opens her mouth to sort him out it was a dream, *adream* ... but he's clicking his tongue at the dogs, untangling their leads as they get to their feet, fishing in his pocket for another cigarette, and Hermione can't really come up with anything to say that won't make her sound like a petulant little swot.

"Go home, lass," the old man says before she manages a reasonable response. He's holding the unlit cigarette in one hand and the leads of the dogs in the other. "It's cold, you're tired, and the lads need feeding. Have a nice cuppa and sit in front of a warm fire."

Hermione nods numbly, suddenly relieved to be free of this conversation and unwilling to think about why. "Yes," she says. "That sound like a good idea."

The old man grins at her. "Fantastic. Have a good night, yeah?"

She musters what is mostly an honest smile. "Yes. You, too."

The old man clicks his tongue and he and the dogs are off, crossing the summit to the footpath down the Tor. Hermione watches him go, with the dogs trotting along in front of him, their noses to the ground, sniffing the myriad of scents with interest.

It's only when he's disappeared below the rise of the hill that she wonders if maybe she shouldn't have Obliviated him, even though the thought of doing so makes her feel ill. He seemed to know an awful lot about the wizarding world for a Muggle. Too much in fact.

She looks up at the slim moon again, at the constellations now forming at the sky, and decides that since he's made it this long without being Obliviated, she isn't going to worry about it.

It's not like that mad old man and his three hounds could possibly be a threat to anyone anyway.

Severus meets Granger on his way out to the pub that night.

She's bundled into a long winter coat, her cheeks are flushed, and her hair is wild and windblown.

As he passes her on the stairs, he sneers at her on principle, she refuses to look in his direction, and they do not speak. Severus intends to keep walking, but the same impulse that undoubtedly caused Lot's wife to turn to salt and Orpheus to banish Eurydice back into the underworld causes him to turn and watch her climb the stairs. His eyes trace the line of her coat, lingering on the neat narrowing of her waist and the sway of her hips, his mind tormenting him with the image of his fingers tangled in that unmanageable mane. As soon as she rounds the corner at the landing, Severus, ashamed of his own interest, turns abruptly before she catches him watching her, and hurries out into the cold night.

He tries to chase the image of his fingers in Granger's hair out of his mind with whiskey, but still he dreams of her, propped up on his potions bench, that long winter coat open around her and nothing underneath. He slides his hands down the lovely taper of her waist, feels the soft warmth of her flesh beneath his fingers, and grips her by the hips. When he thrusts into her, she moans and whimpers and wriggles her bottom to get closer to him, her hands clutching at the back of his shirt, her breath coming in little pants. He grabs a fist full of her hair and tangles it between his fingers, then tilts her head back to crush his lips to that prim mouth...

His eyes fly open. He's in bed, the street lights are illuminating his bedroom with dingy orange light, and the wind is howling beyond the window panes. His body is tingling, his cock hard and eager. Irritated, he rolls over and adjusts the pillow under his head. It takes him a bit to convince his body that, no, there would be no wanking to dreams about Hermione Bloody Granger, and eventually falls asleep again.

Only to dream about the scent of prey in his nose and the pounding of his feet on the ground and the freedom of hunting beneath the stars.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 6

A special kind of madness.

Thanks to Machshefa for the beta.

Disclaimer: Not mine. No money being made. Don't sue. Please.

Chapter Five

Hermione is overwhelmed by the sheer number of redheads at Molly's birthday party.

She loves the Weasleys, she really does. Molly is sometimes a bit too free with unsolicited advice, and the twins wreak destruction in their wake anytime they set foot in her house, but they have been a surrogate family to her in the wizarding world since she was 12. They took her in and cared for her as if she were their own, and it sometimes seems that marrying Ron did not mean becoming a part of the family as much as it meant making it official.

Yet it is hard to walk into the Burrow after almost a year; all of her warm childhood memories are now polluted with the memory of Ron's wake. She can still remember the skin crawling sound of Molly's wailing and the cloying claustrophobia as one mourner after another approached her to give their generic condolences, to ask insincerely if they could do anything for her, to comment with the smug wisdom of the living on the waste of Ron's early death.

She is assaulted first by the scent of the Burrow the clean, flowery smells of Molly's air freshening spells, the lingering scent of roasting chicken and baking sweets, the tangy odor of too many boys, now fading since the children have left home then by the twins, who come at her from both sides while she is trying to take off her coat, as stealthy and silent as Crookshanks stalking prey. She ends up crushed between them in their joint bear hug, with her face pressed into Fred's chest and one arm crooked awkwardly between her body and George's.

They both smell like freshly mown grass and questionably legal potions ingredients. She very much wishes they would let her go.

"Oi, Fred! Look who it is!"

"Seems to be our sister-in-law, George! But I can't be sure. It's been so long since we've seen her."

"Get off, you two." She can only speak out of one side of her mouth and she sounds much less intimidating than she strictly prefers. "You're smearing my make-up!"

"Oh no, George. Her make-up!"

"It's smearing, Fred."

"What a tragedy!"

"A disgrace!"

"A..."

"So help me, if you two don't let me go, I'll hex your bollocks off."

"...good idea to let her go, George."

"I agree completely, Fred. I do so like my bollocks."

"Shall we take the lady's coat and send her in to see our Mum?"

"Splendid idea! As our Mum would also hex our bollocks off if we didn't do just that."

Hermione is quickly relieved of her coat and released to find Molly, but on the way she keeps getting hijacked by Weasleys. First by Bill and Fleur's twins, who run up for hugs, calling her Auntie 'Mione and telling her in their adorable French accents how much they miss their Uncle Ron, then by Charlie, who introduces her to his lovely new wife, a tiny, dark haired thing named Mara, then by Arthur who gives her a hug and tells her sincerely how much he has missed her. Finally she is stopped by Remus, who is not a Weasley, but certainly understands the overwhelming force that is the Weasley clan. He gives her a gentle smile and a glass of wine, both of which Hermione is extremely grateful for, and sends her towards the kitchen where Molly is holding court.

"Hermione!" Molly exclaims when she sees her and comes for her with open arms. She has dressed in shimmering green robes that flatter her hair and skin tones, and she beams at Hermione, and it is all Hermione can do not to bolt. "It's been so long!"

Hermione accepts the familiar and enthusiastic hug as gracefully as she can while holding onto her wine; Molly smells like mint and chocolate and some kind of flowery perfume.

"Why have you been such a stranger? You know that you are still welcome here, even after..." Molly's eyes fill with tears, and the exuberant welcome is dampened by the memory of her grief. "You're still a part of this family."

"I know. It's just that I've been so busy at work...." They both know it's a lie, but Molly only smiles at her and pats her consolingly on the arm. "Of course you have, dear. Now come sit with me and tell me how you've been...."

Hermione obliges, joining her at the kitchen table. Minerva McGonagall is there as well, as is Hestia Jones and Augusta Longbottom. Hermione sits with them, answering questions about her life, listening to their gossip, and drinking wine, but as soon as Molly attempts to turn the conversation towards Ron, Hermione excuses herself to use the loo and does not return. She roams among the innumerable party goers instead, all somehow stuffed into the Burrow. She knows many of them, but others are acquaintances, and several she does not know at all; now that the war is over, the Weasley parents and their children have an overwhelming number of friends, and they all seem to be here, stopping her at every turn to greet her and inquire after her well being and, to her horror, attempting to draw her into their reminiscences of Ron.

Every time she turns around there is a cluster of people talking about Ron: Ron in school, Ron at the Ministry, the time Ron threw himself in front of that Semprarcitus hex, the time he and Harry got caught practicing Crushing Curses with boxes of Muggle cakes during Auror training. Worse, people want to reminisce with her, want to ask her how's she's doing, why she sold the house, was there anything they could do for her...

It's horrifying and overwhelming; Hermione untangles herself from these conversations as quickly and as tactfully as possible, only to encounter another not long after. She purposefully has glass after glass of wine; she has been to enough Ministry functions to know that alcohol really is a social lubricant, and she needs something, anything, to get her through this endless nightmare of insincere and nosy small talk and reminiscing mourners.

Then she comes face to face with Viktor Krum.

She stares at him in shock, her stomach twisting in knots, her mouth suddenly gone dry. She hasn't seen him since lunch with Harry and Oliver, has not received an owl since that night either, and has hoped it would stay that way. Why he's at the party she has no idea, but she's drunk enough to entertain the idea that he might be there with the sole intention of seeing her. There's something creepy about that, but she's can't quite put her finger on why.

"Herm-own-ninny!" he cries, flashing that smile at her, so open, so full of teeth, so not the Viktor she knew. "There you are! I was wondering if I would see you tonight."

"Viktor," she says and quickly glances over her shoulder, searching for an escape. He's trapped her in the hallway between the kitchen and the living room, where she has just escaped group of Ron's Auror friends. Going back the way she came isn't an option; that same group is blocking her way. "I wasn't expecting to see you here, either."

"I was not expecting to come, but Bill Weasley invited me this afternoon while I was at Gringotts."

"Oh. How nice." She nervously sips her wine because she really can't think of anything to say. She wishes he would get out of her way, and where exactly is Harry when she could use his excessive protective streak?

"Yes. Very nice." He steps closer and lowers his voice, fixing her with solemn, hurt eyes. "Tell me, Herm-own-ninny, have I done something wrong?"

Hermione bites her lip nervously. "What do you mean?"

"I have owled you, and you have not replied."

Hermione throws back the rest of her wine to buy herself a few seconds time. She's been a coward about dealing with Viktor so far, but here is her opportunity to sort him out, to make it clear that whatever he wants from her, he isn't going to get. She already feels nauseous with guilt though of course she shouldn't but doing it now would be for the best. It is like pulling off a Muggle plaster: the pain will be sharp and sudden, but quickly over with. However, it does not prevent her from wanting to be anywhere but here at the moment.

She takes a deep breath, draws together her courage. "No, you haven't done anything wrong, exactly. But Viktor, it has barely been a year since Ron..." Hermione pauses, licks her lips. "Since Ron died, and here you are, pursuing me..."

Viktor frowns at her in confusion. "Pursuing you?" Then she sees understanding bloom on his face, and he looks appalled. "Oh, you do not think...? Oh, no, Herm-own-ninny. I merely wish to be friends. If it has seemed otherwise..."

"Well, yes, it has."

"Oh, allow me to apologize," he says, but his body language is not that of an apologetic man. He has not stepped back or put any kind of distance between them to demonstrate his disinterest in anything romantic. In fact, he moves in closer and places his hand on her shoulder. Hermione flinches, but he doesn't seem to notice. "I only wished to be friends again, now that I am living in England."

Hermione steps away from him, pulling gently from his grasp. "I see."

"It is my fault, truly," Viktor continues. "Perhaps I can take you to lunch next week? As friends, of course."

"Perhaps," she says, lifting the glass to her lips to prevent herself from having to commit, only to abort the motion a few seconds later when she realizes there is no more wine.

Viktor give her a relieved smile and holds out his hand. "May I bring you another drink?"

"Yes." She places the glass in his hand. "Thank you. I was drinking the red."

"I shall return in a moment, Herm-own-ninny."

Hermione watches him until he disappears into the kitchen, then bolts from the hallway, slipping past the Aurors who are going on about the various things Ron and Harry blew up while out in the field, and out through the front door.

It is cold outside, so cold that everyone is choosing to remain inside. She slips around the front of the house and hurries towards the back garden, careful to keep low as she passes the kitchen window. The back garden is thankfully empty. Fairy lights are strung around the perimeter, and someone has set up a jack-o-lantern on the picnic table; it looks very pretty and would have made a lovely place for everyone to congregate, but for the cold.

Hermione stays in the shadows, rubbing her arms through her thin jumper, hoping that no one comes looking for her. She feels ridiculous, hiding in the garden in the freezing cold. It isn't as if the party and the Weasleys and Viktor won't still be there when she goes back inside, but she's just so tired and overwhelmed and unable to cope with them. Just a few minutes in the fresh air, a chance to sober up a little, and she'll go back inside to say her goodbyes.

She shivers and looks up at the sky. She can see Cassiopeia and Pegasus and Andromeda amongst the stars, but the rest of the constellations are practically invisible in the light pollution of the fairy lights and the Burrow itself.

"Pretty, aren't they?" says someone off to her left.

Hermione peers into the darkness beyond the fairy lights and sees a floating, disembodied head, but as she moves closer, passing beyond the strings of luminous lights, a body materializes under the head, and Hermione realizes it's Luna Lovegood.

"They are," Hermione agrees. Luna drives her mad most of the time, but as long as she isn't talking about fire mages or the Rot Fang Conspiracy, she can usually tolerate

her. "I have a better view at home."

Luna turned her protuberant eyes on Hermione. "Oh yes, you moved to Glastonbury, didn't you?" She is nearly breathless with excitement. "Have you seen the King of the Tor yet?"

Hermione sighs; she should have known Luna would ask that. "There is no such thing as the Tor King."

"You shouldn't say that. He'll loose his hounds on you."

"Right, I'll keep that in mind."

That seems to appease Luna, because she lets the conversation go. They stand together for a while, watching the sky. Hermione shivers again and wishes she had brought her coat out with her; Luna takes out a spyglass and examines the stars. There is a loud explosion from inside the Burrow, followed swiftly by Molly's screeching. Neither woman so much as flinches at the sound.

"My father says he met him a few years ago, you know," Luna suddenly says.

"Met who?" Hermione asks absentmindedly. She is drunker than she originally thought; the world has started spinning, and she can't seem to stand without swaying a little.

"Gwyn ap Nudd. The Fairy King."

Hermione huffs in exasperation. "Oh, not this again."

Luna seems oblivious to Hermione's animosity and keeps talking. "Father was investigating the reports about Arthur's procession from Glastonbury to Cadbury for *The Quibbler* on Christmas Eve a few years ago. The procession was rubbish, of course, but father met a nice old man in the pub with three hounds who took him up to the Tor to see the labyrinth. Father says the terraces glowed like a furnace, and he could hear the dead whispering inside the hill. He said my mum's voice was the loudest. That's where the Veil in the Department of Mysteries goes, you know."

Hermione looks at Luna sharply, her heart beating wildly in her chest. "Yes. Yes, I've heard that," she says with more calm than she actually feels.

"Oh, then you know that the glow means the gates of the Underworld are opening and spilling their light out over the Tor. Dad said it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen, next to the flock of Crumple-Horned Snorkacks he encountered once, of course." Luna sighs with longing. "I'd love to see it. You're quite lucky to live so close. You'll have to let me know if you ever get a chance to see the Tor glow. Oh, and take a picture. Dad would love to publish a photograph in *The Quibbler*."

But Hermione isn't paying attention to Luna. Her mind is whirring. The Tor, the Veil, the old man with three dogs - this has to be a coincidence. It must be, especially since Luna is the most unreliable source of information she's ever met. But she's seen it herself the Tor, glowing. And the old man with the three hounds, she's met him, and he said the same about the Veil.

She closes her eyes, shakes her head, ignoring the dizziness it stirs up. She is too drunk to deal with any of this right now. Besides, it was a dream. The old man and Luna and Luna's father are all sharing a special kind of madness, and Hermione refuses to be a part of it.

Dead is dead and that is the way it is.

Hermione suddenly feels empty and lonely and numb. She looks up at the stars again, wheeling above her in the night sky. She shivers and rubs her arms, then starts walking, away from Luna and away from the Weasleys and away from Viktor and the throng of people inside, invading her grief.

"Where are you going?" she hears Luna call after her.

"Home," she replies and, reaching the edge of the Apparition barrier, Disapparates without another word.

"You're in my way."

Hermione looks up from where she is huddled on the stairs in the foyer. Snape is standing over her, arms crossed, radiating impatience and exasperation.

Hermione decides not to acknowledge his presence because he's a miserable git and he's cruel and he has the emotional maturity of a sullen eight-year-old. She closes her eyes and presses her forehead against the banister, willing him to go away. She doesn't want to deal with him right now because her head is swimming and her stomach is threatening rebellion. Attempting to climb the stairs was obviously a mistake.

Snape sighs irritably. "Do you plan to spend the night there?"

"Maybe."

Snape huffs and steps around her, his long coat brushing against her arm. Hermione catches a whiff of cigarette smoke and chocolate as he passes; she briefly wonders if he smokes or if he's just come back from the pub.

A moment later his door slams, and she is alone again.

"Miserable bastard," she mutters.

Hermione allows herself to drift in the peace of solitude and the spinning sensation of heavy inebriation, not even considering climbing the stairs again. It's easier not to fight it, and if her head is spinning, she doesn't have any time to think about glowing Tors or crazy old men and even crazier former school mates.

Then Snape shatters her carefully established equilibrium by throwing open his door and stomping down the stairs. "Granger, I have something for you."

Why is he still bothering her? She feels his presence hovering just behind her, and she wishes he would just go away and leave her alone.

"Granger!" Snape barks when she does not answer.

"Just sod off, Snape," she mutters. "I'm staying right here and that's that."

There is an indignant sigh, then Hermione feels something hard pressing against her shoulder.

She jerks away and pulls out her wand. Snape doesn't even flinch at the sight of the wand aimed in his direction. He just holds up a small brown bottle and says, "It's a sobering potion."

She slowly lowers her wand, eying the bottle suspiciously. "And you're giving it to me?"

"Yes."

"That's... uncharacteristically nice of you."

"Believe me, it is purely in my own self interest." Snape's cheeks are still ruddy from the cold, and she thinks that the extra color flatters him, as does the stone he's gained. "I don't fancy stepping over either your unconscious body or a puddle of vomit tomorrow morning."

And Hermione herself doesn't fancy spending her Sunday in bed with a hangover. Nor does she fancy the way the foyer is tossing about gleefully before her eyes, or the way her stomach feels like it wants to crawl up and out of her throat, or the distant pressure of an oncoming headache.

So perhaps she shouldn't be looking the gift horse in the mouth.

Hermione takes the bottle from him and uncaps it. "If this is poisoned..."

"I'll gladly go to Azkaban. Drink it, already, Granger. I want to go to bed."

Sobering potions always taste foul, and she grimaces at the old sock, cottony taste on her tongue. She drains every drop then hands the bottle back to Snape, wiping her mouth sloppily with the back of her hand.

The potion soon hits her blood stream and washes through her; she shivers as the alcohol is burned out of her system.

She looks up at Snape to thank him and finds him staring at her legs.

It's the last thing she expects, and Hermione is suddenly all too aware that her skirt is hiked up over her knees, showing more thigh than is entirely appropriate. She blushes and quickly stands, letting the hem slide down over her legs.

At her movement, Snape's eyes jerk upward guiltily, and they stare at one another for a long, tension filled moment. A flush of warmth spreads through her body; Snape's eyes are heavy lidded and predatory as he watches her, his lips slightly parted. Her heart pounds, and she remembers the dreams: Snape between her legs, his tongue, his hips, the tingle of her body after waking...

She turns away abruptly and starts up the stairs.

"Thank you for the potion," she says over her shoulder, trying to get away before... before... before what, she has no idea. She just needs to be away, and she needs to be away now.

Snape doesn't reply.

As she turns at the landing, she glances at him furtively. He is still standing there, the empty bottle in his hand, his dark eyes following her every move. Hermione swallows thickly and looks away, not daring to contemplate the weakness in her knees or the heaviness between her legs as she flees.

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 6

Hermione looks into the abyss.

Thanks to RenitaLeandra for the beta!

Disclaimer: If it was mine, Snape would be on a beach somewhere, drinking margaritas. Draw your own conclusions.

Chapter Six

Hermione has barely set her briefcase on her desk when Harry comes barging into her office on Monday morning, the coat she wore to the Weasleys' party in his hand.

"You left without even saying goodbye," he says, throwing it over the back of her chair as if it offends him in some deeply personal way.

Hermione sighs. She should have expected that there would be a temper tantrum from Harry. He has become very protective of the Weasleys since the war, has become a positive bully about it since Ron died, and though she understands the psychology behind it, the personal umbrage he's been taking on their behalf is starting to wear her patience thin.

"I know. I'm sorry." She pauses, decides she's too tired to make up an excuse to placate Harry's excessive indignation, and says, "You know, Harry, I'm too tired to justify my actions. I felt like leaving so I left."

Harry stares at her in outrage for a few seconds then shouts, "What is wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with me?" she snaps, suddenly frustrated with how unreasonably dense he can be. "What's wrong with me is that my husband died, and I don't want to talk to Arthur in the hallways or go to Weasley parties or reminisce about Ron with people I don't know. I don't want to be bullied into doing and saying things I don't mean. I don't want..." Hermione's breath catches, and her eyes begin to water, and she presses her hand to her mouth before anything else can come out. She feels brittle, like she might break apart at any minute, and she very much wants Harry to go away.

"Hermione-" Harry begins in a tone of voice that indicates that he has just remembered he isn't the only one mourning Ron.

Hermione holds up a hand. "No, don't. Just... leave."

"What?"

"I said leave. Get out."

"Hermione..."

Hermione opens her briefcase and begins to unpack her paperwork. "Leave, Harry."

He stands there, blinking stupidly at her, then swallows audibly. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Okay." He turns to go, but pauses in the doorway. "I'm sorry, Hermione."

Hermione doesn't reply, can't reply, not right now when she is so upset with him. She just calmly goes about unpacking her paperwork and organizing it until he finally takes the hint and slips out into the corridor without another word.

Eleven o'clock rolls around, and she still hasn't made any headway on the corrections she is attempting to make to the World Cup proposal. In fact, she finds that she couldn't care less about the proposal, the corrections, or anything affiliated with them, so she decides to go to lunch early to regroup and perhaps try again later.

She puts on the coat Harry left lying over the back of her chair and steps out into the busy corridor. The hallways of the Ministry are always busy at midday as people hurry to finish their tasks before they go to lunch, or loiter in the corridors during their lunch hours, chatting. She drifts towards the lifts, side stepping frenetic co-workers and the occasional paper airplane memo, only to find Viktor Krum standing there, speaking with Arthur Weasley. It's a double dose of exactly what she is trying to avoid, so Hermione ducks out of sight, her heart pounding, hoping she hasn't been spotted. She hurries back the way she came, takes the stairs up to the atrium, and escapes into the Muggle world by way of the phone booth lift.

She walks through the lunchtime crowds, inconspicuous in her Muggle suit, finds a small, dark restaurant with a well stocked bar on the Strand. Muggle men and women with their sharp suits and mobile phone ear pieces are packed tightly into the restaurant, but Hermione manages to find a seat between them at the bar with a bit of sly wand work. She is ignored by everyone except the bartender as she orders a vodka and tonic and nothing else. She drinks the first, then a second and third, feeling numb and ignored and invisible.

She's a bit buzzed walking back to the Ministry over an hour later, and is, in fact, pleasantly inebriated. The Ministry has settled down a bit; people have either gone to lunch or returned to their desks, and the corridors are sparsely occupied. Best of all, though, is that she sees neither hide nor hair of Viktor or Arthur, and as she walks along the corridor towards the ladies restroom, and maybe it's the lunch of three vodka and tonics, but she feels, if not happy, content. Calm. Better, in fact, than she has in a long while.

But then, as she's washing her hands, she looks up into the mirror to see a stranger looking back at her. She's someone Hermione has never met before, someone who drinks at lunch time, skips out of work for no good reason, and is inexplicably terrified of sorting out old boyfriends who don't appear to understand the word no. The other woman looks tired and broken. The other woman looks as if her world has ended and there is nothing left to live for.

That other woman in the mirror is her.

Hermione's stomach twists with sick surprise; she has a hard time believing this, that she has fallen so far away from herself that her own reflection is unrecognizable, but it must be true. They have the same hair and are wearing the same Muggle suit and the same knitted scarf around their throats. They have the same dark circles under their eyes and the same wedding band they have yet to remove and the same dead husband rotting in a grave near Ottery St. Catchpole.

Slowly, deliberately, she cuts off the water, and turns away from the mirror as if it is an irate Hippogriff around which she must use caution. Absently she dries her hands on a paper towel, then drifts out of the loo and down the corridor to her office, where she pauses in the doorway to stare blankly at the partially completed proposal revisions open on her desk.

The inner peace she achieved during her long lunch is shattered, and suddenly nothing seems important, nothing matters, not really, so she turns around and walks out on completing an assignment for the first time in her life.

And if that isn't the action of a stranger, she doesn't know what is.

When Severus sees Granger striding towards the shops early in the afternoon, still in her work attire, he finds himself involuntary changing direction to follow her.

He doesn't want to follow her, wants nothing to do with her, but his feet turn anyway, regardless of what he wants, and he falls into step not far behind. His eyes are drawn to the sway of her hips under that long winter coat, exacerbated by the Muggle heels she is wearing, and he remembers that glimpse of her thigh on the stairway on Saturday night. A sharp pang of decidedly unwanted desire rushes over him; he recalls the dream involving that coat and his potions bench, and now he adds a pair of Muggle heels to that fantasy ... not the drab brown business appropriate heels she is wearing, but high, patent-leather stilettos unearthed and dragged out of his Muggle-influenced adolescent fantasies.

She turns the corner, and he follows, all but salivating and helpless to resist his desire. It's a compulsion, almost as if he is under an Imperius Curse, except that there is no euphoria, just a grinding, relentless craving that seems to have welled up out of nowhere. She is hardly his type, with that frazzled mess of hair, that shrill voice, and the sensible shoes, but she has nice legs, long slender legs that would look so lovely adorned in stockings and garters...

Granger slows and steps into the off-license; Severus stops just short of the shop and clenches his eyes shut. This is positively puerile. Stilettos and garters haven't interested him since he found Toby's stash of pornography when he was thirteen and he spent the whole of third year wanking to the memory of those images, yet here he is adorning Hermione Bloody Granger with the remnants of his adolescent fantasies.

It's like a sickness, a disease, his inability to control this sudden desire for Granger. He has been to this place of mindless, compulsive want before with Lily Evans; he has fought this fight and lost. He won't lose again. He won't. But even as he promises himself he won't become enslaved to a woman who wants nothing to do with him, he is stepping into the off-license and slipping in line behind her.

She has a bottle of cheap red wine in her hand and is staring up at the cigarettes above the register with a pinched, anxious look.

"Taking up smoking, Granger?" he murmurs in her ear.

She starts and jumps away from him, her hand going automatically for her wand, though she manages to abort the motion just in time. At her defensive motion, he has to abort his own reflex to reach for his wand, his insipid, adolescent fantasies forgotten in the rush of war-honed reflexes.

They stand there staring at each like two tom cats on the verge of fighting, the overwhelming craving for Granger having receded for the moment, and then her indignant and suspicious expression crumples into something much more... fragile. She turns, sets the wine bottle on the nearest shelf, and stalks out of the shop without saying a thing.

"Your young lady is looking a mite stressed these days," someone behind him says. "You should do something to cheer her up."

Severus whirls to find the old man who owns the three hounds standing behind him, adorned in a bright blue sweater vest as garish as the orange; Snape gives him a look that could melt metal. "She isn't my young lady."

"No? You two certainly fight like she is, and the way you look at her..." The old man leers and waggles his eyebrows.

It's these sorts of situations that make Severus wish that the Cruciatus Curse wasn't an Unforgivable. "Mind your own business, old man."

"Oh, can't do that. Nosey old busy body, me. And it's Rex, by the way, lad."

"What is Rex, by the way?"

"My name."

Severus sneers. "How appropriate."

The man grins. "You have no idea." He nods toward the exit. "See to the lass. She's falling apart, that one."

"If you are so concerned about her, you see to her," Severus snarls.

"Who says I'm not? Now, lad, are you on line or not? You have the young lady to chase after, and I have a nicotine addition to feed."

He wants to curse the old man, almost desperately as he wants Granger, but he forces himself to keep his hand away from his wand as he pivots and storms out of the shop, exasperated in a way he hasn't been since Albus was alive.

Meddling old men - he can't escape them, it seems. Go after Granger, indeed. That is exactly what he wants to avoid, and why, exactly, was the old man so bloody interested in her anyway? Still, he finds himself slowing to a stop in the street and glancing first to the left, then to the right, looking for her. He does not see her; part of him wants to follow the route towards their apartment building in hopes of seeing her again, but the rest of him manages to turn his feet in the direction he was going before he caught sight of her, and even to push her out of his head, for the time being at least.

And of course, that night he dreams of Granger in nothing but stockings and stiletto heels.

Going to work the next day is agony.

Hermione spends a restless night dreaming of being propped on Snape's potions worktable and shagging him in nothing but stockings and garters, or of aiming her wand at Lucius Malfoy's poisonous black heart and demanding to know where Harry was, or of dogs barking endlessly in the distance while she sprints across an empty field, pursued by something she cannot see, only to open her eyes at the sound of her blaring alarm, achy, exhausted, and tense.

She all but drags herself out of bed, dresses in the same suit she wore the day before, and with a flick of her wand, pulls her hair back into a tight twist that even Minerva McGonagall would have considered severe. She feels like she is moving through treacle as she carefully applies make-up to hide the bags under her eyes, and the world seems distant and unfamiliar as she walks towards the Apparition point. The Ministry Atrium is busy when she arrives, but thankfully no one notices her or tries to start a conversation, and when the lift comes, she miraculously has it to herself.

She even lets herself imagine that she might make it to her office without having to speak to anyone, but no sooner does she step out of the lift onto her floor when Percy Weasley is upon her, wielding his appointment diary and wearing the piercing, vulture-like look that indicates he is in Head Boy mode.

"We had a meeting yesterday, Hermione," he says, waving the diary with the same fanaticism as a Muggle fanatic waving a holy book. "Where were you?"

"I was feeling poorly, so I went home early." She tries to step around him, but he leaps back into her path again.

"You didn't even have the courtesy to send a note or an owl..."

Hermione sighs. "Percy, it was one meeting. I'm sure you have another dozen scheduled for this week alone." She tries to step around him again, and this time it works, but it takes her mere seconds to realize that he's on her heels and not going away.

"That's not the point, Hermione." He so insufferably patronizing sometimes that she wonders how he has escaped being hexed by his co-workers for so long.

"What is the point, then?" She is at the end of her tether; she wishes he would just shut up and leave her be, and really, she's starting to wonder exactly how *she* has escaped hexing him for so long.

"The point is courtesy for your co-workers, Hermione," Percy replies, and his supercilious tone of voice is like a finely honed blade, slicing right through whatever had helped her out of bed and into work this morning. Her hand drifts towards her wand like a detached thing, acting of its own accord, and oblivious, Percy just drones on and on, lecturing. "All of our meetings are important, and your recent indifference towards our project..."

His voice chokes to a stop as Hermione whirls on him, her wand strategically aimed. "So help me, Percy," she snarls, "if you do not shut up about the bloody meeting and the bloody project, I will hex your bollocks off and shove them down your throat to make you shut up."

It's not her usual sort of threat, more of something Ron might have said to Draco Malfoy back in their school days, but she's a stranger to herself these days, and maybe this is how the stranger reacts to Percy Weasley's condescension.

Percy himself recoils from her, blinking in surprise. "Really, Hermione, there's no need to resort to physical threats." His voice has the faintest nervous tremor in it, and his eyes dart sideways. "Especially in front of the Muggles."

Awareness of her environment suddenly crashes in on her: she is still in the corridor, with several of her co-workers looking on, a couple of whom seem to be from the Minister's office, and sure enough, there are two Muggles watching them, looking very official in their tailored suits. One is gaping openly, and the other has raised an eyebrow with interest, and she blushes brightly, all the way to her toes.

"Sorry, Percy," she mutters, making her wand disappear as quickly as possible. "I'll owl you about rescheduling."

She retreats as quickly as possible, dropping her eyes and hurrying to her office, where she huddles behind her desk and sucks in long, deep breaths in an attempt to calm herself, to regain her equilibrium. She is so embarrassed that she lost her temper so spectacularly, but even more so because she did it in front of witnesses, including two important-looking Muggles. She can already hear the rumor mill grinding, reports traveling along the grapevine, dispersing into the rest of the Ministry, to Harry, to Arthur, to the Minister...

The thought doesn't bear thinking about, so she pushes the rumor mill out of her mind as best she can, though the thought of it lingers as tightness across her shoulders. She will cross that bridge when she comes to it, but right now, there is another bridge to cross, one involving the World Cup proposal and corrections. It's still open on her desk, right where she left it the day before, waiting for her to pick up a quill and continue.

Hermione sighs. All things considered, she probably should have just taken the day off.

An hour later, there is a knock at her door, and Kingsley Shacklebolt steps in, resplendent in his dress robes.

"Minister," Hermione says and stands, a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Kingsley smiles amicably. "Hermione. Do you have a minute?"

"Of course." She gestures at one of the guest chairs. "Um, have a seat."

"Thank you," he replies and makes himself comfortable. He folds his hands over his stomach. and his amicable smile eases into one of amusement. "So, you're going to hex off Percy's bollocks and use them to shut him up?"

Hermione groans and drops her head into her hands. "I knew you were here about that."

"Yes, well, you put on quite a show for the Muggle Prime Minister."

"That was the Muggle Prime Minister?" She groans. How is it that her luck is this bad? "I'm so sorry, sir, I really am."

"Don't fret about it, Hermione. It was dealt with easily enough, but in light of what happened this morning, I think it's time you took a leave of absence."

Kingsley's words are like a kick to her chest. The thought of being pulled away from the security of a regular routine, of being without something to focus on, of having all that time at her disposal sends her into a spiral of panic.

She stares at him in disbelief. "What? But, I can't take any time off. The World Cup proposal has an early January due date..."

"Sod the proposal, Hermione." He waves a hand dismissively. "The entire Ministry is watching you fall apart, and your mental state is more important than the World Cup, as far as I'm concerned. Just don't tell anyone in the Department of Magical Games and Sports that I said that."

"But sir..."

Kingsley holds up one hand, and she falls silent. "No, I've made my decision. You're taking a leave of absence until after Christmas. And when you come back, you'll go back to your old position in the MLE. Muggle Relations is a waste of your talent."

"I don't want..."

"Hermione, I don't care what you want. What you want isn't working for you. You need time to get yourself together. So pack up the things you need and go home. I don't want to see you again until January second."

"But Kingsley..."

"No arguments, Hermione. My decision is final."

In a daze, Hermione nods.

Kingsley stands, smooths his robes. "And just so you understand how serious I am, I'm sending Percy by here in an hour, and if you're still here, I'm going to let you explain to him that you're off the World Cup project for its duration."

Hermione shuts her eyes and nods, biting her lip to keep back her tears.

The Minister turns to leave, then stops in the doorway, one hand on the door knob. "Oh, and Hermione?"

"What?" she says, refusing to look at him.

"You moved to Glastonbury, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Pretty town," he says, sounding thoughtful. "But watch out for the Tor. Sometimes it glows."

Hermione snaps her head up so fast that the muscles in her neck twinge in protest, but Kingsley is already gone, the door swinging closed behind him.

This time, when Hermione stops at the off-license on her way home, she buys the bottle of cheap wine she intended to buy the day before. Two, in fact, since she won't be going to work tomorrow. Or the next day, or next week, or next month even. She is considering taking up drinking to fill in the empty hours even though she'd never much pictured herself an alcoholic.

Of course, she'd never pictured herself a widow, either.

She walks the block and a half from the off-license to her building against a sharp wind that leaves her cheeks and nose and fingers numb. She shivers in the cold as she unlocks the door, then stands in the foyer, eyes closed, still shivering and willing herself to thaw.

When she opens her eyes, she finds Snape standing in the foyer with her.

He's at the mailboxes, sorting through his mail, his coat unbuttoned and his scarf draped unevenly around his neck. His eyes are on her, almost piercing right through her, and his cheeks are flushed though there is no wind to raise the color.

The most recent dream-image of being propped on his potions bench flashes through her mind unbidden, and with it the remembered sensation of his sharp hips sliding against her sweaty legs and his lips against hers...

Hermione looks away abruptly, refusing to acknowledge the dream-memory, and strides past, ignoring him to the best of her ability.

The sounds of envelopes and junk mail hitting the floor follow her.

"Granger," he says.

"Sod off, Snape," she snarls. She wants silence. She wants solitude. She wants several glasses of wine and a bath and about twelve hours of dreamless sleep. But mostly, she wants to get away from him.

"Granger," Snape says again and grabs her by the arm just as she starts up the stairs, causing her to stumble towards him.

She glares at him savagely, angry that he would dare touch her. "What do you think you are..." she begins, but then suddenly there is a mouth crushing against hers, teeth scraping her bottom lip, a tongue nudging open her mouth.

Snape is kissing her, and the shock of it extinguishes her anger; she's passive for half a minute, allowing his hand to wind into her hair and loosen the bun, allowing him to pull her closer, to tighten his grip on her arm. He tastes like coffee and chocolate and bitterness and it's as if he is stealing her breath, sucking it right out of her, making her helpless.

Hermione shoves him away.

Panting, they stare at each other. Snape is flushed, his eyes heavy lidded and dark, and Hermione has the sudden and nearly irrepressible desire to let him do what he wants with her.

Ridiculous. Ridiculous and risky and mad.

Hermione turns and continues up the stairs.

Snape follows, his heavy tread too close behind her. On the first floor landing she turns, wants to shout at him, to demand to know what he thinks he's doing, to hex him until he runs off, his tail between his legs. Instead she can only stare at him, her eyes darting to his long fingers, to the unwrapped scarf, to the spots of color on his cheeks.

Snape raises one eyebrow.

No. Why is she even considering this?

Hermione starts up the stairs again. Snape grabs her by the wrist; she snatches her hand away, makes it only a few more steps before he has her by the arm again. She whirls, wand out, but Snape doesn't let her go or back off or even flinch. He just stares at her. Focused. Intent. Hungry.

Her stomach twists, her heart speeds up, her skin flushes with heat, and then she moves, lets the handles of the plastic bag carrying the wine slip from her fingers as she takes the two steps down to close the distance between them. She all but throws herself at him, crushing her mouth to his, and it is all hands and teeth and lips between them. His bitter chocolate and coffee taste is on her tongue, and his long fingers are everywhere, plucking at her buttons, pushing open the lapels of her coat, sliding up under her skirt. She tugs his scarf out of the way, scrabbling at the button and zip of his trousers, tugging out his shirttails.

They lose their balance, tumbling against the stairs. A strip of agony lashes across her lower back where she falls against the edge of the steps; Hermione grits her teeth and refuses to cry out in pain, forcing herself to focus on loosening his clothing, of speeding up this process as quickly as possible.

Snape lets her go long enough to shrug off his coat, but his hands quickly find her again, skimming along the slippery skin of her stockings as he pushes up her skirt, mirroring the slide of his mouth down her jaw, the rasp of his tongue against her pulse. She pants, trying to keep herself focused, trying to remember that there's a Death Eater between her legs, one who has casually killed before her very eyes with the merest flick of his wand. But it's difficult to maintain that focus while most of her mind is preoccupied with getting him inside of her as quickly as possible, and she's obsessing over how she is going to get these restrictive Muggle stockings off with Snape's weight pinning her to the stairs.

The best answer is probably to banish her under things, and she raises her wand to do so, but somehow the wand ends up under Snape's chin, digging into the soft spot under his jaw. He stiffens. She pushes his head up and licks her lips, not sure anymore of what she is going to say or do next, but then, that has been the theme of this miserable day.

"Apologize."

His eyes have gone cold, but he's still right there with her, wanting her. "For what?"

"For making that comment about Ron three weeks ago. For tormenting Harry for most of our time in school. For trying to get me thrown out of my flat. For not stopping me from casting a Cruciatus on Lucius Malfoy." Hermione pauses, breathing heavily, surprised by the last, but she's got Snape between her legs at wand point, and this is not the time to analyze Freudian slips. She digs the tip of her wand deeper. "All of those. Some of those. Pick one. *Apologize.*"

His black eyes are glittering dangerously, like maybe he'd like to kill her instead of shag her, but then to her surprise he snarls, "*apologize.*"

He doesn't mean it, but she's just made Severus Snape apologize, and there's power there, power that rushes through her and pools between her legs. She removes her wand from his throat and flicks it with a silent spell; Snape flinches, actually *flinches*, but it is the banishment spell for her under things, and the only thing that happens is that her knickers and stockings disappear.

"Fuck me," she pants, and he does, lifting her hips and sliding into her with one fluid motion. She gasps; her fingers open and her wand rolls out of her hand and down the stairs to join the wine bottles on the landing below. The steps dig into her back, and she will be bruised and sore tomorrow, but the pain is meaningless, mere background noise as Snape thrusts into her again and again with long, methodical strokes, his breath hot on her neck.

She clenches at him, wraps her legs around him to drive him deeper, pants and mews in the back of her throat. She arches against him as he manages to find the right spot again and again. Briefly she wonders if this is another dream; in her experience sex has never been so accurate, and surely her position on the stairs defies all laws of physics, but she loses the thread of the thought as he shifts, changes angle slightly, their contact becoming even more precise. She moans, clenches around him, and he gasps in response.

"Dammit, Granger, come," he hisses in her ear, and though she doesn't intend to let him order her about, the climax breaks and rolls over her anyway, drowning her, snatching her down in its riptide. Snape follows her close behind, his fingers digging painfully into her hips as he shudders and bucks against her, sucking in a sharp breath, and for one perfect moment they meld to one another, drifting in bliss...

Then it is gone. Hermione falls, crashing back into reality, the background noise of her physical discomfort flaring into the foreground. She is sweaty and hot and damp; the pain of the steps pressing into her back is blaring agony, and her legs shake with exertion as she lowers them to the floor to support her and the burden of Snape's weight as he rests on top of her. That awful feeling of embarrassment is spreading lazily through her and maybe even a bit of shame, but maybe not, and lying here under Snape just won't do, not one second longer.

She shoves at him, pushes him off. "Go. Get away."

He heaves himself off of her with a grunt and kneels back, his eyes boring into her, even though he is disheveled and partly undressed. She pulls herself backwards, manages to get to her feet, shimmies her skirt down. She can't look at him as she steps around him, fetches her wand and the bottles of wine, thankfully unbroken, and hurries past him again. He is still watching her though, and she wishes he would stop, would show some sign that he feels like what just happened is a mistake, because if he doesn't, she can't and that makes no sense, but she's now working on a theory that she has possibly and officially lost her mind, so there is no reason to think anything is going to make sense anyway.

"Granger," he says again.

She doesn't answer, just continues towards her flat as if she hasn't just shagged him breathless on the stairs, as if she isn't still wet and perhaps even interested in more.

"Granger," he says yet again as she's slipping her key into her lock, and she still ignores him. She refuses to so much as look in his direction because if she looks back, she might turn to salt or disappear into the underworld or whatever mythological metaphor works best for looking into the abyss and finding it looking back into you.

And after the day she's had, that thought isn't bothering her as much as it should.

That night she dreams of climbing the Tor.

The town is dark and silent as if it is dead, the buildings like empty husks as she threads through the streets. The silhouettes of trees and fence posts stalk her as she walks along the road up to the Tor; constellations and galaxies wheel across the sky, lighting her path with their starlight, casting her thin shadow in all directions. The Tor itself looms over her, pulling her onwards, guiding her up to its summit, beckoning her with its abyss.

She climbs ever upwards, following its terraces to the top, her eyes always on the summit. Her breath puffs out in front of her, twinkling like diamonds in the starlight, and her legs tremble as they did that day under Snape's weight, weak from the climb.

At the summit, she finds that she is not alone.

There is the red glow of a cigarette and the silhouette of man. She knows with senses only available in dreams that he is waiting for her, has been waiting for her for a long while. She is unsurprised by this and is even less surprised to realize that she's been waiting for him, too.

She takes a step towards him. "Who are you?"

He does not answer, only draws on the cigarette, and his face remains dark in the glow, an empty shadow against the revolving night sky.

"Why does the Tor glow?" Her voice is strong, demanding. She needs answers. "What does it want of me?"

"In time, witch, in time." The silhouette points to the ground at her feet. "Until then, you'll be needing that."

She looks down, sees the object lying coiled at her feet, bends to pick it up. It is made of leather and unfurls in her hand, dangles from her fingers.

She studies it in the starlight and frowns.

The long leather strap in her hands is a dog leash.