

Walking in Darkness

by Shadow

A response to the Summer Challenge at Potter Place
Prompt No 11: Post Voldy defeat and Hermione is now a vampire. Given the
Wizarding
world's intolerance of vampires what will she do? Who will help her?
Perhaps the bat of the dungeons?

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 8

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Disclaimer: Not mine, wish it was.

A BIG thank you to my beta, Lumiere. Not possible without you.

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She sat in front of the mirror. Dark circles smudged the delicate skin around big brown eyes that stared hopelessly into the silvered glass, as if trying to see into her soul. But then, maybe that was the problem.

She let her eyes look at the reflected image of her chambers. The velvet drapes surrounding her bed were pulled back, revealing crimson silk sheets and a green comforter, ruffled and disarranged, as if someone had just left their comfortable embrace. Now, in the evening, she had left the heavy velvet curtains at her window open. A cool, gentle breeze sighed through the open window, causing the flame of her candle to dance merrily. The first brave glimpse of the evening star was beginning to peep through the scattering of clouds on the horizon. The huge silver moon seemed to be playing peek-a-boo with the clouds racing past its face. How she wished she could feel anything so frivolous anymore.

She sighed heavily and returned her gaze to the mirror. Her hair was getting long; she could feel it brushing the base of her spine as she turned her head. She could never get an appointment with a Muggle hairdresser at the right time. It didn't matter anyway. Nothing did anymore. Slowly, she raised her hand, gently tracing her features. Her eyes closed, she trailed her fingers over her forehead, the curving slope of her eyebrows, down her nose and over her pale cheeks, stopping to brush her fingers back and forth over her lips. She ran her tongue quickly over her small, white, perfect row of teeth; nothing there, yet. Lightly, she followed the line of her throat, down the centre, careful to avoid the right side of her neck. Not careful enough, the tips of her fingers brushed it: The Marks.

A strangled cry tore from her throat. She clamped one hand over her mouth and hid her eyes with the other, as if to shield them from the sight in the mirror. Tears leaked from her tightly shut eyes and streamed down her cheeks. Her shoulders shuddered as sob after sob racked her thin body. "This isn't true. It can't be happening to me!" The thoughts circled around and around, endlessly through her tired brain.

With an effort of sheer will, she pulled her hands from her face, swiped angrily at the tears on her cheeks and determinedly squared her shoulders. How she hated feeling

so weak and useless! Slowly raising her eyes, she looked again into the mirror. What she saw was no longer as frightening as it was the first time. It was after all the same thing she had seen for the past year: nothing.

Hermione Granger rose and walked into her bathroom. Quickly, she washed her face with cold water. She had to hurry now. It was getting dark. She could feel the insatiable appetite rising in her yet again. She had to leave soon before it became too strong to control. She hurried to the window, pushing the curtain aside and thrusting the glass wider to the night air. Before climbing out onto the ledge, she took one last look at herself in the mirror, or at least where her image should be. She never had gotten used to not being able to cast a reflection, objects seeming to move around by themselves.

She could feel her incisors slowly lengthening, the hunger growing. Swiftly, she climbed onto the ledge, spread her arms and leapt forward into the open air. No thump of a body hitting the ground was heard, but a few seconds later, the fitting silhouette of a small brown bat could be seen against the night sky.

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A/N Please, be gentle! First time fic writer, and I would love to know what you think

Memories and Discoveries

Chapter 2 of 8

Hermione's memory wanders back...

Hermione Granger had always considered herself a logical, sensible person. Every problem had to have a sane and sensible (logical, if you will) solution. Life would just be complete chaos otherwise. It is, of course, very easy to apply this theory with the calm, clear-headedness required when it is someone else's problem to be solved. Unfortunately, it is not so easy when the problem is your own.

Hermione had spent the first few months after becoming a vampire trapped in a vortex of what felt like hundreds of emotions until all she wanted to do was scream. Not the satisfying scream that lets off pent-up emotion, but the kind of constant, earsplitting, getting-you-a-private-room-in-St-Mungo's scream. Fear, anger, despair, and of course, a constant level of panic swirled around inside her. The panic was the worst. It was the one thing that could do what Hermione feared above all: it turned her impressively intelligent brain to pure mush. At this stage, it was what she could afford the least.

Hermione climbed onto her bed, pulling the heavy drapes closed as the first ray of sunlight crept over the windowsill. "Damn," she thought. "I didn't close my window curtains properly. Now I have to be extra careful with the drapes around my bed." The sight of that lonely ray of light suddenly ignited the fire of fury inside her. How pathetic that she wasn't even able to close her own curtains! She was useless, hopeless and utterly deplorable. She was trapped in these rooms with nothing to do but research, and she had still made no progress. But even she, the newest idiot of the century should have remembered to close those bloody curtains for her own safety! The huge mound of books piled next to next to her began to dwindle as she hurled them around the room in a childish tantrum. Finally, when there were no books left, Hermione flopped back onto her pillows. Her anger having cooled sufficiently, she regretted her foolish fit. Now there was nothing to occupy her mind. Just the memories.....

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After Lord Voldemort's defeat, his Death Eaters had scattered to the wind. Many had been captured, but several were still on the loose. Their attacks on innocents were just as frightening as when the Dark Lord had been alive. As Hermione, Harry, Ron and Ginny were of age and an integral part of the Order, they were enlisted to help flush out these bands of marauding psychopaths and cold-blooded killers.

Hermione and Ron had been assigned to the Transylvanian mountains where a group of Death Eaters had been spotted. The day before the stake-out, Ron had been hit hard in the head during the last Quidditch match of the season. The mission was cancelled. No member of the Order was to go on a Death Eater patrol alone, and there just weren't enough members to assign anyone else. Hermione was devastated. This was to have been her chance to show everyone that she was more than just a little girl with book smarts and cleverness. She knew what she had to do. She never was one for breaking the rules, but this was an opportunity she could not pass up. She would complete the mission on her own.

Gathering her thickest cloak, her wand and her flagging courage, she set off for the icy winds of Transylvania. Settling herself among the bushes and trees growing at the base of the cliff, Hermione knew this was one of her more stupid ideas. The castle was looming above her, like a predator about to pounce. She knew she was imagining it, but that fortress reminded her sharply of the book *Dracula*.

Looking up at the castle, remembering all the tales about the dangers of the night, Hermione was not aware of the presence behind her until it was too late. Someone grabbed her roughly by her hair, pulling her towards them with the other arm around her waist like a steel band. Before Hermione could even draw a breath to cry out, her head was yanked hard to the left. She could feel cold, cruel lips on her neck. The scream that started in her throat died to a wavering sigh as cold, pointed teeth pierced her delicate skin. Hermione could feel the strength leaving her limbs, but beyond that, it felt like her very soul was being drawn through those two punctures in her neck. Sorrow and regret filled her. She had never really told Harry and Ron that she loved them, that they were her brothers, her family. They didn't even know where she was. Then there was that other person she would never see again. A throb of emotion washed over her at the thought. Her torturer hissed as if burned and dropped her like a stone. As Hermione lay on the cold, hard ground, looking up at the thing that had destroyed her life, her future, tears welled up and spilled onto the dust.

"Tears, Mudblood?" jeered her tormentor. "Well, well. I thought it might be fun to end it right now, however... Yes, I think it may just be a perfect fitting for the friend of The Chosen One"

The creature leaned over Hermione, rolling up its sleeve. With one long fingernail, it trailed a long red gash down its wrist. Holding Hermione's mouth open, it let a few drops of its blood drip onto her tongue.

"Swallow, Mudblood whore. Eternal life, eternal darkness, eternal damnation!"

The evil cackle of the fiend echoed off the cliff face. Hermione lay in a huddled heap on the icy earth. Darkness swirled around her in sickening waves, crashing and receding, only to repeat again. Finally, she gave in and let the velvet darkness cover her.

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Sick. Oh, how she felt sick. This queasiness was not something she had ever experienced before. Slowly, Hermione opened her eyes, but shut them immediately as the pain shot through her head. She was lying on something rather uncomfortable, somewhere rather draughty, but she wasn't cold at all. How very strange. Suddenly, everything came back. The cold, the fiend... Her death.

But she wasn't dead. Forcing her eyes open, Hermione made herself look around. She was lying in a cave. Huge green speckled stalagmites and stalactites emerged from the dark like huge jaws, waiting to devour her.

Hermione sat up carefully, her foot brushing something soft and furry. A rat. A dead rat, lying there at her feet, like some macabre offering. Hermione licked her lips. It was still warm, as if it had just been killed. The sight of those ruby red drops of blood was suddenly more enticing to her than a lifelong supply of chocolate. It was something she could not resist...

It was over before she could think about it. Hermione stared down at the limp and lifeless pile of fur that had been her first feasting. She had done it, completed the ritual and willingly drank blood. There was no way to stop it now. She was a vampire.

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Hermione Granger was not called the brightest witch of her age for nothing. Her brain absorbed knowledge like a thirsty Thestral. Despite her friends' teasing, she knew her knowledge was her power. She just never thought she would be proved correct in this way. She had done a great deal of reading about vampires; she thought they were fascinating. Thus she found herself uniquely equipped to prepare herself.

She found the cave she had woken up in to be strangely comforting. The ceilings sloped up into the silken darkness, where odd squeaks and flapping noises hinted at nocturnal companions. Situated high up along the Transylvanian slopes, her new home was far enough from human settlements for Hermione's mind to be at rest. When the hunger took her, there seemed no way to control herself. There was one promise to herself she was determined to keep: she would not hurt another human, nor drink human blood.

Her choices were minimal. There was plenty of animal life on the mountain: rabbits, little deer and squirrels. The problem was, even if they came out at night (which they did not), Hermione could not bring herself to feast on such adorable creatures. This left her with one option: rats.

At first, Hermione stayed within the relative comfort and safety of her cave-haven, leaving only to hunt when the need became too unbearable. After a few days Hermione began to test her magic. It seemed that becoming a vampire did not affect most of one's powers. She could still Apparate, but she dared not investigate the state of her spell casting. She knew it would attract the notice of the Ministry. Her one true asset failed her. She could not think of what to do. No plan came to her, no ideas formed, nothing. She knew the how much the wizarding world feared and mistrusted vampires. There was no way to contact any of her friends not that she would anyway. As far as they were concerned, she had disappeared completely. She would not be a burden to them because of her stupidity.

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The bleak, piercing wind raged through the forbidden forest, ripping through the twisted branches, causing them to rattle like the bones of a skeleton.

A dark shape passed along the roadside, keeping close to the deeper shadows at the verge. At the gates, the cloaked figure paused, drawing its hood closer around its face.

Hermione raised her eyes, staring up at the building that had been her home, the windows glowing like jewels in the night. Tears burned the back of her eyes; this was the last time she would ever be at Hogwarts.

"It's a terrible night to be out and about. Are you waiting for someone?"

Startled, Hermione whirled around at the sound of the familiar Scottish brogue, the hood of her cloak falling back from her face.

"Hermione? Oh, Hermione my dear!" Professor McGonagall snatched Hermione into her arms, hugging her tightly. "Where have you been? We've been worried sick!" The professor stepped away, surveying the younger woman, taking in her pale face and hollowed cheeks, the sudden tears brimming in her eyes.

"Oh, Professor, it's all my fault! I knew I shouldn't, but I did. And now... And now..." Hermione broke off, brutal sobs racking her body.

"Come, my dear. I think you and I need to talk."

Once they were safely ensconced in McGonagall's office, the older woman sat Hermione near the fire. Again, she noticed the drastic changes to her ex-student. She had only been missing a few weeks. What could have happened in that time?

She sat in silence while Hermione recited her tale in a monotone, never once looking at the Professor. When she was through, she sat in still, staring at the swirls in the carpet, her hair forming a curtain to hide her face from the other's scrutiny.

"Well," said McGonagall. "Well, I don't condone what you did, young lady. It was irresponsible and rash, not to mention utterly foolish! However, what is done is done. I am not going to harp on it. The only thing to do now is find a solution."

Hermione's head jerked up, the haunted eyes searching her mentor's face. "You... You're not going to send me away? You are willing to help me?"

"Don't be ridiculous! Of course I'm not sending you away. We will have to make arrangements, but I don't see why you can't stay in the castle. Why are you looking at me like that, young lady? You will be perfectly safe here."

"It's not my safety I'm worried about, Professor. It is for the students and teachers. There are too many temptations for someone... like me." The bubble of hope Hermione had been floating on popped, leaving her more despondent than before.

"Do you not think I would put the safety of every person in this castle first? No Miss Granger, I have a plan! We happen to have a wing in this castle, a very special wing off the North Tower. It is hardly ever used. I think it will be perfect. Yes, Miss Granger," she inserted when she could see Hermione about to interrupt. "There are wards on that wing that will keep the students out, and you in. These wards also extend to the grounds. You will therefore only have access to your chambers and the Forbidden Forest. Plenty of little pests out there for you to hunt. You will also have access to the library, by special Floo, only at night, of course. We are going to need all your remarkable research skills to find a cure, my dear."

Hermione had sat, staring goggle-eyed at the Headmistress. Finally, finally, there was a light at the end of this dark, terrifying tunnel. Someone was willing to help her out of the disaster her life had become.

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Now, nearly six months later, lying in her comfortable bed with the curtains shut against the invading light, Hermione regretted her earlier fit of temper. Not only did she now not have anything to do, but she was wasting valuable research time. In the months she had been in these chambers, she had discovered nothing new. It was so frustrating.

With a mental shrug, Hermione stretched out on her bed, drawing the covers over her. At least she could use this extra time to get some much-needed sleep.

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Severus Snape stalked through the halls of Hogwarts. Severus Snape always stalked through the halls of Hogwarts. It seemed to inspire more fear if one stalked, rather than just walked or even strode. It also made his robes billow in a satisfyingly ominous way.

Snape enjoyed stalking through said hallways in the early hours of the morning. It was when he was most unlikely to meet anyone else. It was also when the nightmares

tended to be worse. But he would not think about that. He didn't sleep much in any case.

Severus prided himself on his extensive knowledge of the castle, from the highest turret, to the lowest dungeon and passageway. He probably knew more about this structure than Black and his cronies had ever dreamed of.

There was something lately about his castle home that was niggling at the back of his mind. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on. He headed towards the North Tower. He hadn't been there for quite a few months. As he neared the entry to the tower, he was suddenly struck with the urge to go back to the dungeons. Turning away, it was as if a light had suddenly gone on in his brain. That was why he had not been up the tower for so long. Every time he neared the turret stairway, he had a sudden impulse to go somewhere else.

Returning to the tower, Severus pulled out his wand, waving it at the stairway portal. Ah, yes. Some very sophisticated wards were in place. So complicated and complex that even he had not been able to detect them. For a while, at least. Someone was keeping something in or out of that tower, and Severus was determined to find out just what exactly it was.

The wards came down slowly, but at last Severus had brought down the final one. Mounting the steps quickly but silently, Severus ascended the tower. At the very top of the turret was a heavy, studded wooden door. Surprisingly it was unlocked. His heart beating slightly faster than normal, he pushed open the door.

The room he entered could have passed for any bedroom in the castle, except for the thick velvet drapes that were pulled closed across the window, causing the room to be almost as dark as night, except for the thin sliver of light that stole between the two curtains. Matching drapes were also shut tightly around the immense four-poster bed. Books lay around the room, as if thrown about in a fit of temper. Carefully, Severus made his way to the bed. He had come this far, and he was not going back without knowing what warranted such heavy guards.

Severus gently parted the material, pulling it open quietly, drawing in a deep breath as he did so. Whatever he had expected to find, it was not the sleeping form of one Miss Hermione Granger. The same Hermione Granger who had been missing for the last six months. Severus looked down at the slumbering girl. She was very pale, even in this weak light he could see that. He also noticed how thin she was. Was she ill? He suddenly noticed just how still she was. In fact, she did not even seem to be breathing, her chest failing to rise and fall. A cold chill swept over him. Severus leaned forward and laid a finger along her cheek. She was cold to the touch. With mounting trepidation he brought his hand to her neck. Not even a pulse.

Hermione Granger was dead.

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A/N Thanks to Charmed3 and Lumiere for beta-ing this. A very special thanks to my supporter and biggest fan, G.

## Decisions

### *Chapter 3 of 8*

Severus confronts Minerva.

"It is completely unacceptable, Minerva!"

"Severus, calm yourself or I will end this conversation immediately! By all means, say what you need to, but you will do it in an orderly manner. Do I make myself clear?"

Severus breathed in deeply through his nose. When this failed to calm him, he marched over to the Headmistress' liquor table and poured himself a healthy dose of Firewhisky, ignoring the older woman's raised eyebrows.

"Severus, I do understand, but you were never..."

"... Never supposed to find out!" Severus roared.

Minerva sat back in her chair, her lips pressed together in a thin line, a warning sparking in her eyes.

Severus sighed heavily. Pinching the bridge of his nose to ward off the blossoming headache, he flung himself into a chair, causing his drink to slosh over the sides of the glass. Just minutes before he had been blissfully unaware of the vampire that was living here, in HIS castle. It had only taken him moments to realise why Miss Granger was lying in that tower, so deathly still. The bite mark on the side of her neck had confirmed it. He had stormed out of the tower and straight to the Headmistress' office. He knew his pounding could have woken the entire castle, but in his towering fury, he did not care one jot. Now, sitting opposite his boss in her nightgown and dressing robe, he needed answers.

"Why is that... that creature here in the castle?"

"That creature, as you call her, is a lonely, frightened young woman!" Minerva's forehead creased in a worried frown. "She made one stupid mistake, Severus, and now she will spend the rest of her life paying for it. She will be ostracised and condemned for what she has become, instead of commended and praised for whom she is and what she has done. When I found her here, she was desperate, on the verge of hysteria. She had nowhere to go, no one to turn to. At least with her here, under my protection, she will have a chance."

Severus eyed her incredulously. "Are you so fond of your precious Gryffindors, Minerva, that you are blind to the fact that you allow a dangerous creature to be housed in the school, along with all the pupils, not to mention staff members, under your care?!"

"If you think for one minute that I did not think this through thoroughly, you are sorely mistaken. Hermione Granger is a rare and powerful asset to the Wizarding World, one we cannot afford to lose. Surely you know that everyone should have a chance at redemption, Severus, no matter one's past mistakes." She raised her eyebrows, glaring at him over the top of her glasses.

Severus glared back at her, refusing to let her know she had hit her target. Arching his own eyebrows, he silently demanded she satisfy his earlier questions.

"She is doing research," Minerva sighed, finding it easier to acquiesce than to continue the silent battle, especially since it seemed he had calmed down. "There has to be a cure for vampirism. We have found nothing of use so far, just the stake-through-the-heart sort of cures. We are not too keen on those, obviously."

"Obviously," Snape sneered.

Minerva took a deep breath in through her nose, breathing out quickly through her mouth. She had to remember that Severus was a moody, surly person at the best of times, and now, when he was in shock, was not one of those best times. If she did not get her own temper under control, there would be no chance of her getting him to help. He may be unpleasantly difficult and disagreeable, but he was highly intelligent (and he really did have a high level of integrity, buried somewhere deep down).

Severus had been staring into the depths of the fire as if it held the secrets of his universe. He looked up to see the Headmistress gazing at him with a look so like Albus', it was uncanny. It could only mean one thing: she was planning something for him.

Clearing her throat, Minerva gave him a look of such innocence; Severus just knew he was doomed. One did not need to use Legilimency to guess what was going on inside her head.

"No!" he said, as she opened her mouth to speak. "Absolutely not; I will not go near that tower again, and I most certainly will not help you save the other third of the Golden Trio. Do not ask me to do it."

"Severus, she is scared and alone. She refuses to get in touch with her friends for fear of burdening them, no matter how hard I try to convince her otherwise. I am her only human contact, but I am unable to give her the proper assistance and attention. She has to stay out of the sunlight and spends the rest of her waking hours researching, leaving her tower only when her need becomes too great. Surely even you noticed how thin and fragile she is getting. If we do not find a solution soon, I fear..."

Minerva broke off, staring at her hands clasped tightly in her lap while she regained control of herself. "I only ask this of you because I am at my wits end. She is fading before my eyes, and I am unable to do anything about it. I just thought you, with your extensive knowledge, might be the one to break this thing that is destroying a young, beautiful life."

Severus stared fiercely at the older woman. He felt trapped. He had noticed how fragile and vulnerable Miss Granger had appeared, all but swallowed up in that huge bed. Taking a deep breath, Severus steeled his resolve against that plaintive, desperate note he had heard in the Headmistress' voice.

"I am truly moved by your little speech," Severus drawled, holding up his hand as Minerva lifted her head, looking at him with hope in her eyes. "However, she is still a dangerous being, one I have no desire to help or see again. My reluctance can only be intensified by the very fact that she is one of Potter's cronies, and an insufferable know-it-all that I was so glad to see the last of. She should be able to find the cure herself if she is so brilliant. No, Minerva. You ask too much."

Before Minerva had a chance to react, he was gone, the hem of his robes whipping round the doorframe.

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He was walking on a tightrope. Just as he gained his balance, the rope would sway, threatening to topple him down into the dark chasm yawning below him. He took one staggering step forward, then another. The line seemed to steady, allowing him to breathe easier. There was a figure on the other side, beckoning him closer. As he took another halting step forward, wiping the sweat from his eyes, the figure suddenly became clear. Albus was there. He was right there. He was holding the rope securely, promising him safety and protection, if he could just make it across. A bright, intense red light seemed to fill the darkness gaping below him. Albus disappeared, vanished, gone, taking the safety with him. The cord sagged. Just as he started to fall, evil red eyes appeared behind the light, penetrating him, leaving him naked, as a high, cruel laugh reverberated around his skull...

Severus' eyes shot open as he bolted upright, his sweat soaked shirt sticking to his back. Raising shaking hands, he wiped his sodden brow, brushing the long strands of hair out of his eyes. His tongue felt thick and raw, as if he had used it to scrub cauldrons to a mirror shine. He decided it was better to keep his eyes closed. Once the pounding in his head had abated to a tolerable level, Severus opened them again, daring to move his head to look around. He had fallen asleep on the lumpy, uncomfortable couch again. It didn't help that it was way too short. A hot shower and extra strength headache potion were in desperate need, but not necessarily in that order.

Standing up to get to his personal potions cupboard, Severus nearly brained himself as he tripped over an empty glass bottle. Glaring at the offending object, he tried to think who would dare to leave rubbish lying around his chambers. The empty Firewhisky bottle brought it all back.

Groaning and cradling his head in his hands, Severus made it to his stores cupboard. He quickly gulped down the bitter draught, grimacing as it trailed a burning path to his stomach.

Once the pain had eased its tight grip on his skull, Severus marched into his bathroom, turning on the shower. As he stood under the spay, the water as hot as his skin could handle, he let his chin drop to his chest, the little needles of water pounding at the tension in his shoulders. He did not normally allow himself the weakness of indulging in alcohol. He did not enjoy the loss of control.

But his discussion with Minerva had unnerved him, and he'd needed something to take the edge off. He must have taken off more than the edge.

Damn that meddling woman and her pleading eyes. He thought he had locked all traces of compassion away years ago. It seemed that it was still there, though, barely, but still there. It was like one of those Muggle television sets. As they turn off, for an instant one little point of light remains. His conscience must have retained that one tiny pinprick. And Minerva, just like her predecessor, had managed to find it and try to rip it open.

He remembered the sight of Miss Granger lying in that bed. She looked so helpless and frail and vulnerable. Despite his protestations, Severus knew Hermione Granger was not a real threat. If Minerva had set up such sophisticated wards, the students were indeed safe. What he hated the most was that he had not been told. As Minerva had pointed out, he had the extensive knowledge, due to his unfortunate history, to help solve this... dilemma.

Severus shut off the water, dressed quickly and returned to his sitting room, pacing before the empty hearth. Just the thought of the opportunities this situation presented made his heart quicken. If he solved this little problem, not only would he be saving Miss Hermione Granger, one third of the precious Golden Trio and a WIZARDING World heroine, but he would find a cure for vampirism. It was something no one had cared to touch on for research purposes. No one cared enough about vampires to try. He could just imagine it. He would finally receive the recognition he so desired.

Thoughts, ideas and theories began to rip through his mind at impressive speeds. He could start a potion, research the blood properties of the vampire, observe its behaviour, continue the research on conventional cures....

The problem was it wasn't just a vampire. This was Hermione Granger, cleverest witch of her age and constant thorn in his side. Could he work with the insufferable little know-it-all? If it meant getting HIS name down in the history books, he could.

Would the young woman in question be willing to work with him, though? He was still considered the greasy bat of the dungeons, ostracised by most of their world as Dumbledore's murderer. Even the memories the Potter brat had discovered among the things Dumbledore had left to him, showing the vow the Headmaster had made him take to protect Draco, had not relieved him of that prejudice. To the WIZARDING World, he was nothing more than a Death Eater and a murdering fiend. Even though he had continued to assist the Order with much needed information, he could tell they never fully trusted him. Only Minerva had. She had testified for him before the Wizengamot, proved his sincerity beyond a doubt, and then offered him his previous position at Hogwarts as the Potions Professor.

And after all this, he was refusing her one request. Not only refusing but, throwing a tantrum comparable to a spoiled three-year-old who was having his favourite toy taken away. A slight flush crept up his face as he thought about that.

He stepped up to the fireplace, scooped up a handful of glistening powder and tossed it into the fireplace.

"Headmistress' office" he called out. "Minerva, are you there?" he questioned into the glowing green flames.

Minerva's head appeared, floating eerily in the blaze.

"How can I help you, Severus?" she inquired coolly, her eyebrows raised in expectation.

"You win, Minerva," he retorted. "You may tell your precious Gryffindor cub I will be assisting her with her... studies."

"Thank you, Severus. I will let her know," she replied, still with the air of coolness.

Her head popped back out of the fire, but not before Severus had seen the gleam of triumph in her eyes.

"Severus Snape," he berated himself, "just what have you gotten yourself into this time?"

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A/N A huge thanks to my betas, Charmed3 and Lumiere. Special kudos to G.

## Weaknesses

Chapter 4 of 8

The pair do some research.

"No, Miss Granger," Severus snarled at Hermione. "I do not now, or in the future, need your help with these experiments. Go back to your books and research. Minerva may have asked me to work with you, but that does not mean I must work *with* you."

Heaving an irritated sigh, Hermione flounced back to her desk and the tottering pile of books on its surface. She ducked her head behind the one closest to her, scowling at the printed pages, an embarrassed flush staining her cheeks. When Minerva had told her Professor Snape was willing to work with her, she had been elated. She would now have a chance to try out other forms of research with experimental potions.

The problem was that Professor Snape was now even more withdrawn and snarky than he had ever been when she was a student. He refused to let her give any input and was treating her like an ignorant first year, sending her off to her books whenever she approached him.

She understood that it couldn't be easy for him. He had all his regular teaching and supervisory duties during the day and then had to work in the makeshift potions lab in the North Tower after sunset, the only time it was safe for her to be about, with the know-it-all he so obviously detested.

Lowering her book slightly, she glared at her ex-professor. What she couldn't understand was why he was ignoring her completely since it was her dilemma they were trying to solve. Surely it would be more beneficial to their research to enquire about her symptoms, her cravings or any side effects? But no, the great Professor Snape carried on all by himself, as usual.

Slowly, Hermione placed the book back on the table, got to her feet, and quietly made her way to where the professor was bent over his work. For a few minutes, she watched him over his shoulder as he prepared the last of the ingredients he was adding to the brew. It didn't take her long to identify the brew. It was apparently a mixture between a Blood Replenishing Potion and a Strengthening Solution. A phial of slightly viscous, red liquid was lying to the right of Snape's workspace.

"What is in that phial, Professor?"

Snape, who was concentrating on slicing the daisy roots symmetrically, had not heard her approach. He jumped as she spoke, causing his knife to slip, slicing his index finger instead.

Cursing under his breath, Severus reached for a bit of material lying on the desk, twisting it around his finger. He then levelled his glare on the hapless young woman who had caused his misfortune.

"Are you some kind of imbecile, Miss Granger, that you would creep up on a person who could be preparing potentially volatile substances? Has six years of Potions lessons taught you absolutely nothing?" he barked at her.

Hermione bristled at this insinuation of her incapability. She took a step towards the angry man in front of her.

"For your information, Professor, I did not interrupt you in the preparation of just any potion. I had already identified the potion you were preparing, as well as ascertained that it was not a dangerous item that you were working with," she indicated the now bloodied roots, glaring back at him.

"Never the less, it is your fault that the final ingredient for this potion has been ruined."

"If you would deign to tell me some of the things you are working on, I might not need to ask you questions constantly. I'm sure you do realise that I am no longer your student, and you might have noticed, this problem does concern me somewhat!"

Severus took a deep breath, closing his eyes in exasperation. He was not going to get this potion finished if he continued this childish sparring with her.

"Fine, Miss Granger. I am trying a combination of Blood Replenishing Potion and Strengthening Solution. The ingredients in both potions, when combined, have a calming effect on cravings. This new concoction is commonly used to help with the rehabilitation of wizards addicted to... certain substances."

Hermione nodded her understanding. "So you were hoping this mixture would calm my cravings, rendering me less dangerous. What about the need for nourishment?"

Severus glanced at her. "Correct. The issue of nourishment was to be solved by adding this." He held up the phial of red liquid. "I assume you are the cause of the diminished rat population within the castle grounds?" When Hermione nodded again, flushing slightly, Severus continued. "This is a vial of rat blood. I had hoped that adding this to the new mixture would solve that particular problem, allowing you more time for research as you will not need to go hunting."

As he spoke, Severus adjusted the makeshift bandage on his finger. His blood was already seeping through.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Professor! Please let me heal that for you." Hermione hurried towards him, her wand in one hand, her other outstretched as if to take hold of his injured digit.

"No thank you, Miss Granger. I am quite capable of sorting out my own injuries. If you would be so kind as to return to your research, so I may with continue mine."

Severus turned away from the young woman, the blood-soaked material falling to the ground as he did so.

Hermione's footsteps stopped dead. *The cold-shoulder treatment never seemed to fail with the eager young witch* Severus smirked to himself.

Hermione had watched the bit of fabric drop to the floor. She stopped, her eyes locked on the ruby red liquid soaked into the fibres. Her nostrils flared as the first, tantalising, metallic scent reached her. She licked her lips and closed her eyes. The smell of fresh human blood enveloped her, dulling her mind to all else, except the fact that she would soon be drinking from this newfound fountain of bliss.

Severus did not turn around as he heard the footsteps resume. He assumed she would return to her desk, just as she had always done. It was only when he felt a presence behind him that he knew all was not well.

Hermione shoved her prey into the wall before he could fully turn around. With her hand on his neck, she pushed upwards until just his toes were brushing the floor. In the back of her mind, Hermione was amazed at the strength she was capable of.

With her free hand, she grabbed her victim's injured finger, lifting it up to her face. Again she inhaled the scent of the blood, felt the wild beating of the pulse in his wrist. She could feel her incisors lengthening in anticipation of what was to come. Slowly, she drew the finger into her mouth and sucked on the wound.

Releasing his finger, she adjusted her hold on her prey, dropping his position to a more accessible height. Almost lovingly, she brushed away the strands of black hair that concealed what she truly desired. Once his neck was bared to her gaze, she caressed the soft skin. Just one bite and it would all be over for him.

She looked at his face one last time before striking. Black fire met her gaze. A mixture of horror, resignation and (could it be) understanding shimmered in his eyes. It was the understanding that broke her from her trance-like state.

"NO!" she cried, backing away from him, revulsion and terror coursing through her. "What did I do? What was I thinking?" she sobbed.

Hermione turned and fled to her open window, escaping into the night.

~~~~~

Severus sat slumped against the wall. He used what strength was left in his limbs to stand himself up and stumble back to his work bench.

There he sat with his head in his hands, calling himself every name he could think of.

He had become soft, too complacent. He had let himself grow comfortable around her. He knew what she was, but he had allowed himself to forget. He was too involved with enjoying the company of a young woman who was not afraid of him, not frightened to tell him where to get off if she thought he was in the wrong.

As much as he tried to lay the blame on her, he knew it lay squarely on his shoulders. As soon as she had raised his finger to her lips, he knew. It was his fault; he should not have left an open and bleeding wound in front of a vampire. He had expected the sharp pain in his neck and for his end to come quickly. He had not expected the look of realisation in her glazed eyes mere seconds before the horror and revulsion at her actions.

It seemed the smell and sight of the blood had been too overwhelming for her to resist. But why had she not reacted the same way to the rat blood? Perhaps it was the fresh blood that had been so over-powering.

Severus lowered his hands from his head, staring at the injured finger where the blood had begun to ooze again. He looked at it intently for a long while, as if it had all the answers hidden beneath the skin.

Severus jerked upright as if something had struck the back of his head. His finger did have all the answers! Well, at least his blood did.

He had noticed over the past few weeks of working in such close proximity to the girl (no, young woman) that she was becoming even more frail and ill. She was much paler than when he had first come across her, the dark circles under her eyes looked like heavy bruising, and she was definitely getting thinner by the day. He knew she was hunting rats and other small creatures in the forest, but it did not seem to be making much difference.

She needed human blood to survive.

Unfortunately for her, she refused to allow human blood to pass her lips. It was a very admirable promise, but it would not do for the silly twit to waste away because of her stubbornness.

The only solution was that she never knew about it. She could continue to think she was swallowing rat blood.

Grabbing his silver dagger, Severus quickly drew it along the delicate flesh inside his elbow. Holding a clean phial to the wound, he soon gathered enough blood to finish his potion.

Severus distractedly cast a healing charm over his arm and finger and inspected the bloodied daisy roots. If he was to use his own blood in this potion, they would not be wasted after all.

He just hoped his plan would work.

~~~~~

Big thanks to my betas, Lumiere and Charmed3. G, couldn't do it without you.

## Contemplations

*Chapter 5 of 8*

What exactly is happening up in that tower?

He was walking on a tightrope. Just as he gained his balance, the rope would sway, threatening to topple him down into the dark chasm yawning below him. He took one staggering step forward, then another. The line seemed to steady, allowing him to breathe easier. There was a figure on the other side, beckoning him closer. As he took

another halting step forward, wiping the sweat from his eyes, the figure suddenly became clear. Albus was there. He was right there. He was holding the rope securely, promising him safety and protection, if he could just make it across. A bright, intense red light seemed to fill the darkness gaping below him. Albus disappeared, vanished, gone, taking the safety with him. The cord sagged. He was falling, falling... evil red eyes appearing behind the light, penetrating him, leaving him naked, as high, cruel laughter reverberated around his skull... Suddenly, the cord tightened. He looked up to where Albus had been, but it was someone else holding the cord. He blinked again, trying to clear the buzzing in his brain, to see his rescuer.

"Come to me, Severus."

"Yes, yes?"

"Severus. Severus! Professor!!"

Severus bolted upright out of his chair, his eyes darting around the room, searching for the source of the evil laugh. At the slight movement to his left, his arm shot out, grabbing his quarry by the neck and pinning them to the wall with his body.

Hermione let out a squeak of protest. She had been trying to wake him from what seemed like a bad dream, judging by his whimpering and twitching. Now she was pinned to the wall by what was a thoroughly enraged man.

A red haze was clouding Severus' vision. He would kill this evil fiend that haunted him night after night!

Slowly, Severus became aware of a soft body pressed against his own, and a fresh, clean, spicy smell made his nostrils flare. He let his body sink further into the warmth, his head falling forward to breathe in more of that scent, his free arm instinctively curving around the warm body.

"Professor, are you alright?"

Severus' head jerked back, ebony eyes colliding with apprehensive brown ones, a look of dread dawning across his features. He removed his hand from Hermione's neck as if he had been burned, while his eyes fixed on the one wrapped around her waist.

Snape backed away slowly, mumbling something about being tired. He turned suddenly on his heel and bolted through the door like a startled hare.

Hermione remained leaning against the wall, unable to stand without its support. Sluggishly, she raised her shaking hands to cover her face. She had known all along that Severus Snape was a Death Eater and a spy. She also knew that he had been forced to do things most people would never be able to do (Dumbledore's death being one of those things), but she had never fully appreciated just how ruthless and scary that man could be until tonight.

Over the past few weeks she had seen a different side to the Potions master. He had willingly given up his time to help her, the know-it-all Gryffindor and one third of the Golden Trio. He had even (begrudgingly, at first) let her assist him with some of his Potions research. As time had gone by, he seemed to realise her value as an assistant and had let her help research the theory behind some of his more complicated projects.

And she had needed the break. She was so sick of vampires! Minerva's visits were infrequent, as she had many duties to attend to as Headmistress. Despite all her urgings, Hermione still refused to contact her friends. She would rather they think she was dead than to burden them with her "little problem," as the Headmistress called it.

Hermione had begun to enjoy those evenings spent with Professor Snape. They would sit for ages after they had finished their work for the evening, debating theories and problems.

The potion he was making for her seemed to be working. The cravings seemed to be reduced and she was feeling stronger than she had been since she woke up in that cave. It was strange though. The potion was more satisfying than straight rat blood had ever been. Snape must have found some extra ingredient to satisfy the hunger. It was typical of him not to mention it.

But tonight Snape had seemed like another man. Tonight Hermione saw the cold-blooded Death Eater. The man who had grabbed her had no emotion in his eyes; it was like he had no soul.

And yet... He had leaned into her. Severus had wrapped his arm around her and held on like a drowning man.

"Severus? Since when did I think of him as Severus?"

Hermione removed her hands from her face and looked around the room. It seemed so empty and dull without his brooding presence. The thought of their latest encounter flashed through her mind, and a warm glow seemed to suffuse her entire body. These were dangerous thoughts. It was Snape, for goodness' sake! He was probably scrubbing himself from head to toe to rid himself of her germs! Though, Severus in the shower...

She shook her head to rid herself of those foolish images. Snape was a grown man. A snarky, sometimes nasty, solitary man who would want nothing to do with a silly girl who managed to get herself turned into a Vampire! Hermione walked to the open window, pulled the drapes open further and stared out at the moonlit landscape, the lake glittering in the distance. How she wished she could see it in the light of day again.

She turned from the open window and flung herself on the bed. She would just lie here for a few minutes. Just to think. Then she would do some more research before the light of dawn made her creep back to her shelter like a snake under a rock.

~~~~~

Severus ran to his chambers.

No, Severus never ran. He stalked really fast to his chambers. The fact that he was out of breath was only because he had stalked *extremely* fast. He just wasn't used to stalking that quickly. That was all.

Severus began to pace in front of the cold, empty fireplace. It had nothing to do with the vampire up in the North Tower, nothing at all.

Just because she was intelligent, witty, brave and moderately good looking (if you went for that kind of thing) did not mean *anything*. He was not falling for an ex-student turned Vampire, who was nearly half his age. He must be losing his mind.

Severus knew he should not have gone up to the tower this evening. He was exhausted, but the temptation to spend just a few hours in her company was just too much. And, of course, he had fallen asleep, slumped in his chair like a first year at exam time, he thought scathingly.

He had been dreaming. No, having a nightmare. It was always the same one... But this one was different there was the laughter, falling, but someone was trying to help him.

The next thing he knew he was clinging to the delectable Miss Granger like a leech to its last meal... Merlin's pants, did he smell her hair?

The look on Hermione's face when he had pulled away from her... It must have been disgust at the thought of her lecherous ex-professor getting cosy with her.

Hermione? What? When had he started to think of her as Hermione? Severus shook his head.

She had seen him at his most vulnerable. What was she thinking now? Even Minerva did not know about his nightmares. Would Hermione think him weak, as well as disgusting?

Severus stopped pacing and stared at a little, singed spot on the hearthrug. He should go see her, explain... Explain what? That he had a thing for the young witch?

Shaking his head in disgust at himself, Severus walked to the bathroom to have a shower, noting as he passed the window that it was nearly dawn.

~~~~~

Severus stopped in front of the studded, wooden door. He was a fool, a stupid, damnable fool. He opened the door anyway.

Hermione was lying on the bed, fast asleep. She was stretched out on her side, facing the window. The rays of the morning sun were slanting across the room, reaching out towards the sleeping figure on the bed as if to caress a lover.

As that sickeningly sweet thought crossed his mind, Severus suddenly realised the implications of the sun's rays reaching her sleeping form. The silly vampire uh, witch... uh, woman had forgotten to close the blasted curtains. She must have been more upset than he realised.

Quickly, Severus crossed to the wide-open pane, intending to close it before the silly twit did herself harm.

His footsteps must have been louder than he had intended, for he had not taken more than a few strides when her eyes fluttered open. A look of confusion darted across her features before they softened into a warm smile. Hermione yawned and, before Snape could stop her, she stretched luxuriously, thrusting her bare arm directly into the shaft of sunlight slanting across the bed.

Time seemed to come to a standstill. Severus could hear his breathing echoing in his ears.

Hermione looked at her arm, the pale flesh glowing in the golden sunlight. She wrenched her arm back into the shadows, staring at it with dismay. When nothing seemed to happen, she flopped back on her pillows with relief.

Severus was not so sure. In three strides he was at her side, yanking her arm up to his inspection. As he looked, the tender flesh of her inner arm began to bubble and blister, the skin starting to smoke and char slightly, spreading outwards towards her fingers.

Without another glance at the stricken young woman's face, Severus yanked her to her feet, and pulled her unceremoniously to the bathroom.

Hermione stood frozen where Snape had left her, her horror-filled gaze unable to leave her blistering, boiling arm.

Severus looked at Hermione. She was in shock. He would get nothing useful out of her now. Without another thought, Severus turned on the cold tap and shoved Hermione under the freezing water. When Hermione gasped and tried to bolt out of the shower, Severus stepped under the icy spray, grabbed hold of her injured arm, and held it up to the soothing spray.

Hermione tore her gaze from her damaged skin to the face of the man next to her. All she could see in his features was a dark, forbidding anger. When he lifted his gaze to her, she knew the anger was directed at her.

"What else is there to put on this, Miss Granger?" he asked her in an icy tone.

"Well I... uh..." She stammered, never having had the full force of his icy rage directed at her before.

"Get on with it," he snapped, "before there is nothing of your arm left to save"

Hermione took a deep breath, collecting her shattered nerves.

"There is a special burn salve in the mirror cabinet. I made it ages ago, just in case..." Hermione's voice trailed off as Severus stalked across the bathroom to retrieve the salve.

Hermione had just switched off the water when her arm was again yanked into Severus' firm grip. She watched, mesmerised as his long fingers dipped into the ointment and began to gently massage it into her tender skin. The pain began to ease almost immediately.

"What the bloody hell were you thinking, you little fool?" Severus' enraged words were making her feel even worse.

"You, of anyone else, should know by now to ensure the curtains are properly closed before falling asleep!" Severus, finished with the cream, roughly grabbed Hermione's chin, forcing her to look at him.

"What were you thinking?" he demanded again.

"I... I wasn't thinking."

"That much is obvious. Why would you do something so dangerous, so stupid, after everything Minerva has done to ensure your safety? After all the research and experiments we have done?"

Hermione wrenched her chin from his hand, turning away from him. She folded her arms around herself as is to shield herself from his scorn.

He knew why. He knew she was so disgusted and distraught by what happened that she had forgotten to close the drapes. But he needed to hear her say it.

Severus watched the thin, shivering form, water dripping from her robes and hair. He was so busy looking at her that he almost didn't hear her when she began to speak.

"You are right. I was stupid, a complete idiot. I was so wrapped up in my own thoughts that I could not see beyond them."

Severus bowed his head, mentally flaying himself for indirectly causing her pain.

"I was so busy thinking of you, what it must have been like for you to have to go through what you did and still carry on living. How brave you are. Then I was thinking about how it felt to have you leaning against me, how warm and good and right you felt. And I began to wonder what it would feel like if you kissed me. I fell asleep with silly schoolgirl thoughts running through my head and forgot to close the drapes. You are right. I am a silly, little fool."

Severus' head had snapped up during this speech, incredulity stamped across his face. She was fantasising about him?

"Hermione." It came out a strangled croak

"It is fine if you don't want to work with me any more. I'll understand completely." Hermione kept her face averted from the ridicule she knew she would find there.

"Hermione." This time it came out husky, not at all like his normal voice.

Hermione dared to peek at him. What she saw in his face made her gasp.

"Severus, I..."

And she was in his arms. His warm, firm lips were pressed into hers, and he tasted of rich, dark chocolate and something secret and exotic, and he was holding her like he would never let her go, and she was holding him to her like she wanted to be a part of him, and they were both in heaven.

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Big, huge thanks to my beta, Lumiere, and lots of chocolate! For G, my rock, my shoulder to cry on.

Breakthroughs

Chapter 6 of 8

Severus gets a very useful book for Hermione

A long while later found the two comfortably ensconced on the couch, the curtains firmly closed against any further invading rays of sunlight. Both were now dressed warmly in dry robes, Hermione contentedly cuddled in Severus' lap with her face buried in the warm skin of his neck. Severus was absentmindedly playing with one of Hermione's stubborn curls, bringing it up to his nose so he could inhale its scent before allowing it to bounce back into place again.

They had been sitting in a comfortable silence for so long, Severus had begun to think his little vampire had fallen asleep. He jumped slightly when her voice broke the stillness.

"I am sorry for nearly biting you that time. It was not my intention at all. This whole vampire thing just overwhelmed me and..."

Her voice trailed off. This was the first time she had dared to broach the subject with him. They had spent the last few weeks in strained silence, Severus making her potion, and Hermione continuing with her utterly *useless* research.

Severus tipped his head down, trying to look into her eyes, but Hermione stubbornly kept them averted. With a sigh, he gripped her chin, forcing her head upwards and her gaze to meet his.

"You have nothing to apologise for. I must admit I may have taunted you slightly, not to mention my severe lapse in judgment when I knew what... condition you suffer from." He gently caressed her face. "It is I who should apologise to you for nearly attacking you earlier. My actions must have disturbed you enough for you to forget about your routine safety precautions."

"Please, Severus, let us not go there! That has been said and done. No more regrets or recriminations, okay?"

"Agreed."

Hermione leant forward, picking up a book from the huge pile on the coffee table. She flipped through a few pages before growling in frustration and chucking the book over her shoulder.

She glanced up to see Severus smirking at her.

"And just what, may I ask, was that about?"

Hermione growled again. "It is just no use, Severus! These books are utterly useless when it comes to finding a cure. All they contain are 'cures' for how to rid oneself of a vampire, and every single one of them involves the vampire dying. I do not wish to have a wooden stake pierce my heart or any other such gruesome end, unless absolutely necessary. It is all so frustrating. I will never be human again!"

Severus listened to her rant, a tiny line creasing his brow as some memory tugged at the back of his mind.

Severus scooped Hermione off his lap, placing her back on the couch. His mind whirling, Severus began to pace. He just knew he had seen it somewhere. But was it really there? And could he get his hands on it?

Hermione watched Severus pacing with puzzlement. What had she said to make him react like that?

Abruptly, Severus stopped mid-stride and whirled to face her.

"I need to see an old friend. Get some rest. I will be back soon."

Severus leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. Then he was gone, leaving a completely baffled Hermione behind.

~~~~~

"Severus. How delightful of you to drop in. To what do I owe this honour?"

"Good afternoon, Lucius. I do apologise for not visiting you sooner. I have had other... issues to deal with of late."

Lucius led Severus to the decadent living room, poured each of them a generous amount of Firewhisky and settled himself comfortably on the couch

"Ah. Could it be you have finally found a woman, my friend? I remember when Narcissa and I..." Lucius' voice trailed off as he stared into his tumbler.

Severus cleared his throat roughly.

"I do apologise, Severus. Sometimes it all feels like it just happened."

"Still no news then?" Severus inquired.

"No, still nothing. No word, no clues, nothing."

Over a year previously, Narcissa Malfoy had disappeared. No body had been found, and no evidence of foul play had been detected. Still, the Ministry had been

determined to pin her supposed death onto one of the Malfoy males. After Voldemort's fall, evidence had come to light proving both Malfoys had been working for the side of the Light. A public outcry had ensued at the ongoing case against two now beloved war heroes, and the Ministry had been forced to drop all charges.

Narcissa had never been found, and Lucius, convinced she would never leave him voluntarily, had hired the best wizards to find her. So far they had turned up absolutely nothing.

"I am sorry, old friend, it must be difficult."

"Enough of me," Lucius said, waving away his friend's concern. "Tell me more about this distraction of yours."

"It is a little more complicated"

Lucius snorted. "When has it ever not been complicated with you?" he enquired, smirking.

Severus chose to ignore him, drinking from his glass to give himself more time to structure his request.

"If I am correct, you possess a grand collection of books of a very rare and somewhat, shall we say...*delicate* nature?"

Lucius leaned forward in his seat, interest finally sparking in his eyes.

"Before I answer that question, perhaps you should tell me a little more about your latest *project*."

~~~~~

After Severus left, Hermione had attempted to look through another book, but with each page she turned she could feel her irritation level rising. There simply was nothing of use in these pathetic, biased books. It was all on how to destroy a vampire. It seemed that no one had ever bothered to do any proper research into the life and habits of a vampire, not to mention a *cure* for vampirism.

Letting out small a scream of frustration, she had laid her head on her the desk, softly banging her forehead again and again on the wood.

Had Severus left after her outburst because he had realised she would probably be a vampire for the rest of her unnatural life and a danger to every one around her?

Hermione jumped as a book thunked down on the table in front of her. Jerking her head up, she glared into the smirking face of Severus Snape.

The smirk threatened to stretch into a grin as his gaze rose above her eyes. Hermione realised he had noticed what was probably a huge, red mark in the centre of her forehead.

Biting back a groan of embarrassment, Hermione decided to play it cool.

"Oh, hello, Severus," she said breezily.

She could have sworn his lips twitched upwards even more. Ignoring him, she turned to look at the book he had dropped in front of her.

"*Moste Evil Kreatures*." Hermione's brow furrowed with puzzlement. "Where did you find this? It was definitely not in the library. I searched the Restricted Section from top to bottom. It is extremely rare and on the Ministry's banned list."

"It does help sometimes to have friends in low places," Severus replied.

"Who?" Hermione asked. Severus just sat there looking at her expectantly. Then it hit her like a bolt of lightning, leaving her shaken.

"Mr Malfoy?" At Severus' nod, Hermione asked quietly, "But why would he help me? I am nothing but a Mudblood to him."

Severus stared at Hermione intently.

"Is that truly what you believe? Hermione, Lucius may have been that way years before, but please allow for the fact that time and circumstances can change a man. Believe it or not, Lucius holds you in high regard. He has watched you survive situations well beyond what one your age should be able to cope with. He is impressed with you and your brilliant little mind."

Hermione knew he was talking about more than just Lucius' regard for her.

At her glowing look, Severus shrugged and said, "Besides, he owed me one."

Hermione giggled, opening the book eagerly. Severus watched her flipping quickly through the pages for a moment, before moving around the table to his delectable little witch.

He leaned down and firmly grasped her chin, turning her face up to him. He smiled slightly when he noticed her eyes turned to the furthest corner of their sockets so that she could still see the pages of the book.

"Look at me, Hermione."

Hermione shivered at the sensual tone of his voice. Exasperated, she turned her eyes to look at the dark wizard in front of her. What did he want now when she was on the verge of a breakthrough...? *Oh... oh!*

The kiss was hard, quick and over too soon. It was a kiss filled with promise.

"You continue your research, Hermione, while I finish your potion," he said silkily. Suddenly, he whirled around, moving quickly to his alcove to work on her potion.

Hermione shook her head after a moment. Grinning foolishly, she returned her attention to her book, a little confused by this enigmatic man she was falling in love with.

~~~~~

Severus had just healed the little cut on his arm and was about to add the phial of his blood to the potion when he heard an excited squeal and felt a whirlwind hit him, nearly toppling the cauldron.

Hermione threw herself into Severus' arms, peppering his face and neck with little kisses. In her excitement, she hardly noticed that she had nearly destroyed her potion.

With a surge of strength, Severus pushed her back and held her at arms length, smiling slightly at her exuberance.

"Let me guess," he said sardonically. "The book has something that will help?"

Hermione was at a loss for words. She nodded happily while tears started to fill her eyes.

Severus gently wiped the moisture away with his thumbs.

"That is wonderful, Hermione. Let me just finish the potion, then we can discuss your findings."

Hermione nodded again, stepping back further to watch him complete the final step for her potion.

Severus unstopped the phial, pouring the blood into the mixture.

"Are you still using rat blood, Severus?" Hermione enquired.

Severus felt an unusual twinge of guilt as he nodded stiffly. He wondered what made her ask that particular question. He swiftly bottled the potion and set it aside to cool.

When he turned to face her, she still had a contemplative look on her face. He quickly put his arm around her shoulders, guiding her to the book-laden table. It would not do for his witch to catch on now. *Bloody Hell! When had he started thinking of her as his witch?*

Hermione seemed to snap out of her thoughts as she noticed the book lying open on the table. Her previous excitement rose up in her once more.

Eagerly she turned to Severus, grabbing him by the lapels of his coat. She turned excited eyes up to his inquisitive ebony ones.

"Severus, I have to go to Transylvania!"

~~~~~

A/N Special extra thanks to my wonderful betas, Lumiere and Charmed3, especially now when the deadline is looming!!

G, couldn't do it without you.

Revelations

Chapter 7 of 8

Hermione explains her findings to Severus.

"Wait, slow down. The cure is in Transylvania?" Severus asked incredulously.

"Yes! Well, not really a cure, more like a solution. It will be dangerous and difficult. Very difficult. I mean, I never saw... That makes it much harder, of course."

"Hermione!"

Severus' tone broke into her rambling.

"Would you kindly explain your findings in a clear and concise manner?" he snapped irritably.

Hermione drew in a deep breath, calming her excitement to a decent level. She then turned her gaze to Severus and gave him the most radiant smile he had ever seen. It seemed she had truly found a cure for her affliction.

Hermione sat on the couch, beckoning him to join her. Severus placed himself next to the young witch, giving her his full attention.

"Here. It is all in here. This book is very old. Its author decided to actually research creatures the Wizarding World deemed evil and dangerous." She indicated the book with a flick of her fingers. "Unfortunately, there was huge public outcry. The author was banned from England, and most of his books were burned. That is why it is so hard to find a copy."

She lifted shining eyes to his, and Severus knew she was silently thanking him. Secretly pleased, Severus nodded his head irritably and motioned for her to continue.

"There is a whole section on Vampires. It explains why they... we hunt, everything!"

Severus' brow was knitted in confusion. "Does it say in that book you must go to Transylvania?"

"Well, not exactly, no. I mean, there is a colony of Vampires there. Everyone knows that. I still need to figure out who it was before I am able to..."

Severus' exasperated sigh broke into her rambling again.

"Please, Hermione. No more leapfrogging from thought to thought. Start at the beginning and end with us in Transylvania!"

Hermione swallowed a laugh, but refrained from mentioning that it was him who brought it up this time.

"OK, as I explained before, this book covers everything about Vampires. We hunt to receive nutrition. Any animal blood will suffice, but human blood is required for a Vampire to survive in the long run."

Severus stared down at her down-turned head with dawning horror. How long would it take that formidable mind to work it out that she had been drinking human blood? His blood. He decided to play ignorant until he found out more.

"Of course," Hermione continued, "some Vampires do enjoy the hunt for human blood much more than others." Hermione broke off as a tremor of remembrance shuddered through her.

"Swallow, Mudblood whore. Eternal life, eternal darkness, eternal damnation!"

She jumped slightly as Severus' arm curled comfortingly around her waist, pulling her a bit closer.

Straightening her shoulders, Hermione resumed, "So, Vampires hunt for nutritional purposes, but we also need to hunt to sustain eternal life. It seems that when a Vampire

drinks its victim's blood, it is also draining away its life essence. It is this essence that gives us our... immortality, for want of a better word. The more life essence one receives, the more prolonged that Vampire's life expectancy will be. To become a Vampire, the victim must drink the blood of their assailant soon after the attack has taken place."

Hermione raised her tear-filled eyes to her companion's fathomless black ones. "Severus, what this means is that the Vampire that attacked me basically stole my soul. The only way for me to be free again is to track it down and kill it to release my soul."

"So, that is why you need to go to Transylvania," Severus mused. "That is where you were attacked."

He frowned at her sad, little nod.

"What is making you so distressed? This is a major breakthrough."

"That's the problem, Severus. I have found this major breakthrough on the cure for me, but with two huge problems to overcome."

Severus gave her waist a squeeze of encouragement when she fell silent.

Hermione sighed. "I did not see who attacked me. It was so dark, and I was so busy fantasising about castles and *Dracula* that I didn't hear the monster behind me until it grabbed me. I have no way of knowing which Vampire it was. I can't go to Transylvania and kill all the Vampires there until I get the right one. It is impossible, and ridiculous to try, and ... and stupid!"

Hermione's voice had been becoming higher and higher with her anxiety until she ended with a squeak on the last word.

Severus wrapped his right arm tighter around the young witch's waist, bringing his left hand round to gently cup her face and guide her head onto his shoulder, holding her tightly.

"Think about it, Hermione. Did the Vampire say anything to you, anything to give you a clue to their identity?"

"No, no, nothing at all. Although... I do have the feeling the Vampire was female, and that she knew me somehow."

"That's a clue there. Why do you think so?"

"Well, she called me a 'whore.' Generally, only a female would call another woman that. Then she mentioned something about me being Harry's friend."

"There you have it. You only need to search the whole of Transylvania to find a Vampire that is female and possibly knows you."

Hermione's head snapped up, and Severus had to smother a laugh at her horrified expression.

"I am only teasing you. It follows logic that this Vampire came upon you by chance, yes?"

At her hesitant nod, Severus continued. "It therefore also stands to reason that the Vampire was hunting close to her den. She must also have a slightly more intimate knowledge of who you are and what you look like for her to be able to distinguish your identity in the dark."

Severus could see the moment Hermione realised where he was going with his reasoning. Hope sparked in her eyes as she finished his line of thought.

"So, if Vampire was in the mountains hunting, she probably has a den nearby. So, now I go back to the mountains and search for a Vampire I will recognise!"

The light in her eyes died as quickly as it had arrived.

"I suppose it doesn't really matter anyway. There is still the other problem to deal with. And I don't think I will be able to find a solution for this one."

Severus turned to face her fully, lifting her chin so that she had no choice but to meet his eyes.

"Tell me what the problem is," he gently demanded. "Have I not just helped you with your previous insurmountable difficulty?"

"Yes, but this one is much more difficult." Hermione heaved a heavy sigh. "To release my soul, I must completely destroy the Vampire that attacked me. This must be done by driving a stake made from young oak and soaked in my blood through the heart of the Vampire. That's probably the easy part. The problem is that if I want to return my soul to my body, I must have someone who cares enough about me with me in order to anchor my soul to my body. Their blood must soak the stake with mine."

"I don't see that as being a problem. You have plenty of people who care for you."

"Yes. I did. Harry and Ron were like brothers to me. They would have sufficed, but I have not contacted them in months. I let them believe I was dead. How much do you think they will care about me when they find out I was in hiding the whole time? Besides, I will not risk their lives trying to rescue me from a stupid mistake. There is Minerva, but she is too old and busy to go traipsing around the mountainside with me. I will just carry on living this half life I have existed in 'til now."

At this last, defeated little speech, Severus snapped. Standing up to his full height, he towered over her.

"Where is the fiery, little know-it-all who loved to defy me?" he raged. "Where is that excited, young witch who practically knocked me off my chair with the excitement of her discovery? That is the witch I have come to care for, not this down-trodden, defeated and pitiful creature sitting before me."

Severus knelt down in front of the couch. What he was about to say was painful, but he could not bear to see her beaten like this.

"Hermione, can you not see what is in front of you?" Severus took her by the shoulders and shook her gently. "Me. I am here before you. I am not a nice or easy man, but I am yours, if you will have me. I will not let anything happen to you. I am coming with you to Transylvania, and we will save your soul."

Hermione gaped at the man she had come to care so deeply about. She could not believe he would ever feel the same for her.

Squaring her shoulders and setting her jaw, she could feel the excitement building up in her again.

"Thank you, Severus," she said, quite calmly and sedately, before she leapt at him, causing him to lose his balance and topple backwards onto the rug.

Severus chuckled as she sprawled over him, peppering his face with little kisses for a second time. He allowed her to carry on for a minute before he grabbed her head in his hands, stilling her excited movements.

Then he got down to serious business and kissed her properly.

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A/N: Hugs and big sloppy kisses to Lumiere and Charmed3. As always, G, you rock!

So, does any one have an idea who the Vampire is yet?

# Endings

## Chapter 8 of 8

### Severus and Hermione go to Transylvania

*A/N: Although there is a character death warning, it most definitely is not one of the main ones.*

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Severus shivered slightly in the chill dampness. He glanced over at his companion, her features lit by the flickering flames. He was not so sure that this had been the best idea.

The last week of the school term had been spent making plans and arrangements for their trip to Transylvania.

Severus had found a stout, oak sapling deep in the Forbidden Forest. It was still young, but old enough for one of its branches to be shaped into a dangerous weapon. Hermione soaked the wood in the mixture of their blood for two days then placed it under a Stasis Spell to keep the blood fresh. She quickly wrapped it in thick leather and placed it in her bag to avoid any temptation.

Since neither of them knew how long they would be out of the country, Severus brewed a large batch of Hermione's potion, being careful not to let her see him add his own blood. Severus did not want her to weaken again, or worse, succumb to the hunting instincts again.

The night before the end of the school year, Severus and Hermione joined Professor McGonagall in her office and explained the specifics of their mission to her.

"Surely you could wait a little longer?" she had fussed. "I can organise at least one or two Aurors to accompany you, someone who could be trusted with our secret?"

"It is not possible, Minerva," Severus had patiently explained. "If we are to lure the creature out, we cannot do it in a large group; I am sure you can understand the need for us to be able to move quickly and under this disguise. It is the best plan we have."

In the end, Minerva had agreed.

The following evening, after the last student had left the grounds of Hogwarts and the sun had sunk safely behind the horizon, the two had walked down to the gates and Apparated to the mountains of Transylvania.

Their plan was simple.

The vampire that had attacked Hermione was obviously one that found pleasure in the hunt. Since the vampire had called Hermione 'Mudblood,' she believed the vampire might be a Muggle hater, and therefore searched them out as her food source.

Hermione suggested they disguise themselves as Muggles on holiday. Minerva had provided them with the perfect cover. She had found an old tent in the back of the closet where Dumbledore's belongings had been stored. From the outside, it looked like a normal Muggle tent, but the inside was the size of a small flat. It reminded Hermione of the tent she had stayed in with Harry and the Weasleys during the Quidditch World Cup.

At night, they would set up the tent, start a fire and Hermione would cook Severus a meal over the flames. Severus knew they could not use magic, but still refused to do menial tasks 'like a house elf.' Hermione kept quiet, reasoning that she should be grateful he was there with her. After dinner they would sit around the campfire, talking endlessly about any topic

In the morning, Hermione would Apparate by herself to the cave she had woken up in the first morning after her attack, while Severus remained in the tent until the sun was high in the sky, and the chances of the vampire attacking were nonexistent. Severus would then join the young witch in the cave and roll out a Muggle sleeping bag. Together they would sleep through the daylight hours, comfortably wrapped in each other's arms.

This had been the routine every day for a week. Severus was beginning to think their trap was faulty and the vampire would never come.

Severus again glanced at his companion. The glamour charm she had placed on them had rendered them unrecognisable to any one who did not know them. Hermione's long, red hair glinted in the firelight, and her new, blue eyes reflected the dancing flames.

Severus fingered his own new short, curly, blond locks. Severus had been livid when he saw his new hair, but Hermione had insisted on a complete change. She had also made his nose smaller (for which he was grateful, even if it was only temporary), and made his voice slightly higher pitched (for which he was not so grateful); she said his voice was far too distinctive.

Hermione looked up to see Severus fingering his hair with a scowl on his face.

"Careful, Severus or some one will recognise you from that fierce scowl! Besides, your hair will go back to normal once we have removed the glamour."

She laughed when he immediately dropped his hand, and rearranged his features to a blank mask.

"I would have you know, I was not worrying about my hair. I was contemplating our lack of success with our task. So far we have not seen anything of interest."

"I know. I was thinking that if we have no success in the next few days, we should return home and rethink our strategy."

"Excellent suggestion, all this sleeping on the hard ground is doing my back in. What I would not give for a nice..."

"Good evening."

Severus and Hermione jumped. The soft, feminine voice had come from nowhere. Severus peered into the dark beyond the firelight, chills chasing each other up and down his spine. He knew that voice...

A tall, slim figure stepped into the fire glow, its long, blond hair gleaming. Hermione bit back a startled gasp as Narcissa Malfoy extended her hand graciously towards her, as if welcoming her to tea at Malfoy Manor.

"I am so sorry to disturb you," she said, her cold hand clasping Hermione's. "I am also camping nearby and decided to take a walk in the moonlight. Silly me, I forgot where it was we had set up, and I thought this was my campsite."

"My husband will be so worried when he realises I am lost," she continued, when neither of them spoke. "Would it be possible to request your assistance? I am sure you would be able to escort me back to my husband safely." She turned to Severus and let a sad, little smile play on her lips.

Mrs Malfoy played the distressed woman so well. If Hermione had not instantly recognised that voice, she would have been convinced of her pleas.

Severus cleared his throat. "Yes, of course I would be happy to escort you. Forgive me for my previous lack of manners. We were not aware of any other campers. Your appearance came as a bit of a shock."

Hermione finally regained her wits. "Would you like some tea before my friend takes you back? I am sure you must be thirsty from your walk."

Narcissa turned cold eyes to Hermione. "No, thank you. I must get back as soon as possible."

"Fine. Let me get the torch so you can see your way." Hermione turned wide eyed towards Severus. He saw the confirmation of his fears in their depths.

Hermione rushed into the tent, ripped open her bag and pulled out the little phial of Veritaserum she had thought to bring along, as well as the leather package she had shoved to the bottom. She then pulled out her wand and made her way quietly to the tent flap. She only had one chance at this. Her hands were shaking so badly, she was not sure she would be able to aim straight.

"What is taking her so long? I need to get back, now!" Narcissa was clearly getting impatient.

Hermione lifted the flap and peered at the scene outside. Severus was standing where she had left him, while Narcissa had stalked off a few feet to the right, her back towards the fire.

Severus turned his head, looked directly at Hermione and dipped his chin down in the slightest of nods.

It was all the encouragement Hermione needed.

"*Stupefy!*"

A bolt of red light shot from the end of Hermione's wand, hitting the vampire square in the back. Narcissa toppled forward and lay motionless on the ground.

Severus quickly strode forward. Ropes flew from his unsheathed wand, binding the unconscious woman.

Once she was secure, Hermione ran forward, into Severus' waiting arms.

"Oh, Severus! Is it really her? I never realised it would be so terrifying when I saw her again!"

Severus smoothed his hands up and down Hermione's back.

"Unfortunately, we have just discovered what became of the missing Mrs Malfoy. Yes, Hermione, it is her."

At the harshness in his voice, Hermione stepped back so that she could see into his face. It was a mixture of anger and despair.

"Severus, she was one of your friends. I will not begrudge you if you want to leave. I must do something about her though. You saw tonight how she lures unsuspecting Muggles into the dark. I am sure she could not wait to pounce on one of us. She has to be stopped."

"No, Hermione. I will not let you do this alone. Narcissa was never truly a friend of mine. She was more the wife of a good friend. I just wonder how she came to this. Pass me the stake, Hermione, and we will see this done."

"Wait, Severus." Hermione withdrew the glass phial. "Don't you want to know why she left her husband, her son? There must be a reason. Maybe we can save her too."

Severus stared at the tiny phial. After a long pause, he nodded his head once in acquiescence.

Hermione knelt beside the bound woman and poured a few drops into her open mouth. Once she was standing again, Severus flicked his wand and muttered, *Enervate!*

Narcissa's eyes flew open, and she immediately began to struggle against her bonds.

"Who are you?" She screamed. "What do you want? You will pay for this!"

Hermione suddenly realised they were still in their disguises. A few complicated flicks of her wand later, Severus Snape stood towering over their captive.

"Severus! I should have known" she hissed. Her gaze flicked to Hermione. "Ah, the little Mudblood. Are you enjoying my *gift*?"

"Cease!" Severus' voice echoed around the clearing. "Why, Narcissa?"

"Why what, Severus? Why did I infect your filthy little girlfriend? Because I could, and it was fun."

"Why would you leave like you did? You know Lucius loves you. How could you leave your husband and son?"

"My husband!" she spat. "The useless moron. We could have had everything. The Dark Lord would have won if it weren't for the snivelling turncoats like you and my dearest husband."

"But why would you care? All you professed to want was the safety of your family. Why would you care what side Lucius was on, as long as you kept your family and your possessions?"

"Why? *Why*? The Dark Lord was everything. Without him we are nothing. Letting filth and slime like that," she indicated to Hermione with a toss of her head, "into our schools, stealing our secrets. Bella showed me the true way. I went with her to a meeting. The Dark Lord opened my eyes. Then *Lucius* lost his nerve, claimed to see the error of his ways. Worst of all, he corrupted my son too. And now he plays nicely with the Potter brat." Narcissa paused as a sob escaped her.

"I could not stand it any longer. I came here to visit an old cousin of mine, and met some interesting friends of his. I longed for the power they had, and eventually one of them consented to give it to me. Imagine my surprise when I came across a tasty little morsel, just waiting for me in the bushes and one of Potter's friends as well. I knew her fragile little soul could not handle the desire to drink human blood. It was only a matter of time before she wasted away. It was the perfect revenge."

Narcissa turned her head and glared spitefully at Hermione.

"Tell me, Mudblood, how is it you stand here so healthy? Did you finally breakdown and let human blood past those filthy lips?"

Her gaze turned again to Severus. "Ah, but you found yourself a Potions Master. It is still only a matter of time. You need to drink human blood to survive. You have only

delayed the inevitable!

"Enough of your insane prattling! For the first time I can honestly find a family resemblance to your sister."

Narcissa's evil cackle bounced off the trees, raising the hairs on the back of Hermione's neck.

Hermione looked up at the tree tops to the lightening sky. She did not know how she was going to be able to do this.

"If you are going to kill me, do it now, Mudblood. I have nothing more to say to either of you, and I do not wish to prolong this little scene any longer. Do it. Do it now," Narcissa taunted.

Hermione reached into her pocket and pulled out the leather-wrapped package. Slowly, she loosened the bindings, exposing the blood-soaked stake. She removed the Stasis Spell and wrapped her right hand around the base, the pointed end protruding ten inches past her little finger. Looking up into Severus' blank face, Hermione once again knelt beside the bound woman. Narcissa's face was turned away from Hermione, her eyes closed. She looked like she was sleeping, or dead.

Hermione positioned the stake above the woman's heart. She raised her arm slightly, ready to plunge the weapon down, and stopped.

"I can't do it." Despair made Hermione's voice rough. "I just cannot do it."

Suddenly a warm hand wrapped around her cold one.

"But I can, Hermione. For Draco, for Lucius, but mostly, I can do this for you."

The first rays of sunlight bathed the ground around them as the stake plunged downwards.

Hermione let out a scream of agony before the darkness claimed her.

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Sick. Oh, how she felt sick. Slowly, Hermione opened her eyes, but shut them immediately as the pain shot through her head. She was lying on something rather uncomfortable, somewhere rather draughty and she was getting cold. How very strange. Suddenly, everything came back. Severus, Narcissa... Her death.

But she wasn't dead. Forcing her eyes open, Hermione made herself look around. She was lying in a cave.

Hermione sat up carefully, her foot brushing something soft. She closed her eyes. Was she reliving a nightmare? A rat. It must be a rat. It would be a freshly killed rat to tempt her. The thought made her feel ill.

"Welcome back."

The warm voice echoing off the cavern walls made Hermione jump. Her eyes snapped open and settled on the dark figure of Severus Snape, sitting at her feet and watching her very intently.

Hermione took a deep shuddering breath... Wait, she took a breath! She was breathing! She took another breath, and another. She then put her hand to her face. It was warm. Placing her other hand on her thigh, she gave it a good, hard pinch.

"Ouch!" she yelped.

Severus, who had been watching her inspection with growing amusement, let out a smothered laugh at this last declaration of her returned humanity.

Hermione glared at him, sniffed in annoyance (because she could), then leapt into Severus' arms. Tears of joy and relief slid unheeded down her cheeks as they held on to each other.

"Oh Merlin, Severus. We did it. We actually did it!"

Severus held his living, breathing, rambling witch close to him.

A long while later Hermione sat back and looked into Severus' face.

"Narcissa. Where is she now?"

"There was nothing left but a pile of ashes," Severus replied.

"What will you tell Lucius?"

"I don't know yet. It may be kinder for her to just remain missing."

Hermione nodded in agreement. With deep sigh, she rested her head on his chest. Severus was content just to hold her.

After a while, her soft voice floated up to his ears.

"I know what you did, Severus."

At his puzzled silence, she continued, "With the potion. I know you added your own blood." Hermione felt him stiffen.

"I realised it after I read that book the first time. It stated that a vampire cannot live without human blood. Yet my health had somehow improved with just rat blood. At first I was upset that you did it behind my back. I thought you could have at least told me. Then I realised how stubborn I could be, and that I had vowed never to drink human blood. I know you only did it to help me. I think I love you even more for that."

Hermione felt him pull away slightly. She sat back and looked into his blank face again.

"You do realise what you have done though? When a vampire ingests blood, it is also ingesting the victim's soul. By giving me your blood, you also gave me part of your soul. Not a huge piece, or enough to damage yours, but we are connected now. You are connected to me for the rest of your life Severus Snape, and don't you dare think you can get rid of me easily!"

Severus stared at the witch in his arms. Slowly, the ice inside him began to melt. His stoic mask crumpled into lines of relief.

Severus' arms tightened around Hermione with such force that she felt the air leave her lungs yet again. She didn't mind. There was safety there, and she knew she would find love and comfort in those arms.

Much later, hand in hand, Severus and Hermione left the cave. For the first time in months, Hermione lifted her face to the caressing rays of the sun.

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He was walking on a tightrope. Just as he gained his balance, the rope would sway, threatening to topple him down into the dark chasm yawning below him. He took one staggering step forward, then another. The line seemed to steady, allowing him to breathe easier. There was a figure on the other side, beckoning him closer. As he took another halting step forward, wiping the sweat from his eyes, the figure suddenly became clear. Albus was there. He was right there. He was holding the rope securely, promising him safety and protection if he could just make it across. A bright, intense red light seemed to fill the darkness gaping below him. Albus disappeared, vanished, gone, taking the safety with him. The cord sagged. He was falling, falling... evil red eyes appearing behind the light, penetrating him, leaving him naked, as high, cruel laughter reverberated around his skull... Suddenly, the cord tightened. He looked up to where Albus had been, but it was someone else holding the cord. He blinked again, trying to clear the buzzing in his brain, to see his rescuer.

"Come to me, Severus."

"Yes."

Severus shook his head, clearing his vision. It was Hermione holding the rope. She was promising him the safety he sought. With more confidence, Severus took another step across the rope. With each movement the rope became steadier. The red eyes receded and as Severus stepped onto the safe ground of the other side, they disappeared completely. Severus strode forward into Hermione's embrace.

"I am here with you, Severus. You are safe and I will never let you go..."

Severus woke suddenly, a sense of peace enveloping him. Quietly Severus leaned up on his elbow to look at the witch sleeping beside him, a shaft of sunlight playing across her body. She looked so peaceful and content.

A strange, foreign feeling crept through him. It was almost as if... But it couldn't be. Yes, yes it was.

Severus was happy.

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A/N: Extra special hugs, sloppy kisses and chocolate to my fabulous betas, Lumiere and Charmed3. Ladies, I would never have finished this without your help and support.

G, as always, you are the best.

Thanks as well to everyone who has reviewed. Your support has been fantastic.

OK, now, GO VOTE!