

# In Dreams

*by shefa*

Her dreams have haunted her for years. What will change when she finally remembers them?

Winner, Best Hurt/Comfort and Judge's Choice H/C in The New Library Awards.

## Prologue

*Chapter 1 of 8*

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Thanks to AnnieTalbot, Potions Mistress, and Ariadne for encouragement, guidance and wicked beta reading. This story was written for the Winter SS/HG Exchange.

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### Prologue

She dreamed of him again. The early morning light, filtered by the last fog of midwinter's dawn, lay like a shroud on her bed. Hermione shook her head as if trying to dislodge the mist from her thoughts and tried to catch hold of the last tendrils of her dream.

A flash of white skin and dark eyes. And a voice, there was something that the voice was saying that she should remember. Why couldn't she remember? Above all, it was the sense that there was something important that she had forgotten when she woke that she found most disturbing. And with that, it occurred to her that she woke each morning with the tendrils of this dream, no, not this dream, but one like it, surely, haunting her thoughts and leaving her gasping for breath.

She shook her head again and rolled her eyes. What was she thinking, imagining that she was having dreams that meant something, dreams of a man telling her something that she should remember? She was letting her imagination run away with her. Again. Or at least that's what her friends would say, were she to tell them that she thought that her nighttime wanderings meant anything at all. She could hardly help it, really, this longing to follow that voice, and her dreams, against all reason. Her friends wouldn't really understand. They would remind her that she was supposed to be logical, sensible – the one they could turn to for clear vision. She sighed sadly, shaking her head again. So why, then, was the image of dark eyes still imprinted on her mind's eye, despite her efforts to banish it?

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The voice was yelling at her. She felt herself turning towards the sound, flinching, but moving forward without hesitation. *I've always been a glutton for punishment.* The mists were icy cold on her skin, and she moved quickly, scanning her surroundings as she walked towards the anger.

"Get away." Deep and resonant, the voice had teeth.

She stopped, confused by her inability to find the sharp voice. At his rejection, finding him – the man whose voice called to her even as he sent her away – felt imperative, but impossible.

"Where are you?" she called out. "I can't find you!"

"Have you no sense, girl? I said, go away. Get away from me. As I've been telling you every night for... far too long. Just. Go. Away."

That voice, she knew that voice. And with one last turn past a tree whose bare branches reached low enough to brush the dusty ground, she saw him. Her body flooded with heat – how could she have not realised who she had been dreaming of for years? Flushed, wondering why – why him? What could possibly have possessed her to Conjure the image of Severus Snape each night to haunt her dreams?

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He looked much as she remembered him. A study of shadow and light, dark hair falling around his face, skin so white that it was almost translucent. Piercing black eyes captured hers and held them fast.

She held her breath.

"Why are you here? Why, *why* do you keep coming back?"

*As if I have any choice in the matter. Where are we, anyway?* She stared at him, frozen.

"Leave me," he said, his voice rough from disuse and, perhaps, some emotion that she could not identify.

"*You're in my dream, why must I leave you?*" Hermione retorted, flustered.

"Stupid girl. This is no dream," Snape sneered, then turned away.

*No dream? Then....* "What is this place? Why are *you* here?" Her voice was small, a shrill note seeping in around the edges.

He was silent, back stiff, looking as if he was barely alive.

Then, in barely a whisper, "I don't know for certain."

"Pardon?"

"I don't know." He glared at her. "I should, by all rights, be dead and in hell somewhere. And instead, I find myself waking time and time again... and each time I open my eyes, I am in this... this place. And you are here.... Every time. If you just stopped coming... left me... then maybe I would...."

"Would what?" she retorted, shocked. "Go to hell? If you're not dead, and this isn't a dream, what is this place and how did you...?" She stopped short and breathed deeply, "Sir... Professor Snape, sir. I have no explanation for why I am here, but I am most certainly not here to bother you... or to cause you pain."

Though she could hardly believe that a form that still could be animate, she saw him take a slow breath.

"Please... just leave me. Leave me alone.... I am finished.... I was to die, was prepared to die.... This is unbearable...." And with that, he faded from sight.

Hermione woke abruptly.

And this time, she remembered.

# Chapter 1

*Chapter 2 of 8*

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*Hermione woke abruptly.*

*And this time, she remembered.*

Remembering was not the relief that Hermione might have expected. In fact, she was shaken to discover that the memory of a defeated and exhausted Severus Snape strode to the front of her mind with alarming frequency. Despite her efforts to relegate her dream to the *annals of things that go bump in the night*, Hermione could not shake the feeling that her conversation with Severus Snape actually had occurred in a location outside her own dreams.

Laughing to herself, Hermione realised that contemplating conversations inside her head, or imaginary ones outside her head, would be enough to concern her if she were hearing such a story from one of her patients. After the Voldemort Wars, there had been more demand than ever for Healers who could help the devastated survivors of war. Hermione, who had seen more than enough trauma firsthand, liked the idea of becoming a Healer of broken lives and was among the first batch of trainees that St Mungo's accepted after Voldemort's defeat.

Six years of schooling and practical experience left Hermione with a healthy appreciation for human resilience but with a deep sadness borne of hearing tale after tale of helplessness, loss and trauma. *People endure so much pain, survive so much suffering*. Which brought her back to Snape. She shook her head. Well, Snape was dead. Her dreams notwithstanding, Snape had died before her eyes, bled out from the vicious bite of Voldemort's familiar, Nagini. She shook her head. *Somebody else must have retrieved his body before we returned to bury him*. It had bothered her for years that they had never recovered his body, and she told herself that one of his compatriots must have discovered him and, she hoped, given him a proper burial. But this fantasy gave her little peace of mind, especially this morning.

*I would feel better if I knew for sure that he had a proper burial, not to mention a hero's funeral*She nodded to herself with a deep sigh and opened the patient file in front of her, pushing thoughts of Snape and funerals and an exhausted, haunted-looking wizard from her mind.

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The haunted-looking wizard was glaring at her through the swirling mist. *As if I had any alternative to being here*,she thought bitterly. *I can certainly think of people I'd rather see during my nighttime wanderings.* He looked just as he had the previous night. Dark eyes flashing, sneer in place, and the movement of his black robes in the slight breeze a counterpoint to the whiteness of the mist. *Why, why am I dreaming of Snape?*

Echoing her thoughts, his sharp voice cut through her reverie. "I thought I told you to stay away, girl."

"It would appear," said Hermione, "that I have no choice in the matter."

He looked at her for a long moment and turned away again.

Hermione gritted her teeth. *Just like one of those prickly adolescents who won't let anybody get close to them, no matter how hurt or afraid they feel.* Ah. She smiled to herself.

"I don't know about you, but I, for one, would like to understand what's going on here. From what you've said, you've been here a while," she looked around again at the desolate surroundings, "and being alone in this doesn't appear to have done you much good."

Eyes narrowed, he shot her a look of contempt. "This," he gestured, "does not appear to be of my own making." He looked at her meaningfully. "In fact, if I had to hazard a guess, I would say that this... place... exists inside of *you*, Miss Granger." He clicked his tongue in a disapproving gesture. "Rather bleak, wouldn't you say?"

Heat flooded her, at that. *He couldn't know how depressed I've been, how lonely. It's impossible. He's just flinging arrows, trying to deflect my efforts to engage him.* "You used to be better at that," she said sharply and was rewarded by the flare of his nostrils and a sharp glare.

"I've been a bit out of practice." He turned again to gaze out into the distance.

She looked at him for a long moment, desperate to find a way past his hostile withdrawal. "I expect that it will take our combined efforts to figure out what is going on... and to fix it."

He scoffed, "That's always been the trouble with you, Miss Granger your absolute certainty that you can fix anything you choose. *This is irretrievably broken.*" He looked at her menacingly. "And I've seen quite enough of you already."

Struggling to control the angry flush that flooded her, she held his gaze until she was calm enough to speak. "At the moment, Professor," she said softly, "I appear to be all you've got."

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Hermione woke with a pounding headache. Sitting up, she groaned softly, cradling her face in her hands. *What is going on here? What could he mean by saying that place is inside of me? Oh, for Merlin's sake, this is just a bizarre dream brought on by too many hours at work and too little... too little time with people I care about.* She shook her head and immediately regretted it as the pounding intensified. It was only when she felt the cool dampness brushing her hands that she realised she was crying.

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From the time she was a child, the library had been Hermione's refuge. She couldn't remember ever being taught that comfort and pleasure could be found in the smell of leather bindings, the faded presence of old ink, the feel of ancient paper.... She'd just always known.

And so, when Hermione was depressed, or lonely, or afraid, she went looking for something to read. Sometimes, it would be a novel something to distract her. But more often than not, she looked for solutions to what troubled her in the heart of the library. *You would think that learning to be a therapist would have cured me of that by now. There's nothing like listening to people's suffering and struggling to help them find their way out of the dark to realise what cannot be found in books.* She turned back to her reading. *But still, it's not a bad beginning...*

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St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries had a library to rival that of Hogwarts. Though it was her day off, Hermione made her way to the hospital and quickly lost herself in the stacks. *I must be insane. I've been having strange dreams, that's all. I'm just looking for information on dreams, not on the type of magic that could allow me to create a space that could hold someone else's... I don't know, someone else's soul... inside of my own.*

But despite her best efforts to convince herself, Hermione found herself drifting away from the tomes on dream interpretation. Instead, after wandering aimlessly amongst the stacks for a while, Hermione looked up to find herself face to face with the Restricted Section of the library.

St Mungo's had an extensive collection of books on the Dark Arts, and while Hermione did not work on the wards where the victims of Dark spells recovered, she did have a reasonable familiarity with the collection. *Souls, where else would I go to learn about souls?*She shrugged, surrendering. Surrounded by piles of books and in her element again, Hermione bent her head contentedly to her research.

Three hours later, Hermione was not so content. For all her reading about souls, she was no further in her effort to discover how one soul could contain another. *That's because there is no such magic and you've just been having really bad dreams,* she chided herself. *But why am I dreaming about Snape? And why didn't he appear the way I remember him? He looked so sad, defeated. He was always such a bully, never showed weakness. What would make me dream about a sad and defeated Snape?* She shook her head impatiently. *And why is that making me cry?*As Hermione lifted her head, brushing the tears from her eyes, she could have sworn that she saw a glimpse of Severus Snape in a chair in the corner of the library. When she blinked, he was gone.

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"How did you get into the library yesterday?"

He looked up impatiently from the book he was reading. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Wait a minute!" she looked around at the chairs and stacks of books that had not been there the night before. "Where did all of this come from?"

"I told you. This place is inside of you, Miss Granger. Apparently, your world is filled not only with damp mists and dust, but also with... books." He smirked and returned to his reading.

"Oh, you're one to talk. I expect that your relationship with books is no different from mine." *Especially if you've been as lonely as I think you are... as lonely as I have been.* She turned to face him.

"So, what have you found?"

"Found?" He didn't lift his eyes.

"I spent the day researching dreams. Well, I started off with dreams and then moved on to souls. I expect that, if what you say is true, that most of what appears here would be books I've read ..."

He interrupted her. "Perhaps," he gestured at the rows of books, "but perhaps not books you've read in their entirety, Miss Granger. Maybe just books you've touched or read in part."

She nodded. Prolific reader though she was, even she didn't believe that she had read each and every book on those shelves, cover to cover. She didn't think so, anyway.

"Well, that's a help then, isn't it?" she said briskly, walking to the table and settling herself in the chair opposite his.

"What have you found?" she repeated.

He shrugged. "Not much, actually. There is very little to go on here. I am assuming that you did something to prevent my soul from moving on after..." he shuddered, "... after I was bitten."

*When he was bitten.* Turning her head, distracted by the memory, she gazed at the bookshelves, images from that day flooding her. Moments passed, the silence and threads of memory between them weaving a gossamer web with both of them caught in its strands.

"I was horrified." She was speaking so softly it was almost a whisper. "The look on your face, the sound of your voice.... I couldn't... do anything." She glanced up and found herself captured by his gaze. "Your memories started pouring out of you and Harry needed a container, so I Conjured one for him... for you." Tears were streaming down her cheeks, unchecked. "I wanted to wrap something around you. I wanted to stop the bleeding." She looked at him in amazement. "I had forgotten... I forgot that I wanted to wrap you up and whisk you away to somewhere safe." She paused. "It makes no sense, it all happened so fast, and for all I knew, you were a loathsome Death Eater who had tortured.... Oh." She stopped, shocked at her own thoughts.

"I was a loathsome Death Eater, Miss Granger," he said, bitterly.

She turned to face him more fully, though she sounded as if she were talking to herself. "I must have realised, even though I don't remember really *thinking* about it. We were so busy finding Horcruxes... scared all of the time."

"What are you nattering on about?"

"It was all so overwhelming.... We were moving from place to place every day and worried all the time. We got snippets of information about what was happening in the wizarding world and at Hogwarts, but who had time to think? I had to keep Harry safe, and keep Ron from losing it completely." She paused. "We knew that the Carrows were torturing students, and Harry and Ron kept acting as if you were, too. But you weren't, were you? You *tortured* them by sending them to Hagrid." She smiled bleakly. "You were protecting them, even then. Just as you protected us." She looked up at him. "Harry told us... after... what he saw in your memories. *Now* I know what your life must have been like, but when Nagini bit you.... I didn't realise consciously what part of me must have known, even then." She stopped and took a deep breath.

"What did you do, Miss Granger? What did you do when you Conjured that container?" Snape's voice was low, the gravity of his question reverberating in its deep tones.

She looked him in the eye, still shocked at her own realisation. "I think I Conjured a container for more than your memories, sir. I think I must have Conjured some sort of container... for you."

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The idea that she had created a container of sorts for Snape's soul brought little solace to Hermione. Instead of worrying about why she was dreaming about her former Potions master, she worried about what had led her to create a connection between the two of them that resulted in his being trapped between life and death. It unnerved her that such a link could have been formed without her conscious consent, but then she had enough experience to know how much went on beneath the surface of any mind, especially one as active and intense as her own. *It's not as if I've had nearly the opportunity that I needed to explore my own psyche* she thought one morning after a particularly difficult research session with Snape. *The Healers-in-training supported one another, but the need was so great for us to focus on survivors after the war that we just ploughed on ahead regardless of how we were feeling.*

The years since the war's end had been a whirlwind for Hermione. No longer a child in any sense, she could not imagine returning to Hogwarts for a final year. Instead, she revised and sat for N.E.W.T.s over the summer and entered St Mungo's new training program for Emotional Healing. The human psyche fascinated Hermione, and the opportunity to heal the wounds caused by evil and ignorance appealed to her. Over the years, her focus on work and her development as a Healer had preoccupied and distracted her. Personal relationships had taken a back seat to her career, and her relationship with Ron had ultimately ended as a result. *He couldn't handle me focussed on something that he didn't enjoy, that he couldn't understand*, she remembered. *And I just didn't feel... enough.... He's sweet, but it just wasn't right for me. Not that I have any idea who or what would be right for me.*

Which brought her right back to her nighttime companion. It had become clear to her soon after beginning to remember her dream encounters that she had been frequenting Snape's shadow-space every night for years. *He said that I never really spoke to him, just appeared and listened to him tell me to leave him alone, and then disappeared. I wonder why I started remembering now... I wonder why I kept coming back....*

Each night found Hermione appearing in the rapidly changing space that Snape occupied. The desolate space of dust and mist quickly made way for a small cottage, primarily filled with books.

And so, they cautiously approached each other, too wary to relax and too lonely to disengage.

"There must be something we're missing," she complained one night, some weeks after her first recollection. "It's obviously not a spell that's commonly used, or else people would be using it to rescue dying loved ones every day. And it's not something that appears in any of the literature on souls, so it must have to do with something else." She pursed her lips, thinking.

"Can you remember exactly what you did and what you were feeling when you Conjured that container, Miss Granger?"

She glanced up at him. "Would you call me Hermione, please? Hasn't it been long enough that we can drop the formality?"

He paused for a long while, not answering.

She looked up after a moment, curious. "What is it?"

"You are not uncomfortable with me," he said, softly.

"No, I guess not," she mused. "Why would I be?"

"Why would you not be...? I was your teacher and not a well-liked one at that ..."

She interrupted him, "For all that you were unfair and went out of your way to be unkind, I always stood up for you and demanded that the boys respect you. I did." She paused. "Now, with the perspective of the whole story, plus years to grow up, I have much more empathy for you and for what you must have had to endure for all of those years."

"I am not interested in your pity, Miss Granger," he said stiffly.

"Can't you tell the difference between pity and empathy, Professor?" asked Hermione, startled by his shift in tone.

"I wouldn't know, Miss Granger."

"Everybody should have the experience of knowing that somebody else understands what it's like to be them, to see the world through their eyes, even if just for a moment," murmured Hermione, leaning towards him, trying to keep her voice steady.

"I don't want a therapist, Miss Granger," said Snape sharply.

"Nor do I want to be your therapist, Professor." She spoke quietly, her heart in her throat. "Empathy is not only for therapists, it is essential for all people. Otherwise, how do you know that you're not alone?"

"I am always, inevitably, alone, Miss Granger." And he swept from the room, leaving her shaking, eyes blurry with tears.

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Talking with Snape about empathy set Hermione's thoughts spinning. *Maybe that's the angle we've been missing,* she thought. *Maybe it's not only about the souls, but about the connection between them. Not just containers, but connectors. I did something when I Conjured that container that held him but also connected him to me... and me to him.* She got up quickly from her chair and left for St Mungo's.

This time, not to the library.

## Chapter 2

*Chapter 3 of 8*

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*I did something when I Conjured that container that held him but also connected him to me... and me to him.*

*She got up quickly from her chair and left for St Mungo's.*

*This time, not to the library.*

Healer Shalva had been Hermione's supervisor since the beginning of her training, providing guidance in her work with patients and also gentle advice for Hermione herself. She was a soft-spoken woman who had the talent of a born empath and whose experience gave her an aura of wisdom and strength. Wisdom and strength seemed like helpful qualities for the discussion that Hermione planned to have with her today.

"How have you been, Hermione?" asked the Healer with a warm smile. She beckoned Hermione to enter her comfortable office. "Tea?"

"Yes, please, that would be wonderful," replied Hermione, grateful for something to do with her hands.

"Things have been... interesting of late," began Hermione haltingly. "I think that you knew during my training that I never slept well. I told you that, right?" She looked up, enquiring.

"I do remember that. We had great difficulty figuring out what was causing the disturbance, other than the obvious stresses of training and working with so many traumatised witches and wizards." She paused. "Has it resolved now that you are finished with your training?"

"It hasn't, not exactly," replied Hermione. She took a deep breath. "I've come to realise that the distressing dreams that I could never remember... well... I think that they're not dreams, exactly." Looking up at Healer Shalva, Hermione waited for her to nod before continuing. "A few months ago, I began to remember the... um, I thought they were dreams at first... but now... I don't think they are. Dreams, that is." Hermione stopped, flustered.

"Take a deep breath, dear. What do you mean, not dreams?" Healer Shalva asked softly.

"I've been dreaming about... someone. Someone I used to know. And, well, I thought he was dead; I was there when he died... I mean, maybe he's dead, but I'm not sure anymore because of some things that he said and some other things that I remembered." She stopped short. "I'm not making any sense at all, am I?" She gave a wry smile.

"Not much, no," said Healer Shalva gently, a small smile on her lips. "Slow down and start again. What gives you the idea that what you thought were dreams are something else? And if they are not dreams... then, what are they?"

Hermione opened her hands and sighed. "What he said... the man in my dream. He said that he believes I did something to prevent his soul from moving on after he... died. Or didn't die, or whatever," she tried to explain. "He said that the place he inhabits and the place that I am apparently visiting in my dreams is inside of me. Or something..." she finished, mumbling the last, embarrassed at how ridiculous this sounded.

But Healer Shalva was not looking as if she thought that Hermione was ridiculous. She had a faraway look on her face and took a deep breath. "You mean to say that this man in your dreams... this man that you speak to while you sleep. He believes that your souls have been connected, and his now resides within yours?" she asked softly.

Hermione nodded.

Another long pause, and then she began haltingly. "I've never seen a case personally... I always believed that the stories were just... stories." After another long moment,

she appeared to make a decision, continuing with more certainty in her voice. "Are you familiar with the *Amplector Animum* spell, Hermione?"

Hermione shook her head.

"Actually, it's not a spell, per se. It's wandless magic, usually performed without intent by witches or wizards who are in an emotionally overwhelming situation." She paused, taking note of Hermione's white face and dilated pupils. "*Amplector Animum* is a spell that... enfolds one soul within another. It is not something that one can perform against the will of another it requires that two souls be... reaching out... simultaneously."

Hermione's face was mask-like, white and still. She was barely breathing, her eyes gazing intently at her mentor.

The Healer continued, "Usually, the primary soul is reaching out either with love, compassion, or empathy to the other. The other soul must be receptive, must even be reaching out in turn. The receptive soul is usually endangered in some way, which is how the spell determines which spirit enfolds the other."

At this, Hermione's eyes darted to meet those of the Healer. "He had to have been reaching out at the same time that I was?" she asked, barely above a whisper.

The Healer nodded. "He must have been."

"And I... I was reaching out... to him... with..."

"With a strong feeling, Hermione. Parents have enfolded the souls of their children, husbands, their wives. It's rare, but it happens. Usually, it's love, but it doesn't have to be. Deep empathy, a strong enough wish to provide protection or connection is enough. I believe that the reason that it doesn't happen more often is that the other soul must be reaching out at the same time; the timing must be just right."

Hermione blinked, and the Healer continued, "Do you remember what you were doing when... well, when he was dying?"

*Snape asked me the same question last night, right before our argument about calling me by name, and about empathy... Oh, God.*

"I was Conjuring a container, a real container... for... for something that he was giving to... well, for something important. I didn't remember until recently, but I had the strongest urge to wrap him up and whisk him away... to be safe." Her voice broke.

"What do you think made you feel so strongly about this man, so much so that you longed to bring him to safety?" asked Healer Shalva gently.

"I'm not sure." Hermione looked up, brow wrinkled. "He is not someone I ever really liked, not someone who was ever kind...." She flinched. "He was someone who I knew, at some level... I knew that he had sacrificed himself for us... to protect us from the evil out there... no matter how loathsome he appeared. I didn't realise then that I knew this, only that his pain and fear stirred me in a way that didn't make sense at the time. But I had no time to think about it then, and no reason to think about it after."

Healer Shalva nodded. "Your capacity for empathy has always been higher than average, Hermione, and with an untrained empathic ability, the fear and sadness that you felt yourself and felt from him must have activated the unconscious magic."

Hermione nodded, lost in thought. "What does it mean," she murmured, "what does this mean about whether he is actually alive... or dead? We never found his body... We came back later to look..." she continued. "In the cases that you know, what happens to the soul who is dying when someone reaches out to... hold it?" Her brow wrinkled as another thought occurred to her. "Am I responsible now for the state of his soul?" she whispered. "I... what do I do now?" She looked up beseechingly at the Healer.

But the Healer had risen and was perusing the bookshelves, obviously looking for a specific volume. "Here it is," she said, removing a small book, which was bound in amber coloured silk. "Take this, Hermione, take this and read it, but mostly, let what you read wash over you and see how you feel about it. Follow its lead and I think that it will help you to answer your own questions."

Hermione accepted the book, holding it in her hands reverently. *Adfinitas Animarum*. "Will this book tell me what to do next?" she asked hopefully.

Healer Shalva laughed softly. "There are few worthwhile books in the world, Hermione, that will tell you exactly what to do. Spellbooks will, yes, but only because they are teaching you mechanics. The process of figuring out what to do happens inside of you and between you and the person with whom you must figure it out."

"I don't understand..." whispered Hermione.

"I know," said the Healer. "When you do, your path will become clear."

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"Does it make any more sense to you than it does to me?" Hermione asked Snape when she appeared, once again, in the cottage.

He was sitting on a chair near the fire, perched there as if the chair had offended him by having soft edges and welcoming pillows. He held the amber book, turning it over and over in his hands. He glanced at her and made a soft huffing sound, turning away to gaze at the leaping flames in the hearth. He shook his head.

*Adfinitas Animarum*. Hermione sat in a chair opposite his. *He can't be any more pleased at the thought of having to immerse himself in a book about "soul affinity" than I am*, she thought unhappily. *I still really don't understand what an affinity of souls has to do with our situation. He said it himself, he has always been, and always expects to be... alone. And I all I meant to do was Conjure a container.* She took a deep breath and waited, steeling herself for the discussion to come.

Snape was still gazing into the fireplace, his shoulders stiff, arms folded across his chest. "Miss Granger," he began abruptly, "I find myself in a bit of a quandary." He turned slightly to face her. "I have operated in isolation or nearly in isolation for... many years." Hermione nodded and he continued. "My success, indeed, my life depended on my ability to operate without... depending... on anyone else. For anything." He paused, thinking for a moment before continuing. "I lived alone and fully expected to die alone. But I found... in the moment of death, that I wanted someone to know that I was not entirely the man everyone believed me to be. I realised," he snorted softly, "that dying alone was not all that I had imagined it to be."

Hermione sat, transfixed, and he continued, "And now... now I find myself in between life and death, not entirely sure how I got here, nor what to do with myself now that I am here. And then there is you, Miss Granger. It appears that you come with the landscape or create the landscape," he laughed roughly. "Just as I am left with the knowledge that it matters to me more than I care to admit that I am not remembered as... what was it? 'A loathsome Death Eater'... I am also left with a... reluctant awareness that you, perhaps, are not as you appeared to me during my years as your instructor."

Stunned both by Snape's sudden verbosity and by his unexpected display of introspection, Hermione was speechless. *He's right, though. We can't help but look at each other differently, or at least wonder whether there is more here than meets the eye. Especially now that we have a clue what happened here, we should take time to get to know one another. And if I do bear any responsibility at all for his soul, having reached for him like I did, I must give him this chance to move forward.*

Hermione took a deep breath, choosing her words carefully. "Whatever happened in the Shrieking Shack was something that we both did, that is clear from what I learned yesterday." She paused, braced for him to attack. When he merely inclined his head for her to carry on, she paused long enough for her racing heart to slow again, and continued, "And if this book is any indication, the collision of the magic that we generated because of how intensely each of us was feeling created a link between us one that also created this space." She looked around at the library with its roaring fire, stacks of books and comfortable chairs. "Fortunately, it's a space that works for both of us." She quirked her eyebrow at him, a small smile on her lips. He replied with a twitch of his lips and appreciative tilt of his head.

"Now," she continued, "I believe that we should take some time to get to know one another this time putting aside our preconceived notions and expectations." She

gestured to the book that Snape was still holding gently in his hands. "Perhaps if we read this book together, and do as Healer Shalva suggested and let the contents sit with us and guide us, we will understand how to move forward." She paused, head inclined, waiting for his response.

Snape sat for a long moment, looking at the book cradled in his hands. Long fingers stroked the silk binding, their rhythm matching his slow breaths. Hermione gazed at those fingers, hypnotised by their motion and grace. His hands were strong, the tendons standing out sharply with his movement. *His hands betray his feelings*, thought Hermione. Had she not been watching him so closely, she might have missed his silent nod of agreement. And as she watched, the stiffness in his shoulders gradually eased, and he shifted back into his chair, looking for a moment as if he might relax.

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Reading the *Adfinitas Animarum* together was far less difficult than Hermione had feared. Despite Snape's aloof stance, he was willing to relate to her, and relax, so long as they could focus on ink and parchment.

And so, guardedly at first, they circled one another. First negotiating physical distance who will sit on the couch and who on the chair nearby and then gradually developing a routine. *I love listening to him read to me*, thought Hermione sleepily one evening as Snape recited aloud from the amber tome. *His voice caresses the words, it sounds like velvet*. She sighed contentedly as he continued to read. They usually read in turns, though Hermione often prevailed upon Severus (as she had taken to calling him in the privacy of her own thoughts) to read aloud even when it was her turn.

*Adfinitas Animarum* was quite an unusual book, even amongst magical volumes. Small in size, its weathered parchment and faded ink contained both the humdrum and the sacred. Each chapter held a surprise, every page a gem. Sometimes, they would open the book to find scenic images or visions of classical art pouring from between the pages. Other times, diagrammes or detailed instructions would appear, guiding them in everything from gardening to sculpting. Poetry and lyric music enveloped them many nights as they sat together, reading and listening. And talking.

*He's a surprising man*, Hermione thought many times as they allowed themselves to become engrossed in debate or discussion or to enjoy the easy camaraderie that was growing between them as they worked on some task set by the book. *There is certainly more to him than meets the eye. I can only imagine how difficult life must have been for him all those years, able to show such a small part of himself to others... hiding for so long...*

One night, several weeks after beginning their journey through the book, Hermione arrived to find Snape reclining by the fire, eyes closed. The *Adfinitas Animarum* lay open on his lap; his hands were softly stroking the edge of the binding as evocative music streamed from the pages. *This song must be meant for him, then*.

Like a bird on the wire,

like a drunk in a midnight choir

I have tried in my way to be free...

She did not dare approach as the melancholy melody and snippets of the poetry that accompanied it enveloped her.

If I, if I have been unkind,

I hope that you can just let it go by...

Like a baby, stillborn,

like a beast with his horn

I have torn everyone who reached out for me.

Hermione stood, transfixed, as she watched the deep lines around his eyes gradually relax, his breathing deepen.

I saw a beggar leaning on his wooden crutch,

he said to me, "You must not ask for so much."

And a pretty woman leaning in her darkened door,

she cried to me, "Hey, why not ask for more?"

As the last strains of the song played, Snape turned his head and gazed directly at Hermione his expression serene. *I've never seen him look so... hopeful*. She smiled at him softly and slowly approached him.

"It's a beautiful song," she said gently.

He nodded, a flash of wariness passed over his face. Satisfied that she was not mocking, he nodded again and gestured for her to sit. Settling herself on the chair across from his, she smiled at him again and waited. Long moments passed, both of them sitting in contemplative silence. Hermione noticed the look of deep concentration on Snape's face and wondered where his reverie had taken him. She lost herself in the lines of his face, the set of his jaw as he sat, immersed in thought.

"I cannot ever remember a time when I felt free." He looked momentarily startled that he had spoken this aloud, but continued. "In my youth, I searched for acceptance only from those whom I deemed powerful... but *that* is an insidious trap," he said bitterly, glancing sharply at Hermione.

Seeing nothing but calm interest in her expression, he continued, "I pushed away anybody who reached for me... not that there were many, mind you," he laughed harshly. "I think that I was... must have been... afraid."

This last, a whisper. He ducked his head as if embarrassed. A long moment passed, soft breaths and the crackling fire the only sounds. Another deep breath and Snape lifted his head, meeting Hermione's eyes. "I could not trust..." His voice broke, and he cleared his throat before continuing, "I could not trust that if I allowed myself to depend on another... that I would not be betrayed." His expression was bleak. "Betrayal is, in my experience, lurking just beyond the next bend."

Hermione nodded, blinking the tears from her eyes, lest he see them and think her pitying him. "You always seemed so self-contained... separate from us all," she said softly, turning to look at the dancing flames.

"A persuasive illusion, Miss Granger. My life depended upon its success for many years," he drawled, following her gaze. He paused before continuing, "An illusion which I find I no longer wish to perpetuate."

Hermione looked up sharply to find his eyes on her, as if awaiting a response. She paused for a long moment, allowing the words of the song and the memory of the melody to wash over her.

"Perhaps it is time to ask for more," she said softly.

He was silent, fingers stroking the binding of the small amber book, hypnotic in their rhythm, eyes still locked with hers. "Perhaps it is, Miss Granger, perhaps, it is."

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a/n: "Bird on the Wire" is the property of the incredible Leonard Cohen. I thank him for the lyrics, they are poetry.

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## Chapter 3

*Chapter 4 of 8*

Her dreams have haunted her for years. What will change when she finally remembers them?

Winner, Best Hurt/Comfort and Judge's Choice H/C in The New Library Awards.

*"Perhaps it is time to ask for more," she said softly.*

*He was silent, fingers stroking the binding of the small amber book, hypnotic in their rhythm, eyes still locked with hers. "Perhaps it is, Miss Granger, perhaps, it is."*

*Perhaps it is time to ask for more,* Hermione thought, turning back to the paperwork on her desk. *I can't get those words out of my mind... I thought they were meant for him, not me.* She looked around at her small office, pleased at how welcoming she had made it feel. Soft lights lent a warm glow to the room and illuminated intricate, colourful tapestries on the walls and woven wool rugs on the floor. A plush couch with lots of pillows and several chairs created a conversation area and a desk piled with books stood in front of even more books lining the walls. *I spend most of my time here. I want to be comfortable.*

Hermione's days were filled with meetings, paperwork, and patients. Research into the causes and potential remedies for emotional pain filled every available moment. She loved her work, and was satisfied with her professional development. *It's just my personal life that I can't get straight.* Despite her small circle of friends, Hermione felt adrift. *These days, the conversations I have with my clients are more personal and heartfelt than the ones I have with my friends or family.* she gasped, ... *except with Severus. My conversations with Severus are more personal than ones I have anywhere else....*

A naturally private person, Hermione valued the close relationships that she had developed over time with Harry, Ginny and Ron as well as a few new friendships she had established during her training. But even with these dear friends, she often felt as if they missed seeing the essence of her. They appreciated her competence and depended on her logical and disciplined mind, but tended to tease her when she dared to show a more whimsical or sensitive side of herself. *At least I can relax when I'm with Severus. It's funny that I trust him more with my thoughts than I do my old friends. And he doesn't want me to take over and think for him, either... He's as competent as I am.* As a result, while Hermione could talk with her friends about almost anything, she rarely allowed herself to discuss her hopes or fears, or display the depth of feeling and yearning to understand that she experienced when truly touched by something meaningful.

*They never understood why house-elf rights meant so much to me... even though I was a child, and went about trying to fix it like a child, they didn't get how much it hurt me to see their enslavement... they just... teased me.* She shook her head, remembering. *There is no way that I would tell any of them about what happens when I fall asleep. No. Way.* And so, her relationships evolved, built on a strong foundation of trust and companionship; but with Harry and Ginny marrying and starting a family, and Ron seriously dating a witch who had moved to London after finishing Beauxbatons, they moved more and more in their own circles, involved in their own growing families and lives and Hermione focussing more and more on her vocation.

While Hermione's days were filled with work, her nights were another story entirely. Following the instructions of the *Adfinitas Animarum* had been stimulating and frustrating in turns. By unspoken agreement, neither Hermione nor Snape speculated aloud about the goals of the small book's directives. Each of them passionate and intense by nature, they attacked the chapters with vigour befitting bibliophiles and scholars. That the instructions often took them outside their comfort zones went unremarked, though complaints about the mess made while digging in moist earth to plant seeds, or the hazards of creating a delicate mosaic rang through the small cottage. Laughter usually followed the sniping, and to her surprise, Hermione gradually became comfortable giving as well as she got in these exchanges. *I can be honest with Severus, playful, even.* Hermione mused, *I never would have expected that. I would have thought he'd tease me, too. He seems willing to let me just be... however I am.*

Neither commented on the gradual warming between them, though Hermione, blushing fiercely, sometimes caught Severus looking at her with an unreadable expression before quickly turning away to busy himself with the task at hand. For her part, she found herself peeking at him from beneath half-closed lids, noting the fluid movements of his hands, the strong line of his jaw, the fire in his eyes when he was engaged or excited about something. At first, their growing awareness of each other both thrilled and worried Hermione. *I think about him all day and can't wait to get here at night. And despite what I expected, he seems happy to see me, too... But am I drawn to him so strongly just because we are stuck with each other? What if he's happy to see me just because he's been alone all day? How can I tell if what I'm seeing and feeling is... real?*

Sometimes, she was too preoccupied with the sound of his silky, baritone voice to listen to what he was saying. When he would catch her at this, he would tease her with surprising gentleness. "Woolgathering, Miss Granger?" and she would laugh, willing the colour to leave her cheeks, and refocus on the conversation. Other times, she thought he might touch her, each leaning in towards the other, eyes bright with laughter or soft with unspoken promise. But following such moments, he would always pull back, wrapping himself once again in silence or disdain. *Maybe he doesn't want me... Maybe he is just making the best of this situation, and when we find a way out, he will just... go.* Her stomach clenched at the thought.

As time passed, Hermione's nights inexorably became the focus of her day. Though she willed herself not to think of it, in the early hours of the morning after she woke, or at night as she drifted off to sleep, she couldn't help but admit the truth, if only to herself. *I don't want this to end... I want him... I don't care anymore if it came about because of the spell and the book. But I'm so afraid that he is doing all of this only because he has no other choice.*

And so her days and nights took on a rhythm, days filled with necessities, and nights filled with possibilities. Occasionally, during the day, she would look up and swear that she had seen the back of Severus' head, or the sweep of his robes around a corner. She would shake her head and laugh at herself for her foolishness. But when night fell, she retreated eagerly to her flat and crawled into bed, wishing for sleep to claim her and take her back to where she felt more and more like... herself.

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"I won't! I don't care what the bloody book says." Hermione's face was flushed as she stood, arms folded across her chest.



"Miss Granger," Snape began, the sting in his voice reminiscent of classrooms lost, "we have spent weeks perusing the pages of this... rather unusual tome..." he paused significantly, "... at your behest, I might add." He raised his eyebrows and continued. "We have planted... flowers," he smirked, "we have built a model sailboat and..." he hesitated, a mild look of distaste on his face, "floated it." He took a breath and continued, "I... I have discussed poetry... *poetry* with you." He stood opposite her, arms folded, expression stern. "If the *Adfinitas Animarum* wants you to... sing, why do you object?"

Hermione turned and stalked to the window only to turn back around when she realised that she was staring at the aforementioned flowers. Stifling the urge to stomp her foot, she took a deep breath and threw herself onto the couch, hands covering her face.

"It's personal," she murmured into her hands.

"It's what, Miss Granger?" he asked softly.

Surprised by his gentle tone, she lifted her head and met his eyes. "Singing feels so personal. I haven't got a beautiful voice or anything, and I don't even listen to music all the time... but singing makes me *feel* things..." *And makes me show how I feel... I can't let you see how I feel.*

In the space of a second his face hardened, and he spun on his heel and stalked to the mantle, his back to her. "And I suppose that you dare not expose anything so... personal," he sneered, "to a loathsome creature, such as myself, is that it, Miss Granger?"

Surprised, she stood, reflexively reaching her arm out to him as she approached the fireplace. "No! Oh, no, that's not it at all..." she said, breathless. "Not everything is about you, you know...." she added sharply. He grunted, but did not turn towards her.

"When everybody needs you... for one thing or another... and you're supposed to be the one *whoknows* what to do, people forget..." Her voice was small, her shoulders slumped.

The low rumble of his reply startled her, "What do they forget, Miss Granger?"

"They forget..." she said, voice tight, "that 'know-it-alls' need someone to lean on, too, someone that they can trust. Not someone across the room who won't even call them by their first name..."

*Even after all this time...*

"Someone who is willing to get closer so that they won't be so scared to show who they really are, how they really feel... or to just... be...." She barely noticed the tears trickling down her cheeks.

When, finally, he turned towards her, the expression on his face reminded her of the night she had found him immersed in the book's song. *Hopeful. He looks hopeful....* A surge of emotion, *hope, terror, longing* washed through her as he took a step nearer.

He cleared his throat. "Is this... close enough, Miss... Hermione?" The look on his face had shifted from hopeful to petrified.

*He's as afraid as I am...* The thought gave her pause, and courage.

She nodded. "Better..." her voice was shaky, "thank you." She hastily wiped the tears from her face. She was doing that quite a lot in recent months, she noted wryly.

Soft strains of music began issuing from the book lying abandoned on the couch. Hermione shivered. She walked slowly to the couch and picked up the book, touching the parchment reverently with eyes closed. A stream of amber light seeped from the pages and seemed to melt into Hermione's hands. After a moment, she took a deep breath and nodded. "I'm ready, Professor," she said softly.

His voice, resonant even in its hesitance, "Severus."

She looked up. He had followed her to the couch and was standing close enough to touch. "If I am to be less... far away... perhaps it is time to address one another with our given names." He looked skittish, as if she might reject the notion that his given name could grace her tongue.

Hermione nodded, speechless only for a moment. "Severus...." She smiled, enjoying the texture of his name on her lips for the first time. "Thank you, Severus."

Relief washed over his features, relaxing the furrow between his brows and the stiffness of his jaw. He gestured towards her. "Are you ready to begin?"

She nodded, anxious again. Holding herself stiffly, eyes closed in concentration, she began to sing.

Hermione was right; she did not have a beautiful voice. What she had not said, however, was that she had a soulful one. Severus stood, still as stone, transfixed with the sound of her voice and the shifting emotions on her face as she sang.

If it be your will

That I speak no more

And my voice be still

As it was before

I will speak no more

I shall abide until

I am spoken for

If it be your will

Her voice was soft, hesitant, as if surrendering all efforts to control...

If it be your will

If a voice be true

From this broken hill

I will sing to you

Gaining strength, her voice began to grow in power, hope creeping into its tones...

From this broken hill

All your praises they shall ring

If it be your will

To let me sing

Stronger now, body relaxed, Hermione's voice seemed to come not from her throat now, but from someplace deeper, her voice rich and brimming with joy and hope.

If it be your will

If there is a choice

Let the rivers fill

Let the hills rejoice

Let your mercy spill

On all these burning hearts in hell

If it be your will

To make us well

Her voice dropped, no less resonant, but more evocative, textured with the tears that had risen with the words...

And draw us near

And bind us tight

All your children here

In their rags of light

Voice rising in concert with the intensity of the music, Hermione turned her body towards Severus, eyes still closed...

In our rags of light

All dressed to kill

And end this night

If it be your will

As the last strains of the music faded, and shaking with the intensity of her song, Hermione opened her eyes to find Severus standing a breath away, tears lying unchecked upon his cheeks, the expression on his face so open that it made her heart ache for both of them.

*Oh, God... please...*

One small step forward brought them into one another's arms.

Trembling arms encircling one another, Hermione took in the feel of him, solid and real under her hands. She wordlessly tightened her hold and laid her head on his chest with a hum of contentment.

*Please, let this never end...*

Her body sang with her awareness of him as her hands languidly explored the breadth of his shoulders and planes of his back. One strong hand stroked the nape of her neck while the other held her to him, pressing gently into the small of her back. She could feel his heart pounding in his chest and knew that it mirrored her own.

They stood together, neither measuring time, immersed in the sensations of soft skin and rhythmic breaths. Holding him firmly to her, lest he think she wanted to disengage, Hermione lifted her head to look at him. Black eyes found hers, piercing her with their intensity. He was silent, gazing at her with a mixture of longing and fear. Slowly, she brought one hand around to rest on his chest, then his shoulder, and finally, to hesitantly touch his face. Tentative fingers mapped the sharp planes of his features. She stroked his brow, smoothing the wrinkles that had sprung up there at her touch. She trailed her fingers along his cheekbone to his jaw, tracing the strong line with her thumb. Shyly, holding his gaze, she brought her fingers to his lips, tracing their contour. *I never realised what sensuous lips he has...*

Before she could finish the thought, those lips were on hers. Hot and insistent, his mouth nipped at hers, tongue sweeping across her lips, burning them with its touch. She gasped. He broke away, startled, but before he could step back, Hermione leaned forward, peppering his face with kisses, landing, finally, on his kiss reddened lips. He groaned and she felt an answering heat in her belly. Deepening the kiss, she cupped his face in her hands; he buried his hands in her voluminous hair, caressing her scalp with strong, sure strokes.

Her body thrumming with arousal, Hermione leaned into Severus' touch. Lost to sensation, she was aware only of his lips, his tongue stroking hers, his hands running through her hair, and then to points lower. Her hands struggled with the buttons of his white shirt, seeking warm skin. The moment she found it, stroking his chest and dipping her head to taste his skin, he groaned, "Wait, Hermione...." Reluctantly, she lifted her head, the tang of his skin on her lips.

"Severus..." she whispered. "Severus." Her warm smile lit the room.

He gestured to the sofa, indicating that they should sit. Unwilling to break the contact, his hand on her back, hers clutching his arm, they settled themselves on the settee. Hermione slipped her arms around his chest, head tucked under his chin. Severus wrapped his arms around her as they sat, curled together, on the soft cushions. And so they sat in warm silence, breathing returning to normal, rapidly beating hearts still betraying nervous excitement. After a time, Hermione felt Severus shift in her arms, moving slightly away from her, beginning to absently stroke her arm. They gazed at one another, both still astonished, and neither willing to break the magical silence that stretched between them.

Finally, Severus lifted one hand to gently stroke her cheek, her brow, her lips... noting the glazed look in her heavily lidded eyes. "Hermione..." he said, voice deep and resonant. She hummed softly in response, eyes now closed. He smiled, dipped his head, and tried again, "Hermione?" She looked up at this, brow wrinkled. "It would be so easy," he continued, "to sit like this... holding each other... touching you...." He paused, breathing shaky. "I think... I think that this... turn of events... calls for some discussion."

She took a moment, struggling to steady her suddenly rapid breathing and slow the staccato beating of her heart. A nod, a small smile, a squaring of shoulders as she met his eyes. "Yes... we must figure out... what comes next...." She was hesitant as she met his eyes, suddenly afraid that he meant to withdraw from her again. The warmth in his eyes reassured her, as did the fact that he had yet to stop touching her. "The book," she turned her head to glance at the *Adfinitas Animarum* sitting innocently on the cushy chair by the fire, "it *knows*...."

He nodded. "It seems to draw out our vulnerabilities and deepest selves... and draw us to one another." He looked at her intently, as if to be sure that this did not disgust her. Reassured by her languid smile, he continued, "What I am not sure about is why?"

"Why?" she echoed. "If the *Adfinitas Animarum* is key to our understanding what happened here," she gestured to the two of them, "and to figuring out what to do next, then the book must be guiding us by what it chooses to show us."

"Are you suggesting that the book is sentient, Mi... Hermione?" Severus asked.

Hermione smiled at his slip. "It seems to be leading us into territory that neither one of us would have discovered on our own." She shrugged. "I'm not sure whether the book has awareness or that it tunes in to each of us and... highlights our... affinity." She shook her head. "I don't know... Healer Shalva said that the answers would emerge in ourselves and," she smiled, "between us."

Severus smirked. "We do appear to have discovered something unforeseen between... ourselves." He ducked his head, shielding his eyes. "And I am... astounded, and... thrilled..." he looked up to meet her eyes, "... and terrified."

Humbled by his openness, and feeling oddly safe, Hermione reached out to cup his cheek. *I feel as if I have already laid my soul bare to him when I sang. And he heard me, he heard. Our souls... lay bare. Oh!*

"Severus." Her voice was hoarse from the tears that suddenly choked her. "I have never opened myself... my... soul to another like I have tonight. Never. I didn't intend to, but... I did." She stopped, unable to continue.

For a long moment he was silent, eyes unfathomable, burning as he looked at her.

And then he reached for her, gathering her in his arms, burying his face in her hair. "You did what I feared to do," he whispered, "what I have been longing to do for so long." His body shook with the intensity of emotion long suppressed. "Hermione," he murmured, "my Hermione."

She cried out, a combination of a laugh and a sob, and lifted herself to straddle his legs, hands on his shoulders, her face a breath away from his own. His strong arms encircled her, and she could almost hear the wild beating of his heart as she felt his ragged gasp, hot on her cheek.

"Severus," she paused, pressing her forehead to his and continuing in a whisper, "I never imagined..." She was flooded with feelings so intense that she could barely find the words. "It never occurred to me that I might... fall in love with you."

It was only the space of a few heartbeats, but to Hermione it felt like eternity. *I said too much, I haven't even thought about this first... What was I thinking...?* Heart hammering in her chest, she began to pull away, ashamed of her impulsiveness, of allowing the flood of emotion to dictate her actions. *I should have known better...*

But before she could do more than shift her body back from his, strong hands had drawn her close again, and his lips were brushing her neck, moving to the shell of her ear, murmuring, "Hermione, my brave Hermione... I wondered... I barely dared to hope..." he continued, voice rough. "For so long now, I've wanted... but I was afraid..." His voice barely a whisper. He turned to look into her eyes, and she saw his heart laid bare.

*He thought I would push him away... that I wouldn't want him to love me. He's surprised that I want him, that I love him...*

"I've been afraid, too, Severus," she said softly as she met his eyes.

Eyes burning with intensity, Severus cradled her head in his hands as he drew her close again. "I never imagined it could be real... not for me..." he paused, struggling to control his ragged breathing. "Until now, I didn't believe that I... that a woman like you could ever love me, want me. I am utterly... entranced by you... Hermione, my love... my love..."

A low moan escaped Hermione's throat as she succumbed to the power of his words and the sensation of his lips on the tender skin behind her ear. *Oh, my God... oh, thank God...* "Severus... oh, God, Severus... don't stop, please don't stop."

"I have no intention of stopping," he said, voice hoarse. "I intend to bind you to me, Hermione... as you have bound me to you."

She groaned again, seeking his mouth, sweeping her tongue across his lips, demanding entrance. He opened to her questing tongue, meeting it with his own. Stroking, seeking, tasting... they devoured each other, low moans and murmurs of appreciation the only sounds to accompany the crackling of the forgotten fire.

Slow kisses deepened, and Hermione felt as if she would never get close enough to him. She reached to his shirt buttons, hands shaking, trying to unbutton each without losing the warmth of his mouth. He chuckled and, thinking that he was reaching to help her divest himself of his shirt, found that he was far more interested in her own. With a flurry of movement, both swathes of fabric lay in pools of white on the ground. Hands roamed frantically over heated skin, lips tracing the contour of a collarbone, the dip at the hollow of a throat. Tongues tasted salty skin, eagerly discovering how to bring pleasure and the bliss of receiving these gifts from the other.

"Bed, we need... a bed," Severus gasped, both of them reclining on the far-too-narrow sofa.

Hermione looked up, a door taking shape near the hearth, and inclined her head. "Ask, and you shall receive." She smiled seductively, rising, arm outstretched to lead him to a bedroom that seemed designed for their purpose. While the cottage had provided a utilitarian sleeping chamber for Severus' use, this bedroom belonged not to a solitary man, but to a couple who had every intention of becoming immersed with one another.

Hermione's first impression when entering the room was of its textures. Dominating the room was a large, plush bed; velvet and silk bedding begged to be touched and discarded in favour of silky skin. A crackling fire and scattered candlelight threw soft shadows on walls and heavy, wood furniture. Nodding with approval, Severus moved smoothly towards the bed, gently pulling Hermione with him. Turning her to face him, he gazed at her reverently, eyes glinting with arousal. Slowly, he reached behind her, unhooking her bra and letting it slip to the floor. At her reflexive motion to cover herself, he shook his head. "You are so beautiful," he said, his usually silky voice rough with emotion.

Cupping her breasts in his hands, he dipped his head to taste first one nipple, then a second. Stroking with his tongue, he teased them to hard peaks, and then took each one in his mouth, a look of bliss on his face. "Bed, we were headed for a bed..." he murmured.

She laughed and climbed onto the lush bedding, wriggling until she was in the centre, on her knees, arms out to him. He was on the bed in a flash. "Where was I?" he murmured, finding a turgid nipple between his lips again, drawing a long moan from Hermione. Laying back against the pillows and burying her hands in his ebony hair, she held his head to her breasts, revelling in his pleasure in her body, thrilled at the sensations his mouth could produce in her. Soon, that mouth moved from her breasts, tracing their contours, tongue tasting the salt underneath them before moving to caress her belly.

"Severus," her voice deepened with arousal, "Severus, I want to touch you... please... let me touch you."

He paused, looking up the length of her body to her full breasts, tousled hair, and kiss-swollen lips. "Oh, yes... yes..." He smiled, the first unrestrained smile that she had ever seen lighting his face. *Oh, he should smile more. I will spend my life ensuring that he smiles more.*

He moved to lie beside her and reached for her trousers, unbuttoning them. Taking his lead, she did the same to his, both sliding the last of their clothing from their bodies.

Stripped of all layers between them, body and soul, Severus and Hermione reached for each other, wanting only to get closer, to touch more deeply, to be as immersed as it was possible to be. Her hands stroked his firm chest, his broad shoulders, his wiry back. *He's slender, but so strong. I want...*

"More," she growled, running her hands down his back, to his firm bum, stroking, drawing a groan of pleasure from him as she shifted closer, chest to chest, belly to belly pressing against his obvious arousal.

He gasped as she wriggled against him. "You are ready for more?" he asked, breathless.

"I am... please..." she pleaded.

She felt his hands which had been stroking her bum shift to her thighs, and she opened to his ministrations. Gasping as he stroked her, she begged, "Severus... please...."

She felt more than saw him shift to lie above her, his mouth joining hers again for a soulful kiss. Both moaning as their tongues stroked one another in an increasingly frenzied rhythm, she felt him pressing against her, in her, moving rhythmically. She moved against him, matching his rhythm, the movement of her hips meeting his increasingly powerful thrusts.

"Hermione... my Hermione," he growled, his movements becoming erratic. Sliding his hand to rest between them, he stroked her with deft fingers, bringing her arousal to a fever pitch. "I am yours... oh, God, Hermione..." he cried out in surprise as he reached his peak.

The transcendent look on his face, coupled with the touch of his hand and thrust of his hard body brought Hermione over the edge. "Severus!" she called out, her body thrumming with pleasure. They continued to move together, prolonging their bliss, until both collapsed, finally spent.

Wrapped in each other's arms, limbs tangled together, breathing in one another's scent, they slept.

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Waking alone in a cold bed after a night filled with emotional and sensual discovery was not Hermione's idea of an ideal morning after. Running her hands along her body, she discovered that, just as in the dreamscape, she was naked and, based on her cursory examination, had in fact been thoroughly ravished. *And did some ravishing in return.* She smiled dreamily to herself, and then sighed. *Now what? I have a dream lover... literally? I don't want to spend my days without him... and I'm not about to spend my nights alone, either. We need to figure out what these latest... developments... imply about Severus, and what to do next. If the book leads the way, it is not a coincidence that it led us to each other's hearts....* Hermione nodded to herself. "Back to St Mungo's it is."

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a/n: "If It Be Your Will" is the property of the magnificent Leonard Cohen. His songs are poetry. I thank him.

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## Chapter 4

*Chapter 5 of 8*

Her dreams have haunted her for years. What will change when she finally remembers them?

Winner, Best Hurt/Comfort and Judge's Choice H/C in The New Library Awards.

*If the book leads the way, it is not a coincidence that it led us to each other's hearts... Hermione nodded to herself. "Back to St Mungo's it is."*

Healer Shalva did not seem surprised to see Hermione that morning when she opened her office door. "Hello, my dear," she said as she welcomed Hermione into the familiar room. "I presume that you have an update for me on your... situation?"

Hermione smiled as she settled herself into the comfortable chair opposite her mentor. "I do have an update, and some questions, actually," she added.

The Healer nodded and smiled. "I would expect nothing less, Hermione."

Hermione smiled, blushing slightly. "Well, we have followed your advice and immersed ourselves in the *Adfinitas Animarum*." She laughed. "Which has been... quite an experience."

Healer Shalva smiled. "I can only imagine. So tell me, what has the book revealed?"

"Well," Hermione said thoughtfully, "it's been rather a progression over the last month or two." She paused, remembering. "At first, there were lots of activities that the book directed us to do ... together." She laughed, remembering Severus' reactions to some of those activities. "Some recipes to cook, some gardening guidance, building model boats...." She looked up to see the Healer watching her closely, a small smile on her face. "Each chapter gave us something to do that required us to work together and, often, to negotiate." She shook her head, laughing. "This is not a man who is accustomed to either of these. And yet, if the book directed it, he complied." Hermione looked intently at her mentor. "In fact, it seems as if the book knows something about each of us and about what we each needed to do..." Her eyes widened with sudden insight. "...and what we each needed to see in one another...."

Healer Shalva nodded. "It is as I anticipated." Hermione looked at her expectantly until she continued. "It is mostly theoretical since there have only been a handful of cases in the last three centuries, but there is thought to be a link between the *Amplector Animum* spell and the willingness of the *Adfinitas Animarum* to operate."

"To operate?" queried Hermione. "Doesn't it always work if someone opens it?"

"Oh, no, it does not work for everybody and especially not for a single person. The *Adfinitas Animarum* only works for a pair," replied the Healer. "In particular, it opens only to a pair whose souls whose essences are well-suited for one another. Souls who have a clear affinity. Its job is to illuminate the reasons for such affinity and, with the cooperation of the couple, to bring them into harmony with one another."

Hermione sat, absorbed in thought for a long moment. Colour dotted her cheeks as she thought about the weeks that she and Severus had spent together, the activities and conversations that had gradually opened each to the other, culminating in the explosive revelations of the previous night.

*Explosive in more ways than one.*

Hermione's blush deepened as she remembered their frantic coupling, and even more so, the profound knowledge that she had opened her soul to him, and he had found her beautiful.

"Hermione," prompted the Healer gently, "I can see that there is more to tell." She smiled warmly at the blushing young woman.

"There is..." replied Hermione. "There is so much to tell, and so much that I really need answers to." She looked up at the Healer. "And I now see that there is a great deal that you withheld from me when I first came to discuss this with you." The look on Hermione's face was severe. "Why did you do that? Why didn't you tell me more about the *Amplector Animum* spell and about the purpose of the *Adfinitas Animarum*?"

Healer Shalva chuckled, "And what would you have done had I told you that you and this man... this man whose soul you unwittingly saved, were well suited for one another?" Hermione began to reply, but Healer Shalva put up her hand to stop her. "Furthermore, what do you imagine you would have said had I told you then that in order to bring this man's soul back into his body you would have to solidify the attachment between the two of you?" Hermione gasped. "Do you think that you would have taken that well when you could barely understand why you felt strongly enough about him to wish that you could have whisked him away to safety when he was dying?"

Hermione shook her head, thoughts tumbling, seeking order. *We were already well suited, and our ability to use the Adfinitas Animarum proves that... and it led us to the knowledge that we could... love one another.... And we did, we fell in love... surprised both of us, in fact.*

"Hermione?" The Healer interrupted Hermione's reverie. "Are you still with me?"

Hermione looked up, startled. "I'm so sorry Healer Shalva; I was lost in thought."

"Clearly," the Healer chuckled. "I can see that what I've said has sparked some recognition... care to share?"

Hermione smiled, a blush darkening her cheeks once again. "It would seem," she began, "that the purpose of the *Adfinitas Animarum* has been met..." She looked quizzically at the Healer. "...if the purpose is to bring the pair to the realisation that they are suited to one another... and to come to love one another..." she finished, imagining that her face could not possibly have been redder.

"Ahh," said the Healer, "and is that what prompted your visit today?"

"In a sense," replied Hermione. "Last night, it was like the last layer of mist burned away we could see one another clearly and fully for the first time. It was incredible," she whispered. "And when we were together, I felt as if the rest of the world could disappear and it would make no difference to me. But then I woke up, and I was alone, and I realised that... I can't... we can't have a half-life.... And we didn't even have an opportunity to talk about it." She ducked her head at the memory. "Talking wasn't high on the priority list." She smiled at the Healer who looked rather pleased with the tale.

"Yes, Hermione, yes, that is exactly the point," said the Healer. "Without the experience that you just had, there would not be the same motivation and understanding of why his soul must be released. Even more importantly, there would not be the necessary attachment to make it happen."

Hermione took a moment, breathing deeply, before replying. "Do you know how to make that happen? Do you know how the *Amplector Animum* spell is reversed?"

Healer Shalva gazed intently at Hermione for a long moment, a troubled look resting on her features. "Hermione, the reversal of *Amplector Animum* is no simple matter. It is not always clear what happens to the soul when the release occurs. Even if the body is in sufficient condition to house his soul, sometimes... well, sometimes the soul moves forward instead."

"No!" Hermione cried out. "But you just said that the attachment is what makes it possible to release the soul from the spell! What do you mean the soul sometimes moves forward? I thought that the attachment brings the souls together!" Hermione was breathing rapidly, panicked.

Healer Shalva moved to sit next to her, and drew her close. "Hermione, Hermione. I'm so sorry. The nature of this enchantment is complicated, and reports of its resolution are... scarce. There is no written record describing the process and some say that it differs from couple to couple." She paused, gently rubbing Hermione's back, trying to calm her. "All I know is that there is risk involved in this; the attachment between you is necessary in order for the reversal to occur, but sometimes, the attachment means letting the enfolded soul... go."

Hermione looked at her for a long moment, grief clouding her vision. "Let the soul go?" she croaked. "I've only just found him...."

"The love that you feel for one another will release him, Hermione. Where he goes once he is released... nobody knows why the soul sometimes reanimates the body and other times, moves on." She paused. "He was ready to die, was he not?"

Hermione sobbed, "He was." Her voice broke. "He was ready to die. He said that this... being in limbo... was unbearable... when I first remembered, when we first spoke, he said that it was unbearable, and to leave him...."

"You cannot compare then to now, Hermione. He knows you now; he loves you now, does he not?" Hermione nodded. "Perhaps the nature of the attachment will determine where he will go when his soul is released. I wish that I could be more certain. This is all that I know." She squeezed Hermione's shoulders as she wept.

After Hermione's sobs quieted, the Healer added one final thought, "Hermione, one last thing you must find him. You must find out where his body is and if it is in any condition to house his soul once more."

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Hermione wandered through the remainder of her day in a daze. In the space of twenty-four hours, her world had been upended, and she was at a loss as to what to do next. Still absorbing the new information gleaned from her meeting with Healer Shalva, Hermione was torn between embarking on a search for Severus' body and climbing into bed to fall asleep so that she could return to the shadow space and talk to him about what she had discovered. *Well, I'll be asleep soon enough. I may as well start to figure out where to search for his body... while I'm awake, at least.*

*Easier said than done*, thought Hermione grumpily as she prepared for sleep that night. A full day of investigation and she was no further in her quest to find Severus' body.

*Well, I shouldn't say that. I know that he's not tucked away somewhere in St Mungo's, and I do know for certain that I was right and there is no grave recorded for him. So I am left with the supposition that his body is alive somewhere, and probably not in the wizarding world.* She moaned, tired and discouraged. *How am I to find him if he's hidden in the Muggle world?*

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He was waiting for her on the couch in front of the fire. She appeared, almost as if Apparating in the salon, and smiled at the look of pleasure on his face when he caught sight of her. Seemingly embarrassed at being caught out, Severus quickly dipped his head, fiddling with the book in his hands.

"Severus," she said, oddly relieved to find him sitting there, reading.

At the tone in her voice, he looked up, quizzically. "What is it? Has something happened?"

She crossed the room to join him, settling in at his side on the sofa. She smiled as she took his hand, stroking it as she spoke. "How odd it is to live all day long, to see people moving about their business, to ask questions and receive answers... and at night, to come here where we have our own world in which time stands still."

She felt him stiffen and grasped his hand more tightly as he made to pull away. "I am sorry to interrupt the flow of your life, Miss Granger," he said, tight and formal again. "I had not realised that your forays here distressed you...." Taken aback at his rapid shift in mood, Hermione's heart pounded in her chest, and she moved to cut him off before he could continue.

"Severus... Severus, look at me... please," for he had turned away, refusing to meet her gaze. "Severus, don't you realise... this is the best part of my day, of my life?" She reached out to stroke his cheek, and while he did not pull away, he still would not look her in the eye. "I wait all day to be here with you. The rest of the world can go about its business, and I would be perfectly happy to leave it... to be here with you."

Several moments passed, Hermione distracted by the rapid beating of her heart and the brooding look on Severus' face. Finally, he turned to look at her. "I thought that you... regretted..." He swallowed. "...I thought that, perhaps, you regretted... last night. That you thought it impetuous or foolhardy." He looked at her sternly. "As, indeed, it was."

He stood, beginning to pace the room. "We were not thinking clearly... We cannot do this." Hermione moved to interrupt him, but he continued, "No matter how pleasant the surroundings," he swept his hand to indicate the cottage, "I, Miss Granger, am still in limbo." He turned to glare at her. "I should be dead. And you... you, Miss Granger," he added, without a hint of the pain in his eyes reflected in his voice, "you should be living your life, not passing into limbo with the likes of me."

*Still so prickly... so quick to assume that he will be abandoned...*

She stood and stalked over to where he was standing with arms crossed, looking out the window at the garden in which they had both spent countless hours planting, watering, weeding coaxing the spectacular array of flowers to bloom.

"Severus," she said in a quiet voice, "hasn't it occurred to you to question how it was that our link to one another was sufficient to prevent you from... well, from dying?"

A huff from Severus' back was her only response. She continued, a small smile on her face that he could not see, "Do you imagine that any pair could have pulled off such a coup? To rescue a soul from the hands of death?"

At this, he whipped around to glare at her, "What do you mean, 'any pair'?"

"I mean," continued Hermione calmly, "that there is a reason that the *Amplector Animus* spell occurred between us, and... there is a reason that the *Adfinitas Animarum* will open for us, that we can read its pages." She paused, meeting his piercing look steadily.

"Well, are you going to stand there gaping at me or are you going to tell me what you are babbling about, Miss Granger?" he snapped.

More shaken from the intensity of his glowering and his rapid shifts in mood than she wanted him to see, Hermione took a moment to compose herself. Holding Healer Shalva's words close, she stepped forward, reaching out to softly stroke his brow. She was encouraged when he did not flinch at her touch.

"Severus... the *Adfinitas Animarum* opens only for a couple and will only display its contents to couples whose souls are... suited for one another. The fact that the book not only opened for us, but has spent weeks... months instructing us... proves...."

The look of desolation on his face was heartbreaking. "Proves what, Hermione? That you are doomed to a half-life, just as I am?" His voice broke. "I cannot condemn you to this..." Finally, finally he reached his hand out, stroking the line of her jaw. "I was supposed to be dead... you were supposed to be living your life dating, working, enjoying yourself." He wrinkled his brow. "What do you do during your days, Hermione? Other than your work, I mean... I've never asked... I'm sorry...."

Hermione smiled softly. "My days have been nothing to write home about, Severus... even before... before remembering... you... us... being here." She stumbled over her words. "I've been focussed mostly on my work, on learning to be a Healer, and seeing my patients. I haven't had much time or energy for much outside of that..." she trailed off. Severus was silent for a moment, looking pensive.

"Why did you not make time for a life outside of your work, Hermione? What happened to your family... your friendships?" He paused. "How did you come to be so alone?"

She shook her head. "I don't know, really. It's not something I ever planned." She stopped, thinking for a moment. "I never was someone who had loads of friends, and I've always had a tendency to become intensely absorbed in whatever I do..." she smiled at him, "...a quality we share, I think." He nodded, a quirk of his lips indicating recognition of this commonality.

"After the Battle of Hogwarts, there was so much rebuilding to do, so much repair. So many lost...." Her voice was choked with tears, but she continued, "I threw myself into my training program and into my relationship with Ron." She bit her lip and shook her head sadly. "That didn't last terribly long. He didn't appreciate the demands that Healer training made on me especially the emotional drain." She met Severus' eyes. "It was worse to be in a relationship with someone who was resentful and who didn't understand the passion or the pain I felt for my work. That was much lonelier than being alone." He nodded sharply at this, as if no more explanation was needed.

"It has been years, Hermione, have you dated other men?" asked Severus, a slight edge to his voice.

"Some," she answered, "but nobody who captured my interest. There has been nobody who I cared enough about to argue with; there has been nobody who I cared to work on a project with apart from work, or who could make me laugh or make me care... not until recently." She took Severus' hand in her own. "There has never been anyone for whom I would be willing to sing to expose my emotions the way I did last night." She hesitated. "And there has never been a man who made me feel the way you did when you touched me."

A glint of masculine pride swept across his features, remembering. "But why, Hermione, why... me? I have no life to offer you...."

"I could ask you the same question, I suppose," she replied, thoughtful. "This is not something I planned, not something you did either. It would seem, Severus," she leaned forward, "that the affinity that we have for one another was always there, waiting only for us to have the opportunity to discover it, and to choose one another. I have wondered why I went so long without remembering my dreams of coming here. It's only now that I have the energy to put to anything besides my own healing and my work. I've longed to find someone who... fits me. I admit," she smiled wryly, "that this is a rather... unconventional way to discover one another, and certainly an unusual method of choosing each other as well. But... it's what we have and I for one am reluctant to turn it away."

His eyes narrowed. "You will take it because it is what you *have*, will you?"

She sighed deeply. *He is the most stubborn man.*

"Do you insist on mishearing me, Severus? Please listen. I've spent years focussed only on one aspect of my life yes, I have some contact with my friends and with my parents, but they have busy lives, and well," she opened her hands as if in surrender, "time marches forward. I have a career, some old relationships, but until now, I've had no relationship that really... lights me up. Not until now, until you."

The thought that his presence could cause Hermione's world to brighten seemed to be a revelation to Severus. "I am accustomed to being a shadow that darkens everyone's world, Hermione, not a source of pleasure... or light. I fear that shadow will show itself, and..." Dread darkened his features, bringing out harsh lines and angles. "I have led a hard life, Hermione, and am not a man who brings... light... into the lives of women. In fact, you would be well advised to steer clear of me." A look of grief flashed across his face before he could shield himself from her view. Hermione's heart clenched.

*Oh, Severus. What can I say to help you to see what I see? What would persuade you that you are not the shadow-creature that you believe yourself to be?* Had Severus been less preoccupied with his worries, he would have noted the steel that darkened Hermione's expression. *All right, bluntness, it is.*

"Let's get something straight before this goes any further, Severus Snape," Hermione said briskly. "Since you insist on missing the point, let me make it perfectly clear." She inclined her head for emphasis, eyes locked with his. "Some powerful magic is at play here, and has indicated to me, at least, that you are a man worth loving. I do not believe for one moment that the *Amplector Animum* spell would have held onto a soul as Dark as the one you believe you have. And I don't imagine that the *Adfinitas Animarum* would draw my soul close to yours if we were not suited for one another. So, either you are inferring that my soul is Dark," she raised her eyebrows at his gobsmacked expression, "or you are going to have to face some realities about the state of your own soul."

Both sat silently for a long moment. *Let him absorb that.* Finally, Severus opened his hands in a gesture of surrender. She smiled and let out the breath that she didn't realise she had been holding. Relieved, she let her eyes drift, taking in the cosy surroundings.

"Severus, I just thought of something." A raised eyebrow and smirk were his only response. "Do you remember when I first came here how you commented on how desolate the space was?" He nodded. "But look at it now." She looked around the lushly furnished room, filled with books, a tray of their untouched dinner, soft pillows and blankets for curling up by the fire, and the bedroom door across the room.

"I think that you were right." She narrowed her eyes when he let out a sharp laugh at this. "You are ~~not~~/ways right, but in *this* case, I think that you were right. This place is inside me, and it reflects the state of my... self, or my soul. I was in bad shape when you first got here and obviously hadn't improved at all even by the time I woke up to this place."

"It was rather... grim," he agreed.

"Look at it now," she repeated. "Maybe there is some magic to this place that reflects the innermost state of its inhabitants."

Severus wrinkled his brow. "Perhaps.... It is... possible." He continued, "I have not mentioned it because I did not know what to make of it, but the more immersed we have become in the *Adfinitas Animarum* the more influence I appear to have on our surroundings." Hermione gasped. "What is unclear is whether this is a reflection of the true state of my... self," he smirked, "or if you prefer, soul, or if it is merely a by-product of my growing... affinity... for you."

Hermione nodded slowly, thinking. "That is the fundamental question, I think. Are you merely a resident, trapped in a gilded cage, or are you active and able to influence what happens here?" She stumbled, "I mean, I think that you have free will I have not felt as if my desire... controls you..." and then, more softly, "does it?"

At this, Severus smiled wickedly and scooted closer to Hermione on the couch. Reaching out to toy with an errant curl, he drawled, "Oh, no... I believe that my actions here are entirely my own." The hand caressing her curl moved then to stroke the soft skin behind her ear and then to the nape of her neck.

*No wonder Crookshanks purrs so loudly when I stroke him.* Hermione hummed contentedly and leaned into Severus' touch.

"Good," she murmured, "I would be... devastated... if this," she brought her hand to where he was stroking her, "was merely a figment of my fevered imagination."

Severus chuckled darkly, "I can't say that I have ever been the subject of a woman's fevered imagination, Hermione."

*Oh, don't be so sure of that...*

He brought his lips to the delicate juncture between shoulder and neck. "But I find that I would do... anything... to stay in yours."

Hermione wrapped her arms around him and drew him close, burying her face in his shoulder, revelling in the scent of him the real, earthy scent. No figment of her imagination here.

"And I would do anything, Severus, anything to stay with you," she whispered. She felt him relax against her, his cheek resting on her head. "Please trust me, Severus. Can you trust that what I feel for you is real and that I want... you?"

His arms tightened around her and she felt his breathing quicken. "Trust. Yes... Well, you must understand that it is difficult for me to believe that you will not wake up tomorrow in your own bed and realise that you have been foolish," he murmured, voice silky and low.

"I woke this morning in my own bed, Severus," Hermione replied, tilting her head up to kiss the pulse point on his neck, "and all I could think about was how much I wanted you to be there with me and how to make it so."

He pulled back sharply, the look on his face fierce as he cupped her face in his hands. "This is what you want, Hermione?" He ran his thumb gently across her lips, making her shiver. "You want me... you want to find a way for me to cross back over out of here?" She nodded as his trembling hands began to stroke the outline of her face, and then her wild mane of hair. "Have you any idea how to accomplish this?" he asked, and she had never heard him sound so desperate.

"I don't know, but there is a way Healer Shalva said so, but she did not tell me how...." She shook her head. "I don't understand why she didn't tell me how...."

Severus turned to where the *Adfinitas Animarum* lay on a table by the sofa. "Perhaps," he said, thoughtful, "the book will provide a clue. If its role is to draw us together."

Hermione leapt up and snatched the book from the table, sitting down again next to Severus. She stared at the book for a moment, as if by glaring at it she might get it to speak to her, to explain how to reveal the secret of joining Severus' body once again with his soul. "Perhaps...." she muttered, looking at Severus once more. "Do you think we might ask it to show us?"

Severus smirked. "My dear, what do you think it has been doing all these months if not listening to us and showing us what we need most?"

"Oh!" Her eyes were shining. "I know!" At his crooked smile, she kicked him playfully. "Shall we hold it together usually one or the other of us opens the book to see what it presents, perhaps by opening it together, we demonstrate... our bond... in a tangible way, that is..." She trailed off, confused by the intense expression on Severus' face.

Turning his body so that they were face to face, Severus placed the book between them, open, each of them touching it with one hand. With his free hand, Severus drew her close and lowered his mouth to hers, brushing her lips with soft kisses. Humming with pleasure, Hermione threaded her fingers through his hair, caressing the nape of his neck and drawing him closer, deepening the kiss. Severus' deep groan sent sparks of electricity through Hermione's body and her moan joined his.

As the intensity of their longing fed their desire, hands holding an amber book were more desperately needed elsewhere, for stroking heated skin, for seeking and releasing buttons and fasteners.

Fallen to the floor, all but forgotten, the amber book began to glow.

## Chapter 5

Her dreams have haunted her for years. What will change when she finally remembers them?

Winner, Best Hurt/Comfort and Judge's Choice H/C in The New Library Awards.

*Fallen to the floor, all but forgotten, the amber book began to glow.*

It glowed with an intensity that mirrored the passion of the couple whose attention had shifted solely to each other. Traversing skin kissed with amber light, Severus bathed Hermione's body with his warm breath, touching the soft contours of her figure with trembling hands, his eager mouth tasting her salty skin. Slowly he teased, caressing just enough to draw deep moans from her throat, leaving her gasping for more. As he leaned down to kiss her lips once again, she lifted herself to meet him and flipped both of them over her straddling him, long hair falling to tickle his shoulders.

"My turn." She smiled wickedly at him, meeting his amused expression with a strategically placed stroke of her tongue. The amusement in his eyes vanished, replaced by a glazed look as his breath quickened.

"Do you like that?" she whispered seductively, running her lips and tongue around the shell of his ear and earning a long moan in response. "Where else would you like my tongue, Severus?" She was rewarded with a hiss of pleasure and the sensuous movement of his hands along her thighs.

"Hermione...." He licked his lips as he watched her move down his body, kissing and stroking, mapping the planes and textures of his skin. She glanced up at him, catching his fierce gaze as he watched her obvious enjoyment of his body and his pleasure. Hermione felt a surge of joy at his surrender to her, his grunts and moans of pleasure, his arching into her touch and his strong hands cradling her head as she moved over him, finally grasping her by the shoulders to bring her face to face with him again to devour her in a searing kiss.

As they began to move together with almost painful slowness, Hermione felt her excitement build in waves. Severus caught her face gently in his large hands and anointed her skin with whispered words of love and devotion. Her murmurs of agreement and cries of joy and pleasure mingled with his as they rocked into one another with growing intensity.

"Hermione, oh... Merlin, Hermione." His voice strained with the intensity of his need. "Look at me... look at me." Severus' eyes were blazing, and as Hermione met his gaze with her own, entwined, body and soul, the amber light from the forgotten tome brightened and wrapped itself around them, filling them, holding them mingling with the white hot light of their pleasure and connection.

"Oh, Severus... Oh my God, Severus..." Hermione gasped as the lights mingled and their pleasure mounted. And as the luminous beam of light surrounding them grew ever more intense, its amber tones shifted to a deep azure, shimmering with violet in the firelight, and Hermione felt a warmth and calm wash over her. Severus' face mirrored the joy and peace that she felt, and she laughed out loud.

Wrapped in light, buoyant with ecstasy, Hermione spoke, her words emerging from a place old and deep.

"I take thee to my hand, my heart, and my spirit, to be my chosen one." With those words, the light emanating from Hermione deepened to a rich silver colour, weaving its strands with the azure and violet strands flowing from the silk-bound book.

The radiance of Severus' smile rivalled that of the light wrapped around them. His voice was steady and textured with his longing. "To desire thee and be desired by thee, to possess thee and be possessed by thee, without sin or shame, for naught can exist in the purity of my love for thee." His gaze was reverent, and as his eyes held Hermione's, the light around him deepened to gold twining itself with the beams of silver and blue shimmering around them.

Hermione's eyes filled with tears. "I promise to love thee wholly and completely without restraint, in sickness and in health, in plenty and in poverty, in life and beyond," her voice shook, "where we shall meet, remember, and love again." Her voice broke and tears fell, mingling with the tears that ran, unnoticed, down Severus' cheeks.

"I shall not seek to change thee in any way." He stroked her cheek reverently with his long fingers. "I shall respect thee, thy beliefs, thy people, and thy ways as I respect myself." His voice was rough with emotion, and they paused together for a moment, breathing in synchrony, kissing away each other's tears.

And in one voice, "I pledge to thee that thine will be the name I cry aloud in the night and the eyes into which I smile in the morning."

Lost in each other's eyes and enveloped in light, they began to move together again, their crescendo building once more until with a harsh cry, the light of a thousand hopes exploded inside them, bathing them in radiant colour.

"I love you! Oh, how I love you..." His bass tones mingled with her higher cries, staccato words interrupted by frantic kisses. "Mine forever...." His eyes blazed. "I am yours... don't leave me..." tearful, grasping, "...my love...."

Dazed by the intensity of what they had just experienced, Hermione clung to Severus as he wrapped himself around her, holding on as if she anchored him to life. Shaking and overwhelmed with joy and fear and hope, soft kisses and whispered reassurances calmed them. Finally, wrapped securely in each other's arms, they turned to look at the amber book lying open across the room, glowing with a soft, steady light. Rising from the pages of the book were ghostly images of a map, a cauldron and a key.

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Cushioned by feather blankets that had materialised during some unmeasured moment, Severus and Hermione watched the images hover over the silk-bound book. Curled in front of the blazing fire, exhausted from the physical, magical and emotional ritual that they had instinctively enacted, the figures projecting from the *Adfinitas Animarum* seemed to be plucked from a dream.

Lifting the hand that was not languidly stroking Hermione's curls, Severus muttered, "*Accio*," and the book slid towards them.

"What do you think it means?" she murmured, barely able to keep her eyes open.

Turning the book in his hand, Severus considered the shimmering images projected from its pages. "I think," he said slowly, "that these are our instructions."

"Instructions?" Hermione's head shot up, eyes darting between Severus and the floating icons. "What sort of instructions?"

"I believe," Severus repeated, voice tight, "that these are the instructions for finding my body and reanimating it with my soul."

Heart racing, Hermione reached for the book, nodding sombrely as Severus handed it to her. The images hanging innocently over the pages of the *Adfinitas Animarum* were each tethered to the book with a coloured beam of light. Reaching out tentatively, Hermione prodded the map with a finger and startled when it became solid in her hand. With a glance at Severus, she opened it and laid it out for them both to see.

The contours of the familiar landscape flowed in strokes of black and brown. A slender line of shimmering gold threaded its way from the Highlands of Scotland, southward, ending at a point in the Northwestern part of London. Hermione reached out a finger and touched the glowing point of gold, and the map shifted. Like a train speeding towards them, the image grew larger until the outline of a large, white building took shape; and all at once they could see a figure through one of the large windows that peered onto the city like eyes. Sitting alone in a Spartan room, immobile, staring blankly at the wall opposite but clearly alive--- was Severus Snape.



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*He looks like a shadow of himself.* Gaunt and pale, the body of Severus Snape sat stiffly in the bleak room. His eyes held none of the spark that she had come to recognise, and his usually mobile expression was blank. *This isn't really... Severus.... It's his body and nothing more.... I wonder how he feels seeing himself like this...* She looked up, concerned, and caught his eye. He smiled wanly and reached out a hand to grasp hers.

"It's hard to believe, is it not?" he asked softly. "Everyone believes me dead, and yet there I sit."

"It's not really you though, is it?" Hermione's voice was low and sad. "You the parts of you that make you who you are anyway are here with me. And that," she gestured to the image of Severus on the map, "is just the body that will allow you to be released from here... to be free again." She paused. "I wonder, though, how you survived, and how you got to be there." She clenched his hand harder. "Healer Shalva said that I must find your body and find out if it would be able to house your soul again." Her breath caught. "How will I know if your body can safely hold your soul? What if I make a mistake?"

"Hermione," his voice was low and calming, "you will have some questions, undoubtedly, for the Healers at that place, but look..." He drew her eye to the image again. "... I appear to be conscious, if not... animated, and am sitting and breathing independently. Unless there is some other infirmity that we cannot see, the main impairment in my overall health appears to be the absence of my soul in my body." His brow furrowed as he thought. "I would, however, like to know how I survived that snake bite." He paused. "I had been taking an anti-venin specific to Nagini for months... but I was not prepared for a bite to the neck."

"I'm not surprised that you dosed yourself with protection against Nagini's venom," Hermione said. "It would make sense since you had to be so close to that snake. But that bite..." She shuddered in memory. "I would like to thank whoever it was who treated you and transported you to... wherever that place is." She squinted, trying to make out the wording on the wall of the small room. Running her finger over the parchment, Hermione pulled her hand back.

"I was right, I can make the image move," she said triumphantly. Indeed, as she moved her hand further from the parchment, the image receded from view until only the edifice was visible. In clear lettering on the front of the building were the words, 'The Wellington Hospital'."

"London," she said breathlessly, "your body is in London."

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Stunned and silent they sat, fingers entwined, lost in thought, staring at the photo of The Wellington Hospital in London *Now I know where to find him, but how do I get to him? And what do I do next?* Hermione furrowed her brow anxiously. "What do I do once I get to you?" she said aloud.

Severus snorted, gesturing to the two remaining images bouncing slightly over the amber book. "I would imagine that the answers to your question are patiently waiting their turn."

She smiled and reached for the image of the key. But instead of becoming solid like the map, her hand passed right through it. She looked at Severus, startled. "Why didn't that work?" she mused.

"I wonder," he muttered and reached out to grasp the large brass key, which cooperatively solidified in his hand. He held it in the palm of one hand, turning and examining it with the other. Hermione could see the tendons of his jaw working as he ground his teeth. He pursed his lips and looked up, knowing the question that Hermione was dying to ask. "The key is mine," he began, shortly. "Coupled with the correct password, it opens the door to my... house... and to the potions lab and storeroom in its basement."

"Your house?" she breathed. "I guess I always thought of Hogwarts as your home.... I should have realised that you would have a place outside of the school..." she mused. "Why do you think we've been given your key?"

Severus shook his head. "I can only imagine that whatever we must do, there is something that we will need that we can only find there." He did not look pleased at the prospect. *I suppose that items found only at Spinner's End are not necessarily ones that he would like to revisit.*

Hermione nodded slowly, her thoughts racing. Looking again at the image of the cauldron bouncing almost imperceptibly in front of them, she smiled. "I don't imagine that we will be able to determine what we need to do until we examine this." She gestured to the shimmering cauldron and reached for it with one hand. As with the key, her hand passed through.

"This appears to be your department, Severus," she said with a smirk. But when he reached his hand to the cauldron, it too passed through.

"Perhaps together," he murmured suggestively, and she blushed, remembering her proposal from earlier that evening.

As one, they reached for the projected image of the cauldron, which grew solid and heavy in their hands solid silver and filled with an iridescent amethyst potion. Struggling to catch it as it landed, nearly splashing some of the liquid between them, Hermione cried out in surprise. "Oh! There's an actual potion in here!"

"Indeed," said Severus, peering into the cauldron with a frown. "Though I am at a loss to say exactly which draught this is." He leaned down to smell the vapours that were rising in undulating, intertwining waves from the surface of the potion. Hermione leaned over as well and caught a whiff of what smelled like fresh cut grass and... cinnamon.

"Hm." He shook his head. "Its colour resembles the Draught of Living Death at the midpoint of its brewing." He grunted softly, swirling the cauldron carefully as he examined the surface of the potion. "And its sheen and consistency suggests a Veritas potion. But the movement of the steam rising from the surface is distinctive... very few potions in existence have that characteristic steam pattern.... It always suggests..." He stopped short.

"What does it suggest, Severus?" Hermione asked, anxiously scanning his face for clues.

He shook his head absently, still absorbed in examining the potion. "I don't know for certain, but I believe that, whatever this potion does, it has at least two functions and they are inextricably intertwined. In order for one element of the potion to work, the other must as well."

She nodded. "Well, that doesn't sound so bad... but you look worried. What is it?"

He shook his head and peered into the cauldron once more. "It is too early for me to say," he said brusquely and, with a wave of his arm, Summoned the key. "I believe I know now why we need this." His voice was tight. "There are some volumes on my shelves at Spinner's End that cannot be found anywhere else in wizarding Britain." He Summoned some parchment and a quill. "I will give you a list; you must find them and read enough of them so that they will appear here for my use. Use the key to enter my potions lab and gather my research equipment together. Your touch and intent should be sufficient to bring them here as well. I have a great deal of research to do if I am to determine what this potion does and how to use it."

She nodded, confused by his clipped tone. "Of course, I can do that." She hesitated, biting her lip, reluctant to voice her next thought.

"What is it, Hermione?" he asked impatiently.

"I think... I think that I should also go to you to your body." Her voice barely wavered. "I think that I should go and take you out of that hospital... and bring you home... to my home."

Severus' expression was flat, his eyes fixed on a point that Hermione could not see. A long moment passed before he bowed his head in agreement. Sensing his disquiet, Hermione silently moved into the circle of his arms and laid her head on his chest.

"It will be all right... we can do this," she whispered. She felt him nod, but he did not speak.

And so they sat together on a bed of blankets, quietly talking about what was to come, warmed by the fire and each other until, finally, they fell into a restless sleep. And if Hermione noticed that Severus was trembling as he held her, she never said a word.

## Chapter 6

*Chapter 7 of 8*

Her dreams have haunted her for years. What will change when she finally remembers them?

Winner, Best Hurt/Comfort and Judge's Choice H/C in The New Library Awards.

*And so they sat together silently on a bed of blankets, warmed by the fire and each other, until finally they fell into a restless sleep. And if Hermione noticed that Severus was trembling as he held her, she never said a word.*

Apparating to the end of a long cobbled street lined with row houses, Hermione clutched her wand in one hand and a large brass key in the other. Severus had painstakingly described not only his home's location, but the array of enchantments protecting his house and his laboratory. Reluctantly, he'd described the nearly abandoned street and the ramshackle houses that ran its length. Hermione was confused by his reticence. He'd seemed uncomfortable with the thought of her seeing his house on Spinner's End, though she only had her suspicions as to why. Walking down the deserted road this morning, she could imagine Severus growing up on this street, an awkward wizard boy in a tough neighbourhood. *I wonder if his memories of this place make him uncomfortable. It didn't sound like he had much of a childhood, or that his adult memories from here would be any better.*

His house was as ramshackle as the road. The salon, when she entered, was dark and musty; the books lining the walls were shrouded behind what seemed like a layer of fog. Hermione knew that these shelves did not contain the important or rare volumes; those were shelved below, in an annex to his laboratory. Moving quickly, she found the basement door and, with the proper incantation, released the protective enchantments. The laboratory was expansive and well-equipped. *He must have spent his time down here*, she thought, looking around at the well-organised space and the comfortable couch and table tucked into one corner. Using the list that Severus supplied, Hermione gathered the materials that he needed for his examination of what they referred to as 'their' potion.

Finally, she entered the adjacent room in search of the books that Severus needed. Despite her best efforts, Severus continued to be cagey about his theories regarding the amethyst potion. Unwilling to discuss the possible meaning of its dual purpose, he withdrew and became irritable when she pressed him. *There is obviously something worrying him about this potion.... Why is he so worried about telling me what he's concerned about?*

But, Hermione knew Severus Snape was not a man to be moved when he had his mind made up. She would have to wait; in good time, she would know his analysis of the potion that the *Adfinitas Animarum* produced. *I've never heard of a potion appearing by magic... it's as if the book brewed it for us.*

Consulting her list, she methodically searched the shelves for the ancient tomes that Severus insisted would be impossible to find elsewhere. *I could spend ages examining these books... the ones upstairs, too...* she thought wistfully. She looked around for one final moment. *If all goes well, I will have time enough to examine Severus' library... if all goes well.*

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He was busy examining a steaming cauldron when she arrived that night. *I guess the transfer worked.* She approached in silence, recognising his severe expression of arch disapproval. *That's the look he gets when a student has been recalcitrant... I never imagined that he would favour a potion with that look.*

Smiling to herself, Hermione curled into a nearby chair and observed him at work, entranced by the ease and precision of his movements. *He is a scientist... and an artist... a scholar...* Her thoughts were interrupted by a brilliant flash of light emitting from his wand, followed by a grunt of satisfaction as the potion in question turned the proper shade of olive and the smell of cut greens wafted from its surface. *...and a powerful, talented wizard.*

He looked up at her, a satisfied expression on his face. She rose to greet him as he approached her, and his fierce embrace held a touch of the apprehension that she had felt from him the previous night. She pulled back to look at his face, but it showed none of the tension that she felt in his embrace.

"You're making progress?" she asked, inclining her head towards the lab table and its steaming cauldron.

"Indeed," he replied. "I have done all I can for today. I've been successful in isolating the ingredients of the original potion and believe that I have determined the composition of the component that will release my soul from... here." He waved his hand dismissively. "Nothing surprising. Mandrake, belladonna, and willow leaves in a base of calendula."

"Then why are you so tense, Severus?" she asked, unwilling to ignore the buzz of anxiety that surrounded him.

He glanced at her sharply and, after a moment, opened his hands in defeat. "I am concerned about the second component of the potion. There are some ingredients that I have identified that baffle me... I'm not sure why they are necessary for a potion that reunites a soul with a body, though I suppose that since I've not come across a potion that serves this purpose, I couldn't say how it should be constructed. But still, theoretically, I don't understand...." He shook his head.

"What ingredients bother you so much?" asked Hermione, walking to the lab bench to see what he was working on. For a moment, she thought that he would refuse to answer, but then he strode to the bench and gestured with an elegant hand.

"Jobberknoll feathers, henbane, cassia, lavender essence, datura..." he trailed off, watching Hermione to see if she saw the relationship between the ingredients.

She wrinkled her brow, thinking about potions that utilised those ingredients. She gasped and looked up sharply. "They are all used in serums that either force the drinker to tell the truth or in potions that uncover or force revelation," she whispered.

He nodded. "I don't understand why these elements are necessary for a potion such as this, though I hope to have the answer tomorrow." He gestured to a second cauldron that was bubbling further down the lab bench. "I also do not yet understand how to administer the potion and to whom."

"To whom?" she asked.

He nodded. "It is possible, Hermione, that we will both have to drink this potion in order for it to work..." he looked sickened at the thought "...and *that* will not happen unless I am certain how it works and what it will do. I will spend tomorrow examining the possibilities." He shook his head, and murmured, "I will not put you at risk, Hermione, not for my sake."

She moved closer and reached for his hand, cradling it between her own. "There is nothing to be afraid of, Severus. We will get through this together; we must do this together. As for the potion, you will figure it out, I know you will." His lips moved into the semblance of a smile as he turned his hand to caress hers.

"I hope so, Hermione," he said softly and took a breath as if he was about to say more.

She waited, but he did not continue. Instead, he turned to clean his work area and then, with a wordless gesture, reached for her arm to guide her to their bedroom. She followed him without a sound, the silence wrapping around them like a bubble, holding and cushioning them from the fears and uncertainties outside. In wordless accord, they slowly undressed one another in the candlelit room, feather light touches sanctifying soft skin.

Under the shield of soft blankets, their kisses grew more heated, caresses more intent. Wrapped in one another, they moved together fiercely, drinking in every touch, every taste, every gasp. Their soft moans of pleasure fell like rain into the warm silence of the room, only their tears revealing unspoken worry about tomorrow.

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The Wellington Hospital was as different in tone from St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries as a Hippogriff from a Bowtruckle. While superficially similar in its whitewashed walls and bustling staff, missing were the hordes of frantic men, women and children rushing the welcome witch, demanding care for their cauldron burns, Transfigured body parts or splinched limbs. Instead, the quiet entry with its vaulted ceiling suggested a sombre sort of care where patients were decorous and patient and waited their turn for attention. *This is a private hospital, Hermione realised. Who is paying for his care?*

Hermione had given a great deal of thought to the dilemma of how to retrieve Severus from the halls of this hospital. While she was unconcerned about how to get Severus out Side-Along Apparition seeming like a reasonable option, she was not sure that the layers of bureaucracy in the average British hospital would allow a young woman to simply waltz in and request the room numbers of all unidentified male patients who had been admitted over the last six years.

*I hate to use magic on unsuspecting Muggles,* she thought to herself, *but I really have no alternative.* After discarding several options meant to either persuade the admitting office that she was a long-lost relative or that she should have access to their filing system, Hermione decided that magic was, all things considered, the most efficient and least disruptive of her choices. *A mild Confundus should do the trick,* she thought to herself. *The first step is to find him and to ascertain his physical condition. If he is healthy enough to move, I can just... take him... when the nurses are out of his room.*

Clutching the sheaf of papers in one hand that she intended to use to Conjure Severus' "release documents" and her wand discreetly in her other hand, Hermione approached the administration desk, a smile pasted on her face.

"Good morning," she said to the dour woman behind the counter. As the woman looked up, Hermione lifted her wand and silently cast *Confundo*. The woman's eyes took on a glazed expression as she looked at Hermione.

"How can I help you?" she said, speech slightly slurred.

"I am here to discharge a patient," Hermione began. "You will look through your computer records and give me the status of all currently hospitalised male patients who were admitted to the hospital without identification over the last six years."

The woman nodded and lowered her eyes to her computer screen. "There are only two who are still in hospital," she muttered. "One is in a coma on the fifth floor and the other is in the rehabilitation unit on the fourth floor." She turned to the papers on her desk and began shuffling them listlessly.

Hermione leaned over and spotted a document that had the word "Discharge" across the top. "Please hand me that document," she asked briskly. The woman handed her the paper, not looking up for more than a moment. Hermione quickly scanned the page, noting its layout, and handed it back. Turning away, she tapped her sheaf of papers with her wand and muttered, *Effingo*, and Discharge papers for one "John Doe" materialised on the blank paper. Turning long enough to point her wand and mutter *Finite*, Hermione scanned the hallway to find the nearest lift.

Exiting at the fourth floor, she ducked into an alcove and pulled out her wand. *Point Me*, she muttered. Her wand swung around, pointing to the right. Tapping her wand on her head, she Disillusioned herself and set out down the hall.

Fortunately for her, the nurses were gathered around the nurse's station giving report before they changed shifts. The halls were empty and her trainers were silent as she made her way down the corridor. Room after room revealed men who were decidedly Not-Severus. Frustrated and afraid that she was running out of time, Hermione ducked her head into a room at the end of the hallway. *Let him be here....* As she took in the contents of the space, Hermione let out the breath that she didn't realise she was holding. Alone in the small, spare room, sitting stiffly in a chair, was Severus Snape.

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Hermione froze, unable to look away from the man in the chair. *Oh, Severus....* He was gaunt, like a man who had no appetite, but ate what was given to him. The light blue pullover and dark slacks he wore did nothing for his complexion. Skin pale and dull, he seemed to have not seen much of the sun in months. He was breathing steadily, obviously calm, but his body language and facial expression were vacant.

Cancelling the Disillusionment Charm and approaching his chair, Hermione reached out a hand to touch his, reassured by its warmth. She crouched next to him and spoke softly, "I'm here now, Severus... I'm here to take you home." She stroked his hand gently though she knew he could not respond. "I am going to try to find out who brought you here, and then I will take you with me... away from here."

The silent man continued to stare blankly, and silently thanking the thoroughness of her Healer training, Hermione drew out her wand, wordlessly casting diagnostic spells that sent shafts of light and spinning figures into the air around him. She breathed a sigh of relief. "You are healthy, Severus. I have no idea how that happened, no idea who rescued you from the shack and healed that bite, but you are physically... fine." She was giddy with relief. "I want to see you whole... healthy in body and spirit," she whispered, unbidden tears rising to her eyes.

Reaching out to briefly stroke his cheek, Hermione turned to find his nurse entering the room.

"Who are you?" she asked, abruptly. Quickly, Hermione muttered *Confundo* as she approached the woman with the discharge papers she had copied. "My name is Hermione Granger, and I am here to transport this patient to his new home," she said with the confidence of someone who had spent many hours working in a hospital. "He's a John Doe, right?" she asked offhandedly.

"He is," the nurse answered with a distracted expression, grasping the discharge papers in her hands. "He was apparently brought into the Emergency Ward by a Good Samaritan oh, about six years ago," she said, looking through the admission summary in his chart. "The nurses were all aflutter at the time, I remember that day, actually, because the man who brought him in was quite the looker. Take-charge type, too. Blond, aristocratic. Apparently, he pays for his care as well," she added, managing to look impressed despite the slightly unfocussed look in her eyes.

*Malfoy?* "Um, do you happen to remember how old that man was, the one who brought him in?" Hermione asked, grateful that the nurse was too Confunded to wonder why

Hermione cared.

"Ooh, fairly young, around your age, I'd guess," she replied. "Fine-looking lad, but wouldn't stick around long only to set up payment and to be sure that the patient would be adequately cared for."

Hermione nodded, distracted by the revelation. *Malfoy saved him. Draco he must have found him in the shack before we returned to collect his body. I wonder why he didn't bring him to St Mungo's... and what he did that saved his life after that awful bite....*

"What sort of condition was he in when he was brought in?" Hermione asked abruptly.

The nurse fumbled with the pages of his chart to find the admission summary. "He was in bad shape, but nobody could figure out why. He had an old scar on his neck, looked like a bite of some kind." She read further, "a bit anaemic." She shook her head. "The most remarkable symptom that he had was that he was completely unresponsive. It says here that if you stood him up, he would walk, if you sat him down he would sit, put food in front of him, he'd eat. Same as now. But it was like nobody was there... inside," she stopped, closing the chart and looking confused again for an instant.

"Well, I suppose we should be going, then," Hermione said abruptly, taking the nurse's arm and guiding her from the room. "I'll take care of collecting his things and escorting him out," she continued, the nurse nodding, eyes glazed.

"Yes, that sounds fine. You do that," she muttered.

Hermione breathed deeply to steady herself as the nurse ambled back up the corridor and quickly closed the door behind her. Mind reeling from her discoveries, Hermione took a moment to think. *Malfoy found him, healed him, and moved him. But I can't think about that now... now I have to stay focussed.* She had prepared for this moment, knew exactly where she would be taking Severus. Her small flat had been prepared for an additional occupant, and while her stomach clenched with anxiety, she was ready.

Standing him up slowly and wrapping her arms around Severus' thin shoulders, she whispered in his ear, "It's time to go home, Severus," and Apparated them both from the room.

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Hermione's flat was small, but comfortable. In the tradition of University students everywhere, she had furnished her flat with the gifts and hand-me-downs of friends and family. Though no longer a student, she had not spared time or energy to update her décor. Despite the motley collection of items, Hermione had managed to create a warm space that comforted her each night when she returned home. *Lately, my bed is the most appealing place in the flat... It's the pathway to Severus.* Accordingly, she took Severus gently by the arm and guided him to her bedroom. Though she knew that the man she had in her care was only the shell of the man she loved, she spoke to him in an ongoing dialogue, in case he had retained a modicum of awareness of his surroundings.

"I hope that being in a new place doesn't distress you, Severus. I just couldn't wait... couldn't leave you there one more moment once I knew where to find you." She guided him firmly to her bed and considered what to do. "It might seem strange to you, Severus, but I think that you should sleep in my bed... I will leave you in your clothes, they look comfortable enough." She bit her lip as she thought for a moment. "I think it will be okay for me to sleep next to you... I hope you won't be angry... I'm going to be seeing you when I fall asleep, and it would be nice to wake up with you next to me, even if it's like this...."

Gently, she guided the dark man to the bed, helping him to position himself for the night. Immediately, he closed his eyes and appeared to be asleep. Changing quickly into nightclothes, Hermione slipped into the bed next to him, laying her hand gently on his shoulder and, within minutes, was fast asleep.

## Chapter 7

*Chapter 8 of 8*

Her dreams have haunted her for years. What will change when she finally remembers them?

Winner, Best Hurt/Comfort and Judge's Choice H/C in The New Library Awards.

*Gently, she guided the dark man to the bed, helping him to position himself for the night. Immediately, he closed his eyes and appeared to be asleep. Changing quickly into nightclothes, Hermione slipped into the bed next to him, laying her hand gently on his shoulder and, within minutes, was fast asleep.*

He was waiting for her when she arrived, perched on the sofa, hands clasped together tightly, expression pensive.

"Did you succeed?" he asked as soon as she appeared. "Am I... that is to say, is my body...?"

"Your body is astonishingly healthy and currently asleep in my bed, Severus," Hermione interjected quickly, eager to soothe his anxiety.

He took a deep breath and appeared to relax slightly. "Thank you," he whispered. "Thank you."

Moved by his gratitude and relief, her voice shook. "I am grateful beyond measure that it was possible to find you and to move you." She paused, wondering whether he would ask for more details and when he did not, continued. "I found out who rescued you, Severus." He looked up, eyebrows raised, questioning. "Draco. The nurse said that he brought you to the emergency ward six years ago, made sure that you were cared for and," she hesitated, unsure how he would feel about this last bit of information, "arranged to pay for your long-term care at the hospital."

Severus sat blankly for a moment, absorbing what he had learned. Leaning back into the cushions, he closed his eyes and sighed. "There is good in that boy, I knew there was." He lifted his head and looked at Hermione. "I don't remember much after giving Potter my memories... just some sound and movement and," he shook his head as if disoriented, "something else that I can't quite put my finger on. Then... nothing until... here, you visiting me each night and waking me."

She smiled. "I don't know when he was able to get away, or how he knew that you were there..." She shook her head. "...or for that matter, how he kept you from bleeding out from that bite. Apparently, you arrived at the emergency ward already healed, your blood counts were still low, but they kept you because you were essentially catatonic."

"Because I... the essence of my... self... was not there."

"It was here. With me," she whispered, moving to join him on the couch. "We just didn't know it, either of us, for a long time."

They sat together, each absorbed in thought. Hermione broke the silence first. "There's a lot here that we can't account for, still so much we don't know. But for now, I am thankful that we are here, now... together... and that we are on our way to being together in life and not only in dreams."

Severus turned to her, his expression serious. The flicker of uneasiness that crossed his features was gone before Hermione could respond. "The last of my experiments is about to be completed," he began brusquely, "and then I will know what we need to know about this potion."

She looked at him, eyes wide, but before she could pelt him with questions, he continued.

"This potion has been difficult to decipher, but this is the definitive test. It will tell me how to administer the draught and what we should expect to happen next."

Hermione nodded, uneasiness warring with excitement. "Okay... so, do you mean that we could go forward tonight?" she asked, heart hammering.

He hesitated. "Perhaps... potentially, yes."

"Potentially? But what...."

He did not let her finish. Instead, he stood abruptly and strode to the bench, leaning over the cauldron to examine it.

The look on his face as he gazed into the cauldron was masklike, but before she could move, he shook his head. "It can't be... the texts suggested it, but I cannot believe... that can't be right." He turned away from her, but not before she saw the shuttered look in his eyes. *Something made him close up tight again... but what?*

"What can't be right, Severus? What's wrong?" Hermione jumped up to join him alongside the cauldron.

He stood, back to her, folded in on himself. *Something has frightened him.... This man who risked his life for twenty years, what could be so terrifying?* Hermione reached for him, tentative only for a moment, and wrapped her arms around him, laying her cheek on his back. Silently she held him, listening to the rapid beating of his heart and his erratic breaths as he struggled with a fear that she did not yet understand. As his breathing steadied, he reached for her hands and drew her around to face him. Hermione bit her lip to keep from crying out at the sight of his anguished expression, his eyes filled with an indefinable mixture of hope and terror.

"Tell me," she whispered.

He shook his head and pulled her into a fierce embrace, burying his face in her tousled hair. Finally, he took a deep breath and pulled away from her, shifting his gaze to meet hers, his voice rough with emotion. "I don't think that I really believed it, Hermione." He shook his head at her puzzled expression. "No matter your certainty that the *Amplector Animum* enchantment would reject a soul that was too Dark, or that our use of the *Adfinitas Animarum* proved that we were suited...." She made an indignant noise, and he forestalled more of her response with a touch of a long finger to her lips. "Wait, Hermione, I am not finished."

Nodding reluctantly, despite her confusion, she kept her silence as he continued, "You are an amazing woman, Hermione... generous and loyal. Lovely and brave." He smiled tenderly at the blush that stained her cheeks. "To think that your nature and the power of your desire saved me this I could imagine. But the idea that my soul is any match for yours..." He shook his head sadly. "...no matter how fervently you choose to believe this, Hermione, I fear that you are mistaken." He looked at her with the expression of a man who had lived a thousand years of despair and believed himself deserving.

He paused, struggling again to steady himself. "I might have lived with my secret, Hermione I might have selfishly let you believe that our souls were well-matched. We could have continued to have our moments here together, secret and alone... never really enough, but... it could have sufficed for me... until you grew tired of your half-life and moved on...." His voice was gravelly and he could no longer meet her eyes.

"And I imagine that eventually my soul would have faded away... or moved on... but you would be safe." He paused, distracted. Hermione whimpered, unable to restrain herself any longer. Silently, she moved closer, wrapping her arms around Severus again, bringing him out of his reverie. Her arms around him appeared to trigger a surge of grief and guilt, and he blurted out, "I didn't mean to... I never meant to put you in harm's way...."

"In harm's way? Severus, how have you put me in harm's way?" Her voice was desperate, pleading.

"I participated in our bonding, Hermione, allowed the magic and the passion to take over." He stroked her hair gently, fingers tangled in an errant curl. "There is no going back now... you would have been safe before, but now..." His voice broke.

"Why am I no longer safe, Severus? I don't understand."

Severus gestured to the silver cauldron containing the amethyst potion sitting on the lab bench, intertwining spirals of steam rising from it. "I have never seen a potion with this particular combination of characteristics." She nodded mutely, and he continued, "If I am correct, the first component of the potion will release my soul from the protection of yours." He met her eyes, expression sombre. "But the second part of the potion, the part that has been baffling me is a variant of a Veritas potion. I couldn't figure out why this potion that seems designed to reunite my soul with my body would need a Veritas component." He paused for a moment, reflective, and Hermione endeavoured to remain still.

"According to the sources I have found..." He indicated the pile of books that Hermione had gathered from his house at Spinner's End. "...the *Amplector Animum* enchantment cannot simply be... undone." He rubbed his eyes with his hands. "It led us to our... bonding, a bonding that we chose, but which we were guided to by the magic of the *Amplector Animum* and the *Adfinitas Animarum*. Once the enchantment which is a sort of bonding itself occurs, there is a pull for the two souls to bind themselves to one another further. So in order to untangle my soul from the *Amplector Animum* and from your soul without doing damage to you," he hesitated at this, dread shadowing his features, "the potion will strip us bare, Hermione. It will show us to one another... fully... and it will leave us to choose."

"To choose what, Severus?" Her face was frozen with fear.

"I explained earlier that the intertwining steam pattern means that in order for the potion to work, both components must be active. Neither the release nor the revelation can happen in isolation they occur together. In order to safely release my soul, Hermione, the potion will strip all artifice from us. It will reveal our true selves, our whole selves to the other. In order for my soul to reanimate my body, both of us must choose one another again... freely." He shook his head. "And because of the bonds that exist between us now, if one or the other of us turns away, both souls... move on." He looked at her, his expression fierce. "We cannot do this. You will not like what you see, Hermione, of this I can assure you."

She sat, stunned, absorbing his words. "But why, what are you so afraid of? I love you, I've already chosen you. I told you I do see you whole..." She tilted her jaw in a gesture of defiance. "...and that potion isn't going to show me anything that I don't already know about you."

He laughed roughly. "You have no idea what you will see, Hermione, no idea what I've done... what I am." He turned abruptly, taking the edge of his robe and wrapping himself in its folds. "It is an unacceptable risk," he stated, "no matter your best intentions now, in the moment that you see me under the influence of the potion, you will not be able to prevent yourself from drawing back."

He was pacing now, refusing to look at her as he spoke in tones usually reserved for errant students. "We will not do this. I will not risk your safety, your life." He shook his head. "No. This ends here." He drew himself up, the sweep of his robes oddly reminiscent of another time when he draped himself in fabric armour, the shield's effectiveness now no better than it had been then.

"No, Severus, no." Hermione moved swiftly to face him. "You do not get to decide this alone." Her voice was shaking with suppressed fury. "How dare you act as if I have no right to make this decision? And furthermore," her voice rising as he made to interrupt her, "how can you have so little trust, so little faith... in yourself... in me... in us?"

Her face was bright with anger as she struggled to slow her breathing. "Besides," she said, a bit more softly, "who's to say that you won't be repulsed by what you see in me, Severus?"

He looked up at her, startled. "That's ridiculous..."

"You insist on seeing yourself as ruined, a blackened soul..." She interrupted him. "...and you imagine that I see you in some distorted, idealised way." She laughed shortly. "But I think that it is you who will be surprised that there is also Darkness in me, Severus, not the other way around." She had moved slightly away from him, arms hugging herself, eyes bright. "I am not perfect, Severus. And the only reassurance that I can offer... the only hope that I can see is our trust in one another." She looked up to find him staring at her incredulously. "Trust that I want you. All of you. Just as I must trust that the shadows inside of me won't make you turn away."

Her heart clenched at the look of raw hope on his face. He stood opposite her for a long moment, frozen in the grip of his longing and his terror. After a moment's hesitation, he stepped closer and reached out a hand to cradle the nape of her neck. Drawing her close, he enfolded her in trembling arms as the weight of his uncertainty enveloped them. Standing thus, she was reminded of the first time they had wrapped themselves around one other...each overwhelmed with love and longing, and equally afraid that revulsion and rejection would be their reward.

"Have faith, Severus," she whispered as she drew back to meet his eyes.

"Faith," he echoed, eyes glittering as he held her gaze. And reverentially, as if he were sanctifying a prayer, Severus took Hermione's hand and placed a single kiss in its palm.

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There was nothing left to say. The delicate bonds of trust and love that had sprung between them over their weeks and months together cocooned them. Severus bottled the ancient brew and in silent accord, they settled themselves on the soft rug before the fire. The amethyst potion shimmered in two crystal flasks, its smell reminiscent of cinnamon buns eaten while reclining on a bed of lush grass on a warm summer day. Breathing deeply to steady herself, Hermione's hand shook just a little as she took hers from Severus.

Facing one another, a hair's breadth apart, eyes bright with hope, they drank.

Hermione's eyes closed as she felt the potion move through her, the taste of acid and cinnamon sharp in her mouth. For a moment, she felt as if her body were on fire, and then, after a wave of dizziness, she felt light, almost euphoric. She breathed deeply as she waited. *What am I afraid to see? Am I afraid to know?* Long moments passed until she cautiously opened her eyes.

Severus sat opposite; eyes closed tightly, hands clenched into fists at his sides. A brilliant glow surrounded him, bathing him in shards of luminous colour. He was breathing rapidly, as if terrified. At Hermione's small movement, he cautiously opened his eyes to peer at her. A smile lit his face as he looked at her, and she glanced down at herself and laughed. She, too, was drenched in light. Softer, but no less vibrant, Hermione gazed at a radiant hand and reached out to touch him.

It was as if all the layers of Severus Snape opened to her at once. His pride, his shame, his rage, all glowed in a burning knot of crimson and copper. Not as fiery, but no less compelling, his sadness, his longing for acceptance, his grief, and his guilt all wound around each other in luminous beams of goldenrod and jade. Shards of black, like spidery cracks in glass, shot through the tangles in strands of light as thin as angel hair.

But underneath, secreted beneath the knots of his frailty, which were blinding in their incandescence, shone a smooth, supple core. Integrity, loyalty, passion, honesty and a capacity for love that overwhelmed her with its intensity shimmered in a sheet of azure and amethyst that radiated from Severus like the sun shining off the ocean. Deep and still, the light shone steadily, unwavering and true.

Hermione looked up to find him examining her with all the intensity that she had directed towards him. She opened to him, showed him her competitiveness, her need to be recognised, her fear of being left behind, all wound together in luminous tangles of sienna and emerald. Her frustration and loneliness twisted around her pride in strands of scarlet and yellow. She showed him her vulnerability, her insecurity, both thin knots of grey woven into the shimmering tendrils. Beneath the snarls of fear and pain shone radiance as rich and deep as Severus'. Like liquid gold, it glowed with the depth of the sun and seemed as deep as any sea. Steady and solid, it shimmered, and the knots of colour around it paled in its shadow.

A sound of pure joy escaped her as she reached for him with both hands, meeting him as he moved towards her with the same intent. And with arms wrapped around each other, face to face, their eyes met. Images flooded them, flashes of memory and fragments of emotion jumbled but interlocked around their jagged edges.

And there was a baby crying irritably, held awkwardly by a frazzled woman who looked overwhelmed and afraid of her own shadow; and a little boy with a sad face pulling on the woman's skirts as she shuffled away from him; and then a slightly older boy talking eagerly with a red-haired girl who was smiling, gazing at a canopy of leaves in the trees above them; that boy, older still, looking astonished and awkward as a group of older, tougher boys made space in their circle for him to join them. A teenaged Severus now, watching a young woman with auburn hair turn stiffly away from him, closing a portrait door in his face; that same boy, muffling sobs with his pillow in the dead of night. Then confusion, fractured images of dark cloaks, silver masks and flashes of green and a sickened young man holding himself rigidly in the circle, looking at no one; a windswept mountain where, terrified and torn apart with fear and regret, a weary wizard in a black cloak knelt, hiding his face from the thunderstruck expression of the headmaster and his words. *You disgust me.*

Hermione wept silent tears as she watched that man hide himself deeper and deeper behind layers of rage, shame and regret. Memories of meting out harsh words with the precision of a blade warred with the recollection of nights spent cold and alone in his dungeon quarters, fear holding him in its vicelike grip. Dark shadows and screams of agony echoed in his memory as he hardened his features when he dared not turn away; images of whispered meetings and warnings, comrades distracted or diverted by his sharp wit and clever tongue fuelled a rush of relief and remorse for the many times when such diversions were impossible or went unheeded.

Without warning, Severus inhaled sharply, and Hermione tightened her grip as she saw his anguished face reflected in the headmaster's impossibly blue eyes. *...And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?* And again... *Severus, please...* A flash of green and a silent scream so powerful that Hermione cried out in pain as she pulled him closer, enfolding him more securely in her arms. She saw his aura become dull as he retreated further behind his shields, flashes of contorted bodies and frightened young faces surrounding them. Then, facing Voldemort in the Shrieking Shack, transfixed by the snake suspended in its protective bubble, paralysed with horror that he would die without telling Potter what he must do. She felt him try to pull away from her embrace and held fast.

*I will not go, nor will you. I am here and I will stay.* Her thoughts, like a whisper of cool water in his mind, slipped through the cracks of memory and the fissures of grief. *Look at me, Severus.... Look at me.*

Confused, but momentarily distracted from his immersion in memory and pain, he shifted his focus. Other memories flooded them, textured with emotion, shaped differently than his, but magnetic in their honesty.

There was a baby, held securely in her mother's arms as they gazed into one another's eyes; a toddler, delighted at the floating blocks above her head, bursting into tears at the shock and horror on her parents' faces; a little girl in a cloud of hair, buoyant with excitement but withdrawing in shame as other children laughed or turned away; a taller child, hair grown along with her, holding a wand with a rapturous expression, a pang of guilt marring the moment as she saw her parents hang back from the shower of golden sparks that burst from her wand.

That same child with her hand in the air, blazing with the desire to show that she belongs, that she knows, desperately ignoring the impatience of peers and professors alike; alone again behind the curtains of her bed, tears soaking her pillow as she listened to the raucous noise from the common room below; crying again, hiding under a sink, a troll ripping through the room... and then... shocked expressions and welcoming smiles; and then two men duelling, one light, one dark, a surge of admiration and shame colliding; an older Hermione, watching Harry and Ron turn from her in anger and disgust as Professor McGonagall held Harry's new broom in her hands.

Then Yule, brimming with anticipation, flooded with hurt at the looks of disbelief when Viktor Krum reached ~~for~~ her hand; fear and fierce pride as the image of a dark, severe man with sharp black eyes strode to the Minister of Magic and exposed his Dark Mark; a stab of fear and longing as that man left on a mission that would surely risk his life; then a dark room with many doors, spinning; running, terrified, Death Eaters around every corner until searing pain and darkness descended; a flock of canaries, Conjured in a blinding rage; terror that Ron might die before she could tell him that she was sorry, so sorry.

Images moving faster now: running to the dungeons to get help when Death Eaters stormed the castle; shock and disbelief as Harry described the scene on the tower *Evil is a strong word...* the fear and constant dread of being discovered as they hunted Horcruxes; confusing pangs of grief and sorrow as she listened to stories of happenings at Hogwarts; a flash of blinding fear alongside the images of Bellatrix Lestrange and Fenrir Greyback's leering faces; then searing pain and *Crucio!* echoing as if from a distance; hot anger, bitter betrayal at what Dumbledore had kept from them.

Then the Shrieking Shack. Shaking, peering between cracks of wood, hidden, terrified, startled by the slash of a wand, a snake attacking and a man crumbling like a rag doll to the floor.

And then, as Hermione watched herself step into the Shrieking Shack behind Harry, her vision merged with Severus'. Time seemed to slow, as together they watched his soul rise from his agonised body, the purple aura appearing like bruises beneath the strands of fierce colour. As he turned to face her, a wail of despair emerged from the depths of his soul, carrying with it the echo of every memory, every hurt and every hope held within. In a streak of fractured light, it burst from him...a radiant slash of anguish and loss.

And Hermione turned to it and opened her arms, drawing it near so that it shimmered between them in a luminous arc. They watched as her aura radiated from her in a wash of ochre light and seemed to soothe the splintered beam, gentled it, and drew it to her heart.

And then she heard him, in an anguished whisper, *Alone... forever, alone.*

But through the flickering light, Hermione's soul reached for his, shimmering gold, the knots of her fear and jealousy and anger dimmed by the brightness of her compassion and fierce belief in him. *No, not alone. I see you, I am here with you.*

He stilled, eyes narrowed in astonishment. *You see me? You really... see me?*

She nodded, steady and encouraging. *I do... I see you. Please. Will you come?*

He hesitated, brutal self-loathing a shadow on his soul. *I don't want to hurt you. I could not bear to hurt you....*

She shook her head and took a step towards him. *I am not afraid of you... I see now, I understand..* She gestured to her heart, where the tortured light had stilled and woven itself with the fiery strands of her aura. *But you need to see me as well, you must be sure....*

He moved towards her cautiously, azure light radiating from him. He hesitated, as if loath to bring his essence any closer to hers than he had done already. But finally, he lifted his eyes to hers, a bewildered expression softening his features. Eyes locked, they intuitively leaned towards one another, rapid breathing gradually slowing as they instinctively laid bare the landscapes inside their souls. In an instant, they shifted again, looking at each other with entirely new eyes, Severus' expression no less bewildered, but now also yielding. And then, in tandem, they stepped forward, arms open. In the space of a heartbeat, his soul slipped into hers, disappearing within.

As they sat, the image of the shack and its inhabitants faded, but the watching witch and wizard held fast to one another, shivering with the force of what they had witnessed.

"We have already seen one another's souls bare, we just didn't remember," Hermione whispered.

"The enchantment, in the shack, it required both of us to be revealed," he murmured. "It was then that we had to choose, then that we had to see. The risk was then; the risk is over now. You are safe, my love, my life; you are safe." He buried his head in her hair as he shook with relief.

"We both are safe, Severus, both of us," she murmured as she reached for him and drew his lips to hers. "Look," she gestured to their surroundings.

No longer sitting before the fire in the cottage, they were instead huddled alongside a bed in a dark room. Two figures lay immobile on the bed. Severus gasped sharply and rose warily to look more closely.

"Where are we, Hermione?" he asked in a low voice.

She rose to stand beside him, worried about his reaction to her having placed his body in the bed beside her. "This is my bedroom, Severus. And here we are," she said nervously, gesturing to the two figures lying side by side, her hand resting gently on his shoulder as they slept.

He looked up at her sharply, brow furrowed. "You put me in your bed," he said, bemused.

Hermione blushed hotly. "I hated waking up every morning without you," she said softly. "Are you angry?"

He shook his head. "No, not angry. It's just," he swallowed thickly, "that you would want to be close to me even when I am... like that," he whispered. "I didn't, I never imagined...." He shook his head, at a loss for words.

Hermione smiled and reached for his hand, tracing the elegant lines of his fingers. "This way, when I was with you in dreams, I was also with you here. It was the closest I could get to having you with me, whole." She blinked back the wetness that misted her vision.

He clasped his fingers around her hands, stilling her caresses and drew them tenderly to his lips. Noting the apprehension that still shadowed his eyes, she spoke.

"I think it's time now, Severus. Our souls have been entwined, but now we can live our lives, as two who love and choose one another every day." She looked at him with her heart in her eyes. "I choose you, Severus; I choose to trust that you will love me and protect me with all that you have. I believe in you and have faith in us." She smiled softly. "You are free; you can be whole again and live the life that you have earned."

He nodded, speechless. His eyes glittered as he dipped his head to capture her lips in a searing kiss, pouring everything that he could not say into the purposeful strokes of his hands on her skin and the texture of his mouth's caress.

With a deep breath, he walked slowly towards the bed, laying a tentative hand on the thin chest. Like a river finding its ocean, his soul slipped into his body. The next thing Hermione knew, she was stirring as if from a dream. Disoriented only for a moment, she turned to look at the man lying beside her to find him awake and watching her.

"Severus," she said, reaching for his face, his arms, his hands, anything to verify that he was here, alive and awake.

"Hermione." His resonant voice rough from disuse, he still managed to caress each syllable.

She shivered. "Welcome home."

The smile that lit his face was the only answer she needed.

*Finite*

