

Pomegranate Seeds

by Deathofme

AU. Hermione travels to the Underworld to find Snape. What she discovers surprises her: he is not who he once was, and he does not want to go back.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 9

AU. Hermione travels to the Underworld to find Snape. What she discovers surprises her: he is not who he once was, and he does not want to go back.

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CHAPTER ONE

"You want what?"

"His wand, Harry. I need his wand."

Harry sighed darkly, burying his head in his hands. Hermione knew she ran the risk of turning Harry against her completely, but she persisted. This was her last chance.

"Ginny, how's that tea coming?" Harry called out to his wife, looking for a distraction.

She replied airily from the kitchen and emerged soon after with a steaming pot. Harry and Ginny had decided to get married quite young. It seemed Ginny was the only Weasley who would speak to Hermione these days.

"I know you kept it as a sort of memento, Harry. It is very important; it will solve everything."

Ginny looked wide-eyed at Hermione then at Harry. She knew the gravity behind such a request. After the war, after burying all their dead, Harry had taken Snape's wand from the Shrieking Shack and insisted the body be buried properly. In death, the hated Potions master became a martyr, and Harry hero-worshipped the man's memory, seemingly forgetting all past grievances. To be stripped of his last connection to the man, as lovingly recollected as Sirius and Lupin, would be like asking Harry to give his right arm.

However, Hermione was still bold enough to ask.

"Harry, it'll be the last time I attempt anything, I swear. This one last go and if it works, good, but if not, I'll stop. I'll be able to stop. This is really the last thing I can try..."

"No."

Hermione's face dropped.

"Harry, please ... "

"I said 'no', Hermione." He looked cross with her. "No, because it won't stop here. You won't be able to let it go; it's always been 'one more try, Harry, one more try'. I think you've gone to a point where you won't be able to stop unless somebody makes you. First, it'll be his wand and then what? Exhuming his body?"

Harry's temper deflated slightly, and he looked at her with genuine concern.

"You look ill, Hermione. You've let this crazy experiment completely take over your life. It's only created more problems than it's worth ... it's driving you away from people. You know, I'm sure Ron...

"Don't. Talk. About. Him." Hermione hissed, her eyes blazing.

Harry looked like he wanted to press the matter further, but a stern look from Ginny silenced him. Ron and Hermione's falling-out had been a dreadful affair.

"Harry, this isn't just about communicating with Snape anymore. If what I've researched is correct, *I could bring him back* And not just Snape, Harry, I could bring back your mum and dad, too."

She knew it was the wrong thing to say when he went chalk-white and she heard porcelain shatter against the floor.

He looked afraid. Afraid *of her*.

"Hermione, do you know what you're saying?"

Hermione remained silent.

"You're talking about necromancy; you're talking about very dark magic. *Merlin* ... bringing back the dead? Don't even think about it; you're deluding yourself if you think it will even work. Besides, even if it did, it wouldn't turn out the way you expect ... remember the Resurrection Stone? It doesn't bring back somebody, just a shade of their former self."

"*This will!*"

"No, it won't!" Harry bellowed as he rose to his feet.

Hermione rose as well, on the verge of angry, exhausted tears. "What claim do you have over him, anyway? You act as if you're the authority on everything Snape, like you knew him better than everyone else. No one can mourn more deeply than Harry Potter, no one feels more grief than Harry Potter ... *no one feels guiltier than Harry Potter.*"

Ginny thumped the cup she was holding down onto the table a bit harder than she anticipated.

"Now just a minute there..."

"Ginny, don't." Harry held up a hand beseechingly, and then looked back at Hermione, shocked.

He continually opened and shut his mouth, struggling for something to say. Hermione couldn't meet his eyes for shame; she knew she had hurt him. She had definitely crossed the line.

"Hermione, the dittany wouldn't have worked anyway."

It was Hermione's turn to look up in shock. To her surprise Harry looked neither hurt nor angry but concerned. His voice was soft and soothing.

"The snake venom was magical; remember when Nagini bit Arthur and it deterred most healing potions? The dittany wouldn't have worked."

Her voice was small and hard. This was an argument that chased circles round in her head and kept her from sleeping every night.

"You don't know that."

"You don't know if it would have done anything either."

"But I could have done more than just watch him die."

"Merlin, Hermione, no one could have kept it together under a situation like that. What, with Voldemort nearby, watching Nagini do...what she did ... anyone would have panicked. And nobody blames you for anything," Harry paused, as if speaking to himself, "except yourself."

Hermione stared coldly at a spot on the floor. After a tense moment, she picked up her bag from her chair.

"I have to go."

"Mione..."

Ginny stopped Harry with a hand on his arm and a knowing look. She then followed Hermione to the front door.

Looking at Hermione, Ginny noticed that her friend had become the ragged husk of the brilliant, bright witch she once was. Guilt, sleepless nights, not eating, and poring over obscure texts and potion cauldrons had taken its toll. Her face was gaunt, her eyes frequently pink lined with dark circles underneath. She often shivered, her wrists skeletal, and she was losing large amounts of bushy hair.

"Ginny, you could help me."

Ginny looked away. Then there was the ever-present hint of desperation in her voice. Harry and Hermione had both said hurtful things to each other tonight, but Harry was right in this. Hermione had let this experiment take over her life.

"The potion can be done in three days. If you could just bring the wand, then ... "

Ginny sighed and opened the front door, gesturing for them to move to the porch. They both stood silently staring into the night sky, which looked like an inky blanket strewn with glittering pinholes of light.

"What are you going to say to Snape anyway, if you can find him?"

Hermione looked at her hands, silent. She couldn't meet her friend's gaze. Ginny raised an inquisitive ginger eyebrow and angled her head so she was in Hermione's line of vision.

"Well? Why do you have to see him, Hermione? What is it you need to do, *need to say*, to put your mind at ease?"

Hermione mumbled something softly into the collar of her shirt.

"I'm sorry, what was that?"

Hermione lifted her head up and steeled her nerves.

"I have to let him know..."

Ginny waved for her to stop with a smile.

"You don't have to tell me the details, as long as you know. Look, how about I have lunch with you tomorrow in Diagon Alley? You can tell me about the potion and what you need from me then."

It was with one last encouraging smile that Ginny went back into the warmth of her house. Hermione shrugged on her coat, which was too big, around her shoulders and padded through the snow. The lamps above her flickered, and she paused for a moment under the clear yet wintry sky, before Apparating to her flat.

Immediately upon entering her flat, Hermione tripped over a stack of books and upset a pile of notes and parchment scrolls. Her tiny flat overflowed with papers, books, diagrams and magical apparatus. She had Arithmancy charts taped to her walls and potions scales strewn haphazardly on the floor. Crookshanks meowed loudly in complaint of her noisy entrance before resuming his pacing in her small kitchenette. She would have to feed him later.

Hermione dusted her knees and pushed aside the texts on deciphering the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* in disgust. That was definitely a botched investigation and a complete waste of her time. She took off her coat, draping it unceremoniously on top of her recently upturned pile of books, and made her way over to her cauldron.

Her small potions lab was the only place that was uncluttered, and she busily began throwing ingredients into her cauldron. The ingredients had already been measured and ordered on her worktable; the recipe ... after many practice trials ... she had learnt by heart. An open volume of an Ancient Greek text in addition to her translations and revisions was propped open beside her unopened bottle of powdered wormwood.

The idea had seized her when Harry first commissioned a portrait of Snape to hang in the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts.

The unveiling of the painting had been frightening. Hermione had felt her heart constrict at the thought of hearing the Potions master speak again. What would he remember? What would he say?

The portrait artist looked a little worriedly at them, his fingers nervously picking at the frame's edge.

"It's not what you've been expecting, Mr. Potter. I'm afraid this is one of those rare duds."

Snape sat with his head in his hands, eyes closed and apparently sleeping. A slight breeze inside the painting stirred his hair so that it brushed against his face, but apart from that there was no movement, not even the rise and fall of his chest.

"I've only gotten two before like this one, so it's not common, but sometimes, Mr. Potter, a painting just doesn't want to be. Can't do much to convince them either."

The disappointment on Harry's face was evident. He thanked the artist and asked for him to take the painting away. Hermione had also felt like her hopes had been dashed, but there was a sense of relief for her as well. The portrait had not come alive to snarl at her or belittle her.

The phenomenon, however, piqued her interest. Why would some subjects be impossible to place in a painting? What was the deciding factor that would have them move or not move? Abandoning her Care of Magical Creatures studies, Hermione began researching the tenuous link between the world of the living and the world of the dead. She knew there were more connections, or perhaps the divide was just weaker, in the wizarding world compared to the Muggle world. She looked not only at portraits, but ghosts, the Priori Incantatem specters and the archway in the Department of Mysteries. Her findings and any progress she made, she published in the major wizarding academic journals, securing a captive audience and modest income.

She supposed Harry was unfairly roped into it all, especially as he had been looking forward to a low-profile future. He, however, was the one person she had ready access to, and who had experienced many of these life and death anomalies. She picked his brain about the Resurrection Stone until he grew frustrated and tired. She (unsuccessfully) attempted Priori Incantatem to see if the shades of Cedric Diggory, the Potters and others deceased would return, and Harry had reluctantly cooperated, dismissing it as "that old Granger curiosity". He had balked a little when she took him to see the Veil, begging him to describe the black curtains and voices only he could see and hear, but he gave in and complied once more, believing it was just for research.

He became leery of her when he realized her studies had taken her from examining the barrier between life and death, to exploring active methods of crossing said barrier. They had an argument after she unsuccessfully tried using Snape's memories (grudgingly donated by Harry) to form a communication link, and Harry hadn't talked to her since, save for the recent wand fiasco.

Kingsley had been generous and indulged her little pet project with regular research grants from the Ministry ... no questions asked. In the beginning, her work had sparked much interest and looked like it actually could be of benefit to the magical community. Those expectations soon vanished once her articles veered away from logic tried and true and more towards the uncharted territories of wizarding myth and mysticism. She still had a huge readership for her journal articles now, but it was mainly out of morbid curiosity and other academics who wanted to watch the slow fall from genius to madness.

Hermione knew that the grant money she lived off of was just charity now, and it was only a matter of time before the funding would be cut and Ministry officials would put a lockdown on her research. She was toeing the line over to the Dark Arts too frequently to easily escape notice.

Hermione was hoping that would all end with her latest finding; it was an ancient tome and a potion alluded to in several legends and Ancient Runes texts. It had taken her years to decode all the cryptic scripts and finally piece together enough information to discover the potion's true functions and its recipe. It went under several names, the one she liked using being the Tartarus Draught. According to historic references it had only been brewed twice before, and never used. If it didn't work for her now, she could honestly wash her hands of the whole affair and call it quits.

Funnily enough, it had actually been Dumbledore who had helped her find the defining text. It seemed as a young man he had been preoccupied with the self-same notions as she, and had done large amounts of research on the subject as well, keeping impeccable records. Hermione had found them in the Headmaster's Office (another favour from Harry) and pored over them. Dumbledore had given up the search after becoming lost in all the mythologies and symbols used ... most information was found in obscure folk tales, myths and fairy tales.. Picking up from where he had left off, Hermione discovered that the trick was in interpreting the ancient stories literally.

There was one text...written in an obscure mix of Ancient Greek and archaic runes ... that had information on traveling to the Underworld and descriptions of the Tartarus Draught. Hints at the ingredients and brewing procedure were dropped haphazardly throughout the book, but after collecting them all, Hermione had a fairly comprehensive recipe. Where Dumbledore had made his mistake was in assuming the symbolism behind an ingredient. For example, the "earth taken from the forest of Suicide".

Dumbledore had written many variations beside it (*earth mixed with blood ... earth taken from blood soaked ground? ... not earth, but ashes from suicide death*) but Hermione knew now what the text actually meant was: mud. Plain mud. It was the simplicity of the potion that had baffled so many researchers before her.

And so she had it. The Tartarus Draught.

The contents in the cauldron bubbled and turned a bright green. Stirring counter-clockwise seven times, Hermione set down her ladle and allowed the potion to simmer. It would need to be left alone to cook for three nights, only being stirred seven times counter-clockwise at midnight each night.

Suddenly exhausted, she tottered over to her chair and sat down heavily, yelping as she felt something pointy dig into her hip. She stood then looked at a sadly crumpled book on the seat: *Hogwarts, A History*. Sighing, she dumped it onto the floor and curled up into the chair. Her throat felt dry, and she was getting a headache from not eating, but her stomach was too nervous to hold down anything more substantial than coffee. She wanted to sleep, her body cried out for it, but her mind wouldn't shut down long enough for her to even catch a short nap.

She let out a miserable groan, which was loud enough to startle Crookshanks in the kitchenette.

The prime of her life had been spent and gone, all in the pursuit of what could, ultimately, be called The Art of Being Dead.

"And how does the wand play into this?"

Ginny had abandoned her soup, engrossed in staring at Hermione, who hadn't even touched the meal Ginny insisted that she order.

"The wand is how I find him. I think it's also how I might be able to bring someone back. The wand remembers its owner; it will be drawn to them. I'll be able to use it almost like a compass point. It will bring me to him ... wherever he is. And the text I've been reading implies the wand can also help the owner cross boundaries. Like the boundary between Life and Death."

Ginny's face darkened slightly in disapproval, but she didn't voice her inhibitions on the subject. For this, Hermione was grateful. She had had enough preaching from Harry.

"How are you going to come back? Hermione...what if you're stuck there?"

"It's all right. As long as I don't eat anything from the Underworld, I won't be bound to it. That's the only rule. 'Do not eat from the land of the dead.'"

Ginny looked very serious and asked in a hushed whisper, "Dead people eat?"

The two witches laughed gaily for a moment, the somber mood lightening. Hermione felt encouraged enough to nibble a little on her food.

"I don't know."

"And if you get hungry?"

"From what I understand no one feels hungry there, not even the living. But whatever happens, I should be all right. My wand connects me back to the living world. To go back to the living, I just have to perform a spell."

"Which spell?"

"Anything, any magic. Even a spell as simple as Lumos."

Ginny looked down into her bowl, moving her spoon around in the soup. She had quieted and was beginning to make Hermione nervous. What was wrong?

"You know, Hermione, that I will help you with this. I'm just ... I'm just hoping you will finally be able to let go after all this is over. I'm just worried too because when this is all done, will you know what you'll do with yourself? You've been looking for this for so long, and since you were so young ... "

Ginny looked up, startled at how much she had let tumble forth, still fiddling with her spoon.

"I mean, you still are young, but you're an adult now. It's carried over since we were still teenagers, and now you're almost twenty-seven"

Hermione laughed a little self-consciously then immediately sobered before asking, "What are you trying to say, Ginny?"

"I'm saying that I'm helping you because I hope this is the closure you've been looking for. And that you've been looking for far too long."

They stared at one another at length. There was really nothing more that could have been said after that. They finished lunch in silence.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 9

AU. Hermione travels to the Underworld to find Snape. What she discovers there surprises her. Snape is not who he once was, and he does not want to go back.

CHAPTER TWO

Hermione arrived at the Department of Mysteries first. Ginny had sweet-talked Dean Thomas, now an Unspeakable, into letting them in that day. He had grumbled about getting hell from his superior, but surreptitiously passed them access badges anyway.

The stone archway stood in the middle of the room. Hermione shivered as she looked at it. Harry had described a grey veil hanging from the arch: a tattered, grey cloth. Hermione could not see the veil, but it spooked her just the same. This was one of the places between life and death. This was where her journey to find Snape would begin. She could not hear the voices Harry had described either, but she could imagine them. They were the voices of the people on the other side of Life.

Fifteen minutes after silently contemplating the arch on her own, Hermione heard footsteps behind her. She turned and saw Ginny approaching the archway with reverence. Ginny stopped in front of her, silently reached into her robes and pulled out a slim, wood box. Handing it over to Hermione, she said, "So. This is it."

Hermione accepted the box and nodded. "Will Harry be very mad?"

"He'll get over it. I'm very good at persuading him."

Ginny gave Hermione a wry smile. Hermione took small respite in the gesture then, taking a breath, opened the box. The wand lay inside: twelve inches, ebony, supple, dragon's heartstring. Holding it in her hand, she felt overwhelmed and only came out of her daze when Ginny laid a hand on her arm.

"The potion, 'Mione?"

"Here."

Hermione dug into her robes and brought forth a crystal phial, which over the three-day brewing process had cooked the bright green potion into an agate grey. She uncorked the phial and took a deep breath.

"Look, if I don't come back after seven days ... "

Ginny shook her head, dismissing all speech. "You take as much time as you need. Don't come back with regrets. I'll come check on you every day, no matter how long it takes. I won't let anyone do anything to you."

Hermione nodded, unable to speak. She hoped Ginny knew how grateful she was, and how much she appreciated the support and the willingness to listen. Ginny had never dismissed this as an academic fancy or whimsical obsession. That, above everything else ... including the wand ... made her most thankful.

Hermione stood in front of the archway, steeling her nerves. She looked at the agate grey potion and, in a decisive move, tipped the phial's contents down her throat. She heard Ginny say something behind her.

"Remember, don't eat anything. Don't eat anything, Hermione, or you'll be lost forever."

The potion phial slipped to the ground and shattered. Hermione felt weak, her body shook with the effort to remain standing. Her innards felt as if they had been slicked with ice, a rattling shiver held onto her body and wouldn't let go. The veil shimmered in front of her, and Hermione could see torn grey curtains flapping from the archway, shifted by an invisible wind.

"Hermione, gather yourself. You have to go through on your own."

Ginny clasped Hermione's right hand and closed it firmly, so that Snape's wand wouldn't fall to the ground. She steadied Hermione and gave her a gentle push forward. Hermione struggled to swallow, her throat was so dry. Stepping forward, she reached one hand up, pressing it flat against the stone. The shivering sharpened into prickles, feeling as if invisible needles were stabbing against her skin. Her heart began to palpitate as the curtain brushed against her face.

Hermione pitched forward as if pulled by an invisible magnet and passed through the archway, the curtains possessively caressing her. What Ginny saw was Hermione standing still for a moment and then crumpling to a heap on the ground. One-half of her body lay under the archway, the other outside, stuck in between two worlds.

Hermione opened her mouth to scream; no sound issued forth. She was falling slowly, in an inky, viscous blackness. She opened her eyes but could see nothing. She continued to fall, the black syrup-like substance filling her nose, mouth and ears, yet she could still breathe. A moment longer and her body suddenly connected with solid ground.

Hermione lay winded on the ground. A nervous moment passed before her lungs sweetly swelled and she began to cough. She looked up and was relieved to see more than blackness. She lay by a dark river; the ground she lay on was hard and barren of any life. The sky was permanently overcast.

The wand in Hermione's hand had a string of light spilling forth from its tip; it continued across the river, vanishing to a distant point beyond Hermione's field of vision. She fondled the light string curiously between her fingertips, giving it an experimental tug. A spark of hope fluttered in her chest, and she scrambled to her feet. Brushing gray dirt from her knees, she tucked the wand into her robes, the light still shining through the material.

Walking cautiously along the riverbank, she came across an empty boat. She nudged it with her foot, deemed it solid enough to support her, and climbed in gently. Just as she began to wonder where the oars were, the boat glided across the river. The waters were unnaturally still and resembled a large, twisting mirror. The boat rocked precariously as she stepped out and onto the other bank, but she still managed to cross safe and dry.

There was a large, grey forest with dead, gnarled trees. Hermione looked about disconcerted; she wasn't sure what she had expected of the Underworld but somehow a large, iron-gate figured into it. The string of light tumbled down from her robes and onto the forest floor, passing through the dead trees. Hermione was obliged to follow the direction Snape's wand pointed her to. The branches scratched lightly at her arms and legs, snagging at her clothing. She heard a faint, low moan vibrating from the trees, as if emanating from the inside of the trunks. Hermione gamely continued to follow the light, its glow oddly comforting in the eerie wood.

She did not know how long she had been walking through the forest. Had it been two hours? Two days? Maybe even two minutes? It seemed the passage of time down here was difficult to discern.

Hermione saw a break in the trees and eagerly ran towards it. The string of light spilled over into a huge, grey field. The trees seemed to melt away as she stumbled into the clearing. The sky was grey, the land was grey and the permeating light was grey.

Hermione instantly wished she had taken more caution in approaching the clearing. There was a large gathering of people around the string of light. They were also grey, merely shades of a person who had already passed. Upon her arrival, their heads snapped forward in unison and they gazed at her with blank faces, eyes holding no emotion.

She could tell her string of light had caused a disturbance because they murmured, some picking up the string in their fingers and gently feeling it in reverence. One shade began to approach her, and Hermione took a step back. This incited the rest of the crowd to draw near, moving quickly and aggressively. They held the light string in their fingers, holding out their hands to touch her, their murmuring swelling to a loud buzz.

"Don't ... stay back ..."

Hermione's hand reached for her wand until she remembered she couldn't perform any magic if she wanted to stay in the world of the dead. Clenching her hand into a fist to resist the temptation, she gave a muffled shriek when the shades closed in all around her. She couldn't understand their buzzing, but she got the impression that they were angry she was there. She felt cold hands brush against her face and grab at her robes. They wanted the light string, and whatever it was attached to.

One shade found Severus' wand tucked away in her robes. Hermione's heart leapt to her throat, and she quickly grabbed it. The shades stared at her, faces still blank, but their hands were expressive: clenching and tensing into claws, pulling persistently on the wand. Afraid she would lose it ... her only link to Severus ... Hermione yanked the wand toward her, tearing it from the shades' grips. They murmured angrily at her daring, glancing at each other, before leaping towards her. With a shriek Hermione turned her back to them, fell to her knees, and curled into a fetal position, the wand clutched protectively against her chest. She felt the cold whispers of their hands snatch at her robes and tug at her hair.

"Miss Granger?"

Hermione's heart stopped.

"Hermione."

Hermione turned her head, looking behind her. The awkward position she was in caused her to twist her knees too far, and she collapsed to the ground in a graceless heap. The moment's flash of long black hair was all she needed to see to know her search was over.

"Professor."

The tall shade froze for a second, and then its thin lips quirked into something halfway between a smirk and a smile.

"Severus ... I haven't been a professor for a very long time now, Hermione. Perhaps you should get up from the ground."

Snape extended a hand towards her, and she stared at it for a moment's pause before accepting. The strength he used to pull her to her feet seemed fluid and effortless.

Hermione had to suppress the impulse to grab his face so she could better look at him. His skin looked dull, as if no light could reflect off it.

As Hermione's eyes hungrily drank in his countenance, he looked intently at the wand in her hand. When Hermione broke from her reverie, she noticed he looked at his wand with longing, and she held it towards him. He glanced up at her once before taking it with reverence.

There were no scars on his neck; apparently, one did not carry their injuries into the next world. He turned the wand over in his hands, nimble fingers caressing it with familiarity. The string of light faded away into the grey. Everything was gray. He looked like a person who had a light extinguished inside of them, or as if the only light that could emanate from him was grey. It made Hermione's stomach turn.

He was so engrossed with his wand that Hermione felt he wouldn't even notice if she touched him. She wanted to know if his skin still felt like skin. Her fingers crept forward, diffident, unsure in her trepidation (would he react badly?), finally grazing his left wrist. She was right; he didn't notice a thing, and if he did, he didn't care; he was still staring at his wand. His skin felt like skin cooled by a constant autumn breeze, dry and without warmth but not cold.

A thought struck Hermione, and she pulled up his robe's left sleeve. His forearm was pale and smooth, a blank canvas of cool skin. Her fingertips traced over it, and she felt the muscle underneath flex. Snape turned his head to see what she was doing.

"It's gone." Her voice was soft.

His eyebrows, dark and dramatic, twitched in confusion. "What?"

"Your mark, it's not there anymore."

He remained silent, a question mark written over his face. Hermione looked back at him shocked; she realized he didn't understand what she was talking about.

"The Dark Mark, you don't have it here. You used to have one."

Hermione felt her insides go cold. She had never considered that the dead may not remember parts of their past. She had just assumed they would be continuing their lives, albeit on a different plane of existence. Now, the more she thought about it, she realized Snape hadn't once snapped at her or said anything caustic. He didn't look as if he would. There was no guarded mask policing his facial expressions, or caution in his actions. It seemed he was not only extinguished of vibrancy and light, but of his bitterness and festering anger as well. He was ... blank. Blank like the shades that had gathered around the one source of light that had strayed into their realm.

"I think, I may know of what you speak," Snape said slowly, turning the idea over in his mind.

Hermione could see the gears turning, an ember of remembrance slowly being allowed to ignite. A slight frown creased his brow.

"It is not something I think of often. It was not a pleasant time; I think you would agree."

Hermione nodded quickly, not wishing to press the matter further. She was afraid her mention of the Dark Mark would unwillingly force him to relive horrible things and cause him to revert back to his former unpleasant demeanor. To see him so calm and amiable surprised her.

"Why are you not like them?"

The shades had gathered around to watch them again, fully grey and flitting from degrees of insubstantiality. Snape gazed at them indifferently.

"We are in the fields of Asphodel. They live here. I do not. Come, I do not think you are welcome."

He took her hand and led her away. The brush of skin against skin was electric and caught her off guard. Hermione could see no situation like this playing out between them when Snape was alive.

It seemed as if they had only taken a few steps before the setting changed to a brighter field with trees, a part of the grey river and vegetative life the field of Asphodel did not have. It only reinforced the notion Hermione had that the laws of time and space were different down here.

Snape let go of her hand and gazed contentedly at the dimly lit field. A soft light seemed to permeate the surroundings, giving the impression of early dawn. There were other people walking and sitting around them. Hermione thought it was subdued and slightly melancholic, but still pleasant and tranquil.

"Where are we?"

"These are the Elysian fields."

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 9

AU. Hermione travels to the Underworld to find Snape. What she discovers surprises her: he is not who he once was, and he does not want to go back.

A figure passed by Hermione, and its appearance disturbed her so much that she grabbed the front of its robes without thinking. The gray face of Remus Lupin turned to stare at her, politely curious, and a gentle smile broke over his features.

"I know your face."

Hermione shook with emotion, still overwhelmed. Remus affectionately gripped her shoulder.

"And you look much older than how I remember you."

"I *am* older, Remus."

A shadow passed across Remus' face as his hand cupped against her cheek. It was cool and dry, like Severus'. A frown knitted on Remus' brow, and he removed his hand from her face then grasped her hands in his, pressing them in between his own. He looked to Severus.

"She shouldn't be here."

"She wasn't welcome in the fields of Asphodel."

Hermione looked at them nervously. Remus wouldn't let go of her hands.

"You're very warm, Hermione. You are unmistakably alive. You shouldn't be here."

Severus' mouth twitched into a peculiar, little smile. He cocked his head, regarding her.

"Now how did you manage a feat like that?"

Hermione licked her lips nervously. She felt like a schoolgirl again, squirming under a professor's gaze, answering for some mischief she had orchestrated. The only difference was Snape seemed amused and without malice.

"The Tartarus Draught."

Remus and Severus looked at each other, obviously impressed.

"That's quite admirable, but then, you always did excel in my classroom."

Hermione looked up. That glimmer of praise was the one thing she had never thought she'd hear from him.

"I did?"

"Of course. Although, I suppose I never would have said so."

Remus then noticed the wand in Severus' hand. It seemed to be the only thing that glowed as it was its own source of light down in the Elysian Fields. He nodded curtly at it.

"Put it away, Severus. Hermione's presence will cause enough of a stir."

Severus seemed to see the wisdom in that, as he stowed the wand away in his robes, hiding its light. Hermione noticed that Remus and Severus both wore similar robes of a lightweight, black material. Voluminous, it moved like smoke and seemed different from hers, which looked heavy and cumbersome in comparison.

"Come, Hermione, you will have to see the others."

Severus took her hand in his (it had happened *twice* in a lifetime), and Remus kept a protective hand on her shoulder. As they walked Hermione saw them approaching a large group of people, and she tensed.

Severus murmured under his breath, "No one will harm you here, don't worry."

"Hermione?"

A dark, shaggy figure bound forward and squeezed the life out of her, then instantly twirled her round and round. Hermione wheezed for breath, but the figure's cheer was infectious, and she found herself grinning.

"Let her down, Sirius, she'll break easily."

"Never! Not this one."

He let her down, and Hermione giggled as she regained her footing. Sirius looked very handsome, and the grin on his face wolfish and playful.

"Look at you, you're all grown up. I still remember you as a little girl. Here, tell me what's happened ... What's been going on?"

Hermione laughed, overwhelmed. "I don't know where to start."

"The war? What happened...did you see what happened to Voldemort? And what about Harry? What's happening now, did any Death Eaters survive? Bellatrix Black? Did someone finally do the bitch in?"

There was a hunger in Sirius' voice and desperation in his eyes. His curiosity surpassed a degree that was comfortable, and Hermione fought the urge to take a step back. Why was Sirius so keen to know? Why didn't he have that same indifference and amnesia as Remus and Severus?

Severus' hand landed on her shoulder protectively.

"Contain yourself, Sirius. Such ugly questions you ask."

Sirius' enthusiastic inquiries had carried over the Elysian Fields, drawing a crowd. There were some faces Hermione vaguely recognized, witches and wizards in the periphery of her life. She felt a little frightened, but they were not as menacing as the Asphodel shades had been.

"Who is she, Severus?"

It was a beautiful, young woman who asked. Her eyes were a subdued green, her hair a dull red, but her beauty still undeniable. She would have looked positively vibrant in life, and despite having the same gray light that permeated the others, she still stood out among them; a smudgy red pastel smear against charcoal.

"You're Lily."

She cocked her head, her smile politely curious but friendly.

"How do you know that?"

"You're Harry's mum."

Lily Potter's face darkened, and without a word, she left. Hermione was startled into silence, and Sirius looked at the situation excitedly. She suddenly found him and his eagerness hateful. Looking up towards Severus, she asked, "What did I say?"

"I'm not sure; worry about it later."

Remus gently nudged her to start walking and guided her through the fields. The crowd of figures followed. Hermione saw flashes of people she knew, and each time, she failed to call out their name in time. Tonks. Fred. The push of the crowd was persistent, and Hermione found she had no choice but to obey.

"Where are we going, Remus?"

"We're taking you to see the wise man. He'll appease the rest if he approves of you being here. And he may be able to answer any questions you have."

"Who's the wise man? Dumbledore?"

"No."

The flat answer was the only response Remus offered. When Hermione looked up at Severus for clarification, he only glanced back with the ghost of a smirk around his lips.

"What's everyone doing now, Hermione? Was there chaos with the Ministry...who's Minister now? Lucius and Cissy wouldn't tell me anything when they first got here. Go on, tell me what's *happened*."

Severus grabbed the front of Sirius' robes and neatly shoved him to the edge of the crowd.

Hermione's brow knit in confusion. "Lucius? You mean Malfoy ..."

She stopped walking despite the push of the flowing crowd around her. They stopped and settled around her as well when they realized she wasn't going to budge. They had been progressing through the gray fields towards a flat, gray rock. There were two people sitting on the rock, their golden hair catching the available dim light. Their foreheads rested against each other as they breathed softly.

Hermione hadn't known Draco's parents had passed away.

"They don't speak to anyone. No one knows if they even speak to each other," a young girl with black hair offered in a whispery voice. She disappeared back into the small crowd before Hermione could ask her to elaborate.

The crowd began to move again, and Hermione allowed them to push her along the path. The gray river cut through the land, and they all walked along its twisting bank. Up ahead was a tree, and under the tree a stump. An older man was sitting on it with his back turned to the crowd. A hush fell over the scene, and Hermione took a hesitant step forward. The tree creaked from an invisible wind, and the man turned his head to look at her. It took Hermione forever and a day to recognize him.

"Moody?"

He beckoned her with the motion of one hand and gestured for her to sit on the ground beside him. As she lowered herself to sit, she bumped into a second stump that had just materialized.

Alastor Moody looked at her with two clear eyes. The scars on his face were gone; the only deep grooves marring his face were from the passage of time. The difference in his appearance was so startling that half of Hermione didn't believe she was sitting with the true Mad-Eye Moody. Where was his Mad Eye? He looked homely and plain, like someone's benign grandfather.

Moody grunted and gripped her chin, turning it this way and that, inspecting her. A part of her was delighted...constant vigilance! The other part was protesting loudly that he was pinching her face too roughly.

"You're a very long way from home."

"I had to come."

"*Had* to," Moody said with a searching look.

Hermione squirmed, even with two normal eyes she felt he could still see right through her.

"Y-your scars are gone."

Moody nodded, contemplating something and sucking his teeth.

"Hmm ... don't talk about the war down here, gel. They don't want to hear it. Trust me on that."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll find out for yourself, soon enough. It's just best not to talk about the living world down here. They'll forget it soon after, anyway."

"Sirius..."

Moody nodded, sucking his teeth. Hermione thought he looked similar to the tree he was sitting beside.

"Yes ... Sirius remembers. Or, at least, wants to. Badly. Sirius fell through the veil when he died. He was alive for a split second as he fell through the archway, and it had already opened to the Underworld. That makes him different. A part of him still wants to be in the living world. Try not to indulge him. It doesn't do any good."

They lapsed into silence. Hermione had so much she wanted to ask him, but was afraid to. The moment just didn't seem right. Did Moody remember? How did he remember...how did he know all this?

She supposed that he just did.

She blinked, realizing it was true. As simple as that, like the myths and folk tales she had read about concerning the land of the dead. Down here, some things just were.

"You brought something down here."

Hermione froze. He looked at her suspiciously.

"Don't advertise it, gel, whatever you do. You should never have brought it down here. That'll cause some trouble."

"It's nothing, it..."

Moody raised a hand to silence her. She looked into her lap feeling guilty. Could he know she was also trying to bring Severus back to the living world with her?

"We won't talk about it anymore. Don't talk about what you brought here."

"He likes it. It hasn't done any harm."

She thought she sounded a little petulant. Moody just waved his hand dismissively again.

"He *would*."

She didn't know what that meant, but Moody offered no further explanation. He only sucked his teeth again.

"You came here for something."

Hermione looked up, hoping to betray nothing. Moody's eyebrows rose.

"For *someone*?"

Hermione didn't know what to say; she wasn't sure of herself anymore. She had come for Severus, and to harness the link between life and death. These things seemed impossible now, given that so much had surprised her, had deviated from her expectations, and that she could not understand. She nodded for the sake of a response.

"Be sure you now what it is you're here for; you could find yourself with something completely different..."

Hermione snorted inwardly. *You can say that again*

"And what will you do then?"

Moody didn't wait for her to answer.

"Go home then. Don't be afraid that there's nothing here for you. That could happen."

Moody stood up stiffly with one hand against the tree trunk. Hermione noticed that they were alone in the clearing; the crowd had gone. It was just her, Moody, and the tree.

"You're tired, gel, go to sleep. Don't be afraid to sleep, nothing will happen to you."

The instant he said that, Hermione felt her eyelids grow heavy. Her body hummed softly in gentle exhaustion, and she lay down on the field's ground. Moody waved a spade-like hand at her in farewell and shuffled out of her line of vision. Her fingers curled around grass blades; they tickled her nose. They were cool, dry and gray.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 9

AU. Hermione travels to the Underworld in search of Severus. What she discovers there surprises her. He is not who he once was, and he does not want to go back.

A/N Wow. Bad me for not updating. I completely blanked on the fact that this was up here. Many apologies.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hermione felt cushioned in from all sides, as if the very ground suspended her in a gray womb. Supporting, but never touching. She stretched languorously, not wanting to open her eyes. Sleep was still softening her senses.

A dry hand was tracing the contours of her face, whispering across her eyebrow, following the dip beside her nose, skirting around her lips to stroke the dimple underneath, and tickling back up to draw the tear crease from the corner of her eye. Poetry in the flesh.

Hermione slowly opened her eyes, and her breath hitched in her throat. Severus looked back unabashedly, cocking his head in curiosity. He knelt comfortably beside her in the gray grass and didn't pause in the exploration of her face.

"Your skin is very warm."

Hermione gulped. "How long have you been there?"

"Since you started sleeping. It's fascinating to watch, actually. No one sleeps down here."

Hermione sat up quickly, forcing him to drop his hand. He didn't look perturbed in the least and continued to look mildly at her.

"How long have I been sleeping?"

"I couldn't say."

Hermione had grown taller since her teenage years, but she noticed she was still considerably shorter than Severus. Her head would have tucked neatly under his chin, were they embracing. Her eyes kept flitting from his chin to her lap nervously; she couldn't meet his gaze.

"Why were you touching my face?"

He seemed mildly surprised by the question, as if the answer were obvious.

"I wanted to know what your skin felt like."

Hermione's cheeks flushed as she remembered that she had had a moment quite like this one when first running into him. His eyes lit up, and his curious fingers went to the blush on her cheeks, fingertips caressing the sudden warmth, inciting more.

Hermione thought that if he was allowed his explorations, then why not she? Taking his left arm into her lap, she pushed back his robe sleeve again. The Dark Mark still wasn't there. She murmured in amazement.

"Was it ugly?"

Hermione looked up, the top of her head almost bumping against Severus' chin. Her fingers were still dimpled into his forearm, though his hands had settled themselves back on the grass.

"I...I never saw it on your arm. I can't say."

A shadow passed across his face again, the amiable indifference darkening into a slower, blacker passion. Hermione was still getting used to, but enjoying, the mild Severus. She knew, though, that to make him want to come back to the living world she would have to ignite the darker humours that made his person. Part of her was excited by the glimmer of darkness. Another part was afraid.

"It was an ugly mark. It was on me for a very long time."

Hermione thought that he looked much younger than he used to with the softening of his features, but a hint of his former face was flickering through.

"Not so long."

He looked at her, forcing her brown eyes to meet his black.

"Long enough."

A silence fell between them, until Severus drew his wand from the inner folds of his robes. The darkness passed from his face as he twirled it through the air. Gold sparks streamed from its tip.

"I was a powerful wizard," he said as if questioning her, so Hermione nodded in affirmation.

"You were a celebrated Potions master, too."

He looked lovingly at his wand, turning it over slowly in his hands. Hermione had the feeling he had done this many times previously, and would do it many times more.

"I forget what's in it."

"Dragon heartstring."

He raised an eyebrow at her, but then nodded, believing. Hermione saw her chance to make more progress with her plan. She nodded at the wand.

"That helped me find you here."

"I remember."

"It's connected to you still, even down here."

Severus nodded, unfazed. "Yes, I expect so."

Hermione's tone grew urgent, and she felt a little frustrated that he didn't acknowledge the implications of such a thing.

"Severus, the wand is from the living world. It still connects to you, down here, in the dead world."

"Yes."

"Severus, the wand could get you back up to the living world...you could bloody well be alive again."

She snapped her mouth shut, horrified. This wasn't exactly how she'd envisioned telling him, she had been hoping to have come to it slowly and with more tact. Merlin, she should have kept her mouth shut. Would he get angry? Would he listen to her again...had she just blown her only chance?

He laughed.

It was the exact opposite thing Hermione had expected. Severus' laugh was throaty and rich, melting into her ears and the gray fields surrounding them.

Did this mean he wasn't taking her seriously? A discordant vibe struck in Hermione's breast.

"Now how can that be?"

"It's not silly; I've done my research. All the ancient texts say a wizard's wand will allow him to cross boundaries he wouldn't be able to normally on his own. That means you could cross back into the living world with your wand."

Severus stowed his wand away, an amused smirk still playing around his lips.

"And why do you think the boundary the texts mention is necessarily the one between life and death?"

Hermione had no answer for that. In fact, it made her heart drop a little. Severus' fingers came up and wove through her hair, the mildness and curiosity settling firmly back into his face again. The moment had passed; she'd have to wait for another opportunity to bring the matter up.

"Severus."

"Hmm?"

She could feel the hum against her ear.

"Show me the fields. Show me this place."

Severus took her back along the river, to the world in which it was always dawn. The sky was a gradient from pastel gray to obsidian black. She couldn't tell where sky and atmosphere met.

They saw the rock Lucius and Narcissa sat on, and Hermione went up to them. Narcissa looked at Hermione but said nothing. Lucius did not open his eyes; his exhale was slow and stirred the hair on Narcissa's face.

"Do you remember me?"

Narcissa didn't break her gaze from Hermione's, but she didn't utter a word either.

Severus came over with cupped hands. He had stooped on the riverbank and collected water into his hands. He sat down beside Lucius on the rock and pressed his hands against the other man's lips. Lucius' eyes fluttered open, and he looked wearily at Severus. He drank half of the water and then wiped an escaped droplet from his mouth with delicate fingers. Severus offered the rest to Narcissa.

It was the first time Hermione had seen the Malfoys move. Lucius sat up straighter, he did not seem to mind Severus sitting with them; and there was a passing familiarity between Severus and the Malfoys.

"Are you well?" Severus asked as Lucius rubbed the nape of his neck, easing a crick.

"Yes, as well as can be."

Lucius' eyes settled on Hermione, and she felt pinned to the spot. It was surreal to see him there, the man she had fought against for the better part of her adolescence, who had hated her for her Muggle-born existence, and whom she still couldn't fully reconcile herself to in later life. Here was the man who had committed countless evils, sitting with his wife and looking weary, as if he held the weight of the world on his shoulders.

"I remember you."

His cold, regal face held no quarter; his tone brooked no affection. Hermione felt affronted, and prickled slightly. Any sympathy that had stirred in her heart was instantly quelled.

"You should. You did terrible things to me."

He shrugged, a golden eyebrow arched in nonchalance.

"So I did."

Narcissa stirred beside him, resting her chin on his shoulder.

"I rather think my sister did most of the damage."

This piqued Hermione's curiosity. She asked without a second's pause for thought.

"Why are you here, and not Bellatrix? Why are there no Death Eaters here?"

"You mean, why are we not with the other Death Eaters?"

Lucius' breath flickered into a hiss at the end of his sentence, instantly shaming Hermione. Narcissa rested a hand on his shoulder, and he allowed himself to relax. His eyes were still narrowed and unfriendly. He gestured with his head to Severus.

"You could ask the same of him."

Narcissa clicked her tongue disapprovingly.

"Now, now Lucius ... Truth be told, Hermione, we're not sure ourselves."

"I'm done talking. Go away." Lucius lay down and rested his head on Narcissa's lap, effectively dismissing Hermione and Severus.

Severus got up from the rock and smiled wryly at Hermione. He bent down and whispered in her ear, "He's always like that. He does like the attention, although you'll never hear him say it."

They left the Malfoys, tall, pale, and golden-haired, content in their stillness and with each other.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 9

AU. Hermione travels to the Underworld in search of Severus. What she discovers there surprises her. He is not who he once was, and he does not want to go back.

CHAPTER FIVE

"You mentioned Dumbledore."

Hermione nodded.

"He is here as well, but you'll only find him in one place."

Severus pointed to a tent in the middle of the fields, in front of a large, squat rock. Hermione looked at him searchingly until he urged her to go forward, assuring her it was all right. With one step she found herself in front of the tent, its material shimmering like half-cloth, half-gas. A little disconcerted, she snuck one last glance at Severus before lifting up the flap.

A tall woman looked up at the disturbance. Her neck was long, and she had a coldness to her. Hermione only seemed to interest her for a second, as she looked away again. A young girl sat on a cushion on the ground, an older man sat beside her, smoking a pipe. The man had twinkling blue eyes and a smartly, trimmed beard. Hermione blinked in confusion. He looked like Dumbledore, but he couldn't be ... he was too young ...

"Headmaster?"

The man looked up, surprised. He took the pipe from his mouth and gestured to the rock outside the tent.

"Albus? Out there."

The man must have been Dumbledore's father, which made the others gathered in the tent Dumbledore's family. Hermione recognized them now; there were pictures of all three in Rita Skeeter's horrid book.

Hermione quickly backpedaled out of the tent, feeling awkward; she couldn't handle anymore of the tense silence. Severus was not outside the tent, but she could hear talking from the other side of the rock. Curious, she made her way over to see Severus taking over a seat Remus had just vacated. There was a rickety table set up beside the rock, and Dumbledore sat across from Severus. An old chessboard was set up on the table.

"I will win the next game," Remus said wryly, perching against the rock.

Albus looked up at Remus distractedly.

"Oh, that I doubt my friend ... that I doubt."

Severus amusedly placed black pieces on his side of the board. They were still, like Muggle chess pieces rather than the wizarding kind, standing frigidly to attention.

"Remus may not have won you yet, but I've knocked you off your high throne twice already, old man."

Albus gave a "hmpf" and looked down at the board, patting his snowy beard as he contemplated a game strategy. Hermione felt a rush of relief and emotion as she saw her former headmaster, the solid rock everyone had depended upon during the war, untimely taken away from them. He sat there, humming distractedly under his breath, concentrating on his chess game as if nothing else existed.

"Headmaster."

He looked up for a brief second, and then back down to the chessboard. Hermione almost felt like crying. There, too, was something irrevocably different about Dumbledore down here.

"Professor."

He looked up again, a little annoyed at the continued interruptions.

"You can play as well, but you'll have to wait for Severus to finish."

Remus steered her away from the chess game and rubbed her shoulder soothingly. He could tell she was hurt, and he knew why.

"None of the Dumbledore family are quite themselves right now, Hermione. They're all waiting."

"What for?"

"Aberforth."

Hermione sniffed, gingerly dabbing the end of her nose with a crooked finger. She sat down on a lush patch of grass Remus indicated, and he sat down amiably beside her. One could see everything, and yet nothing of the fields from here. There was always something else tucked away ...

"Why are they waiting for Aberforth?"

"Their family has been torn asunder and kept apart for so long in the living that their only true reunion can be in death. They're waiting for all of the family to finally come home. They only need to wait for Aberforth now."

Hermione calmed, instantly comforted by Remus' steady presence. He seemed to be the most like himself and put together after Moody.

"You know as much as Moody."

Remus shook his head, chuckling.

"All I know, I heard from Moody."

Remus looked down at Hermione's robes and plucked at the sleeve. There were small holes and tears, and he pushed his finger through one of the holes and frowned.

"Why are they torn?"

"I came here through a forest, the trees tore it."

"Oh, Suicide Grove."

Hermione's eyes lit up.

"Really? That was Suicide Grove?"

Remus shrugged.

"It's just a name, Hermione. Those who commit suicide don't actually become a tree there. We just call it that because the trees have nasty tempers. Bloody things."

Remus got to his feet, brushing gray dust off his knees and motioning for Hermione to continue sitting.

"Wait here, I'll get you new robes."

Hermione couldn't see where he went; the gray fields seemed to stretch on forever and ever. He had just passed her line of sight before reappearing an instant later. She was still getting used to the flexibility of time and space down here.

Tonks was standing beside him with luminous black material pooled in her arms. She had a perky smile on her face, though the first thing Hermione noticed was that her hair wasn't pink.

"Wotcher, 'Mione."

Hermione felt a rush of gratitude towards Tonks for the familiarity.

"Hullo, Tonks."

Tonks looked over at Remus, twirling her finger in the air.

"Turn 'round, Remus. No peeking."

Remus did as he was told, and Hermione giggled, shrugging out of her tattered robes. Tonks helped her into the black robe, similar to what they were all wearing. It felt like cool mist and sea spray against her skin, making her hum with pleasure. So cool, so soft, so much better than silk.

"It must be good for you two to still have each other."

Remus looked over his shoulder, and then turned around when he saw that Hermione was dressed. He shared similarly puzzled looks with Tonks. Hermione's stomach did a turn.

"Oh no, I've just put my foot in my mouth again."

Tonks didn't let her off that easily.

"What do you mean, 'Mione? What were we up there?"

Remus put a hand against his mouth and exhaled heavily. He looked like he was going to be sick.

"I don't want to hear this..."

He made to leave, but Tonks grabbed his sleeve and forced him to stay put. She looked somewhere close to angry.

"You're not going anywhere. Go on then, Hermione. What were we before?"

"Tonks, it doesn't matter..."

"Tell me."

"Tonks, I can't..."

"Tell me."

Hermione looked miserably at her, wondering just how she managed to make such a cock-up of what was usually a happy event.

"You two were married."

Remus flinched as though someone had struck him across the face. His hand was still firmly over his mouth. Tonks looked pale, as if she didn't want to believe what Hermione was saying.

Remus and Tonks stood just a few feet apart. Their bodies angled away from each other's, as they looked at different points in space. Hermione slumped to the ground and sat, her head buried into her chest. After a tense moment, Tonks looked over at Remus.

"So it was you."

Hermione looked up at the scene. Remus was still staring hard at a spot on the ground. He looked like the slightest touch would knock him over. Tonks continued.

"I knew I had someone before ... I just never thought it would be you."

"I told you."

The choked response was the only one from Remus so far. Tonks rubbed her left arm.

"So I suppose the child is yours as well."

Remus abruptly turned his back on Tonks and Hermione, startling Tonks by his sudden movement. Hermione had a sneaking suspicion Remus had started to tear. What was going on? Why was this news so upsetting to them?

Tonks looked at her.

"I know there was a child. I could always feel something in the pit of my stomach."

Her hands folded overtop her lower stomach.

"Tell me about him. Her?"

"Him."

Hermione chewed on a thumbnail, wondering if she should say anything about Ted. She had done enough damage already. Tonks looked like she wouldn't go away unless she heard, though, and even Remus had his head turned slightly towards them.

"His name's Ted, he..."

"Is he like me?"

The sudden anguished outburst startled the two women. Remus looked at them from over his shoulder, hand now clenched against his face. His eyes were red, but no tears had fallen. He shook uncontrollably.

"No. No, Remus, he's not. He's like Tonks. He's a Metamorphmagus. You knew this before."

Remus sank to his knees on the ground, one hand clutching his head, his teeth clenched. He looked like he was fighting the onslaught of an anxiety attack. Tonks looked down at him, wrestling something within herself, and then knelt down beside him. He flinched away from her, so she didn't reach out to touch him.

Hermione wanted to crawl under a rock and die. She didn't know such innocuous words could have demolished his composure so completely. She thought he was going to be a rock like Moody. Obviously, she had made a bollocks of that too.

"T-tell me ... about him." Remus' voice was strangled as he was fighting down emotion. Tonks was silent and looked guilty beside him.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," Remus said it with such force that Hermione felt obliged to comply.

"He's ten years old now. He'll get his Hogwarts letter next year. He's been on the list to attend since he was born. He's very sweet. He lives with Andromeda; Harry looks after him a lot, too."

Remus had a twisted smile on his face, his eyes still red. The news was bittersweet to him. Tonks looked deliriously happy, but too conscious of the tense situation to fully enjoy the news. Remus shot her a hurt and angry look.

"I told you. I told you so many times."

"No one could know for sure."

"I knew. I knew it was me."

Hermione squirmed, wondering if she was supposed to hear any of the arguing. Remus and Tonks seemed to forget she was even there.

"I can't believe you thought it was Sirius."

Tonks looked liked she'd just been slapped. Her eyes blazed.

"And so what if I did?"

"You're cousins."

"Second cousins; and that means nothing in a pureblood family. And do you really think I'd let a thing like that stop me if I loved someone?"

Remus clapped his hands over his ears, too upset and overwhelmed to handle any of the arguing. Tonks looked equally as hurt, but she still had herself together and wasn't backing down.

"Well, are you happy now, Remus?"

He looked anything but. Hermione looked at them, frightened, and found herself pleading with them.

"Stop, please stop yelling."

She felt like her whole world had turned upside down. Tonks, the woman she had looked up to and learned from as a girl...now younger than herself down in the Underworld. She couldn't reconcile the two Tonks in her mind, and neither could she reconcile the steady, unshakable Remus from the living world with the frayed, jittery mess in front of her.

"And you, clinging on to his every word and more, like some infatuated schoolgirl...how could you fall for his act? It's been the same since school, only the most superficial, vapid girls fell for it..."

"Vapid? Vapid, am I? You really think me that moronic and immature...how could I have put up with you?"

"Stop, stop shouting at each other!"

Hermione's pleas were drowned out. A tall figure slipped in between Remus and Tonks. The hem of its smoke-like robes kissed and weaved through the ground. Hermione looked up to see Severus, confused and disturbed by the scene before him. He had a hand on each of their shoulders and forcibly held them apart.

"Nymphadora, walk that way. Remus, go that way."

He gestured in opposite directions, and they both rose to their feet, still shaking, but glad for the intervention. Remus sniffed, wiping his face with his robe sleeve. Tonks held herself and looked on the verge of enraged tears.

Severus was unconcerned with them after they began their parting and stooped down to where Hermione was. He reached out to touch her shoulder.

"Hermione? You look upset."

She fell forward into his chest and started crying. His arms circled themselves around her and the folds of their self-same, black cloaks enveloped her until she could only see gray, feel gray, hear gray, smell gray and taste gray on her lips.

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 9

AU. Hermione travels to the Underworld to find Snape. What she discovers surprises her: he is not who he once was, and he does not want to go back.

CHAPTER SIX

Gentle material skimmed across her eyes again and again until her tears had dried and her cheeks polished smooth. Severus had her cradled in his lap, an arm scooped

behind her back, and fingers tangled in her hair. There was a moment when she had resisted his holding her, but his grip remained firm, and her struggles died as her sobs drowned into his chest. He treated her as if she were made of porcelain.

Hermione sighed into the hollow of his throat, weary. He stirred under the tickle of breath and murmured insubstantial nothings by her ear. Hermione looked up at him, her eyelids heavy. He looked back down at her through hooded eyelids; their faces were scant inches apart.

His fingers, ever curious and searching, traced her cheek, never tired of the warmth it found on her skin. She settled her hands around his face, warm hands against cool skin. Compelled by some unfathomable pull she brought his face towards hers until their lips pressed together. His hands tensed and then gently gripped her face. He settled his mouth possessively over hers, and she closed her eyes. He was drinking her colour, her light, her warmth, and she felt it all in the kiss. As her mouth was hot, his was shockingly cold.

Severus could have kissed her forever, but Hermione broke apart, needing air. He looked disappointed and immediately ran a finger over her bottom lip, still wanting to taste heat. His eyes were impatient; he wanted to kiss her now, *now* and without interruption.

Hermione shrugged away from him and held her head in her hands. She had to reconcile the memories of her former Potions master with the man sitting beside her. She would also have to find the courage to tell him he had died by her neglectful hand. Yet, it was made more difficult by the fact that now he always came to her and wanted to touch her of his own volition.

It was also difficult coming to the realisation that in her thoughts he was no longer *Snape*, but *Severus*.

"Have I upset you?"

She shook her head mutely, but he didn't look convinced.

"I apologise if I do. I'm afraid there's something that always draws me to you."

His fingers reached up into her hair and he murmured, "It's difficult to suppress."

She turned to him, and he leaned in to kiss her face, but she stopped him, afraid of the sensation that he was drinking warmth from her. He kissed the fingertips halting his lips instead, not wanting to frighten her off by being any more forward.

"I find I want to touch you, to be near you, to see you, to make sure you're in arms' reach."

"Why?"

His voice was barely above a whisper, she dared not dream this was happening ...

"I'm not so sure ... You brought me my wand, I think that's part of it."

Hermione blinked, all romantic notions flying from her head.

"Your *wand*?"

He brought it out from his robes and held it up on open palm. It still glowed with an internal light, casting shadows on her face. He looked more at peace in its presence than ever without, and Hermione felt her stomach churn. She got up on her feet and walked away from him. He began to rise and she stopped him with a glare.

"Don't follow me."

He looked puzzled, mildly hurt, but sat back down. His eyes went back to his wand, and a soft peace suffused his features once more, as if nothing had happened. This upset Hermione more and she half-walked, half-ran from him.

She only had to think of seeing Moody, and his tree and stump were visible on the horizon. She looked back over her shoulder and saw no sign of Severus. Shakily smoothing back her hair, she walked purposefully up to the stump. Moody turned around to face her, showing no surprise at seeing her.

"I told you, didn't I?"

Hermione sat down on the second stump.

"Told me what?"

"Bringing the wand down here was trouble."

Hermione shrugged helplessly; there was nothing she could say in defence. Moody just nodded to himself.

"Of course he's drawn to it; it's the last source of his magic. And you brought it down here, well, makes it significant. He'll keep coming, like a moth to a flame. Trouble. That's all that wand brings."

Hermione felt her cheeks go hot.

"So he'll keep coming to me because I brought him his magic? Because something compels him to?"

"Why? Were you expecting some other reason?"

She looked back at Moody with cold, hard eyes.

"No. Not at all."

Moody nodded, giving her a knowing look. She grit her teeth and tried to suppress the urge to smack the humouring smile on his face.

"Everyone down here likes to live untroubled by passion, be it love or hate or even sex. I suppose the idea would be foreign to someone still alive."

"Remus and Tonks? What did I do to them?"

He gave her such a reproachful look that she winced and averted her eyes.

"Don't bother them anymore, well, that's still sorting itself out."

Hermione stared hard at a spot on the ground until she thought it was safe to ask Moody a question again.

"Does everyone truly forget what happened to them in their life?"

Moody relaxed, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. Hermione was still nervous, Moody was very displeased about the whole Remus and Tonks debacle, but it looked like he

wasn't going to bring the subject up again.

"No one truly forgets, but no one has the strength to keep remembering. That's the tragedy, or beauty, of being dead. Depends on how you see the matter."

Hermione wandered through the Elysian Fields, walking for the sake of walking. She had passed by Fred Weasley who was throwing an old, beat up Quaffle to Cedric Diggory. She hurried past them so they wouldn't notice her. One of the most disconcerting things for her was when someone who had been older than she was living was now several years her junior down here.

She couldn't say if the fields were beautiful. They were not ugly and they were not barren like the Field of Asphodel had been. They escaped articulation. Even as she wandered around, following the twisting river, there was every sensation that she was walking in circles, though there were always new things to see.

"Hermione! Over here."

Sirius was sitting on the riverbank, his legs submerged in the water. Hermione was a little wary of him because of what Moody had told her, but the smile on his face was open and friendly. She figured they were both in the same boat for stirring up trouble.

She sat down beside him on the bank as he hummed an old wizarding song. She dipped her hand in the grey water. It felt cool and like light syrup. It moved through her fingers like a thousand down feathers, and she found it within herself to smile.

Sirius scooped two hands in the water and drank.

Hermione felt a twinge in her throat as she thought of how cool and crisp the water must taste. Sirius looked over at her; she was gazing so intently at his hands, so gestured to the river.

"Have a drink."

Hermione's lips twisted into a little frown.

"I can't."

He scooped more water into his hands and held them out to her.

"Go on, have a bit."

She drew a hand up to her mouth and pressed her lips together tight.

Shaking her head, she repeated, "I can't, Sirius."

He looked for a second as if he was going to push the matter, but then splashed the collected water on his face. He ran wet fingers through his jet hair and rubbed the whiskers on his chin. He looked thoughtfully at Hermione and then searched around for something in his robes pocket. Whatever it was, he held it in a closed hand.

"Don't you miss the living world, Hermione?"

"You know, I haven't really thought of it."

Sirius looked down at his closed hand. "I miss eating. No one down here does it. Sometimes I think about it too long, and I feel like I'm going bloody mad."

He opened his hand and cradled in his coarse palm was a blood red cherry. Its juices had stained his skin.

Hermione was shocked; she had never seen food or fruit down in the Underworld.

"Where did you get that?"

"I found it. I found several of them by the garden. They must have fallen from one of the trees."

"What garden?"

Sirius pointed in a northerly direction. "There's a garden with high walls over there. I'll show you if you like. Don't you want to eat the cherry? No one eats down here. I haven't seen anyone eat in so long."

Hermione closed his hand and gently pushed it back towards him.

"Why don't you eat it yourself, Sirius? I thought you missed it."

"I do, see, there's just this one thing."

Sirius took the cherry and sunk his teeth into it. The taut skin burst under the pressure, dark droplets leaking sweetly forth and rolling down his fingers. The flesh gently separated and his lips sucked against the hard stone. He sucked the droplets from his fingers, his mouth stained red. Hermione's lips twitched.

Sirius turned to her, chewing contemplatively.

"The thing is ... I can't taste it."

He held up the other half of the cherry, juice leaking, skin tattered. It looked like a bleeding heart. Hermione felt her mouth water from want to taste, rather than from hunger. She resolutely shook her head.

"I can't eat down here, Sirius."

He shrugged and popped the remainder in his mouth. Paring flesh from pit, he made short work of the fruit and spat the stone into the gray river.

"Come on, I'll show you that garden."

He got to his feet and offered her a hand. His fingers were stained a reddish purple from the cherry juice.

The garden in question was enclosed by four high, stone walls. They walked around the entire perimeter and stopped by two solid doors marking the only entrance in. Hermione pushed on them experimentally, but they didn't budge an inch. Sirius pointed to a tall tree whose bough had strayed over the boundaries. There were red juice stains on the ground below.

"That's the cherry tree."

"Do you know what else is in the garden?"

Sirius shook his head. Hermione frowned a little, running her hands over the door. There was no padlock, but they remained firmly shut.

"Why is it kept shut? Is anyone allowed in?"

Sirius shrugged. "I've never seen anyone go in before. No one here really pays it any mind."

"That's a pity. I would have liked to see it."

"So would I; maybe it has apples."

Hermione looked at Sirius with his cherry-stained mouth, wistfully gazing up at the treetops...stuck in one world while yearning for another. It reminded her why she had come down here, and what she had yet to accomplish. She was more determined than ever to make sure Severus wasn't denied things like warmth, magic, colour, and taste any longer.

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 9

AU. Hermione travels to the Underworld in search of Severus. What she discovers there surprises her. He is not who he once was, and he does not want to go back.

A/N I undersand I major fail for not updating. Can't believe I forgot about this again. Enjoy the chapter. Severus has a bit of a blow-up.

CHAPTER SEVEN

When Hermione found Severus, he was sitting on a flat rock beside Lily Potter with Tonks seated on the grass below. She felt a dark rush of jealousy, which was only interrupted by an uncomfortable glance from Tonks. Severus looked up, almost beaming, glad to see her. A hand reached and pulled her down beside him.

The first word anyone would use to describe Lily Potter was *beautiful*. It made Hermione prickle inexplicably, and she sat stiffly by Severus. He leaned down towards her.

"What is it?"

"Severus ... " She licked her dry lips. "...remember what I've said about your wand?"

He had an amused smile on his face.

"That it will allow me to cross over into the living?"

Hermione nodded, hoping to impress the seriousness of the situation on him, though he looked amused and dismissive.

"I'm not going to stay here forever, Severus. I want you to come back with me."

"My wand won't let me cross over again..."

"Yes, it will."

"Even if it did, why would I want to do that?"

Lily laughed from beside him, tucking an auburn strand of hair behind her ear.

"What is she talking about, Severus?"

The clear laughter, melodious and innocent to any other ear, sounded hateful to Hermione. She felt her back straightening as she regarded the pretty, young woman. Lily Potter was murdered at twenty-two years, which made her five years Hermione's junior now. It was an odd way to think of a friend's mother, but it made Hermione prickle even further that to think that she was being laughed at by a woman much younger than she was. Severus seemed to share the amusement as well, and Hermione grew angry.

"And how do you remember her, Severus?"

He was surprised by that question. He lifted an eyebrow and glanced from Lily, back to Hermione.

"You mean Lily?"

Lily looked puzzled as well.

"We were school friends."

Hermione laughed bitterly, a black humour beginning to swirl inside of her.

"Oh, really? Severus, you gave your *life* for her."

They both looked shocked. Severus looked confusedly at Lily, as if to ask if Hermione was referring to the same person.

"Hermione?"

"And when she died you devoted yourself to her memory, still doing everything for her. And for what? To die someone else's puppet."

Hermione was growing excited, her field of vision clouded by a red haze. She could see Severus with glazed eyes, things slowly turning in his mind. Lily was sitting, pale

and still confused.

"You."

Hermione barked, and Lily started.

"Are you married down here?"

"T-to James."

Severus' hands clenched the edges of the flat rock, an ugly sneer suddenly carving onto his face.

"*James Potter.*"

His voice was no longer the rich, throaty chuckle that murmured in her ear, but the acid-dripping sibilant drawl she knew as a girl, roughened by invectives and uttering dark curses.

Lily jumped as Severus swung around to glance at her with hurt, wild eyes. There were still memories flying through his brain, a lifetime of despair sweeping through him on the spot. Hermione felt perversely proud of herself for having finally evoked such a strong reaction from him.

Lily was trembling; she didn't fully understand what was going on. She reached out a shaking hand towards him.

"Severus?"

He knocked her hand away, suddenly volatile in his fury.

"Why him...why *him*?"

Severus leapt to his feet, his breathing ragged, his voice consumed by dark passion and hatred. He clutched his head with both hands, his fingers tensed into agate claws. When he finally opened his eyes, they were stormy and tempestuous. He slowly lowered his hands, anger simmering just beneath the surface of his still demeanor.

"She's right. I did suffer many things on your behalf. There was only misery that made up my sorry excuse for a life."

Lily looked beseechingly at him, reaching out to hold his hand.

"Severus, why are you angry?"

He seized her wrist in a vice-like grip, and she cried out, startled. He pushed it away from him, shamed and bitterly proud.

"What I want to know is why." He suddenly turned to Hermione, frightening her. "Why did I do all these things? Why ...?"

The cold authority in his tone sent chills down Hermione's spine. It was the same voice that had once looked at her and hissed "I see no difference". The situation was beginning to spin out of control, but she was determined not to regret anything.

Understanding passed across his face.

"I gave you up to him, didn't I?"

Severus' knees suddenly buckled and he collapsed to the grassy floor. His burning anger was slowly being replaced by anguish, and he looked fearfully at the three women gathered around him, ashamed at being witnessed in such hurt and vulnerability. His crippling self-consciousness caused him to shrink into himself.

"It was because of me, wasn't it?"

His face was hidden by his hands, his voice unnervingly steady. Tonks gathered Lily protectively in her arms and eyed Severus cautiously, wary of another outburst. Lily could only look upon the scene, horrified.

"I don't blame you for anything, Lily. I truly don't. You were a child. I was a child. I remained the child. But I was always there, I..."

He struggled with the words, causing a blip in his steady delivery that was difficult to recover from.

"You were always important, I mean. Always."

Lily's voice was soft and slightly strangled, startled tears threatening to fall from her eyes.

"You were always important to me too, Severus."

"No, I wasn't," he replied sharply, the barbs back in his voice.

"I think you should leave now. I don't want to look at you anymore."

"*Severus...*"

"I said I didn't blame you for anything. Now leave, or are you going to make me repeat myself?"

The dangerously soft, silky threat in his voice shocked and hurt her, though it was all too familiar in Hermione's ears. Tonks helped Lily to her feet and then backed away slowly from the scene. The murderous look Tonks shot her and the wounded look in Lily's eyes made Hermione flinch inwardly.

Severus slowly got to his feet, his face a still, porcelain mask, betraying no emotion. He smoothed the front of his black robes and regarded Hermione with a look of utter contempt.

"Sit down, Miss Granger."

She looked at him blankly, and he drew in swiftly, catching her off guard. His hands gripped her shoulders painfully, and he towered above her, his voice lowered to a soft hiss.

"I said *sit down*, Miss Granger."

She sat down on the flat rock, trembling, and watched as he sinuously paced in front of her, a sardonic, cruel smirk on his face.

"What happened to Potter?"

"W-what?"

"It was a simple question, Miss Granger, and well within your capabilities to comprehend if what they say of your formidable mental capacities is true. Or was that even more Gryffindor boasting?"

He leaned in and gave her a nasty, mocking smile.

"Were you truly only good for memorizing dull, redundant texts?"

She opened her mouth angrily, but forced herself to snap it shut again. The look he gave her promised her he would make things very unpleasant should she voice her retort.

"Harry's alive and doing quite well. He's in the Auror Department at the Ministry."

The shock on Severus' face filled her with dread.

"But the Dark Lord died...tell me he's gone."

"He is. Voldemort's dead."

Severus flinched at the name.

"Then how is Potter still alive?"

The mounting horror on Severus' face made Hermione squirm uncomfortably.

"Lily's blood, it had something to do with them both sharing Lily's blood..."

Severus looked as if something had just burned him. His eyes were wild, his mouth working itself into a frenzy. He grabbed her wrist and hauled her to her feet.

"Hey!"

"Come, it will be easier on you if you comply, but know I'm not loathe to the thought of dragging you behind me."

Hermione stumbled a little and then had to half-run to keep up with his long, urgent strides. She soon found herself at the Dumbledore tent, and Severus dragged her over to where Albus sat...chessboard and all.

"Albus!" Severus barked. The old man had been dozing and woke up at the sharp noise. Severus finally let go of Hermione's hand and pointed imperiously at her, trembling with rage.

"She tells me Potter's alive, she tells me he still lives!"

"Pardon me, Severus?"

Severus slammed a hand down on the chessboard, causing the pieces to jump.

"What game were you playing at, old man? Why were you still keeping things from me till the very end?"

Severus looked wildly at Albus, desperate.

"Did you ever trust me? Ever? Albus, speak!"

Albus regarded him curiously and stuck a finger in his ear, massaging his abused eardrum.

"I'm afraid I have no idea what you're talking about."

Severus looked at Albus with an imperial gaze that commanded attention. He spoke slowly, his voice dangerously calm again.

"The Potter boy still lives because of Lily's blood. You must have known he would have survived. Yet that entire time you told me he would die as the last Horcrux and all my efforts had actually been for your 'greater good'.

"And I accepted that, and I made sure he knew all he had to in order to fulfill this. And what do I find? That you've played me yet again and pulled a fast trick behind my back?"

Dumbledore still looked at him blankly, as though he thought Severus was raving mad.

"Why would you let me believe that? Why wouldn't you let me know he would survive it? Did you think I would have sacrificed myself more easily knowing Potter wouldn't survive the war either...did you really think me so petty? I had sworn to protect him, Albus. I expected him to live."

Dumbledore pushed his half-moon spectacles up the bridge of his nose.

"Are you here to play chess?"

Severus looked away, a pained expression on his face. He then swept the board from the table, allowing it to crash to the ground in a shower of black and white playing pieces. There were a few scattered pieces still left on the table, and Severus picked up a black pawn.

"Yes ... you played a chess game even well into your death, old man. You let me sacrifice myself for a boy you had ensured would still have a chance to survive. You made sure that to the very last, he would never truly have to give up anything."

Severus tossed the black pawn into Dumbledore's lap.

"I suppose it was laughable on my part to think you'd extend such a sentiment to me."

Severus turned away from Albus, looking weary and as if gravity was punishing him more severely than the next man. He looked at Hermione and his upper lip curled.

"You're just like him; obviously he teaches you Gryffindors well. Orchestrate everything to fall in place with your obscure sense of morals. My house was shamed for having the honesty to admit they were self-serving. A virtue, I think, you all grossly lacked. Especially you, Miss Granger, you're a disappointment."

She couldn't bear to look at the accusatory glare on his face; the disgust in his voice curdled in the pit of her stomach. She sat down on the wooden chair and exhaled shakily.

"It seems Severus does not care for a game. Would you?"

Dumbledore had retrieved his chessboard and was re-assembling the pieces. Hermione gave a hesitant nod and mutely set up her side of the board.

They played in silence, and she was grateful that Dumbledore did not once acknowledge her shamed, guilty tears.

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 9

AU. Hermione travels to the Underworld to find Snape. What she discovers surprises her: he is not who he once was, and he does not want to go back.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Albus beat her soundly in chess twice, and by the end of the second round, she was feeling pleasantly numb and distanced from all the previous drama. Her eyelids felt heavy and sore, but the tears had since dried.

"Checkmate."

Dumbledore's blue eyes twinkled, and Hermione knocked over her king.

"Are you thinking of a third round, or will you let me give him a good thrashing, m'gel?"

Hermione looked up to see the face of Moody. She got up from the chair, and Moody laboriously eased himself into it. Hermione sat off to the side, head propped up in hands. Moody gave her a sidelong glance as she set up his pieces.

"You've got a storm cloud on your face, gel."

Hermione shrugged. "Moody?"

"Hmm?"

"I've noticed there are no Death Eaters here, except for the Malfoys. Why is that? I thought the Underworld wasn't split up into heaven and hell."

"It's not."

Moody jumped his knight around the board, taking out a white pawn. He carefully placed it to the side, never taking his eyes off the game.

"They aren't here for the plain and simple fact that the death they imagine is not this. They feel they deserve a different end. It's nothing inferior or superior to the Elysian Fields, it's just different. Different souls call for different resting places."

Hermione looked thoughtful, taking a moment to respond.

"The Malfoys?"

Moody sneaked her a gnarled smile before ruthlessly taking Dumbledore's bishop.

"Still curious about them?"

"Yes, they almost seem like they don't want to be here. They just shut everything out."

Moody laughed as his errant knight pounced on Dumbledore's queen.

"They are here because when Draco passes, he will come here."

That moved something in Hermione, and she fell into a contemplative silence. The chess game progressed steadily onward in front of her, and Moody soon made short work of the white pieces on the board.

"You should really be asking how Severus got down here, gel."

She looked up at him questioningly, and he gave her a knowing look, eyebrows raised.

"He had less reason than the Malfoys to think he belonged here, but he managed to find his way."

Moody moved his knight and casually looked up at Dumbledore.

"Checkmate."

Hermione's eyelids had grown too heavy for her to keep them open much longer. She walked away from the chess game until she found another lush clearing in the field. She lay down on the gray grass, her head spinning for a moment, and fell asleep.

She was still the only one to sleep in the world of the dead.

She didn't know how much time had passed when she slipped into consciousness again. She woke with sleep grit in her eyes and the sour taste of dried spit in her mouth. Her head wasn't throbbing anymore, but it still felt muddy. She allowed herself plenty of time to open her eyes and sit up. She rubbed the grit from her eyes, wistfully banishing all notions of drinking river water, gamely swallowing in an attempt to ease her dry throat.

"There's still one thing I can't remember."

Hermione nearly jumped out of her skin. She looked behind her to see Severus sitting several feet away. He looked leery of her, wanting to maintain their distance, so she stayed put. He must have been watching her sleep again.

"What can't you remember?"

It struck her that despite what had happened, and all the angst she had caused, he was still drawn to her and still found it difficult not to come near. There was such a disparaging distance, though, from his curious hands wanting her warmth to the physical barrier he maintained now that it made her chest constrict and feel heavy.

"I did something toward the end. Something ... big, something I don't think I got over, and it made it difficult for me to see things through to the very last. It continually escapes me."

"What do you remember?"

"Sitting in the Headmaster's office, but in the Headmaster's chair. It confuses me."

She grew quiet, and he lifted up an eyebrow.

"If you have any idea, you best come clean about it."

"The Headmaster was killed."

Snape blinked slowly.

"Who?"

"You did it."

His face dropped. The sudden hopelessness that overcame him frightened her.

"Severus, it was all planned. Dumbledore wanted you to kill him...he was going to die from a curse anyway. He asked you to do it."

Severus had lowered his head so that all she could see was a curtain of his black hair. He remained very, very still.

"Severus?"

"By my hand. Dead by my hand."

He started laughing. The sound was guttural and full of such sourness and bitterness that Hermione felt her mouth pucker. He shook with this terrible, overwhelmed laughter and then abruptly stopped. Hermione regarded him warily, disturbed.

"And another plan of his, just brilliant."

"Severus, it's okay. He was going to die anyway, it was all thought out first..."

"No, no, Hermione; it's damning."

He looked up, strands of his coal black hair obscuring his face. His voice sounded hollow, his eyes looked on the verge of fresh anger.

"He may have used me, but he was probably the most essential person in my life after Lily died. He gave me a sense of purpose and a sense of self-worth. I had hoped that by doing as he asked me, I may have found some semblance of happiness again."

Severus leaned forward, mouth twitching.

"But I killed him. I killed that. And it's worse that I did it because he asked me. That just shows I had no will to refuse him, to do something for myself and my sanity."

Severus then sighed, suddenly deflating. Any anger or rage he had could not be sustained, as he had no strength or energy left for them. Instead he emanated a perpetual sadness and resignation.

"I should have died years earlier than I did."

Hermione swallowed hard. "Don't say that."

He looked up at her with hollow eyes, almost as if surprised to see her there.

"Perhaps even in the womb."

Fingers tugging through blades of grass, he stood up and looked up at the sky. He walked away from her, torn grass falling to the ground as they escaped his fingertips.

His skin was gray, his face was gray, and the breath he exhaled was gray.

"Severus, wait."

Hermione struggled to her feet and was stopped by the gaze of dead eyes.

"You need me to be angry about my life. I don't know why."

"Not your life, but your death."

He shrugged, unmoved.

"Regardless, I'm too tired to indulge you any further."

She let him walk away from her undisturbed.

If it could be said that before Hermione arrived Severus had been stripped of any warring passion, then it could also be said that after learning of the manner of Dumbledore's death, he had been stripped of all mild, gentle humour as well.

He fell into a state of quiet depression that had a note of finality to it. Whenever Hermione saw him, he was sitting by himself, eyes unfocused. He had become so gray that he could have passed for a shade in the Field of Asphodel. He allowed no one to come near and spoke to no one. He never looked up at her when she watched him.

He no longer hungered for her warmth.

When she asked Moody what she could do to have Severus come around again, he gave her an incredulous look.

"How in Merlin's pants am I supposed to know?"

When she tried walking right up to him, he just got up and walked another way. The Fields swallowed him up in their malleable pockets of space and time, and she did not see him until he would decide to re-materialise much later.

Even the Elysian sky began to turn grayer.

"The Weasleys' joke shop?"

"Famous. It makes ridiculous amounts of money. Lee Jordan decided to partner with George, and they run it together."

Hermione sat with Sirius by the gray riverbank. She was idly weaving blankets of grass together. He was chewing on the ends of some blades, still in pursuit of phantom taste.

"What are some of the best-sellers?"

"The Skiving Snackboxes of course. Getting business from Hogwarts alone pays their expenses twice over, but they've even expanded to other countries in Europe."

Sirius nodded, proud.

"I knew they'd do well."

Sirius was the only person left Hermione felt comfortable being around. She answered his questions tirelessly, glad for friendly company and the knowledge that at least one person hadn't sunk into desolation after she mentioned something about their life. If anything, Sirius thrived on all the dirty details.

"So what're the rest of them doing? Ginny?"

"She's playing for the Wimbourne Wasps. Keeper, I think, but she's moving up to Chaser soon."

Sirius had a wolfish grin on his face, nodding in appreciation.

"Quidditch girl, fantastic. And what about Ron? You haven't talked about him once."

Hermione saw Severus walk past in the distance out of the corner of her eye. She fell quiet.

"Hermione?"

"There's nothing really to say."

Sirius looked at her a little worriedly, wondering if he had said anything that upset her. She gave him a wry smile and plopped the woven grass crown on his head. It fell over his eyes and he smiled, lifting it off his face so he could see again.

She was nowhere in sight.

Lucius surveyed the scene through half-open eyes. He was leaning back on the rock, propped up by an arm with Narcissa curled up against him. They were like two regal cats sleeping in the sun.

"She's back again."

Narcissa didn't look up, feeling the hum of Lucius' voice with an ear against his ribcage.

"Not surprising."

Hermione knelt by the riverbank and collected cool gray water in her cupped hands. She walked reverently over to the Malfoys and held out the water in offering. Lucius regarded her in an unbearably long, tense moment before lowering his eyes, conceding to drink. Hermione thought the experience was rather like bowing to a hippogriff in the hopes that it wouldn't attack you.

Lucius' bottom lip followed the curve of her thumb, and the water disappeared into his mouth with the slightest of ebbs. The remaining half was offered to Narcissa, and she was similarly as dainty and graceful as he had been. Narcissa sat up, leaning into Lucius, and offered Hermione the space she had created.

Hermione sat down and fiddled with her robes, unnerved by their majestic stares.

"I came to ask about Severus."

"What about him?"

Hermione looked up at Lucius, who had spoken, then to Narcissa, and then back down at her lap.

"What can I do about him? What should I do?"

The Malfoys looked at each other, obviously not expecting the question. Narcissa looked at Hermione with a questioning, arched brow.

"You don't do anything."

"Do nothing? There's nothing I can do?"

Lucius snorted a little impatiently.

"Of course not. That doesn't even warrant questioning."

"So he'll stay this way forever?"

The Malfoys looked a little affronted at the panicked tone in her voice. Her excitability was disturbing their tranquil scene.

"Things always end a certain way, you'll understand what I mean soon enough. There's nothing for you to do, this is how it's always been."

They looked like they were quite through with talking. Hermione got up from the rock, rolling their cryptic words in her mind. She hoped whatever the 'certain way' things

ended down here was, was far divorced from the events that had precipitated them.

"Well then who do you think it is?"

Remus trotted quickly alongside Tonks, serious for an answer, but still in a playful mood. She shrugged bashfully, hitting him on the nose with a leafy tree branch, making him yelp.

"Oh I don't know ... Sirius?"

"Sirius?"

Remus snatched the leafy branch from her, wrinkling his nose and playfully swatting her with it. She giggled, and he tossed a comradely arm around her shoulder.

"Well, I still say it was me."

"Oh *please*."

Tonks snorted, saw the look on his face, and started laughing again. Remus didn't look at all offended, and they amicably kept up their banter walking side by side.

Hermione had to remember to breathe.

Chapter Nine

Chapter 9 of 9

AU. Hermione travels to the Underworld in search of Severus. What she discovers there surprises her. He is not who he once was, and he does not want to go back.

CHAPTER NINE

Hermione looked for the garden Sirius had once shown her. It took her longer to find than was usual down in the Underworld, but eventually she found its four high walls. She pressed her hands against the stone, pushing them, marveling at the solid structure beneath her skin.

She sat down with her back pressed against the wall and waited.

A breeze like a sigh stirred the gray grass and rustled the leaves of the gray trees.

The sky was gray, indistinguishable from infinite atmosphere.

The soft light in the fields made it look like dawn.

Hermione heard the soft whisper of footsteps and almost began to weep. She turned, and when Severus knelt down beside her, she grabbed the front of his robes and buried her face into the crook of his neck. He was fazed for a moment, but once recovered from his initial surprise, took her face in his hands and kissed her. His lips murmured along the crease of her eyelid, drinking warmth from where tears usually traveled.

She took his face in her hands and looked at him, searching. He looked back, politely curious, and with a mildness to his face no one had ever seen.

She almost cried in relief when Severus played with her hair, a puzzled but amused expression on his face. She sank to the ground, lying on her back and suddenly feeling deliriously happy. A giggle escaped from her.

Severus followed her down to where she lay, looking like a big, curious cat. He stretched down and lay beside her, fingertips brushing the hollow of her throat to find the source of her giggles, followed by feather light kisses that sent shivers down her spine.

From some strange turn of events, the most important person in her life regarded her in the same manner.

Firmly grasping the collar of his robes, Hermione pulled Severus down so his face was mere inches from hers.

"Come back with me, Severus. You must come back with me."

He blinked slowly, humouring smile softly playing around his lips again. Hermione whined in frustration.

"Please, Severus, say you'll come back. The world is a different place. The war is over. People think of you as a hero. All the love, appreciation and validation are yours if you just *come back*. Everything that was robbed of you is now yours."

He stopped smiling, but only to show her he was taking her seriously. There was no aggressive rejection of her request, but his eyes held a firm finality.

"I wasn't robbed of anything. I have no reason to go back."

Hermione looked up, suddenly afraid.

"What about me?"

She looked away, hotly embarrassed. He grinned, he liked it when she blushed, and placed his lips against the hotness of her cheek to feel it bleed in through his mouth.

"You're here."

"I have to go back."

"But you won't be up there forever."

His long hair fell onto her face, tickling her throat and kissing her brow. She closed her eyes and breathed him in. He smelt like autumn. The fingertips tracing the contours of her face were cool kisses of autumn. His mouth was cold.

"You died because of me, Severus."

She looked up, her voice small, her skin singing with the need to be touched. He looked at her curiously.

"I had a bottle of dittany. I could have saved you...I could have done something. You'd still be alive."

Severus' eyes creased into a smile, and he laughed into her hair, placing kisses on her temple.

"Did you know so little of me when I was alive to have let that be a source of guilt?"

"W-What do you mean?"

"Well, ignoring the fact that my death was a product of a chain of events...I also, quite simply, would never have forgiven you if you had kept me alive that day. I was an unhappy man, Hermione. I had long since tired of the world."

His hands rubbed circles into her shoulders, traveling across the region of her collarbone. The smoke-cloth shifted and slipped around her body, setting her nerves alight.

"You'll never come back with me?"

Severus reached into his robes and brought out his wand.

"It doesn't let me cross over to the living, Hermione."

"You can't know that."

Nimble fingers slid over the wand and then, in a decisive move, snapped it in half. A whimper tore from Hermione's throat.

"Now, neither can you."

Severus tossed the wand pieces away and shifted so that he was directly above her.

"Forget about the wand, Hermione, and trust me. Do you trust me?"

His breath was cool and stirred the hair on her face.

"I'm not sure ..."

He had a wicked grin on his face.

"Good."

His hands reached under the flowing material of her robes, fingertips dancing over her hot body. She murmured, feeling her back arch. Severus pulled the gaseous, liquid-like cloth off of her body, and she lay naked on the gray grass of the dead.

Severus pulled off his own robes as well; they almost seemed to melt away from his body. He lay down beside her, scooping her into his arms, skin pressing against skin. He was cold, so cold it made her nipples erect and her skin flinch away from his until she was used to the sensation. It was like lying naked against a marble statue; that is if the statue were soft, moving flesh. His fingertips stroked and traveled along her body, sipping at her warmth, kisses from autumn leaves, making her squirm and writhe in his arms.

He pressed his icy mouth against hers and she gasped against him. He kissed her, stroking her languorously with his cold tongue, reveling and celebrating her heat, her colour, her light...needing her on a base and primal level no one had ever needed her before.

Her small, hot hand pressed against his stomach and traveled southward, making him smile against her mouth. She could feel his thigh muscle flex beneath her hand, and shifting, she cupped him, thumb and forefinger teasing sensitive skin.

He looked at her amusedly. "That doesn't happen down here."

Indeed, Hermione felt nothing stir in her hand.

He chuckled, amused. "No one needs to."

He held her gently in his arms, mouth never straying far from hers, demanding heat from time to time with lazy suckles. His cold hands touched her where she needed to be touched, and she felt tingles and electric jolts shoot over the expanse of her skin, passionate union or no.

It was more than enough being hip to hip, shoulder to shoulder, and lips to mouth with the one man she'd gone through Hades to find.

When Hermione awoke, it was to find herself in a bed of black robes and limbs. She sat up, propping herself up on outstretched arms. Her hair tumbled down her shoulders, unruly and truly a mess. Severus smirked and tugged gently on a strand.

Hermione patted the black robes until she found a slim piece of wood. Her wand. She looked down at Severus and reached out with a hand. Her hand was small, only with her fingers outstretched could it cover his face. He looked at her, eyes mirroring the gravity she felt in her motions.

"I'm going to miss you. I'll miss you so much it will hurt."

"Are you going back?"

Hermione nodded, clenching her jaw tightly. Severus just smiled softly back at her, hand resting cool on her thigh.

"Don't miss me; you'll be back soon enough."

Hermione shook her head, the world becoming blurry through a curtain of tears. She sniffled and sat ramrod straight and still, until the tears had dried and she was sure she would not cry. She could not cry.

"It will feel like a lifetime for me. But I can't stay any longer."

His fingers traced figure eights into her hip.

"Why not?"

"It's just time to go."

Hermione looked at her wand and twirled it experimentally in the air. Green sparks streamed from its tip, and Severus eyed it approvingly.

"Lum..."

A hand enclosed over hers, stopping the wand's movement. Hermione looked at him startled. Severus slowly sat up and looked her piercingly in the eye, his gaze seeing past a brown iris, vitreous humour, aqueous humour, and reaching to her very soul.

"Why do you have to go? What's waiting for you? An exciting career? Academic glory?"

There was a dangerous undercurrent to his voice, which made her toes curl.

"Will you go home to an empty flat? Or is there someone else waiting for you?"

Hermione stared at him, hypnotized by the jealousy in his eyes.

"There's no one."

He leaned forward sinuously, words slipping from his tongue in a purr.

"Then why do you have to go?"

"I-I can't stay down here like this any longer. It'll drive me mad."

Severus leaned back, and for a moment, she thought he was drawing away from her. Instead, he searched through his robes and then brought forth a red pomegranate.

He tore the fruit in half with his hands, the rind's fiber separating like heavy paper. Dozens of jewel-like seeds glistened inside the fruit, tart pips bursting with sweet nectar. Severus brought half to his mouth and divested the pomegranate of some of its seeds. The juice gushed forth from the rind and dripped onto his pale chest, staining like crimson flowers.

He looked at her through hooded eyes and with a blood-red mouth.

"Eat this pomegranate with me."

He held out the fruit to her, his eyes never leaving her face.

"Are you asking me to give up my life?"

"I'm asking you to embrace your death."

Her small hands closed over his fingers, feeling the waxy rind. She couldn't tear her eyes away from his searching gaze.

"It won't be the same. I won't be warm anymore."

"I won't need you to be warm afterwards."

What was waiting for her in the living world? An empty flat filled with books that were now redundant. An uproar in the academic community that would either hail her as a genius or shun her as a charlatan. Her friends? Friends she had grown away from.

She took the pomegranate half from his hand and examined it in the soft light of dawn. He eyed every one of her movements hungrily.

"Where did you get this fruit from, Severus?"

"From the garden. My wand allowed me to cross the boundary into the garden."

Hermione looked sharply up at him, and he nodded with a self-satisfied grin on his face. So he truly couldn't have been able to come back with her, even if he had wanted to.

The dark red juices dripped down her fingers and pooled in the cup of her palm. Severus leaned in close, sucking out more seeds from his half of the fruit.

Hermione bit into the pomegranate and felt an explosion of cold, sweet, tart juice flood into her mouth and welcome her. It trickled down her throat cold and good, and pomegranate seeds burst under the pressure of her teeth, releasing their fresh contents.

Somewhere, in another place, Hermione stopped breathing.

Here, Severus cupped her face and drew her in for a kiss. Their lips were stained pomegranate red, and both their mouths were icy cold, with the lingering tartness of pomegranate seeds neither could taste.

And it wasn't the same as before, but it didn't need to be.

FIN

A/N Thanks for reading, hope you enjoyed that. Big thank you to my beta, DeeMichelle, and the winter round SSHG Exchange mods and participants.